

Assumption Regarding Language Strategies to Protect Chinese Regional Dialects from the Perspective of Language Planning: A Case Study of Singapore

Jun Qin

Northwestern Polytechnical University
China

Hongmei Ruan

Northwestern Polytechnical University
China

Abstract

Since China launched the campaign to promote usage of Mandarin in 1955, Chinese regional dialects have faced predicaments, such as decline of their learners and diversity. Chinese regional dialects play a very important role in many aspects, and they should be preserved. Therefore, this paper aims to draw more attention from people and propose possible measures to protect regional dialects based on the three hypotheses behind language planning.

The three hypotheses behind language planning refer to the instrumentalist's view, prescriptive and sociolinguistic view of language. After analyzing Singapore's language-in-education policy, the author finds similar experience can be applied to China in terms of protecting regional dialects- curriculum and examination design in schools and usage of regional dialects by parents at home. Also, the author proposes another two possible language strategies compatible with the above two: business operation by educational institutions and efforts from non-profit NGOs.

Keywords: Chinese regional dialects, language strategies, protection, Singapore, three hypotheses behind language planning

1. Introduction

In 1955, China held the National Conference on Reform of the Written Language and Conference on Standardization of Modern Chinese to discuss the problems regarding the relationships between Mandarin and regional dialects. The two conferences made it clear that China was going to promote the use of Mandarin across the country. So far, it's been 72 years since the campaign of promoting Mandarin was launched. The campaign has generated some positive influence on China's population, such as efficiency of communication thanks to the common usage of Mandarin. However, it does have some negative impacts on regional dialects like resulting in decrease of Chinese regional dialects' learners and their diversity.

In 2006, the Steering Group Office for Survey of Language Situation in China released a book, titled *Survey Data on the Use of Chinese Language and Writing*. In this book, the Steering Group Office presented detailed data about the current situation of Chinese regional dialects based on its survey. According to this book, about 86.38% of the Chinese population can use regional dialects to communicate with others, and 53.06% of the population is able to communicate with other people in Mandarin. Among those who can speak Mandarin, the people aged 15-29 occupy 70.12%, and people aged 30-44, 45-59 and 60-69 account for 52.74%, 40.59% and 30.94% respectively¹⁰.

The figures above demonstrate that the number of people who can converse with others in regional dialects has been decreasing, which is especially true among the younger generations, because they are more immersed into such situations as school, family and highly commercialized areas, where Mandarin is mostly used to communicate with each other rather than regional dialects, leading to a subconscious acquisition of Mandarin and discard of regional dialects. Also, due to the impact of the campaign promoting Mandarin, people's attitude towards Mandarin and dialects have changed a lot, leading to superiority of Mandarin and inferiority of dialects, which has resulted in less learners of regional dialects as well. Last but not least, mobility of the population because of such reasons as work and traveling has caused decline of learners of regional dialects, too (Zhou Yifan, 2015).

The promotion of Mandarin has also caused decline of Chinese regional dialects' diversity. Researcher Xia Xianhua wrote a paper in 2018, titled "Legal Protection of Dialects: Current Situation, Causes and Countermeasures". In the paper, Xia mentioned that 56 ethnic groups in China totally speak 129 ethnic dialects or languages. Among these dialects or languages, some are decreasing due to the influence of Mandarin, and some regional dialects of extreme minority groups are on the edge of extinction.

Due to the fact that more and more Chinese, particularly the young generation, tend to learn Mandarin and speak it in most cases, it is predicted that in the future most young people will speak Mandarin. Even worse, it is assumed that under the current conditions, most of Chinese regional dialects will die out in the next decades (Li Fuli & Yang Manren, 2016).

As is said by Peter Trudgill in his book *Sociolinguistics: an Introduction to Language and Society*, "...language as a social phenomenon is closely tied up with the social structure and value systems of society... (Peter Trudgill, 1983, p8)", language is of very importance for our society. It helps pass on values of the society to next generations and connect people together with the same regional identities no matter where they are and how far they are from each other. Regional dialects, as varieties of language, of course play a similar role when it comes to passing on values of the society and social connections. Apart from passing on social values, dialects have many other functions. Xia Xianhua (2019) expresses his opinion that regional dialects bear the characteristics of one society, and they can help researchers to study local living habits, ethics and cultures. Zhang Lanxin (2019) thinks the protection of regional dialects can promote social stability and national solidarity. Deng Xiaolin (2021) thinks that regional dialects are solid foundation for artists and writers to create numerous works. All in all, regional dialects are beneficial for many aspects of our society. If we can protect regional dialects and take advantage of them, we can produce huge benefit for our nation and the whole world.

