

Research of Social Media and Minority Languages in Guizhou

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates minority languages and social media. The focus is on examining people's attitudes towards ethnic minority languages, ethnic language users and the future of languages. It also evaluates people's views with regards to whether ethnic minority languages should be used on social media. Factors that motivate people to use ethnic minority languages on social media are also investigated. 454 successfully completed questionnaires were used as data. The findings uncovered that the majority of Guizhou people use ethnic minority languages in order to maintain the relationship with family members and friends. In addition, it also showed that people in Guizhou, regardless of their identity, have positive attitudes towards the aforementioned three aspects on ethnic languages. Finally, it was discovered in the study that most people think ethnic minority languages should be used on social media as this functions to preserve ethnic minority culture and languages.

Keywords : *Ethnic minority language, Social media, Guizhou*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Research Background

Multilingualism is a common phenomenon in most countries. As a country comprising fifty-five minority ethnic groups, China is also featured by a vast diversity of languages. According to Zhou, more than eighty languages are used across the country. [1, p. 25] Of all the languages, Mandarin is considered the only super major language that is used nationwide. However, other languages, namely the other major languages, the ethnic minority languages and the extreme-ethnic minority languages, are either used regionwide or among members of the same ethnic groups [1]. The complex language situation has remained a study interest for many researchers over the years. This linguistic research in China has been made even more intriguing by the development of internet. The online sites that promote interaction, so-called social media, are also fast becoming a key area of linguistic research. Chinese social media appears to share multilingual characteristics with the physical world, that is, while mandarin is used as the dominant language, other languages are also the choices of ethnic minorities. This is noticeable on social media platforms including Wechat, Weibo and Douyin. When using such platforms, people can 'have stronger

connections and daily conversation with people all over the globe'. [2] Aside from simply interaction among people, some symbolized contents involving languages or pertaining to ethnic minority culture, such as folk songs, traditional festivals and so on, are also presented on Chinese social media platforms. However, what drive people to use minority languages on social media? And what are their views and attitudes towards minority languages on social media?

The present study narrows its focus to the southwest of China. It first takes a closer look at the purposes of people using minority languages, meanwhile gaining insights into people's attitudes towards minority languages by means of collecting questionnaires in the area. Then it investigates the current situation with regards to minority languages on social media and considers whether the social media serves to help ethnic languages.

1.2. Research Purpose

The aim of the present study is first to investigate factors that motivate people in Guizhou to use minority languages, and then the attitudes of Guizhou people towards ethnic minority languages, ethnic language users, the future of ethnic minority languages as well as the necessity of using minority languages on social media.

1.3. Research Questions

1. What are factors motivating people in Guizhou to use minority languages on social media platforms?
2. What are the Guizhou people's attitudes towards ethnic minority languages on social media?
3. What are the Guizhou people's attitudes towards ethnic minority language users on social media?
4. What are the Guizhou people's attitudes towards the future of ethnic minority languages?
5. What are the Guizhou people's views about the necessity of using minority languages on social media?

1.4. Research Methods

A questionnaire was adopted as the main data collection method in the present study. A purposively selected sample of 510 people were requested to respond to a questionnaire. The sample consisted of 261 males and 249 females. Participants from ethnic groups accounted for approximately 44.7%, or 228 people. Among the 510 questionnaires collected, 454 were valid and 56 are invalid. Questionnaires were invalid either due to respondents' non-Guizhou habitual residency or their inappropriate responses.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

As the number of social media users is growing, the diversity of languages used on the platform, particularly number of ethnic minority languages, these strongly representing peoples' identities, is also on the increase. With regards to the relationship between social media and ethnic languages, linguists seem to have different perspectives. Renowned sociolinguist Joshua Fishman held negative views on media. [2] Nevertheless, the positive functions that social media brought for minority languages has been recognized by some linguists. Crystal [3] states that electronic technology could facilitate language maintenance. Aside the benefits for language maintenance, UNESCO acknowledges media and internet as appropriate tools and utilize them to promote language diversity as well as multilingualism. [4] Cunliffe et al. as cited by Jones [5] point out that 'the possibility of using the internet and electronic technology as a tool to strength linguistic communities and received weakened languages by producing easily accessible content in minority languages and providing networks of support for fluent speakers and learners alike'. Indeed, as internet access and availability has continued to increase globally, these positive effects of social media on language maintenance, language education and language revitalisation have constantly been revealed to researchers. Jones [5] conducted an interview and survey-based case study to investigate the use of social media for Welsh language learning with an emphasis on informal learning. The

