

Challenges of Heritage Language Learning in Australia

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Abstract: In developing the concept of language ecology since the 1970s, there is a wild acceptance that multilingualism is a valuable resource rather than a problem. However, in a migration country like Australia, heritage languages are constantly challenged and threatened by the dominant language in the language ecology, and this situation has raised concerns on heritage learning in migrant families for a long time. With theoretical exploration of language ecology and language attitude, this paper provides a brief overview of the language ecology of Australia, and further explores how the challenges of heritage language learning arise. By detecting the Australia family language ecology, the attitudes and ideologies towards monolingual and language variation could be a leading factor to the main problems of the heritage language learning in Australia language ecology.

Keywords: language ecology, heritage language, language learning, attitudes, ideologies

1. Introduction

As a part of globalization, transnational population flow has drastically changed our world. Australia is a typical country of migrants with multiple ethnic groups, languages and cultures. With the development of language ecology theory, the importance of linguistic diversity aroused people's attention. From the 19th century, the Australian government started pursuing a multilingual promotion policy^[1]. Funding for education in languages other than English by the government has increased the number of people Learning non-English languages. However, for migrants, the promotion of multilingualism did not ease their anxiety about insufficiency in the dominant language. Many migrant families are gradually abandoning their original languages in order to better integrate into Australian society. In such a contradictory situation, the challenge of heritage language learning in Australia has gained increasing attention by linguists. Case studies about heritage language learning and maintenance in Australia increased in recent years. Most studies concentrate on a specific heritage language, exploring the challenges of Japanese heritage language maintenance from relevant social relationships such as schooling and ethnic community^[2], family support on Chinese Heritage Language learning^[3], parental attitude on Korean heritage resources^[4].

The aim of this essay is to explore the challenges that children of first generation migrant parents learn their heritage language. The focus will be the problems that are raised by language attitudes and ideologies, which are presented as salient impacts on the family language plan made by first generation migration parents. I will briefly review the relevant concepts of language ecology and language attitudes, followed by an outline of the influencing factors model of family

language ecology for migrants. Then, I briefly portray the Australia language ecology and propose that heritage language learning in migrant families is often associated with two aspects of problems. One is the influence of a monolingual preferable attitude and the consequent motivation shortage, and another one is the influence of standard language ideology and the subsequent teaching misgivings. These two factors are rooted in Australia's language ecology by the English dominant status and marginalization of English varieties, which greatly affect the decision that the migrant parents pass the heritage language to their children or not. Finally, I will discuss the possible solutions of the heritage learning challenges and the future effort directions.

2. Heritage Language

The emergence and development of heritage language had been deeply affected by social conditions and sociolinguistic theories. This concept was first put forward in Canada in the 1970s but aroused enormous interest in the United States in the 1990s^[5]. Heritage language refers to the linguistic minority languages that have historical connections with the speaker^[6]. The speakers of heritage languages have a certain extent of heritage language environment, usually their home, and are exposed to the majority language environment most of the time. They have partial knowledge of their heritage language but are not as proficient as native speakers. From the characteristics of heritage language speakers, it is not difficult to think of children in migration families.

Around the concept of heritage language, language maintenance and language shift are closely related. According to Fishman, language maintenance means a migrant keeps to use their first language after migration, and the phenomenon that one's mother tongue is replaced by the mainstream language of the host country is called language shift^[7]. A Number of previous studies have shown that language shift tends to occur within three generations of immigration, and the language used both at and outside home will be replaced by the dominant language.

Two kinds of migrants are likely to encounter the heritage language maintenance problem. One is young children who migrate with their parents, they usually need to face the challenge of heritage learning. Another is long residence migrants who eventually stay in the migration country permanently and become the first generation immigrants, they tend to be involved into the heritage learning as parents. No matter who faces the challenge, the maintenance of the heritage language is definitely related to not only one person or one language. Fishman proposes that family language ecology plays a vital role in language maintenance^[7]. Multiple languages establish the language ecology, and all the people related to the heritage language will impact the language ecology balance.

3. Language Ecology

Language ecology

The ecology metaphor in linguistics was firstly introduced independently by Haugen, referring to "interactions between any given language and its environment"^[8]. This concept borrows from the ecological description of the relationship between animals, plants and the environment, to describe the interaction between languages and the surrounding environment. Haugen proposed that language ecology be determined by language learning, language usage and language transmission. Hornberger suggests that, in the language ecology paradigm, multilingualism is not a problem but a valuable resource. Speakers choose the language they use in three kinds of environments, social environment, natural environment, and psychological environment, which makes languages in the ecology compete with each other^[9]. Some languages are inherited and enriched during the process, while others gradually decline or even die out because of the inadaptation to the environment. It is the constant competition and relative balance that keeps the language ecology alive^[10].

In the language ecology of migrants, the heritage language and the dominant language are exactly the competition relationship, and the social environment is of great importance. When the dominant language is strong and constantly chosen by speakers, the heritage language would gradually diminish and eventually disappear from their ecology. During

this process, different language practices interact with each other, from which heritage language learning either benefits or faces challenges, and ultimately determines the outcome of the language.

