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ASSESSMENT OF THE SOCIAL FUNCTIONS
AND VITALITY OF THE YI LANGUAGE
FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ITS DOMAINS
OF USE

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Assessment of the Social Functions and Vitality of the Yi Language

from the Perspective of its Domains of Use

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Abstract: In general, the vitality and social functions of a language are assessed in connection with such indices as the language's intergenerational transmission, the absolute number of speakers and the proportion of speakers in the population. The various indices are then ranked for vitality levels and synthesized to obtain the language's degree of vitality and degree of endangerment (Graaf 2006). By means of a questionnaire survey of Yi-Chinese bilingual students at the Ethnic Secondary School of Xichang, and observations of natural language use by urban Yi-Chinese bilinguals and rural Yi monolinguals, the author of this article seeks to understand current use of Yi family, education, religion, work, and the media in order to assess Yi's vitality and social function in the Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture. The author also proposes measures for enhancing Yi's vitality and social function.

0. Introduction

Most cases of language loss start with the loss of the domains of use. Once family domain is affected, natural intergenerational language transmission is interrupted and the language becomes endangered in its future survival unless language transmission is restored. Many socio-linguists convincingly argues that endangered language studies can contribute to the maintenance of languages, in particular if the study of language shift is taken up early enough. This paper is such a study. It partly reports on the results of a domain survey of Yi language used in the *Liangshan Yi* Autonomous Prefecture (凉山彝族自治州). The questionnaire survey was conducted by

the author in 2007.

The survey aims to shed light on the question how safe existing domains of Yi language use are and what prospects for the Yi language can be expected. This study suggests measures which need to be taken if existing domains are to be maintained. Consequently, this paper is organized into four sections. In the first section, ethnolinguistic background information on the Yi and their languages are given. The second section, introduces the survey and an analysis of its results. Part three discusses factors behind the weakening and dwindling of Yi language domains, and the final part introduces strategies which need to be adopted in order to safeguard the struggling domains of Yi language.

1. Ethnolinguistic background information

The *Yi* (彝) people in China, also known as the *Lolo* (傣傣) in English, is the seventh largest of the 55 ethnic minority groups in China. Their total population comprises about 7.76 million people according to the 2000 census (more than eight million currently). They variously call themselves *Nuosu* 諾蘇, *Nasu* 納蘇, *Nisu* 尼蘇, *Lolopu* 傣傣濮, *Lalopa* 拉傣拔, *Azhe* 阿哲, *Sani* 撒尼, *Axi* 阿細 or *Misapo* 迷撒泼 and are distributed across *Sichuan* 四川, *Yunnan* 云南, *Guizhou* 贵州 and *Guangxi* 广西 provinces in the south-west of China, as well as in parts of Vietnam and Myanmar. The largest concentration of *Yi* people as well as the largest district in which the Yi language is best preserved, are located in the mountainous *Liangshan* (涼山) (Cool Mountain) region of Southern *Sichuan* and adjoining parts of northern Yunnan and western Guizhou. Its full administrative name is *Liangshan Yi* Autonomous Prefecture (涼山彝族自治州), which is the topic of discussion of this paper. It is located between 100°15' to 103°53' degrees longitude and 26°03'to 29°27' degrees latitude. It covers an area of land which amounts to 60,100 square kilometers, prefecture divided into 17 counties (cities). Xichang(西昌)City, the capital of the prefecture, rises to 1.500 meters above sea level. Most Yis are scattered in mountain areas, some in frigid mountain areas at high altitudes, and a small number live on flat land or in valleys. Most Yi are farmers,

herders of cattle, sheep and goats; and nomadic hunters in traditional society. Nowadays, many younger Yi people are pouring into the urban areas to make a living. The *Yi* language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman language family. It is closely related to Burmese. The language is classified into six major dialects: Northern Dialect, Southern Dialect, Western Dialect, Eastern Dialect, Central Dialect and South-Eastern Dialect. Most of these dialects are mutually unintelligible. Among the prefecture's 4,285,641 inhabitants, 1,925,671 (44.9 percent) are Yis, and 2,206,064 are Hans (2005 statistics) (<http://www.lsz.gov.cn>) The Liangshan Yis call themselves "Nuosu", which language the "Nuosu dialect," falls in the category of the northern dialect of Yi. There are nearly 2.8 million population speakers of Nuosu dialect including the out of Liangshan prefecture.

