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The Changing Langscape:
Family Language Policy and Planning in China

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Abstract

In this editorial introduction, we present what motivated us to organise this collection of studies on family language policy and planning (FLPP) in the Chinese contexts. In order to better understand why ethnic minority languages and *fangyan*s (also known as dialects or regionalects) are challenged by the official Chinese language, *Putonghua*, the introduction situates this group of studies in the disciplinary context, and proposes the family as a critical site where macro and meso language policies penetrate the private domain and influence the process of family language decisions. By looking at the interactions between families, schools, communities and workplaces, we can also trace the sociolinguistic and political environments in which language shift takes place. In the discussion of these contextual factors in China, we argue for the need to explore family and language changes in Chinese contexts. The introduction concludes with an overview of the studies included in this special issue, highlighting the key claims put forward by the contributors.

Introduction

This collection of studies takes as its starting point an understanding that family language policy and planning (FLPP) is shaped and enacted in interaction with wider political, social and economic forces in the Chinese contexts. Recent decades have witnessed great changes in China's landscape of languages (or langscape) as a result of government policy and the massive internal migration that has taken place over the past 50 years (e.g. Gao, 2015, 2017; Gao & Shao, 2018; Shen & Gao, 2019). Although this changing linguistic ecology has been shaped by external forces, families also play a critical role in influencing the language practices of younger generations (e.g. Curdt-Christiansen & Wang, 2018). It is therefore

important to explore how these external forces influence FLPP, and how they interact with family decisions on whether or not to continue the use of particular languages or linguistic varieties in their everyday life. While family language policy has received increasing attention in the West over the past decades because of intensified transnational movement, fewer studies have examined language changes in society and family in the context of China. The purpose of this special issue is to shed light on the changing langscape shaped by macro (political), meso (educational), and micro (family) policies in the Chinese contexts. In what follows, we will first present what we mean by FLPP research, before we draw attention to the broader contextual issues that motivated this collection of studies on FLPP in China.

Contextualising the special issue within family language policy and planning research

In its classical model, language policy consists of two inter-related but different spheres of activities: *language policy*, and *language planning*. *Language policy* is a set of regulations, laws or rules that can be enacted through the process of language planning. *Language planning* refers to deliberate efforts to influence the language behaviour of individuals or affect the function of languages, such as language use and status (Cooper, 1989; Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997; Liddicoat, 2013). Some scholars argue that language planning is the enactment process of language policies (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997), while others argue that language policy is the output of the language planning process (Schiffman, 1996). However, the two terms have often been used interchangeably and coalesced into one term as language policy and planning (LPP) (Hornberger, 2006; Johnson, 2013).

For this special issue, we adopt the term *language policy and planning* to indicate the deliberate and intentional aspect of language planning (top-down), as well as the implicit and unintentional aspect of language policy (bottom-up). In this regard, LPP recognises language policy enactment by different actors in different domains, such as state, education, workplace and media. In a complex and nested system such as a society, there are varieties of competing forces from different domains exerting influences on each other – or, as Spolsky (2012) points out, "each domain within a sociolinguistic ecology has its own variety of language policy, and each influences and is influenced by all the other domains" (p.4).

The family is one of the critical domains that shape how people choose which language to use. Family language policy and planning (FLPP) has been defined as explicit/overt and implicit/covert language planning in relation to language and literacy

2

practices within home domains and among family members (Curdt-Christiansen, 2009, 2018; King, Fogle & Logan-Terry, 2008; Spolsky, 2012). FLPP, like any other policy, concerns "what is valued in a society" and represents "articulations of the beliefs and attitudes of a society about the values of languages and their use" (Liddicoat, 2013, p.1). Much research in the FLPP literature has drawn from Spolsky's (2004) tripartite model of language policy, which consists of three interrelated components: language ideology (what family members think about language), language practices (what they do with language), and language management (the efforts they make to maintain or develop language). While language practices often are implicit, covert and unintentional "as a consequence of ideological beliefs" (Curdt-Christiansen, 2018, p. 420), language management is the deliberate and observable efforts made by adults through their conscious involvement and investment in providing linguistic conditions and contexts for language learning and literacy development. Language management, in this context, is similar to the notion of *language planning*, where adults (the 'managers' of a family) seek to provide solutions to 'language problems' within a family, such as preventing the otherwise common loss of intergenerational transmission within three generations in immigrant families, or providing the 'right' linguistic conditions to facilitate desired child language outcomes.

