

Critical Review of the Current Language Policy in China

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Abstract: This paper investigates the current Language Policy in China, using a descriptive qualitative approach throughout. Describing the current language policy and listing its strengths and weaknesses in detail, the author makes suggestions and recommendations for sustainable language development. In addition to providing a reference for the development of language policy in China, the paper also serves as a stimulus and inspiration for future research on language policy.

Keywords: Language Policy; Chinese; Dialects; Minority languages

Introduction

Description of the Language Policy

What is Language Policy?

Language policy has gone through different historical stages and has developed different understandings. It is generally accepted that language policy entered academic field after the World War II (Ricento, 2000).

"Before the Second World War, language was more often seen as a 'natural growth' phenomenon, and there was relatively little human intervention and interference in language. After the Second World War, the relationship between language and society has become increasingly closer: the role and influence of language in the development of society has been increasingly appreciated. There is also a desire to manage and intervene in society through the management of language. The establishment of a corresponding language policy has clearly become the most effective means of achieving this management and intervention."(Wang, 2015)

There are a number of representative definitions of language policy. Australian linguists Kalpan and Baldauf (1997) suggested that language policy is a set of linguistic concepts, laws, regulations, rules and practices developed and implemented by a society, group or system in order to bring about planned language changes. The Israeli linguist Spolsky (2004) proposed a three-part view of language policy, arguing that language policy is described through 3 parts: language practices (the habitual patterns in which users choose among the language variants available to them), language beliefs or consciousness (beliefs about language and language use), and all efforts to modify and influence such languages. According to Chinese scholar Cai (2002), language policy refers to the laws, regulations, rules and measures that are enacted by human in the process of communication according to the position and viewpoint they take on a particular language or languages. According to Chen (2005), one of China's leading linguists, language policy is an important regulation and measure taken by the government on language status, language role, language rights, interlanguage relations, language development, language use and regulation, and is also a concrete demonstration of the attitude of the authorities on language matters.

Current Language Policy in China

Being a country of many nationalities, languages and cultures, China is home to 56 ethnic groups, almost 100 languages and about 30 written languages. Of these, Hanyu alone has more than 10 dialects, under which are sub-dialects and vernaculars, and in some places there are different sounds within five or ten miles, so there are difficulties in language communication. Dealing with the language and writing issue is of great importance to maintaining the country's unity, promoting national unity and modernization (Language Policy and Language Legislation in China, 2006).

The policy on languages commonly used in the country: Mandarin and standardized Chinese characters are commonly used in the country; the State promotes Mandarin and standardized Chinese characters (Language Policy and Language Legislation in China, 2006).

The policy on local ethnic languages: All ethnic languages coexist and discrimination against languages is forbidden; each ethnic group is free to acquire, utilize and cultivate their languages; and the government is encouraging all peoples to share each other's languages. In ethnic autonomous zones and those inhabited by ethnic minorities, the national language and the local minority language

can be used simultaneously. The State's promotion of Putonghua (Mandarin) and standardized Chinese characters is not intended to restrict the use and development of minority languages, but rather to enable minority residents, who can use their own languages and characters first, to learn a commonly used Putonghua (Mandarin) so that they can communicate in a wider range of situations. The use of minority languages should follow relevant regulations of the Constitution, the Law on Regional Ethnic Autonomy and other laws (Language Policy and Language Legislation in China, 2006).

The policy on dialects: Dialects exist objectively and there are individual uses for them. Popularising Mandarin, the national standard, does not mean that dialects will be wiped out and they would persist in some districts and zones. The promotion of Putonghua (Mandarin) requires people in dialect areas to master their own dialects and then learn the nationally spoken Putonghua (Mandarin) for communication in public settings (Language Policy and Language Legislation in China, 2006).

The policy on traditional Chinese characters: Traditional Chinese characters have their own value. The introduction of standardized Chinese characters does not require that traditional and variant characters should not be used in all contexts. Rather, it is to restrict the use of traditional and variant characters to a certain range (Language Policy and Language Legislation in China, 2006).

