

A Generational Gap: Declining Use of Hokkien in 21st Century Taiwan

Background

By the time the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) arrived in Taiwan, government officials found a diverse linguistic environment, a stark contrast with their envisioned monolingual “New Chinese Society.” This linguistic diversity in Taiwan was decidedly not welcomed by the KMT. From 1949 to the late 1970s, Mandarin was the only language deemed appropriate for the public sphere. Yet at the time, the only Mandarin speakers on the island were limited to the newly arrived Mainlanders fleeing the Communist takeover across the strait, making up less than 13% of the population.¹ Due to this low number, the KMT government devised new policies to dissuade the use of non-Mandarin languages. One of the first strategies was to rename and codify Mandarin as *guoyu* or the national language.² Between 1949 and 1987, the KMT government enacted a range of language policies, including forbidding media broadcasting of non-Mandarin languages (primarily Taiwanese) to mandating a strict Mandarin-only classroom language policy.³ Despite these official policies, Taiwanese citizens continued to use local languages in daily life after 1949.⁴

On July 15, 1987, the government abruptly ended the 38 year-long KMT martial law. Following the end of this period and the steady democratization of Taiwan over the next decade, a new political scene welcomed open discourse about the place of Taiwanese in a new democratic society. The Taiwanese government began developing local language revitalization

¹ Yap Ko-hua, 《外省人的人數、來源與分布》, 國立台灣圖書館.

² Gareth Price, *Language, Society, and the State: From Colonization to Globalization in Taiwan* (Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2019), 133.

³ Mei-ju Chen. 《台灣語言教育政策之回顧與展望》. Kaohsiung City, Taiwan: Fuwen Book Publisher, (2009).

⁴ Price, 143.

and education programs in the early 1990s, following a period of political push for “Taiwanization” and “Localization.”⁵

During this time, classroom punishments for not speaking Mandarin began to disappear. In 1987 (the same year as the end of martial law), the government issued a decree, formally forbidding the use of “physical punishment, issuing fines, or... other such improper means to punish students for speaking dialects on school grounds.” Gareth Price in *Language, Society, and the State: From Colonization to Globalization in Taiwan* notes that, although this edict was by no means comprehensive, it represented a larger shift in attitudes toward local languages.⁶ Over the next decade the government devised new language policies, and in 2001 formally implemented language development curricula. The new legislation requires schools to offer curricula in Taiwanese Hokkien, Hakka, and several aboriginal languages (depending on the location of the school). In addition, primary students are required to take a minimum of one course every year in a local language.

Since the early 2000s, the government has also passed several legislative acts that have given official governmental status to Taiwanese, Hokkien, and aboriginal languages. The 2003 Language Equality Act officially designated Hokkien, Hakka, and aboriginal Languages as Official Government Languages. A series of resolutions passed after 2017 have also allowed government documents to be written in these languages.⁷ Most recently, the Ministry of Culture announced that it will host an inaugural National Language Development Conference at National

⁵ Chang-Yen Tsai, “National Identity, Ethnic Identity, and Party Identity in Taiwan,” *Maryland Series in Contemporary Asian Studies* 1, no. 188 (2007), 25.

⁶ Price, 152.

⁷ 文化部公告, 《國家語言發展法草案》, 中華民國文化部, 2017.

Taiwan Normal University in June to October 2021, providing a forum for local language preservation committees to discuss trends in non-Mandarin language education.⁸

Even with these educational initiatives and governmental policies, the decline of local languages has continued. In every generation fewer people use Taiwanese Hokkien and other non-Mandarin languages than in previous generations.⁹ The decline of local languages in Taiwan is symptomatic of the global trend of shrinking linguistic diversity. According to a 2018 UNESCO report on global language trends, over 43% of languages on earth are losing speakers; this ranges from languages that are vulnerable due to an aging population to languages that are nearly extinct, with only tens of speakers.¹⁰ Fortunately, Hokkien (including the Taiwanese dialect) is not yet in significant danger, still boasting 50 million speakers globally; the language continues to be spoken in its namesake Chinese province of Fujian, as well as diaspora communities in the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, and the United States. However, this relative linguistic safety may only be short-lived. Taiwanese Hokkien speakers tend to be older, often living in more rural areas. In addition, written proficiency in Taiwanese is borderline non-existent, with very few able to read or write the available unstandardized scripts well.¹¹ Because of this, many have voiced concerns about a gradual decrease in proficiency in Taiwanese local languages, hinting at a more vulnerable future for non-Mandarin languages.¹²