Previous research has illustrated how FLPP is multidimensional and incorporates both parental and children's attitudes and ideologies: language and literacy practices at home (Curdt-Christiansen, 2009, 2013, 2016, 2018; Smith-Christmas, 2016, 2018); deliberate language measures that parents employ (Curdt-Christiansen & Wang, 2018; Wang & Curdt-Christiansen, 2017; Curdt-Christiansen & Lanza, 2018); as well as practiced policies in daily family routines (Fogle, 2012; Gafaranga, 2010). Since much recent research on FLPP has been conducted in the West because of intensified transnational movement in the last few decades, it is timely for us to explore family and language changes in the Chinese contexts, because political decisions are influential and powerful with direct implications for language practices at the individual and societal levels as well as for the linguistic ecology in China.

Contextualising the special issue within the Chinese contexts

China officially has 56 ethnic groups, of which Han is the dominant group, constituting 91.5% of the population. The 55 ethnic groups other than Han, including Mongolian, Tibetan, Uyghur and Zhuang, speak more than 290 different languages (Lewis, 2009). The *Han* language, which is known as Chinese or *Hanyu*, is not a linguistically monolithic entity, but

consists of nearly 2000 varieties of spoken language (*fanyang*). Although they are united in one communal written form and often perceived as one language, "the Chinese language", many *fangyans* are mutually unintelligible, so that cross-dialectal communication in many cases is almost impossible (Li, 2006). Since linguistic unity has been traditionally regarded as foundational to political unity, *Putonghua*, also called Mandarin*, has been chosen as the standard common language*, widely promulgated by the central government particularly after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. This promotion has been distinctly top-down and rather intense as a political decision, not only to develop national unity but also to provide effective governance and socio-economic development, as well as to establish a centralised educational system in the New China (Zhang, 2013).

Subsequently, *Putonghua* has become the language of instruction in all schools nationwide, the working language of government at all levels, and the language used in radio and television (Rohsenow, 2004). Through such intense promotion, *Putonghua* has gained significantly wider use than local *fangyan*s in both public/formal and private/informal domains. However, language policy makers face challenges related to the promotion of *Putonghua* and foreign languages (particularly English) as well as the sustenance of ethnic group languages in the Chinese contexts that are characterized by linguistic diversity and dramatic demographic changes caused by internal and cross-border migrations.

The massive rural-urban migration has also led to linguistic complexity. Because of their negative image as portrayed by public discourse and marginalisation by host city residents, the majority of rural migrant workers (RMWs) and their children prefer to use *Putonghua* (e.g. Chen & Lin, 2013; Yu, 2010). For instance, Yu (2010) reported a study of 327 migrant children in Suzhou, where the findings showed that more than 90% of the participants preferred using *Putonghua* in public places like schools and markets. Within the family domain, more than 60% also shifted to *Putonghua* and nearly 30% used both *Putonghua* and their native *fangyan* interchangeably when speaking with their parents. Like any other sociolinguistic phenomenon, RMWs' language shift might have been associated with a variety of factors such as *Putonghua*'s increasing communicative role at local, regional and national levels, better job opportunities, and also the intermarriage of couples with different *fangyan*s. Nevertheless, the decline of these *fangyan*s has become a major concern for language policy makers (e.g. Shen & Gao, 2019).

