

LANGUAGE AWARENESS IN THE HAKKA GROUP¹ IN THAILAND

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Abstract

This paper proposes that every minority or ethnic group wishes to preserve their language and culture if at all possible. Although some ethnic groups in Thailand have started to teach their language in the formal school system, the Hakka people have not yet been able to do this, but this does not mean they do not want to revive their language. Nowadays, some Hakka descendants in Thailand are aware of language shift. The phenomenon of language shift or the decline in language use normally occurs in languages which are no dominant in that society. In other words, they do not have an integral function in the community. While the new generations are unable to speak their mother tongue, the older generations are keen to maintain links with their origins and to preserve their language. Although there are Hakka associations in Thailand, language revitalization is not a priority for them because the association committees have many other responsibilities to take care of. However, the advantage of Hakka associations is that they have Hakka networks both inside and outside Thailand. Language revitalization awareness has already started with the establishment of a Hakka study center founded by a business man who is determined to study the origins of his mother-tongue and culture in order to spread this knowledge to other people, especially those of Hakka descent. He is not the only one wishing to see a revival of the Hakka language. Some Hakka youth, for example, have demonstrated their interest by reviving old Hakka songs as new style pop songs.

Keywords: Hakka, language awareness, revitalization

Introduction

The Hakka people are one ethnic group of the 'Han' Chinese. Most Hakka reside in the provinces of Guangdong, Southern Fujian, Jiangxi, Taiwan, Guangxi, Hunan and Sichuan, China (Egerod 1967, Wang 2003, Ramsey 1987). The overseas Hakka are scattered around the world in many countries, such as Australia, Borneo, Brazil, Brunei, Burma, Canada, UK, France, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, and the United States, etc. In linguistic terms, the Hakka language belongs to the south dialect of

the Chinese language, which is sub-branch of the Sino-Tibetan family (Ramsey, 1987). As we know, more than 1.2 billion speak several Chinese dialects which are mutually unintelligible, but use the same writing system. Even though they use the same Chinese characters, they pronounce the words differently, and sometimes create new characters in some dialects if it is necessary, such as Cantonese and Hakka. The meaning of the word Hakka (in Cantonese) or Kejia 客家 in Mandarin Chinese is literary translated to “guest families” (Hashimoto, 1973, p.1).

Sociolinguistic Setting of Hakka in Thailand

The Hakka speakers

Most of the Hakka speakers in Thailand came from Mei Xian and the area around the city of Shantou, Guangdong province, more than 100 years ago. Skinner states that “a large number of Hakka speakers immigrated to Thailand around the period 1906-1917” (p.50). But there is no evidence to confirm exactly when the Hakka moved to Thailand. Currently, there have been no census of the population of each Chinese dialect group in Thailand because nowadays, the descendants of Chinese immigrants have become indistinguishable from the indigenous population because of intermarriage. Thus, we cannot state the exact number of Hakka people in Thailand. The Hakka population however, can be estimated. In percentage terms they are the third largest group (16%) after the Teochiu (40%) and the Hinganese (18%) of all Chinese dialects living in Thailand (Vatikiotis, 1998). The areas where the Hakka speakers are densely settled are Bangkok and the southern part of Thailand, especially in Hatyai district, Songkhla province and Betong district, Yala province. The Hakka people also live in scattered communities in provinces where Hakka associations exist.

Language situation

According to many factors having an effect to Hakka language, we can say that the Hakka language use in Thailand is declining. There are only a few older Hakka speakers who speak the Hakka language well. The Hakka people over the age of 50 years can speak Hakka, but those under 50 years can speak only a little Hakka (Ungsitipoonporn, 2007). or none at all. Most Hakka speakers do not use Hakka at home. The new generations are not aware of language shift. This means that the Hakka language cannot be preserved if the Hakka descendants are not aware of the Hakka crisis. Language is one important aspect which is used to identify a person’s cultural identity. At present, the younger Hakka generation are automatically assimilated to Thai culture because they do not use Hakka in their daily life and there are no schools teaching the Hakka language. This situation corresponds to Veltman who states that “it is a normative phenomenon that the process of language shift from the minority languages to the dominant languages is normative; but language shift from dominant language to minority languages is

almost nil" (p.147). Although the Hakka language situation in Taiwan aims to protect it from endangerment and is better off than in other areas some scholars argue that the Hakka dialect spoken in Taiwan is hardly to be preserved if the Hakka people do not recognize the crisis of their language and culture (Deborah,2006).