The *Yi* people have their own traditional script. It is a kind of pictographic system, which has developed independently from the Chinese script. It is also unrelated to the alphabetic scripts of neighboring peoples such as the Tibetans or the Burmese. It comprises 8,000–10,000 glyphs, and each symbol represents a basic lexigraphic unit. A number of works on history, literature, religion and medicine as well as genealogies of the ruling families written in the *Yi* script are still in circulation in *Yi* areas today. Writing in Yi script was however almost exclusively restricted to the nobility and the Bimo (毕摩) clergy. There is a large collection of books in Yi script at the National Library, at the Cultural Museum for Nationalities in Beijing, but many are also owned privately. An important topic that these books address is religion. The *Yi* worship the spirits of ancestors and are animistic. They believe that everything including humans, ancestors, hills, trees, rocks, water etc. are spirited. The religious practitioners called Bimo (毕摩) officiate rituals at births, funerals and weddings just like priests.

The general state of usage and preservation of the Nuosu is: The great majority of rural Yis, including grandparents, parents, children, and grandchildren can all speak Yi, which is their language for everyday communication. Urban Yi residents mostly and basically all grandparents

speaking Yi in everyday life; parents are less uniform in that some speak Yi fluently, others who live in cities prefer to communicate in Chinese; children basically do not use Yi for communication, although some do understand basic everyday expressions; and grandchildren basically cannot speak Yi. Even among those whose mother tongue is Yi, they have limited domains of use for Yi. Since language preservation, concurrent use, and shift is a dynamic process, this study will place emphasis on the effects of the Chinese on Yi-Chinese bilingual and Yi monolingual persons and the functions of Yi in various domains of use.

The methods used for this study are mainly the questionnaire survey method, the participation method, the observation method, and a combination of qualitative and quantitative research. Since I myself speak Yi as my mother tongue, I will therefore assess the vitality and social function of Yi mainly by means of covert observations and tape recordings of the natural speech of urban Yi-Chinese bilinguals and rural Yi monolinguals. This will be used in conjunction with questionnaire surveys of Yi-Chinese bilingual students among Xichang city's residents, by means of case studies of Yi in other important domains of use, and by using Joshua A. Fishman's (1972) domains of language use as the theoretical foundation.

3. The Domains of Yi Use

Domain of use refers to the venues in which a language is used in society, the persons who communicate in that language, and the scope of the topics discussed with the language (Xu, Tao, and Xie 1997). Research into domains of use helps to determine preference or even exclusivity in the choice of languages in different domains. Schmidt-Rohr (1933) posited nine domains of language use: The family, the sports field, the neighborhood, the school, the church, literature, newspapers and publications, the army, and government administration. Fishman (1972) posited

five typical domains of language use: Families, friends, education, religion, work, and the media.

Based on the above domains and in conjunction with current Yi use, in this study I posit five domains of use—the family, education, religion, work, and the media. These domains are most closely related to people’s everyday lives. Of course, when assessing the language’s vitality and social functions these domains of language use are not of equal value, but the different domains of use are inter-related and affect one another.

1) The family domain: This is a most important domain of use in all languages. The natural transmission of a language, i.e. intergenerational transmission, takes place for the most part in the family. Intergenerational transmission also heads the six main indexes posited by UNESCO experts for assessing language vitality. Choice of languages for intergenerational communication was structured into the survey questionnaire for students in Xichang Ethnic Middle School in Liangshan. The students who filled in the 100 questionnaires were between fifteen and nineteen years of age, and all were from rural areas. These results of the survey are shown in following table.

