Language Ecology in Tibetan Areas of Western Sichuan: Problems, Causes and Strategies
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**Abstract.** The language ecology in western Sichuan is diverse and complex, and there are nearly 20 ethnic groups and 20 languages intermingled with each other. However, their unique linguistic individuality is often covered by the universal language and become "disadvantaged languages" in their own habitat. Many reasons, of which are mixed ethnic distribution, deficient education resource and economic transformation etc., have led to the loss of linguistic vitality of the ancient languages. Ethnic, bilingual and vocational education are necessary strategies to improve the ethnic language ecology.

1. Introduction

Sichuan Tibetan area located at the South-eastern fringe of Qinghai-Tibet plateau, stands at the transitional and intersection zone between Qinghai-Tibet plateau and Sichuan Basin from which Yun’nan-Guizhou Plateau is accessible. It consists of Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Ngapa Tibetan and Qiang Prefecture and Muli Tibetan Autonomous County, which covers a vast area of 249,700 square kilometres and is approximately 51.49% of the total Sichuan territory. Diversity and complexity is the feature of Qinghai-Tibet plateau in terms of landform. Hengduan Mountains are characterized by deep alpine valleys from south to north which are steep and dangerous. And yet it bears the characteristics of both Qinghai-Tibet plateau and Hengduan Mountains. Its remote geographical location and closed geographical environment make the ancient national language and culture preserved sporadically. This area was the "Frontier Trade of Tea-horse" for a time and the key way that connects Chinese mainland and Middle Asia, Western Asia and European continent, and thus dubbed as "Ethnic Corridor". This place has always been a breeding place for various ethnic groups, with multi-languages and multi-cultures being touched, merged and coexisted harmoniously.

2. The Overall of Language in Sichuan Western Tibetan Area

The language ecology in western Sichuan is diverse and complex, and there are nearly 20 ethnic groups and 20 languages longly intermingled with each other: Tibetan, Yi, Qiang language, inter-ethnic common language, Han, as well as the local scattered languages such as "ground foot language" used by the lower class[1]. For a long time, relying on natural geographical barriers, these ancient national languages scattered all over the country have become "language islands" that retain their individuality in ethnic communication and language contact. However, their unique linguistic individuality is often covered by the universal language and become "disadvantaged languages" in their own habitat.
The common features of these languages is: 1) No common words with a small population and a small range of use; 2) On the verge of extinction as the language function and structure declines. There are eight languages with these characteristics, including Baima, Ersu, Muya, Zaba, Guiqiong, Quayu, Namuyi and Shixing, among which the latter four are the most typical. Only religion, literature and art exists in a higher vigor value in the national languages of western Sichuan.

Tibetan is the major language used by Tibetans, mainly used in the Tibet autonomous region and parts of the provinces of Gansu, Shanxi, Qinghai, Sichuan, Yunnan provinces of China, Tibetan-Burmese language group, which belongs to the Sino-Tibetan family. The Tibetan of Sichuan Tibetan areas is mainly divided into three types, namely Jiarong dialect, Kham dialect and Amdo dialect. Jiarong dialect, containing several local dialects, is commonly spoken in the Dadu River Valley, which can be divided into several local dialects. And it is the dialect that retains the most ancient constituents of Tibetan language. Kham dialect is the prevailing language in the agricultural areas of South Road and North Road of Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Muli Tibetan Autonomous County and other places. Amdo dialect is widely used in the pastoral areas of Aba Tibetan and Qiang autonomous prefecture and Ganzi Tibetan.

3. The Endangered Ethnic Languages of Western Sichuan

Many reasons have led to the loss of linguistic vitality of the ancient languages in the "Ethnic Corridor" of western Sichuan, which are generally believed to be concentrated in the following aspects:

1) Mixed ethnic groups and population distribution. Ethnic groups live in a mixed or scattered situation, and the common language among ethnic groups in mixed areas is Chinese.

2) Quite a few people use the ancient language and the users are generally too old. As the prestige of ethnic languages is inferior than the common languages among the inter-region and inter-ethnic groups, the chains of languages for inter-generational communication in mixed areas are broken.

3) Trans-racial marriage is the cause of the extinction of weak languages. Inter-ethnic marriage is more common in areas where ethnic groups live together. Exotic marriage has three stages: In the first stage, the first generation of families are bilingual, the mother tongue is strong enough to assimilate the outsiders' language; In the second stage, mother language is slightly weak among the second generation of bilingual family and the immigration language starts to get equal opportunity; in the third stage, the alien language gradually replaces the mother tongue in the third generation of bilingual families, and in the end, the mother tongue in the fourth generation completely died out, and the monolingual system of foreign language was implemented among the family numbers. At present, it is on the third family bilingual stage in the western Sichuan ethnic corridor area.

