

A Study of Endangered Languages from an Ecological Linguistic Perspective

The endangerment of ethnic languages has now become a hot issue of general concern for all ethnic groups in China. The languages that make up multiculturalism provide humans with a wide variety of ways to view the world. As an emerging branch of linguistics, eco-linguistics views language as an integral part of the ecological environment and aims to study the relationship between language and the environment. A comprehensive investigation of the endangered status and causes of China's endangered languages from the perspective of ecolinguistics and the search for ways to protect our endangered languages can help realize the meaning of cultural pluralism and contribute to national unity and social stability.

Keywords: *eco-linguistics; endangered languages; language protection*

Introduction

The issue of endangered languages has been a hot topic in linguistics since the 1980s and has been the focus of attention for ecological linguists. The language ecology should follow the natural growth and decline of languages, but the balance of the language ecology has been disrupted by a large number of intervening human activities. With the accelerated pace of global economic integration, the advantages of Chinese as the lingua franca in China have been highlighted, and people in many minority regions have switched to the powerful Chinese language, and many minority languages have become endangered. This paper studies the ecological languages of language endangerment from the perspective of ecolinguistics. As an emerging discipline in linguistic research, ecolinguistics provides a new scientific perspective on language research from an ecological point of view. The study of a language under the framework of ecolinguistics involves not only studying the language itself, but also the environment in which the language is located and the interrelationship between language and environment. It is an inescapable fact that languages are endangered because of the complexity of the language ecology in China and the number of languages that are in danger. Studying the external and internal environments of languages is of great significance in preserving and saving national languages and cultures (Zhao, 2020).

Literature Review

Definition of Endangered Language

American Linguist Krauss (1992:18) in University of Alaska made an analogy between language and biology, and classify languages into moribund, endangered and safe ones. Moribund languages refer to those no longer acquired as mother tongue by children; Endangered type of language are those that although children are still learning, if the current situation does not change, then by next century children will no longer learn. Fan Junjun(2006) states that once users no longer use the language, or language of intergenerational inheritance stopped, or use of the language communication occasions less and less, so the language is facing endangered, or they will fade away within a few generations in the future, these endangered or extinct language is called the endangered languages. According to Professor Dai Qingxia (2011) of the Central University for Nationalities, “an endangered language is actually a language whose function or activity tends to decline and face extinction in the process of communication.” Yang(2014) states that endangered languages generally refer to languages of some ethnic groups, regions or clusters that tend to die out in the course of historical development and also have an interrelated impact on the identity of ethnic cultures. “Of the more than 6,000 languages that exist worldwide, approximately 2,500 are endangered; the number of endangered languages exceeds one-third of the total number of languages in the world...People who make up 3% of the global population speak 96% of the world’s languages (Jin, 2011).”

Studies of Endangered Language

The phenomenon of language endangerment came to the attention of the international linguistic community in the 1970s, when the issue of language extinction was raised. In the 1980s, the issue of endangered languages became the focus of international linguistic attention and a hot topic of research in ecolinguistics. In 1992, Chinese linguists were first exposed to the concept of endangered languages at the 15th International Congress of Linguists. The domestic journal *Ethnolinguistics* reported the conference, and endangered languages as a term and concept entered the Chinese linguistics session for the first time (Fan, 2018).

In the 1990s, UNESCO hosted several conferences to discuss the rescue and protection of minority languages and cultures that were in danger of being passed on, and issued many documents on the protection of language and cultural diversity, such as *the Red Book of Endangered Languages, Language*

1 *Vitality and Language Endangerment*, and the *Universal Declaration on*
 2 *Cultural Diversity*, and an international information exchange center for
 3 endangered languages has been established in Tokyo, Japan. In research on the
 4 definition and maintenance of endangered languages around the world, the
 5 relevant UNESCO documents are basically used as the authoritative basis and
 6 indicator system for research in this field.

7 In 1995, the Endangered Languages Foundation in the United States
 8 stated in its founding declaration: “Language extinction has been a constant
 9 throughout history, but never before has the mass extinction that we are
 10 currently experiencing threatens the world” Language endangerment has
 11 been one of the three major language topics of world concern. Language
 12 endangerment is one of the three major linguistic issues of concern to the world.
 13 In 2000, two important monographs in the field of endangered languages were
 14 published, one by David Crystal (2000), *The Demise of Languages*; another
 15 book is *Vanishing Voices: The Extinction of the World’s Languages* by Suzanne
 16 Romaine and Daniel Nettle (2000).

