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LANGUAGE CHOICE IN MULTILINGUAL SPEECH COMMUNITIES: THE CASE OF AKSAY, CHINA

The purpose of this study is to investigate the language choice of Aksay Kazakhs based on different situations. It also finds out their mastery of the languages they use. Moreover, the study attempts to understand the changing trend of language usage among Kazakh residents of different age groups in the region and the reasons behind it. In order to achieve the research objectives, the researcher chose a sample of (40) Aksay Kazakh respondents. The characteristics of the survey sample are diverse and reasonable, covering two age groups at the same time. The research tool is a questionnaire. The results show that Kazakhs of different ages have different language choices for various reasons. The elder generation chooses Kazakh for most situations, while the younger generation prefers Mandarin. The influencing factors mainly include educational experience and the overall language environment. Their mastery of each language is different. The young generation of Kazakhs has a higher standard of Mandarin and a gradual decline in their mother tongue. At the same time, they have one more language choice, which is English. Through the above phenomena, this study also confirms that the linguistic diversity of the multilingual community is being threatened. The author proposed recommendations for maintaining linguistic diversity in multilingual communities.

Keywords: language choice, multilingual community, language mastery, Chinese Kazakhs, minority language, dominant language, changing trends

Introduction

As an important medium for communication and information exchange, language has directivity, description, logic, communication, dissemination, inheritance and nationality. Language is produced in a specific environment for the needs of life. Various environments and cultures have created different

languages and dialects, but all of them have a common role in expressing social behavior. Many scientists have studied language and culture in depth, including the production, development and meaning of language. Language choice is based on the behavior of people using language according to their needs in different situations. The act of language selection is not as simple as we think. Language choice, as part of language studies, is an area of research that cannot be ignored.

Multilingual community refers to a community where people use more than one language for the purpose of communication. Such communities are usually composed of different ethnic groups with different cultural backgrounds or language experiences. In order to communicate and exchange information, people learn to use the languages of other ethnic groups apart from their mother tongue. The language of community will evolve and change accordingly over time, which depends on a variety of factors. For instance, the proportion and frequency of use of these languages changes dynamically.

More and more multilingual communities are being formed all over the world. People use different languages in dissimilar situations for assorted intentions. Each multilingual community has unlike backgrounds and factors, thus there are uneven explanations for the language choices of people in each bilingual or multilingual community. According to Janet Holmes, «though sociolinguists like to try, it is not always possible to account for choices among languages in situations where the participants are all multilingual. Therefore, the reasons for people's language choice are diverse and complex» [1].

Meanwhile, it is important to be aware of the social environment of the speaker. We need to understand the object and context of the speaker in order to make a correct interpretation. «Certain social factors – who you are talking to, the social context of the talk, the function and topic of the discussion - turn out to be important in accounting for language choice in many different kinds of speech community» [1].

Furthermore, whether it's a bilingual community or a multilingual community, «the language preference of a speaker is influenced by dominant languages» [2]. Choosing the mainstream language means better education and job opportunities. It also provides a favorable opportunity to integrate into the dominant language and cultural environment. No matter for a country or a community, the dominant language and culture occupy a major place, which largely influences the formulation of language policy. This is a factor to be taken into account when discussing multilingual communities.

Additionally, what kind of language policy is formulated affects the speaker's daily language choice, and it also changes the language choice of people from different generations. It is shown that «national language policies plays significant roles in determining language spoken in some speech domains» by Ansah A. M. [3].

With the process of globalization, different ethnic groups with great diversities leave their places of residence for generations and migrate to new fields and get along with other ethnic groups. Their languages also coexist with other languages and are learned and used by people, thus forming assorted multilingual communities. People's choice of language use in different situations is also different, and there are many influencing factors behind the choice [4]. It has vital implications to study language choice in multilingual communities in the 21st century. Changes in language choice in multilingual communities directly affect the rich development or disappearance of languages. Such research can be the basis for people and local governments to take the right action.

Aksay is an immigrant county which is subordinate to Jiuquan City, Gansu Province, China. There are 11 ethnic groups living in Aksay, including Han, Kazakh, Hui, Uyghur, Tu, Salar, Xibe, Tibetan, Mongol, Manchu and Dongxiang. The registered residence population of 9425 people by 2020, of whom 3487 were Kazakh, who moved to the first half of twentieth century, came from different regions of China. It formed a unique language environment combining of Mandarin, Kazakh language, other minority languages and Gansu Chinese dialects. It is the only minority autonomous county with Kazakh as the main body in Gansu Province and one of the three Kazakh autonomous counties in China. Different languages are chosen and used by people in distinct contexts in this community. Mandarin, Kazakh and dialects of Gansu are the languages with the highest proportion and frequency among them. Other languages are used by local residents based on various needs. The community is part of a number of multilingual communities in the world. Therefore, understanding the language choices of people in this place has implications for studying other multilingual communities.