Therefore, the author of this paper hopes to draw some attention from its readers to the protection of Chinese regional dialects, and hopes to find some possible solutions to addressing the predicaments that Chinese regional dialects are confronted with.

2. Literature Review

In this part, the author first reviews some knowledge about language planning, including definition, function and three subcategories of it. Then, three relevant hypotheses concerning language planning, which see language from an instrumentalist's, prescriptive and sociolinguist's view are presented, followed by domestic and abroad studies about language planning. Finally, Singapore's language-in-education policy is analyzed.

2.1 Language Planning

According to Wikipedia, "language planning (also known as language engineering) is a deliberate effort to influence the function, structure or acquisition of languages or language varieties within a speech community¹²".

Language planning can be categorized into three subcategories: Status planning, corpus planning and acquisition planning. The first subcategory is status planning, which is "the allocation or reallocation of a language or dialect to functional domains within a society, thus affecting the status, or standing, of a language"². For the second subcategory, corpus planning, it refers to "the prescriptive intervention in the forms of a language, whereby planning decisions are made to engineer changes in the structure of the language"². At last, acquisition planning is "a type of language planning in which a national, state or local government system aims to influence aspects of language, such as language status, distribution and literacy through education"².

2.2 Relevant Hypotheses Behind Language Planning

Hypotheses underlying language planning mainly include three points: (A) An Instrumentalist's View of Language. In this hypothesis, instrumentalists see language as a tool or instrument. They believe people can evaluate languages or language features objectively to determine which one is more efficient to fulfill certain language functions (Appel & Muysken, 1987). Also, they do not assume that the existing literary language is the best tool for education. What's more, they view written languages as subordinate to oral languages and suggest people to use the simplest and most efficient forms of languages, whether they are derived from dialects or more prestigious languages; at the meantime, they encourage people to develop simpler and more efficient standard written languages based on vernacular (Tauli, 1968). (B) A Prescriptive View of Language. For prescriptive linguists, they seek ideal and appropriate languages for governments and/or national language academies to defend (Eastman, 1983). They agree with the hypothesis that varieties of languages with high status should be encouraged and promoted in countries to achieve certain goals, such as consolidate solidarity of a country in certain times. (C) Sociolinguistic View of Language. In sociolinguists' view, written languages are always more conservative than oral languages, which thus results in more than only one correct oral utilization. Sociolinguists point out that in every society, different varieties of the same language are in daily use by native-speaking populations for different purposes (Eastman, 1983). They argue that every dialect or language is appropriate to be used in classrooms, as all language varieties are inherently equal (Appel & Muysken, 1987), and trying to confine a population to one standard usage is unlikely to be successful, as oral language is a dynamic, living system that is constantly open to negotiation and change.

Researchers at home and abroad have carried out studies based on language planning and the three hypotheses behind language planning.

At home, in terms of protection of dialects, Zhai Jibo (2010) tried to integrate speech recognition technology with scripts to recognize regional dialects. Li Fuli (2016) suggested that regional dialects should be protected from the perspectives of status planning and corpus planning. Cao Zhiyun (2017) showed that Chinese dialects were faced with four main problems, including preservation, protection, transmission and development of regional dialects.

Abroad, there are also many researchers carried out studies about language planning. Einar Haugen (1966) became the first scholar to describe the processes of language planning, including norm selection, codification, implementation and elaboration. About the implementation of language planning, L. Quentin Dixon (2009) gave his assumptions regarding Singapore's language-in-education policy, and expounded some hypotheses behind Singapore's language policy. Maarja Siiner, Francis M. Hult and Tanja Kupisch (2019) edited a volume that investigates agents, processes, and discourses about acquisition of language planning.

