A Brief Discussion on the Status Quo of the Standard Languages and the Dialects of Chinese and Arabic

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When we talk about a language, it definitely not only means the language itself. It can reflect an individual’s consciousness, thoughts, and feelings, illustrate a nation’s history, culture, and traditions, and even relate to a country’s identity, image, and dignity. This article discusses the status quo and some existing problems of the standard languages and the dialects of Chinese and Arabic.

Keywords: Chinese, Arabic, standard languages, dialects

Introduction

China, which has the largest population in this world, is a unified big country with multiple ethnic groups, languages, and dialects. China is composed of 56 ethnic groups (the dominant Han and the other 55 minorities). Among the 55 minorities, 53 of them have their own languages, except for the Hui and the Manchu. Some of these minorities even have several languages at the same time. Chinese is divided into seven dialectal areas: the Northern dialect, the Wu dialect, the Min dialect, the Cantonese dialect, the Hakka dialect, the Gan dialect, and the Xiang dialect, among which the Northern dialect is widely accepted and used by the largest population. At present, some Chinese dialects are faced with an embarrassing dilemma: They have fewer and fewer users and even some of them are on the brink of extinction. The reasons for such dilemma are: On the one hand, after the founding of the P. R. China, China has committed to popularize the Mandarin Chinese for decades to achieve national unification, national unity, and social progress and to develop its politics, economy, culture, education, technology, and social interaction; on the other hand, the occasions of using dialects are being narrowed down. With the development of population mobility and the change of the regional framework of dialects, the immigrants in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou always use the Mandarin Chinese as their ordinary language. With the impact arising from globalization and urbanization, the old language ecological environment has undergone more dramatic changes.

Literature Review

Under the condition of the intensified population mobility, increased immigrant’s population, and increasingly diversified urban languages, how to regard this hot issue by some experts is set as follows:

The importance of the Chinese dialects proposed by LEI Hong-bo (2012) has attracted certain attentions. LEI believed that in order to formulate a scientific development strategy for the Chinese dialects, it is the top
priority to identify the position of dialects, strengthen the creation of dialectal databases, identify the existence and future of dialects, and focus on scientific and systematic administration. As for the implementation of these strategies, a scientific analysis on the elements of dialects’ vitality should be applied, the vigorousness of dialects should be improved specially, and the dialects’ functions should be expanded appropriately. In addition, LEI proposed that dialects planning should be included into the work of national language construction and an effective interactive mechanism should be created to give full play to the role of the government departments, academic research and education institutes, social media, and people who speak dialects, making contribution to the cultural heritage and the construction of harmonious language-speaking situations.

After analyzing the relationship between dialects and the Mandarin Chinese, SUN Li (2009) believed that the two were not opposite but can coexist. She believed that the coexistence of dialects and the Mandarin Chinese will not generate adverse impact on the economic development and social progress, but on the contrary, this coexistence can inherit and develop the Chinese culture and promote the unity of China and its people of all ethnic groups for a certain degree. This coexistence will not only satisfy the needs of national construction, but also meet the requirements of people’s material and cultural life. At last, SUN stressed that it is necessary to popularize the Mandarin Chinese, but it does not mean to eliminate dialects.

CAO Zhi-geng (2001) explained that there are many reasons for some endangered dialects, including there is no defined regulations on the use of dialects in the language policy and the usage of dialects is limited, for example, dialects are not allowed to use in schools, official, media, and other formal occasions; even some families do not use dialects to communicate with each other; there is no written words or literature for some dialects, except for the Cantonese. He also listed some endangered dialects which have few users and are strongly affected by the Mandarin Chinese. Once again, he stressed the adverse influence it will have on our life and society if dialects are eliminated. At last, he called for people’s attention to the endangered dialects and put forward relevant countermeasures and methods.

In 1990, the Academic Workshop on the Issues between the Mandarin Chinese and Dialects was held in Beijing. During this workshop, it was believed that after the implementation of the reform and opening up policy, China has made rapid development on many respects. With the tremendous progress on all respects of the society, it was an urgent mandate to popularize the Mandarin Chinese. People on the workshop also believed that to promote the Mandarin Chinese is definitely not to eliminate dialects and it is impossible to eliminate dialects by manpower. The Mandarin Chinese and dialects will coexist in the long run. In the workshop, ZHONG Zhe-ming on the Academic workshop in Beijing noted that in order to better popularize the Mandarin Chinese, studies on the issues of the Mandarin Chinese and dialects should be enhanced. He also stressed that the policy of encouraging blossoming and contending of all should be the guideline principle throughout the academic research, but the implementation of national language policies should not be undermined.

WANG Yu-han (2010) thought that it is necessary to learn the Mandarin Chinese, but there is no need to ask people who speak the same dialects to use the Mandarin Chinese. The Mandarin Chinese is adopted to communicate with others; while dialects stand for the collective memories of local cultures and the source of cultural identity. WANG also stressed that dialects are important parts of Chinese culture, so the elimination of dialects will lead to the extinction of culture. Therefore, in order to achieve cultural preservation, the dialects should be protected. Speaking the Mandarin Chinese is for the communication of the Chinese people and only
through communication and acculturation can new culture and civilization be created. The purpose of popularizing the Mandarin Chinese is to promote cultural development.

Through the investigation of Shanghai high school students using the Mandarin Chinese and the Shanghai dialect, SUN Xiao-xian and her peers (2007) found that the proportion of these students using the Shanghai dialect at families was greatly increased with age. They also learnt some problems that the current language work is faced with, including how to help students further improve their application of the Mandarin Chinese, how to teach students to use standard oral language, how to develop students’ language accomplishment comprehensively, and how to improve students’ respect and recognition to their mother tongue continuously. She also suggested that we should actively guide the public to forge a right recognition and scientific attitude to dialects, to understand China’s language policies of promoting the Mandarin Chinese, and to carefully implement the work to improve students’ language and words capability with a breakthrough of cultivating students’ oral language capability.