A Review of Language Revitalization in Some Ethnic Groups in Thailand

Not only Hakka language has confronted the crisis of language and culture but also the other minority languages in the world. In Thailand, there are 14 severely endangered languages that should be revitalized. These minorities groups are Chong, Kasong, Samre, Chung (Saoch), Mlabri, Sakai, Nyahkur, So (Thavung), Lawa (Gong), Mpi, Bisu, Lua (Lavua), Moklen and Urak Lawoi (Premssirat, 2004). The Resource Center for Revitalization and Maintenance of Endangered Languages and Cultures, Mahidol University, has a commitment to preserve and revive languages and cultures in Southeast Asia that are in crisis and on the verge of extinction. Most minority groups do not have a written language so they are at risk of losing their language. These unwritten ethnic minority languages need to create a writing system so that they can record anything they want to, such as stories, folktales, songs, and various forms of local knowledge. The writing system is not just a tool for literature recording but it is used to teach the younger generation, making the language status higher than in the past. Language preservation and revitalization is not just the linguist's duty but it is the native speaker's task. This means that if the native speaker is not aware or not interested in revitalization, it is not plausible to do that. Therefore, linguists have the role as consultants, and encourage the endangered minority groups to recognize this crisis.

So far Chong in Chanthaburi province which is the first ethnic group for teaching their language as a subject in a formal school has been developed the local language curriculum. That is one method for language revitalization. Besides Chong, Nyahkur in Chaiyaphum province, and So (Thavung) in Sakon-Nakorn province have been also introduced their languages as subjects in their community schools. The introduction of ethnic languages in formal schools is one method to preserve language but not every group can do that. It is dependent on many factors, such as human resources, funding resources and opportunity. Although some ethnic groups in Thailand have started to teach their language in the formal school system, the Hakka people have not yet been able to do this, but this does not mean they do not want to revive their language.

The Road to Hakka Language Revitalization

As mention above, the revitalization of Hakka language group is not as same as other endangered ethnic groups in Thailand. What are the important factors or

inspirations to revive Hakka language? What do they do or the steps of the revitalization? Finally, what is the future plan in this case?

Thinking about revitalization

Why do some Hakka speakers think about language revitalization? What are their inspirations? What is the Hakka situation they want to see in the near future? These are the questions raised in this paper, particularly of the Hakka speakers who want to preserve their language and culture.

The following data was obtained from interviews with Mr. Nopphadol. Mr. Nopphadol Chawalkorn is a businessman. His age is around 68 years and he was born in Thailand. He would like to know about his father's homeland because in the past he always listened to his father talk about China where his father was born, but Mr. Nopphadol has never seen it before. He wonders why his father had close ties with his homeland. If his father's homeland is really good or has something special, why did he come to Thailand? What was the real reason or purpose to come to Thailand and how did he come? Mr. Nopphadol would like to clarify the path in which Hakka people came from China and he also wants to see the real place in China. The most important thing is he wants to search for the Hakka origin or Hakka homeland. He wonders why the name of this group means 'newcomer' or 'guest family', why the Hakka people named themselves 'guest people'.

To search for the answers to these questions, he went to Meizhou, the capital of Guangdong province, China. He has read many books about Hakka history and Hakka origin until he has acquired enough information to be a Hakka lecturer in many areas, such as the Hakka associations in some provinces of Thailand and also in some academic institutions. At the time he went to China, he not only searched for his father's homeland, but also for the history of the whole Hakka group.

He discovered why the meaning of the name Hakka does not tell anything about the area they came from, as is common with other Chinese dialect groups such as Hokkien speakers, who came from Hokkien province; Chao Zhou speakers, who came from the Chao Zhou area in Guangdong province; Hainan speakers, who came from Hainan Island; and Guangdong or Cantonese speakers, who came from Guangdong province. This made him more interested to search of the history and other points of views of Hakka. He found that the Hakka people have only stories to tell of their migration, over and over. Hence, concluding that the Hakka people do not have a true homeland. This is also the reason (the frequent migration from one place to another) why the meaning of Hakka is related to being a newcomer or a guest. Mr. Nopphadol felt funny because he is a Hakka descendant. He found it meaningful and valuable to find his origin, thus finding his own self. He would like to know everything about his Hakka ancestors. For this reason, he has dedicated his time and money to do research on Hakka from that time on.

