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The effects of language policy in China

Abstrakt (Efekty polityki językowej w Chinach). Ludność Chin składa się z 56 oficjalnie uznanych grup etnicznych, które posługują się (w zależności od zastosowanych kryteriów) od 135 do prawie 300 językami. Około 90% populacji deklaruje przynależność do narodowości Han. Język używany przez tę większość nie jest bynajmniej jednolity; odmiany chińskiego są tak zróżnicowane, że większość z nich jest wzajemnie niezrozumiała, a niektórzy lingwiści nazywają je nawet odrębnymi językami. Pozostałe 10% mówi językami, które są podzielone na pięć rodzin językowych.

Czy jest możliwe wprowadzenie jednego wspólnego języka w kraju o największej populacji na Ziemi? Chiny prowadzą taką politykę językową od lat pięćdziesiątych. Celem jest rozpowszechnienie krajowego standardu – mandaryńskiego (*putonghua*) w całym kraju, tak, aby wszyscy mieszkańcy mogli swobodnie się komunikować. To idealistyczne dzieło jest już bardzo zaawansowane i spowodowało ogromne zmiany w językowym krajobrazie Chin.

Nie wszystkie zawarte w konstytucji prawa języków mniejszości są respektowane. Również nie-mandaryńskie odmiany chińskie podlegają unifikacji, a w lokalnych językach zachodzą zauważalne zmiany. W niniejszym artykule przedstawiono różne aspekty chińskiej polityki językowej; pozytywne i negatywne skutki, jakie ma ona dla języków używanych w Chinach.

Abstract. The population of China consists of 56 officially recognised ethnic groups, which speak (depending on the criteria used) from 135 to nearly 300 languages. About 90% of the population declare themselves as belonging to the Han-Chinese nationality. The language spoken by this majority is by no means uniform, the varieties of Chinese are so diversified, that most of them are mutually unintelligible, and some linguists even call them separate languages. The remaining 10% speak languages that are classified into five language families.

Is it possible to introduce one common language in a country with the largest population on Earth? China has been carrying out such a language policy since the 1950s. The goal is to spread the national standard – Mandarin, or Putonghua, all over the country, so that all inhabitants could communicate freely. This idealistic work is already very advanced and it has caused vast changes in the linguistic landscape of China.

Not all the rights of minority languages declared in the constitution are respected. Also the non-Mandarin varieties of Chinese are subject to unification and noticeable changes are ongoing in the local tongues. This paper shows the various aspects of Chinese language policy, the positive and negative effects it has on the languages spoken in China.

1. Languages of China

To understand the scale and importance of language planning in the People's Republic of China, one must begin with an introduction of the general linguistic and ethnic situation in the country.

China is by no means a linguistic nor an ethnic monolith. Currently, there are 56 nationalities which have been officially recognised, of which the largest is the Han nationality. The 55 officially acknowledged ethnic minorities is a simplification made by the State. In the 1950s, when the so-called "ethnic classification" (*minzu shibie*) project was carried out, over 400 groups applied for the recognition of their ethnicity, but the number was significantly reduced (cf. Poa and La Polla 2007: 343; Bruhn 2008: 8).

About 91.6% of the population of China belongs to the Han (Chinese) nationality, the remaining less than 10% is divided between 55 minorities, of which some are more numerous, while some are very small. The largest minority are the Zhuang (around 16 million people), the smallest do not exceed 10 000 people, of which e.g. the Lhoba amount to around 3000 people (c.f. CPG 2013; Mofcom 2009; National Bureau of Statistics of China 2011).

The number of languages spoken by these 56 nationalities ranges from 135 (recognised by Chinese linguists, see Sun 2015: 547), up to nearly 300 (Ethnologue, see Simons and Fennig 2017). The languages, belong to five language families¹. These are, according to the second edition of the *Language Atlas of China* (Zhang and Xiong 2012): Sino-Tibetan, Altaic, Austro-Asiatic, Austronesian, Indo-European and the Korean language.