findings show that learners use social media widely, but the way they use social media can be distinct according to their levels. With slight differences, Lai [6] also found social media is of advantage for language leaning. 141 surveys from secondary school ethnic minority students were analysed, and the results showed that 'social media practices in the informal context may influence students' level of motivation for learning in the formal contexts.' In the respect of language revitalization, Belmar and Glass [2] state that the social media could be of benefits. As they suggest in their article, the rise of virtual communities addressed the problem aroused by decreasing opportunities to practice the language in a geographically bound area. The virtual communities can be seen as 'breathing spaces' for practicing minority language without the threat of the majority languages. Furthermore, Chechen, a minority language in Jordan, is preserved with its culture by Chechen people. They use the indigenous language on social media with friends and family members. [7]

3. THE LANGUAGE SITUATION IN GUIZHOU PROVINCE

Guizhou, a province located in the southwest of China, is well-known for its vast diversity of ethnic minority groups, forty-nine in all, seventeen of which have resided in the province for generations. The province has three autonomous prefectures, two of which are Bouyi and Miao, and one Dong-and-Miao. According to Guizhou Provincial Bureau of Statistics, the total population of Guizhou Province was estimated at 31,562,148 people based on the seventh population census. [8] About two-fifths of the province's population are from ethnic minority groups. Among the most significant are the Miao, the Bouyi, the Yi, the Tujia, the Dong, the Gelao and the Shui. All of the ethnic minority groups tend to intermingle with Han people. However, an exception is at low Xiang or Village level, where exclusive ethnic grouping can be found. [9]

The geographical features in Guizhou have resulted in a unique language landscape. Not only are there a number of ethnic minority languages, but also noticeable linguistic differences between many of these. This has resulted in them only being usable in specific regions in some cases. The social transformation of the state brought with it both a series of challenges and opportunities for ethnic languages in China. [1, p. 284-304] In Guizhou, they are slowly being replaced by majority languages. A decrease of ethnic languages vitality has been observed as more minority people are gradually losing their ability to speak indigenous languages. For example, in ethnic communities that live adjacent to Guiyang, the capital city of Guizhou, only the elderly are fluent ethnic language speakers now. What happens along with the varying population of speakers is usually acculturation of ethnic areas. Traditional

heritages are influenced by dominant culture. Custom and costumes of some ethnic groups are also changing under the influence, and it is even the case that some of their conventional festivals are no longer celebrated. Fortunately, the government and linguists in China are making efforts to reverse the declining situation of ethnic language and save the ethnic cultures in Guizhou.

4. STUDY ON THE LANGUAGE STATUS IN GUIZHOU PROVINCE

4.1. Questionnaire Design

An online questionnaire was adopted. It was formulated on Sojump and designed specifically to achieve the aim of the study. It has been written in Chinese and a cover letter that introduces the goals of the research has alongside it. Before the final operationalization, a pilot survey was conducted in order to increase the reliability, viability and practicability. With regard to the distribution, a QR code and a URL link were generated via Sojump and were shared on social media platforms, such as Wechat and QQ. The questionnaire entails 32 questions, but not all of the questions are required to be answered. Participants were only directed into questions that relate to them most. For instance, questions vary according to an individual’s ethnic language ability and language preferences on social media.

4.2. Research Results and Discussion

4.2.1 Minority Language Proficiency

Table 1. Minority Language Proficiency of People in Guizhou.

Language Proficiency	Subtotal	Percentages
Speaking with high fluency and accuracy	43	29.66%
Fluent while making occasional errors in pronunciation	27	18.62%
Fluent but with non-standard accent	15	10.34%
Be able to engage in simple discussion	21	14.48%
Be able to understand but produce only basic words	24	16.55%
Can understand but unable to produce independently	15	10.34%
Unable to understand and produce	0	0
Total	145	

According to the data, 145 out of 454 participants are able to speak ethnic minority languages. Table 1

illustrates the different ethnic minority language abilities of the 145 respondents. It is revealed that more than half of the speakers have high proficiency levels. Of the participants, 29.66% of them are capable of speaking ethnic minority languages with a high level of fluency and accuracy. 18.64% of them recognize themselves as fluent speakers while making occasional errors in pronunciation. 10.34% of the subjects reach fluency in speaking but with non-standard accent. The high proficiency levels might be due to speakers' ethnic background and language preference. When speakers have a preference for a minority language, they regard the language as a significant means of communication in public or family domains. Language fluency, as a result, is more likely to be achieved. The rest are speakers with low proficiency level. 16.55% are able to understand and produce only basic words. 14.48% of the individuals can understand and are able to take part in simple discussions. In addition, with the same percentage, 10.34% of the respondents are able to understand but unable to produce minority language independently. In some sense, the low proficiency of speakers with ethnic identity could indicate that they use majority languages more often than minority languages, and as a consequence, their abilities of speaking minority languages are gradually losing. The participants also contain some Han people who are using minority language with low proficiency. This is likely an effect of intermarriage, which exposes people to circumstances that a minority language is essentially a means of communication among family members.

