

English in Ogasawara

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A thousand miles south of Tokyo, one finds a remote archipelago known as Ogasawara. Formerly known as the Bonin Islands and also as Arzobispo, these islands were uninhabited until 1830 when two U.S. citizens, together with a Genovese, an Englishman, a Dansker, and some twenty-five Polynesians, established the first known settlement.¹ In 1853, U.S. envoy Commodore Perry recognized these settlers as the legitimate government of the Bonin Islands. Despite such international recognition, Japan declared its sovereignty and began colonization of the islands in 1862 with an eye toward displacing or assimilating the native English-speaking population.

Despite the hardships of maintaining contact with English-speaking communities in Hawaii and elsewhere, the Bonin Islands enjoyed tranquil bilingual commerce until the events of World War II led the Japanese government to reconsider its policies vis-à-vis the minority language populations under its control. At that time, Ogasawarans who spoke English were punished. Eventually, nearly 7000 inhabitants were evacuated to Japan's main island, Honshu, which further disrupted the English-speaking community. As such drastic evacuation measures were not taken in other islands under wartime threat, one is inclined to the view that the Japanese government perceived these English-speaking islanders to be a security risk.

After the war, in 1946, 135 Bonin Islanders who could make strong claim to ancestral Bonin Island roots antedating the Japanese colonization were permitted to return to their homes in Ogasawara, then under U.S. administration. During the next twenty years, this dwindling population was resuscitated by the U.S. Navy, and the English-speaking community was again flourishing when Japan resumed control of Ogasawara in 1968.²

After 1968, incorporating Ogasawara into the Tokyo prefectural administration, Japan repatriated many of the ethnic Japanese Ogasawarans who had been displaced during World War II, but it discouraged the idea of returning to an era of bilingualism. All children, regardless of their heritage, were taught using Japanese as the sole medium of instruction, and no allowances were made for students whose mother tongue was English. In most instances, the English-language services which Tokyo provided for foreign tourists were better than the services provided for Japanese citizens in Ogasawara. Following over a century of English usage and creolization,³ English usage has been in serious decline since the return of these islands to Japanese administration.

¹ Lionel B. Cholmindeley, *The History of the Bonin Islands*, London: Constable, 1915.

² Paul Sampson, "The Bonins and Iwo Jima Go Back to Japan", *National Geographic*, 134 (1968): 128-134.

³ Daniel Long, *English on the Bonin (Ogasawara) Islands*, Publication of the American Dialect Society, number 91, 2007.