2.3 Brief Introduction to Language Planning in Singapore

In 1965, Singapore gained separation from Malaysia, and then it attempted to catch up with the world in terms of economy and society and consolidate its freedom. The Prime Minister of this new born nation, Lee Kuan Yew, determined that English would be a good choice for Singapore as one of its official languages to promote trade and investment with other countries. At that time, Singapore was constituted by three major ethnic groups, with Chinese occupying a proportion of 77%, Malays 14% and Indians 8%. The composition of its population resulted in its release of policy in 1965 that determined Singapore's selecting another three languages as its official languages: Mandarin, Malay and Tamil (Dixon, 2009).

In 1966, Singapore introduced an education policy under which English and one of other three official languages, which are Mandarin, Malay and Tamil, are required for students to learn during their schooling life. If students are in non-English-medium schools, they have to learn English; in addition, they have to learn their official Mother Tongues-Mandarin for Chinese, Malay for Malays and Tamil for Dravidian-speaking (Tamil and Malayalam) Indians, and they must reach a second-language proficiency level in their Mother Tongues. Under this policy, English is underscored as the most important language in education, and other three official languages are also highlighted. Since it is compulsory for students to learn English and students are immersed in an English-speaking environment in school, English is not a challenge for them. Therefore, parents are more concerned with their children's Mother Tongues. To rise to this challenge, parents tend to speak their Mother Tongues with their children at home, and send their children to "community-run" classes on weekends (Dixon, 2009).

With a bunch of measures, students not only master bilingualism, including English and one of other three official languages, but also achieve excellent results on international comparisons, such as much better results in the Third International Math and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Progress in Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) (Dixon, 2009).

Though researchers both at home have carried out lots of researches about language planning and the protection of Chinese regional dialects, few of them do researches based on the three hypotheses concerning language planning. Therefore, the author of this paper will take Singapore's language-in-education policy as a study case and propose some practical assumptions regarding the protection of Chinese regional dialects based on the three hypotheses from the perspective of language planning.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Questions:

This paper aims to survey the current conditions of Chinese regional dialects in terms of the amount of their learners and diversity, and come up with related countermeasures to protect them based on the three hypotheses of language planning. Based on the above, the author proposes two research questions: (1) It is believed that the amount of learners of regional dialects has been declining and so has their diversity since the campaign to promote Mandarin in 1955.

But what are the exact current conditions of regional dialects in these two aspects? (2) What possible measures can be introduced to protect regional dialects? What should entities in the society, including the government, other social organizations and individuals, do to help protect regional dialects in a coordinated and effective way?

3.2 Research Method

The author of this research uses case study to carry out research. In order to propose relative countermeasures to protect them, apart from gaining support from some hypotheses, the author turns to Singapore's language-in-education policy

for help to find out what people can learn from this policy, and whether China can adjust the policy and introduce similar ones that can help protect Chinese regional dialects.

4. Assumptions Regarding Language Protection Strategies

In this part, the author introduces four related possible measures to protect regional dialects based on the three hypotheses of language planning and Singapore's language-in-education policy, which includes designing curriculum and examinations in schools, using regional dialects by parents at home, operating business related to protection of regional dialects by educational institutions, and non-profit NGOs' making efforts.

4.1 Curriculum Design and Examination in Schools

In 1965, Singapore's government made English the most important official language at home and requires that every student should study English once he or she starts grade one in primary school. Also, it advocated that its people should speak Standard English rather than Singlish (Dixon, 2005), which is regarded as being inferior to Standard English. This policy actually is consistent with the prescriptive view of language, that is, languages or varieties of languages with high status should be promoted in areas like education.

The language-in-education policy at home also conforms to the prescriptive view of language. In most areas, schools are required to use Mandarin to teach lessons. Due to the fact that most people consider Mandarin as superior to dialects, Mandarin owns high status over regional dialects. Therefore, Mandarin is the appropriate language for education, and it has been chosen as the only language for education in most areas for long since 1955.

However, there is something wrong with the implementation process of this policy. In many areas, once Mandarin was chosen for education in all levels of schools, Mandarin has been the only legitimate language in schools and regional dialects have even been prohibited in communications in schools. When students speak dialects, they may even be laughed at by their classmates and told by their teachers to speak Mandarin at school. All these block the transmission and development of regional dialects, and even have endangered those invaluable assets.