This paper is committed to studying the language choice and mastery of the second and third generation Kazakh residents in Aksay, to determine their language choice in different situations and understand the percentage and variation in people's choice of these languages. Interviews were conducted to ask the respondents why they made these choices. Moreover, another purpose of this paper is to understand the changes and trends of Kazakh residents' language choice in this area by investigating the mastery of each language.

Materials and methods

In order to achieve the target results, the research adopts the research method of questionnaire and tries to answer the following two questions:

- 1) Language choice of Aksay Kazakhs in different situations.
- 2) Language mastery of Aksay Kazakhs.

In this paper, the target population includes all Kazakhs living in Aksay, China. All participants were born there, and were the second and third generation Kazakh residents of Aksay using Mandarin and Kazakh in all aspects of daily life

with varying degrees of mastery of both languages. The choice of participants is based on convenience and availability. The researcher used an anonymous questionnaire to personally contact the participants and distribute and collect the language questionnaire. The survey was conducted for three days. The respondents were interviewed and asked about the reasons for their choice of the questionnaire after completed it. They were also asked about their opinions on the languages used by people in the community. This study selected 40 participants as the focus of it, including 16 males and 24 females, 20 of whom were born between 1960 and 1980 and 20 between 1990 and 2000. In addition, 30 of all participants were 10 families with parents and children. The sample shows a series of vital demographic variables, such as gender and age.

The researcher designed a questionnaire with mobile phone software «questionnaire star», which is specially used to meet the needs of current research. The questionnaire is written in Chinese, with information on the purpose of the survey and the filling method. The researcher designed 13 questions in two parts. The first part is about language choice. The purpose is to find information about the respondents' choice of language in different situations. For example, respondents were asked to choose the language when communicating with their peers; choose the language they studied at school; choose the language when using social media; choose the language when communicating with family and relatives (elderly); choose the language they use at work; choose the language when watching TV programs; choose the language when listening to music. Respondents can choose from the following three options: 1-Mandarin, 2-Kazakh, 3-Mandarin and Kazakh. The second part is about language proficiency assessment, which aims to understand the respondents' mastery of listening, speaking, reading and writing of these languages. Respondents were asked to evaluate from the following 5 options: 1-A1-A2, 2-B1, 3-B2, 4-C1, 5-C2. Due to the fact that only the third generation Kazakh residents have been educated in English courses and mastered a certain amount of that. Therefore, only this part of the respondents answered the questions about English in the second part while respondents of the second-generation Kazakh residents did not answer these questions.

Researcher conducted the analysis after collected all the data and converted the data results into percentages to make a graph to display in the article. The interview results are sorted and classified, and displayed in the result section together with the analysis of the questionnaire data.

Results and discussion

1) Results of question one: language choice of Aksay Kazakhs in different situations

The results in Table 1 show the respondents' language choices for various situations. Respondents of different ages have different choices in the same

situation, and their answers do not only choose one language. In some of these cases they chose to use both languages at the same time. Respondents born between 1960 and 1980 chose Kazakh with their families and relatives (the elderly) and their peers in communication, reaching 70 % and 65 % respectively. Nearly half of the respondents receive education based on Kazakh and use Mandarin at work. 80 % tend to listen to Kazakh music while 45 % preferred Kazakh when using social media. For the third generation Kazakhs, 75 % of the respondents chose Mandarin in education and work. 85 % of the respondents chose Mandarin when watching TV programs and using social media. Based on the above data, the older generation generally chooses to use Kazakh, and the younger generation tends to choose Mandarin. For the same situation, the choices of the two generations have been significantly different.

