

Language Politics, Hakka Dialect and Taiwan History

Kuo-sheng Chang

Associate Professor

Department of Public Affairs and Management, Kai Nan University, Taiwan

Abstract:

Language, commonly considered a tool for communication, has in reality exceeded this neutral functional feature. The inherent assimilation and differentiation power of language has played an important role in the language politics in Taiwan. This paper reexamines the marginalization of Hakka language in Taiwan and its conflict with mainstream language. It draws attention to Hakka's strives for language preservation by foregrounding language as a constituent of Hakka ethnic cultural identity.

Keywords: Hakka dialect, language, differentiation, assimilation, ethnic cultural identity

Introduction

Language, commonly considered a tool for communication, has in reality exceeded this neutral functional feature in various political, social, cultural and psychological aspects. In *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Benedict Anderson endows great significance to language by stating that spoken languages in the pre-print world, “were (and are) the warp and woof” of their speakers’ lives, while “print language laid the basis for national consciousness” (42-43). Language per se or linguistic behavior is indeed a crucial constituent of an individual’s identity. Besides body images, such as skin color, hair color, facial features and clothing, which can commonly become distinctive characteristics of race, nation and ethnicity, linguistic features have an important bearing on our identity.

From infancy, we start to understand our own existence and the world we live in from our five senses, while language constructs and reinforces this understanding. Jacques Lacan has explained how one learns via one’s mother tongue rules and laws governing the language and the world it signifies, he states that “it is the place of language where subjectivity is constituted.” Even without Lacan’s psychoanalysis, we can explain the importance of language from our own experience. Words spoken by our mother, or primary nurturer, initiate us into the social world. Our mother’s words help us recognize who we are. Psychologically, we are under the sway of comments made by our mother. In the set of language we learn from our mother, there are inherent values and ideologies. That is why it is generally accepted that mother tongue, the language commanded by our mother, the language we learn from infancy, has an enormous impact on our understanding of who we are, and on our recognition of our own identity in various facets, including social, national and ethnic ones. It is not uncommon for a child, whose mother tongue is that of an ethnic minority, to be acutely aware when he or she comes into contact with the majority of people in the society that language is a signifier of his or her different ethnic identity.

This paper reexamines the language scenes in Taiwan in the past two centuries. It discusses the marginalization of Hakka language in Taiwan and its conflict and continuous contention with mainstream or dominant languages. It draws attention to Hakka’s strives for language preservation by foregrounding

language as a constituent of Hakka ethnic cultural identity.

Language and Identity

In traditional societies, an individual's linguistic capability in the language of a country or an ethnic group is usually understood as a crucial factor distinguishing an insider from an outsider. The influence of language in this political aspect has been observed by Michael E. Brown and Sumit Ganguly, who declare "language is a critical marker for many groups—defining the boundaries of the group and determining membership in the group"(1-2). In a modern state such as the United States of America, the ability to use her de facto official language is an important requirement for naturalization, that is, becoming a citizen. As clearly stated by the official website of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, naturalization eligibility requirements include "Be able to read, write, and speak basic English." According to the *New York Times*, in 2017, President Donald Trump has embraced a new proposal for immigration to the United States, which awards points to immigration applicants based on various factors such as education, high-paying job offers, age, record of achievement, among which is "ability to speak English" (Baker). The Washington Post has reported that Rick Santorum, while visiting Puerto Rico in his 2012 campaign for the GOP Presidential nomination, stated that the territory must adopt English as its primary language if it wanted statehood (Liu and Sokhey). All these language politics manifest the importance of language in determining an individual or a group's insider or outsider status.

Ethnic identity, just like national identity, can be interconnected to language. In many societies, ethnic identity can be constructed, sustained, and reinforced through various ways pertaining to common denominators, such as genealogy, geography, culture, history and, especially, language. Linguistic behavior, as Robert Brock Le Page and Andrée Tabouret-Keller correctly observe, is "a serious of acts of identity in which people reveal both their personal identity and their search for social roles" (14). This is especially true in social contexts where multiple languages coexist and vie with each other, while an individual's outward appearance cannot serve as a means for differentiation.

The inherent assimilation and differentiation power of language is often

used as political strategy for forming identification and bonding, or for distinction and separation. The recognition of the great impact governmental language policies can have on the whole society and especially their relevance to the channeling of interests to speakers of particular languages renders governmental language policies an area of contention in a multi-ethnic, multi-language society like Taiwan.