⁸ 《邁向國家語言新時代：文化部啟動2021國家語言發展會議 邀請公民參與》，中華民國文化部，(2021)。

⁹ *Note about terminology: Due to the existing multiple names for many local languages in Taiwan, this study will refer to Hakka as “Hakka,” languages spoken by the aboriginal peoples as “Aboriginal Languages,” and the Southern Min language spoken in Taiwan as “Taiwanese” or “Taiwanese Hokkien.” All of these non-Mandarin languages will be referred to together as “local languages.”*

¹⁰ Zach Hollo, “As Taiwan’s Identity Shifts, Can the Taiwanese Language Return to Prominence?” *Ketagalan Media*, 27 August 2019.

¹¹ 《1959.12.17 長老教會對禁止使用羅馬字聖經所提之行政訴訟遭中華民國政權駁回》，台灣會議探險團，17 Dec. 2018.

¹² Hollo.

Globalization and internationalization have undoubtedly led to a decrease in linguistic diversity across the world. Professor of Linguistics at the University of Buffalo Jeff Good concludes that “We seem to be in this massive global stage of endangerment because social structures have changed so rapidly.”¹³ Although Taiwanese is not yet an endangered language, the recent decline in proficiency illustrates a frightening trend. Taiwan reflects this rapid change in social structure, transitioning from a one-party martial law state to a pluralistic democracy in one decade. Even receiving active governmental support and boasting native speakers in the millions, Taiwanese Hokkien is on the decline. The study of Taiwanese Hokkien and non-Mandarin language policy in Taiwan may contribute to both a general understanding of language decline and the efficacy of language revitalization efforts in nations with a similar history of monolingual homogeneity.

Research Question

Why has the use of Taiwanese Hokkien and other local languages continued to decrease, despite governmental language initiatives and policies created to encourage the use of these languages?