17 In April 2015, *Introduction to Endangered Languages* by Sarah G.
 18 Thomason, is the first textbook-level work on endangered languages,
 19 indicating that endangered languages as a disciplinary branch has gained
 20 formal recognition and academic status in the field of linguistics (Shang, 2018).
 21 In 2015, China’s Language Resources Protection Project was established. In
 22 this context, many scholars have also participated in the survey and research on
 23 the use of dialects and ethnic languages in various places, which has brought
 24 China’s endangered language protection work to a new level. Experts and
 25 scholars such as Dai Qingxia, Ding Shiqing, Fan Junjun, Li Bing, Li Jinfang,
 26 Sun Hongkai, Xu Shixuan, etc. have made great contributions to the study of
 27 endangered languages in China. Important monographs on endangered
 28 languages in China include *Study on the Vitality of Minority Languages in*
 29 *China*, *Study on Endangered Languages; Newly Discovered Languages Series*
 30 edited by Sun Hongkai, *Case Studies on Endangered Languages* and Reference
 31 Grammar Series edited by Dai Qingxia, etc.

32 33 *Studies of Ecological Linguistic*

34
35 In 1990, M. Halliday gave a keynote address at the Association
 36 Internationale de Linguistique Appliqué (AILA) World Congress entitled *New*
 37 *ways of meaning: the challenge to applied linguistics*. His presentation
 38 prompted language researchers to think about the relationship between
 39 language and environmental issues in a new way, i.e., to examine language and
 40 language studies as part of ecological issues, thus forming an alternative
 41 research paradigm for ecolinguistics. At this conference, some scholars put

forward the term “eco-linguistics” as a general term for the study of language and ecological problems, which marks the birth of ecolinguistics as a young interdisciplinary discipline.

The discipline was primarily concerned with the impact of the environment on language from 1970 until 1990, with a research paradigm focusing on the Haugen model of language ecology; after 1990, a new concern was added, which focused on the impact of language on the environment, with a research paradigm focusing on the Halliday model of language ecology. “The study of ecolinguistics began with the study of the relationship between language and other contexts of use metaphorically as a relationship between organisms and their natural environment..... that is, using the principles and methods of ecology to study language ontology and to interpret the relationship between language and environment” (Zhao&Liu, 2020). Haugen’s ecological metaphor of language has laid down the mainstream research paradigm of language ecology.

According to Fan Junjun (2005), “the main task of ecolinguistics is to reveal the interaction between language and environment by analyzing and studying the ecological factors of language systems.” Language endangerment is the focus of ecological linguistics research. This paper focuses on the ecology of language to interpret the ecology of minority languages in China and the causes of the current linguistic situation.

Ecological Factors Causing Language Endangerment in China

As a language-centered multidimensional system, the language ecology plays an important role in limiting and regulating the creation, existence, development and extinction of languages. It is a system of social, economic, political, and cultural, etc. macro-environments, as well as micro-environments consisting of the language itself and psychological factors of language speakers (Zhao, 2020).

Macro-ecological Factors

This chapter mainly focuses on the natural, social and educational macro-ecological factors of language to interpret the ecology of minority languages in China and the causes of the current linguistic situation.

Natural Factor

Such natural or human factors as drought, famine, disease, war, flood, earthquake, tsunami, volcano eruption, acts of genocide, or other catastrophe

may wipe out a whole people (Li, 2012). Small groups in isolated, remote, and backward areas lacked the ability to withstand frequent disasters due to their low productivity and lack of proper preparedness, and as a result, entire communities became extinct and their languages disappeared. The ecological environment on which they depend has changed drastically or disappeared completely, thus leading some or all members of the minorities to abandon their native languages, thus creating a linguistic ecological crisis of their native languages.

For example, the Xiandao people in Yingjiang County originally belonged to the same branch as the Achang, but gradually separated during the subsequent migration and became an independent group hidden in the deep forests. Before the founding of New China, there was an outbreak of smallpox that killed many people in a single day, and the population of Xiandao declined dramatically, from more than 300 families to about 40 families. According to the statistics in February 2011, there were only 92 people in Xiandao, and the language is also endangered because of the small number of speakers (Li, 2012). As the people speaking the local languages die, those languages will inevitably run the risk of being extinct.

Without species diversity, we would not be able to know what makes us animals and what distinguishes us from other animals based on behavioral observations and genetic calculations. Each animal is an excellent occupant of its own ecological niche. If humans want to break free from the ground, they must learn from other animals such as birds and fish. It goes without saying that plants and microorganisms are also important. Likewise, without linguistic diversity, we would not be able to learn the most fundamental commonalities of human language, and we would not be able to serve to further understand human cognition and develop artificial intelligence and control it effectively.

