

Dialect in Decline: The Dilemma of Sichuan Dialect and Possible Means of Revitalization

Ke Wu^{1,a,*}

¹*Jincheng No.1 Secondary School, Chengdu, China*

a. wuzhiyong@chinageo.com.cn

**corresponding author*

Abstract: Sichuan dialect, one of the most popular dialects in China, is continuously receiving a wide range of attention among teenagers. However, in recent years, the users of this dialect are becoming less and less. This paper talks about the reason why the users of the Sichuan dialect are experiencing the process of decline. It is separated into various aspects such as society, technology and educational influences that may be influencing the declining trend. Studying the reason for the reduction of users of the Sichuan dialect can help contribute to the preservation of local dialects. Understanding these factors is crucial not only for comprehending the dynamics of linguistic shifts, but also for formulating strategies to safeguard and inherit this local dialect. Efforts to maintain and renaissance local dialects are essential for safeguarding cultural heritage and identity. The presented findings aimed at providing a renewed appreciation for the Sichuan dialect among the younger generations.

Keywords: Sichuan Dialect, Language Decline, Reversing Language Shift, Language Commercial Value

1. Introduction

With over 7000 kinds of language coexisting on the earth, there are 14 kinds of language that vanish from the world day by day [1]. It can be seen apparently that the fragility of language diversity is proven. Meanwhile, there is a high percentage of nearly 40 languages being listed as endangered, it means that without further effort there will be no more exiting further, which can be treated as a loss of human culture.

UNESCO has reported that nearly half of the 144 local languages existing in China are facing endangerment which same as others, therefore Mandarin, of the dominant position in China, should take on another identity. Over the past 100 years, the paradigm under which Chinese diglossia operates has undergone significant change [2]. Eventually, with the rigorous promotion initiated by the Law of Common Language in 2001 which enforced the general government standard, the relationship between the locals and Mandarin experienced a huge change. However, whatever government measures have been taken, including digital preservation and awareness raising, the dialects with huge users before still witness a rapid decline in the number of speakers [3].

1.1. The Status and Importance of Sichuan Dialect

Efforts to protect Sichuanese include the establishment of the Chinese Language Resource Audio

Database in 2008 and the National Language Resources Protection Project announced by the Ministry of Education and the National Language Commission in 2015, it means the government token the key role as the dialect [4]. However, the preservation of Sichuanese faces hurdles and the impact of Mandarin promotion on traditional dialects remains a concern. Sichuan dialect holds a significant position in the realm of Chinese linguistics, which is categorized within the northern dialect area or the Mandarin dialect area among the ten major dialects [5]. Its uniqueness lies in its simplicity, forthrightness, strong generality, and humor in its own way. Notably, the Sichuan dialect drama ‘Zhuangmen’ enjoys widespread popularity, especially in Sichuan, showcasing the distinctive charm of the Sichuan dialect. However, it is important to note that the term “Sichuan dialect” does not exclusively refer to the dialect itself, as more common Chinese dialects in Sichuan Province include local Cantonese and Lao Huguang (Xiang), distributed in dialect islands across the region [6]. Despite conscious efforts by relevant government departments to preserve local traditional culture, daily usage of the Sichuan dialect faces challenges, as per certain studies and common understanding is major for children.

The Sichuan dialect reflecting the unique natural environment, local customs, and historical traditions of the Sichuan region, serves as a vital cultural carrier. Traditional art forms, including Sichuan opera and storytelling, are tightly tied to the dialect. The Sichuan dialect, regarded as a crucial component of the Chinese language and culture, documents historical changes and cultural developments in the Sichuan region. As a common tool in daily life, the Sichuan dialect plays a role in maintaining social stability and promoting cultural exchanges. Its historical value is major in offering a precious resource for historical research, to trace the evolution of history.

The distinct regional characteristics of the Sichuan dialect reflect the unique natural environment, local customs, and historical traditions of the region. This environmental diversity contributes to the overall richness and variety of the Chinese language environment. Being served as a noticeable carrier of the local culture of Sichuan, including Sichuan opera, Quyi, storytelling, etc., the Sichuan dialect plays a vital role in preserving and developing traditional cultures through performances, propagation and usage. It mainly contributes to providing linguists with rich research materials, holding great significance for studying the evolution, characteristics, and laws of Chinese dialects [4].

1.2. Purpose of the Research

Frequency dialects carry unique linguistic features, expressions, and historical context that provide valuable insights into the local culture as well as the tradition of the Sichuan region. Researching the Sichuan dialect, like studying any other language or dialect, can offer several advantages with significant cultural and academic implications [5]. The Investigation of the Sichuan dialect can eventually contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage.

Sichuan dialect serves as a historical record, which can furnish precious information about the historical development and the cultural evolution of the Sichuan region. Within these advantages, linguists can benefit from studying the Sichuan dialect to gain insights into linguistic evolution, phonetics, and grammatical structure changes [6]. This research can contribute to the broader field of linguistics and people’s understanding of language development, strengthen the connections among people who share this linguistic heritage, and form a sense of community and cultural identity among younger generations [7].