The shifting sociolinguistic situation is further complicated by the multiple languages spoken on a regular basis by the 55 ethnic minority groups. These 55 ethnic groups may speak their own language (L1) at home and in their immediate community and the dominant

minority language in the larger ethnic region, while many of them also speak *Putonghua* in formal domains (Feng & Adamson, 2018). Over recent decades state language policies for minority groups have been underpinned by different ideologies, such as economic advancement, assimilation, political stability and ethnic harmony (e.g. Gao, 2017; Gao & Ren, 2019; Xu, 2019). With respect to the educational system, minority children are required to learn their ethnic language as L1, Putonghua as L2, and English as L3. In practice, these children and their families will naturally invest more in learning the languages that are more likely to bring material benefits and opportunities for upward social mobility.

Unfortunately, therefore, relevant language policies and language education practices may create tensions related to the survival and thriving of ethnic group languages and cultures. Postiglione (2014) notes that China is at a critical crossroads; the nation may shift toward "plural monoculturalism", in which "ethnic minority groups emphasize their cultural identities above those of the nation and limit their potential to take on multiple roles in national development" (p. 43). If the linguistic complexity is managed well, however, the nation may also achieve 'harmonious multiculturalism' in alignment "with the Confucian tradition of 'harmonious yet different'" (ibid.).

Whatever the outcome is for the nation, it can be contended that the promotion of *Putonghua* clearly undermines the existence of ethnic minority languages and *fangyans* (e.g. Xia & Shen, 2019; Zhang & Tsung, 2019; Zhao, Zhou & Gao, 2019). While this is a significant challenge for government policy makers to address, it is also a dilemma faced by many families and linguistic communities. Planning activities related to language use and learning within Chinese families will be particularly visible as families tend to be strongly influenced by the macro and meso levels of policies, the pragmatic values of different language varieties, and commodity properties of languages (Curdt-Christiansen & Wang 2018, Shen & Gao, 2019). Curdt-Christiansen (2009) observed that Chinese parents tend to place a great deal of emphasis on education as the pathway to upward mobility, resulting in deliberate efforts at family language planning to comply with educational demands. Therefore, language policy makers and educators need to address important questions as follows: Should *fangyans* and ethnic languages continue to be used in schools, in families, and in public domains? Or should the younger generation only learn and use *Putonghua* and English because of the instrumental value of these languages? How do individual stakeholders define their aspirations, desires and identities in the complex socio-linguistic-political reality? Finally, what role does the family play in this intensified language contact, language competition and language political situation?

Presenting the thematic issue on family language policy and planning in China

In response to these questions, the papers in this special issue trace the trajectories of macro language policies in the Chinese contexts to understand how they penetrate the private domains and influence the process of family language decisions, as well as how families negotiate language use in families. They aim to "make visible the relationships between private domains and public spheres and reveal the conflicts that family members must negotiate between the realities of social pressure, political impositions, and public education demands on the one hand, and the desire for cultural loyalty and linguistic continuity on the other" (Curdt-Christiansen, 2013, p. 2).

The papers in the special issue build upon previous work within the emerging field of FLPP and provide a deeper understanding of how language policies, whether institutional or private, relate to language behaviour and affect the ways in which we respond to and engage ourselves in issues of power, linguistic and cultural diversity, and socioeconomic differences. While caretakers can provide rich environments and set specific language 'rules' for their children in many contexts, they may also face challenges when putting particular FLPPs into practice. This is particularly true with regard to minority and regional language maintenance, given the wide-spread tension between linguistic loyalty and cultural identity on the one hand, and societal and economic pressures and institutional/educational impositions on the other. With a focus on the Chinese context, where there are tensions related to majority, minority and endangered languages as well as political discourses about official language/mother tongue, this collection of FLPP studies will can enhance our understanding of the role of language in perpetuating social inequality, as well as the role of formal educational language policy (medium of instruction) in the maintenance of minority, endangered and regional languages.

