

Globality and China Linguistic Identity in Contemporary World Society

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Abstract

Drawing on perspectives of globality, identity politics and cultural studies, this paper presents a critical argument on globalization and China linguistic identity with an array of new theoretical and practical evidence in contemporary times. It is believed that neither globality nor identity is free of the play of power. Both are engaged by the level of participation, inclusion and exclusion of one over the other. However, a wide range of possibilities of linguistic identity can be anticipated in the process of globalization. Changes brought by globalization are of great significance on contemporary Chinese culture, language education and social life. Further, linguistic identity determinates the formulation of language policy, and diverse linguistic identities render possible the liberalized usage of different languages. In the perspective of globality, linguistic security and cultural diversity have become the major issues of world society. Language and its related issues are receiving due attention by all countries, such as linguistic ecology, language safety, cultural loyalty. Particularly, there has been a strategic consideration of the status of national language. Language security, as related to the fate of the nation and the cultural well-being of the country, has become a priority, especially in non-traditional security perspectives. And consideration of language safety is intimately related to cultural development of the nation, so that the Chinese local linguistic administration has formulated and implemented strategies to reassure the administration of verbal and non-verbal communication of the Chinese language. However, in the current situation of globality, it is proper and significant to maintain the co-existence and co-prosperity of Chinese national language and linguistic variety in the country and beyond.

Keywords: Globalization, Linguistic Identity, National Language, Chinese

Introduction

The recent decades have witnessed the revolutionary of globalization. With the trend of globality, different cultures and social systems around the world are becoming connected and merged owing to more exchanges between countries with the help of instantaneous electronic communication. As to the defining of globalization, it is pertinent to refer to Anthony Giddens with his remarks that “ Globalization can thus be defined as the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa (1990). To be particularistic, Giddens argues that globalization is political, technological and cultural, as well as economic in essence; and the process of globalization is driven by a mixture of cultural, economic and political influences, involving a wider range of perspectives. From his point of view, it can be recognized that globalization cannot be illustrated by simple explanations of financial

interdependence or cross-border economic activities. The process of globalization is driven by a mixture of cultural, economic and political development.

Diverse attitudes in China towards globalization can now be summarized by the terms the people of the country are using, such as “world society”, “internationalization”, “transnationalization”, “international integration”, “interdependency”, “Westernization” and “convergence” (Yang & Wang, 2008). There is some accuracy in them when the individual terms are used as specific signifiers, but none of them is as commonly received as globalization pertaining to its broad theme. In China, globalization is a material reality. The global trends in all walks of life reflect that China, after having shut itself against the outside world, has merged into world community in a deep and extensive manner.

According to Hoogvelt, many of the disputable opinions on globality arise from a confusion of globalization with its precursor movements, namely, internationalization (as processes involving the simple extension of economic activities across national boundaries) and transnationalization (as in the increasing organisation of production on a cross-border basis by multinational organisations), (2007). Robertson’s (2002) concept of globalization focuses on an intensified compression of the world and people’s increasing consciousness of the world with the ever-increasing abundance of global connections and general spread of global phenomena. In his view, globalization can suitably be seen as “compression of the world,” and understood in terms of the institutions of modernity. Moreover, the idea of modernity can also be interpreted as a cultural norm. Following this line of thinking, one can differentiate between a view of culture as bounded, tied to a specific location and inward-looking, and one in which culture is regarded as outward-looking “translocal learning process,” as Pieterse suggests, “Introverted cultures, which have been prominent over a long stretch of history and which overshadowed translocal culture, are gradually receding into the background, which translocal culture made up of diverse elements is coming to the foreground (2005).

As matter of fact, cultural development is imperceptibly affected with the deepening of globalization. With the discourse of cultural globalization comes the issue of cultural identity. The problem arises when we perceived identity as fixed, natural and timeless. Such a conception makes it unlikely for contested and pluralized identities to emerge. (Zhang, 2000) In regard to cultural globalization, some argue that the world has become less diverse and more homogeneous, which can be shown in the loss of culture diversity and cultural hegemony. Cultural diversity, as the main feature of human civilization, is represented in the languages of nations. It is evident that while the number of nation-states adopting English has increased; the variety of national languages is minimized. For instance, English as a global language helps to facilitate international communication and promote mutual understanding among nations. It also causes an irretrievable loss of many other languages. Though cultural globalization appears to propel cultural exchange and international understanding, it often leads to the lacking of cultural diversity, which further tends to be accompanied by the declination of national identity.

