Saving Shanghai Dialect: A Case for Bottom-Up Language Planning in China

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Abstract This paper examines the dynamic interplay between language policy and local stakeholders in the process of dialect planning in the city of Shanghai, in the context of social tensions surrounding the decline of Shanghai dialect in mainland China. A process-oriented Language Management Theory (LMT) model is adopted as the analytical framework to reveal the interactive facet of micro language planning. Drawing on in-depth interviews and document analysis, the paper analyzes and interprets ten key players’ perceptions and experiences in relation to the ‘saving Shanghai dialect’ movement. Qualitative data analysis demonstrates five stages in the dialect planning process and reveals how individuals’ agency, when struggling and striving for local language rights, exert bottom-up influence upon language policy-making. The findings also unravel the social political duality between macro structure and individual agency. The paper ends with a discussion on the need to negotiate the individual agency in a more interactive and democratic dialog with predefined policy constraints. This study may have implications for multilingual /multidialectal contexts in other geographical locations where linguistic diversity in the local contexts is encountering shifts in language use and language changes. Besides, this study may also enrich applicability of the LMT framework which reveals the interactive and dynamic process by unbundling individual responses and influences on language planning.

Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a surge in interest in preservation of endangered languages among language policy researchers, but insufficient attention has been paid to endangerment of regional dialects (Schilling-Estes and Wolfram 1999; Tulloch 2006). A range of case studies conducted in different geological contexts, such as Canada (Tulloch 2006) and China (Gao 2015) have revealed that dialect preservation is a dynamic and interactive process. Yet, little empirical research has been done to have an integrated holistic approach to language planning practices. A process-oriented view towards language planning has become particularly important since the policy-making mechanism not only has to take into account the complex demographic and socio-cultural realities, where the local and micro language policies are to be initiated and implemented (Zhao and Baldauf 2012), but also needs to accommodate strong bottom-up voices, by involving individuals in making decisions about endangered languages. While the shift of focus adds substantial complications to language policy-making, it means roles of various stake holders in the policy-making and implementation process should be emphasized in research on the process of formulation of policy on endangered languages and dialects. From this point of view, in the case of the somewhat oversimplified and marginalized language planning, the traditional top-down language planning process now needs to be complemented by bottom-up examinations of inter actions between multiple stakeholders at a more contextualized level.

Integration of bottom-up voices in the decision-making process is of immense social significance particularly in a multilingual society such as mainland China, where Chinese, or Mandarin, is a linguistic system with ten major sub-branches (regional dialects), each having its own sub branches (regional varieties of dialects). There has been an upsurge of social concerns about the vitality of Chinese dialects and such concerns have even triggered outcries or protests in different parts of mainland China. For example, Gao (2012) and Liang (2015) contend that in Guangzhou, one of the major Chinese metropolises, local citizens’ reactions, and struggles to defend Cantonese require language policy-makers and the public to engage in important dialogs related to the status of Cantonese as the regional lingua franca. Similar social tensions have also been observed in Shanghai, the largest city in China. Citywide and even nationwide debates over local children’s poor proficiency of ‘Hu Yu’ () or ‘Shanghai dialect,’ a regional variety of Wu dialect group spoken in much of the eco nomically developed Yangtze River Delta on the east coast of China, have made headlines in print media coverage as well as social media spaces, leading to an ongoing movement to “save Shanghai dialect” across the academia and the general public since 2012. In light of these social realities, this study probes the dynamic interplay between language policy-makers and local stakeholders with regard to protection of Shanghai dialect in Shanghai.

The Process Model in Language Management Theory as an Analytical Framework

As players from multiple spheres are getting increasingly involved in the complex process of language planning, analytical, and theoretical approaches able to address the complexity for explanatory and interpretative purposes are needed. The Language Management Theory (LMT) (Jer-nudd and Neustupny´ 1987; Neustupny´ and Nekvapil 2003; Kimura 2014) has emerged as one such theoretical option to capture the dynamic process with intersecting perspectives on the interplay of bottom-up and top-down approaches. The LMT as an applied theory emphasizes the different processes in language planning by proposing a cyclical model as follows (see Fig. 1):

As can be seen in Fig. 1, the model begins in a particular language use context or language situation with the noting of deviation from norms or expectations at multiple levels of different stakeholders. Following the noting stage, the deviation may be evaluated according to social conventions and preferences in the subsequent stage (Edwards 1994). Afterwards, an adjustment plan is selected and imple mented. Kimura (2014) also incorporates the process of feedback as the final stage to the LMT process before new deviations are noted to trigger another cycle of language planning. This model of the process of language planning can integrate the bottom-up voices of multiple stakeholders during language planning because it has a thorough,

Fig. 1 The LMT model (adapted from Kimura 2014, p. 267)

dynamic, and interactive facet of micro language planning in dialect communities (Baldauf 2012).

Linguistic Insecurity and Individual Agency

Any deviation in norms can be noted and evaluated as a symptom of linguistic insecurity. The notion of linguistic insecurity (LI) is theorized as a measure of speakers’ negative attitudes toward the prestige of certain linguistic forms, and a relation between a judgment of normativity and a self-evaluation for linguistic change in social-stratification (Labov 2006). CalVet (2006) further proposes two types of linguistic insecurity, statutory insecurity as a result of speakers’ negative evaluation of the status of own varieties in comparison with another language or variety and identity insecurity that speakers may have when using a language different from that used by the community, they identify themselves with (Escandell 2011). The notion of linguistic insecurity has become an increasingly important issue for language policy-makers as language planning is often motivated by feelings and attitudes of insecurity in the community (Ager 2001). A closely connected concept that is different from the notion of language insecurity is agency, which refers to the individuals’ capacity to act linguistically as well as socially in a controlled and knowing way, usually juxtaposed with structure (O’Byrne 2011). The interplay in social life between the agency, our freedom to live as we choose, and the structure constraining how we live has proved to be a vital topic in socio-linguistics (Bell 2014). Language policy researchers have also begun to stress the significant role individual agency plays in the process of language planning (Liddicoat 2008). Zhao and Baldauf (2012) argue for the necessity of examining the role of the individual agency in different stages of language planning. Interactions between individual stakeholders when constructing emerging language use situations need to be systematically explored together with the power structure of relevant language policies. Therefore, this study addresses the following research questions to better understand the interplay between language policy-makers and multiple stakeholders in the discussion on ‘saving Shanghai dialect’:

1. How did local stakeholders inform the process of language planning to save the Shanghai dialect?
2. How did language policy-makers respond to the bottom-up voices of local stakeholders in the process?

Conclusion

This paper has examined how local stakeholders exerted efforts to inform and impact language planning in response to social tensions emanating from a sense of language insecurity within the LMT framework. It presents the case of Shanghai dialect with an aim to reveal and interpret the interplay between top-down and bottom-up dimensions underlying the language-planning process. The process of saving Shanghai dialect is unique as it illustrates atypical bottom-up case by demonstrating individual stakeholders’ agency struggling and striving for regional language rights, which is indicative of a democratic micro-level planning process in the formation of a macro language policy (Shohamy 2006). The finding may have relevance for language policy-making processes in other multilingual/multidialectal context with similar contextual constraints where linguistic diversity at the local contexts are experiencing and encountering shifts in language use. Besides, this study may also enrich he applicability of the LMT framework which reveals the interactive and dynamic process by unbundling individuals’ responses and influences on language planning.

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