2. The diversity of Chinese

Even though over 90% of the population belongs to one ethnic group, their language is not uniform. The Han Chinese speak a multitude of dialects, which are so distinct, that many linguists treat them rather as a group of related, but not mutually unintelligible, languages, called Sinitic (cf. Mair 1999; Chappell and Li 2016). These dialects, or languages, are classified into 7-10 groups, depending on the criteria. These are (the percentage of total Han population given in brackets) (Xiong and Zhang 2008)²:

¹ Bradley 2015 lists 9 language families in China, as his classification is slightly different from the ones used by other scholars, such as Xiong and Zhang 2008, e.g. he categorises the Altaic family into three separate language families (Turkic, Mongolic and Manchu-Tungus).

² The older (but still accepted by many) classification into 7 groups does not include Jin, Hui, Pinghua and Tuhua (cf. Norman 1988: 181).

Mandarin (66.2%)
 Jin (5.2%)
 Wu (6.1%)
 Hui (0.3%)
 Gan (4%)
 Xiang (3%)
 Min (6.2%)
 Yue (4.9%)
 Pinghua and Tuhua (0.6%)
 Hakka (3.5%)

3. Language legislation

The language legislation since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, has undergone many stages. In the 1950s, the main ideas concentrated on unifying the language. The 1960s through 1970s were an era of political chaos in China, and thus works on language planning began anew after the Cultural Revolution and are intensified at the moment. This paper will concentrate on the language policy since the introduction of the Language Law in 2001 (GOV.cn 2000).

Zhou Youguang³ (2001: 9) lists the main aims of language planning in China since the 1950s. These are (cf. Rohsenow 2004: 21):

“1. To standardize and popularize the lingua franca of China” (Zhou 2001: 9).

The “lingua franca” denotes Putonghua (lit. ‘common speech’), known generally in the West as Mandarin⁴, which was declared as the standard in 1955 (cf. Zhou 2001: 10). Initially (in the 1950s) Putonghua was intended to replace the local varieties; later this idea was abandoned (cf. Spolsky 2014: 168; Guo 2004: 46-48).

“2. To write in vernacular style instead of the traditional classic style” (Zhou 2001: 9).

Classical Chinese (*Wenyanwen*) functioned as the standard literary language before 1919, when it was replaced by the so-called vernacular language (*Baihuawen*). Since 1950s the government documents and newspapers use the vernacular writing (Zhou 2001: 11). Classical Chinese is still visible in formal language and in poetry, where many archaic expressions are in use.

³ Zhou Youguang (1906-2017) was the creator of the Chinese Romanization system – *Hanyu Pinyin*.

⁴ The term ‘Mandarin’ has a broader meaning than ‘Putonghua’, as it usually also denotes the standard Chinese languages spoken in Taiwan (*Guoyu*) and in Singapore (*Huayu*). These three standards are very similar to one another, but are not identical. ‘Mandarin’ can also mean the Northern Chinese dialects (*Guanhua*). Therefore, to avoid misunderstandings, this article will apply the term ‘Putonghua’ to denote the standard national language in the People’s Republic of China.

“3. To design and promote a system of Chinese phonetic symbols” (Zhou 2001: 9).

The system mentioned by Zhou is the *Hanyu Pinyin* system, which is the official transcription of Chinese characters into the Latin alphabet since 1958 (cf. Zhou 2001: 12). The original idea was to replace Chinese characters by *Hanyu Pinyin* system, but eventually it was decided that it should only serve as an auxiliary system (cf. Zhou 2001: 12-13; Spolsky 2104: 167).

“4. To simplify the Chinese characters” (Zhou 2001: 9).

Zhou Youguang speaks of the script reform, carried out in China since the 1950s. The main intention is to make learning the Chinese characters easier by simplifying their form and thus reducing illiteracy (cf. Spolsky 2014: 166-167).

“5. To design and, if needed, improve writing systems for minor nationalities” (Zhou 2001: 9).

