

Language Contact and Language Shift in Taiwan

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I shall talk about the linguistic history of Taiwan and then discuss the chief factors responsible for the current linguistic situation. When people with different linguistic background come into close contact, influence on language is almost inevitable. The most common type is language borrowing, and the most drastic is the complete shift from one language to another.

Taiwan is a multi-lingual and multi-cultural society today. People in Taiwan have experienced one major language shift after another: (1) The Formosan natives in the western plains gradually shifted from their own native languages to Taiwanese during the Qing Dynasty (1683-1895); (2) Both the Chinese and the aboriginal people had to learn Japanese as the national language during the Japanese occupation (1895-1945); and (3) They have had to learn Mandarin as the national language since 1945. Consequently Mandarin has been replacing Taiwanese, Hakka and all Formosan languages at an alarming rate in the past few decades.

Austronesian languages in Taiwan generally remained intact 400 years ago. Dutch and Spanish had little influence on the languages due to the small number of speakers and their short stay in Taiwan in the 17th century. However, the influx of Chinese speakers to Taiwan during the Qing Dynasty (1683-1895) gradually replaced the various Formosan languages spoken in the plain areas, called Pepo (平埔族). Japanese influence on the languages in Taiwan is limited to some loanwords during the Japanese occupation of Taiwan (1895-1945). It is generally understood that the propagation of Mandarin as the national language, the language policy adopted by the Nationalist government since 1945, has pushed most of the native languages to extinction or on the verge of extinction.

The main factors that can account for language loss include (1) small population size, (2) language policy, and (3) mass media. I shall demonstrate how the mass media, rather than the language policy, played the crucial role.

In fact, there has been a major shift of the language policy in the past two decades in Taiwan. The government started to encourage people to use their own native languages. There are all sorts of revitalization programs with official financial support, yet mostly of little avail. I shall try to explain such an awkward situation.

I shall also make use of some of the research result from an on-going research project "Investigation of the Language Endangerment in Formosan Languages" (2012-2015) in my talk.