The Study on Language Attitudes towards the Protection of Dialects

Bai Yun

Abstract

Researchers attaching great emphasis on language attitudes in sociolinguistic all over the world hold the views that an individual's or a community's attitudes toward their own language or other languages will affect how they learn and use a language and lead to a language's further development or extinction. The research will be conducted on the relationship between people's language attitude (LA) and the protection of dialects in China, where a great variety of dialects and Standard Chinese (SC) used by the speakers from 56 minorities co-exist and implement each other.

With Standard Chinese promoted for 60 years, migration led by the development of social economy after the adoption of reform and opening-up policy, urbanization further promoted since 21st century, the status of Standard Chinese is rising while that of dialects is on the decline, and to some extent regional dialects in some ethnic minorities are dying out, resulting in the disappearance of their unique cultures and cultural forms, such as operas.

Based on a review of previous studies on LA, the research will be conducted with questionnaire and interview. The questionnaire will suggest speakers' conscious, overt attitude towards SC and dialects, the frequency they use SC and dialects, the situation in which they use SC and dialects and so on. Interviews conducted indicates the interviewees' unconsciousness and covert attitudes towards SC and dialects.

The questionnaire and interviews conducted, three findings are obtained. First of all, parents' LA plays a significant part in their children's language learning or language use, further resulting into the decreasing number of dialect users in China. The second, the promotion of SC in schools varying from kindergartens to universities facilitates the widespread use of SC and extinction of dialects in that kids start to learn and use SC from so early ages that they have fewer chances of picking up a single dialect and the kids' using SC offers their parents more opportunities to use SC in their daily family communication. The third, different attitudes towards SC users and dialect users from a community have great impacts on what language they will choose to communicate.

Although SC plays a significant role in China's economic development and urbanization, dialects are heritage of regional cultures; therefore, with the promotion of SC, dialects must be sustained and further developed.

Keywords: Standard Chinese, dialects, urbanization, status, language attitudes

1The Dept. of Foreign Language, Baoji Vocational Technology College, Baoji City, Shaanxi Province, 721013.
I. Introduction

1. Background of the study

Researchers attaching great emphasis on language attitudes in sociolinguistic all over the world hold the views that an individual's or a community's attitudes toward their own language or other languages will affect how they learn and use a language and lead to a language's further development or extinction. The research will be conducted on the relationship between people's language attitude (LA) and the protection of dialects in China, where a great variety of dialects and Standard Chinese (SC) used by the speakers from 56 minorities co-exist and implement each other.

2. Significance of the study

China is a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-dialect nation, where Standard Chinese and regional dialects co-exist and complement each other, functioning in various social situations from formal occasions to family life. In terms of the sociolinguistic concept-diglossia and distinct functions, there is generally a "High" variety, for formal and serious occasions, and a "Low" variety (Hollnes:1999:32), for conversations and other informal uses. Hence, Standard Chinese is High Variety, expected to be used in education, working place, public service, while dialects, Low Variety, used in daily communication and family life. However, with the promotion of Standard Chinese from 1955, the economic development after the reform and opening-up and the urbanization promoted, Standard Chinese is used across-the-board, that is to say, in more occasions than merely as an official language, and its number of users sharply increases, with the result that the status of Standard Chinese is rising while that of dialects is on the decline, even some regional dialects are dying out. The relationship between Standard Chinese and Dialects and the protection of dialects, however, become the focuses of our attention.

3. Purpose of the study

In the paper, with the functions of dialects being introduced, the gradual abandonment of some dialects analyzed, it is put forward that positive language attitude towards dialects avails us in protecting dialects, and some effective ways of changing people's language attitude are suggested to protect dialects as well.

II. Literature review

Language Attitudes means "the attitudes which speakers of different languages or language varieties have towards each other's language or to their own language" (Rechards et al., 1992:248). Whereas, Ryan et al. (1982:7) suggests Language Attitudes will "be taken in a broad, flexible sense as any affective, cognitive or behavioral index of evaluation, reactions towards different language varieties of their speakers". Linguistic forms, varieties and styles can reflect beliefs about a speaker, their group membership, and can lead to assumption about the attributes of those memberships. People will cast a feeling or opinion on a language and are likely to have certain comments on a language or a variety such as elegant, expressive, musical, and vulgar impolite, etc. It is clear that people tend to have positive or negative attitudes in relation to a wide range of linguistic issues, such as a common language, varieties of a language, words and pronunciations. In addition, people's
reactions to language or varieties reveal much of their perceptions of speakers of their varieties.

