

The Preservation of Hokkien

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Abstract—Hokkien in recent years has witnessed a gradual decrease in speaking population, which will accelerate the process of language endangerment. However, it is unaffordable not to cease Hokkien's decline because Hokkien possesses elements that distinguish it from others. From linguistic, cultural and community-based views, it is necessary to maintain Hokkien so that it will not disappear from any speaker's tongue. To achieve that, measures against its decay should be executed and reinforced, which will involve 4 types of aspects, namely personal, societal, governmental and cross-national. With these measures coming into effect, the revitalization of Hokkien will take place in a near future.

Keywords—Hokkien; preservation; measures

I. INTRODUCTION

Hokkien is a dialect of Chinese language, spoken mainly in Southern Fujian Province and Taiwan in China, as well as in Chinese communities in Southeast Asia and was once the lingua franca in that region. In recent years, however, Hokkien speakers in China and Southeast Asia have been decreasing in numbers in a way that Hokkien is rarely taught and spoken by younger generations because Mandarin has become the representative tongue of China and Chinese people home and abroad. Ding has concluded that in all regions historically associated with Hokkien, a growing percentage of young hokkien-Mandarin bilinguals are shifting to Mandarin as their dominant language [1]. In China, as a survey indicates, in a total sum of 1964 Hokkien respondents from mainland China and Taiwan, only 54.8% of those who are below 10 years old are able speak Hokkien properly [2]. In Southeast Asia, dialects (Hokkien as the most dominant one) in Singapore, for example, had lost vitality and the disappearance of them is inevitable [3]. A census completed in 2001 by Leow indicates that in 1990 and 2000 the percentage of age groups of 5-14 and 15-24 speaking dialects were respectively 18.9, 4.3 and 51.5, 18.4 [4]. Under such circumstance, this paper will focus on stating the reasons and specific methods of maintaining the existence of this dialect.

II. THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF HOKKIEN

Hokkien, as one of eight the most prominent dialects of Chinese languages, enjoys a couple of properties that make it so distinctive from others.

To begin with, formed by migration of people in the Central Plain, Hokkien is an ancient Chinese language that can date back to more than 1000 years ago. On account of this, there are a large number of ancient vocabularies in Hokkien; besides, the tones and phonetics of ancient Chinese can be found in today's Hokkien. With the valuable language information contained in Hokkien, quite many linguists, home and abroad, especially those who specialize in Chinese languages, believe that it is the "living fossil" of ancient Chinese language [5].

Second, Hokkien once served as lingua franca for people in Taiwan and Southeast Asia, as a result of its witnessing the movement of people from Fujian to those places and how these newcomers fought for the lives in new lands. These stories of the hardships and harvests were told in Hokkien to next generations, and to the Hokkien community in Mainland China. Hokkien therefore plays a role in bonding generations and Hokkien communities in different nations.

Third, Hokkien, as the language medium, expresses many an artistic form and unique tradition such as architecture, religion, food and regional rites. In terms of artistic forms, Liyuan Opera, Nanying Music (also called Nanguan), Puppet show and Gaojia Opera are well enjoyed by Hokkien populations. These arts were listed in The First Batch of National Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2006 (Source from http://www.gov.cn/zwgk/2006-06/02/content_297946.htm). Besides, Nanyin Music was inscribed in 2009 on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO (Source from <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/nanyin-00199>). As for the architecture, the Red-brick house best represents the architectural culture and is likely to be in the list of the World Cultural Heritage in the near future. These cultural forms are closely related to Hokkien, making it distinguished from other dialects and languages.

III. THE NECESSITY OF THE PRESERVATION OF HOKKIEN

Preserving a dialect or a language has its ground. From a legal standpoint, Yang and Dai explains that the Constitution of PRC acknowledges citizens' right to use their own dialect or language [6]. Apart from that, for Hokkien communities, it is hoped that their mother vernacular tongue can be well preserved based on the following reasons.

First of all, preserving Hokkien is the basis of keeping Hokkien identity. Ivona Orlić argues that dialect, as regional

element over national, is the basis of identity and a way to quickly recognize “your” people. Through its symbolic values, it is bestowed with the power to express belonging to a certain regional identity [7]. Maintaining identity of Hokkien communities constructs the spiritual belonging of Hokkien populations to the culture and mentality they are attached to.