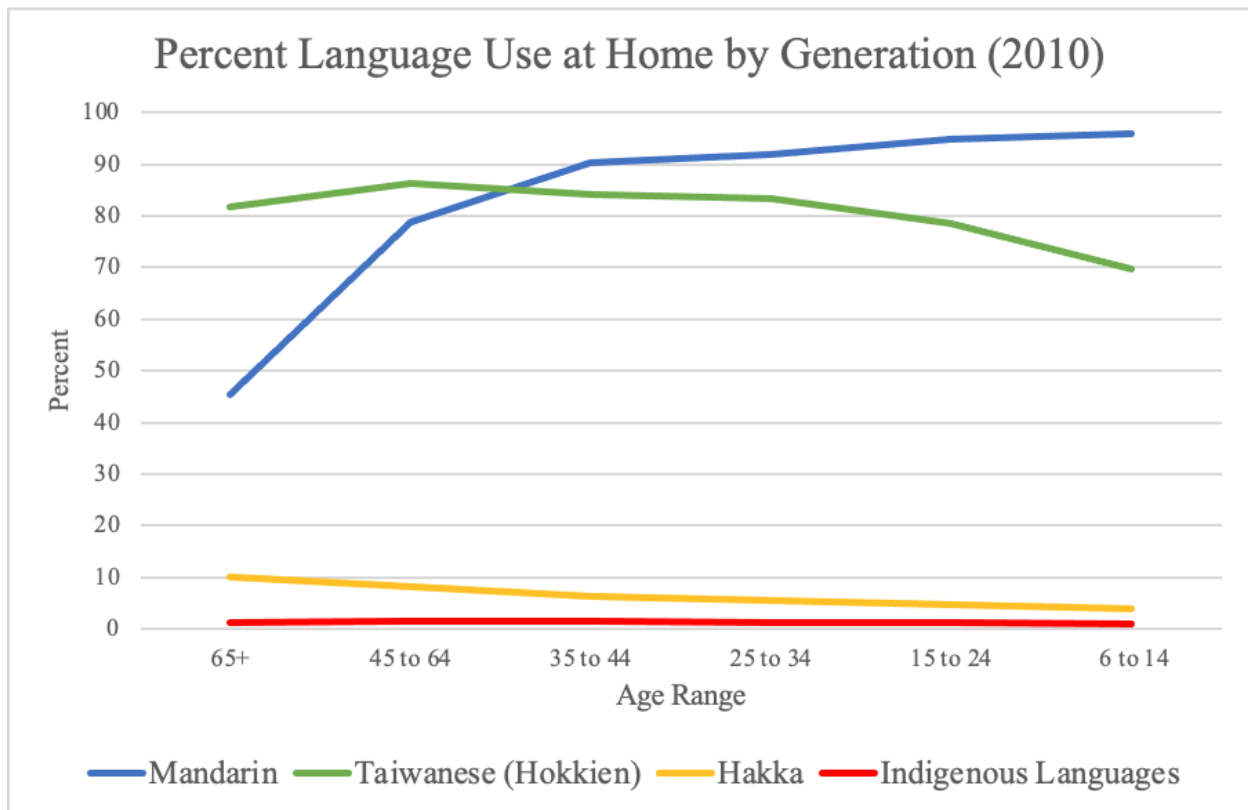
Literature Review

Despite progressive governmental initiatives, data indicate a counterintuitive decline in Taiwanese Hokkien, Hakka, and aboriginal language proficiency on the island. The Taiwan Population and Household Census has gathered data on nationwide self-reported language use; however, this data is a fairly recent addition. The 1956, 1966, 1980, 1990, and 2000 censuses do not include any questions involving language use. Only the 2010 survey asked respondents to

¹³ Hollo.

report their use of non-Mandarin languages.¹⁴ This inclusion of self-reporting language use provides a way to gauge the efficacy of local language development programs post-1987.

The 2010 National Census survey asked respondents to mark which languages they use at home, giving as options *Mandarin*, *Taiwanese Hokkien*, *Hakka*, and *aboriginal languages* (noted as “Indigenous Languages” in Table 15). Census data divided respondents into distinct generation groups (representing 10 year increments) and revealed a significant decline in local language use between generations who received education under the martial law period and generations who attended school during post-1987 language development programs.¹⁵



¹⁴ Ko-hua Yap, 《台灣歷次語言普查回顧,》 *Journal of Taiwanese Languages and Literature* 13, no 2 (2018). 264

¹⁵ 《99 年人口及住宅普查 99 年人口及住宅普查：總報告統計結果提要分析,》 行政院主計總處, (sep. 2013). 27.

Table 15 from 《99 年人口及住宅普查: 總報告統計結果提要分析 [2010 Population Census]》

Translated by researcher

(Total number of respondents: 23,123,866)

The 2010 census data indicates that, for individuals born between 1946 and 1985, there was only a decrease of 2.8% in Hokkien usage at home. However, for individuals born between 1986 and 2004 there was a dramatic drop of usage of over 13%. The census data reveals a relationship between age and decline in usage. The younger the individual, the less likely the person is to use a non-Mandarin language. This is not surprising, though, given that other researchers, such as Guadalupe Valdes, have found a similar pattern of generational language loss in other immigrant communities.¹⁶

Researchers have begun to hypothesize why this generational gap exists in language use within Taiwan, but there is little agreement about possible causes. Some have suggested that the decline in language use is intimately connected to partisan politics, while others have proposed that neighborhood language preference may be a larger contributing factor, particularly as younger generations migrate to larger metropolitan areas in Taiwan. Still others have, ironically, attributed the loss to the way that the educational initiatives have been implemented in Taiwan. One final factor may be the role that social media have played in language maintenance of Taiwanese and other aboriginal languages. Although little research has been conducted on social media and the decline in Taiwanese and local languages, the lack of commonly-used written scripts for the languages has likely contributed to the local languages rarely being used on social media. Therefore, the generational gap of Hokkien use may in part be attributed to the inability

¹⁶ Valdes, Guadalupe. "Heritage languages students: Profiles and possibilities." In J. K. Peyton, D. A. Ranard & S. McGinnis (Eds.), *Heritage languages in America: Preserving a national resource* (pp. 37-77). Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics/Delta Systems, 2001.

of speakers to use the language in online communication. As younger generations are more likely to use social media, the lack of a written script may contribute to a decline in use.

