Language socialisation as social practice: Case studies of a Chinese Heritage Language School

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Case Studies of a Chinese Heritage Language School

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Abstract

In this paper, I use the language socialization approach to analyze the interplay of language learning and cultural development in a Chinese heritage language school where a group of middle-class Chinese Americans come together for various imaginations from widely dispersed suburban areas in Upstate New York. My focus is on how socialization through language and socialization to use language is embodied in the co-construction of teenagers’ language proficiency and cultural competence through learning of Chinese idiomatic expressions. Specifically, I use discourse analysis to discuss adolescent learners’ learning and use of these idiomatic expressions in two different settings: a standup comic in the Chinese New Year Party and a Chinese language class. In spite of some differences, these two cases offer some common implications for language education research. Firstly, learning and use of idiomatic expressions are intricately linked with cultural development. Secondly, learning and use of idioms might enhance learners’ ethnic identity. I argue that idiomatic expressions, as an important site of language socialization, will provide insights into language education research in general and heritage language learning in particular.

Introduction

This paper constitutes part of my dissertation project on Chinese American teenagers’ ethnic revitalization and heritage language maintenance. Let me first briefly say something about this project. Grounded on anthropological frameworks, my project aims to study the role of language in the process of positive ethnic identification for Chinese American adolescents, and how this dynamic identity construction, in turn, contributes to various patterns of language use and language learning. The focus group is second-generation Chinese heritage language learners in Upstate New York. From a language socialization perspective, my ethnographic study examines how these Chinese American youngsters are socialized through media, interpersonal contacts, and the Chinese heritage language school, as well as what is implied in regard to the formation of various levels of language competence and a continuum of “Chineseness” and

“Americanness”. My data is collected through both intensive case studies and extensive general studies. My preliminary evidence indicates that, on the one hand, it is the youngsters’ consistent learning and use of Chinese that enables them to be socialized through various contexts, which helps to establish various identities including ethnic belongingness; on the other hand, their strong ethnic identifications incline them to certain phenomenological experience, which in turn facilitates their learning and use of Chinese.

My main objective of this paper is to use the language socialization approach to analyze the interplay of language learning and cultural development in the Chinese heritage language school where a group of middle-class Chinese Americans come together for various imaginations from widely dispersed suburban areas. My focus is on how socialization through language and socialization to use language is embodied in the co-construction of teenagers’ language proficiency and cultural competence through learning of Chinese idiomatic expressions. Why I choose idiomatic expressions as the site of language socialization is two-fold: first, Chinese idiomatic expressions contain a lot of culture-specific meanings, which best demonstrates the indexical relationship between language and socio-cultural context (Ochs, 1996); second, there are few works that have addressed Chinese American children’s learning of these culture specific concepts, although some scholars, like Agnes Weiyun He (2000, 2003, 2004), have studied language both as target of socialization and as tool for socialization. Specifically, I’ll use discourse analysis to discuss adolescent learners’ learning and use of these idiomatic expressions in two different settings. One is a standup comic in the Chinese New Year Party; the other is a Chinese language class. While the first setting is concerned with how learners apply their pragmatic knowledge to use idiomatic expressions in a culture specific genre—Chinese standup comic, my second case is located in a more traditional language classroom where formal learning is involved.

Case 1: a Chinese standup comic
About four weeks ago, all Chinese around the world celebrated their traditional Spring Festival which initiates the Year of Dog based on the Chinese zodiac. My first example is from a standup comic, one of the performances at the school’s Chinese New Year Party. This performance is of particular interests to study the interplay of language and culture, because Chinese standup comic is a culture specific genre which requires both excellent verbal skills and cultural knowledge to achieve humorous effects. In addition, the topic of this comic is on dogs from which the Chinese language has so many idiomatic expressions. The following conversation is a short excerpt from this comic. Let us look at how students’ linguistic and cultural competences are embodied in their use of dog related expressions.

1   A：说到狗，今年是狗年，咱们得给狗讨个公道？
Shuodao   gou, jinnian shi   gounian, zanmen dei gei gou tao ge gongdao?
Speaking of dog this year COP dog year we   need for dog beg MSR justice
“Speaking of dogs, this year is the Year of Dog. We need to return justice to dogs.”

2  B: 不错，在中文里，狗字大多是贬义的。
Bucuo, zai zhongwen li, gou zi daduo shi bainyi de
Right in Chinese inside dog character almost COP derogatory EMP
“Right, the connotations of the character ‘dog’ are almost derogatory in the Chinese language.”

3  C: 不是吗，文革那时，大字报不是说你爷爷是不齿于人类的狗屎堆吗？(to A)
Bushi ma, wenge nashi, dazibao ni yeye shi buchi yu
NEG Q, cultural revolution that time big character flier NEG say you grandpa COP despise by
renlei de goushi dui ma
human beings POS dog shit pile Q
“During the Cultural Revolution, your grandpa was depicted as bad and worthless as dog shit on Big Character Fliers, wasn’t he?”