Second, the preservation of Hokkien promotes the maintenance of Hokkien culture. It is generally agreed that language and culture are intimately related. Language can be viewed as a verbal expression of culture to maintain and convey culture and cultural ties. Bernini believes that preserving a dialect means preserving not just a language, but also the culture based on that language that in turn can play an important role in the preservation of the language itself [8]. Romaine makes clear that the arguments in favor of doing something to reverse language death are about preserving cultures and habitats [9]. More noticeably, there is direct relationship between a dialect and its artistic forms, such as operas and dramas, which were produced and performed in dialects. If dialects are lost, these arts will soon lose their roots [10]. As is concluded above, those precious arts and traditions in Hokkien communities are not only regional treasures, but worldwide ones. Thus the preservation of Hokkien is in urgent demand.

Third, the need to save Hokkien lies in the research value that it is embedded with in the field of history and linguistics. A language/dialect, experiencing the lapse of time and changes, reflects the course of history and ancient linguistic information. For one reason, Lei in his article describes dialects as the mirror of history that can reflect important issues taking place in the time that elapsed, such as demographic movement and wars [11]. Hokkien is believed to be firstly spoken in Central Plains of China, and Hokkien speakers gradually moved to Fujian because of wars. Later in the history, Hokkien speakers went to settle down in Taiwan and Southeast Asia at the quest of fortune and better lives. For another, as pointed out above, Hokkien evolved and developed from ancient Chinese and thus is endowed with valuable linguistic information.

Fourth, Hokkien, together with other languages and dialects, demonstrates the wisdom of human beings and therefore deserves more focus on preservation. Languages and dialects are dying in a way creatures do. Every loss of a tongue is irrevocable.

From the reasons listed above, preserving Hokkien makes cultural, logical and scientific sense and it is necessary that Hokkien be revitalized.

IV. DIALECT PRESERVATION

The preservation of minority languages and dialects has been a heatedly discussed issue. Many factors are engaged in the process. Sridhar [12], Fishman [14] and Romaine [14] have concluded several factors that are responsible for language maintenance and shift, the most important among them is generation; also the strength of a group in relation to other minorities and majorities, language status, socioeconomic value, education and institutional

support/government policies. In addition to those factors, Gupta and Yeok [15] and Sridhar [16] specify their argument that the ability and desire of parents to transmit the ancestral language to their children or the extent to which the language is used among the younger generations constitute a large proportion in language maintenance. And the individual's decision of whether or not transmitting the ancestral language to their children is not influenced by the generation alone, but by other factors such as the status of the ancestral language in the wider society, government's language policy vis-a-vis the ancestral language in question, community support, etc. [17].

Based on those fundamental factors, supporters are proposing a great variety of measures against the dialect decay. Anthropologist Akira Yamamoto has identified nine factors that help maintain and promote the small languages:

The existence of a dominant culture in favor of linguistic diversity; a strong sense of ethnic identity within the endangered community; the promotion of educational programs about the endangered language and culture; the creation of bilingual/bicultural school programs; the training of native speakers as teachers; the involvement of the speech community as a whole; the creation of language materials that are easy to use; the development of written literature, both traditional and new; the creation and strengthening of the environment in which the language must be used [18].

Tulloch, S [19] mentions 4 perspectives to make it possible: 1. establish goals and strategies locally, based on speakers' values; 2. promote the language, while embracing dialectal diversity; 3. focus on grassroots, oral initiatives; 4. encourage dialectal awareness and mutual intelligibility. These ways are reference-worthy to the maintenance of a dialect. Anne Pauwels studies the maintenance of community language and he lists 3 factors to maintain the vitality of community language: persistence of use, consistency in language use and parental use of teaching and learning techniques. Sims. CP [20] in her paper describing the preserving efforts of a minority language mentions three approaches that benefit the language maintenance: generational approach, language-teaching approach and individualized approach. In Person K.R.'s paper, he speculates the research subject, Bisu, a minority language spoken in a limited number of regions, can remain viable for at least a few more generations in following reasons concluded: the interest of national government in preserving languages, growing appreciation of ethnic diversity, positive language attitude, development of a written language and awareness of a large community. [21]

With all these factors that are the key to the preservation of dialects and languages, it can be indicated that many levels of different aspects are involved, such as governmental level, societal level, educational level, personal level and so on.

V. THE PRESERVATION OF HOKKIEN

A. A Brief Summary of Current Preservation

Some Hokkien communities abroad have taken measures against the endangerment of Hokkien language. Outside China, in Penang, Malaysia, a Speak Hokkien Campaign has been organized. Also in Malaysia, a Hokkien channel, Astro-HuaHeeDai, is available all day long. It is the only 24-hour Hokkien TV channel around the globe. Domestically, in Taiwan, as is mentioned above, Hokkien lessons are provided for students in schools and students are required to take them as a part of Mother Tongue education. Moreover, between 2008 and 2009, the Education Bureau of Taiwan published 700 Hokkien characters for literacy popularization. Tributes should also be paid to some Taiwan entertainment stars, who produced Hokkien pop songs and movies. For example, a Taiwanese pop band May Day has composed quite a number of Hokkien songs that are widely listened to even by people who do not understand the language. However, entertainment stars like them are not the majority. In mainland China, some schools, not a large number, offer elective Hokkien courses for pupils; some societal organizations also dedicated to popularizing Hokkien and producing Hokkien cultural products. However, these dedications overall have limited influence on Hokkien communities in the way that they are not noted or recognized by Hokkien speakers.