III. Research Mythology

1. Research questions

The main focus of this study is to investigate people's language attitudes towards SC and dialects. Age, profession, the role of being a child or a parent, and the interviewees' birthplace and present inhabitance are viewed as major factors which attach importance in the conduction of the research. Aiming at discovering the close linage between urbanization and decreasing status of dialects, those who migrated from countryside into city and have resided in city for a relatively prolonged time are considered as the primary interviewees.

The research questions in this study are as follows:

1) What is general LA towards SC and dialects the interviewees, in particular the city dwellers that migrated from the countryside hold?
2) Does the interviewees' LA affect their language learning and using?
3) What's relationship between urbanization and disappearance of some dialects?
4) Will the improvement of people's LA towards dialects save some dialects in danger of being dying out from disappearance?

2. Subject

To achieve the comprehensive result of the investigation, the subjects were selected from the kids in kindergarten and primary school, young men from colleges and adults working in different working positions. A total number of the questionnaire received is 200, among which 178 are valid while 22 are invalid because they were uncompleted or were not answered as required. The valid questionnaire accounts for 89%.

Half of the subjects involved in the questionnaire are kids who are receiving education in kindergarten, primary school and required to speak SC in family or school, and the second half are college students and adults having immigrated into Baoji City (a city in Shaanxi Province) from the countryside. Kindergarten kids unable to read or write were helped to participate in questionnaire indicating what the percentage of the pre-educational kids who can understand and speak a certain dialect is. Primary pupils, college students who have their own awareness of choosing a language as a daily communicative means contribute to the findings of the investigation to reflect children's and adolescents' LA towards SC and dialects. Adults having migrated into Baoji City from the countryside are investigated indicating that migration and urbanization have great impact on the rising status of SC and the decreasing status of dialects. Among the adults, a great majority are those whose kids are receiving education in Baoji City. Those adults are primary interviewees in that they are a classic reflect to the migration and urbanization in China, and their LA towards SC and dialects hugely affect their children's learning or using a certain language.

3. Instrument

A questionnaire, as the main instrument of data collection, has gotten a high level of sophistication and formal development. The key idea of the questionnaire in this study is to encourage all subjects to freely express their language attitudes towards SC and dialects. The
first part of the questionnaire concerns personal information, such as age, profession, education, birthplace, present inhabitance, as well as the role of being a child or a parent. The fifteen choices in the second part refer to their general LA towards SC and dialects and the language they choose as their daily communicative means. Questions with open-ended answers are offered in the last part to indicate their views on the functions of dialects and the necessity of protecting dialects.

4. Summary of questionnaire and interview

In this part of research, findings are shown through the analysis of results of questionnaires in three dimensions. First of all, a great majority of pre-educational kids are not able to understand and speak dialects, and even without a chance of listening to a certain dialect, which will be a contributive factor to the decreasing number of dialect users. Secondly, kids and adolescent in school, particularly those receiving education in city schools are supposed to use SC in their daily life including in school and out of school, whose parents, therefore, will communicate with them using SC consciously or unconsciously, which is another factor leading to the decreasing status of dialects. Thirdly, migrants from countryside into city begin to use far more SC in their daily communication on various occasions from working place to family life, which will affect their kid's attitudes towards using a language.