4  A: 那人家不也说你奶奶是落水狗，还痛打落水狗呢。(to C)
Na renjia bu ye shuo ni nainai shi luoshui gou, hai tong da luoshui gou ne
CONJ somebody NEG also say you grandma COP fall water dog also harshly beat fall water dog PRT
“You grandma was also called ‘falling water dog’ who was harshly beaten.”

5  D: 你别狗眼看人低。(to C)
Ni bie gou yan kan ren di
You NEG dog eye look person low
“Don’t despise people the same way as dogs look at people.”

6  E: 你怎么提那些事，狗拿耗子，多管闲事。(to A)
Ni zenme ti naxie shi, gou na haozi, duo guan xian shi
You how mention those thing dog catch mouse more care casual affair
“How come you mentioned those things? It is not appropriate to meddle into others’ affairs, just as it is not dogs’ business to catch mice.”

7  F: 你这是狗咬吕洞宾，不识好人心。(to E)
Ni zhe shi gou yao Lvdongbin, bu shi hao ren xin
You this COP dog bite Lvdongbing NEG recognize good person heart
“You are unable to recognize others’ good intentions, just as the dog bites Lvdongbin who is a good guy.”

8  A: 你这狗嘴里吐不出象牙。(to E)
Ni zhe gou zui li tu bu chu xiang ya
You this dog mouth inside spit NEG COMP elephant tooth
“You can’t say anything good out of your mouth, just as the dog can’t spit ivory out of its mouth.”
In this conversation, 6 students are talking about dogs or dog related issues. Student A initiates the topic of dogs (line 1), and student B notices that the connotations of dogs are usually derogatory in Chinese (line 2). To illustrate B’s remarks, student C gives an example that A’s grandpa was depicted as bad and worthless as dog shit in the Cultural Revolution (line 3). In response to C’s mentioning of A’s grandpa as goushi dui (dog shit), A fights back by giving another example that C’s grandma was harshly beaten like a falling water dog (line 4). Uncomfortable with C’s use of goushi dui (dog shit), student D told C not to despise people the same way as dogs look at people (line 5). Unhappy with A’s mentioning of C’s grandma being beaten dog like a falling water dog during the Cultural Revolution, Student E uses another dog related idiom-- It is not appropriate to meddle into others’ affairs, just as it is not dogs’ business to catch mice (line 6). Immediately responding to E’s comments on A, student F uses another Chinese idiom to criticize E—you cannot recognize A’s good intention, just as the dog bites Lv Dongbin who is a decent guy (line 7). This idiom implies that E has misunderstood A’s intention of using luorui gou (falling water dog) as an example to show derogatory meaning of “dog” in Chinese. In response to E’s blame, A teases back by saying—you can’t say anything good out of your mouth, just as the dog can’t spit ivory out of its mouth (line 8). Uncomfortable with all previous insulting remarks, student E proposes not to speak ill of one another just as dogs bite each other (line 9). In an effort to divert the current topic on negative meanings of “dog” to positive ones, student C claims that dogs are most loyal animals (line 10). However, student D clarifies the connotation of dogs’ loyalty by pointing out that they are walking dogs who always follow their masters, which again has derogatory connotations (line 11).

When I first saw their performance at the Chinese New Year Party, I was so surprised that these Chinese American youngsters could use so many Chinese dog-related idioms in such as a good way that they were like professional Chinese comedians. It turned out later that
these 6 students came from the most advanced Chinese class and this comic was written and directed by their teacher who is an expert in Chinese language and culture. I interviewed the teacher and got a lot of interesting stories behind this show. In regards to the idea of this special performance, the teacher told me that integrating dog related idioms into the standup comic is a perfect choice to help his students to learn Chinese language and culture. This is because “dog” is a very culture specific concept in Chinese, which has totally different meanings from English. In order to perform well, the students had to be familiar with the genre of standup comic and to understand all those idioms. These students had a hard time understanding why the character gou (dog) has so many different meanings in various idioms, the majority of which have negative connotations. The teacher spent a lot of time explaining this cultural difference. Since all of these idioms are metaphorical expressions, he also urged his students to not only learn them as functional units but also understand the culture-specific information carried by these idioms. In doing so, students were able to internalize the connections between the linguistic forms and their metaphorical meanings. I also asked one student’s feeling on her learning and use of these dog-related idioms. She told me that although it was hard to get the idea of what those idioms exactly mean at the very beginning, she felt very proud of manipulating her Chinese linguistic and cultural knowledge in the performance. As she said, “this is a fantastic experience, because learning these Chinese idioms is not only about learning language itself per se, but learning about, in my case as well as numerous others, one’s roots, one’s history”. In other words, these students’ ethnic identity is also strengthened by learning and use of these culture specific expressions.