As can be seen, the efforts of Chinese Hokkien community to preserve Hokkien are unsatisfactory, especially those in mainland China. The measures that have been taken so far are restricted to only a small domain. Then, what can be done to achieve the preservation of Hokkien? We will start with the dialect planning.

B. Dialect Planning

To plan a dialect is no easy task. Nowadays, the importance of lingua franca, English, becomes more and more predominant. Spolsky points out that English as a global language is now a factor that needs to be taken into account in its language policy by any nation state [22]. Apart from English, national language should be placed at the highest position to ensure a nationwide communication. The existence of a dialect in a country is under the besiegement of English and national language. Therefore, dialects ought to be planned in a scientific and unanimous manner.

Bernini [23] in his article puts forward 5 steps of planning a dialect (in a top-to-bottom order): corpus planning (the documentation of a dialect), status planning (the judicial safeguarding in the light of the language rights), prestige planning (the promotion of activities aimed at spreading the cultural importance), acquisition planning (the way to teach it), and family language planning (the transmission inside family). In China, the legal position of Mandarin keeps the possibilities of corpus planning for Hokkien at bay; the family language planning will not be an acceptable result for Hokkien communities. However, because of the weaker status of a dialect, a bottom-up process is considered to be a better way to plan the dialect. Therefore, planning Hokkien can begin with the family planning stage and by and by

develop upper, if possible, to the status planning. To complete the task, actions for preserving Hokkien are called for to a community-based extent.

C. How Will the Preservation Succeed?

1) Personal level

a) *Attitude*: A positive language attitude towards Hokkien is the fundamental element. It is never shameful for any native speaker to speak their own language nor pass it on to their offspring. Any dialect or language that survives the course of history is always worth exploring and learning, at least, by its native speakers and their next generations. There is no ground to say that speaking a certain dialect or language is stupid. These days, the reality that some speakers put Hokkien into an awkward situation where it is, in their viewpoint, an inferior dialect to speak is truly a counterexample of entertaining a positive attitude. Moreover, being able to speak both the national language and a dialect is never a contradiction; teaching kids both of them is not a conflict, either. Hokkien Speakers need to value it and always feel proud to speak and teach it.

b) *Awareness and identity*: Dialectal awareness and identity are also essential, which is rather similar to language attitude. The difference is that they require speakers to be aware of the tongue they are speaking and the identity they hold so that?? a language loyalty may be established. The incomparable heritage Hokkien possesses is bound to be kept in mind by the native speakers to encourage their awareness and unique identity. It is inconceivable to observe quite a few parents' rejection to teaching their kids the dialect and teachers' prohibition of kids from going on Hokkien conversations after class. It is necessary that all the community bear the mindset that anyone's efforts in the preservation count.

c) *Use of dialect*: Frequent use of dialect also matters. The use of dialect is not simply limited to family base; a great number of occasions allow the use of dialects so long as the occasions are right (where the listeners and speakers are all natives of a dialect). Also, people feel more comfortable with a dialect when they speak it frequently. The biggest problem facing Hokkien communities and other dialectal ones is that people, especially the younger generations, use or is forced to use the dialect in a far lower frequency. The deficient acquisition will thus lead to a weaker identity and language loyalty and thus a cultural attachment may not be well set up.

d) *Mutual intelligibility and tolerance of accents and vocabulary*: Knowledge of accents and lexical difference can smooth the communication within the dialect or language communities. Due to the absence of a universally acknowledged standard accent, some conversers switch to Mandarin when they find a slight difference of phonetics or lexicon in the conversation, which demands speakers to be familiar with different accents and vocabulary via radio, video or television to increase their tolerance of accents and mutual intelligibility. Hinton [24] takes the position that

tolerance of variation is essential because linguistically speaking, there really is not one right way to say things and it is discouraging to speakers to say that there is. Although native speakers of English from the US, the UK, Australia and other countries speak differently the same language, their tolerance of accents facilitates the vocal communication beyond countries. It is the same case when we refer to people from different parts of China speaking Mandarin with all kinds of accents, sometimes sounding strange but understandable. Therefore, no matter where the Hokkien speakers are from, mainland, Taiwan, or foreign countries like Malaysia, Philippines, it is imperative that speakers expose to different accents of the dialect to promote mutual intelligibility.

