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Diglossic, bilingual life and diglossic, bilingual policies

Preface to *The Language Situation in China: 2014*

Language planning is in service of linguistic life. How language planning is formulated and whether language planning has been appropriately formulated depends on whether it is in accord with the practical circumstances of linguistic life, and whether it can guide the healthy development of linguistic life. Language planning must therefore be scientifically formulated, requiring an understanding of linguistic life, and comprehension of the developmental trends of linguistic life. Linguistic life is not only the object of study in language planning, but also the object of and fundamental basis for sociolinguistic governance.

1 Diglossic, bilingual life

Although linguistic life in China at present features certain discordant phenomena, on the whole, it is healthy and brimming with vitality: one of its most important characteristics is that it is rapidly developing from monoglossic, monolingual life toward diglossic, bilingual life.

1.1 Diglossic life

The term “diglossia” refers to the common form of a given language and its dialect. Diglossic life refers to circumstances where a common language and dialect, or two/multiple dialects are used in linguistic life: this has now become the fundamental pattern of linguistic life in our country.

In linguistic life at the national level, Mandarin Chinese (Putonghua) is predominant, but dialects also play a role on certain occasions and in particular spheres. For instance, at the national “Two Sessions,” some use dialects to discuss national affairs; some high-ranking public servants use dialects to perform their duties of governance; on national-level radio and television, one can also frequently hear the sound of dialects. In linguistic life at the provincial level, Putonghua and dialects are essentially in a situation of “diglossic co-use”;

Putonghua predominates in written language, while in oral language, dialects and Putonghua take equal shares. In linguistic life at the county level, dialects may predominate, but the occasions on which Putonghua is used are multiplying, the number of people able to speak and understand Putonghua is increasing, and the role of Putonghua is expanding.

With respect to the social sphere, Putonghua predominates in the fields of radio and television, but there are also some dialect stations, dialect channels, and dialect programs; the application of dialects in radio and television is more common in the south than in the north, more common locally than centrally, and more common in non-satellite programs than in satellite programs. In the educational sphere, Putonghua serves as the fundamental medium of instruction, but some instructors use dialects to teach classes: the use of dialects is more common at non-normal schools than at normal schools, more common among instructors in science and engineering than among instructors in the humanities, more common among older instructors than among young instructors, and more common at a higher stage of education than at a lower stage of education; in addition, dialect education or dialect classes have also been incorporated into the school curriculum at some schools. The public service sector also features diglossic co-use: Putonghua is used comparatively more often in public service, while dialects account for a certain proportion of usage as a working language within enterprises.

Diglossic life has existed since ancient times: in border areas and cities of immigrants, dialects have seen diglossic co-use since time immemorial. However, at that time, diglossic life was “natural diglossic life,” characterized by the natural formation of diglossic life: the role of the common language in diglossia was not pronounced, and its range of distribution was comparatively small. In contrast, the diglossic life of today is “rational diglossic life,” formed through sociolinguistic planning for linguistic unification, and formed through school education; in diglossia, Putonghua occupies a dominant position, and diglossic life extends nation-wide.

1.2 Bilingual life

The root “-lingual” refers to different languages. Here, “bilingualism” also includes “multilingualism,” encompassing multiple categories such as ethnic languages and the national common language; ethnic languages and Han dialects; ethnic languages and other ethnic languages; one’s native language and foreign languages, and so on. Our country’s bilingual life has also existed since ancient times, and the general situation at present is:

In ethnic minority regions, bilingual life has gradually become mainstream. Of course, there is some variation in the application of bilingualism in different regions and among different ethnic groups: in some regions and within some ethnic groups, the native language is predominant, while others might use the national common language comparatively more often.

On a nation-wide scale, bilingual life is only present in certain spheres and on certain occasions. Within the state's important political life, minority languages such as Mongolian, Tibetan, Uyghur, Kazakh, Korean, Zhuang and Yi are working languages at conferences. Toponym signage, public instructional signs, and other urban instructional systems have essentially adopted bilingualism or multilingualism. Most government, enterprise and institution webpages are bilingual: at the very least, there will be an English webpage. With respect to international affairs, bilingualism is in the majority. International conferences convened in China essentially all adopt bilingualism. In the sphere of higher education, there is also advocacy for bilingual courses. Bilingualism is also quite often adopted in communications, transportation and other public service sectors. There are applications of bilingualism even in personal life: for instance, business cards are printed in Chinese on the front side, and the majority are printed in English on the reverse side.