Strengths of the Language Policy

Our language policy can be broadly summarized as follows: (i). The State encourages the common use of Mandarin throughout the country. (ii) For all peoples, it is their liberty to utilize and develop their languages.

The State encourages the common use of Mandarin throughout the country

Firstly, the promotion of a common language will help the 56 ethnic groups in China to become more unified and contribute to the peace and economic development of the country.

Secondly, the popularization of Mandarin throughout the country can help residents in poor and remote mountainous areas to integrate into the city easily, providing them with more employment opportunities and improving their living conditions.

Thirdly, the implementation of Putonghua education in Hong Kong and Macau can increase cultural exchanges with Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan, and enhance cultural identity.

For all peoples, it is their liberty to utilize and develop their languages

First, under the guidance of this policy, a good pattern of multiple languages in China has been formed.

Second, this principle helps protect endangered languages; it helps establish a national database of language resources and promotes the sharing of minority language resources.

Third, China encourages foreign language education, which has produced a large number of multi-language talents, helping China export its excellent culture and ideas and expanding cultural exchanges at home and abroad.

Weaknesses of the Language Policy

First, language policies on some endangering minority languages have never been built currently, such as Manchu, Hezhe, Olunchun, Tujia and She languages. As the legislation on language policy is mainly state built and the major officials in the state governments commonly are Han people who may be not familiar with the minority languages, which has caused the little attention paid to the minority language policies, especially those uncommonly used minority languages because of small minority population.

Second, the current foreign language education policy emphasizes the importance of English, but ignores the position of other foreign languages. English has been one of the curriculum subjects in the country for many years, only several areas (especially in Northeast China) choose Japanese as the second language learning.

Third, no related laws or regulations are set for the language used in the exporting products. As the great volume of Chinese export and the influence of the China's economy, it is time to let the people all around the world enjoy the beauty of the Chinese characters.

Recommendations

First, the language laws need to be established and implemented to protect the endangering minority languages. Although the language has its own development principle, it is necessary to save the endangering ones to show the variety of a nation's languages and to enrich the human's civilization.

Second, for the endangering minority languages, the government should provide the funds and organize the professionals and experts to collect and record the history and details of the languages and set up the corpus, or even to advocate/push the particular minority areas to enact the bilingual education to prolong the existence of the endangering languages.

Third, the bilingual education should be implemented in the minority areas to protect the minority languages. The government could

put the equality of minority languages into practice, advocate the public to treat each language equally and protect the existence of the minority languages.

Fourth, the measures should be taken to protect the various dialects which also need to be recorded in the long run as the popularity and the mainstream of Putonghua. New science and technology could be used in researching, recording, and data analysis in the historic development of dialects in China.

Fifth, foreign language education policy should provide more foreign language choices for students to find the most interested or the most appropriate one or to fit the characteristics of local development, as not everyone has the same foreign language learning talent / desire or the market necessity for a particular foreign language. To put English as the almost only choice all over the nation will cause fewer students know other foreign languages, which will not help the individual and national long-term development.

Sixth, to nurture the intelligent young people for the further possible market needs, the strategic planning on foreign language education needs to be designed and enacted to change the current only-English situation, balance the development of different foreign languages education in China and improve the quality of foreign language education, as the translation and introduction of foreign advanced knowledge still needs to be strengthened.

Seventh, the laws and regulations need to be designed and enacted to give clear rules to use the Chinese characters or Hanyu Pinyin in the exporting Made-in-China products to build the Chinese own brands. The influence of the China's economy is beyond what we can imagine in recent years, the Chinese could be more powerful in the worldwide stage. To enrich the human's civilization, the beautiful Chinese characters with the unique Chinese logic/wisdom need to be widespread in the world to share the prosperity of material and spiritual civilization.

Eighth, the new proper linguistic theories are needed by the unique Chinese language situation. It is not enough to record or do empirical researches on the dialects or minority languages, the appropriate linguistic theories development is essential to analyze the special ancient eastern languages.

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