What is Hakka?

What is Hakka? When one searches for the word “Hakka” in *Oxford English Dictionary*, generally considered the most authoritative English dictionary, one finds two definitions for the word in its noun form--“A member of a people of south-eastern China, especially Canton, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, who migrated from the north during the 12th century,” and “The dialect of Chinese spoken by the Hakka, with about 27 million speakers.” There is also a definition of the word in its adjective form--“Relating to the Hakka or their language.” When one searches for words such as Chinese, English, American, Irish and French, one finds rather similar forms of definition, which refers to the people and the language of the respective national groups.

When one compares the entry of the word “Hakka” in *Oxford English Dictionary* to that in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, generally considered the most authoritative encyclopedia, one finds that the latter uses Hakka to mean the people, and the word “Hakka language” to mean the language spoken by the Hakka people. By not adding the term “language,” and simply using “Hakka” to mean the Hakka language, the entry in *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests an interesting link between the Hakka people and their language---which has always existed in our conceptualization of a nation or an ethnicity, be it English, French, Hoklo or Hakka--the people is the language; the language is the people.

Poetic Productions Highlighting Language Politics

A strong link between a people and their language has been the dramatic center in many poetic productions in Taiwan. Poetic productions are basically works constructed by language, and their inherent consciousness about the power of language is natural. In *Blue Brave: The Legend of Formosa in 1895*, a

2008 movie directed by Chih-Yu Hung based on a novel by Hakka writer Li Chao, the bond between Hakka and their language is the reason prompting the protagonist to resist the Japanese. The story is set in 1895 after the Ching Dynasty government ceded Taiwan to Japan. Resenting Japanese rule, local Taiwanese, most of whom are originally farmers, fought against incoming Japanese soldiers. The hero of the story is a Hakka man named Wu Tang-hsing, who leaves his mother, wife and children to be the resistance leader. Even though he understands that the resistance might be useless, he still persists, because, as he says in great sorrow, “changing his name to a Japanese one, speaking the Japanese language, becoming a Japanese” are totally unacceptable to him. His words pinpoint the importance of name and language to his identity.

In the movie, another Hakka figure, a woman called Ay-ying, persuades her bandit friend to join the local resistance army against the Japanese. Her reasons are similar to that of Wu Tang-hsing. She says, “When the Japanese are here, we have to change our names to Japanese ones. I do not want to forget who I am. Shall we not fight against the Japanese, too?” Even though Ay-ying does not mention the Japanese language, her abhorrence of Japanese names can be equated to the Japanese language, as names are symbolic identities inscribed in language.

Blue Brave: The Legend of Formosa in 1895 is the first Hakka language movie made in Taiwan. Hakka is the major language as the leading roles are mainly Hakka, while Hoklo and Japanese are also used accordingly based on the ethnicity or nationality of the different characters. The movie presents contact and conflicts between different languages and peoples. Linguistic difference marks the first main episode, in which the heroine, a Hakka young lady named Huang Hsing-mei, and her servants are robbed and abducted by Hoklo bandits. While the bandits talk to their abductees in Hoklo, the heroine scolds the bandits in Hakka. One of the bandits says that he cannot understand what the Hakka woman is saying. In spite of the seemingly mutually unintelligible languages, the Hoklo speaking bandits finally release the Hakka women without hurting them as the leader of the bandit admires the heroine. He wishes the heroine would return to him when nobody in her community believes that she has not been sexually violated by her abductors. Yet his wish is thwarted because the hero

trusts the heroine and marries her in spite of her unfortunate abduction.

This group of Hoklo-speaking bandits eventually joins the resistance army led by the Hakka hero to fight against the Japanese. The bandits also recruit several indigenous Taiwanese people. The cooperation of Hakka, Hoklo and indigenous people of Taiwan shows that their language and ethnic differences are no obstacle to their determination to protect Taiwan from Japanese invasion.

It is noteworthy that throughout the movie, the Hakka hero clings to his Hakka tongue even when he is commanding a guerilla army comprising not just Hakka but Hoklo and indigenous people. He can, in fact, speak Hoklo, as when he talks with the leader of the Hoklo bandit after he discovers that the latter is an honorable man. But that is just for once. For the rest of the time throughout the movie, he continues to speak in Hakka. This is the man who pronounces that speaking the Japanese language and changing his name to a Japanese one are unacceptable. He is a figure symbolizing the strong link between Hakka and their language.

