

The Development of Mongolian as a Minority Language in Digital Spaces

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1 What is minority language?

Chaklader (1981) argues for adopting a definition of minority languages at the state level. A 'minority language', in the most straightforward sense, is simply one language spoken by less than 50 percent of a population within a specific geographic region which is different from the language of the majority community and the language of the state^[1]. The crucial point is the proportion of speaker population in the given region or country. In other words, a minority language might be only a minority language in this specific region, but a majority language in other region (Grenoble, 2014)^[2]. For example, Spanish is the majority language in a group of south American countries, however, it is a minority language in the USA in general. Mongolian, is also an example of this kind of minority language.

Mongolian is a majority language in Mongolia, but a minority language in China. Bhatt *et al.* (2008) argue that the sociological definition of minority language, based on functional or ethnolinguistic vitality, turns "numerical" majority languages (at the state level) into minority language^[3]. United Nations provides a broad definition of minority, "the term minority includes only those non-dominant groups in a population which possess and wish to preserve stable, ethnic, religious or linguistic traditions or characteristics markedly different from those of the rest of the population". (*UN Yearbook for Human Rights 1950, 490*)^[4]. This definition catches the outstanding features of minority languages: "non-

dominant" and "different from rest of the population". Furthermore, it states that language acquires its minority status due of the voice community to which it belongs. If the number of communities using the language is large but not dominant, then the language is allowed to be marked as a minority language. Another point of view, on the basis of European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, adopted in 1992 by the Council of Europe, it defines minority language based on two criteria: a small number of speakers and lack of official status^[5]. Therefore, a language that has an official status but is spoken by a smaller proportion of a specific group of people (such as Irish) is not considered as a minority language.

2 Mongolian as a minority language within China

The Mongolian language is the official language in Mongolia. The total number of Mongolian (including all its dialects) speakers, with about 5.2 million people, is made of the vast majority of the residents of Mongolia and many of the Chinese Mongols of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. The Khalkha dialect, written in Cyrillic is mainly used in Mongolia, while in Inner Mongolia, the language is written in the traditional Mongolian script. According to the data of the sixth national census in China in 2010, the population of Mongolians in China is 5,981,840 and this population is mainly distributed around Inner Mongolia, Liaoning, Jilin, Hebei, Xinjiang, Heilongjiang, Qinghai, Gansu. However, the number of Mongolian language users in China is about 3.38 million (Purev and Altangerel, 2011)^[6].

In the past two decades, China has vigorously developed higher education for ethnic minorities in

the border areas. In order to cultivate the integrative talents of both Mongolian and Chinese, many Chinese Mongols choose to take the courses taught by Chinese. On one hand, this measure helped Chinese Mongols to learn more advanced technology and modern science thus promoted the modernization of the Mongolian people. On the other hand, it also caused more and more Chinese lose their mother tongue (Sirmu, 2014)^[7]. The number of Mongolian students in ethnic minority colleges is decreasing year by year (Yao, 2018)^[8]. As a result, a number of Chinese Mongolians realize that it is necessary for them to regain their mother tongue and to revitalize the Mongolian culture, because ethnic identity is often accompanied by an increased interest in language maintenance (Janse, 2003)^[9]. Today, The economy, culture, and science and technology are developing rapidly. The technology and information are constantly refreshing every moment. The new words of international common language, national common language, and social buzzwords are constantly updated. These are forcing each language group to keep up with the times, and the speed of language development is unprecedentedly accelerated.

3 The digital development of Mongolian as a minority language in China

Crystal (2000) propose that '*an endangered language will progress if its speakers can make use of electronic technology*'^[10]. Cunliffe and Herring (2005) think that communication technology can be a facilitating tool for propagating a language and cultural value^[11]. Today, new media is constantly developing which allows users of Mongolian to exploit new opportunities to use the language like never before. In China, Mongolian learners start to make full use of the increasingly abundant online resources and various platforms such as Mongolian learning websites, online Mongolian language communities or 'affinity spaces' (affinity space is a place—virtual or physical—where informal learning takes place) and Mongolian learning software and mobile application and so on.

3.1 Mongolian learning websites

Due to the inherent limitations of traditional Mongolian learning media such as newspapers, radio and television, their status has been increasingly impacted by new online media, and traditional methods must be changed to find a new way to survive. From the perspective of the effect of cooperation with the network, the

scope of communication has been infinitely expanded after the use of the network, and it is impossible for traditional media to have overseas recipients. When learner searches "Mongolian learning websites" on Google, a series of Mongolian language learning websites will be pop up, including website for learning traditional Mongolian, learning Cyrillic Mongolian, online Mongolian courses, and even online face-to-face instruction. Most of these websites are free to learn, and a small number of top-quality courses require payment. Study Mongolian (<http://www.studymongolian.net/>) is an excellent website to learn to read and speak the beautiful language of Inner Mongolia, in other words, the traditional Mongolian.

The courses in Study Mongolian are consist of one basic course and 17 formal courses, as well as supplementary courses. The basic courses mainly introduces the history and the development of Mongolian. The formal course includes daily conversations, basic words, detailed explanations, phonetic symbols and examples to understand the meaning and how to pronounce and write. At the end, the supplementary lesson provides all book and recording resources that learners need. At the end of each lesson, word lists and exercises are provided to test learning outcomes and consolidate knowledge. If there is a problem or a learning experience, they can communicate with the students who are also studying or the teachers of the website. They will also provide timely feedback. This is very useful for people who are learning Mongolian. In this website, in addition to discovering that Mongolian people in China use the website to learn traditional Mongolian, many foreigners are also learning traditional Mongolian. Therefore, the audience for website learning is not limited to one region, but is facing the whole world.

