Draft for MPSA 2018

Thank you for this chance to present this interesting project that I’m working on. I would like to start my talk with a movie, Arrival. I don’t know if you’ve got a chance to watch this movie. If you haven’t, this is enjoyable piece to watch. It talked about how a physicist and a linguistics figure out the language of the alien and save the world. An important theme the movie intends to convey is how salient language can shape minds. Well, this is definitly not a new knowledge. Many sociolinguistic and pschological studies have provide evidence to support this idea. Unfortunately, it has been rarely involved in political scientist studies. Think about that, governments and individuals use language to conduct political and social communications every singal day, and language can shape thought. But we do not take this into acount when understanding peoples’ political thoughts, attitudes, and opinions. So, I decide to contribute to filling this gap by researching an aspect of language that is closest to politics—language policy. Language policy is a public policy to recognize the official language, the language that the government will use for laws, policies, and public services. It also lays out the relationship between official language and other languages. My research question is then how language policy affect people’s thoughts, especially political attitudes and opinions.

This research also attempts to answer a puzzle in CHinese politics. We know the story of Tower of Bable, right? When people shared one language they decided to build this tower. God felt this project would threaten his authority and thus messed up people’s language to weaken them. Well, in China, what’s the core of its language policy? Promoting Putonghua. So, the government does not regard its people speaking the same language as a threat. It has even kept promoting it for over a half of a century! In other words, the Chinese government is rebuilding the Tower of Babel! And China is not the exceptional case! France did this. German did this, and many other countries have done this. Why? What makes these governments apply such a policy that has a totally opposite logic to the biblical story? I would like to answer this question by investigating how language policy affects citizens’ political attitudes and trust.

As I mentioned, there are not many studies focusing on language policy. Even for the small number of established studies, there are salient limits. First, a large proportion of them only focus on the language policy’s influence on a small part of the population, such as ethnic minorities or immigrants. Does it mean language policy only influence these groups? Also there is another branch of literature talking about language policy as a tool for state building and construction of common imagination. But how about after that stage? Does language policy stop influencing people when they recongize them with the shared nationality? Finally, most existing literature has a specific culture focus, such as Latino vs. white and Uyghur vs. Han. This perspective restricts the studies from applying to other cases, as no culture is the same.

So the goal of my research is to build a theory that can explain the influence of language policy on public opinions of the full population who have already got clear social and political identities, and a theory that goes beyond the specific cultural comparison. One point my theory shares with the existing literature is that we both focus on people’s official language proficiency, as this is usually the core of language policy.

I called this new theory as a communication-based theory. This theory argues that language policy can affect people’s political attitudes and trust through the three common communication functions of official language: listening, speaking, and relative. First, since official language is the unique language governments use to publish laws, policies, and express politcal wills, if you can listen the language better, you are exposed to the governmental propaganda more and thus be influenced more. Correspondingly, such individuals are expected to know the established system more and align more with the government. In terms of political trust, they trust the government more.

Second, official language is the dominantly inter-commnual language. That means, if you can speak it well, you are more capable and willing to express yourself to the others, since you are confident that they can understand you. In turn, I expect those who speak the official language well to have more interest and internal efficacy in politics. However, in a regime such as China where the institutional channel of political participation is not always guaranteed, more participation usually leads to more dissatisfaction. “Hey, I express myself reasonably and well, secretary! Why don’t you listen to me?!” Right? That will lead to less external efficacy and more negative impression of the officials.

Finally, I will introduce in a new measurement of official language proficiency. That is, the relative proficiency. There is a branch of literature about language argues that a good official language proficiency will make an individual more competitive and access more sources. I agree with this argument with one condition: the good proficiency should be a relative concept. Taking my lovely wife as an example. She was born in Southern China and I can easily identify the southern accent when she talked to me in Putonghua. However, if she back to her hometown where most people’s native language is the southern dialect and speaks Putonghua there, she’ll nail it.

Another research focuses on the modernization theory, which argues that language and language policy are important tool for state-building and the construction of the common imagination. Then how about after the state building? What impact will language policy make on the people who already recognize their nationality and shared culture? The theory does not have an answer to this. Therefore, the goal of this reserach is to build a theory to explain the influence of language policy of the full population in an established social and political environment. On the other hand, the research does shared one thing with the previous theories, that is, it will still focuses on official language. After all, this is the core of most language policies.

Ok, here’s my new theory, which I called as a