Table 2. Percentages for Factors Motivate Minority Individuals to Use Minority Languages on Social Media.

Factors	Subtotal	Percentages
Researching information	26	27.66%
Acquiring knowledge	25	26.60%
Fulfill academic needs	20	21.28%
Task demands in work	19	20.21%
Making friends	31	32.98%
Communicating with friends and family members	41	43.62%
Sharing private life on social media	32	34.04%
Staying up to date with friends	29	30.85%
getting access to the latest news	14	14.89%
Entertainment or fighting boredom	13	13.83%
Others	10	10.64%
Total	94	

Approximately one-fifth of the respondents use minority languages on social media. As it can be seen from the table 2 above, the top four factors that motivate participants to use ethnic minority languages on social media are as follows:

- (1) Communicating with their friends and family members.
- (2) Sharing private life on the internet.
- (3) Making new friends.
- (4) Staying up to date on friends' lives.

Ethnic languages in Guizhou are typically rooted and used in specific areas. For ethnic people who are not situated in the same region with their communities, social

media, as a type of technology, allows for synchronous communication, in which ethnic people can better socialize in ethnic minority languages without time and distance restrictions. The interactions they are involved in could lead to higher degree and frequency of minority language use, which in turn, helps maintain ethnic languages. [10]

In addition to the four factors listed above, social media offers more opportunities for participants to become actively involved in minority language-related contents. From the next four motivating factors revealed by respondents, (5) ‘Researching information’, (6) ‘Acquiring knowledge’, (7) ‘For academic needs’, (8) ‘For work tasks’, it is obvious that the demands of job and

Table 3. People's Attitudes towards Ethnic Minority Languages. (Non-minority Language Users on Social Media)

Options	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Means
Beautiful sounding	109(54.77%)	76(38.19%)	8(4.02%)	6(3.02%)	1.55
Sounds appealing	89(44.72%)	89(44.72%)	16(8.04%)	5(2.51%)	1.68
Have positive impacts on society	88(44.22%)	84(42.21%)	20(10.05%)	7(3.52%)	1.73
Useful (eg. For employment, communication)	87(43.72%)	83(41.71%)	19(9.55%)	10(5.03%)	1.76
Subtotal	481(48.34%)	402(40.4%)	75(7.54%)	37(3.72%)	1.67

Table 4. People's Attitudes towards Ethnic Minority Languages. (Minority Language Users on Social Media)

Options	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Means
Beautiful sounding	24(25.53%)	48(51.06%)	17(18.09%)	5(5.32%)	2.03
Sounds appealing	54(57.45%)	21(22.34%)	13(13.83%)	6(6.38%)	1.69
Have positive impact on society	21(22.34%)	54(57.45%)	11(11.7%)	8(8.51%)	2.06
Useful (eg. For employment, communication)	25(26.6%)	47(50%)	10(10.64%)	12(12.77%)	2.1
Subtotal	124(32.98%)	170(45.21%)	51(13.56%)	31(8.24%)	1.97

study drive respondents to become active consumers of minority language contents on social media. In this sense, social media functions to create environments for sharing and creating language material and contents, which is consistent with what Galla [10] found out ‘technology allows languages to be experienced multimodally in broad domains, while permitting immediate access to materials in the comfort of homes, schools, offices and so

forth. Ethnic languages are no longer be confined to specific regions with the presence of social media, but instead, they are accessible around the globe and the sphere of ethnic language related communication, hence, is expanded.’ [10, p. 9]

Furthermore, respondents are not only consumers of language contents in work and study, but also consumers

in their spare time. According to the data disclosed on the table (9) ‘Getting access to the latest news’ (10)

‘Entertainment or fighting boredom’. With the help of social media, minority or ethnic language-related contents can be presented in various forms, such as short

videos on Tiktok and the hottest news on Toutiao. When the content is readily approachable in a relaxed way, people use the ethnic languages with an enjoyment. In this way, ethnic languages could be practiced and sustained.

Table 5. People's Attitudes towards the Minority Language Users on Social Media.