Influencing factors model of family language ecology for migrants

Family language ecology, a sub-system of language ecology, is the most salient part for heritage language learning, as the most possibility of using heritage language is communicating with family members. Every family, big or small, has its own family language ecology. Just as there are no two identical leaves in the world, the language ecology situation in each family cannot be exactly the same. But under the social environment, the influencing factors and patterns to family language ecology are similar. Drawing on the theory of Hornberger, the influencing factors model of family language ecology for migrants was illustrated as Figure 1. From the figure, we can see clearly that family attitude and social environment jointly act on family language ecology, impacting the language choice and the language power, making the micro ecology of family in a constant dynamic change. These effects are also the roots of the challenges faced by heritage language learning.

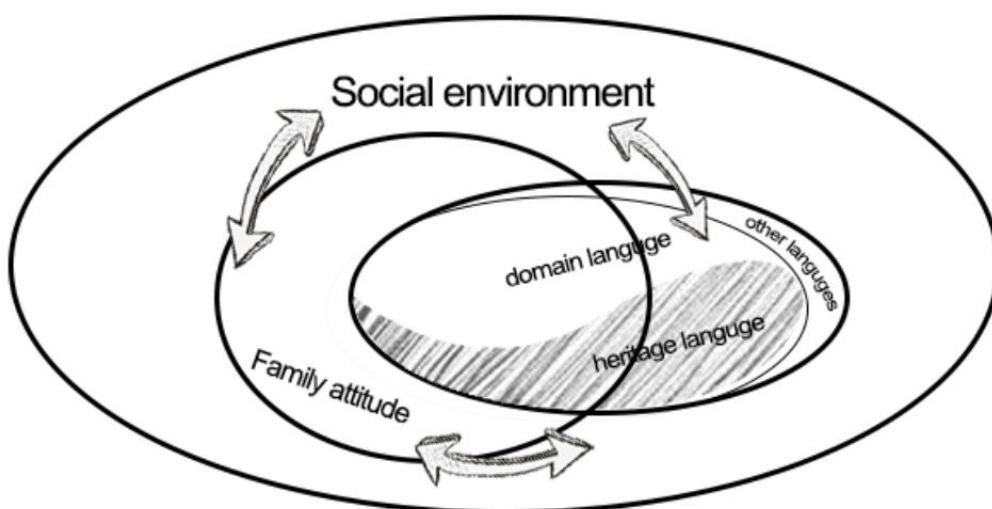


Figure 1. Influencing factors model of family language ecology for migrants

4. Language Attitudes and Ideologies

Language attitudes, as discussed in preceding paragraphs, are clearly important in a migrant minority language context. Language attitudes are defined as "evaluative reactions to different language varieties"^[11], and both the majority (social attitudes) and minority group members' attitudes (family attitudes) are key particles to decide the development of a minority language of a language ecology^[12]. In the family language ecology, the attitudes of parents who are more powerful in the family often determine the language choices and learning styles of children, and the attitudes of parents are influenced by social attitudes.

Around language attitude, there is a concepts, language ideology, which is inevitable to be mentioned. Ideology is "shared framework(s) of social beliefs"^[13] for a group of social members rationalized their social practice. When comes to language ideology, it reveals language users' linguistic beliefs which linked with social and culture system. For English speakers, they specifically tend to hold a belief that their language has a standard form^[14] and this ideology may be reflected by social attitude, which then affects migrants' language practice.

5. Development of Australia Language Ecology

The language policy changing in Australia history lead to the changing attitudes to linguistic diversity. Kipp divided the language development in Australia's community into three stage^[1]. Before Federation period, large number of migrants

came from Europe countries. With the developing colonies, the attitude towards multilingualism is acceptance and laissez-faire. The second stage, after Federation in 1901, strict monolingual policy was conducted due to the economic and political dominant of Britain. British English is highly regarded in this period, and people developed a hostile attitude towards languages other than English^[15]. As a result, migrant policy and language were severely suppressed. Then, the third stage was when into the post-war, the boom of migration and the process of globalisation gradually brought Australia back into an open mind to multiple languages.

The profound National Language Policy (1987) confirmed the official language status of Australian English, and also emphasized the right of indigenous and migrant languages, even required everyone to learn a second language^[15]. Along with funding for multilingual projects by the government, such as Australian Second Language Learning Program, speakers of language other than English growth significantly in the following decades in Australia^[16]. The Census data in Australian Bureau of Statistics shows that more than 300 identified languages are spoken in Australia, and over 21 per cent of Australians spoke a language other than English at home^[17]. However, with the increasing linguistic diversity, heritage language learning is still under great pressure in Australia today. Minority languages are not likely to survive more than two or three generation^[18]. The situation could attribute to two aspects. Firstly, English is still have absolute advantages in Australia language ecology, both explicitly and implicitly. Secondly, along with the flourishing of multiple languages, the notion of language variation failed to impress in Australian society. Both of the two aspects will be discussed in detail in the following section.

