

Research on National Language Capacity: Current Situation and Development

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Abstract: By means of the visual analysis software CiteSpace, this paper depicts the academic development of research on national language capacity through retrieving relevant domestic literature published from 2009 to 2024. Over the past 15 years, research on this topic has shown an upward trend, with research hotspots including "language capacity", "language planning", "language policy", "national security" and so on. Although current research has achieved results in improving theoretical systems, constructing language resources and supporting national strategies, it still faces such problems as insufficient theoretical integration and adaptability, weak empirical and quantitative research, and lack of dynamics and forward-looking perspective. In the future, it is necessary to clarify the connotative meaning of concepts to construct theoretical systems, integrate multidisciplinary methods to strengthen empirical research, and establish a dynamic monitoring mechanism to enhance forward-looking planning, so as to promote the research on national language capacity to better serve the construction of China's independent knowledge system of linguistics.

Keywords: National Language Capacity; Bibliometric Analysis; CiteSpace

1. Introduction

The concept of "language capacity" was first proposed by Noam Chomsky, who founded Generative Linguistics in the 1950s and drew a clear distinction between language capacity and linguistic performance. He argued that human beings are innately endowed with the capacity for language acquisition: the initial state of language capacity is a shared universal grammar, and upon maturation, it manifests as linguistic knowledge stored in the human brain. Building on Chomsky's theoretical conceptualization of language capacity, Chinese scholars initiated explorations into the notion of national language capacity. In 2008, the Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council adopted the Reform Plan for the Measures for the Examination and Approval of Doctoral and Master's Degree Authorizations, which put forward the initiative to establish doctoral programs tailored to address China's specific national needs. In response to this policy, Jiangsu Normal University launched a talent cultivation program in neurolinguistics. In its application report submitted to the State Language Commission, the university put forward the concepts of "national language capacity" and "national linguistic competence" from the perspective of national strategic demands. It emphasized that enhancing these two capacities is a key imperative for safeguarding national sovereignty and dignity, embodying core national interests, and meeting the needs of national scientific and technological development as well as social progress.

^[1]Against this backdrop, academic research on national language capacity and national discursive capacity gradually gained momentum. At the theoretical and logical level, studies have focused on constructing the theoretical framework of national language capacity, defining it as the linguistic capability required by a country to handle domestic and international affairs and support national development.^[2] This framework encompasses five core dimensions: language governance capacity, language control capacity, language innovation capacity, language technology development capacity, and language expansion capacity. Scholars have underscored that improving national language capacity is of great significance to safeguarding national security, optimizing the utilization of linguistic resources, and elevating national comprehensive strength. At the practical and operational level, research has emphasized aligning with national strategies, with a focus on the dissemination of language and writing systems, the promotion of the national common language and writing, and the prioritization of linguistic resources and talent development. Studies advocate conducting surveys on the demand for language capacity, strengthening the inheritance of linguistic and cultural heritage, and advancing the construction of national language capacity on the basis of enhancing individual and social linguistic competence, thereby serving the drive toward Chinese modernization.^[3]

Given that research on national language capacity in China started relatively late, the past decade has marked a critical period of its emergence and growth. Empirical studies focusing on this time frame can more accurately reflect the latest trends and characteristics of current research in this field, thereby identifying promising directions for future exploration. In light of this, on the basis of systematically sorting out relevant concepts, this study adopts a combined methodology of literature review and bibliometric analysis. By employing CiteSpace, a visual analysis tool, this paper examines key features such as the number of published articles and research hotspots, summarizes the achievements and limitations of existing research on national language capacity, and further prospects the future research trends of China's national language capacity. It is hoped that this study can provide insightful references for subsequent research in this field.

2. Research on National Language Capacity

As a prominent research field, the knowledge system of national language capacity has been constructed through an extensive body of literature. To provide a comprehensive overview of research in this area, this paper adopts an empirical research approach. By collecting and analyzing relevant data, it presents the research context and characteristics of this field.