Options	1	2	3	4	5	6	Means
People who speak minority languages have good educational attainments	16(5.46%)	15(5.12%)	44(15.02%)	59(20.14%)	100(34.13%)	59(20.14%)	4.33
Someone who speaks a minority language gets a good job.	23(7.85%)	11(3.75%)	34(11.6%)	70(23.89%)	99(33.79%)	56(19.11%)	4.29
Someone who speaks a minority language earns a decent income	14(4.78%)	23(7.85%)	47(16.04%)	67(22.87%)	50(17.06%)	92(31.4%)	4.34
Subtotal	53(6.03%)	49(5.57%)	125(14.22%)	196(22.3%)	249(28.33%)	207(23.55%)	4.32

4.2.2. Language Attitude on Social Media

Table 3 and Table 4 demonstrate the Guizhou people's attitudes towards ethnic minority languages in the context of social media. Data from Table 4 represents the attitude of ethnic minority language users while Table 3 shows the attitude of participants who are not minority language users but have been exposed to minority languages before.

Four agree/disagree questions for possible descriptions of ethnic minority languages are included in order to gain insights of how people in Guizhou perceive these languages on social media: these descriptions are:

- (1) Beautiful sounding
- (2) Sounds appealing
- (3) Having positive impacts on society
- (4) Useful (eg. For employment, communication)

Based on the data from table 4, of the 94 respondents who are ethnic minority languages users on social media, nearly half of them express ‘agree’ in terms of (1) ‘Beautiful sounding’ and (4) ‘Useful’ (eg. For employment). More than half of them express ‘agree’ when it comes to (3) ‘Have positive impacts on society’. However, ‘strongly agree’ is revealed by 57.45% of the respondents for (2) ‘Sounds are appealing’. The overall attitude here expressed by minority language speakers is positive. It is probable that the positive responses of participants are given on the basis of their special affection towards the languages. To be specific, a special feeling might be expressed because minority languages are their mother tongues. It is the language of their

identities. More importantly, they feel more comfortable when using minority languages.

By analysing results from Table 3, of the 199 participants who don't use ethnic minority languages on social media but have experiences encountering minority languages, more than half of them revealed that they ‘strongly agree’ the (1) ‘Beautiful sounding’ of ethnic minority languages and (2) ‘Sounds appealing’. Similarly, for the final two statements, the suggestion of usefulness and of positive impact on society, are strongly agreed by most participants (with the highest percentage). It is noticeable that strong positive attitudes are expressed by non-minority language speakers. However, unlike minority language speakers, these attitudes may be formulated from an external aspect by non-minority users, that is, on the basis of their impression towards the languages they have encountered on social media. What can be inferred is that the good impression might relate to what social media can offer. With the help of social media, appealing minority language contents reach a wide range of audiences. As a consequence, people receiving the contents are left a good impression of minority languages.

All participants with different language backgrounds show their positive attitudes towards ethnic minority languages. However, slight differences could be discovered by comparing two tables. Non-minority language users express their attitudes towards the language in the higher end, which indicates they appear to possess a more positive attitude than minority language users. Even so, both could be attributed to the function technology or social media provide. On one hand, it allows contents to be presented in various forms

to stimulate people's interest in minority languages, and also, make these interesting contents easy to access. On the other hand, it helps minority language speakers form positive attitudes towards a language from an emotional aspect. Users are able to interact with people in the same community frequently, which gives them positive feelings towards the language.

The 6-point Likert scale shown above on Table 5 illustrates participants' attitudes towards Minority language users on social media. Respondents could indicate their non-agreement (1-2), neutral agreement (3-4), or agreement (5-6) with the statement by putting a mark on the scale which most represents what they feel.

Overall, respondents tend to possess relatively good impressions of ethnic language speakers on social media. They agree that minority language speakers have good educational attainments, good jobs and decent incomes. Although according to the mean score of 4.32, these attitudes are not strong, it could still clearly indicate that participants hold positive predispositions towards the language speakers with respect to their education, occupation and economic level.

The above three statements are related to people's background educationally, occupationally and economically. Together, they have an effect on linguistic choices on social media. The economic factor with its derived purpose of obtaining job, is always the stimulus which could lead to language shift in today's globalized multilingual society [11], not only in real life, but also on social media. Minority languages, therefore, could become involved in the trend and to be replaced by other dominant languages. However, with the help of social media, people are provided easier opportunities to present themselves more from different aspects as well as share more interesting and distinct contents related to them. Hence, minority language speakers are no longer recognized with stereotype but are objectively recognized through direct encountering on social media.

