Bilingual Education Begins Here: Tutoring and Mentoring to Learn Language, Culture, and Lives

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The Importance of Bilingual Education

Chinese Language or Dialect: What’s in a Name?
Several years ago, I (second author) had an opportunity to observe a student teacher who had been placed in a bilingual (Chinese-English) class. I was surprised to discover that virtually all instruction and materials were in English with just a few Chinese symbols on the wall. When the lesson was over, I asked the teacher why no Chinese had been used in the lesson. She explained that three mutually unintelligible varieties of Chinese were spoken by the children in class and their families: Cantonese, Mandarin, and Fukienese. The person who had set up the class did not speak any Chinese languages and had placed the children based on their Home Language Questionnaire (HLQ) the parents had filled out: All had said they were from Chinese speaking homes.

Lost in Translation
One issue involves a challenge in translation. Mandarin has several terms to refer to Chinese varieties. These include: the Chinese word “fāngyán” (方言) which while often translated into English as “dialect,” actually is broader in semantic scope, and can refer to varieties of related languages that may or may not be mutually intelligible when spoken. To address this problem, Mair (1991) coined a new term, “topolect,” meaning a group of large regional varieties; this expression, if adopted, would provide a more accurate English translation of “fāngyán.” However, this term has not been widely accepted in common English speech, and the challenge of creating more transparent Chinese language labeling persists.

Politics and Planning
Another dimension of this lexical debate revolves around issues of politics and language planning. In 1932, an important text on pronunciation was published. The Vocabulary of National Pronunciation for Everyday Use caused debates on implementing the National Language (Guoyu) policy. There were different opinions between the North and the South about unifying the spoken language and retaining the local “dialects.” A suggested compromise was that while all Chinese should speak the National Language, each could also speak his/her local variety. However, no consensus was reached on this issue (Ramsey, 1987).

Mandarin was chosen in 1956 as the official language of wider communication and education throughout the People’s Republic of China (PRC). While this policy and its implementation have been evolving over many decades, at this time, Mandarin (Putonghua) is the undisputed lingua franca of China and is used in a range of country-wide and global settings including educational institutions, media, film, and literature (Dong, 2010). Of course, there exist alternative forms of Mandarin that mark speakers in terms of regional, social, and educational affiliations (Norman, 1988). Western linguists would commonly say that all mutually intelligible varieties of Mandarin are dialects including the most standard and prestigious versions.

Linguistics and Folk Linguistics
This brings up yet another confounding factor. For most linguists, a dialect is any variety that can be associated with a particular speech community, irrespective of prestige. However, English speakers informally use the word dialect to refer to varieties of a language which are
mutually intelligible with the standard, at least to some degree, but lack the status and power of the official standard form (Wolfram, 2004). Indeed, Niedzielski and Preston (2003) usefully distinguish notions about language that recur among non-linguists in the population versus the scientific knowledge and constructs used by linguists and applied linguists themselves. Clearly, folk notions regarding varieties of Chinese are in conflict with the understanding of language specialists regarding these alternative forms.

Language, Respect, and Identity

Since languages and varieties have acknowledged value in that they carry social norms, local knowledge, history, and traditions, some speakers of Chinese varieties deemed “fāngyán” (dialects) complain that this terminology does not engender adequate respect for their language. For example, in a study of language attitudes among Cantonese speaking university students in Guangdong, Ng and Zhao (2015) reported a preference for bilingualism, which is not supported by national policy. The fact that schooling in China typically privileges Mandarin is also resulting in the loss of local languages among younger speakers, who sometimes even have difficulty communicating with grandparents and elders (Zhang & Ma, 2012).

According to UNESCO, Cantonese is a major world language rather than a dialect, broadly used in a range of settings. It has a distinctive phonology and morphology as well as a traditional orthography (Gao, 2012) and is associated with its speakers’ personal and social identities. In Gao’s recent study, Cantonese-speaking users of the Internet, dubbed “netizens” by the researcher, argued for Cantonese status as a language based on its historical connection to earlier literary forms, its use as a global as well as a regional lingua franca, and its important association with local identity.

Writing with Meaning

A further complication is that while English is written alphabetically (graphemes correspond more or less to particular sounds), Chinese writing uses characters to represent concepts. Thus, two individuals who cannot communicate orally would be able to write ideas to each other successfully using the same ideographs for lexical items with a common meaning but very different pronunciations. Although the writing reform of the PRC developed a simplified script, it is derived from traditional writing and both are still in use today. In addition, several phonetic scripts have been developed; the most commonly used is the Pinyin system which is helpful for foreigners who do not have the time or energy to master the 8,000 characters typically known by an educated Chinese person; over 50,000 exist (BBC, 2015).

Questions and Challenges

Pandey (2015) is one of many scholars who value the transmission of heritage languages to the next generation. She writes: “Research shows that identity (i.e., feeling a sense of affinity towards one’s teacher and the school culture) is central to learning, particularly in the formative years…” (p.8). At the same time, taking an additive view to multilingualism, many benefits have been attributed to the acquisition of more than one language. A heritage language connects the individual to family, community, and culture. The maintenance and growth of bilingualism and biliteracy have been shown to have very positive outcomes, both in terms of enhanced cognition (Bialystock, 2001; King and Mackay, 2007) and more robust self-esteem (Collins, et al., 2011). Naming Chinese languages and varieties in such a way that their importance is marked by what they are called could be helpful in promoting their acquisition and use in a bilingual, biliterate and/or multilingual setting. The value of a societal language of wider communication is also widely acknowledged. But this need not be achieved at the expense of local languages, which after all do have official status within the PRC. In China, as in the U.S. and elsewhere around the globe, the development of bilingualism and biliteracy, can potentially benefit individuals as well as society as a whole. “What’s in a name?,” Juliet asked. Often a name can reveal our beliefs and attitudes- and what we call our languages and varieties can affect our feelings and perspectives about our languages and ourselves.

References


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