

Language Practice and Identity of People from Minority Ethnic Groups

Rui Liu, Yue Wang

Yunnan University, Kunming, Yunnan, 650000, China

Keywords: Language practice, Identity, Minority ethnic group, Putonghua, Sociolinguistics

Abstract: Language practice of minority ethnic group is a prevalent topic of the society with cultural diversity. This article focuses on this speciality from perspectives of characteristics and applications. Through the analysis of redefinition on the identity, researchers try to figure out the factors and effects of language practice of minority ethnic group people. In this research, researchers find that language use is relevant tightly to identity people belonging to.

1. Introduction

China is a multi-ethnic country. For thousands of years, every ethnic group has developed their own distinctive cultures while integrated closely with each other. Nowadays, ethnic community is a prevalent discourse. At the same time, Chinese government often emphasizes that we should maintain cultural diversity of minority ethnic group and preserve their characteristics.

Thanks to Yunnan Province, which is blessed with 25 minority ethnic groups, researchers have met with many people from different minority ethnic groups. However, some of them explained that, "I'm not able to speak ethnic language, so I'm not pure or genuine." According to them, ethnic language has faded away from their life. It also occurs to researchers that language use seems relevant to identity. To find out the relationships beyond these phenomena, we interviewed 12 university students from minority ethnic groups. This research focuses on the following 2 questions:

- (1) Which factors influence language practice of minority ethnic group people?
- (2) How does language practice influence their identity?

2. Research Context

2.1 Definition of Identity

The word "identity" contains the connotations of characteristics and similarity. This concept was first applied by Freud in the field of psychology to describe the process of psychological and emotional convergence of individuals, and then it was applied in social psychology, sociology and other fields. In the interaction of individual-collective-society, it has richer connotation and broader explanatory ability.[1] In this research, it refers to a label that a person attaches to themselves about which ethnic group they belong to.

2.2 Putonghua and Ethnic Languages in China

Putonghua is characterized by Beijing pronunciation, northern dialect and Vernacular Chinese. After the establishment of new China, Putonghua is recognized as national language. From then on, the use and promotion of Putonghua have been written on the five-year plan, law and constitution of China. It's reported that the popularity rate of Putonghua reached 80.72% in 2020.[2]

China is blessed with language diversity. Among 55 minority ethnic groups in China, 53 groups have their own language, except Hui and Man. There are about 130 ethnic languages in China. However, 40 of them have been or are inclined to be in danger. [3]

3. Methodology

In table 1. The participants are 12 university students from different minority ethnic groups. On the basis of topic, researchers propose 8 questions to communicate with participants in one-to-one

interview. Through structured interviews, researchers collected their basic information. Additionally, researchers adopt some relatively open questions to discuss their language attitude, language emotion, sense of identification and other issues about ethnic groups.

Table 1 Basic Information Of 12 Participants

Number	Ethnic groups	Father	Mother	Residence is Settlement or Not	Can Speak Ethnic Languages or Not Now	The Degree of Identity
1	Dai	Dai	Dai	Yes	Little	Strong
2	Bai	Bai	Bai	Yes	Little	Strong
3	Hani	Han	Hani	No	No	Weak
4	Zhuang	Yi	Zhuang	Yes	No	Weak
5	Yi	Yi	Han	No	No	Moderate
6	Dai	Dai	Hui	Yes	Yes	Very strong
7	Tu	Tu	Han	No	No	Very weak
8	Gelao	Gelao	Miao	No	No	Weak
9	Lahu	Lahu	Dai	Yes	No	Strong
10	Yao	Yao	Zhuang	No	No	Very weak
11	Dai	Dai	Dai	Yes	Yes	Very strong
12	Yi	Han	Yi	No	No	Moderate

4. Findings

4.1 People Cherish Mainstream Language as Significant Capital for Personal Development

Putonghua is national lingua franca of China. It has become language for teaching, working, publicity and communication. As show in Table 2, Except tests on foreign languages, every national examination is based on Putonghua. Putonghua is a necessary skill for most Chinese.

Table 2 Language Use Of 12 Participants

Number	Ethnic groups	Can Speak Ethnic Languages or Not Now	Could Speak Ethnic Languages or Not in the Past	Language Used in School
1	Dai	Little	Yes	Putonghua, dialect
2	Bai	Little	Yes	Putonghua
6	Dai	Yes	Yes	Putonghua
11	Dai	Yes	Yes	Putonghua
3	Hani	No	Yes	Putonghua
4	Zhuang	No	No	Putonghua, dialect
5	Yi	No	No	Putonghua, dialect
7	Tu	No	No	Putonghua
8	Gelao	No	No	Putonghua
9	Lahu	No	No	Putonghua
10	Yao	No	No	Putonghua
12	Yi	No	No	Putonghua, dialect

Every interviewee speaks Putonghua in school and some of them haven't spoken Putonghua before school. Education occupies most time of their life. During such a long time, Putonghua is the most important and frequently used language. To acquire it, they have to give up their mother tone.

“My father and grandma communicate in Lahu language. Every elder in my village can speak it fluently. However, my parents didn't allow me to learn it because they feared it will disturb my study of Putonghua.” Li is a girl from Lahu ethnic group. Her parents regarded Putonghua as education capital, so they strained to sweep distractions from other language. An interviewee from Bai ethnic group had same experience: her parents prohibited her from speaking ethnic language.