**Case 2: a Chinese language class**

Different from the previous case, my second example is from a language class where the teacher asks her students (3-4th grade) to speak out all four-character Chinese idioms they have learned, and almost every student comes up with at least one idiom. This conversation starts when a boy brings up a new idiom yuexia laoren (old man under the moon light). Let us look at how different learning processes are involved.

1. **S1:** 哦, 月下老人。
   *O, yue xia laoren
   PRT moon under old person*

   “Eh, old man under the moonlight.”

2. **T:** 月下老人？你现在是需要月下老人的吗？月下老人的意思你知道吗？
   *Yue xia lao ren? Ni xianzai xuyao yue xia lao ren ma?*
   Moon under old person You now need moon under old person Q

   Yue xia lao ren de yisi ni zhidao ma?
   *Yue xia lao ren de yisi ni zhidao ma?*
   Moon under old person POS meaning you know Q?

   “Old man under the moonlight? Do you need old man under the moonlight right now? Do you know the meaning of ‘old man under the moonlight’?”
3  S1: 我是随便听到的。
Wo shi suibian ting dao de
1 EMP incidentally hear COMP EMP
“I heard it by chance.”

4  T: 他不知道月下老人的意思，因为他现在还不需要月下老人。你们知道月下老人的意思吗？
Ta bu zhidao yue xia lao ren de yisi, yinwei ta xianzai hai bu xuyao yue xia lao ren
He NEG know moon under old person POS meaning cause he now yet NEG need moon under old person
Nimen zhidao yue xia lao ren de yisi ma
You know moon under old person POS meaning Q
“He didn’t know the meaning of ‘old man under the moonlight’, because he doesn’t need old man under the moonlight right now. Do you guys know the meaning of ‘old man under the moonlight’?”

5  (silence)

6  T: 不知道。以前，在很久很久以前，中国的男人和女人是不能见面的。他们的结婚，他们的结婚一定要通过媒人。。。
Bu zhidao. Yiqian, zai hen jiu hen jiu yiqian, zhongguo de nanren he nvren shi bu neng jianmain de
NEG know Before in very long very long before China POS men and women EMP NEG Can meet EMP
Ta men de jiehun yiding yao tongguo meiren
they POS marriage certainly require through intermediary
“You don’t know. Lon long time ago, Chinese men and women were not supposed to meet each other. Their marriage had to be instigated by an intermediary (Meiren).”

7  S2: What? Television?

8  T: 媒人哪。媒人，不知道？就是说专门管结婚的人。要介绍。。。
Meiren na. Meiren, bu zhidao? Jiu shi shuo zhuannmen guan jiehun de ren
Intermediary EMP Intermediary NEG know EMP COP say specifically manage marriage POS person
Yao jieshao
Need introduce
“It is intermediary. Do you know intermediary? That is to say, they are specialized in managing marriage. They need to introduce…”

9  S3: （in English but unclear）

10 T: 然后呢，媒人把男孩的情况介绍给女孩，把女孩的情况介绍给男孩。然后把他们牵起来，成为一对夫妻。
Ranhou ne, meiren ba nanhai de qingkuang jieshao gei nvhai ba nvhai de
Then PRT, intermediary PTP boys POS background introduce PRT girls PTP girls POS
qingkuang jieshao gei nanhai. Ranhou ba tamen qian qilai chengwei yi dui fuqi
background introduce PRT boys. Then PTP they connect COMP become one MSR couple.

“Then, the intermediary introduced boys’ background to girls and girls’ background to boys, and then connected them together to become a couple.”

11 S1: 哦。
O
PRT
“Eh.”

12 T: 而这些人呢，有的是职业性的。如果不是职业性的，就称他们是月下老人，懂了吗？
Er zhexiong ren ne, youde shi zhiyexing de. Ruguo bu shi zhiyexing de, CONJ these person PRT some COP professional EMP If NEG COP professional EMP
Jiu ba tamen chengzuo shi yue xia lao ren, dong le ma?
CONJ PTP they call COP moon under old person understand PERT Q
“Among these people, some are professional. If not professional, they are called ‘old man under the moonlight’. Got it?”

13 Sa: 嗯。
En
PRT
“Eh.”

14 T: 所以你现在还不需要请月下老人。你还小，ok?
Suoyi ni xianzai hai bu xuyao qing yue xia lao ren. Ni hai xiao, ok
So you now yet NEG need invite moon under old person You still young ok
“So you don’t need to invite an old man under the moonlight. You are still young, ok?”