GU Yue (1997) thought that the reason why overseas students cannot communicate with others smoothly after they have learnt the Mandarin Chinese is that dialects are very different from the Mandarin Chinese in terms of phonetics, vocabularies, and grammar. GU also believed that it is far from enough to only teach the Mandarin Chinese to overseas students who always need to use dialects in their daily life. Therefore, GU suggested that some local dialects must be taught in class.

WANG Lie-qin (2011) discussed several dialectal issues in the film and television programs from the aspects, such as the situation of Chinese language, the overview on the Speaking Mandarin Campaign, the brilliant effects brought by films with dialectal accent, and how far on earth dialects films can go. She also believed that under the context of China’s Speaking Mandarin Campaign, films and television shows with dialectal accent can give people a fresh and shocking feeling, bringing people interest and truth, but it can also give obstruction to the Speaking Mandarin Campaign, bringing obstacles and bewilderment to people. Lastly, she made a suggestion that all kinds of factors must be considered comprehensively before producing the dialectal films and television shows.

Overall, most language experts thought that language is a shared resource and mastering a language is shared ability, so the ability to speaking dialects cannot be weakened with the increasing of speaking the Mandarin Chinese. During the development of some dialects, more and more young people cannot speak fluent dialects like their previous generations do. However, the main reason for the extinction of dialects is the lack of related cultural background and people who speak dialects, not because of the promotion of the Mandarin Chinese. All in all, we should deal with the relationship between dialects and the Mandarin Chinese, build a natural bilingual environment, and give a full play of multiple styles and functions of languages, so as to promote the development of the Mandarin Chinese and dialects at the same time. But the dominant position of the Mandarin Chinese cannot be threatened. We would like to achieve the harmonious coexistence between the Mandarin Chinese and dialects.

An Overview of Arabic

Belonging to a Central Semitic language and as one of the official language of the United Nations, Arabic is a language widely used by the Arab world. The Arab world has 22 countries, distributed to the West Asia and North Africa. Countries located in Asia are: Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Oman, and Palestine; while countries located in Africa are: Egypt,
Sudan, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania, Somalia, Djibouti, and Comoros. The Classical Arabic is the language found in the *Quran*, a classic book of the Islam. Muslims who believe in the Islam would like to learn Arabic so as to support their religious beliefs. Currently, almost all members of the 337 ethnic groups from 117 countries believe in the Islam. Among them, 55 are from the Islamic countries or areas and they constitute the Islamic world.

There are 28 alphabets in the Arabic and the Arabic grammar is divided into morphology and syntax. There are strict regularities and rules for the word formation and morphological changes. The Arabic is widely used through the spread of the Islam. Many languages, such as the Iranian of Persian, the Urdu of Pakistan, and the Uygur in Xinjiang, China, have adopted the Arabic letters.

The Statue Quo of Arabic Dialects

Arabic is the lingua franca of the Arab world. There is Modern Standard Arabic, but in different areas of different countries, there are many dialects, among which the most popular one is the Egyptian dialect. Although there are so many dialects, there are little changes for the standard Arabic for a long time owing to the existence of the *Quran*, so the standard Arabic is also called the classic Arabic.

Each Arabic country has its own dialects, while some are close to the standard Arabic, such as the Egyptian and Syria dialects, but others are different with the standard Arabic, such as the Tunisian and Moroccan dialects. The reasons why the Egyptian dialect has the greatest influence are: (1) The advanced films and television shows have been distributed to the whole Arab world, so that the Egyptian dialect is understood by most people from the Arab world; (2) the Egyptian dialect has rich vocabularies, which is easy to understand; (3) Egypt has a good geographic position and it is a bridge connecting Africa to Asia; (4) many other countries from the Arab world learn from the Egypt’s education system and they send many teachers and students to the Egypt for training; (5) the Egypt has a favorable climate, which attracts many Arabians to travel here; and (6) many Egyptians go to the rich Arabic countries to find jobs.

Issues That Standard Arabic Is Faced With

In many Arabic countries, the Arabic dialects are used for most occasions except for some news channels and religious programs, and even schools also use dialects as their teaching languages. The standard Arabic always coexists with dialects, but in recent years there has been a decline in the use of the standard Arabic. Many young people will not speak very pure standard Arabic or speak a “foreign-language-mixed” language, and even some young people cannot speak the standard Arabic fluently due to the difference between Arabic dialects and the standard Arabic and the widely usage of foreign language in the Arabic-speaking countries. Although the Egyptian dialect is understood by many Arabians, it is, like other dialects, merely a language limited in certain areas and is not a common language for the whole Arabic countries. So many linguists and educators advocate to increase the use of standard Arabic in media and schools and to reduce the use of dialects, thus, it can be helpful to improve their national consciousness and national pride. The standard Arabic is in imminent danger. Although the standard Arabic does not disappear right now, it cannot be ignored and need more concerns.

Conclusion

China is a big country with multiple ethnic groups, dialects, and languages; while the Arab world consists
of many countries with only one language. Therefore, the situation of the Arabic is totally different with the Chinese. The Mandarin Chinese is created and developed under the basis of many dialects and many words from dialects are being adopted by the Mandarin Chinese; while the Arabic dialects are developed under the basis of the standard Arabic, which is the source of the Arabic dialects.

References