Language Attitude and Language Degeneration: 
An Empirical Study Based on the Pearl River Delta of China*

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This paper conducts a tracking investigation of the dialect speakers in Cantonese, and addresses the impact of language attitude on language degeneration by using OLS models. Results reveal that the stronger the language identity, the less obvious the language degeneration. It’s necessary to maintain the harmonious coexistence of dialects and Mandarin.

Keywords: language attitude, language identity, Cantonese, dialect mingled by Mandarin, language degeneration

Introduction

There are many factors influencing dialect death, including subjective and objective categories. The objective aspect is mainly embodied in economic development, national policy etc., and the subjective one is mainly manifested in speaker’s language attitude. Chambers (1999) and Edwards (2006, pp. 324-331) pointed out that language attitude is people’s value judgments about a certain language, as well as the resulting linguistic tendencies and verbal behaviors. The attitude of language groups has a significant impact on the death and resurrection of languages and the inheritance of culture (Coupland et al., 1999). This issue deserves attention. As far as Chinese dialects are concerned, “dialect mingled by Mandarin” (Li, 2019) has become a common phenomenon in the Chinese dialect area. The dialect speakers’ emotional response to the impact of other languages on their dialects determines whether they adhere to their dialects to a large extent. In this way, China has a large number of dialects, the influence of language attitude on the language extinction is also worthy of attention. However, the research on this issue has rarely been studied directly.

Therefore, this paper focuses on the influence of language attitude on the trend of language extinction and proposes to answer the following research questions:

i. To what extent does the dialect speaker’s dialect extinct with the continuous use of Mandarin?
ii. How does the language attitude affect language extinction dynamically?

This paper begins with a investigation on the language attitudes towards dialect and Mandarin of dialect speakers, as well as the degree of “dialect mingled by Mandarin” that reflects dialect extinction happened on

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dialect speakers. Then, we further empirically analyze the impact of language attitude on language extinction. The last section summarizes the research findings.

**Literature Review**

**Language Attitude and Language Death**

Language attitude is a key factor in measuring language maintenance or loss or extinction (Mac, 2000), and positive language attitude is one of the necessary conditions for the growth of language use (Grin, 2003; Grin & Vaillancourt, 1999). Schüpbach (2009) explored the factors of inter-generational maintenance and transformation within the family through an in-depth analysis of life stories and life story interviews written by 14 immigrants from Switzerland who speak Swiss German. He noted that only migrants raising children spread their language only to a limited extent, or not at all. As a result, the inter-generational transmission of Swiss German faces a crisis and the possibility of extinction. Parents’ attitudes towards Swiss German and bilinguals play an important role in this, especially when Swiss German is considered “useless”, then it may face the result of death. Language death is commonly defined as the loss of the competence in a language at community level (Crystal, 2000; Mufwene, 2004).

Likewise, the residents in Chinese dialect areas are also in the bilingual environment of dialects and Mandarin, and the maintenance of the vitality of dialects and Mandarin depends on speakers’ language attitudes and behaviors. In other words, if residents have a more positive attitude towards dialects than Mandarin and insist on passing dialects to the next generation, the dialects will continue to survive; instead, if their attitudes towards dialects become more and more negative, and the attitudes towards Mandarin become more and more positive, then dialects will face the trend of extinction, while Mandarin will usher in good development.

**Language Degeneration**

The development of economy and society exacerbates the competition between languages exponentially. Many more languages are in danger of losing ground to more powerful and prestigious ones (Abrams & Strogatz, 2003; Trask, 1994). Reza & Tej (2017) explored the historical results of contacts between Arabic-Persian and Arabic-Egyptian and found that Egyptian Coptic died after the Arabic invasion, but the Persian survived. They believed that Persian survived after its contact with Arabic because of its structural compatibility, the structural compatibility between the two languages broke the language boundaries, led to linguistic convergence and language changes, and the death of less dominant and less prestigious language. Factually, the most frequent route for the death of a language is rarely abrupt but mostly gradual and protracted one under contact situations in which the language is not able to compete with the other languages.

