Market Values and Expressive Registers: Some Thoughts on Collaboration between Indigenous Songwriters and Language Revival Movements in Taiwan

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In the run up to her second album release in 2012, talk show host and popular singer, Ado discussed her motivation for producing an album entirely in Sowal no 'Amis, one of Taiwan's indigenous languages. Market considerations push her and other Taiwanese indigenous singers toward the Mandopop market. While hoping that her album would achieve commercial success, Ado was motivated by another structure of values. How might it be possible, she asked (Pacidal, 2012), to participate in a globally circulating popular culture and remain 'Amis? Like several others in her cohort of indigenous singers in their mid-20s to 30s, she felt the urgency of this question within the limitations of existing movements for language revival. We might express her question more theoretically: given interlinguistic metapragmatic structures that mark indigenous languages as indices of “tradition” how might one produce a contemporary register within them as an indigenous speaker? Can the indigenous speak now?

As anthropologists working in the A'tolan 'Amis community, we situate this question within a wider framework that Tsai (2013) has called a culture trap: Efforts at decolonization notwithstanding, Taiwan's multicultural polity has tended to promote a surface expression of ethnic difference in which indigenous people cannot assert a contemporary form of indigenous citizenship or even domesticity. In public ceremonies and ritual, textbooks and tourism promotion, Sowal no 'Amis is a language of highly circumscribed public performances. Whether that performance is of compliance or protest (Lo, 2010), multicultural rhetoric and market values set the boundaries in which one might speak 'Amis. Taking off their regalia, 'Amis youth return to a Sinophone daily life. Even elders who struggle with Mandarin will speak it with young people once the festivities have ended. Collaboration between 'Amis songwriters and language activists might produce registers of Sowal no 'Amis that appeal to urban 'Amis youth. Yet overcoming the culture trap will require a structure of interests that can trump both economic rationality and other value structures, such as national identity, that compel Taiwanese indigenous people to speak Mandarin except when called to perform indigeneity in contexts set by the dominant society.

Sowal no 'Amis is one of ten extant Taiwanese indigenous languages, all of which belong to the Austronesian language family. The Taiwanese indigenous population is small (around 500,000 people) and divided into dozens of ethno-linguistic groups, of which the 'Amis (or Pangcah) are the largest group. The perhaps 50,000 of a total population of 160,000 'Amis people who speak Sowal no 'Amis speak five different dialects of the language. Even with some standardization, the target audiences for 'Amis media cannot support mass media without some subsidy. Linguistic differences among Taiwanese indigenous groups have thus often selected for pan-indigenous media in Mandarin, Taiwan's dominant language. Educational and public institutions reinforce the dominance of Mandarin, recent attempts at including indigenous language proficiency tests in the college or civil service selection process notwithstanding. The questions of these tests are often known in advance and are restricted to a narrow range of topics: another instance of being hailed to perform an indigenous identity subordinate to Sinophone society. Responding to the dominance of Mandarin, most indigenous parents primarily speak Mandarin with their children. Sowal no 'Amis thus has few fluent speakers under the age of 30.

Around A'tolan norms for code switching reinforce an ideology of Sowal no 'Amis as the language of old people. Middle aged men and women, content to speak 'Amis among themselves or with elders, will shift to Mandarin immediately when speaking to members of the younger generation, often within a single communicative context. They do not expect young people to speak 'Amis with any fluency. However, demak no niyaro’, literally affairs of the village but now meaning ceremonial contexts of village performance, such as the annual harvest festival in July, require use of Sowal no 'Amis in song, oratory, and socialization. Demak no niyaro’, of course, are “old”: they unfold according to traditional protocols. Hence the requirement that young people speak 'Amis in these contexts does not displace the dominant language ideology that consigns Sowal no 'Amis to elders.

Nonetheless, Demak no niyaro’ are also playful contexts of language transformation and pedagogy. The panemmemmay ritual on the second day of A'tolan's annual festival revolves around songs with improvised lyrics that discuss the land and people of A'tolan and a gossip game, in which satiric messages about senior men are transmitted from age set to age set, until they reach the mihining, a group of men at the cusp of middle
age who sit at the door of the men's house. These messages, which usually contain linguistic landmines such as suggestive puns, often reach the mihining's ears in mangled form; otherwise, the mihining may choose intentionally to bend the pronunciation for humorous effect when they shout them back at the senior men sitting at the far door of the men's house. Called to respond to the taunts of the young men at the door, one of the senior men gives a short oratory which cleverly explains the misinterpreted message. The explanations cover village history, the meanings of perhaps unfamiliar words from 'Amis oratory, and current affairs. The gossip game often includes cross-linguistic puns and introduces new uses for 'Amis words as well as “deeper” associations known generally only to senior men. Panemnemmay is thus a particularly ritualized form of language pedagogy and a sacred version of an 'Amis aesthetic of play practiced in everyday life.

In this presentation, we juxtapose the gossip game with the work of contemporary 'Amis songwriters, hoping to document the possibilities of both for the creation of what Errington (2003) has called “impure but authentic” registers of language use, which suggest to us a path out of the culture trap. However, we also wish to point out the vulnerability of the gossip game: an improvisational form that plays with language, it requires skills that the ritualization of 'Amis (and consequential disappearance of Sowal no 'Amis from everyday life) has eroded. The work of 'Amis songwriters to encourage fandom as a means to language revival through an ironic fetishization of indigenous languages (Hatfield, 2011), may suggest another medium in which indigenous Taiwanese languages circulate and maintain their relevance to 'Amis youth. Whether the projects of these songwriters will succeed, however, will depend upon the ability of these songwriters to situate their practices in relationship to everyday contexts of language use. Similarly, language activists will need to overcome their own compliance with language ideologies that valorize tradition.

References