In Chung Chiao-cheng's *Taiwanese Trilogy*, the miserable condition of Taiwanese people's lives during the Japanese colonization period is the main theme of the second part of the trilogy. Linguistic contacts and conflicts, as experienced by the Hakka family in the story, manifest the important role of language at that time. Japanese, as the language of the colonizers, is the official language and the language of prestige. Local Taiwanese who wish to climb the social ladder and eager to be accepted by the Japanese institution must learn the Japanese language. The hero's elder brother, Lu Wei-dong is a good example. After completing elementary education with good performance, he continues to study in high school. Upon graduation, he acquires the position of a teacher who is able to teach the Japanese language. When it comes to his younger brother's turn to study in high school, his mother, a widowed Hakka woman in her fifties, opposes stubbornly.

The story revolves around the thoughts and feeling of the two brothers. The elder brother, Lu Wei-dong, who is eager to please his Japanese superiors at school, feels his mother looks down on him. He knows that his mother, a traditional Hakka woman, is psychologically resistant towards the Japanese language. The younger brother, Lu Wei-liang, feels his mother treats him unfairly

when she does not permit him to study in high school even when socially influential people and relatives have tried to persuade her. He runs away from home, goes to Taipei to work for a Japanese bookstore owner, learns excellent Japanese from his employer, and acquires lots of knowledge from books in the store. Eventually, he goes back to his village to help illiterate Taiwanese farmers who are exploited by Japanese government.

In the story, time and again it is mentioned that the local farmers cannot understand what the Japanese officials say to them. They are completely disadvantaged. When the Japanese police, who are usually brutal towards the Taiwanese, hears the Japanese language spoken by Lu Wei-liang, they respect him. The same thing happens when they meet his elder brother, Lu Wei-dong. During the fifty years of Japanese colonization of Taiwan from 1895 through 1945, even though there were political and linguistic resistances, the Japanese language, as the colonizers' language, was still the language of prestige and a means for upward mobility. Therefore, many Taiwanese elites learned to use the Japanese language superbly (Tai 529), and many dwellers in major large cities could speak Japanese (Kubler 43). Obviously, Japanese language proficiency during that period can be linked to one's social prestige. The link is not purely imaginative, for the ability to speak the Japanese language is the ability to be heard by those in the ruling class and those with power. Those who cannot speak the Japanese language would seldom have a chance to be heard. Due to Lu Wei-liang's ability to speak fluent Japanese, he is able to help his fellow Hakka people.

After Japan was defeated and ceded Taiwan to the Republic of China in 1945, the Japanese language deflated immediately in prestige and was banned altogether by the new rulers of Taiwan. The newly arrived Kuomintang government mandated Mandarin Chinese as the only official language and called it "Kuo-yu," which literary mean "national language." The teaching of Mandarin Chinese and its use as a medium of instruction were strictly administered in all levels of educational institutions. The use of local dialects, be it Hakka, Hoklo or indigenous people's languages, was strictly banned and violators could be slapped, fined or punished in various ways (Dreyer 396). The use of Japanese turned into an act "extremely unpatriotic" (Kubler 43-44). Obviously, the

language politics of the Kuomintang government consolidated the advantage of the newly arrived Mandarin Chinese speakers, while it disadvantaged the local Taiwanese, who were speakers of Hoklo, Hakka, indigenous languages, and who had been schooled in Japanese for the past five decades. The sea change in the status of the various languages, and especially the unpatriotic label attached to Japanese disempowered the elites in Taiwan. By debasing the language the elites are fluent in, the new government deprived their power to articulate their thoughts and to express themselves.

A City of Sadness, a 1989 movie directed by Hou Hsiao-hsien, vividly presents the chaotic linguistic conflicts experienced by the people in Taiwan in the post-Japanese colonization period. The arrival of the Kuomintang government brought people from mainland China. These new arriviers command many different mutually incomprehensible dialects. There is a remarkable scene in which a Taiwanese figure, Lin Wen-heung, has to negotiate with mainlander gangsters to rescue his brother from imprisonment. The negotiation is through tedious interpretation from his Hoklo dialect to Cantonese and then to Shanghainese. The interpretation from a dialect via another to a third one undoubtedly causes great confusion. He finally resolves not to talk too much and just gives the mainlanders a pile of money.