IV. Data analysis

1. The causes of the gradual abandonment of some dialects

With the cultural, economic, and social development, Chinese people's language attitudes towards SC and dialects are on the change, where the status of SC is rising and that of dialects is declining, causing the number of proficient users of some dialects to fall sharply and be in danger of dying out. The main causes are as follows:

1.1 Promotion of SC

In 1955, the standard language of the People's Republic of China was officially defined as: “the standard form of Modern Chinese with the Beijing phonological system as its norm of pronunciation, and Northern dialects as its base dialect, and looking to exemplary modern works in báihuà ‘vernacular literary language’ for its grammatical norms” (Order of the President No.37), and afterwards Standard Chinese was promoted all over the country and required to be used in formal occasions including on campus, at working places, in publicity (newspaper, radio, TV and so on). Since 1998, China has crashed into a new tendency of promoting SC. The use of SC as the medium of instruction in the educational system and in the media has contributed to the spreading of SC. As a result, SC is now spoken fluently by most people in China. In practice, however, SC being a "public" lingua franca, other Chinese varieties (dialects), have shown signs of losing ground to the standard, to the chagrin of certain local culture proponents.

1.2 Migration led by economic development

The widespread migration causes some dialects to lose their ground in communication. Since the Reform and Opening-up Policy in 1978, China's economy developed at an unprecedented speed, an increasing number of people in rural areas making for cities to pursue careers or education. So as to effectively communicate with others, the migrants embark on
learning and speaking SC, and a multitude of university or college graduates take Putonghua Evaluation Exam before looking for a job, because employers often require varying proficiency in SC from applicants depending on the nature of the positions.

Additionally, many of children whose parents migrate into cities from rural areas are born to be taught SC in that their parents hold bias that the people who speak dialects are inferior to those who speak Standard Chinese and consequently those children are not able to speak and understand their own dialects when grown up.

1.3 Urbanization

Urbanization in China took place at an unprecedented pace following the initiation of the reform and opening-up policy. By the end of 2014, China's permanent urban residents stood at 749.16 million at the end of 2014, accounting for 54.77 percent of the country's total population (Chinese Urban Population 54.77 pct of Total. Xinhua. January 20, 2015). Urbanization in China is a comprehensive process involving transformations in many areas varying form the management of spatial expansion via modern urban planning to the social, economic and cultural changes. Concerning cultural changes, the most obvious one is the number of the users of SC is on the rise while those of dialects on the decline in that more and more people get involved in urban areas, where they are subjected to using the common language (SC) not only in working place but in daily communication, and the children in urban schools are also supposed to speak SC in class and out of class as well so that they have fewer chances to speak their own dialects.

2. Chinese people's general attitudes towards dialects

With the reasons mentioned above, Chinese people, especially in urban areas, use SC more frequently and in more occasions than using dialects, resulting in their change of LA, and a large quantity of urban dwellers hold the idea that dialects and dialects users are inferior to SC and SC users and look down upon dialects and dialects users. Those holding such idea tend to give up speaking dialects with others, even with their family members, and object to their family members' using a certain dialect or forbid their kids to learn or use dialects making themselves and family members more "superior" to those speaking dialects. Socially, there is a greater chance that dialects users and their requirements are declined in many occasions just because they are considered "out". The status of Standard Chinese, as a result, is rising and that of dialects is on the decline, even some regional dialects are dying out, resulting in the disappearance of some unique cultures and cultural forms, such as operas.

3. The approaches of changing people's attitude toward dialects

With dialects losing the ground to Standard Chinese, the nation and the public ought to have greater awareness of protecting dialects, and relating actions and measures are to be taken to prevent dialects from dying out, for instance, language policies made by government. More importantly, people's LA towards dialects should be promoted because language attitude plays a significant part in treating, speaking, learning a language for individuals and language planning for officials. The primary task is to help those holding negative LA towards dialects raise their awareness of the charm of dialects and the importance of sustaining cultural heritage with the protection of dialects. The official and individuals can hold more activities relating dialects to promote regional cultures and dialects enabling people to appreciate the
charm and importance of dialects. For instance, TV programs are held in some provinces like Sichuan, Hunan, Shaanxi, etc. to publicize and promote their dialects, which paid off in protecting dialects. While in daily family life, it is necessary that parents teach and encourage their kids to speak dialects instead of using CS with family members.

V. Conclusion
Though SC plays a significant role in China's economic development and urbanization, dialects are heritage of regional cultures; therefore, so as to protect regional cultures, dialects must be sustained and further developed with the promotion of SC simultaneously.

References