Understanding and promoting the Sichuan dialect can enhance the cultural bond for tourists visiting the region. It adds authenticity to cultural presentations, performances, and exhibitions, contributing to the overall appeal of Sichuan’s cultural offerings.

In essence, researching the Sichuan dialect serves multiple purposes, from cultural preservation and academic inquiry to promoting linguistic diversity. It contributes to the collective understanding of the potential links between language, culture, and the social-historical development of societies.

2. Current Situation of Sichuan Dialect Users

The Sichuan dialect is mostly distributed in Sichuan Province as well as part of South-West China, extending to surrounding areas such as Chongqing Municipality, Yunnan Province, and parts of Guizhou Province [1]. Chengdu Dialect which is the capital of Sichuan, representing the Sichuan dialect, is a prominent branch of the Southwest Mandarin with a noticeable population, making it one of the most significant dialects in the region.

Although there are some differences between the Sichuan dialect and Mandarin in initial consonants, vowels, and tones, these differences are usually seen as pass to ensure your local identity, meanwhile, ensuring effective communication in the Sichuan region [4]. There are many unique words in the Sichuan dialect, which are lively and interesting and have obvious regional characteristics, such as “holding Longmen array” and “beating a tooth”. Although the grammar of the Sichuan dialect is relatively close to Mandarin, it still has its unique grammatical phenomena, such as the “zhe” sentence and the “bei” sentence, which add unique language elements.

The Sichuan dialect is closely linked with traditional art forms, embodying a rich cultural connotation. Sichuan dialect’s humor and wit are characterized by strong expression and appeal, and the vivid reflection from its listeners adds to better performance [6].

Factors such as urbanization, migration, and globalization may influence the usage patterns of the dialect, impacting its prevalence among different demographic groups [1]. The dynamic changes in the number of Sichuan dialect speakers are a vital aspect of the current situation. Ongoing research and demographic studies on the changes in the number would be essential to understanding the problem of nowadays policies, and eventually contribute to the preservation and continuity of the Sichuan dialect.

3. Reasons for the Decline in Sichuan Dialect Users

3.1. Social Change

In urban areas, where Mandarin is predominant, the number of Sichuan dialect speakers is diminishing mostly because of the education of the young generation. The rapid social economic development can be a crucial reason. Coupled with the active promotion of Mandarin, has led to a reduction in the usage scope and frequency of the Sichuan dialect [5]. Urbanization, seen as the second biggest impact, has caused a significant influx of rural migrants, influencing the utilization of the Sichuan dialect. This shift limits the use of dialects, and the breakout of topographic closure due to improved transportation facilitates the decline of Sichuan dialect usage. Social attitudes, required as the third reason, especially among the younger generations, have shifted. With another social mainstream value rising gradually, mandarin is increasingly considered a requirement, while speaking local dialects is sometimes viewed as an uncivilized behavior. This change in mindset contributes to the decline in the use of the Sichuan dialect mentally [4].

3.2. Education

Reforms in the education system have elevated the status of Putonghua, emphasizing it as the national common language. While the school environment is gradually becoming a crucial space for Mandarin communication, the role of dialects has been diminished. The standardization of Putonghua including the law established and the popularized usage on the Internet platforms has further accelerated its decline.

3.3. Cultural Change

Although the Sichuan dialect is a significant part of local culture, the awareness and efforts toward its protection and inheritance are weak [1]. The absence of government initiatives and coercive policies contributes to the gradual decline in Sichuan dialect users. Under the influence of Mandarin's dominance, the use of the Sichuan dialect is diminishing, leading to a weakened ability among the population. Local cultural forms which are closely tied to the dialect, are also disappearing as dialect usage decreases. The interplay of these social, educational, and cultural factors jointly contributes to the multiple challenges faced by the Sichuan dialect, eventually turning into a rational cause of the evident decline in the number of its users.

4. Solutions to Preserve and Revitalize Sichuan Dialect

4.1. Government Initiatives

It is recommended that the local government should organize public awareness broadcasts to emphasize the significance of the Sichuan dialect. By implementing educational reforms, such as including Sichuan dialect courses in school curricula, to ensure its integration into formal education, and utilizing modern information technology to collect audio and video data on the Sichuan dialect to establish a comprehensive Sichuan language resources database, the Sichuan dialect could be better preserved. It is also possible to engage experts and scholars for language recording, preservation, and utilization, as demonstrated by the "Sichuan Language Resources Protection Project" to implement a dialect protection plan encompassing cultural activities, dialect courses, and dialect plays [8]. By making dialect an active part of daily life through cultural initiatives, its charm can be revitalized among the public [9].