Overall, bilingual life in our country is still regional and sector-based in nature, and has not reached the degree of popularity seen in diglossic life; based on its trends of development, it is not possible for it to reach this degree of popularity.

2 Multicultural life

Diglossic, bilingual life is an expression of multicultural life in the linguistic sphere. It can be said without hesitation that we are in an era of multicultural life. The Chinese people are a big family composed of 56 ethnic groups, and the cultures of each ethnic groups blend together to form a unique, pluralistic culture. Many ethnic groups have historical cultures and dialect cultures: for instance, Han culture features variations between north, south, east and west, and variations between traditional culture and modern culture; the communications between ancient, modern and regional cultures give bloom to myriad cultural blossoms. Foreign cultures have continuously been imported into China: for instance, ancient Indian culture and modern Euro-American culture, Russian culture, Japanese culture, Korean culture and so on have all influenced our cultural life to varying degrees, and exchanges between Chinese and

foreign cultures have given rise to a cultural garden of many flowers. In particular, the influence of European and American culture and Japanese and Korean culture has caused China to develop from a traditional multicultural society into a modern multicultural society.

One important reason for the formation of multicultural life is the multitude of diglossic, bilingual people. As they effect the convergence of different cultures, they promote cultural exchanges and intermingling. As the vast number of diglossic, bilingual people bring together different cultures, this allows even monoglossic, monolingual people to understand and partake of multiculturalism. Multiple cultures coexisted from the beginning in traditional China, but Confucian culture held a commanding position: in cultural contact, the other culture would often be assimilated; furthermore, due to the slow pace of social development, the frequency and dynamism of intercultural contact were relatively low, and ordinary people often did not experience the impact of different cultures. Not so today: the rapid development of transportation, communications and the Internet has accelerated the pace of exchanges between different cultures, and widened the scope of exchanges. Modern communications, the media and the Internet have transformed the mildly hyperbolic statement that “A scholar knows the affairs of the entire world without stepping out the door” into a vital reality of life.

It is particularly worth noting the high population flow. The population flow in China is unprecedented, as the floating population continuously moves from rural to urban areas, from small cities to big cities, and from the west to the east. From a global perspective, this population flow in China is merely a microcosm of the global population flow: the population of the entire world is also rapidly moving, from one country to another country, from small countries to large countries, and from developing countries to developed countries. Everywhere in the world, population flow is like a “Russian nesting doll”: when one doll is opened, a similar doll is found within; and when that doll is opened, another similar doll is found within. The large scale and high frequency of population flow drives the flow of culture, bringing different cultural experiences to migrants and zones of migration: multicultural life has gradually become the norm in life.

Vertical cultural inheritance and horizontal cultural dissemination are the two avenues of cultural development, as well as the two means of cultural expansion. In the past, vertical inheritance of culture predominated, while today, horizontal dissemination has become an important or even the primary means. The dynamism of horizontal dissemination has grown, giving rise to an increasingly profound cultural generation gap, and sharply curtailing the period of time for the formation of a generation gap: in the past, it took several

generations to form a cultural generation gap, while today, a generation gap can form in a single generation, or even in 20 or 10 years. Grandparents, parents and grandchildren may live as three generations under the same roof, and the post-60s, post-70s, post-80s and post-90s may all live under the same sky, but their world views, value systems, and even their hobbies in life may be vastly different, or even substantively divergent. In connection with this, vertical cultural inheritance has clearly been constructed, thus often giving rise to cultural anxiety in society. This cultural anxiety impels society to adopt various measures for “cultural conservation”: first, endeavoring to publicize and promote traditional culture, and striving to guard against the “infiltration” of external culture, in an attempt to enable the smooth inheritance of our culture by later generations; and second, utilizing the mechanisms and opportunities of horizontal cultural dissemination to allow one’s own culture to “Go Global,” and exercise more influence over other ethnic groups. At the same time, two issues have incited reflection: first, how to absorb the outstanding cultural achievements of humanity to develop our own culture, and allow our own culture to become stronger and more prosperous; and second, how to enable society to better adapt to multicultural life. Of course, this kind of cultural anxiety may at times foment “populism,” “fundamentalism,” and other sentiments, and encourage the spread of “linguistic purism”: foreign loanwords and foreign language studies are often the targets of social criticism and reform.