In the first paper, Wang and Curdt-Christiansen explore the role of parents in intergenerational transmission in city families. By examining everyday conversations during table talk, homework tutoring and children's playtime, the authors illustrate how parents act as 'medium translators' during conversations involving both children and grandparents. That is, parents translate the dialogue from *fangyan* to *Putonghua* for the children, and vice versa for the grandparents. Although there are different features and types of medium translation involved in the families' interactional practices, they all contribute to the loss of *fangyans* in

families and reveal the process of language loss in translation. The micro level analysis in this paper suggests that local *fangyan*s, *regionalects* and *Putonghua* are hierarchically ranked, presenting different symbolic values in society.

In addition to studying the interconnections between macro and micro levels of FLPP, Zheng and Mei also focus on meso-level social conditions that provide affordances and constraints for families to access particular types of social and learning experiences. Through a comparative lens, they explore the different ways in which families from two distinct socioeconomic status (SES) communities facilitate their children's Chinese and English development. They pay particular attention to community resources such as libraries, literacy activities and facilities to understand how family language planning is conditioned by these resources in creating possibilities and social identities for children. They argue that despite the similar aspirations that parents hold for their children's language development in Chinese and English, low SES may prohibit them from translating their language ideologies into consistent language and literacy planning activities.

Continuing with the investigation of SES in FLPP, the third paper by Yang and Curdt-Christiansen is concerned with a group of low-SES families, namely rural migrant worker (RMW) families. The authors trace the association between identities and language choices in the context of a language shift from their *fangyan* to *Putonghua*. In examining why this language shift takes place in everyday communication between children and other family members, their participants show conflicting identities shaped by macro-social systems, public discourse and discrimination. It seems that language shift in these families is a deliberate choice to avoid issues of 'othering'.

The fourth paper, by Shen, Wang and Gao, considers one of the largest ethnic minority groups in Guizhou – the Miao. Using 900 questionnaires and 20 interviews with Miao families as data, the study traces the decline of Miao language use across different generations. Despite the government's initiative to protect endangered languages, the Miao language, like all other *fangyan*s, is in sharp decline. One of the important findings from this study suggests that there are inconsistencies between language ideologies and management efforts. While parents believe the Miao language represents cultural capital and provides an emotional bond and a sense of sociocultural belonging, they nonetheless encourage younger generations to use *Putonghua* or the regionalect, because of the instrumental value of these languages. The authors argue that any consideration of language shift phenomena should take into consideration the exo-system surrounding the family domain, such as language policies

at national, local and school level. These context-specific factors can profoundly influence language practices and management efforts.

Also studying an ethnic minority group, Yin and Li's paper focusses on the Sibe ethnic minority in the Charbuchar Sibe Autonomous County of Xinjiang. Examining language attitudes towards the Sibe by comparing the perspectives of parents and young people, the authors find that parents tend to have more positive and affective views towards their mother tongue, whereas young people show more anxiety about learning the language as well as concern for its vitality. Similar to the findings in the study by Shen, Wang and Gao, Yin and Li also find a decline in the use of Sibe language in the younger generation. Different from the studies by Zheng and Mei and Shen et al., Yin and Li's findings suggest that higher SES Sibe parents do not see much value in maintaining the language, while parents with fewer resources are more motivated to preserve their language and culture.

The last paper, contributed by Gu and Han, involves transnational migrants from South Asia in Hong Kong. The study explores how immigrant mothers' experiences at home, school, in the community and in the workplace shape their language planning and management activities. As in the study by Zheng and Mei, the authors conclude that lower SES migrant mothers' "lack of local educational experiences and limited knowledge of the Chinese language may disadvantage their children" from accessing educational opportunities.

The issue concludes with a commentary by Patricia Duff, who provides a critical review of the common issues underlying all six papers. We trust that the findings of these empirical studies can help to inform language educators, educational administrators and policy makers with regard to the promotion of family language practices conducive to the preservation and maintenance of minority/endangered/regional languages in the Chinese contexts. We also believe that the findings will help language educators, educational administrators and policy makers to offer similar support in contexts other than China.

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