In order to show the process of language death accurately, this paper puts forward the concept of “language degeneration” to reflect the dynamic process of a language gradually giving way to another language in language contacts. Meanwhile, this paper suggests the phenomenon that dialect features are gradually exhausted in the course of contact with Mandarin belongs to language degeneration.

**Aims and Value**

With respect to research subject, this paper chooses Chinese dialect and Mandarin as an example because little research has been conducted to show Chinese dialects in the linguistic circles, only a few studies of
Cantonese. Research on language death has focused mostly on European-related languages, such as East Sutherland (Dorian, 1978), Scottish Gaelic dialect (Dorian, 1981), Isle of Man (Broderick, 1999), Austria and Belgium etc. (Mufwene, 2001; 2004), and Julia (2010) studied the old Swiss language, Länsisalmi (2016) studied on Ainu and Saami, etc.. However, less attention has been paid to the competition relationship between Chinese dialects and Mandarin. There are a large number of Chinese dialects and many of them are on the brink of extinction, a study in this area is of considerable interest.

As to research method, this paper makes more attempts in empirical research. This paper establishes a quantitative model of causality between language attitude and language degeneration, and attempts to solve some new problems. That is the concrete result of the influence of language attitude on language degeneration.

In terms of research perspective, this paper highlights the concept of “language degeneration” to reflect the gradual process of language death. The aims are twofold: first, language degeneration has regularity, this paper attempts to describe its characteristics; second, we use the word frequency of “dialect mingled by Mandarin” to measure language degeneration (Li, 2019). In Chinese dialects, there have been many variations of Chinese dialects and Mandarin in phonetics and vocabularies, that is, “dialect mingled by Mandarin”, which are formed when speakers are influenced by the negative transfer of structural elements of Mandarin when using dialect although the overall characteristics are dialect. In recent years, this phenomenon is more and more obvious in the era of China’s rapid economic development.

Research Design

Source of Data

Interviews were conducted from July 10, 2019 to August 13, 2019. Interviewees were the residents in Pearl River Delta, China. Our investigation team consisted of 12 locals, all of them were college or graduate students. A total of 625 sets of valid data were obtained finally, and all questions were answered.

Variables Setting

1. Explained variable

Language degeneration (Degeneration) was applied as an explained variable. Compared with pure dialects, the heterogeneous pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar mixed with Mandarin in dialects can well reflect language degeneration. Hence, we used the heterogeneous word rate of “dialect mingled by Mandarin” to measure the degree of language degeneration.

2. Explanatory variables

Language attitude (Identity) was selected as explanatory variables. Respondents’ overall evaluation of Cantonese can basically reflect their language attitudes. The language attitude was assigned by the Likert scale method, and 1-5 points were scored according to the degree of identity.

3. Controlled variables (C)

Four variables: gender (Gender), age (Age), occupation (Occupation) and education level (Education) of respondents were controlled in this paper.

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1 This paper only analyzes the identity of dialect but not Mandarin, the language attitude is called “language identity” in the following paper.
4. Variable Measure System

The information of all the variables covered in this paper is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable type</th>
<th>Variable name</th>
<th>Variable symbol</th>
<th>Variable interpretation</th>
<th>Remarks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Explained variable</td>
<td>Language degeneration</td>
<td>Degeneration</td>
<td>Number of heterogeneous pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar mixed with Mandarin/total number of vocabularies spoken by respondents</td>
<td>Words statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explanatory variables</td>
<td>Language identity</td>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>Assign 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 points according to the degree of overall identity of dialect</td>
<td>Likert five-point scale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controlled variables</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Virtual variable: female, assigned 1; male, assigned 0</td>
<td>0-1 assignment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>2019-respondent’s year of birth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td>Virtual variable: student, assigned 1; other, assigned 0</td>
<td>0-1 assignment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Education level</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Assigned according to the actual years accepting education: illiterate or semi-illiterate = 0; primary school = 6; junior high school = 9; high school/vocational high/secondary school = 12; university specialty = 15; university undergraduate = 16; master = 19; PhD = 23</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PCDI of households</td>
<td>PCDI</td>
<td>Sum of annual household income/total number of families</td>
<td>2018</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Empirical Analysis

Influence of Language Identity on Language Degeneration

According to the variables listed in Table 1, an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model is established to verify the relationship between language identity and language degeneration, as shown in Eq. (1):

\[
Degeneration = \alpha + \beta \text{Identity} + \sum \gamma_n C + \varepsilon
\]  

(1)

In Eq. (1): \( \alpha \) is a constant term, \( \beta \) and \( \gamma_n \) represents the coefficient of language identity and series controlled variables respectively, \( n \) and \( C \) respectively represents the number and symbol of series controlled variables, \( \varepsilon \) is an error item.