2.1 Data Collection

This study takes CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) as the primary data source, with "national language capacity" or "national discursive capacity" as the subject search terms. The time span for the search is set from 2009 to 2024, and the search was conducted on November 7, 2024, yielding a total of 368 documents. These documents cover the manifestations and impacts of national language capacity across various fields and groups, including language acquisition among residents in ethnic minority areas, research on language education, strategies for enhancing the national common language capacity, and the relationship between language capacity and socioeconomic development. The research perspectives involve multiple dimensions such as language policy, educational practice, sociolinguistics, and psycholinguistics.

To enhance the pertinence and logical coherence of the study, the collected data were refined based on the following exclusion criteria. First, documents that address language-related issues without mentioning "national language capacity" or "national discursive capacity" were excluded. Second, works that explore the language capacity of specific regions or groups from the perspective of individual language capacity but do not involve the national level were also excluded. After screening, 329 articles were selected as the bibliometric data source. Using CiteSpace, a visual analysis tool, analyses were conducted sequentially based on classification criteria such as "author" and "keyword". By adjusting the visualization effects, the relevant knowledge maps required for the study were finally generated.

2.2 Data Analysis

2.2.1 Analysis of the Number of Published Articles

As shown in Figure 1, the number of annual publications on national language capacity from 2009 to 2024 exhibits an evolutionary trend characterized by "slow initial accumulation, rapid mid-term growth, and fluctuating late-stage deepening". This development trajectory is highly correlated with the advancement of national language policies and key milestones in theoretical innovation.

From 2009 to 2013, research on national language capacity failed to attract widespread academic attention, with fewer than 10 articles published each year. From 2014 to 2022, research interest continued to rise, marked by two critical surges in publication volume.

The first surge occurred in 2016, with 32 articles published, driven by policy initiatives. The Ministry of Education and the State Language Commission issued the 13th Five-Year Plan for the Development of the National Language Undertaking, which explicitly proposed the concept of "national language capacity" for the first time. The academic community conducted intensive discussions on its connotation and extension, arguing that clarifying this concept would help provide theoretical support for the national language undertaking to serve national development needs, guide the research priorities outlined in the 13th Five-Year Plan, and promote the establishment of a national language capacity system that matches the country's comprehensive national strength.

The second surge took place in 2022, with 50 articles published, driven by interdisciplinary

exploration integrating theory and technology."May 31 Speech" on strengthening China's international communication capacity building, Beijing Foreign Studies University released the 2022 National Language Capacity Index, triggering an academic upsurge in research on the "quantitative evaluation of national language capacity". In the era of big data, scholars explored how to organically integrate the theoretical system of national language capacity with objective data, conform to the trend of interdisciplinary development, and use quantitative and objective data to understand and evaluate complex social language practices.

Some scholars focused on urban foreign language capacity related to national language capacity, constructing an index system for urban foreign language capacity from the perspectives of foreign language resources, foreign language services, and foreign language strategies.^[4] Additionally, an index system for urban emergency foreign language capacity was established, encompassing three primary indicators: emergency foreign language resources, emergency foreign language management, and emergency foreign language strategy.