Table1 – The language choices of respondents in different situations

| Statements | Age | Mandarin % | Kazakh % | Mandarin and Kazakh % |
|--|-----------|------------|----------|-----------------------|
| Communicating with family and relatives (the elderly) is in... | 1960–1980 | 5 | 70 | 25 |
| | 1990–2000 | 5 | 25 | 70 |
| Communicating with peers is in ... | 1960–1980 | 5 | 65 | 30 |
| | 1990–2000 | 25 | - | 75 |
| Working is in ... | 1960–1980 | 45 | 20 | 35 |
| | 1990–2000 | 75 | - | 25 |
| School, college and university education is in ... | 1960–1980 | 25 | 55 | 20 |
| | 1990–2000 | 75 | - | 25 |
| Watching TV programs is in ... | 1960–1980 | 25 | 30 | 45 |
| | 1990–2000 | 85 | - | 15 |
| Listening to music is in ... | 1960–1980 | 5 | 80 | 15 |
| | 1990–2000 | 30 | 10 | 60 |
| Using social media is in ... | 1960–1980 | 20 | 45 | 35 |
| | 1990–2000 | 85 | - | 15 |

When both languages are covered, the second generation of respondents chose when watching TV programs, and the proportion accounted for 45 %. Respondents explained they could watch TV programmes in both languages, but 90 % were in Mandarin. Watching TV shows is an important way of entertainment for the elderly, and they accept a very large proportion of Mandarin programmes. While

the younger generation chose both when communicating with their families, relatives and peers (70 % and 75 % respectively) and listening to music (the scale of the selected population is 60 %). During the interview, the researcher learned that third generation residents tend to be bilingual in their daily communication, and the respondents said that this is inseparable from the reasons that they grew up in a bilingual environment. This fact is similar to other bilingual and multilingual communities.

2) Results of question two: language mastery of Aksay Kazakhs

As for the mastery of the four language skills, according to the data in Table 2, there are significant differences between the second and third generations of respondents. About half of the second generation of respondents believe that their Kazakh language level reaches C2, 55 % of which for listening and speaking and 40% for reading and writing. While their Mandarin level reaches B2. 25–30 % of people in this age group evaluated their Kazakh listening, speaking, reading, and writing level as B2, while 10–15 % evaluated their Mandarin level as C1. Through interviews with second generation respondents, the researcher learned that two-thirds of Kazakh residents in this age group received basic education in Kazakh language. A small percentage of respondents received basic and university education in Mandarin. Some respondents also received basic education in Kazakh and university education in Mandarin. Thus their different educational experiences result in different language proficiency.

The respondents from 1990 to 2000 assess that their Mandarin level reached C2, with an average of 67 %. One third of the respondents believe that their Kazakh language level reaches B2. None of the respondents chose A1 in four skills of Mandarin and listening and speaking of Kazakh language. It showed that they have a high level of Mandarin. Proficiency with the four skills of Kazakh language is uneven. In general, respondents in this age group have a higher-quality Kazakh listening and speaking than reading and writing. The proportion of people with a listening and speaking level of C2 is 25 %, and the number of people with a reading and writing level of C2 is only 5 %. These respondents indicated that their basic education and university education were in Mandarin. Although they had courses in Kazakh at their basic education, respondents felt that the small number of hours was not enough to enable them to achieve a high-standard mastery, especially in reading and writing. Only one of the respondents received a full basic education in Kazakh language.

Overall, other respondents of the two age groups have different mastery of these two languages. Some respondents have different mastery of listening, speaking, reading and writing skills about the same language.

Table2 – The language mastery of the respondents

| Language Skills | Age | A1-A2 % | B1 % | B2 % | C1 % | C2 % |
|----------------------------------|---------------|------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Mandarin (Speaking&Listening) | 1960– 1980 | 5 | 20 | 50 | 15 | 10 |
| | 1990– 2000 | - | - | 10 | 20 | 70 |
| Mandarin (Reading&Writing) | 1960– 1980 | 10 | 25 | 30 | 20 | 15 |
| | 1990– 2000 | - | 5 | 5 | 25 | 65 |
| Kazakh (Speaking&Listening) | 1960– 1980 | - | - | 30 | 15 | 55 |
| | 1990– 2000 | - | 15 | 35 | 25 | 25 |
| Kazakh (Reading&Writing) | 1960– 1980 | - | 10 | 25 | 25 | 40 |
| | 1990– 2000 | 15 | 20 | 30 | 30 | 5 |
| English (Speaking&Listening) | 1990– 2000 | 20 | 35 | 40 | 5 | - |
| English (Reading&Writing) | 1990– 2000 | 25 | 35 | 30 | 10 | - |

Since only the third generation respondents' school education included English, they assessed their mastery of English. 40 % of the respondents thought their English listening and speaking ability reached B2, while their reading and writing ability reached B1. None of the respondents has reached the level of C2. One-fifth of the them had only A1-A2 in English listening, speaking, reading and writing. The researcher learned that because respondents did not have enough opportunities and language environment to use and practise English, their mastery is moderate and the rate of improvement is relatively slow. There are language choice and usage dilemmas similar to Kazakh language.

