

A Survey of the Language Use and Language Attitudes among Adolescents in Sanya

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Abstract: Through a large-scale survey of the language life environment of primary and secondary school students in Sanya, this paper finds that the language usage of local adolescents in the city shows significant age changes. Behind this change, there are also age changes in language attitudes and language identity. As local teenagers grow up, their sense of identity with Hainan dialect is increasing, but their use and identity with Putonghua is declining. To some extent, the dialect returning of the adolescents nowadays is a phenomenon of age grading, which is caused by various factors such as changes in the language environment, language socialization, and increased local awareness. The study also finds that there is a significant correlation between language choice and the sense of language belonging. It is suggested that when promoting Putonghua in the future, more consideration can be given to enhancing the emotional identity of Putonghua, so as to better promote it.

Keywords: Language Use, Language Attitude, Adolescent

1. Introduction

At present, it is generally reflected in the society that compared with previous generations, the dialect ability and dialect usage rate of urban adolescents have declined significantly. Adolescents' language use, as well as their language attitudes, is the key to the sustainability of a language. According to existing research, researchers generally believe that the language use of urban adolescents shows age changes. But is the age change in language use an ongoing language change or a short age grading phenomenon within the same generation? What social factors contribute to the age change of language use? What language attitudes and language identity of adolescents are behind the age change of language use? So far, the research on the above issues is not deep enough. This paper attempts to answer the above questions based on the survey results in Sanya.

2. Research Methodology

We surveyed primary and secondary school students in Sanya in December 2020 and August 2021. The content of the survey covers language use, language attitude and language ability. In the survey, we adopted the methods of stratified sampling and questionnaire survey. We selected 3 primary schools, 3 junior high schools and 3 high schools, that is, a total of 9 primary and secondary schools, in the main urban area of Sanya City. Then, we selected a number of classes in the sampled schools (in primary schools, we selected classes from grade 5 and above) to conduct a cluster survey. We let the students fill in the questionnaire to grasp the language life environment of the adolescents in Sanya.

A total of 1272 valid questionnaires were obtained in the survey. In order to study the changes in language use and language attitudes of local adolescents in Sanya, we selected students who were born in Sanya and whose parents were both from Sanya as the research sample. There are 423 questionnaires in this part, accounting for 33.3% of all valid questionnaires; among them, boys account for 45%, girls account for 55%; primary school students account for 26%, junior high school students account for 30%, and high school students account for 44%.

3. Results of the Survey

3.1 Basic situation of adolescents' language use

Among the local adolescents in Sanya surveyed, 53% said they first acquired Putonghua before

going to primary school. Only 32% of the adolescents said they acquired Hainan dialect first, and another 16% said they acquired Putonghua and Hainan dialect at the same time. Most of the adolescents have acquired Putonghua since childhood, and Putonghua has an advantage in the field of mother tongue acquisition of adolescents nowadays.

A total of 85.4% of local adolescents said they could speak Hainan dialect, which was mostly acquired during their growth. Most of the local adolescents have grown up to be bilingual speakers of Putonghua and Hainan dialect. It can thus be seen that Hainan dialect still has a certain degree of linguistic vitality nowadays.

In families, the proportions of local adolescents in Sanya who speak Hainan dialect to their parents most often are 48% and 46%, respectively, the proportions of local adolescents in Sanya who speak Putonghua to their parents most often are 45% and 47%, and the proportion of adolescents who speak Putonghua to their parents as much as they speak Sanya dialect to them is 6%. The proportion of adolescents who spoke Hainan dialect most often to their grandparents is 57%, and 40% spoke Putonghua most often. Putonghua has now entered the home language use domain of local adolescents in Sanya, and is on an equal footing with Hainan dialect.

In the public domain, 52% of local Sanya adolescents speak Putonghua most often in the markets, 79% of them speak Putonghua most often in shopping malls and supermarkets, and 86% of them speak Putonghua most often in banks and post offices. The more formal the occasion, the higher the proportion of local Sanya adolescents using Putonghua, and the lower the proportion using Hainan dialect. Adolescents have formed an awareness of high and low variant of Putonghua and Hainan dialect.

At school, 54% of local adolescents in Sanya speak Putonghua most often when talking with their classmates after class, and 43% speak Hainan dialect most often; 86% speak Putonghua most often in conversations with teachers after class, and only 12% speak Hainan dialect most often. Putonghua is the dominant language in the campus language life of middle and primary schools in Sanya.