Table of Intergenerational Language Use:

| Communication with | Use of Yi |
|--------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Grandparents | 96 % use Yi exclusively 4% use Yi in most cases |
| Father | 87% use Yi exclusively 12% use Yi in most cases 1% use Yi occasionally |
| Mother | 95% use Yi exclusively 4% use Yi in most cases 1% use Yi occasionally |
| Siblings | 89% use Yi exclusively 14% use Yi in most cases 4% use Yi occasionally 2% never use Yi |

It is evident from the table that Yi is the language used in rural homes. It is also evident that Yi is the language used by all generations for intergenerational transmissions, and thus Yi is safe (from endangerment). It can also be seen that Yi's safety is not static, since the use of Yi in communication among siblings of the same generation has declined to 80 percent as compared to the 96 percent of communication among grandparents. Thus it is evident, that Yi's safety is not permanent. In the family, many Chinese loan words are present in the conversations of monolingual Yi persons, and Yi-Chinese code-switching has appeared among bilinguals.

The following data from a natural discourse tape-recorded during my fieldwork shows the extent of Chinese loans. The discourse (of ten minutes' duration) was produced by a fifty-six year old female monolingual Yi speaker who had no school education. The topic was about a nephew who disobeyed his parents and went elsewhere.

Chinese loan words: *pingzi* (bottle), *sianhua* (telephone), *jiguan* (organization), *dongxi* (thing), *mofa* (unable?), *laoban* (boss), *gongcheng* (engineering project), *nongcun* (rural), *guanzi* (restaurant), *zu* (lease), *kai (shouji)* (switch on (mobile phone)), *linyaju* (forestry bureau), *zhongyao* (traditional Chinese medicine), *nongmaoshichang* (farm produce market), *taiqiu* (billiards), and *pai* (cards).

In the domain of family, Yi is still the only language used. It contains loan words but no code-switching is found.

2) The education domain: The school education domain is an important language use domain. Not only does it reflect the status, functions, and vitality of a language; it may also directly affect the language's transmission and its social functions and vitality. Strong interference from policies is

another characteristic of the education domain. There is a natural and incremental character to the choice of language in the family and other domains, but language use in the education domain is directly connected with education policy and employment policy. There are two models of education at senior middle schools in Liangshan. In one model, mathematics, physics and all other courses are conducted in Yi, Chinese is taught as a language course, and college entrance exams are taken in Yi. Only two senior middle schools throughout the Liangshan Prefecture use this model. In the other model, Yi is only taught as a language course; all other courses, including mathematics, history, and physics, are taught in Chinese. In senior middle schools there are, in general, three to four Yi language class hours per week. The Xichang Ethnic Middle School I surveyed is a school of the second model. Ninety-five percent of the students and 40 percent of its teachers are Yis.

One of the items in my questionnaire is:

You maintain that the present Yi language class hours: A. are sufficient B. should be increased C. should be decreased

Of the 100 student surveyed, only 3 percent maintained that the class hours were sufficient, while 91 percent maintained that Yi class hours should be increased. Some students complained the contents of the textbooks had no connection with Yi history or culture, but were directly translated from Chinese textbooks. Education is a highly important domain for transmitting a language, but the Yi language's social function and vitality remain at a low level if that Yi is merely taught as language course instead of serving as an medium of instruction for mathematics, history, and other courses. In sum, Yi has seen substantial progress in the education domain as compared to the past, but it has yet to undergo full development.

3) The domain of religion: Yi is the language used for traditional religious rites and activities. The Liangshan Yi religion consists of ancestor worship, and the Bimo priest is the transmitter of scriptures and the executor of religious rites. Religion is the language-use domain in which Yi is preserved in its most complete and purest form. In ritual activities, Yi used by the Bimo basically contains no Han loan words or code-switches, and consists for the most part of classical and literary language. Furthermore the language used by the Bimo scripture teacher in everyday communication and speech is little influenced by Chinese, and any influences are manifested mainly in terms of Han loan words, such as: *gongzuo* (work), *shengyi* (business), *feiji* (airplane), *ban luguan* (running an inn), and *ban chaguan* (managing a teahouse). Discussions on religious matters are all conducted in Yi.

No code-switching has yet appeared in the Bimos' language. A tendency toward gradual decline is also evident in the transmission of the Bimo vocation and Bimo culture. The Bimo vocation is hereditary and may be transmitted from fathers to sons only. A Bimo interviewed during this study had two sons, one of whom had gone elsewhere to work, and the other was still in school. Neither of them wanted to take over their father's occupation. They thought serving as a Bimo was too toilsome and earned too little money.