3) Discussion of the results related to question one

According to the data in Table 1, the second generation of respondents prefer Kazakh language, while the third generation choose Mandarin. Through interviewing the reasons behind the respondents' choices, it can be attributed to factors such as educational experience, ease of use, social environment and personal preferences. The reasons that influence people's choices in a multilingual community are diverse, which can be divided into collective environmental reasons and individual reasons. In social communication, compared with the third generation of respondents, the second generation still use Kazakh language,

while the third generation choose Mandarin or mixed using. The interpersonal environment of the older generation is more traditional, so it is biased towards the mother tongue. The interpersonal range of the younger generation involves more people of different ethnic groups, and they accept the mode of language mixing. For social media, film and television, Mandarin is more developed as a carrier language and having more impact on people. It is observed the weak position of Kazakh language in the network pattern. Music is a widely spread cultural form, and any language can become a carrier. It is relatively high to have free choice. Therefore, an important reason for respondents' choice on music is personal preference. Respondents received different educational languages although they live in the same multilingual community. The former's educational language is more complex, while the latter's educational language has tended to be the same and unitary. In any multilingual community, educational language is an important factor playing a key role influencing people's life, thinking and usage choices. In addition, since the official language is Mandarin, the language choice of respondents at work is the same. Respondents also indicated that it is necessary to use different languages at the same time at work living in a multilingual community and dealing with diverse groups of people.

From the result it is shown that the dominant language affects the speakers' language choice. Dominant language is related to the interests of the speaker in all aspects, such as work and education. The importance of Mandarin in their environment has gradually increased, and the using of Kazakh residents' mother tongue has narrowed [5].

4) Discussion of the assessment related to question two

Due to different educational experiences, the data in Table 2 shows that the language proficiency of the two generations of respondents has changed. The level of Kazakh language of the second generation is higher than that of the third generation, while the level of Mandarin is lower than the latter. The reason is the popularity of Mandarin. This can be seen that changes in the language environment and educational language affect people's mastery of different languages. It further interpreted the data of people's language choice in Table 1. People's mastery with a language directly affects their preferences. Although they have different levels of mastery, the four skills of the former are relatively balanced, but the reading and writing on Kazakh language of the latter is worse than listening and speaking. When a language is not the dominant language, literacy skills are more easily overlooked than listening and speaking skills. This also explains why the latter's Kazakh literacy is gradually weakening. Researcher found out other related studies that this phenomenon is also seen in many minority multilingual communities. Based on this fact, some solutions can be taken to change this situation, such as increasing reading and writing courses in the corresponding language.

In addition, since English is included in the education of the third generation of respondents. They master a certain level in English which is intermediate. It can be seen that the language choices of the younger generation have become more diverse, and the types of language proficiency of the residents of the community are also changing. Respondents said they spend a lot of time learning English, but they have few opportunities to use it in daily. Another reason is that the level of education is not as high-quality as other developed regions in China. Although the younger generation has an additional language choice, in most cases they do not choose to use English.

5) Suggestions and approaches to promote the prosperity of multilingual communities

The residents of multilingual communities need to establish awareness of maintaining language diversity and have language sensitivity to observe language changes in all aspects of their environment. According to many research and experience on learning language, practice is the best way. People should maintain or improve their language proficiency through various ways such as courses and online resources, so as to enrich their language choice in any situation.

The department of multilingual community need to establish a professional section to provide support on policy, technology and information sharing. In order to promote the common prosperity and development of dominant languages and non-dominant languages to preserve the linguistic diversity of the community.

With the convenience and development of communication, multilingual communities need to cooperate on communicating and discussing, and organize various activities to exchange information and experiences. It is necessary to learn from the successful experience and methods of other multilingual communities and avoid inappropriate approaches, which can help the community save time to develop and maintain language diversity [6].

Conclusion

As a tool for human beings to exchange information, language is changing and evolving all the time. Multiple languages in the same region can also change dramatically over decades. The content and expression of languages are influenced by other languages positively or negatively. As one of the multilingual and multicultural communities in the world, Aksay is a good material for studying the language environment. Kazakh residents of different ages have distinct language choices in different situations. There are numerous factors behind their choices, such as educational experience and the overall language environment. The life experience of the second generation residents is more related to mother tongue, namely Kazakh language, so they prefer the use of Kazakh in their daily life. The residents of 1990–2000 spend more time in a Mandarin-speaking environment. The dominant language of a multilingual community influences the use and

development of other languages. People also choose to use a certain language for different interests.