Social Factor

Today, modern science and technology have developed rapidly, transportation conditions have improved significantly, and communication tools have become widespread, making language convergence a trend of the times (Cun, 2016). The spread and popularity of the Internet has strengthened the spread of Chinese as a common language.

In today's era, science and technology are constantly developing and progressing, and media such as radio and television have penetrated deeply into all corners of society and the Chinese language is relying on the power of modern technology and media to make its influence. The Chinese language is relying on modern technology and the power of the media to make its influence even wider and deeper. Some minority ethnic groups are not very good at Chinese, but because of the power of modern technology and media, their

influence has become even wider and deeper. Some minority groups who do not know Chinese well have unknowingly improved their Chinese language skills by listening to and watching Chinese radio and TV programs. Some minority children have learned Chinese before they even enter school to receive formal school education. At this time, minority groups find that Chinese, the national language, is more widely spoken than their own. National language is easier to use and has a wider range of communication than their own language. The Chinese language is easier to use and has a broader range of communication than their own language.

At the same time, many ethnic minorities have been influenced by the open-mindedness of the media to integrate into the wave of urbanization and lose their native language environment. In order to integrate into the mainstream of society, they voluntarily give up their native language and switch to Chinese or other strong languages. The subjective and objective rejection of their mother tongue gradually makes them lose the ability to choose their language, while their offspring, influenced by their parents, also turn away from learning and using their mother tongue, and their mother tongue gradually falls into the danger of extinction.

In terms of the current language use in China, only Mandarin Chinese is basically used in politics, economy and news, and no more endangered minority languages are used. Endangered minority languages are limited to folklore, local religion, specific literary chapters and some minority families. With the disappearance of endangered minority languages in various public spheres, their basic communicative functions as languages are also gradually declining.

Educational Factor

With the deepening of reform and opening up, in ethnic minority areas, young and middle-aged people and children under the age of 50 have basically received formal primary and secondary education. Subjectively, they want to learn Han culture and Chinese in school and take pride in it; objectively, many schools also do not have the ability and intention to provide bilingual education, some endangered languages even completely withdrawn from the school education. Some endangered minority languages have even retreated to the “family fortress” and are only used as the family languages of individual minority members, such as She and Hezhe (Bai, 2021). Even if they have the conditions to offer bilingual education, it is for the purpose of better learning mainstream culture and language, not for preserving their own language and culture. Many ethnic minorities naturally tend to choose to use the more powerful Chinese language, and they are reluctant to create or use their own language, which further leads to the narrowing of the use of that ethnic

1 language (Zhao, 2020).

2 Language endangerment also involves issues such as the loyalty of
3 language speakers to their native language, with some communities fighting
4 strongly for their rights when their native language is threatened by a powerful
5 language, while others voluntarily give up passing on their native language to
6 the next generation. Some parents believe that the native language affects their
7 children's thinking and learning of Chinese proper, and in minority areas,
8 especially near towns or in mixed families with intermarriage, many young
9 parents see the use and learning of their native language as an obstacle and a
10 burden. Bilingual education is an important way to promote social mobility of
11 ethnic minorities, an important guarantee to maintain social stability and
12 prosperity and develop socialist spiritual civilization, as well as to recognize
13 and respect the freedom, rights and dignity of ethnic minorities. Adequate
14 bilingual talents play an important role in promoting international trade and
15 regional economic development. Therefore, the implementation of bilingual
16 education is a great task to build up the country and secure the state. The ability
17 to recognize the importance of bilingual education in ethnic education will
18 directly affect the effectiveness and success of education.

19

20 Economic Factor

21 The disappearance of endangered languages is the inevitable development
22 of things. And the main factor is economy. In the traditional agricultural
23 economy, ethnic minority groups mainly adopt manual labor methods, with
24 family members participating in production work, and their activities are
25 closed and conservative, relying on one language or dialect to meet the
26 communication in production activities. However, as the productivity level
27 increases, the economic scope expands, economic activities become more
28 frequent, trade between regions and ethnic groups brings different languages
29 into contact, the demand for a second language increases, and people's ability
30 to learn and use a second language grows, and the phenomenon of language
31 partitioning and language conversion naturally occurs, and the languages that
32 are gradually replaced present an existential crisis (Zhao, 2020). As long as the
33 economy is moving forward, the variety of languages is bound to become less
34 and less. In a modern society where trade is so free, the weaker language
35 groups are bound to adjust their languages to the common ones in order to
36 adapt to the rapidly developing social life.