The formation of Chinese identity cannot nowadays be reduced to the local issue but must be seen as a product of the complex set of flows and the complex conditions and situations which they generate. Globalization as economic, social and cultural process is never even or uniform. In actual fact, different nations and different social groups have different experiences of globalization. Some countries or regions are naturally more active,

more engaged and more affected than others. Specifically, the effects of globalization process, no matter positive or active, are especially significant in developing countries, such as China.

Cultural and Linguistic Identity

Globalization thus not only deals with the local and global status but also deals with the issues of language and identity. With regard to identity, it has come to the forefront of attention only in recent times as an opposing and embracing operation to globalization (Rajchman, 2015). In spite of the fact that there has not been any reference to identity in some dominant cultural studies works, such as Raymond Williams's *Keywords* (2003), it now has become a key concept and an important field of enquiry. As to the significance of discussion on identity, perhaps it is not so far-fetched to refer to Xunzi, an ancient Chinese philosopher, who said that men cannot but band in groups, but groups without differentiated identities shall contend. Contention brews disorder, disorder brews separation, separation reduces their strength and results in chaos. The Chinese legacy of "harmony allowing diversity" thousands of years ago remains practical for the topical discussions on the aspects of the broad theme of identity in academia. Generally, these studies on identity are associated with theories of postmodernism and globalization. On the one hand, as a form of resistance, emphasis on identity has emerged as a response to homogenizing global forces. On the other hand, as a generative force, ever-proliferating globalization produces new configurations of identity—national, local, and cultural. The flows of products, culture, capital, and information are accompanied by flows of people and emigration (Sarup, 2006; Lash and Urry, 2004). Transnational diaspora from every continent involving vast migrations of people produce the conditions for new transnational hybridised cultures and identities. Tendencies of "blending culture and capital" with specified functions of "regulating spaces, exercising aesthetic control, and producing historical narratives and images" are in fact originated from localities (Edensor, 2007).

Discussion on identity concerns the confluence of global culture with local and national culture. The global trends and local variations place a great strain on older concepts of a national and regional culture. A global media culture provides new sources for pleasures and identities that redefine gender, fantasies and new cultural experiences. These lead to the fragmentation of traditional identities, subjectivities and the construction of new identities. Obviously, the intersection of the global and the local is producing new matrixes to generate the emergence of hybrid identities. In other words, the global permeates the local with the result that new configurations emerge. In this process there create "contradictory forces of neo-colonization and resistance, global homogenisation and new local hybrid forms and identities," (Yu, 2008). Although global forces can be oppressive and erode cultural traditions and identities they can also provide possibilities to rework one's identity and can make people well equipped to create new possibilities of identification.

When it comes to "linguistic culture", culture cannot be avoided. There are numerous definitions of culture, none of which is universally accepted. Following Raymond Williams, Chinese linguist Xing Fuyi (1999), in his work *Cultural Linguistics*, defines that culture is a way of life which is shared by all members of society, including all matters created to satisfy the way of life, as well as the psychology and behaviour formulated on the way of life. Culture reflects the unique behaviour and concepts of different ethnic groups or nations. It is arguably the most important basis to distinguish different social groups or nations in terms of cultural identity. Language is part of culture and plays an important role in cultural formation. Meanwhile, language is influenced by culture and reflects back. Black American English is

the case in point. It has been given various names since its early formation, including Negro Pidgin, Negro Dialect, Black English Vernacular, Afro-American English, and Black English, etc. It can be seen that these language variants, just like the Black cultural identities, have gone through the process from discrimination to recognition. Just as "culture" is defined differently, so is the defining of "cultural identity". Hamers and Blanc (2009) hold the view that individual's cultural identity is constituted by the combination of individual personality and the integration of complex cultural structures. Their point of view emphasizes that cultural identity is the result of the socialization of individuals. It is the dynamic mechanisms that people formulate and develop from childhood, and will be ever impacted by the influence of social and psychological situation of the day. Socialization process never ceases to develop, which implies the changing facts of individual cultural identity. Kramsch (2008) put forward that cultural identity is the membership of a cultural group formed by individual self-identification. This definition deals with the self-identification and external identification of a cultural group to their cultural belonging. Four characteristics of cultural identity are summarized the by Luo (2009), namely constructivity, pluralism, inheritance, development and change, and the emotional features. Furthermore, she points out that cultural identity has a series of characteristics, which can be expressed through people's daily use of language.

Initially, language has the function of identifying cultural identity. As an important carrier of information transmission, language has irreplaceable communicative functions. Language condenses cultural achievement by humans and is an important attribute of a nation that distinguishes it from others. At the same time, language is the main content and important carrier of national ideology and culture, so that it also has the function of constructing cultural identity. As Huang (2012) put it, "Language, serving as the cultural resources and national rights, is mainly reflected in the identity function of national groups." In fact, language is no longer a simple communication tool in daily life. Whether acknowledged or not, the nationals of a nation-state popularise cultural legacy and wisdom mainly through language, intentionally or unintentionally. As Sapir (1985) remarked, "Languages cannot exist without culture. That is to say, they do not separate from the society and the generality of customs and beliefs which determine human life". Language is not only a unique expression and communicative carrier of culture, but also an indispensable part of its own culture.