There are obvious changes in the mastery of Mandarin and Kazakh language among different generations of Kazakh residents. It is not consistent on the language proficiency of the two generations. The young generation of Kazakhs have a higher standard of Mandarin and a gradual decline in their mother tongue. Meanwhile, they have one more language choice which is English. This phenomenon is prevalent in many multilingual communities. The older generation has a higher level of mastery of their mother tongue. Through the above research, this study also confirms that the non-dominant language status of the multilingual community is being threatened and is gradually tending to a monolingual community. This is a common dilemma for all languages which are in a relatively disadvantaged position in multilingual community. It can be achieved to maintain its linguistic diversity and continue to make itself unique only through the efforts of the residents themselves, the support of the community department, and mutual assistance among multilingual communities.

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КӨПТІЛДІ СӨЙЛЕЙТІН ҚАУЫМДАСТЫҚТАРДЫҢ ТІЛДІ ТАҢДАУЫ: ҚЫТАЙ, АҚСАЙ МӘСЕЛЕСІ

Бұл зерттеудің мақсаты әр түрлі жағдайларға байланысты Ақсай қазақтарының тілдік таңдауын зерттеу болып табылады. Сондай-ақ, зерттеу жұмысы олардың қолданыстағы тілдерді қанишалықты жақсы меңгергендігін анықтайды. Сонымен қатар, зерттеу өңірдегі әртүрлі жас топтарындағы қазақ тұрғындары арасындағы тілді қолданудың өзгеру тенденциясын және оның себептерін түсінуге тырысады. Зерттеу мақсатына жету үшін зерттеуші Ақсай қазақ респонденттерінен (40) іріктеме таңдады. Сауалнама үлгісінің сипаттамалары әр түрлі және ақылға қонымды,

бір уақытта екі жас тобын қамтиды. Зерттеу құралы-сауалнама. Нәтижелер әртүрлі жастағы қазақтар әртүрлі себептермен әртүрлі тілдерді таңдайтынын көрсетеді. Аға буын көп жағдайда қазақ тілін таңдайды, ал жас ұрпақ қытай тілін артық көреді. Әсер етуші факторлар негізінен білім беру тәжірибесі мен жалпы тілдік ортасын қамтиды. Олардың әр тілді білуі әр түрлі. Қазақ жас буынының қытай тілін меңгеру деңгейі неғұрлым жоғары және ана тілін меңгеру деңгейі біртіндеп төмендеуде. Сонымен қатар, олар ағылшын тіліне таңдау артықшылығын береді. Жоғарыда аталған құбылыстар арқылы бұл зерттеу де көптілді қауымдастықтың тілдік әртүрлілігіне қауіп төніп тұрғанын растайды. Автор көптілді қауымдастықтардағы тілдік әртүрлілікті сақтау бойынша ұсыныстарды ұсынды.

Кілтті сөздер: тіл таңдауы, көптілді қауымдастық, тілдерді меңгеру, Қытай қазақтары, ашылық топтар тілі, үстем тіл, өзгертін тенденциялар.

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ВЫБОР ЯЗЫКА В МНОГОЯЗЫЧНЫХ СООБЩЕСТВАХ: ПРИМЕР АКСАЯ, КИТАЙ

Целью данного исследования является изучение языкового выбора аксайских казахов в зависимости от различных ситуаций. Это также выясняет их владение языками, которые они используют. Кроме того, в исследовании предпринята попытка понять меняющуюся тенденцию использования языка среди казахов разных возрастных групп в регионе и причины, стоящие за этим. Для достижения целей исследования исследователь выбрал выборку из (40) аксайских казахских респондентов. Характеристики выборки опроса разнообразны, целесообразны, охватывает две возрастные группы одновременно. Инструментом исследования является анкетирование. Результаты показывают, что казахи разных возрастов по разным причинам выбирают разные языки. Старшее поколение в

большинстве ситуаций выбирает казахский язык, в то время как молодое поколение предпочитает китайский. Влияющие факторы в основном включают образовательный опыт и общую языковую среду. Респонденты по-разному владеют каждым языком. Молодое поколение казахов имеет более высокий уровень владения китайским языком и постепенное снижение уровня владения родным языком. В то же время у них есть еще один выбор языка – английский. Благодаря вышеуказанным явлениям это исследование также подтверждает, что языковое разнообразие многоязычного сообщества находится под угрозой. Автор предложил рекомендации по сохранению языкового разнообразия в многоязычных сообществах.

Ключевые слова: выбор языка, многоязычное сообщество, владение языком, китайские казахи, язык групп меньшинств, доминирующий язык, меняющиеся тенденции.

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