37 Today, the global economy is gradually becoming integrated. Modern
38 science and technology have developed rapidly, transportation conditions have
39 improved significantly, and communication tools have become widespread,
40 making language convergence a trend of the times. In areas where ethnic
41 minorities live, many people have given up their own languages and switched

to strong languages in order to improve their economies, so as to get better development opportunities (Cun, 2016).

There is a lack of sustained economic support for bilingual education, and language preservation activities in ethnic minority areas. Bilingual education is a major issue for the long-term development and stability of society, yet the funding, teachers and teaching materials for bilingual education is a considerable amount of money. It can be seen that bilingual education is a costly project with slow results.

Micro-ecological Factors

The survival, use and preservation of vernacular languages are also influenced by internal factors, such as the language attitudes of ethnic groups and structural changes in language ontologies, etc. which constitute the micro-ecology of endangered languages (Zhao, 2020).

Language Attitudes of Ethnic Groups

Language attitudes refer to the subjective feelings of individuals, organizations or social groups toward a language, including: language orientation, language values, language planning, learning and usage tendencies, etc. (Bai, 2020). To a certain extent, language attitudes can determine the choice and continuation of a language by an individual, a social group or even a nation. Thus, the language attitudes and language planning of an individual, group or nation play a key role in the development prospects and survival of a language.

As the ties between the various ethnic groups in China continue to grow, a series of changes have occurred in the linguistic attitudes of some members of minority groups toward their own language. Their subjective identification with their own language has diminished, and they feel that their own language lacks social and practical value, so they have switched to other strong languages such as Chinese. According to the survey, 45% of the endangered minority language members in China have a positive attitude toward the continuation of their native language, 23% have an indifferent attitude, and 42% have a negative attitude (Yang, 2018). It can be seen that the proportion of endangered minority language members with negative attitudes is high.

In some endangered or even critically endangered minority languages, even though their domains of use have shrunk extremely, and some of them are even used only within the family, and there are still a large number of borrowed words in the language system, if the members of their ethnic group always maintain a strong sense of identification with their own language, and still continue to use it in their existing domains or families, and are learned by

children as their mother tongue, such endangered minority languages are still able to maintain their vitality. For example, although the Yugur language in western China has been in an endangered state, with a greatly simplified grammatical structure and the frequent intermingling of Chinese loanwords and Chinese words, it has remained as the common communicative language of its own people from generation to generation and has not been replaced by the surrounding Chinese or Tibetan languages (Bai, 2020).

Language Ontology Structure

Endangered minority languages, have an obvious tendency to decline in their linguistic ontological state, often manifesting themselves in lexical, phonological, and discourse organization habits that are close to other strong languages (Bai, 2020). A large number of words were borrowed from the strong languages, either consciously or unconsciously, to make up for their own structural rigidity or innate deficiencies, usually starting with common words and gradually transitioning to the borrowing of basic words, and the borrowed words usually maintain the phonetic form. In terms of phonology, some features of Chinese and other strong languages have also influenced the phonemic system of endangered minority languages, such as the variation in the pronunciation of plosive and affricate consonants in Xianren Tujia, and the tendency to disappear of marked items of native phonology in Guijiong. In terms of grammar, the language rules of Chinese and other strong languages have invaded the endangered minority languages, such as the use of OV and VO forms in Xianren Tujia, and the disappearance of the distinction between the inclusive and exclusive forms of personal pronouns in Guijiong. It is worth noting that the decline of the ontological state and internal structure of China's endangered minority languages is also characterized by unidirectionality, and once the decline has occurred, it can never be recovered (Bai, 2020).

Strategies for Preserving Endangered Languages

Because of the link between culture and language, when one culture is replaced by another, what disappears at the same time is the old language associated with that old culture. The revitalization of languages requires collective social assistance, proactive action and financial investment. We must recognize that the harm caused by reduced linguistic diversity is as serious as the harm caused by reduced biodiversity.

From the Government Level

To fundamentally change the contradictions in the language mechanism and change people's attitudes, it is necessary to adopt appropriate policies and practical measures. Relevant government departments can establish minority language protection policies through administrative legislation and other forms to establish the status of minority languages in the education system in ethnic areas. Many schools do not have the capacity and willingness to provide bilingual education. When bilingual education courses are offered in schools in ethnic minority areas, special funds should be set up to facilitate the proper implementation of the work. Under the relatively tight state funding, even if bilingual education is supported by policies, the lack of specific laws and regulations makes it difficult to implement it effectively. Therefore, in order to avoid the influence of human factors and ensure the effective implementation of bilingual education, it is imperative to have specific bilingual education regulations. At present, the bilingual education law, which is an important part of ethnic education, must be put on the agenda as soon as possible (Xu, 2015).