4) Deficient education resource. The minority areas of western Sichuan lack language education and reading and writing materials. Up to now, all the above-mentioned ethnic languages lack a ready-made writing system except Ersu language, which has its own pictography. The common people only receive language acquisition through oral communication, while religious leaders write their religious doctrines in Tibetan. Apart from this, there are no other reading and writing materials. The implementation and popularization of Chinese education, just like the catalyst for the decline of the weak language, accelerates the conversion to Chinese for the ethnic residents.

5) Economic transformation. Ethnic areas in western Sichuan have been in the state of animal husbandry and farming for a long time, and the chieftain system since the Yuan and Ming Dynasties intensified the state of separatism. Although there was the famous "tea-horse trade", in general, commercial activity was not frequent. In recent years, western Sichuan ethnic areas have opened up
to the outside world, introduced advanced technology, strengthened foreign exchanges, and brought about the birth of a young generation of bilingual people.

6) Psychological, social and cultural concepts lead to the extinction of ethnic languages. Due to the relatively backward productivity, ethnic minorities have the "Han" mentality, and the national consciousness is weakened. The new ideas and new information introduced are all based on Chinese as the medium language. The mass media, with its popular culture style, has a stable and strong position in the mind of young people in ethnic minority areas. This mentality leads to the evolution of language function: language contact—language influence—language combination—language diversion.

According to the above analysis on the geographical and humanistic environment of the ethnic languages distribution, the main causes of endangerment of ethnic languages in western Sichuan are as follows: ethnic mixed-living and population distribution > population size and distribution range > economic transformation > culture education > inter-ethnic marriage > language psychology. The above reasons have acted on the languages of the "ethnic corridor" in western Sichuan to varying degrees, leading to the decline of some languages' vitality.

4. Necessary Strategies to Improve the Ethnic Language Ecology

4.1. Information Collection on Language Ecology in Tibetan Areas of Sichuan Province

Most of the research on language ecology is based on the collection and analysis of large-scale field data, it mainly includes:

1) The data collection of language information and language usage. Data collection involves the general social situation of the surveyed place, including geographical location, origin names and migration, administrative divisions and institutional evolution, rules and regulations, population, main modes of production and social organizations, living habits, religious beliefs, ethnic relations and ecological types, etc.

2) Information collection of language users. It includes age, education background and occupation; monolingual, bilingual or multilingual; the language used by family members, etc.

4.2. Survey on the Implementation of Language Policies and Ethnic Education

The survey on local language policies focuses on school education, mainly involving the use of Chinese and Tibetan in school education, the educated population, teachers, and the size and number of schools.

Ethnic languages and publications in ethnic languages are also important parts in the study of language ecology. The use and popularization of ethnic writing have not only enriched the cultural life of the residents in ethnic minority areas, but also greatly facilitate the improvement of people's cultural level and the unity of ethnic groups. It has also laid a solid foundation for the protection and promotion of traditional ethnic culture[^3].

With the rapid development of society and culture, multimedia resources such as radio, television and network have entered into the lives of Tibetan people. New technologies and new lifestyles have brought unprecedented influences on the lives of Tibetan people.

4.3. Coordinated Development of Bilingual Education

Yi and Tibetan are the main body of the ethnic autonomous areas in Sichuan. There are only two types of bilingual education in the whole province: Yi - Chinese and Tibetan - Chinese. The development of bilingual education in these two ethnic areas are directly related to the realization of the strategic goal of "rejuvenating Sichuan through science and education". In ethnic areas, the
ethnic education and bilingual education is much more difficult than non-bilingual education, and also needs more manpower, material resources investment\(^4\).

4.4. Vocational Education in Ethnic Minority Areas

Vocational education in ethnic areas is an important part of ethnic education, which is different from the "non-ethnic" education, and its typical characteristics is "ethnic", which nature reflects the close relation and interaction between vocational education, cultural ecology and human development in the minority areas. Only does vocational education in ethnic minority areas really meet the needs of ethnic minority areas, deeply integrate vocational education into the ethnic individual development, reasonably develop the natural and cultural resources in ethnic regions, and consider the development particularity of ethnic minority areas, the competitive advantage with differentiation and sustainable development can be achieved.

The study of Tibetan language ecology in Sichuan contributes to the protection of Tibetan cultural diversity and the improvement of local education and the talent cultivation. The development of the western region and the Tibetan areas not only depend on the support of state policies and a favorable social and ecological environment, but also on technical and managerial personnel with modern knowledge. The cultivation of talents is inseparable from education, and the sound development of education is inseparable from language ecology.

5. Conclusion

The diverse and complex language ecology in west Sichuan attributes to its location of "Frontier Trade of Tea-horse" in ancient times. However, the rich language resources there are gradually declining. The main causes of endangerment of ethnic languages in western Sichuan are as follows: ethnic mixed-living and population distribution > population size and distribution range > economic transformation > culture education > inter-ethnic marriage > language psychology. Ethnic, bilingual and vocational education are necessary measures to improve the ethnic language ecology.

Reference