The declared aim of creating writing systems for the national minorities was to establish ethnic and linguistic equality. On this occasion, the minorities would also be more able to learn Putonghua (cf. Spolsky 2014: 169; Sun 2004: 179-180).

The promotion of Putonghua is guaranteed by Article 19 of the Constitution of the P.R.C. proclaimed in 1982 (National People’s Congress... 2004). It is also stressed by the Language Law, valid since 2001. Article 4 declares that “[a]ll citizens shall have the right to learn and use the standard spoken and written Chinese language” (GOV.cn 2000).

Concurrently, both the Constitution (Article 19; National People’s Congress... 2004), and the Language Law (Article 8) ensure, that “all ethnic groups shall have the freedom to use and develop their own spoken and written languages” (GOV.cn 2000).

The usage of Putonghua as the official language used by the State organs, and as the “basic language in education and teaching in schools and other institutions of education” is announced in the following two articles of the Language Law (Articles 9 and 10; GOV.cn 2000). The standard language has thereby the highest status. Regional tongues can be used in unofficial situations, also to some extent in local media and in traditional folk arts or publications, but with restrictions (Article 16 of the Language Law; GOV.cn 2000; cf. Kurpaska 2005: 40-41).

Apart from the national law, there are also detailed regional laws and regulations in respective provinces and other administrative regions, where the minorities have their sovereignty, such as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, Tibet Autonomous Region, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, and other areas (see Pan 2016: 272-273).

4. Promotion of Putonghua and script reform

The statistics, which are the result of a large-scale survey on language use in China, carried out in 2004, showed that 53.06% of the population of the country spoke the

standard language (cf. Wang and Yuan 2013: 36). More recent investigations show that there has been significant progress in spreading Putonghua. In 2014 around 70% of China's population declared knowledge of the standard (MOE 2014). However, only 10% out of the 70% is said to speak "relatively standard" Putonghua (MOE 2014). This reveals that there is still a lot of work to be done in promoting the standard language among the Chinese people.

4.1. The means of promoting Putonghua

One of the main tools of spreading the standard language is Putonghua Promotion Week (*Tuiguang Putonghua Xuanchuanzhou*), carried out during the third week of September every year since 1998 (cf. MOE 2014; Wang and Yuan 2013: 31-32; Liang 2015: 21). It involves various activities and reaches not only large cities, but also towns, villages and ethnic minority regions (cf. Wang and Yuan 2013: 32-34).

To verify the level of the standard language used by native speakers of Chinese dialects, the Putonghua Proficiency Test (*Putonghua Shuiping Ceshi*) has been introduced. The fluency level defines then the qualifications for work which the citizens apply for. This is especially important for those who intend to work as teachers or presenters in the media (cf. Wang and Yuan 2013: 29-31).

In order to reach the smallest towns and villages, Putonghua is also being strongly promoted in the rural areas and in regions inhabited by ethnic minorities (cf. Wang and Yuan 2013: 34-36). Special training is also provided for migrant workers and teachers in ethnic minority regions (cf. Zhou, Wei and Xie 2013: 18).

But probably the most important is the fact, that according to Article 10 of the Language Law, Putonghua is used as the language of instruction at schools, both in dialectal and in ethnic minority areas. It is also the language of media (Article 12 of the Language Law; cf. GOV.cn 2000). Thanks to this the national standard language reaches all the corners of the country.

4.2. Script reform

Script reform in the PRC involves the simplification and standardisation of Chinese characters, and also the introduction of a Romanization system, called *Hanyu Pinyin*, or simply *Pinyin* (Zhou 2001: 11-14). Reducing the number of strokes in the most commonly used characters was expected to reduce illiteracy in China (cf. Spolsky 2014: 166-e167)⁵ while *Pinyin* is used as an auxiliary system, though there were ideas in the beginning to eliminate the characters and replace them by an alphabetic script (Zhou 2001: 12-13; Spolsky 2014: 167).

⁵ The traditional, i.e. not simplified Chinese characters are still used in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau.