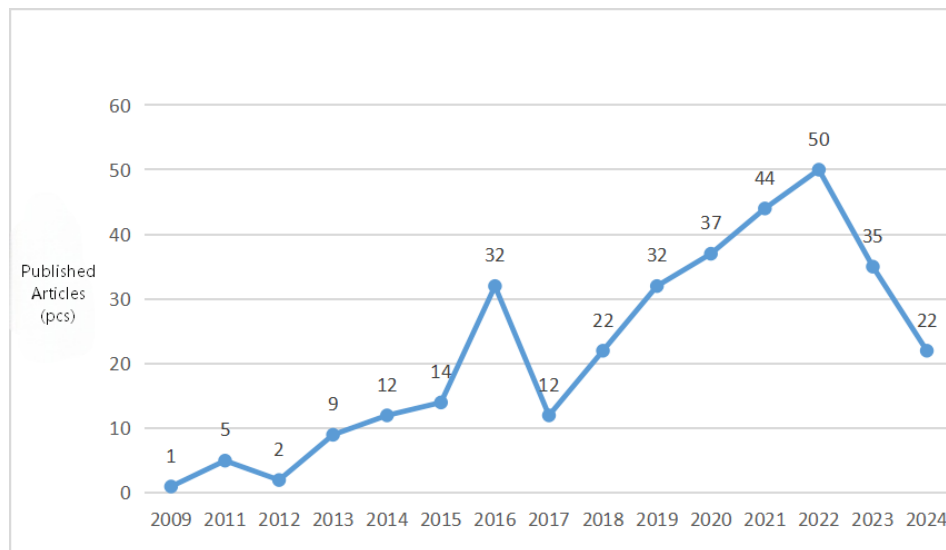


Figure 1: Annual Number of Publications on National Language Capacity Research (2009–2024).

2.2.2 Keyword Analysis

Keywords are a highly concise summary of a paper's research theme. Analyzing keywords enables researchers to identify the hot topics within the current research field. High-frequency hot keywords and their centrality values are collated in the form of a table (see Table 1).

Table 1: High-Frequency Hot Keywords in National Language Capacity Research.

No.	Keyword	Frequency	Centrality	Year
1	Language Capacity	42	0.24	2011
2	Language Planning	20	0.19	2011
3	Language Policy	18	0.09	2014
4	National Governance	14	0.02	2014
5	Language Strategy	12	0.03	2014
6	National Security	12	0.17	2011
7	Discourse System	8	0.01	2016
8	National Discourse	7	0.05	2011
9	Language Resources	6	0.07	2011
10	Critical Languages	6	0.01	2014
11	Rural Revitalization	6	0.11	2021
12	Foreign Language Education	5	0.04	2014
13	The Belt and Road	5	0.06	2018
14	Discourse Power	5	0.06	2015
15	National Image	5	0.06	2012

First Category: Basic Concepts

With a frequency of 42 and centrality of 0.24, Language Capacity ranks first as the logical starting

point of this research field. Its theoretical origin can be traced back to Chomsky's concept of "individual language capacity", which has evolved into the localized notion of "national language capacity" in China. The triangular theoretical framework of national language capacity proposed by Wen Qiufang regards this concept as a core element, defining it as "a country's comprehensive capability to utilize linguistic resources to serve development needs and participate in global competition". Research in this category focuses on the definition of connotation, constituent dimensions, and evaluation system of national language capacity. Zhang Tianwei (2021) upgraded the national language capacity index system and constructed a quantitative model consisting of "5 primary indicators, 12 secondary indicators, and 26 tertiary indicators". He ranked 193 countries based on this model and conducted an in-depth analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of China's language capacity.^[5]

Second Category: Governance Capacity

Language Planning (frequency=20, centrality=0.19), Language Policy (frequency=18, centrality=0.09), and National Governance (frequency=14, centrality=0.02) are direct manifestations of a country's linguistic governance capacity. These keywords are associated with the 70-year practice of linguistic governance by the State Language Commission, and they embody the viewpoint of "governance capacity leading systematic interaction" in Wen Qiufang's "triangular theory". Shen Qi (2020) divided the transformation of China's language planning toward discourse planning into three stages, and proposed that the current priority should be given to advancing three key tasks: "integration of discourse resources, innovation of discourse technology, and optimization of discourse communication", which provides guidance for discourse construction in national governance ^[6]. Wen Qiufang and Yang Jia (2020) sorted out the four stages of language and character policies, summarized the core policy tenet of "practicing the people-centered concept", and put forward policy optimization suggestions for addressing issues such as linguistic equity and resource balance in the new era.^[7]