Mongolian Learning School (<http://www.mongolian.com.cn/>) is another website for learning Mongolian which is different from the previous one. The majority users of this website is Chinese Mongols. The biggest feature of this web is that various courses are available to learners of different levels. For example, there is zero-based Mongolian language courses aim at learners who have little or no Mongolian language knowledge. Besides, the platform also provides courses at different stages, such as kindergarten, primary school, junior high school, high school and college level for learners of different needs.

Mongolian Learning School (<http://www.mongolian.com.cn/>)

com.cn/) also has a great advantage, that is, it has a mobile application. Learners can download the mobile app to synchronize the courses they are learning. Each course is equipped with a QR code, scan it then it can be viewed on the smart phone.

3.2 Online Mongolian language communities or ‘affinity spaces’

The ability of the individual users to collaborate, create, and share content with other users may prove especially useful for learning languages (Lomicka & Lord, 2009)^[12]. Learning Mongolian language through online communities or ‘affinity spaces’ is good method to improve language skills for Mongolian learners. Take the Facebook group “Mongolian studies” as an example, it is a public place for sharing articles and videos, calls for papers for journals and conferences, solicitations for research assistance, and other resources for learning and understanding Mongolian language and history. This group has 1,775 members from different places and gather together to learn Mongolian. The biggest benefit of learning in a group is that one can share and communicate with people who are also learners, and it is easier for them to find books, resources and learning methods that suit them.

Skill exchange is also a common phenomenon existing in the group. People use their native language seeking a language partner to “exchange language” they are not good at, which means they learn language from each other.

Baidu Online post bar is another kind of affinity space which brings together people with the same interests in an online communication platform, then can share or ask questions by posting. Baidu Post Bar “Learning Mongolian” is a very good Mongolian online learning platform. It sets up different sections to categorize posts with different content, such as Mongolian language tutorials, Mongolian book resources, Mongolian songs, Mongolian history, etc. Members of the Post Bar ask questions by posting, and there will be enthusiastic bar members to answer.

3.3 Mongolian learning software and mobile application

Liu *et.al* (2018) propose that E-learning is the use of electronic educational technology in learning^[13]. The population of using Mongolian language is decreasing in recent years, some features of idioms language ontology has been declining gradually, the frequency of usage has constantly reduced, and the usual user

was aging. This situation fully reflects the shrinking application of Mongolian idioms (Hai, 2016)^[14]. So it is a urgent task to save Mongolian idioms. The learning software of Mongolian idioms (as in Figure 10) is developed and produced based on the purpose “to grasp and use common idioms correctly in a language is an important symbol of higher language proficiency” (Wang, 1998)^[15]. Using modern technology to collect, preserve and compile Mongolian idiom resources, and then establish an online learning platform to provide fast and effective learning feedback and search results.

“Idioms learning” is an query platform providing subcategory, topic and definition of the idioms available for users to learn basic knowledge and extract record instance directly from a large-scale corpus. “Question-answer system” is designed for mastering the right meaning of similar idioms. By selecting any of the Mongolian alphabets in the module, the user can fill in the blanks and submit the correct answers to the upper or lower part of the similar idioms to learn the idioms correctly.

The software focuses on the implementation of learning and query idioms and the development of database index according to subclass of idioms, alphabetical orders and keywords. Among all the functions, learners can choose appropriate learning functions based on their needs. This software put more emphasis on interestingness and flexibility of learning rather than rote learning.

4 Conclusion

The online spaces have created new opportunities for and otherwise declining language to be used in a multitude of different ways. The digital development of Mongolian online has great benefits for the popularization and promotion of Mongolian in China. Mobile learning, is a booming branch of the e-learning movement. Such portable media—referred to in popular and scholarly literature as mobile, wireless, handheld or nomadic—are now social staples (Chinnery, 2006)^[16].

Now trans language phenomena always appear on social networks, For example, when users are posting something on their own social profile, they always mixing of script. The mixing of script resulting in a multitude of trans language practices which are not consistent or standardized but meaningful within the communities within which they occur. New words have emerged which are previously unknown to both Mandarin and Mongolian. With the development of

technology and science, new things emerge one after another. Language also produces new words for the need to express these new things. For example, in Mandarin, (television), (nuclear power), (computer), etc. are all new words in the language. The materials that make up the new words are borrowed from foreign languages, and most of them are constructed using the original morphemes in the language according to the inherent rules of word formation. However, the Mongolian language in China completely “takes” these new words from Chinese and is used in Mongolian. This is essentially different from borrowing. Although the borrowings are borrowed from foreign languages, the pronunciation/grammar has to obey the rules of Chinese language construction. The phenomenon that Mongolian cannot rely on its own potential to achieve response to new things reveals the limitations of Mongolian survival in China. By contrast, Mongolian language in Mongolia has absorbed the vocabulary of other countries, especially the absorption of a large number of Russian/English vocabulary, making it a new part of Mongolian language. And to a certain extent affect its grammatical composition, enrich and develop the Mongolian language.

Therefore, in China, if Mongolian language wants to continue to have a vigorous development, it must develop in various ways and increase its number of users. As a minority language in China, Mongolian still needs more abundant online learning resources and more convenient and fast learning platforms. In the aforementioned examples of Mongolian language as a minority language in China in online spaces, it can be seen that more standardized and influential Mongolian learning website, a growing number of Mongolian study groups in affinity spaces, an those easy to use and comprehensive Mongolian learning software, they are all giving a new life to Mongolian as a minority language in China.

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