4.3. Writing systems of minority languages

In 1958 the Government decided to design writing systems based on *Pinyin* to minority groups which had no writing systems and to improve those who already had their own scripts. Apart from Tibetans, Mongolians, Koreans, Uyghurs and others, nationalities such as Hani, Miao, Buyei, Yi, Lisu, etc., also received the tool for writing in their languages. By 2004 there were around thirty writing systems (including pre-existing ones) in use by various ethnic minorities (Spolsky 2014: 169; Zhou 2001: 14-15; Sun 2015: 544-545). Nonetheless, Chinese characters are still the main writing system in education, also in minority areas (Zhou 2001: 16).

5. The effects of the language policy in China

The goal of current Chinese language policy would be that every citizen can speak perfect Putonghua fluently, while the local tongues have not been affected. However, the reality is different.

5.1. Impact on dialects

The vigorous promotion of the standard language has caused a decline of the local dialects and thus dialect endangerment. While Putonghua is taught in schools, the younger generation has now problems communicating with their grandparents (cf. Li 2015). The phenomenon of massive rural-to-urban migration in China, has brought about another threat to the dialects. In order to communicate with one another, people use the national standard instead of their native tongues. The problem of dialect endangerment affects not only rural regions, but also cities like Canton or Shanghai, where the local tongue is seemingly very strong (cf. Li 2015; Spolsky 2014: 168). As a result of the intensive teaching of Putonghua, it has entered the private sphere and is more and more often spoken at home and in the future the dominance of the standard language is inevitable (cf. Liang 2015: 22; Li 2015).

A natural outcome of the language policy is the existence of diglossia. In China, Putonghua plays the role of the High-variety language, while the dialects are Low-variety, used in unofficial circumstances (cf. Liang 2015: 22; Li 2015; Kurpaska 2013: 62-63). In some regions, one can even speak of triglossia. These are especially rural areas, where Putonghua has replaced the former dialectal standard. The people must know their native local dialect, the regional dialectal standard, which is used as the means of communication in the area (such as Cantonese in Guangdong province), as well as Putonghua (Li 2015). In such situations, Putonghua plays the role of the Superior-variety (cf. Saillard 2004: 170).

Due to the fact that the dialects of Chinese are so diverse, the occurrence of bidialectalism, closely bound with diglossia, is quite evident (cf. Guo 2004: 48-50). The speakers of Chinese know their mother tongue as well as Putonghua. The officials intend to make the relationship complementary, but with a growing role being played by the standard (cf. Guo 2004: 49).

In order to facilitate the promotion of Putonghua, research into local dialects is currently increasing. Knowing the structure of the local dialects makes it less difficult to teach the standard. At the same time, dialectal research is intended to preserve as much information as possible before the local varieties disappear (cf. Kurpaska 2005: 42-43; Guo 2004: 48).

The spread of Putonghua also has a reverse side. The standard itself is becoming diversified and is undergoing a process of vernacularisation. The variant forms are called “local Putonghua” or “non-standard Putonghua”. This is especially noticeable in pronunciation – speakers adopt characteristics of their own mother tongue while speaking Putonghua. But syntactic, as well as lexical features are also applied by local speakers (see Saillard 2004: 168-171; Li 2015).

As a result of the diversification of the national language, the standard is absorbing dialectal features (lexical, phonetical, grammatical) (cf. Guo 2004: 51). These features slowly enter dictionaries, grammars and change the standard pronunciation. Each new edition of the *Contemporary Chinese Dictionary*, considered to be an authority of the standard vocabulary, contains more entries that are annotated as being of dialectal origin (cf. Su 2001).

5.2. Impact on minority languages

Despite the guarantees which minority languages have in the Constitution and the Language Law (see section 3.), Sun Hongkai (2015: 548) states that “[t]here is still a lack of national law to protect the use and development of the minority languages and script”. Without clear legislative grounds, the rights of ethnic minorities cannot be observed. Thus, the forceful promotion of Putonghua, together with the general need to communicate with other peoples, leads to the endangerment of minority languages in China (cf. Sun 2015: 550; Poa and LaPolla 2007:).