Third Category: Core Capacity

Language Resources (frequency=6, centrality=0.07) and Rural Revitalization (frequency=6, centrality=0.11) focus on the construction and practice of a country's core linguistic capacity. Ding Sai and Yan Jun (2021) found that there is a significant positive correlation between the proficiency in Mandarin of rural laborers in ethnic minority areas and their probability of obtaining non-agricultural employment. They also pointed out that the higher the density of ethnic minority populations, the more pronounced the employment promotion effect of common language popularization, which provides practical evidence from the perspective of language capacity for rural industrial revitalization.^[8]

Fourth Category: Strategic Capacity

National Security (frequency=12, centrality=0.17), Language Strategy (frequency=12, centrality=0.03), Foreign Language Education (frequency=5, centrality=0.04), and The Belt and Road (frequency=5, centrality=0.06) are key dimensions of a country's linguistic strategic capacity. Based on an analysis of emergency language practices in six countries including Japan and the United States, Zhang Tianwei (2020) proposed that "emergency language capacity" should be incorporated into the national security system. He suggested establishing a multilingual emergency language corpus and an inter-departmental coordination mechanism to meet the linguistic needs in scenarios such as public health emergencies and geopolitical conflicts^[9]. Dai Manchun (2016) pointed out that China's foreign language capacity faces problems such as "imbalanced language structure and shortage of high-end talents". He recommended that universities adjust their academic program offerings in accordance with strategic needs such as The Belt and Road Initiative, and strengthen the cultivation of "language + specialized discipline" interdisciplinary talents.^[10]

3. Analysis of Research on National Language Capacity

Since the concept of national language capacity was proposed, relevant research has yielded abundant outcomes. However, it also has notable limitations. Summarizing these achievements and shortcomings is expected to provide a directional basis for breakthroughs in subsequent studies.

3.1 Research Achievements

3.1.1 Gradual Improvement of the Theoretical System

Progress has been made in the theoretical construction of national language capacity research. First, the core concept has been clarified. The academic community generally recognizes that national language

capacity, as an important component of national strategic capability, covers multiple dimensions such as linguistic resources, language use, and language governance. Second, influential theoretical frameworks have been established one after another. For example, the three-dimensional "Governance-Core-Strategy" model proposed by Wen Qiufang (2019) provides a theoretical tool for analyzing national language capacity ^[1] Third, research perspectives have been continuously expanded, extending from initial surveys of linguistic resources to multiple levels including language ecology, language security, and language governance, which has enriched the theoretical system.

3.1.2 Remarkable Achievements in Language Resource Development

Fruitful results have been achieved in the development and management of linguistic resources. First, large-scale surveys of national linguistic conditions have been completed, clarifying the overall picture of China's linguistic resources, including the distribution and usage of Mandarin, dialects, and ethnic minority languages. Second, a series of large-scale corpora and language databases have been established, such as the Modern Chinese Corpus of the State Language Commission and various local dialect resource databases, providing data support for linguistic research and policy formulation. Third, projects for the protection and development of linguistic resources have been launched. Some endangered languages and dialects have been systematically recorded and preserved, and the strategic value of linguistic resources has become increasingly prominent.

3.1.3 Facilitating the Enhancement of National Strategic Capability

Research has supported the implementation of major national strategies. First, centering on the Belt and Road Initiative, planning has been conducted for critical foreign languages, and targeted research on language services and talent cultivation has been carried out. Second, emergency language capacity has been tested and improved in practical applications. Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, multilingual language services were quickly organized, providing effective support for epidemic prevention and control. Third, the international Chinese education system has been increasingly refined. Research on the dissemination of Chinese ideological and cultural terms and the construction of an international discourse system has effectively promoted linguistic and cultural exchanges and mutual understanding between China and other countries.

3.2 Research Limitations

At present, China's research on national language capacity has accumulated considerable achievements. However, against the backdrop of the era's questions—"For building a strong country, what should education do? For building an education powerhouse, what should language do?"—existing research still has shortcomings in terms of systematicness, forward-looking perspective, and practicality.