4.2. Societal Engagement

Since Sichuan is characterized by its unique culture, promoting traditional cultural performances that inherently use the Sichuan dialect, such as Sichuan opera and harmonic opera could better engage the greater population. These performances serve as a medium for protecting and passing down the essence of the dialect [9]. It could be also useful to compile comprehensive resources like the "Encyclopedia of Sichuan Dialect" to standardize and protect the dialect. Such resources enable a broader audience to understand and learn the Sichuan dialect. Encouraging the creation of films and TV series where the Sichuan dialect is the primary language like "Hot Pot Hero" and "Happy Rake Ears" can leverage the influence of visual media to familiarize more people with and promote the use of the Sichuan dialect [1].

4.3. Individual Efforts

Individuals play a crucial role in the preservation of the Sichuan dialect. News, media platforms, and other communication channels can serve as platforms to raise awareness about the importance and necessity of dialect preservation and emphasize the role of each individual in contributing to the sustained existence of the dialect.

Today the comprehensive solutions address the multifaceted challenges faced by the Sichuan dialect, encompassing government policies, societal engagement, and individual awareness, individual effort is one important thing, because personality is something unique thing to an individual, unless good education and social engagement the people still need keep their soul and spring. By combining efforts at different levels, there is a greater likelihood of preserving, protecting, and revitalizing the rich linguistic and cultural heritage embedded in the Sichuan dialect.

Elevating the status of the Sichuan dialect requires a shift in responsibility from language specialists to a shared goal for the entire Sichuan community. Engineers, scientists, educators, and professionals across diverse sectors need to collaboratively contribute to enhancing the dialect's commercial, going beyond traditional roles and encouraging participative and deliberative actions within the curriculum, the programs and the classroom [4].

5. Conclusion

The Sichuan dialect contributes to its changing, is deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of the region, is a vital element of Sichuanese identity, and is also seen as the most important and proudest thing for Sichuan. The preservation of the dialect requires a concerted effort from the community. By uniting the Sichuanese world, achieving success will not only protect the language but also elevate its status as a cultural symbol.

According to the Chinese Language Resource Audio Database in 2008, this paper studies the reasons why the Sichuan dialect has declined, such as social changes, educational shifts, evolving cultural attitudes, and commercial values of the Sichuan dialect, which are been regarded as some of the most important factors that we have concluded from the previous studies. To preserve and revitalize the Sichuan dialect, government initiatives, societal engagement, and individual awareness can be the most important key points. For example, the "Sichuan Language Resources Protection Project," serve as a vital step towards safeguarding the dialect's variety of forms of expression through modern technology and the government's overall action. Social engagement also plays a key role in emphasizing the importance of traditional cultural performances. Compiling dialect books, and encouraging the creation of films and TV series that prominently feature the Sichuan dialect, can be other ways of preserving the cultural connotation behind the words and expressions. At the individual level, awareness-raising comes into becoming the major part. News, media platforms, and other channels that help enhance the role each person plays in contributing to the preservation and counteract the decline of the Sichuan dialect can be vital actions in improving community-level development. The commercial value of preserving the Sichuan dialect might not immediately show up, especially when compared to the widespread popularity of Mandarin. Elevating the status of the Sichuan dialect requires a shift in responsibility from language specialists to a shared goal for the entire Sichuan community. Engineers, scientists, educators, and professionals across diverse sectors need to collaboratively contribute to enhancing the dialect's commercial.

References

- [1] Wang, L. & King, K. (2022) *Language Ideologies, Language Policies, and Shifting Regional Dialect Proficiencies in Three Chinese Cities*. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*.
- [2] Li, W. (2013) *Shifting Patterns of Chinese Diglossia: Why the Dialects May Be Headed for Extinction*. *Transcultural Research – Heidelberg Studies on Asia and Europe in a Global Context*, 65-86.
- [3] King, K. A. & Curdt-Christiansen, X. (2021) *Family Language Policy Foundations and Current Directions*. In *Multilingualism Across the Lifespan*. London: Routledge.
- [4] Melo-Pfeifer, S. (2015) *The Role of the Family in Heritage Language Use and Learning: Impact on Heritage Language Policies*. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 18(1), 26-44.
- [5] Barnes, D. (1982) *Nationalism and the Mandarin Movement: The First Half-Century*. In *Language Spread: Studies in Diffusion and Social Change*, edited by Robert L. Cooper. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- [6] Duanmu, S. (1999) *Stress and the Development of Disyllabic Words in Chinese*. *Diachronica*, 16(1), 1-35.
- [7] Kang, L. (2017) *Who is Foreigner: Study of People's Local Identity and its Factor in Big Cities: Shanghai as an Example*. *Journal of Huazhong University of Science and Technology*, 1, 58-67.
- [8] Ding, S. (2020) *On the Sustainable and Progressive Approaches to Protect Ethnic Language Resources in China*. *Journal of Minzu University of China*, 6, 167-173.
- [9] Melo-Pfeifer, S. 2015. "The Role of the Family in Heritage Language Use and Learning: Impact on Heritage Language Policies." *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 18 (1): 26–44.