Regardless of how people think and act, multicultural life is an inescapable, immutable reality. Multicultural life requires that people have a capacity for cross-cultural life. A capacity for cross-cultural life should primarily comprise the following aspects: first, one should be bilingual or trilingual, with the capacity for cross-cultural communication; second, one should construct a multicultural knowledge framework, to understand the history and current conditions of different cultures; and third, one should establish a correct cultural outlook, with the ability to understand and preserve one’s own culture, while also mastering inclusiveness and respect for different cultures.

3 Diglossic, bilingual policies

Diglossic, bilingual life is not only an expression of multicultural life, but also a promoting factor for multicultural life. Many studies have shown that diglossia and bilingualism have many advantages with respect to personal development, such as: being able to have a more capacious cultural breadth of mind, to objectively approach different cultures and subcultures; being able to have

a comparatively strong capacity for cross-cultural communication, expanding one's radius of activities and radius of living, and easily finding a fairly suitable job (employment opportunities for bilingual people are markedly more numerous than for monolingual people); and benefiting the development of different regions of the brain, enriching cerebral intelligence, and so on. Diglossic, bilingual people are beneficial to national progress: they can import different cultures and increase the vitality of development of our own culture; they can disseminate culture outward and increase the influence of our culture; they can improve the nation's language proficiency to help achieve national missions; and they can improve the nation's cultural soft power, and even its hard power in relation to the military, the economy and so on.

Training diglossic, bilingual people and building diglossic, bilingual life requires policy support. Education in our country is currently training a cohort of diglossic, bilingual people: the popularization of Putonghua has created large numbers of diglossic people; and the practice of a national common language, mutual language learning between ethnic groups, foreign language education, et cetera, has created a large number of bilingual or trilingual people. However, the state has not yet introduced corresponding requirements for citizens' language proficiency, and with respect to the phenomena of diglossia and bilingualism, research from a policy perspective and awareness on a policy level are still lacking. On the foundation of a variety of educational practices, to satisfy the requirements of multicultural life, appropriate diglossic, bilingual policies should be formulated, and relevant effective measures should be adopted.

Appropriate diglossic, bilingual policies are first and foremost able to guide diglossic, bilingual life, standardize certain levels and certain spheres of diglossic, bilingual life, and reduce conflict between Putonghua and Han dialects, between the national common language and ethnic languages, and between the Chinese language and foreign languages, facilitating the construction of harmonious linguistic life. Second, they facilitate the training of advantaged diglossic and bilingual people. For advantaged diglossic people, the two dialects they have mastered include the national common language; and for advantaged bilingual people, the two languages they have mastered include a language that is comparatively prevalent in the region or in the world. Advantaged diglossic and bilingual people are an important element in the development of national human resources. Third, they are able to ensure the training of diglossic, bilingual people particularly required by the state. The languages particularly required by the state refer to languages or dialects for which the state has a special need with respect to foreign exchanges, national security, international peacekeeping, cultural inheritance, academic research, social services, economic development, and other areas. Training the linguists

particularly required by the state represents a guarantee that the state will have the language proficiency to handle domestic and foreign affairs.

At present, language planning exhibits a comparatively strong mentality of “monoglossia and monolingualism.” Within the reality of multiculturalism and diglossic, bilingual life, a “mentality of diglossia and bilingualism” ought to be established, recognizing that diglossia and bilingualism are an advanced form of linguistic life, fine qualities in future citizens, and a necessary path for a strong nation and a wise people. On this foundation of this mentality toward language, by carefully studying diglossic, bilingual life, and studying diglossic, bilingual people, language planning and relevant policies will be able to facilitate the training and development of diglossic, bilingual people, and facilitate the construction of diglossic, bilingual life. The state and its citizens will thus be able to adapt to an era in which multiculturalism has already become the norm.