3.2.1 The Integration and Adaptability of Theories Need to Be Enhanced

The theoretical construction of current research still has obvious weaknesses. First, the core concept has not yet been unified. Scholars hold different views on the connotation, extension, and core dimensions of "national language capacity", resulting in a weak foundation for academic dialogue. In addition, the measurement indicators for some key capabilities are vague. Second, there is a disconnect between the macro-level "national" capacity and the micro-level "national linguistic competence". Research on the internal mechanism of how the two interact, transform, and support each other is insufficient, failing to form an integrated theoretical framework that connects the macro and micro levels.

3.2.2 Insufficient Empirical and Quantitative Research

The research methods in this field need to be strengthened. First, existing achievements are mainly based on theoretical speculation and policy analysis, lacking solid support from large-scale empirical data, which makes many conclusions remain at the descriptive level. Second, there is a lack of a scientific and systematic comprehensive evaluation index system, which makes it difficult to accurately diagnose and effectively assess the current situation of national language capacity, not to mention revealing the causal relationships between different variables, thus limiting the scientificity and practical guiding value of the research.

3.2.3 Lack of Dynamic and Forward-Looking Research

Research perspectives have limitations in the temporal dimension. First, most studies are static cross-sectional analyses, lacking diachronic tracking research on how national language capacity evolves over time and develops dynamically under the influence of policies. Second, the research lacks forward-looking perspective. There is insufficient strategic prediction and cutting-edge discussion on the

challenges brought by future technological changes and adjustments in the global landscape, making the research as a whole lag behind potential needs.

4. Future Prospects for Research on National Language Capacity

As indicated by the above analysis, the research on national language capacity is affected by multiple factors, including the construction of theoretical systems, the singularity of research methods and perspectives, and the lack of empirical evidence. To advance the in-depth development of future research on national language capacity, on the one hand, it is imperative to clarify the connotation and extension of national language capacity and construct a sound theoretical system, thus laying a solid foundation for subsequent studies. On the other hand, efforts should be made to broaden research perspectives and adopt diversified research methods to enhance the depth and breadth of research. Meanwhile, interdisciplinary cooperation should be encouraged, and empirical cases should be added to the research on national language capacity through the collection and analysis of empirical data.

4.1 Induction and Construction: Clarifying Connotation and Extension to Build a Theoretical System of National Language Capacity

Current research on national language capacity is confronted with key theoretical construction issues such as the ambiguous definition of core concepts and unclear theoretical positioning. To promote the theoretical development of this field, it is necessary to deepen the understanding from the following three aspects.

First, clarify the essential connotation of the concept. Clarifying the essential connotation of the concept is a fundamental issue in addressing theoretical construction. Numerous scholars have defined national language capacity; however, further clarification is required on how to precisely define its connotation, what specific items its extension covers and the corresponding basis, as well as the relationship between national language capacity and its superordinate concepts.

Second, define the theoretical positioning of the concept. By sorting out the relationship between national language capacity and its superordinate concepts, this concept should be placed within the conceptual framework of "language capacity—individual language capacity—group language capacity". Its theoretical coordinates should be established from the perspective of linguistic ontology, so as to achieve effective integration with the entire linguistic theoretical system.

Third, adhere to a problem-oriented research approach. The ultimate value of theoretical construction lies in guiding practice. Centering on the major language needs in national development, researches should focus on key issues, such as the construction of national common language capacity, the improvement of global lingua franca capacity, and the guarantee of language service capacity under the Belt and Road Initiative. Theoretical innovation should be driven by solving specific practical problems, thereby constructing a theoretical system of national language capacity that conforms to linguistic principles and embodies Chinese characteristics.

4.2 Mutual Learning and Integration: Drawing on Interdisciplinary Methods to Enrich Empirical Research on National Language Capacity

To advance the in-depth development of research on national language capacity, it is essential to strengthen the innovation of research methods and consolidate the empirical foundation.