Dialects, as varieties of languages, are equal with each other since they can fulfill their functions- to convey meanings and communicate with others in communities (Peter Trudgill, 1983). Though Mandarin is appropriate for education in schools, promoting Mandarin at the cost of confining the use of and even endangering regional dialects in schools is not right as it would damage diversity of cultures. In Singapore, while making its students obligated to learning English, the government also requires students to learn their Mother Tongues until they reach a second-language proficiency level. Apart from Singapore, Canada has also implemented the policy- "multicultural policy" in 1971, which requires that indigenous Indians should be educated in Indian (Dong Xiaoxiao, 2019). The author of this study thinks these policies can be adapted to China in a similar way: Mandarin and regional dialects can co-exist with each other through using Mandarin as a medium in education and designing compulsory curriculums in which regional dialects are taught and students need to pass relevant examinations. This would make students and parents pay enough attention to pick their regional dialects and learn more about them, helping to avoid decline of learners and diversity of regional dialects.

4.2 Usage of Regional Dialects by Parents at Home

After Singapore introduced its language-in-education policy, all students are required to study their subject-matter curriculum through the medium of English since the first grade in primary school, but they also need to reach a 'second-language' level of proficiency in their official Mother Tongue. Because students are immersed in such an environment in which they listen and speak English in subject-matter classes, like math, English is not always a problem for them to master. For parents, they are more concerned with their children's Mother Tongues, which urges parents to speak their Mother Tongues with their children at home to improve the level of their children's Mother Tongues (Dixon, 2005).

However, in China, parents, as a very influential factor in children's growth, tend to speak Mandarin with their children, no matter they are at home or in public areas with the assumption that this would help their children speak standard Mandarin and acquire some kind of competitiveness; even worse, they tell their children not to speak regional dialects due to discrimination toward those dialects.

According to the perspective of sociolinguistic, dialects and Mandarin are equal. Therefore, discrimination from parents against regional dialects should be eliminated. Also, from instrumentalists' view, it is much simpler and efficient for parent to use regional dialects, which are native and indigenous language varieties of certain areas, to converse with their children without having to learn Mandarin. Hence, there is no need for parents to abandon regional dialects at home; speaking regional dialects can help their children get better scores in examinations of courses

regarding regional dialects; even more importantly, speaking regional dialects can help pass on these invaluable assets and precious values of certain regions from generations to generations.

4.3 Business Operation by Educational Institutions

Educational institutions, boosted by enormous economic interests and market trends, are held by individuals or corporations featuring the role of education. They often operate with many kinds of products and services, and can provide students with targeted goods or services (Li Na, 2021).

After searching the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), the author of this study did not find any research related to language planning that discuss the protection of regional dialects from the perspective of educational institutions. However, educational institutions do play a significant part in protecting regional dialects. Besides, with the issuance of the “Double Reduction” policy by the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China in July 2021, educational institutions have been banned to provide training courses on their major subjects on legitimate festivals, weekends, summer vacations and winter holidays. It is necessary for them to shift their services to other areas, and the provision of classes on regional dialects is a possible way. Therefore, the author tries to discuss how educational institutions can play its role concerning the topic of this study.

For educational institutions, they can hire local people in the regions, who have been living in the areas for a long time and can speak local dialects very well, to be teachers. This can ensure that students can learn good and “standard” regional dialects with pure sounds, lexis, tones and so on.

If the previous two measures- designing curriculum and examinations regarding protecting regional dialects in school and parents’ using dialects at home, are introduced, this one would be of great importance. First, after schools design curriculums and examinations about regional dialects, some students may find it hard to learn their dialects well and they may not pass the examinations. Studying in educational institutions will help them to improve their dialects and pass their exams. Second, if schools introduce the above measure, but parents do not have enough time to or they cannot speak their regional dialects, they can send their children to those educational institutions to study the dialects so that parents do not need to worry about their children’s learning of regional dialects too much.

Therefore, educational institutions, as an influential and creative entity, can be established and allowed to play their part in protecting Chinese regional dialects.