Indeed, there is a natural and inevitable connection between the language choice and the cultural identity. National language is a key factor in the self-identification of national members, and it is the way in which national culture can be transmitted from generation to generation. In the process of learning and utilizing language, the concomitant national culture also becomes the root of maintaining the national identity. Language is also an important symbol for the ethnic groups to maintain the sense of national unity and solidarity. It is the close relationship between language and culture that makes people subconsciously accept the values embedded in the language while learning and using it, and accept the cultural meanings in it. This characteristic of language binds people closely, forming cultural identity dynamically.

Furthermore, language is the intrinsic manifestation of cultural identity. As an important aspect of human culture, its generation, formation and development are imprinted with the historical and cultural features of a particular nation. The symbolic system that records the language has largely accumulated the intellectual culture of society. For example, we can observe some of the customs, concepts and psychology of the ancient Yin and Shang dynasties encoded in the inscriptions on bones and tortoise shells dating back to the pre-

modern time in China. From this perspective, language can be regarded as the representation, the bond and inherent ties of a nation from its linguistic forms to inner contents. As an important part of national culture, it profoundly affects and shapes the national spirit. Language represents not only the structure of vocabulary, phonetics, semantics, etc., but also the fertile ground for the development of spiritual identity of a nation.

Besides, language serves as natural demand of cultural identity. It is a way of expression, as well as a reflection of users' thoughts. If the language on which the national culture depends is on the verge of survival crisis, cultural identity of the nation will doubtlessly be jeopardized. If a nation cannot maintain the independence and vitality of its national language, the values, religions and customs of the nation may be negatively influenced. Failure to maintain the cultural function, identity and spiritual independence of national language will affect people's reverence for their own cultural heritage. The weakening of national language and culture will inevitably lead to the decline of the national strength, to the weakening of the human spirit, and even to the endangering of cultural security of the nation. Therefore, mastering the national language is conducive to the construction of national identity, as well as to the elimination of the anxiety caused by language lack. As cultural identity is related to the management of language, the differences in cultural identities are reflected in the language use at both the macro and micro level. Languages spoken by people from different countries and ethnic groups vary widely in pronunciation, grammar and rhetoric. There are still great differences even in the same linguistic variety. For instance, Black English in different localities has different grammatical and phonetic features, let alone mentioning about American English, British English, and Canadian English. People of different regions, occupations, classes, ages and even genders equally have their own unique features, which is the testimony of democratization of language identity at play.

Security of Native Language

Modern social theories, especially socio-linguistic theory, have a practical significance in the analysis of the formation of new cultural identities in China with global influence. The deep and extensive manner of China's involvement in the process of globalization and the awareness of globality by the Chinese people can be reflected in the changes of their ideologies, conceptions and language. The reform and opening policies have enabled people to "free the spirit from its cell," a pledge familiar to most Chinese. As a result, what have happened are the changes that are really tremendous and omnipresent.

Language, as many cultural theorists and linguists have pointed out, embodies and reflects the emergent character of social and cultural life, its changing situations and meanings in particular (Dunn, 2018). Being integral to the social development, language serves as a fundamental condition of social life and has essential function in formulating cultural identity. Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) has made a unique contribution to modern linguistics by stressing the idea that language speaks us, rather than we speak it. There are some other scholars who have advanced the need to substitute language for the person who had been supposed to be the author. It is language that speaks, not the author's identity. According to a pragmatic view of language by Wittgenstein, language and social practice are interrelated. He attached greater emphasis on language as constituting force to culture. In his words, "The limits of my language mean the limit of the world." Instead of holding the absolute determination of material practice over language, he insisted that language and social practice are inseparable (Peters, 2009). In Voloshinov's view, linguistic

function in social relation is dominant. Language for Voloshinov is regarded as the “theoretical point of departure for a more general (and ‘revisionist’) view of social and cultural production,” (Dunn, 2018). Structuralists would want to emphasise on the importance of language in the ongoing construction of identity. They propose that it is through the acquisition of language that we become human and social beings. Through language, we come to “know” who we are.

In his article “Language and society as seen by Xu Shen, an ancient Chinese lexicographer,” Xu Guozhang, a modern linguist of China, elaborated Xu Shen’s theory of language in the context of society. Xu Shen regarded words as representation of things, groupings of things as categories of things. In the process of grouping words and categories, he saw systems of beliefs and behaviour, a hierarchy of men, a structure of transactions, and values arranged in degrees (1997). In a way, Xu Shen’s linguistic theory can suitably be applied in articulating social and cultural identity today.