The language attitude of the minorities is one of the reasons why their languages are declining. The ability to speak Putonghua helps people find better employment and improve their quality of life. The smaller an ethnic community is, the more vulnerable is its language (cf. Bruhn 2008: 9; Wang and Phillion 2009: 7). The spread of Putonghua among the users of minority languages helps bring about a conflict of loyalties. On the one hand, ethnic minorities want to maintain their culture and language, on the other, it is much easier to make a career speaking Putonghua (cf. Spolsky 2014: 169-172). In consequence, the status of minority languages is lowered vis a vis the national standard.

There is still much inequality in the treatment of ethnic minorities and their constitutional language rights are not always respected. The pressure to know Putonghua

is one reason why ethnic minorities are often subject to discrimination. There is a lack of bilingual teachers, so students who live in minority areas do not have the possibility of studying in their own language or to learn the standard language properly (cf. Wang and Phillion 2009: 4). Roche (2018: 9) shows the results of his research in Tibet, and it shows clearly, that Chinese is used as the main language at all stages of education. The higher the level, the lesser the role played by Tibetan, whereas non-Tibetan languages spoken by the people living in Tibet, are used only in preschool.

The languages of larger minorities, or those of more strategic significance, are still treated better than those of smaller groups. For example, the National Higher Education Entrance Examination, which is required for students to enter institutions of higher education, has versions in six minority languages, i.e. Tibetan, Uyghur, Mongolian, Korean, Kazakh, and Kirghiz. Other minorities must take the Chinese version (Wang and Phillion 2009: 6).

Education is not the only area in which disparity is visible. Minority languages are not always used as they should be where they have the status of official languages. Documents and government conferences are not translated into the minority languages, but are often in Chinese only (Zhou 2004: 84-85).

Similarly to the situation of the dialects of Chinese, the current language policy in China enhances bilingualism, or even trilingualism. Ethnic minorities need to master both their mother tongue and the national standard in order to function in society. However imperfect, bilingual education is one of the points carried out by the authorities in ethnic minority regions. Trilingual education denotes “[p]rimary schools of Mongolian and Korean ethnic groups which simultaneously teach in a minority language, Chinese and a foreign language” (Zhou, Wei and Xie 2013: 19).

Nonetheless, the Chinese language policy has caused a rise of interest and investigation of minority languages. The aim is the dissemination of Putonghua and local languages are investigated to further this (Sun 2015: 548-549). The introduction and improvement of writing systems used by ethnic minorities, besides being a tool in bilingual teaching, has undoubtedly raised their self-awareness and is helping people to maintain their cultural heritage (Sun 2015: 550).

6. Summary

Language planning in China has caused irreversible changes in the linguistic landscape since the 1950s. The dominance of Putonghua, the unification of the varieties of Chinese and weakening of smaller languages are all direct outcomes of language regulations and policies.

The language policy of the People’s Republic of China has one clear goal: to spread Putonghua all over the country. The work carried out by language planners has already gone very far and is evidently unstoppable. As a matter of fact, the Government has

abandoned its original plans to eliminate the varieties of Chinese, or to supersede the minority languages, but there are nevertheless many worries about the future of these tongues. The promotion of Putonghua is maybe not so aggressive, but is slowly making its way into the deepest recesses of everyday life. Therefore, much work needs to be done to preserve the minority languages.

There are also brighter aspects of the question: the interest in Chinese dialects and in minority languages is growing, ethnic groups are gaining writing systems. The communication between citizens of China is getting easier owing to the national standard. Probably in the future the existence of bilingualism and bidialectalism, as well as of diglossia will be gradually more common, with the increasing dominance of Putonghua. But one has to remember that Putonghua is also a living language, absorbing local features and diversifying as a superstratum. Maybe at some point it will be possible to speak of dialects of Putonghua.

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