First, expand the diversified research methodology system. On the basis of adhering to a problem-oriented approach, a systematic research path combining quantitative and qualitative methods should be constructed. For quantitative research, statistical methods can be drawn on to establish a monitoring index system of national language capacity through large-scale questionnaire surveys, database construction and data analysis. For qualitative research, methods such as in-depth interviews, case studies and field investigations can be adopted to explore the institutional mechanisms and implementation paths in the construction of language capacity.

Second, enhance the in-depth integration of data science and linguistic research. In the context of the digital era, full use should be made of emerging technologies such as big data and artificial intelligence to build dynamic monitoring platforms for language resources, develop evaluation models for language capacity, and realize the accurate depiction and trend prediction of national language capacity.

Third, establish an interdisciplinary collaborative research mechanism. Research on national language capacity involves multiple fields including linguistics, sociology, management science and information science, which requires breaking disciplinary barriers and establishing a collaborative research mechanism. By setting up interdisciplinary research teams and launching interdisciplinary research projects, joint efforts should be made to solve comprehensive issues such as the construction of language service systems, the research and development of language technologies, and language security early warning, thus promoting the transformation of research methods from single-discipline to interdisciplinary integration.

4.3 Monitoring and Prediction: Constructing a Dynamic Observation System to Strengthen Forward-Looking Planning for National Language Capacity

To address the deficiencies of insufficient dynamics and forward-looking perspective in current research on national language capacity, future efforts should focus on constructing a future-oriented research system.

First, establish a dynamic monitoring mechanism for national language capacity. By building long-term databases, setting up observation points and conducting follow-up surveys, the evolution rules and development trends of national language capacity can be grasped, thus transforming from static analysis to dynamic monitoring.

Second, strengthen forward-looking prediction research. Attention should be paid to the profound impacts of new technologies such as artificial intelligence and big data on language life, and the changes in language capacity demands in the digital and intelligent era should be predicted, so as to provide forward-looking guidance for national language planning.

Third, promote collaborative research on inheritance and innovation. While well inheriting the excellent traditional Chinese linguistic culture, active exploration should be made on new paths and models for linguistic and cultural communication in the digital and intelligent era, so as to realize the creative transformation and innovative development of traditional linguistic culture.

5. Conclusion

Based on the data from China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), this study systematically combs through 329 relevant literatures on national language capacity published between 2009 and 2024 by means of CiteSpace software. It reveals the research trends, hotspots and deficiencies in this field, and provides valuable insights for future research directions.

The research results show that the research on national language capacity has exhibited a marked upward trend in recent years, with two critical surges in the number of publications occurring in 2016 and 2022 respectively. These surges are closely associated with the release of the 13th Five-Year Plan for the Development of the National Language Undertaking and the publication of the 2022 National Language Capacity Index. These major policy and academic events have not only promoted the popularization of the concept of national language capacity, but also stimulated scholars' enthusiasm for research in this field.

In terms of research hotspots, keywords such as "language capacity", "language planning", "language policy" and "national security" frequently appear, reflecting the core research topics of national language capacity. Meanwhile, with the advancement of globalization and new media technologies, emergent keywords such as "national discourse", "discourse system" and "the Belt and Road" have gradually become new research focuses. These changes not only reflect the progressiveness of research on national language capacity with the times, but also provide an important perspective for us to understand the new role of national language capacity in the global context.

Nevertheless, research on national language capacity still has some deficiencies. First, there are ongoing debates on the connotation and extension of this concept, and a unified and clear definition is lacking. Second, research methods are relatively single, dominated by qualitative research with insufficient empirical data support. In addition, the inadequacy of interdisciplinary research has also restricted the depth and breadth of relevant studies.

In the future, research on national language capacity should focus on clarifying the connotation of concepts, constructing a sound theoretical system, broadening research perspectives, adopting diversified research methods, strengthening interdisciplinary cooperation, and promoting the in-depth development

of empirical research. Meanwhile, enhancing the capacity for the inheritance and development of linguistic culture and vigorously popularizing the national common language and characters are also important tasks in the construction of national language capacity.

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