

# Research on the paths of minority language inheritance in southwest China from the perspective of language ecology

Chunyan Zhang

Language and Language Education Research Center, Central China Normal University, Wuhan, Hubei, 430070, China

**Keywords:** language ecology; ethnic minority; Language inheritance

**Abstract:** National language and culture need to be inherited. Clarifying the practical strategies and paths for scientific protection and inheritance of minority languages is a powerful measure to promote the protection of minority languages. Based on the perspective of language ecology, this paper discusses the status quo and significance of minority language protection and inheritance from the perspective of the relationship between language essence, value and language ecological elements, and in combination with the language reality of the Miao people in Yunnan. On this basis, we clearly point out that bilingual education reform and information technology empowerment are the path to effectively protect the inheritance of minority languages. Linguistic ecology provides a new perspective for the study of minority languages, and there is a long way to go in protecting and inheriting minority languages.

## 1. Introduction

China is a multi-ethnic country, and most ethnic groups have their own languages.[1]Language is the product of human evolution. Like biological ecosystems, language ecosystems have similar isomorphic relationships, which are affected by both external and internal environments. Language is people's realistic consciousness and has important cultural value [2]. Language is the symbol of national existence and the most important culture of a nation. The languages and cultures of all ethnic groups are rare treasures of human beings, and also the wealth that we should attach importance to and vigorously protect. At present, about 60 million ethnic minorities in China use their own languages, accounting for more than 60% of the total population of ethnic minorities [3]. Specific to different nationalities, the differences are huge. Minority languages have emerged and developed in the long historical development process. As an important aspect of intangible cultural heritage, language has very important value and significance[4]. However, due to the impact of various mainstream and non mainstream cultures, powerful languages, globalization and the Internet on the excellent traditional culture of ethnic minorities, the protection and inheritance of ethnic languages are worrying [5]. On February 21, 2019 (International Mother Language Day), the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, the UNESCO Representative Office in China, the National Commission for UNESCO of China and the National Language and Literacy Commission jointly held a press conference in Beijing, China, The Yuelu Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of World Linguistic Diversity, the first important permanent document of UNESCO with the theme of "protecting linguistic diversity", was officially released. Since then, the relevant departments of the Chinese language protection project have further effectively carried out language protection related work and made certain achievements under the guidance of "scientific protection of national languages". Among them, minority language protection is the top priority of the "language protection project". With the development of the new era, the protection of minority languages has become an important issue in China and even in the world. Therefore, how to protect and inherit minority languages is still, and will certainly become, the focus and core of national language work.

Haugen defines language ecology as "interactions between any given language and its environments"[6]. Feng Guangyi also pointed out that the core issue of language ecology research is "the interaction between language and environment" [7]. Salikoko pointed out, Voegelin and

Haugen were the first scholars to use ecology to express the social environment in which a language is used. [8]From the perspective of language ecology, minority languages are mainly affected by and interact with language users, language and cultural ecological environment, the development of the times, national language research activities and other factors. In addition, such elements in the language ecosystem as nationality, society, culture, politics, region, era background, language users, language occurrence environment, etc. will affect the use, protection and inheritance of minority languages. China is a multi-ethnic and multilingual country, with 56 nationalities using more than 130 languages. From a macro perspective, the use of minority languages in China is generally good, and most ethnic minorities have been using their own languages [9]. However, the inheritance of minority languages still faces severe challenges. At present, the emergence of the ecological crisis of minority languages in China is directly related to the decline of the quality of education in China and the reduction of the number of users in minority areas. Based on this, this paper discusses the inheritance paths of minority languages from the perspective of language ecology.

## **2. The relationship between the nature, value and ecological elements of language**

We are very familiar with language, and everyone can't live without it. Just like painting, art, architecture, literature and other ideologies, language is the most important expression of human feelings and thoughts, and an important form and way of transmitting culture. In the process of language communication, it not only plays the role of communication, but also conveys cultural connotation and civilization wealth. [10]Language is the medium of mutual understanding. Only through language communication can human beings reach consensus. China, as a multi-ethnic country, is rich in language resources, and the language ecological environment is extremely complex and changeable. In China, with the development of social economy and the improvement of living standards, people of all ethnic groups can speak fluent Chinese. What is valuable is that most of them still use their own national language. They are bilingual people. They will encounter confusion in language choice in daily communication, and show contradictory and complex emotions or attitudes in language use. Language is not only the inheritance of culture, but also the inheritance and accumulation of history. During thousands of years of cultural heritage, language has collected and recorded cultural and historical information, which is passed down from generation to generation through word of mouth. To communicate effectively with all nationalities and countries through language or non language forms, to resolve conflicts, seek and reach consensus, and then establish a cooperative, orderly and win-win community of common destiny to promote the common progress of human society. Generally speaking, language can be effectively protected and inherited especially when language users have the awareness of protecting and inheriting the language, have a good language use environment, have a great impact on the development of the times, and have more in-depth and extensive language research activities.