Partisan Politics

Gareth Price contends that, as monolingual homogeneity was intrinsically tied to political ideology during the martial law period, post-1987 language development programs are similarly political in nature. For the DPP and pan-green political camp, the repression of local languages during the martial law period “was indexical of its repression of a distinct Taiwanese political identity.”¹⁷ Therefore, promoting the use of local languages is key to creating a unique Taiwanese identity apart from Mainland China. In addition, professor of Taiwanese language and literature of National Taiwan Normal University Li Bi-chhin points out that much of the existing contemporary Taiwanese Hokkien literature covers issues such as the 228 incident and the KMT White Terror--all incidents that raise the “national identity question.” Li Bi-chhin maintains that “As Taiwanese people lose the ability to access this body of literature, they lose perspectives that effectively advocate a certain political view.”¹⁸

Wan- Hua Lai’s research seems to confirm this. Using semi-structured interviews with four participant families, Lai had participants share their individual perceptions of why they had experienced language loss. Without exception, every participant mentioned “political power” as one of sthe reasons for their language loss.¹⁹ Though Lai’s research for her Master’s thesis was limited to a small number of individuals, the consistency in responses suggest that partisan politics could be a factor.

¹⁷ Price, 152.

¹⁸ Hollo.

¹⁹ Lai, Wan-Hua. “Language Loss Phenomenon in Taiwan: A Narrative Inquiry—Autobiography and Phenomenological Study.” University of Manitoba. 2012.

Others, however, have contested the idea that local language use is politicized, instead citing the decline as proof that Taiwanese political identity is no longer associated with language use.²⁰ According to the Taiwanese National Policy Foundation, in 2020 DPP presidential candidate Tsai Ing-wen received a 40% higher turnout from voters aged 20-39 than her KMT counterpart Han Kuo-yu.²¹ In other words, DPP and pan-green voter turnout skews young. The same generations who use non-Mandarin languages less espouse more pro-independence attitudes, not pro-Chinese attitudes. This suggests that even though Mandarin is their first (and only) language, perhaps younger generations may not tie identity to language to the same degree as older generations. If so, other factors beyond political affiliation may be responsible for the decline in language usage in younger generations.

Location

One factor beyond political affiliation may be location. Taiwanese sociologist Yap Ko-hua argues that local-language loss is tied to neighborhood language preference. As younger generations are migrating to larger more metropolitan areas in Taiwan, Mandarin is becoming the preferred dominant language.²² Yap conducted a study interviewing 58 parents in rural and urban areas in Taiwan. He found that language preference did vary from urban to rural locations.

The 2010 census data also records language use and respondent location. The census revealed greater non-Mandarin language use in particular regions. While this data may confirm that language usage is connected to location, it is difficult to determine, without further research,

²⁰ Hollo.

²¹ Leon Chen, 《國民黨的青年斷層有多嚴重?》, 財團法人國家政策研究基金會, (13 March 2020).

²² Yap, Ko-hua, 《臺灣民眾的家庭語言選擇 [Taiwanese Language Usage Choice at Home],》 *Taiwanese Journal of Sociology* 62 (2017). 59-111.

whether these data are due to a decrease in usage or rather a natural language preference in each region (i.e. Mandarin in Taipei, Hakka in Hsinchu).²³

Educational Quality

Although the Taiwanese government has implemented language development education since the early 2000s, there are significant gaps in non-Mandarin Language instruction.

Researchers have noted that the current language development programs have had little change in two decades, as classes are few in number and generally not rigorous. The new educational requirements only provide one hour of instruction per week in the local language, compared to the rigorous, multiple hours per week of English language education. Moreover, local language classes are generally limited to primary school levels, with secondary students having no local language class requirements. Educator Elizabeth Hubbs notes this irony, stating that “it becomes evident that internationalization is preferred over Taiwanization [by the Ministry of Education].”²⁴

Although there are several orthographic systems for Hokkien including romanized Peh-oe-ji and Hoklo Characters, an estimated 90% of Taiwanese Hokkien speakers are functionally illiterate in the written language.²⁵ As Joseph Lewis Reid, a professor in East Asian Studies, points out, “No matter how much you encourage the usage of these languages, if you only teach them at a primarily spoken level and people still struggle to express themselves in more formal situations through either writing or speech, then these languages will still not garner the respect of more standardized, better taught languages like Guoyu (Mandarin).”²⁶ In other words, if

²³ 《99年人口》, 26.

