Variation in word meaning across closely related language varieties: a look at Ryūkyūan

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Differences between language varieties are often investigated through analysis of translations. For example, English head can be translated as either hoofd or kop in Dutch, while German uses Kopf; green is translated as groen (Dutch) or grün (German). By translating a list of words, e.g., the oft-used Swadesh List (Swadesh, 1952), researchers can study sound changes and cognacy, and infer how closely related the studied varieties are. But variation does not end there. The meaning of words also differs (Malt & Majid, 2013). For example, the two Dutch lexemes for head differ in reference: hoofd refers to the head of humans, while kop is usually used for animals – a distinction English and German do not routinely make. Similarly, even though they are close, green, groen and grün do not refer to exactly the same part of the color spectrum (Majid, Jordan & Dunn, 2015). However, little is known about the extent of variation in semantic system, in comparison to the attested variation at phonetic and lexical levels.

In the study, we compare Tokyo Japanese to different Ryūkyūan varieties (Amami, Okinawan, Miyako, Yaeyama, Yonaguni) on variation in terminology for colour, body parts, and "cutting and breaking" events. While (Standard) Japanese has been included in previous cross-linguistic studies on semantics, Ryūkyūan varieties have received considerably less attention. However, a closer examination shows Ryūkyūan varieties could differ in interesting ways from Standard Japanese in referential meaning, e.g., au for both blue and green in Miyako (Nakama, 1988), and CuN "cutting with a knife", vs. PaN "cutting with scissors" in Yonaguni (Uwano, 2012). However, a quantitative comparison remains to be undertaken, as semantic variation remains an understudied topic (cf. Heinrich, Miyara & Shimoji, 2015). In the current study, we examine semantic variation and compare it to variation in phonetic and lexical patterns.