6. Challenges of Heritage Language Learning in Australia

Preferable attitude to monolingual and learning motivation shortage

Australia is described as "the most monolingual industrialized nation in the world"^[18]. Although it is easy to obtain multi-language learning resources, multilinguals are not considered common. The monolingual mindset strengthens the status of English in Australia's language ecology. As a result, English got absolute dominant status in Australian society. The dominant status of English is presented in two aspects in society. For the explicit policy attitudes, English proficiency requirement is inevitably prioritized in the most important areas, such as education system^[19], visa obtaining and maintenance^[20], and work application^[21]. For the implicit public attitudes, the monolingual belief is embedded in social attitudes, it is common for local Australian to regard multilinguals as exceptions to the norm^[22].

As shown in Figure 1, the social attitude to monolingualism would also influence the family attitude of migrant families. Facing the enormous demand to English, the attitude of the decision maker in the family language ecology would inevitably try to align with the social reality and give priority to English learning. As a result, the motivation of learning heritage language in migrant families tends to be negatively affected.

Standard language ideology dilemma and the teaching misgivings

Standard language ideology is a belief that there exists a standard language with certain accent or grammatical characteristics, which Lippi-Green called "an abstract, idealized homogeneous language"^[23]. The standard languages are closely linked with the varieties that are used by upper-middle classes. It is essentially a ethnolects bias "with the goal of suppressing variation of all kinds"^[14].

The ethnolects bias usually presented as accent preference in Australia language ecology. Although linguistics studies about Australian English varieties, which was called New Australia English, such as Italo-Australian English, Greek Australian English and Lebanese Australian English, were conducted from about two decades ago, there is a common prejudice about accents other than inner circle English accents. Speakers with "foreign accent" are normally regarded as low English proficiency and are discriminated against^[24].

The discrimination attitude influences migrants when speakers are tagged as incapable of the language. Ryan's study about linguistic ideologies present two cognitive processes of the discrimination: social categorization and

stereotyping^[25]. Listeners categorize people by linguistic characteristics, sometimes even just hearing several sentences, and tag them with stereotype description. When a listener is not able to understand a migrant's accent, at most of the time, migrants' language proficiency would be questioned, even if they speak a systematic variety. The discrimination and prejudice can be found in the workplace, education system, housing and even courts.

Again, ideologies permeate social attitude and then affect heritage language learning. As a result, when migrant parents consider their children's language teaching plan, they might hesitate to pass their community language, which is the heritage language for the children. According to an investigation of Diskin & Escudero, this situation is not rare for many first-generation migrant parents in Australia because they are afraid that their children's accent of English would be influenced by a different language^[24]. When parents only speak English at home, their children would face the situation that they passively abandon the heritage language.

7. Changes for Possible Solutions from a Sociolinguistic Perspective

To cope with the problem that comes from language attitudes and ideologies, solutions from a sociolinguistic perspective need to be taken into consideration. Previous Applied Linguistics studies tried to solve the heritage language learning problems by top-down methods, which put heritage education into the consideration of national language planning^[19]. It is indeed important. However, mobilizing more national and school resources is hard to implement and not enough for challenges that are deeply rooted in the family attitudes and the whole society attitudes. It is also necessary to pay attention to bottom-up changes.

Build confidence and deliver a positive language attitude

The first and foremost change should be to build parents' confidence in multilingualism. The confidence is vital to expand the ecospace of heritage languages in family language ecology. A large amount of research reveals that multilingual upbringing benefits children's development by a better metalinguistic awareness to control language practice, better acquisition of the mainstream language, and increasing the self-esteem of heritage culture^[19]. These advantages should be delivered to society from migrant families, trying to change attitudes so that parents could positively invest for the heritage language learning of their children.

Recognize language variation and do not hesitate to teach

Recognizing language variation and breaking down stereotypes of varieties could ease parents' misgivings of teaching their children heritage languages. This is not something that can be achieved by laying down a regulation. After establishing the confidence of multilingualism, migrant families could try to link with migration communities, providing more communicative opportunities to children, allowing them to understand the varieties of languages as well as people, rather than judge someone only by accents or a particular characteristic. In this way, language varieties will be gradually accepted by the public, and migrant families would have less pressure on learning heritage languages.

Conclusion

In current Australia's language ecology, English is the dominant language but various languages are also spoken by second language speakers as well as a number of migrants. Heritage languages in the ecology are minority languages, and the heritage language speakers are under huge pressure to maintain the language. This challenge mainly comes from the attitudes and ideologies towards monolingualism and English varieties. From the influencing factor model of family language ecology drawn in this essay, we can see the joint influence of family attitudes and social environment on family language ecology. With the social attitudes of recognition of English dominance and the bias towards English variants, migrant families lack motivation or do not dare to teach children the heritage language, resulting in the situation that migrant children abandon the heritage language passively.

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