Similar to researchers who want to publish their research results worldwide, Mr. Nopphadol would like to tell other people, especially the next

Hakka generations, about his Hakka knowledge, including the Hakka language and culture, in order to extend the period of time before language shift and final disappearance. One main cause for this language shift is the effect of language policies both in Thailand and China. As you know, the president of China has promoted Mandarin Chinese worldwide so the other Chinese dialects are not allowed to be used as a language of instruction in formal schools. This means Chinese dialects do have not a formal role in the community. Not only Hakka will shift to another language but other Chinese dialects will shift as well. At present, Hakka youngsters cannot speak their language and do not know anything about their mother tongue. Thus, Mr. Nopphadol wants to preserve the Hakka language and culture as long as possible.

Language and culture are the ethnic identity of each ethnic group because one can tell who they are based on these. For example, if you are not a Hakka person, you cannot speak the Hakka language; or if you are not a Hakka person, you do not want to speak the Hakka language. Therefore, if Hakka descendants do not realize the value of the Hakka language, it will disappear in the near future. Thus, language is the most important thing to be aware of.

The plan for Hakka revitalization

Since Mr. Nopphadol began to study Hakka history, he has been able to persuade some Hakka speakers who have the same goals with him, and their numbers are increasing. For the past six years, he has made a great effort to accumulate Hakka knowledge as much as possible. He plans to set up a Hakka academic institute in order to study both Hakka language and culture, and these data will be disseminated. His intention is to both promote Hakka culture and teach the Hakka language at the same time, or at least produce a Hakka website with Hakka language for self-studying. The content should be filled with vocabularies, dialogues, and passages written in Hakka, including Hakka lessons. These mass media will be suitable for self learning. Furthermore, Hakka history in the past and present will be available in this website. Everyone can search the Hakka data of many Hakka sub-dialects such as Meixian, Taipu, Xingning, etc.

In addition to these mass media efforts, other cultural activities can help with the revitalization program. For example, there are some Hakka foods that identify Hakka identity. The first Hakka food festival was held in Saraburi province last year and it is hoped that it will be held further in other provinces.

Networks both inside and outside Thailand

Since Mr. Nopphadol founded the Hakka study center in Bangkok for many years, he has used his own funding to search for Hakka information. He has tried to find networks of people working on Hakka studies. First, he looked for some scholars or academics working on Hakka research projects. He was ready to give scholarships to anyone who does Hakka studies. He was very delighted to know that the Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia, Mahidol University,

are doing research on the ethnic groups in Thailand, including Chinese dialects. He hopes that he can co-operate with the researchers in that institute so that he can convince the Hakka youth to preserve the Hakka language according to his intention. Although this has not yet come true, he will not give up.

Several known academics in the universities in Thailand are of Hakka descent, such as Ajarn Worasak of Chulalongkorn University and Ajarn Arthorn of Thammasat University. Although these scholars are of Hakka descent, no one is doing research on the Chinese dialects, except from Mahidol University. Currently, Mandarin Chinese is very popular and more important for finding employment; thus, most universities teach and do research on Mandarin Chinese. That is one reason why Chinese dialects including Hakka have been threatened by the majority language and have no role in the society.

Secondly, he traveled to Taiwan, where many of the Hakka people reside, to have a language awareness program and to initiate language preservation there. He found out during their meeting that the Hakka people in Taiwan only speak Mandarin Chinese, even in general communication. He thought it is not plausible to preserve the Hakka language in Taiwan if they will not try to speak Hakka. He also went to Meizhou, Guangdong province, China, the supposed Hakka homeland. He went to Jieying University to make connections with the academics there to establish Hakka academic co-operation. He is currently waiting and looking forward to hearing an answer from there.

He thinks if he can collaborate with the university in China to set up a Hakka academy, he will be very happy because his dream will come true. He would like to see at least Hakka youths learn Hakka language in this institute. In general, most universities in China would like to found Confucius Institutes which focus on Mandarin Chinese not Hakka. Therefore, for setting up the Hakka academy in Thailand is quite difficult. If he can do that, it is the first Hakka academy in Thailand.