In the middle and late 20th century, the ecological worldview gradually became a new thinking method and research paradigm frequently used by scholars in sociology, anthropology and other fields, and linguistics was inevitably deeply affected [11]. Linguists put linguistics in an ecological and cultural environment and use ecological principles to research language dynamically. In this way, the interdisciplinary language ecology integrated with ecology was born. Linguistic ecology is a discipline with linguistic ecology or ecological language as its research object.[12]The interaction between language and environment can also be studied in the fields of ethnography, anthropological linguistics and sociolinguistics. At present, the relationship between language and environment has covered almost all social and environmental factors related to the existence and development of a language, such as regional natural environment, culture, economy, politics, speaking field, language people, language attitude, language education, etc.

## **3. Discuss the status quo and significance of minority language protection and inheritance in combination with the actual situation in Yunnan**

Among the 55 ethnic minorities in China, only the Hui and Manchu use Chinese as their

common language. Other ethnic minorities have their own national languages. Minority languages are different from Chinese in terms of expression, pronunciation and culture, and contain rich cultural connotations, such as stories, philosophies, legends and moral concepts. Due to the limitation of population and other factors in language inheritance and dissemination, some national languages are on the verge of being lost. In the process of China's modernization and urbanization, the continuous integration and exchange of people, logistics and information flow has led to an increasingly prominent demand for language universality. Therefore, in the competition between national languages and national lingua franca, non national lingua franca has become a weak language and is gradually declining, endangered or even dying out. This is a development trend that is not based on human will. This trend is a common problem that all multi-ethnic countries in the world will face. It can be said that the current situation of the development of Chinese minority languages is not optimistic, and there are the following development difficulties. First, the imbalance of educational development. Second, the awareness of personal language protection is not strong. Third, the scope of use has shrunk. Under the situation of economic integration and language convergence, minority languages are facing an unfavorable living environment, which further increases the difficulty of protection and inheritance. The focus of language protection lies in the active protection of language, that is, how to let the young generation continue to use the national language, and how to let the language serve the national development. In the process of inheriting and protecting minority languages, we should strengthen the inheritance and protection of minority languages, deeply tap the national cultural value behind the language, combine the national cultural content, use the national cultural connotation, draw nutrition from the national cultural literature works and film and television works, expand the inheritance channels, and effectively develop and use the precious wealth contained in national culture. Table 1 shows the statistics of mother tongue use of different age groups in four Micha villages in Yunnan Province, where we are currently investigating.

Table 1 Statistical table of mother tongue usage of the Micha people(a branch of Yi ) in different age groups in 4 villages of Yunnan province(N=130)

Age bracket	Sample	Skilled	Common	Difficult to say	Can't say
7-17 years old	27	17	7	2	1
18-40 years old	41	40	0	1	0
41-65 years old	49	49	0	0	0
Over 66 years old	13	12	1	0	0

It can be seen from Table 1 that 7-17 year olds have appeared people who can understand and can't speak and can't speak at all. In fact, these places have always been recognized as areas where the diversity of minority languages is well maintained. There is no doubt that the extinction crisis faced by minority languages is influenced by other factors besides their own language development rules. In today's society, with the rapid economic development, many kinds of resources in ethnic minority areas have been developed to develop the economy, which has made great changes in the natural ecological environment of these ethnic minority areas. China is a multi-ethnic, multilingual and multilingual country with many nationalities, languages and written languages. In addition to the Han nationality, there are 55 ethnic minorities whose ethnic composition has been determined, accounting for about 8% of China's total population. In ethnic minority areas, people communicate and communicate their feelings through their own unique language full of ethnic plots. In the development and change of the times, making full use of new media technology to spread international culture will inevitably have a certain impact on the inheritance of minority languages. Therefore, maintaining and strengthening the inheritance of minority languages is conducive to promoting national unity and protecting the feelings of ethnic minorities. In the study of language protection and inheritance, we should consider various language ecological factors and pay attention to the language habits of language users.

#### 4. Bilingual education reform and information technology empowerment are conducive to ethnic language inheritance

##### 4.1 Strengthen and reform bilingual education, improve the awareness of minority language protection

Bilingual education helps to cultivate the inheritors of national traditional culture, and also undertakes the function of national cultural inheritance, especially for the inheritance and development of traditional culture of ethnic groups with small populations. Bilingual education is of great significance for language protection and cultural heritage. Its purpose is not only to enable students to learn professional knowledge, improve their educational level and cultural quality, but also to solve the problem of national language and cultural heritage, so that minority students can better understand national traditional culture through learning two languages [14].