Except the dominance of Putonghua, the demand of ethnic language decreases with the shift of living environment. All 12 interviewees are college students. To obtain further education, they have to leave their ethnic village and integrate themselves into another group where ethnic language wouldn't be accepted. To communicate with schoolmates from different ethnic groups, local dialect is necessary. Having entered university full of students from different regions, Putonghua is

necessary. The more broadly they explore the world, the less opportunities they are given to speak minority language.

4.2 Language Practice Influences People with Different Levels of Identity in Two Opposite Ways

Because of social environment, culture, family background, national policy and other complicated factors, interviewees manifested different levels of identity. When it comes to how language use impacts your identity, their answers indicate that language use influences them in two opposite ways. For people with stronger ethnic minority identity, whether they have a good command of ethnic language or not, language use tends to strengthen their identity. For people with weaker ethnic minority identity, language use tends to weaken their identity.

4.2.1 For People with Stronger Identity

Two interviewees born in ethnic group habitations have strong identity. “I have never forgotten that I’m a Dai girl. I was born in a Dai village and live with Dai people.” Living environment and ethnic cultures endow her with strong identity. At the same time, these factors propose many requirements for group integration. Language use accounts for a considerable percentage, especially in communication and culture inheritance.

“Children and elders in my village can only speak Dai language. But I have forgotten how to speak it. When they are expressing their care and appreciation, I want reply with gratitude in Putonghua, but they can’t understand. The only thing I can do is smile.” said Shi, a Dai girl.

Communication puts a rigorous demand on her fluency of Dai language. Once she couldn’t finish this task, she would reflect, “I’m a Dai girl, but I couldn’t speak with other Dai people in Dai language.” Thus, this event reminds her of identity as well as differences between her and other companions. And then, she wants to integrate into this group more deeply to become a genuine Dai, which further strengthens her identity. In this mental course, her identity was first awakened and then intensified.

“I speak Putonghua in school while Dai language in family. It occurs to me that Putonghua is a formal language, and Dai language is friendly.” Feng is a Dai girl with high fluency of ethnic language. Dai language not only assists her in conversation with relatives, but also distinguishes her from people from other ethnic groups. She notices the particularity and boundary of her identity when switching two languages.

4.2.2 For People with Weaker Identity

Traditionally, people’s identity of their ethnic groups stems from consanguinity and cultures. In modern Chinese society, government divides citizens into 56 ethnic groups and put “ethnic” in the position of legal identity.[4] At the same time, in China’s textbook, the characteristics of minority ethnic groups are emphasized in aspects of clothes, scenery, events, customs and personages.[5] Negatively speaking, the former gives the identity label to people, while the latter sets stereotypes on them.

Among our participants, interviewees with weaker identity of their minority ethnic group doesn’t live in habitations, and have scarcely touched ethnic cultures. “My ID card writes that I come from Li group.” “I don’t think I’m a Hani girl. In fact, I think I’m Han.” “I always forgets that I’m Yao, unless I need to finish some forms.” For them, their identity mostly comes from household registration system.

The outside world classifies them as ethnic minority, and spontaneously throws imaginations and stereotypes about ethnic groups on them. However, they don’t completely recognize their identity. To clarify truth and prove their impurity, they would look for disproof according to stereotypes. “I haven’t worn traditional clothes.” “I don’t live with other Yi people.” “I can’t speak Gelao language.” Thus, language use plays a role as an obvious characteristic.

Compared with people with stronger identity, for people with weaker identity, the lack of language use won’t evoke their emotions like shame, guilty and nervousness. Instead, it only convinces them of their impure identity.

5. Conclusion

The room for ethnic language is narrower, especially for highly educated young people, who should have been successor to ethnic cultures. To be admitted into mainstream society, they give up their mother tone. The language practice doesn't impact their identity directly. However, as a group feature, language does stimulate their reflection on their identity and thereby evoke original judgement about it.

During research, researchers find two points need deeper study. Firstly, some interviewees want to learn ethnic language, but no resources are accessible. Therefore, more platforms about ethnic language should be established for people interested in it. Secondly, due to special distribution of ethnic groups in China, some interviewees can't balance their ethnic identity and regional identity. When taking ethnic language and local dialect into consideration, the confusion would be more complex. Thus, more researches are expected to be made.

References

- [1] Zhou Bo. From Identity to Cultural Identity--A New Aspect of the Design of Representative Inheritor System of Intangible Cultural Heritage [J]. Cultural Heritage,2022(02):19-26.
- [2] Liu Jinlin,Cheng Fan,Ma Jing. Investigation and Study on Popularizing Standard Chinese and Alleviating Relative Poverty of Peasant Households in Frontier Minority Areas--The Guangxi Case[J]. Journal of Guangxi University for Nationalities(Philosophy and Social Science Edition),2022(05):86-95.
- [3] Wang Yuanxin. Enhancing the Investigation of Languages Used by Underpopulated Minorities and the Protection of Endangered Languages[J]. Journal of Xinjiang Normal University(Edition of Philosophy and Social Sciences),2008(01):111-119.
- [4] Gu He. Ethnic Policies and the Construction of the Ethnic Identity[J]. Academic Exploration, 2007(06):34-37.
- [5] Liu Shuzhen. A study on elements about ethnic unity in Chinese textbooks used by primary schools [D]. Qufu Normal University,2020.