The mean score of 4.32 on the scale is a result between 'neutral agreement' and 'agreement', which is not a high but still a positive recognition of minority language speakers in the context of social media. The positive recognition of language speakers in the aforementioned three aspects could, in some sense, work to support and protect minority language in a community undergoing the process of shifting into other languages.

4.2.3. Attitudes Towards the State and Future Trends of Ethnic Minority Languages

Table 6. People's Attitudes towards the Future of Ethnic Minority Languages on social media.

Options	Subtotal	Percentages
Having a great development prospect	136	29.96%

Will only be used in certain domains	213	46.92%
Will not be used in the future	39	8.59%
Unsure about it	66	14.54%
Total	454	

Table 6 indicates people's attitudes towards how ethnic minority languages would develop in the future. 46.92% of the participants hold the opinion that minority language will be used in certain domains. This could relate to the data indicated in table 2, ethnic languages are most likely used in certain domains, such as among family members and friends, and for learning or work purposes. In the future, social media could play an important role to sustain minority languages. It allows ethnic languages continue to be used by community members in order to meet their social needs. 29.96% of the respondents believe that minority languages have a great development prospect. This is consistent with Crystal' postulates as cited by Cunliffe [12] that languages will progress if electronic technology is well utilized by speakers. More minority language materials tend to be produced on social media than through traditional media. [12, p. 133] The materials are well preserved and shared with other people in this way. Then, an increasing number of people would become aware of the importance of minority languages. Therefore, minority languages would be developed greatly in the future.

However, only 8.59% surveyees think that ethnic minority languages will not be used in the future. This might be ascribed to the possibility that online language shift happens. Ethnic people are exposed to an online environment that full of dominant languages. They tend to abandon their mother tongue in favour of wildly used ones since dominant languages are stronger on media. In this case, the use of minority languages will be affected and lead to online language shift.

4.2.4. Views about the Use of Minority Languages on Social Media.

In the current study, people's attitudes towards minority languages on social media was also investigated. As the results show, while 57.47% of the participants agree with the opinion that minority languages should be used on social media, 42.51% of the participants hold the opposite opinion. Data from table 9 demonstrate reasons why ethnic minority languages should be used on social media. 85.06% participants think it is instrumental for preserving ethnic minority culture and languages. The high percentage indicates they have positive attitudes towards the use of minority languages online. 63.22% of the participants believe that it facilitates language diversity. Additionally, 53.64% of the respondents agree it helps minority language speakers meet their social needs.

Table 7. Why Ethnic Minority Languages should be Used on Social Media.

Options	Subtotal	Percentages
Benefiting minority languages and culture preservation	93	48.19%
Facilitating language diversity	104	53.89%
Making social life more convenient for ethnic minority groups.	94	48.70%
Other reasons	24	12.44%
subtotal	193	

Furthermore, 7.66% express other reasons, including letting more people know minority languages, and showing their loves of using ethnic minority languages.

Table 8. Why Ethnic Minority Languages should not be Used on Social Media.

Options	Subtotal	Percentages
Limited number of speakers	93	48.19%
Inconducive to communication among ethnic minorities	104	53.89%
Put the national standard spoken and written language at a disadvantage	94	48.70%
Other reasons	24	12.44%
total	193	

For respondents who oppose the use of ethnic minority languages online, 53.89% of the participants state using minority languages online create communication barriers between different ethnic groups. 48.19% state that the number of ethnic minority speakers is fewer than those of other more dominant languages. Therefore, it's easier to utilize dominant languages instead of minority languages online. In addition, use of ethnic minority languages could put the national standard spoken and written language at a disadvantage. In terms of its small popularity, 48.7 % of the participants think this is a reason for not using ethnic minority languages on social media.

5. CONCLUSION

In this paper, attitudes towards ethnic minority languages in the context of social media is seen as a focus and had been explicitly investigated. The results suggest that participants possess positive attitudes towards three interrelated aspects, minority languages, minority language speakers, and the future of the language. The purposes of using minority languages on social media are also studied. The majority of the ethnic minority people in Guizhou were found using ethnic languages in family and friendship domains on social media to keep in touch with their family members and friends. The use of minority languages on social media is also supported by a relatively higher percentage of participants who assert that culture and linguistic will be preserved if minority languages are used on social media. The importance of language attitudes is well-acknowledged by linguists. ‘Language attitude is a crucial role for language maintenance.’ [13] ‘clearly more positive attitudes toward the language tend to strengthen its usage, and more negative attitudes to weaken it’ [14, p. 797]. The discovered positive attitudes and motivating factors of using minority languages on social media would contribute to future study on maintaining minority languages in Guizhou, especially by utilizing social media as a critical medium.

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