3.2 Age changes in language use among adolescents

3.2.1 The domain of home

In fact, the language use of adolescents is not invariable. About 77% of local Sanya adolescents aged 10-11 speak Putonghua most often to their parents at home, but only about 19% speak Hainan dialect most often. But as they get older, the proportion of those speaking Putonghua most often at home decreases, and the proportion of those speaking Hainan dialect most often increases. Among 14-year-old local adolescents in Sanya, those speaking Hainan dialect most often at home begins to outnumber those speaking Putonghua most often at home. At 18, the proportion of those speaking Putonghua most often to their parents at home drops to around 19%, while the proportion of those speaking Hainan dialect most often rises to around 72%. From the age of 10 to the age of 18, there is a major reversal in the use of Putonghua and Hainan dialect among local adolescents in Sanya. The proportion of language use changes by more than 50%, and in the process, age 14 is the key point of change.

3.2.2 The domain of school

Local 10-year-olds mostly use Putonghua to talk to their classmates at school, with 91% speaking Putonghua most often. However, as they grow older, this group's use of Hainan dialect at school gradually increases. Among 16-year-old local adolescents, those speaking Hainan dialect most often in after-school conversations with classmates begin to outnumber those speaking Putonghua most often in such conversations; the proportion of 18-year-old local adolescents speaking Hainan dialect most often in conversations with classmates after class rises to 67%, while the proportion of those speaking Putonghua most often drops to 31%, a change of around 60%.

As for the language that students use in conversations with their teachers after class, it also changes continuously with age, but the overall change is not large. In conversations with teachers after class, the proportion of students using Putonghua most often drops from 95% at age 10 to 83% at age 18.

3.2.3 Language attitudes of adolescents

It is generally believed that language attitude is one of the important deep-lying reasons for language retention or conversion. Since there are age changes in the language use of adolescents, what role do language attitudes and language identity play behind the changes in language use? The

following part will focus on the exploration of this.

The language attitude survey in this paper is mainly conducted through the Likert five-point scale. Respondents were asked to evaluate the four indicators of "sounding pleasant", "sounding affable", "social influence" and "useful" in Putonghua and Hainan dialect respectively. "Sounding pleasant" and "sounding affable" are people's psychological feelings and evaluations of the emotional value of a language, which are important elements of the sense of language belonging; "social influence" refers to the status and prestige of a language in society, and is an evaluation of the status and social prestige of a language; "useful" refers to the usefulness of a language in social interaction, and is an evaluation of the practical value of a language. "Social influence" and "useful" are instrumental dimensions. Therefore, investigating the language attitudes of urban adolescents can not only help us grasp their inner sense of belonging to a certain language (or dialect), but also understand the status and value of a certain language (or dialect) in their minds.

For Hainan dialect, the highest rating by local adolescents in Sanya is the degree of it sounding affable (the average value of the five-point rating was 3.83, the same below), followed by the usefulness of Hainan dialect (3.76) and its social influence (3.68). The lowest rating is the dimension of Hainan dialect "sounding pleasant" (3.14). The low evaluation of the pleasantness of Hainan dialect is largely due to the traditional concepts of the local society. Generally speaking, the evaluation of Hainan dialect by local Sanya adolescents focuses on its emotional value. They still maintain a relatively strong emotional identity with Hainan dialect, which is conducive to the maintenance and development of Hainan dialect in the future. For Putonghua, adolescents rated it the highest for its usefulness (4.29), followed by its pleasantness (4.27) and social influence (4.16), and the lower evaluation was its affability (3.94). Adolescents' evaluation of Putonghua is more focused on its practical value.

In the comparison of language attitudes between Putonghua and Hainan dialect, in terms of their pleasantness, usefulness and social influence, the evaluation of Putonghua by local adolescents in Sanya is significantly higher than that of Hainan dialect; in terms of language affability, there is no significant difference between their evaluations of Hainan dialect and Putonghua. This shows that in the minds of local adolescents, except being no less than Putonghua in terms of the sense of language belonging, Hainan dialect is obviously inferior to Putonghua in terms of the social prestige and practical value.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Explanation of the age changes in adolescents' language life environment

Current age changes in language use and language identification among urban adolescents are caused by multiple factors. First, this is related to the changes in the language life environment of adolescents. After entering the school or kindergarten, children spend most of their time at school. In the school, Putonghua is the carrier of a lot of knowledge, information and understanding of society. In society, the media such as radio, film and television also mainly use Putonghua. On the one hand, the early contact with and education of Putonghua enable them to have good ability of Putonghua, and on the other hand, they develop the habit of speaking Putonghua and their emotional identification with Putonghua since childhood. At home, parents will accommodate and adapt to their children's language choices when their children are young, and often speak Putonghua to their children. In addition, under the current social trend of popularizing Putonghua, many parents are aware of the practical value and importance of Putonghua in today's society, so they take the initiative to speak Putonghua to their children and create a family atmosphere where they can speak Putonghua so as to cultivate their ability to use Putonghua.