4) The media domain: Yi is also used for newspapers and in radio and television programs. There is one newspaper, the *Liangshan Daily*, and television offers a news program and a *Yi Xiang Feng* (Yi Hometown Winds) program in Yi. The news program, which presents new contents twice every week, is rebroadcast twice, and lasts 15 minutes per session. The *Yi Xiang Feng* program presents new contents every week, is rebroadcast five times, and also lasts fifteen minutes per session. The durations and contents are both fairly limited as compared to their Chinese language

counterparts, thus limiting the use of Yi, and the limited broadcasting times affect their rankings in assessments of language vitality. The media exert a great influence on language transmission and public awareness. Talking at the Endangered Languages Conference convened in Paris by UNESCO in 2003 on the subject of awakening public awareness of protecting languages, David Crystal (2006: 132) said: “We need the arts to help us get our initiative into the three domains where it can make the greatest impact—the media, the school, and the home.”

Some popular songs in Yi that are spread afield with the help of the television medium domain have played a very important part in raising the position of Yi. Another art form that is popular with the public is Yi “crosstalk”, combined with the Yi folkart “ke zhe” (a sort of humorous debating activity that is often held during weddings and funerals and that manifests the debaters’ intelligence, eloquence, and abundant knowledge of society and history). It borrows from the Chinese crosstalk forms such as “*shuang huang*” (a sort of two-man pantomime) and “*dou baofu*”(unfolding a hummer) and uses the lives of ordinary Yi people as its main subject matter. It is disseminated by Liangshan’s TV medium and plays a positive role in preserving the Yi language.

5) The work domain: public signboards of government organs and all stores and companies are in Chinese-Yi bilingual, as are all important documents. However, Yi is not a work language in these institutions, and even Yi-Chinese bilingualism is seldom practiced. The function of Yi (more exactly the Yi written language) has been reduced to a sort of status symbol. Chinese is also the language used in law courts of the prefectural government, even when both the defendant(s) and the plaintiff(s) are Yis. It is quite evident that Yi does not occupy an adequate position in the work domain.

4. The Social Function of Yi Language: Diglossia and Code-Switching

The theory of diglossia points out that the various language varieties commonly used in a fairly stable bilingual society may generally be divided into “high varieties” and “low varieties,” based on the social and economic venues in which they are used. In society as a whole there are unanimous views and unanimous practices in this regard, and any violation of these conventions may adversely affect the effects of the communicative activity (Ferguson, 1985). There are switches between different varieties in the process of speech, i.e. code-switching. “Code-switching” means constantly alternating and using different language varieties (linguistic codes) to fulfill the linguistic strategies of diverse intents of communication. The “varieties” referred to here may mean different languages, or may mean different dialects. Different societies have norms for the use of different varieties. Acts of linguistic code-switching frequently take place in the everyday lives of Yi-Chinese bilingual speakers among the Yis of Liangshan, with the Chinese code being used to convey topics and contents related to work, studies, life in modern settings, and especially science and technology, and the Yi code used to convey such contents as traditional culture, ways of life, sentiments and so forth. Chinese has become the high variety that is related to education and knowledge, whereas Yi has become the low variety related to everyday life and sentiments but not to education or knowledge. In teaching mathematics, 100 percent of Yi teachers use Chinese whereas, in the classroom, 65 percent of the students and, after class, 85 percent of students frequently discuss problems of mathematics with their teachers in Yi and Chinese. The students always talk about everyday life subjects in Yi but discuss textbook contents in Chinese.

Again for example, the following Yi discourse is by a Yi-Chinese bilingual scholar (male, 60

years old) of the Yi culture. His mother tongue and everyday language was Yi, but he frequently employed code-switches when talking about his academic research, in this case, the distribution of Yi genealogical trees and Yi clans.

