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 an old, well-known biblical story: the Tower of Bable. At the time people shared one language that everyone can understand each other. They decided to build this tower, which made God felt his authority was threatened. His way to protect the authority was to mess up people’s language. Well, if you look at China, a totally different story was playing. The Chinese government had implemented its language policy for over a half of a century, and the core of the policy is promoting all Chinese citizens to speak one single language, the official language Putonghua. Things become even more interesting if you look around the world and found China is not exceptional. France has done this. German has done this. And so do many other countries. Why do they follow the completely opposite logic to the biblical story? Don’t they afraid of their authority being threatened?

I seek for the answer these question by investigating how language policy affects citizens’ political attitudes and trust. Although there has been some political science research mainly in the area of ethnolinguistics touched on this topic, they do not offer a sufficient answer due to at least three limitations. First, a lion share of them focuses only on a small part of the population, such as ethnic minorities or immigrants. As I mentioned these research are mainly ethnolinguistic studies. In this sense, the ethnic minorities are exactly what they should focus. However, does it mean language policy, the policy that determines the official language and the linguistic relationship of the entire country’s language system only influence these minorities? Highly doubt about that.

In addition, there is another branch of literature regarding language policy as a tool for state building and construction of common imagination. But what happens after that stage? Will language policy lose its influence once people recognize them with the shared nationality? Finally, most existing literature has a specific culture focus, such as Latino vs. white and Uyghur vs. Han. They regard language as nothing but a proxy of a specific culture and assume people’s response to language policy just reflect their attitudes towards the culture. I agree that language plays a crucial rule in constructing culture. However, is symbolizing culture the only reason we use language in our real daily life? Probably not. We mainly use language for communication, right? In this sense, only focusing on culture may make us ignore some impact of language and language policy in a more general and profound sense.

Therefore, the goal of this research is to build a theory that explains the impact of language policy on the full population (not ethnic minorities) with established social and political identities (they have got a shared nationality) from a perspective beyond culture. On the other hand, there is one thing the new theory will share with the conventional ones, that is focusing on the official language. This is the core of most language policies and the common reference for observing the influence of the policy on the entire country.

Let’s start to build this new theory. I called it a communication-based theory of language policy. 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 political wills, if you can listen to 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 central government. Be aware that aligning with the government does not necessarily mean blindly support the government. Taking China as an example, as many recent studies have indicated, the Chinese central government has a strategy to distract the anger of the public from the central to the local. In this sense, aligning with the government means acting exactly as the government plans.

Second, the official language is the dominantly inter-communal 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 argues that a good official language proficiency will make an individual more competitive and access more sources for development. I agree with this argument with a condition that the good proficiency should be a relative concept. Taking my lovely wife as an example. She was born in a province of 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 a southern dialect and speaks Putonghua there, she’ll nail it. In other words, you can take the advantage of official language without having a perfect speaking proficiency. You just need to be better than the people who live or work around. In terms of political attitudes, having better relative speaking proficiency implies a better suitability in this society. Those with this advantage are easier to access sources and achieve their goals. In turn, their self-evaluation is expected to be high. So does their confidence in the established regime—since they love the social and political environment built upon it that favors them. Their enthusiasm to change it would be low while trusting the established political system more.

Ok, we have the theory now. Let’s test its inferences with real-life data. The data comes from China. I don’t have time to talk too much about why I choose China, but this is not a convenient choice. If you are interested, we can talk about my case selection in the Q&A. I used the CGSS data, probably the best over-time nationwide representative survey data we have now. It started to ask questions about Putonghua proficiency since 2010, and I use all the available data since then.

Moreover, to conduct a thorough and robust test, I tested the influence of Putonghua proficiency on sixteen dependent variables. I won’t have time to go through each of them today. Let’s focus on the most interesting part: political trust. I tested four types of institutional trust in China: the public trust on the legislature, central and local governments, and judicial system.

The independent variables include three types of Putonghua proficiency. Within them, the relative proficiency was measured by the difference between the respondent’s speaking proficiency and the average proficiency of his or her county. Apart from this, I also added a battery of controls of respondents’ demographic and socioeconomic characteristics. A regional fixed effect model is applied to control for the unobservable spatial variance. So do the post-stratification weights. If multiple waves of data were used together, wave binaries were also included.

I don’t have the time to go over all the results. But all of them are in the appendix after these slides. So, if you are interested we can back to talk about them in the Q&A. Let’s focus on the most interesting part: the political trust. In this dot-whisker plot, each panel represents a type of trust. The dots are coefficients, and the whiskers are 95% confidence intervals. Let’s look at listening proficiency. We have positively significant results on both legislature and central government and negatively significant result on local government. The effect on the judiciary that is rarely mentioned in the political propaganda is insignificant. The results follow the government pretty well, aren’t they! Then let’s look at the speaking and relative proficiencies. Speaking: significantly negative all over the models except for the local government. Relative is the opposite: significantly positive across the models. Besides these, the rest twelve models I didn’t show here also support the communication-based theory. I consider this as strong and robust evidence for the mechanism and outcome of my explanation of how language policy affects political attitudes and trust.

In conclusion, my research provides a mixed picture of the impact of language policy. Yet it should be sufficient to answer the question why a large number of governments prefer rebuilding the Tower of Babel. It could benefit the political support through multiple ways. More importantly, this research provides a general communication-based theory that goes beyond any specific culture to understand the influence of language policy. The theory can be easily applied in other countries, although the inferences might be different according to the concrete states. The theory also provides a new insight into the political influence of language policy apart from ethnic balancing and state building. Finally, it uncovers a factor that can significantly affect public opinion that has been long neglected. This could also be a new window for us to understand the government-citizen communications. For instance, we all knew the strategy of the Chinese government on central and local government trust, and we do see Chinese citizens’ trust are different at the two levels. However, the citizens could be just like this all the time—trust the central more than the local, even without the strategic guide. This research, however, provides evidence that government’s strategy does shape people’s opinions.