2) Societal and organizational level

a) *Cultural products*: Cultural industry plays an indispensable role in the augmentation of the dialect or language and the feeling of pride of the native speakers. The cultural products come in artistic forms, such as dramas, songs, poems and movies and the modernization of unique cultural arts can also motivate the development the dialects. The excellent example of Hong Kong entertainment industry can be a reference to Hokkien communities and others. Noticeably, these cultural products need to accommodate a wider range of age, with more targeting young groups who possess a weaker Hokkien identity. Cartoons, movies, TV series, talk shows and programs alike in Hokkien will make popular the Hokkien dialect.

b) *Dialect activities*: Activities regarding dialects are also helpful of preserving the dialects. It is impressive that the Chakavian community launches dialectal contests related to poems engaging various age groups to promote Chakavian dialect's influence [25]. Hokkien organizations and the community as a whole can refer to the activities alike aiming at encouraging speakers' passion for the dialect.

c) *Schooling education*: Being the primary zooms of education of a variety of subjects, schools are tasked with the Hokkien literacy of students'. Döpke [26] thinks that strategic use of some language learning techniques can compensate for the limited exposure that children have to the community language and can in fact enhance the learning process. Techniques include modelling, rehearsing, elicitation and word games. Moreover, student activities relating to Hokkien, such as Hokkien speech contest and Hokkien writing contest, may be available to stimulate enthusiasm for Hokkien. More importantly, recruitment of qualified Hokkien teachers has to be of top priority to guarantee the expertise that students are expected to master.

d) *Family education*: Family is the most decisive social unit that can contribute to the dialect preservation in that, regardless of schooling education, a kid can learn to be able to speak Hokkien with the help of their family members. Parents need to firstly have a mindset that their dialect should be passed on to their next generations. At the same time, the participation of elder fluent speakers should

be engaged. For example, the time kids spend with their grandparents can create a more solid language exposure.

3) Governmental level

a) *Favorable policies*: Policies are the most decisive external factor that determines the fate of a language or dialect. It is never a wise move to barbarously forbid any use of a dialect. It will be blessed if the nation allows the sub-existence of dialects and empowers the local government with favorable dialectal policies. Policies include supports of dialectal activities and speeches under decent occasions, systematic curricula of dialectal education (they can be elective in case some students are not intended to learn), establishment of dialectal studies and researches and alike.

b) *Standardization*: A standardized variety of a dialect or a language determines the developmental prospect and increase comprehensibility of it. In Hokkien community, a universally recognized standard has yet to be established, though in Zhou's book, he points out Xiamen variety is the standard one in mainland [27], and Taipei variety is also considered standard in Taiwan. The lack of an accepted standard impedes Hokkien's further evolution. The process of standardization is not an easily completed mission, either. Tulloch mentions two ways of standardization in her article: flexible standard and compromised standard [28]. A flexible standard is that it permits concurrent existence of more than one standard and these standards, equal but different, make sense to speakers. The Received Pronunciation of British English and Standard American English of American English are both standard Englishes. While a compromised standard means that the standard is artificially created with elements from other regions. Either of them can standardize Hokkien and other dialects.

In addition, the uniformity and standardization of Hokkien orthography is/are expected to be well established. Hokkien pertains to Chinese language family where Chinese characters are used by all the dialects. Following this logic, a consensus of character selection deserves to be reached among Hokkien communities.

4) *Cross-national level*: The cooperation and inter-reference from all Hokkien communities at home and abroad will also make a difference. Cooperation regarding to standardization of written system and phonetics, sharing of Hokkien programs and frequent exchange of experience can lead Hokkien to a brighter future. Remarkable experiences, such as the Speak Hokkien Campaign in Penang, the Hokkien curriculum in Taiwan, are worth referring to. When the cooperation is achieved from home and abroad, Hokkien will be more influential, and the progress and vitality can be more realistic.

VI. CONCLUSION

The most worrying dilemma is not that there are not sufficient studies and researches, but that these work on Hokkien communities with limited effect: a majority of people have not realized yet the meaning of preserving their

dialect. The preservation of dialects is by no means a way to isolate the community and shun communication from a national base; rather, it is a means to present the world the marked diversity of magnificent Chinese culture. People who identify themselves as Hokkien need to engage themselves in the enterprise of preserving the dialect for the sake of the cultural genes in the blood. The dedications of the nation, society and communities will eventually brighten the future of the dialect.

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