Globalization has provided the advanced technology capable of performing the function of cultural preservation in terms of storage, retrieval, transportation and display. We should harness this potential in ways that cultural diversity and pluralistic identity are preserved for posterity. There is a need to preserve languages of different peoples through which we all can get an insight into the past and present conditions of ourselves. We need a diversity of language because democratic linguism is a normal and healthy part of the way human society is organized in. Language is a means of personal as well as group identity.

China’s policy of opening to the outside world has in the process introduced foreign cultures to Chinese society. The large flow of foreign cultural theory and practice, capital, products and languages has blurred the distinctions between Chinese and foreign cultures. The globalizing forces and transnational communication have caused linguistic changes to appear. Today, the emergence of new cultural identities has their manifestations in the Chinese vocabulary, in language usage and in the way the Chinese people tend to live.

It has been the government policy since 1994 to promote *Putonghua*, the Mandarin or standard Chinese language, across the country. This movement has been carried out for many years by the extended coverage of mass media and social movement from the rural to urban areas. But it is not the official policy to limit the use of different regional dialects. With an increase of cultural and economic flows from Hong Kong SAR and Chinese Taiwan to the main land, Cantonese and local dialects are making an ever important presence. However, in Hong Kong and Guangzhou, *Putonghua* speakers may fail to get themselves understood sometimes. But Cantonese as a business language obviously has its own importance in the Cantonese regions within China and abroad, which is interesting and globally phenomenal.

On the curricula of Chinese schools and colleges, foreign languages education, especially the teaching of English has long been emphasized. In recent years, still greater importance has been attached to foreign language learning. According to Barry Turner, a contemporary English writer and media expert, “Nearly a quarter of the world’s population, up to 1.5 billion people, are already fluent or competent in English. The official language in seventy-five countries, English is the language of international business and entertainment. Eighty per cent of the world’s electronically stored information is in English,” (2004). With the consciousness of globality, some believe that a working of English plus necessary skills in computing knowledge is a passport to a job and comfortable living. According to the new government regulations, professionals including lecturers, doctors and engineers will be required to pass a test in English and computing for their promotion and academic activities

outside China. But, it is not certain that English alone will be the only world language in the future, as we are confident that at least Chinese and Spanish are gathering strength in more and more countries in Asia, Africa, and Americas. No-one will be able to ignore the strong and serious linguistic rivals. “Linguistic ascendancy,” like discourse of globalization, is also “up for grabs.” (Zhang, 2000). We need to restore Chinese to the first place in the national curriculum as well as to front the campaign of Chinese learning abroad. Specifically, we must make sure that Chinese should deserve better of its home country.

Conclusion

Though it is witnessed that language competition becomes quite fierce on the global stage, the communication, collision, fusion and infiltration of languages are now becoming increasingly frequent in the process of globalization. The linguistic ecology and better language environment are receiving due attention by all countries at stake. Such issues as linguistic hegemony, language security, and cultural loyalty have also continued to emerge. In particular, for some, language safety along with its purity, as related to the fate of the nation and the development of the country, has become a priority, especially in non-traditional security perspectives. For others, the consideration of language safety is intimately related to cultural safety of nations, so that great linguistic powers have formulated and implemented strategies to reassure an effective administration of verbal and non-verbal communication of language in the world society. The updating of the national security has caused the linguistic role in traditional and non-traditional domains to be more critical. For example, the United States launched the National Security Language Program in 2006, emphasizing the importance of "key languages" in ensuring national and international communicative security. China has also proposed a series of novel language policies, realizing that an early surveillance mechanism of national language security strategy must be established. The central government is to supervise the management of the formulation and implementation of national language strategies to avoid the crisis of Chinese marginalization. As a matter of fact, foreign language communication is always an important need, a way of individual wellbeing as well as collective improvement in the global society, and it is of no reason to exclude communicative exchange through foreign languages media. Pragmatically, foreign language education is not only the acquisition of linguistic knowledge, but also the convergence of disparate expression habits and ways of thinking. However, in the current situation, promoting a strong foreign language culture with favourable policy or even ulterior motives has brought about some undesirable consequences. The outlook and spiritual attitude of the young has undergone fast transformation, which has greatly changed their cultural stand. They may seek after cultural and ideological values of foreign countries, especially the Western countries, which have arguably created difficulties of identification with their mother language and national culture. Thus, it becomes necessary that such influence of foreign languages should be prevented to the best interest of the population, especially the younger generation of the nation.

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