In another remarkable episode in the movie, Lin Wen-ching, the youngest brother of the aforementioned Taiwanese figure, is confronted by an angry mob of local Taiwanese, who seeks revenge on the mainlanders after the 228 incident, a violent conflict between the newly arrived mainlanders and local Taiwanese. Lin Wen-ching is deaf since eight from an accident of falling from a tree. His deafness has made him mute. When confronted by an angry Taiwanese on a train threatening him with a sickle and asking him where he is from, he has to declare himself a Taiwanese. With a broken, nervous voice, he speaks up in Hoklo to say that he is a Taiwanese. That is the only sentence he speaks in the movie. But his interrogator does not believe in what he says because his pronunciation is not accurate. The interrogator asks him where he is from again in Japanese, showing that knowledge of the Japanese language is used as a means to differentiate between the local Taiwanese and the newcomers from mainland China. Since Lin Wen-ching is not able hear the question, he cannot answer. Just as the

interrogator is about to strike with his sickle, a friend appears to explain that the young man is deaf and hence cannot understand the question. The scene manifests the significance of language as a means to differentiate between local Taiwanese and the newly arrived mainlanders.

Language and history are linked, and in the post-Japanese colonization period, only local Taiwanese who have gone through the Japanese rule are able to understand Japanese. Newly arrived mainland Chinese are those who cannot speak Japanese and that also means that they do not understand the pains local Taiwanese have endured under the Japanese government. The Japanese language is a signifier of the shared colonized experience of the local Taiwanese. Therefore, languages, indigenous or foreign, willingly learned or imposed by others, are all imprints of the social and political power on Taiwan. They are markers of the lives of the people. What happened in history inevitably leaves imprints on the linguistic phenomenon of the people. The name Formosa, which is now accepted as an alternative name of Taiwan, is a historical relic of Taiwan's linguistic contact with foreigners. It is generally believed that the term, which means a beautiful island, was originally from the exclaiming mouths of first Portuguese navigators gazing at the beauty of Taiwan. If we examine carefully the origin of words in our language today, we would be able to find from their genealogy the cultures or forces, be it domestic or foreign, influencing the lives of the users of the language.

Language Politics and History in Taiwan

Language is a constituent of identity as linguistic behavior is an expression of who we are. In our linguistic behavior, we are inscriptions of history and we in turn inscribe history. Language has always been central in the political and social history of Taiwan. This is because Taiwan is inherently multi-lingual. The indigenous people, who are officially recognized as the first inhabitants of Taiwan, are of 16 different tribes with as many as 42 different dialects.¹ Though

¹Even though traditionally it was thought there are nine indigenous tribes in Taiwan, currently, the Council of Indigenous People of the Executive Yuan of Taiwan recognizes the existence of 16 indigenous tribes. See <https://www.apc.gov.tw/portal/docDetail.html?CID=964B9BFAAA44B32A&DID=0C3331F0EBD318C29EC71D49B5E8708F>.

Han or Chinese people, the majority of Taiwan's population, are portrayed like natives of Taiwan in *A City of Sadness*, they are in fact immigrants from mainland China. Han people are categorized into three different groups, two of which are defined by their languages, Hakka and Hoklo. Like the Hoklo ethnic group in Taiwan, the ethnic identity of Hakka people is preserved in various ways out of which the Hakka language is a fundamental element. Language plays an important role because basically Hoklo and Hakka groups are not distinguishable by outlooks. Neither are these two ethnic groups distinguishable in appearance from those Chinese who arrive in Taiwan after 1945 when Japanese colonization ended. This third group is called "Wai-sheng-zen" (which means "other province people" 外省人). It is generally noted that they command dialects varying from those from the north to the south of China, which are described as "north accent south tone" (from the Chinese expression 南腔北調).

Mutually unintelligible languages or dialects have inevitably caused many conflicts between the various groups of people on the island. It is said that the 228 Incident, a conflict between a Taiwanese woman who sells tobacco and a mainlander soldier on February 28, 1947, which eventually turned tragically into a large scale conflict between local Taiwanese and the newly arrived government originated from mutually unintelligible languages between the woman and the soldier. By administering mandarin-Chinese-only education, Kuomintang government has marginalized not just the local languages or dialects, but also their speakers.