Direct translation: An Yi saying has it that “The east is the Ahuo clan’s, the west is the Luohong clan’s, the south is Woli clan’s, and the north is the Wazha clan’s.” This **sums up the matter among the Yi folk but has never been written down in books and no one has had time to research the matter. This in itself is a deficiency.** Also, “The Sagumupa clan takes first place among the multitudes in Dogaerpu.” I do not know why this was said, because there were only a few Sagumupas in Mabian and Ebian. “The Apujijiu clan takes first place among the multitudinous Four Sons of Diwo.” Apujijia refers to the Baqie (household) clan. Why do I say this? The Baqie clan **had a family rule that two of the same clan had to pay with their lives for violations of family laws.** Nine pairs—eighteen persons—paid reciprocally with their lives *before the Liberation*. These, plus the two persons *after the Liberation*, make a total of 20 persons who paid reciprocally with their lives. This family rule was *harsh*.

There are three Chinese loan words, which are italicized in the above text. There are two cases of code-switches (from Yi to Chinese), which are bold in the text.

There are four reasons for the emergence of Yi-Chinese code switching. First, when there is an insufficiency, in Yi, of terms related to science/technology, politics, economics, and work, the relevant discourses are converted into Chinese. Second, when Yi terms for conveying sentiments and feelings are richer and more precise, the discourse switches over to Yi. Third, because of the

need to convey status, the switch may be into Yi or into Chinese. Switching into Yi is to identify with the other party and decrease the social distance; switching into Chinese is to show off one's Chinese level and degree of education, or abundance of experience (for example, the fact that one has gone to work in big cities such as Beijing and Guangzhou). Fourth, code-switching may be habitual. In cases where terms with equal semantic meanings exist in Yi and Chinese and there is no particular significance to code-switching into Chinese, codes are switched merely because of comfort of employing those words in work or everyday life. Also, the great majority of bilingual Yi-Chinese speakers know how to write in Chinese but not in Yi.

When interviewees briefly described the different roles and venues of use of Yi and Chinese, their assessment of the attitudes to and functions of the two languages was the following. First, Yi is an effective instrument of communication, especially when communicating with children, women, and elderly people who do not understand Chinese. Second, Yi possesses a special symbolic significance that the communicators identify with each other; most of the interviewees were filled with pride for the Yi language, culture, and history. Third, Yi speakers evince profound sentiments for the mother tongue, which enables them to fully and precisely convey their feelings. Last, Chinese has more extensive applications.

The great majority of the interviewees maintained that Yi language was fairly narrow. On the contrary, Chinese had a wider range of application and a stronger use function and higher status. One interviewee said: "Outside our community, we can only use Chinese. For example, we can only use Chinese in stores, schools, hospitals, and work units." In schools, they used mostly Yi with Yi schoolmates to talk about family matters and relatives, and about such everyday things as getting hot water and food. When talking with Yi schoolmates about mathematics problems,

although they used both Yi and Chinese, Yi merely played an introductory role whereas substantive calculations were carried out in Chinese.

Yi's domains of use are mainly the household, traditional activities, and everyday life, while Chinese is the main language in the work domain. Although Chinese still dominates the education and media domains, there has been some development and progress for Yi over the past. Yi still possesses communicative, cognitive, and cultural functions in the rural areas, whereas these functions have all withered to a certain extent in the cities, and the language's most important function has become a symbolic one. It is evident from the code-shifting among bilingual Yi-Chinese speakers that the social function of Yi is tending to become that of a "low variety."

5. Countermeasures to Improve Yi's Social Functions and Maintain Its Vitality

A worldwide tendency is for minority languages to be naturally assimilated by mainstream languages, and for languages in an inferior socio-economic position to be assimilated by those in a superior socio-economic position. In the present macro-environment of information technology, economic globalization, and assimilation of minority languages by mainstream languages, a challenging problem is how to improve, effectively, minority languages social functions and to retain their vitality. To resolve these problems, efforts must be made in the following three areas.