He also has connections with non-government organizations, for example, the Hakka associations in various provinces, family clan associations, and famous Hakka people. He tries to promote Hakka preservation awareness. So far, he is quite well known among the members of the Hakka associations and scholars. He is currently the president of the major branch of the Hakka association based in Bangkok. He has power to reconstruct the committees so that he can reach the mission of Hakka revitalization. Despite the fact that one important mission of the Hakka association is to pass on the Hakka language and culture to younger generations, this is not practical yet due to lack of an action plan. The meeting of the Hakka association is only being held every two years in Thailand, as well as the World Hakka Convention held in different countries every year or every two years. Although this is on-going, there is no discussion of Hakka language preservation. These meetings are just focused on displaying vernacular Hakka culture, and using Mandarin Chinese to communicate, the same as the meetings of the Hakka

association in Thailand which also uses Thai or Mandarin Chinese, because some Hakka members cannot understand the Hakka language.

Future plans

Mr. Nopphadol he would like to hold a conference on Hakka culture within the next three years. The most outstanding item of Hakka culture is the song 'San ge'. The original 'San ge' song is still sung in China. The contest is always arranged during the Mid-Autumn festival (the 15th day of the eighth lunar month). The song content is composed of Hakka culture which has never been written in the history, but it still inherited from generation to generation. The characteristics of these songs are similar to the poems in the Tang dynasty which having flowery alliteration in poetry. When these songs are sung in Hakka dialect, they will be present profound feelings because about 80% of the contents are related to love. Hakka people believe that Hakka culture is inherited by Hakka women because it is known that Hakka women do everything in the house and work, whereas Hakka men have only studied in order to compete in a courtier position (a person who is part of the court of a king or queen in the past). Besides, Hakka lullabies (a soft gentle song sung to make a child go to sleep) are the most popular songs among Hakka people, especially the song 'ngiet guang guang'. Nowadays, one Hakka youth unable to speak Hakka has attempted to compose these songs using the Thai language but still maintaining the origin meaning or just changing the content a little bit according to the suitable rhyme. He feels very proud to be a Hakka descendant who is aware of Hakka identity. Therefore, not only the Hakka version of these songs are well known but also the Thai versions will be gradually well known in the future. Hakka women always sing these songs when there is a Hakka association meeting. As long as his contemporary generation still exists, Mr. Nopphadol is quite assured that the Hakka language can be preserved, but later on he does not know what it will be like. The Hakka language will continue to exist or will disappear, depending on the next generations. It can be said that "if there is no Hakka language, there will be no Hakka people".

Conclusion and Suggestions

This is a case of language preservation and language revitalization started by one businessman who desired to know the origin of Hakka. This is unlike other ethnic groups in which linguists approach native speakers of a dying language and encourage them to awaken to preserve or revive their language. In order to maintain endangered language, the ethnic groups should realize and implement their mother tongue in daily life in the family domain. The collaboration between native speakers and linguistic scholars will give a stronger power to maintain languages and language diversity in the society. Mr. Nopphadol's experience is a good example of language awareness.

According to data above, how can the Hakka language in Thailand survive? Suggestions to save the Hakka language in effective and feasible methods can be summarized as follows:

Encourage Hakka youngsters to be proud of their heritage

The older generation should convince the younger generation to understand virtues such as diligence, loyalty, and love for study that a Hakka possess, and they should act as good models so that the next generation can absorb these virtues easily.

Have a good network in both Thailand and China

Fortunately, the Hakka group has a good advocate in the person of Mr. Nopphadol who has good vision and strong will power to drive the Hakka revitalization process. He has earnest intention to organize difficult tasks, such as creating a Hakka website, establishing a Hakka academy, and holding Hakka cultural festivals. All of these plans are always in his mind.

Pass on Hakka language and culture from generation to generation

Documenting Hakka studies and publishing it via the internet are good methods to save the Hakka language. Creating learning opportunities for the children is also an important way. It can be taught in school or self-learning. Various materials can be implemented such as, website, mass media, news, broadcasts, including ballad and drama.

At present, there is a prime opportunity for every ethnic group to revive their language and culture because the language policy in Thailand is open to having everyone speak their mother tongue, unlike in the past, when Chinese dialects and all minority groups were prohibited to be used in the classroom in formal Thai schools. It is time to wake up for the protection of your heritage which is a tremendous gift, that is, your mother tongue and culture.

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Endnotes

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