We should call loudly for attention under the guidance of the current language policy. The current situation of China's endangered Chinese dialects and the seriousness of their problems should be fully explained in appropriate settings (e.g., academic fields, cultural fields) in order to draw the attention and focus of relevant government departments and the public. In the call to emphasize Chinese dialects are widely distributed and populated, and they involve all aspects of social life, which are directly related to people's daily life, culture and education, economic development and even social stability issues. Chinese dialects have a long and rich history, and they are a valuable treasure of the language and culture of China and of all mankind.

People tend to give up their native languages because they are exposed to cultures that are expanding or becoming more economically powerful. As a minority, in order to improve their political and economic status, they necessarily have to give up their native language and switch to the main national language. To resolve this fundamental contradiction, special economic policies are needed to improve the economic status of minorities. In addition, it can develop the local economy and allow young people to choose jobs nearby without having to go far away. This will not only maintain the purity of the living environment of minority languages, but also motivate children to practice their own languages, which is conducive to the long-term development and prosperity of their own languages (Su, 2020). Appropriate economic policies are essential for the protection of endangered languages.

It is also possible to protect the endangered language through recording minority languages through written form or multimedia form, declaring

1 intangible cultural heritage, and developing ethnic cultural tourism resources.
 2 Its also importsnt to appropriately broaden the scope of their use. For example,
 3 using dialects in television and radio to broadcast local plays for literary
 4 creation or to create dialect literature.

5
 6 *From the Citizen Level*
 7

8 The two main tasks of language revival are: To teach endangered
 9 languages to those who do not know them. Second, to enable endangered
 10 language learners and those who have mastered the endangered language to use
 11 it in as many domains and contexts as possible (Shang, 2018).

12 Many schools, even if they are equipped to offer bilingual education, do so
 13 to better learn the dominant culture and language rather than to preserve their
 14 own language and culture, and there are many parents of ethnic minorities who
 15 feel the same way. Many ethnic minorities naturally prefer to use the more
 16 powerful Chinese language, and are reluctant to create or use their own scripts,
 17 further reducing the scope of their language use. Linguistic and cultural
 18 diversity is the source think tank of human innovation and development, and
 19 bilingual education should make students aware of the important connection
 20 between cultural diversity and national security, cultural security, and survival
 21 and development (Shang, 2018). The best national culture and the mainstream
 22 culture should be combined and interact. Bilingual educators should be fully
 23 aware of the role of the mother tongue in carrying the national culture, and
 24 connect and integrate bilingual education with the national common language
 25 and culture to form. Bilingual education should cultivate students'
 26 self-confidence and self-awareness in preserving and transmitting the language
 27 and national culture. It is important to send children to school nearby, to
 28 receive bilingual education, and to pass on the language of their own people.
 29 One should not send one's children to schools where only Chinese is taught in
 30 order to advance to higher education. Those of their own ethnic group should
 31 increase their self-confidence and identity in their ethnic language, as well as
 32 their awareness of the importance of their ethnic language. Let them
 33 understand that a nation's language is a living history of the nation and its
 34 culture, and that the extinction of a nation's language also means the extinction
 35 of its history and culture, which is a major irreparable loss to humanity.
 36 Members of ethnic minorities should strengthen their sense of identification
 37 with their own language and actively participate in the protection and
 38 transmission of their own language.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of endangered minority languages in China has attracted widespread attention currently and has become an urgent linguistic ecological problem. The main manifestations of this phenomenon are the shrinking of the language domain, the gradual decrease of the number of speakers, the change of the language attitude of the members of the ethnic group and the decline of the language ontology status. The causes of the endangerment and even extinction of minority languages are multifaceted and involve psychological, natural and social factors, including accelerated social mobility, unequal language contact, changes in the original language ecology and changes in the psychological environment of minority members. The minority language is an important linguistic and cultural resource in China. Governments should work with citizens to contribute to the preservation of endangered languages. Relevant government departments should formulate policies on minority language protection and continuously promote language preservation projects, such as develop ethnic cultural tourism resources and promote ethnic cultural education. Our citizens should take multiple measures to enhance the self-confidence of native speakers, build a language ecological civilization, and promote the harmonious coexistence of multiple languages.

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