²⁴ Elizabeth Hubbs, “Taiwan Language-in-Education Policy: Social, Cultural, and Practical Implications,” *Arizona Working Papers in SLA & Teaching*, 20 (2013): 85.

²⁵ 王俊忠 [Wang Jun-Zhong]. 《巫義淵台語教學 成大超人氣 [Woo Yi-yuan’s Taiwanese Instruction is Gaining Traction at National Cheng Kung University].》 Liberty Times Net. 2010.

²⁶ Reid, Joseph Lewis. “The Problem with Mandarin in Taiwan.” *New Bloom* (Aug. 2016)

National Language Development instruction remains superficial and relegated only to early primary education, these measures may be unable to reverse the decline in local languages.

Social Media

Although no direct research has been conducted on the relationship between social media and the decline in non-Mandarin languages, the lack of a common written system for Hokkien and other non-Mandarin languages may contribute to a decline in a different way. Due to a generational difference in internet usage, the lack of a commonly used orthography may discourage younger generations in using local languages. Edmond Kachale states that any language that lacks a significant presence on the internet is “heading for extinction.”²⁷ There is an overall dearth of Hokkien, Hakka, and aboriginal Language use on social media.

Data and Methods

This study will begin by analyzing data from the 2010 census to determine the statistical significance of the relationship between age and local-language decline. This study will then investigate potential contributing variables as identified in an extensive review of the existing literature: partisan politics, location, educational quality, and social media. Although existing research offers insight into these variables, most of the quantitative research has been limited to small sample sizes. Using inferential statistics, this study will analyze a much larger data set from the Asian Barometer (wave 4) to verify there *are* correlations, and if there are, to what extent the variables identified in the literature influence the decline in language use of younger generations.²⁸ In particular, this study will explore the relationships between demographic data

²⁷ Shwab, Katharine, “The Internet Isn’t Available in Most Languages,” The Atlantic. 2015.

²⁸ *The Asian Barometer is a multinational survey cohosted by National Taiwan University and Academia Sinica, gauging views on governance and politics across 17 nations in Asia since 2002; I became familiar with this survey during my internship at the NTU headquarters in 2020. “A model survey has a sample size of 1200 respondents.”*

from Taiwan regarding age, educational level, geographical location the respondent lives in, and language spoken in the home, and questions #32, 33 (Did you vote in the elections? Which party?), #s 49, 50, 52 (How often do you use the internet? Do you use any of the following social media? How often do you use the internet or social media to express your opinion?). Other survey questions may be mined as well, based on a more in-depth review of the literature. Data from these questions, as well as demographic data, may provide more definitive insight into why the younger generation does not use Taiwanese Hokkien or other aboriginal languages.

Proposed Outline of Chapters

The first chapter of this study will begin by establishing the decline in usage of local languages post-1987, introducing data from the 2010 census and language surveys. Equally importantly, this introductory chapter will provide context for why the decline is a concern for both the Taiwanese government and organizations like UNESCO. Chapter Two will then provide a historical background of the Hokkien language and language policies in Taiwan both pre- and post-1987, focusing particularly on educational initiatives and governmental policies created to slow the decline of Taiwanese and other local languages. Chapter Three will offer a comprehensive review of the literature that discusses possible variables that may be responsible for the decrease in the use of Taiwanese Hokkien and other local languages despite governmental language initiatives and policies created to encourage the use of these languages. Using the variables identified in Chapter Three, Chapter Four will use primary research collected by the Asian Barometer survey to determine if significant correlations exist, and if they do, to what extent. This chapter will conclude by offering recommendations for future research in this area

and discussing the implications these findings have for language decline and the efficacy of language revitalization efforts in nations with a similar history of monolingual homogeneity.

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