4.4 Efforts from Non-profit NGOs

The last protection strategy is to encourage and support the involvement of social NGOs, or non-profit NGOs, which can underpin the protection of regional dialects as a complementary and subordinate measure of the previous three methods.

As is explained by Zhou Yifan (2020), talents with expertise in language can play very important roles in the protection of regional dialects. This is extremely true when it comes to corpus planning, one of three subcategories of language planning. Talents who are experienced and well-known in the field of corpus can be organized together to form a special social organization, in which they can help record regional dialects in forms of corpus. This can help preserve regional dialects at the edge of extinction and even provide people later with chances to know and revitalize regional dialects after they die out.

Furthermore, certain groups of people can participate actively in social NGOs. Native people who can speak really good regional dialects, especially the old who have ever spent their whole life in that region and have plenty of free time, can be gathered together to formulate a voluntary organization to teach the young generation to speak regional dialects.

Through these two methods, the knowledge about regional dialects can be transmitted from the older generation to the younger ones, which is a similar natural way of transmission in society, which is free and standard.

5. Conclusions

Faced with the promotion of Mandarin by the government and other influential factors, Chinese regional dialects have been encountering difficulties, which have led to the decrease of their learners and diversity. This situation is similar with the one Singapore’s English-exclusive Mother Tongues were faced with shortly after its independence in 1965. Therefore, after analyzing Singapore’s language-in-education policy, the author proposes that similar practices can be drawn to protect Chinese regional dialects based on the three aspects of language planning: schools can design related curriculum and examinations, and parents can speak regional dialects with their children at home. Apart from the above

two possible measures, the author of this paper proposes that educational institutions can operate relevant businesses, and that non-profit NGOs can play their part in protecting Chinese regional dialects. All these can help regional dialects preserve in a coordinated way.

References

- Appel, R., & Muysken, P.(1987). *Language contact and bilingualism*. London: Arnold.
- Deng Xiaolin(2021). Research on Protection of Hunan Regional Dialects in the Form of Archives.*Work on Archives*, 02, 103-105.
- Dong Xiaoxiao(2019). *An Analysis on China's Dialect Protection Measures with Reference to Canadian Minority Languages Policy—A Case Study of Guanzhong Region, Shaanxi Province*. Beijing: North China University of Technology.
- Eastman, C. M.(1983). *Language planning: An introduction*. San Francisco, CA: Chandler & Sharp.
- Haugen, E.(1971). Instrumentalism in language planning. *In J. Rubin & B. Jernudd (Eds.), Can language be planned?*. Honolulu, HI: University Press of Hawaii.
- LiFuli (2016). Protecting Regional Dialects from the Perspective of Language Planning. *Journal of Guiyang University (Social Science Edition)*, 05, 82-93.
- MaarjaSiiner, Francis M.Hult, & Tanja Kupisch (2020): *Language Policy and Language Acquisition Planning*. *Language Policy*,19, 319–321.
- Peter Trudgill (2011). *Sociolinguistics: an Introduction to language and society*. London: Clays Ltd, St Ives plc..
- Quentin Dixon (2009). Assumptions behind Singapore's language-in-education policy: implications for language planning and second language acquisition. *Science+Business Media B.V*, 09, 117-137.
- Steering Group Officefor Survey of Language Situation in China, (2015),*Survey Data on Chinese Spoken and Written Languages*. [Online] Available <https://www.docin.com/p-1179934067.html> (June 11, 2015)
- Tauli, V. (1968).*Introduction to a theory of language planning*. Uppsala, Sweden: Almqvist & Wiksells.
- Wikipedia, (2021),*Language planning*. [Online] Available https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Language_planning (March 27, 2021)
- Xia Xianhua (2019). Legal Protection of Regional DialectsPositioning, Cause and Measures. *Journal of Hubei University of Police*, 01, 61-70.
- Zhang Lanxin (2019). Historic Course and Modern Development of Protecting Regional Dialects. *History and Culture*, 04, 198-199.
- Zhou Yifan (2020). *A Study of Dialect Spread from the Perspective of Omnimedia*. Taiyuan: Shanxi University.