First, the correlation analysis of the major explanatory and controlled variables shows that Gender, Age and Education are all negatively correlated at the lower significant level, while the other variables are not significant and the correlation coefficients are small basically. It interprets that there is no multicollinearity among explanatory variables. Then, according to the data in Table 1, OLS regression is performed on model (1) in Eviews 8.0, and White variance correction technology is applied to solve the variance problem. The regression results are shown in Table 2:
Table 2
Regression Results of Language Identity on Language Degeneration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Standard error</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>0.201**</td>
<td>0.663</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>-0.359**</td>
<td>-1.459</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>0.075</td>
<td>0.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-0.557***</td>
<td>-0.981</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td>0.123***</td>
<td>0.016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>0.075*</td>
<td>1.017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCDI</td>
<td>0.184*</td>
<td>0.630</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Observation: 625
Adj. R²: 0.175
F-Value: 11.984***

Note: * represents significant statistics at 10 %, 5 %, and 1 % level respectively. The following tables are the same.

1. Influence of language identity on language degeneration

Table 2 shows: Identity has a significant negative effect on the Degeneration, indicating that the stronger the language identity, the less obvious the language degeneration; On the contrary, the weaker the language identity, the more obvious the language degeneration. Because speakers with the weak language identity tend to deliberately evade the study of dialects, resulting in the continue decrease of the standard of pronunciations and gradual forgetfulness of authentic dialect vocabularies.

2. Influence of controlled variables on language degeneration

(1) Gender has no significant effect on Degeneration. It shows that language degeneration does not differ markedly due to gender. (2) Age is significantly negative with Degeneration, while Occupation is significantly positive, both significant levels are very high. This indicates that the older the respondents, the less obvious the language degeneration, because the older respondents are more capable of using dialect and have stronger feelings towards it. Meanwhile, students’ language degeneration is very apparent. On one hand, students are exposed to Mandarin more frequently than dialects, so their dialect ability are relatively poor; on the other hand, students are younger and have weak emotional identity to the dialect. Furthermore, languages such as Mandarin or English can bring them more opportunities or benefits. (3) Education is positively correlated with Degeneration at the lower significant level. This demonstrates that the language degeneration is more obvious in the better educated group. (4) PCDI is positively correlated with Degeneration at the lower significant level. It means that the language degeneration is obvious among the respondents with better economic conditions. In general, residents with better family economic conditions are more likely to live in the county and have relatively decent jobs, Mandarin is used more often.

Conclusions and Revelations

Conclusions

This paper investigates the phenomenon of “dialect mingled by Mandarin”, dialect speakers’ language identity and its effect on language degeneration. Empirical analysis proves that the stronger the language identity, the less obvious the language degeneration. The analysis of basic information interprets that the younger the speaker, the more obvious the language degeneration, while the older people’s dialects are less affected by
Mandarin. Compared with other occupations, student’s dialect degenerates most remarkably. Additionally, those with higher education levels and better economic conditions, language degeneration is more obvious.

Revelations

These results imply that: (1) There are differences in dialect speakers’ language identity. As to the dialect protection and inheritance, students, those with higher education levels and better family economic conditions deserve attention, especially the student group. Thus, classrooms below secondary school should be moderately invested in dialect activities, such as dialect courses. Additionally, those belonging to remote marriages and working out of town can not be ignored to avoid the rapid language degeneration. (2) Language degeneration is inevitable in language contacts. It is necessary to popularizing Mandarin comprehensively and gradually to maintain the harmonious living space between Mandarin and dialects.

References