Parents of elementary school students often speak Putonghua to their children. More than 70% of parents speak Putonghua most often at home. In the early language life environment dominated by Putonghua, adolescents naturally develop a sense of identification with Putonghua and a sense of alienation from the dialect at this stage. But as adolescents grow up, after they have basically mastered Putonghua, parents will relax their requirements on their children's use of Putonghua, and the parents themselves will also reduce their use of Putonghua and choose to speak the dialect more at home. The proportion of parents of junior high school students who often speak Hainan dialect to their children at home exceeds that of those who often speak Putonghua; and the proportion of parents of high school students who often speak Hainan dialect at home reaches about 65%. While the language environment at home changes, so is the language environment at school. The proportion of classmates and friends

using Hainan dialect increases, and the peer pressure of speaking Hainan dialect increases. At the same time, young people have more and more contacts with the local society, and the opportunities to use the local dialect increase. Changes in the language environment of adolescents are one of the important factors that promote changes in language use and language identification. Second, changes in adolescents' language use and language identification are also related to their process of language socialization. According to the theory of language socialization, the development of language ability is not only related to the language learning activity itself, but also the result of participating in social communication. Families, schools, and peer groups are all important mediators of adolescents' language socialization. Local adolescents' social networks are also mostly composed of members of local language communities. As adolescents increase their contact with the local society and as their social experience increases, they will gradually feel the potential prestige of the local dialect. In the process of contact with members of the local language community, they will gradually realize the identification value and practical value of the dialect. In the process of socialization, the values, norms and social conventions of the local society will gradually become part of the adolescents themselves. With the deepening of the language socialization of local adolescents and the enhancement of their local awareness, their identification with the local area will further promote their identification with the local dialect, which will eventually lead to age changes in the language use and language identification of adolescents.

Changes in language life environment, language socialization and enhancement of local awareness are important reasons for the age changes of language use and language identification among adolescents.

4.2 The nature of age change in adolescents' language situation

As for the nature of the age changes in adolescents' language situation, sociolinguistics classifies differences in speech among people of different ages into two categories: "generation difference" and "age grading". The so-called "generation difference" refers to the difference between one generation and another, which is used to explain the changes of a language; while the "age grading" refers to the difference in speech between people of different ages in the same generation, which is reflected in the changes in the use of certain language variants by a generation at different ages.

The phenomenon of age grading of a language is relatively stable over a historical period, which means that the same generation will experience the same process of change over a long period of time. This paper also finds that the language identification of urban adolescents is also changing simultaneously, and the age changes in language identification directly lead to the age changes in language use. This paper holds that this phenomenon of "age grading" is a return after adolescents' excessive infiltration of Putonghua in early years. As for the extent to which the dialect returning of adolescents will eventually reach, further research is needed, but it is basically difficult to fully reach the level of the previous generation. It should be said that under the current social situation, the phenomenon of dialect returning and dialect weakening of urban adolescents coexist.

5. Conclusion

On the basis of investigating the language living conditions of primary and middle school students in Sanya, this paper analyzes the age change of the language use of local adolescents in the city. As local adolescents in Sanya grow older, their emotional identification and practical value evaluation of Hainan dialect continue to improve, while their emotional identification to Putonghua continues to decline. This leads directly to the phenomenon of them using Hainan dialect more and using Putonghua less. This paper argues that these changes are age grading rather than generation difference, and that they are caused by a variety of social factors such as changes in the language living environment, language socialization, and increased local awareness.

During the research, this paper also found that there is a significant correlation between adolescents' sense of language belonging and their actual language use. Adolescents' language use and their emotional identification with the language will change synchronously, and changes in emotional identification directly lead to changes in language use; this also reminds us that in the future promotion of Putonghua, we can consider adopting a "flexible" method to improve the affability of Putonghua, and enhance the emotional identification and sense of belonging of the adolescents in the dialect area to Putonghua, so as to avoid the "loss" of Putonghua in the growth process of adolescents and promote the harmonious coexistence of Putonghua and dialects.

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