

Preface

My path to linguistics is inspired by my own rich linguistic experiences, having been born to a Hokkien-speaking family in Burma and raised in Cantonese-speaking Macao. Since my early days of majoring in linguistics, I have always been thinking of doing some research on, or related to, languages that formed part of my growing up experience. When I first applied to graduate school for my M.A. study, I tried to come up with such a proposal, but failed.

Later on my field trips to Yunnan around the mid-1990s, when I observed language shift from Prinmi (a Tibeto–Burman language of southwestern China) to Mandarin, I had a *déjà vu* feeling. I have witnessed language shift in my own family that happened years ago. The shift from a minority language, either an ethnic or an immigrant language, to the dominant language of society hence caught more of my attention. Sociolinguistically speaking, an immigrant language is much like an ethnic minority language when it is relocated to a new land, where the majority speaks a different language; it does not matter how many native speakers the immigrant language has back in the homeland. For more on this view and relevant issues, the reader is referred to *Education in Languages of Lesser Power: Asia-Pacific Perspectives*, edited by Craig Volker and Fred Anderson.

I am very glad that I finally have this opportunity to achieve the goal of conducting research related to my personal experiences. The kind of ethnolinguistic data presented in this book, especially that involving language use in the family history, does not come by easily. It is accessible to me mainly because it concerns me personally, an argument I advanced to convince some elderly families to recount decades-long ‘trivial’ details. I am grateful to them for sharing with me the early history of the family and my life. Through the writing of this book, which took me back to the Hokkien community in Rangoon more than half a century ago, I have understood much more the hardship endured by my grandparents’ and parents’ generations.

As this book looks beyond the Hokkien community in Rangoon, a journey is made to Singapore, Taiwan, and eventually southern Fujian, the homeland of Hokkien. These are the places that I have some direct knowledge about the use of

Hokkien via my observation in the past three decades. This span of time, aided by recent field trips to Singapore, Kaohsiung, Taichung, Xiamen, and Zhangzhou, enables me to examine the gradually proceeding language shift from Hokkien to other languages in these places. The Youngest Child Model, originally proposed for language shift within the immigrant family, has turned out to hold a wider scope of application beyond the family domain. It is employed in discussing various situations of language shift in Singapore, Taiwan, and southern Fujian.

I must express my special thanks to Mrs. Lam, the mother of my best Singaporean friend. This septuagenarian speaks perfect Hokkien, even though she has no familial connection to southern Fujian. The vivid memory of her childhood life has substantially informed me about sociolinguistic settings of overseas Chinese in colonial Singapore.

I would also like to thank Roselle Dobbs for her careful proofreading of an early draft of the first three chapters. Her comments have significantly improved the readability of these chapters. Likewise, Jamin Pelkey has offered his kind assistance to polish up the English style in Chap. 4. Moreover, my gratitude goes to two anonymous reviewers; their insightful and critical comments and suggestions on the manuscript have helped me to clarify those points made vaguely in the earlier draft. Of course, I alone take responsibility for any residual errors and problems that may exist in this book.

Finally, I thank the editorial team of Springer for their patience and colleagues who have generously granted me permissions to reproduce illustrations adapted from their publications.

Hong Kong

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Southern Min (Hokkien) as a Migrating Language
A Comparative Study of Language Shift and
Maintenance Across National Borders

Ding, P.S.

2016, XIV, 109 p. 20 illus. in color., Softcover

ISBN: 978-981-287-593-8