15 Sa: 哈哈哈哈。。。。
Hahahaha……
“Hahahaha……”

16 T: 如果找不到女朋友，我来帮你做月下老人，好吗？
Ruguo zhao bu dao nv pengyou, wo lai bang ni zuo yue xia lao ren, hao ma
If look NEG COMP girl friend, I come PTP you be moon under old person, good Q
“If you can’t find a girlfriend, I will come to be your old man under the moonlight, ok?”

17 Sa: 哈哈哈哈。。。。
Hahahaha……
“Hahahaha……”
This conversation shows a clear example of how socio-cultural information is conveyed when the teacher explains the meaning of an idiom *yuexia laoren*. First, she introduces another culture-specific concept *meiren* by providing the larger background that ancient Chinese men and women were not supposed to meet each other as in line 6. Next, she explains the role and responsibilities of *meiren* as in line 8 and 10. Then, she clarifies the relationship between *meiren* and *yuexia laoren* as in line 12. Finally, she relates this concept to S1’s personal life as in line 14 and 16. Although the students are able to have a general idea of what socio-cultural information this idiom carries, the teacher does not give further explanations on how the literal meaning (old man under the moonlight) is connected with the metaphorical meaning (unprofessional intermediary). Another issue worthwhile to mention here is that the teacher is trying to inculcate traditional Chinese values in her students. For example, in line 2, she shows her surprise at hearing this idiom by using three consecutive questions, which implies that Chinese boys are not supposed to talk about dating or marriage at such a young age. And she emphasizes three times (line 2, 4 and 14) that S1 is too young to need *yuexia laoren*. And finally, she volunteers to find a girlfriend for S1, which again implies another Chinese practice that it is usually parents or other senior people who instigates marriage. Students’ feedback also reflects this socialization process. Since romance is a sensitive topic for Chinese teenagers, these students respond to the teacher either with laughter (line 15 and 17) or a simple word *eh* (11 and 13). By contrast, they were actively involved in the brainstorming of Chinese idioms before *yuexia laoren* comes to the place. In other words, the teacher and her students are involved in a process of constructing and negotiating culture specific meanings carried by this idiom, which in turn leads to socialization of traditional Chinese values and beliefs.

**Discussions**

These two cases demonstrate different processes of language socialization. First of all, the former case involves a deliberately prepared Chinese standup comic where a number of dog-related idioms are used to achieve certain effects expected by this culture specific performance, whereas the latter one takes place in a natural setting where the teacher and her students co-construct the meaning of one idiomatic expression in a language class. Secondly, while the students in the first case understand the connections between literal meanings and metaphorical meanings of those idioms, the students in the second case pick up the culture specific idiom as a functional unit. This is probably due to different levels of cognitive and linguistic development. In the first case, the students (11-12th grade) are involved in a process of conceptual socialization (Kecskes, 2003) that is one step further beyond language socialization. In other words, these advanced Chinese learners are able to internalize the socio-cultural information implied in those Chinese idioms and to use metaphorical thinking in new circumstances. By contrast, those students in the second case (4-5th grade) are too young to capture the metaphorical information derived from the
literal meaning. It is more appropriate for them to just get a rough idea of the meaning of an idiom by providing some general cultural background.

In spite of the above differences, these two cases offer some common implications for language education research. Firstly, they indicate that learning and use of idiomatic expressions are intricately linked with cultural development. This is because Chinese idiomatic expressions are metaphorical language, which requires deciphering the indexical relationship between the linguistic form and its socio-cultural meaning. Secondly, both cases suggest that learning and use of idioms might enhance learners’ ethnic identity, especially when those idioms have some relevance to their own life. For example, in the first case, Chinese American teenagers are proud of being Chinese comedians by applying various dog-related idioms in a comic when celebrating the Year of Dog. The second case also shows that S1’s identity as a young Chinese boy is constructed by the teacher’s explanation of age-appropriate behavior in relation to yuexia laoren and other students’ laughter. Last but not the least, they show language socialization not only as a process but more important as a set of social practices—how learning takes place in and through language regardless of the setting (language classrooms or Chinese New Year Party). In both cases, learning and use of Chinese idiomatic expressions are embedded into wider social practices of talking, doing, seeing, listening, valuing, and interacting.

Conclusion
To sum up, in this paper I have used two different cases to show how the symbiosis of language acquisition and cultural development is embodied in learning and use of Chinese idioms. I argue that idiomatic expressions, as an important site of language socialization, will provide insights into language education research in general and heritage language learning in particular.

Appendix A: Transcription Symbols

A--F  6 performers in the standup comic
S--S3 3 students in the Chinese Class
Sa  all students in the Chinese class
T  the teacher of the Chinese class

Appendix B: Grammatical gloss

COMP  directional or resultative complement of verb
CONJ  conjunction
COP  copula
DUR  durative aspect marker
EMP  emphatic marker
LOC  locative marker
References