First, there should be support from and improvement of language policies. The American psychologist Abraham Maslow (1943) maintains that humans have five levels of need. The first and foremost level is the need for the basic necessities of existence, that is, food, clothing, and accommodation (the other four levels are the need for security, the need for communication, the need for respect, and the need for self-fulfillment). In order to satisfy the need of first importance, people will tend to learn and use the mainstream language that holds a dominant socio-economic

position, i.e. the language used for advancing to higher schools of education and for employment. Hence policy directly affects the number of people who wish to learn their mother tongue. The policies regarding the first model of Yi language education in Liangshan (using Yi for direct access to higher education) has already brought benefits to some educated in Yi and will encourage more people to learn the language. Also, the recent policy of laying emphasis on bilingual Yi-Chinese speakers for government employment has been highly effective for expanding Yi's social functions. The education and work domains are the main factors in determining whether a language serves as a high or low variety in society, and whether the language's social function is strong or weak. Hence, the education and work language policies that have already proved effective will improve Yi's social functions if they are expanded in scope and strengthened, and will thereby preserve Yi's vitality.

Second, it is important to raise public awareness. Language acquires vitality only if it is used by the public. Language is transmitted by the public, therefore the public's awareness of using and protecting languages should be awakened. They should be aware that languages are living fossils of culture and history, that they are an ethnic people's most important primary culture, that languages not only possess communicative functions but also have cultural functions, cognitive functions, and symbolic functions. The "public" mentioned here is comprised of the formulators of language policy, of experts and scholars, and also of ordinary Yi people, including those that still use Yi and those that have stopped using Yi. Other experiences in China and abroad show that the people often are unaware that protections for a language should be strengthened while that language is still in regular use, and that such awareness comes only when the language is in danger.

Third, different treatment should be given to different use domains, and different policies should be adopted for different use domains. Regarding the family domain, for the great majority of rural Yis, Yi is still the language of the family, although it contains an increasing number of Chinese loans. The popularization of television has also impacted the family domain, but no special measures are needed as yet, and all one needs is linguistic self-respect and awareness of protecting the language, and Yi's intergenerational transmission is not yet interrupted.

As regards urban Yis, Yi is no longer the language of the family. Not only has its intergenerational transmission been interrupted, but also linguistic attrition is evident in the parental generation's mother-tongue proficiency and frequency of use, as they accommodate Chinese spoken by their children and in everyday work. Language acquisition by children is a natural yet complex process in which the linguistic environment is most important. Urban Yi children will not naturally acquire Yi if matters are allowed to take their natural course. Parents should pay attention to this matter. After a child is born, one parent could persist in using the mother tongue to communicate with the child and refuse to do so in any other languages, whereas the other parent could use the mainstream language to communicate with the child, so that the child experiences no linguistic barrier when moving on to kindergarten education. If Yi is not acquired naturally, it may be acquired through language learning, which may take the form of learning at home, or school learning, or short-term training at summer camps. Where the conditions are present, language immersion may be conducted in a Yi language environment.

Yi children in some county towns have the language environment, but do not want to speak Yi because of language status and attitudes, because Yi is associated with rural areas, with poverty, with dirt and decay. By the time they begin to be aware of self-respect and pride in their language

and culture, they are already past the best years for learning languages.

In the education domain, as the first model of education involves a good many aspects, including related higher educations, social needs, associated employment policies and so forth, I will not discuss them here. What is easy to do, and urgently needed at present, is to increase the number of Yi language class hours in the second model and enhance the contents of the written language. The written language fully manifests the ancient Yi's lexical categories, cultural contexts, grammatical categories, and semantic fields. It is connected with traditional cultural and value concepts, such as those in the myths, legends, children's stories and fables in ethnic history, the historical epic *nhe wo te yi*, the *Classic of Education mha mu te yi*," *Yi Proverbs (Erbi)*, talk shows (*Ke nzhe*), Yi music and dances, traditional Yi sports items, and so forth. In addition to formal learning and education, schools should be operated in combination with parental and social capabilities.

In the media domain, the television medium plays a very efficient role in popularizing culture and language. The flawless, appropriate, and formal language use by the announcers at Liangshan's *Yi Hometown Events* TV program is very effective for converting Yi from a low variety to a high variety. Liangshan Prefecture's TV media should offer more Li language programs, contents, and hours. It should increase content that finds favor with the masses, such as cross talks, popular songs, poetry and so forth in Yi. The Yi's ritual life is replete with literary language and poetry. Literary language should not be limited to ritual life; its use should be expanded by means of the media domain.

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