The language policies administered by the Japanese colonizers are still fresh in the minds of many people in Taiwan. They have become a part of the historical memories of Taiwanese people, and these memories are perpetuated and reinforced in poetic productions such as the ones discussed above. A general awareness about the significance of language as a political means for assimilating local people still exists on the island. Hence, movements for the rights to use local languages/dialects eventually began in spite of the Kuomintang government's stringent language policy. Hakka language, which was at first attached with shame as the language of the uneducated, gradually gains more and more recognition in Taiwan due to loud calls from Hakka writers and Hakka intellectuals, who started Hakka movements. Appealing Hakka poetic

productions like the ones above discussed, which feature the positive image of Hakka people and their love for the Hakka language, also play an important role in strengthening Hakka identity.

Conclusion

Language is interconnected with history, and it is not severable from the inherent political, social and cultural forces dominating history. This is because language springs from the living experience of people. It is the means for the people to conceptualize and to express their existence. The term “Hakka,” as the aforementioned definitions in *Oxford English Dictionary* manifest, refers to the Hakka ethnic group as well as the language they speak. Just like “French,” “English” and “Chinese,” the term “Hakka” share the notion that the language is the people and the people the language. An old Hakka saying goes, “sell your ancestors’ land rather than forget your ancestors’ language.” It shows Hakka’s deep attachment to their language.

I would like to conclude this argument about the significance of language in our political, social, cultural and historical life by quoting Rene Descartes’s well-known philosophical proposition, “Cogito ergo sum,” which translated into English means: “I think, therefore I am.” Though thinking may be in graphic mode, it is more often in linguistic terms as language is a potent bearer of knowledge and thoughts. I believe when it comes to identity, be it national, ethnic or individual one, be it Hakka or Hoklo, Decartes’s preposition about thinking can be changed into, “I speak, therefore, I am.”

Works Cited

- Anderson, Benedict. (1991) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso.
- Baker, Peter. (Aug. 2, 2017) "Trump Supports Plan to Cut Legal Immigration by Half." *The New York Time*. Accessed Sept. 2. 2017.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/02/us/politics/trump-immigration.html>
- Blue Brave: The Legend of Formosa in 1895*. (2008). Directed by Chih-Yu Hung. Performed by Sheng-hao Wen, Cheryl Yang, Josephine A. Blankstein. DVD.
- Brown, Michael E. and Sumit Ganguly. (2003) Introduction. *Fighting Words: Language Policy and Ethnic Relations in Asia*. Ed Michael E. Brown and Sumit Ganguly. The MIT Press. 1-17.
- Chung, Chao-cheng. (1999) *Taiwanese Trilogy. Part II. A Complete Collection of Chung, Chao-cheng*. Department of Cultural Affairs, Taoyuan.
- A City of Sadness*. (1989) Directed by Hou Hsiao-hsien. Performed by Tony Leung Chiu Wai, Shufen Xin and Sung Young Cheng. DVD.
- Dreyer, June Teufel. (2003) "The Evolution of Language Policies and National Identity in Taiwan." *Fighting Words: Language Policy and Ethnic Relations in Asia*. Ed Michael E. Brown and Sumit Ganguly. The MIT Press. 385-409.
- "Indigenous People's Languages Use Survey Report." (3 June 2016) Council of Indigenous People of the Executive Yuan of Taiwan. Accessed on 5 Sept. 2017.
<https://www.apc.gov.tw/portal/docDetail.html?CID=964B9BF4AA44B32A&DID=0C3331F0EBD318C29EC71D49B5E8708F>.
- Kubler, Cornelius C. (1985) *The Development of Mandarin in Taiwan: Language Contact*. Student Books.
- Lacan, Jacques. (1953-1954) *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre I: Les Ecrits Techniques de Freud*. French: (Texte établi par Jacques-Alain Miller), Paris: Seuil, 1975. English: Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique (edited by Jacques-Alain Miller), New York: Norton, 1988.
- Le Page, Robert Brock and Andrée Tabouret-Keller. (1985) *Acts of Identity: Creole-Based Approaches to Language and Ethnicity*. Cambridge University Press.

Liu, Amy H. and Anand Edward Sokhey. (18 June 2014) "When and why do U.S. states make English their official language?" *The Washington Post*. Accessed on Sept. 2. 2017.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/06/18/when-and-why-do-u-s-states-make-english-their-official-language/?utm_term=.fe3962f69577.

Tai, Eika. (1999) "Kokugo and Colonial Education in Taiwan." *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 7.2. 503-40.

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service. Naturalization Eligibility Requirements. Accessed on Sept. 2. 2017.

https://www.uscis.gov/citizenship/educators/naturalization-information#eligibility_reqmts.