In daily life and work, ethnic minorities should strengthen the inheritance of their own languages. Encourage young people to actively learn and use their own mother tongue, link the development of their own national language with the development of other national languages, and do a good job in the inheritance of their own national language. At the same time, the protection and inheritance of language largely depends on policies. Since 1949, China has introduced a series of ethnic and language policies to protect minority languages, actively exploring and implementing "bilingual" teaching. The language policy of "all ethnic groups have the freedom to use and develop their own national languages" reflects the scientific approach to the development of minority education, but it is also an important way to protect and inherit minority language and culture. Relevant personnel should improve the quality of bilingual education, establish a characteristic eco-tourism area with minority languages as the carrier, and protect minority languages by adopting diversified inheritance methods such as oral inheritance, written inheritance, media inheritance, and action inheritance. We will make great efforts to improve the ability of minority language teachers, attach importance to the pre-service, in-service and in-service training of minority language teachers, and make minority language teachers become language disseminators and researchers with a sense of national pride. At the same time, it is necessary to innovate the teaching methods of minority languages, constantly improve the traditional teaching mode, optimize the teaching system with new technologies and processes, improve the teaching quality, and promote the inheritance and protection of minority languages. Table 2 shows the number of students in Ma'an Primary School, a rural primary school attended by ethnic groups in the Micha people inhabited area of Yunnan, China, in 2022.

Table 2 Statistics of "Students in School" of Ma'an Primary School in 2022-2023 Academic Year

Grade	No. of classes	No. of Ss enrolled	No. of boarding students	No. of transferred students	No. of non local students
Preschool class	1	12	0	0	0
Grade 1	1	11	7	0	0
Grade 2	1	15	11	0	0
Grade 3	1	14	7	0	2
Grade 4	1	9	8	0	0
Grade 5	1	12	10	0	0
Grade 6	1	14	10	0	1
Total	7	87	53	0	3

Ma'an Primary School is a rural primary school located in the mountainous area where the Yi( the Micha people) live. There are 12 full-time teachers and 1 temporary worker, including 8 men, 5 women, 6 Han, 3 Yi, 3 Miao and 1 Lisu. Table 2 shows that there are 87 students in Ma'an Primary School, 55 students in residence and 3 people from other places. At present, there are Yi, Han, Lisu and Miao students in school. Instead of using the local national language Yi, students communicate in the national common language or local Chinese dialects. Our survey also shows

that the local minority people have insufficient knowledge of protecting and developing their own languages, and teachers do not have Yi-Chinese bilingual ability due to their lack of Yi language ability. Therefore, from the perspective of language ecology, when we protect and inherit the minority culture and language, we must first start from the minority gathering places and minority schools and students, strengthen the ability of students and teachers to master the minority language, improve the influence of inheriting minority language, encourage teachers to innovate and optimize the traditional language teaching mode, and expand and inherit the local minority language through students, Empower minority languages.

#### **4.2 Information technology enables minority language inheritance**

Information technology empowerment refers to making full use of information technology and tools, and adopting various innovative methods to protect and inherit minority languages from multiple perspectives. From the perspective of linguistic ecology, ethnic minority individuals play a direct role in protecting and inheriting ethnic minority languages. At the same time, ethnic minority languages also play a communicative role in their social life. The influence of Chinese minority language ecology involves social, economic, cultural, religious and other factors. The development of science and technology and the popularization of Chinese as the mainstream media have objectively weakened the functions of some minority languages or changed the structure of the language itself. China is rich in language resources and complex in language environment. In the process of inheriting and protecting minority languages, we can make full use of the impact of the development of modern information technology on language inheritance, transform it into certain incentive conditions, and provide new practice space for strengthening language protection. At the same time, minority language researchers should use modern information technology to classify, sort out and standardize language materials according to the size of language materials, the dispersion of language materials and their different sources. In addition, the information environment such as network media language will inevitably have a great impact on minority languages. The information environment here refers to the way and channel that various TV programs, Tiktok short videos, etc. are affecting the learning and transmission of minority languages with the popularity of electronic devices such as TV, mobile phones, tablets, etc. If we can make full use of new media digital information technology to realize the digitalization of minority languages, make them become media languages that can be spread and used by computer networks, mobile Internet, etc., and make minority languages and cultures more widely and quickly spread, it will also greatly promote the inheritance and development of minority languages.

In general, the use of information technology in the new era can empower the inheritance and development of minority languages. We should make full use of information technology to establish acoustic databases of minority languages, corpora of endangered languages and cultural resources databases on the premise of ensuring the authenticity, accuracy, standardization and comprehensiveness of language data such as voice recordings and video recordings of minority languages. These databases have multiple language values such as archives, culture, politics, economy, information, scientific research and social values, and are the wealth of nations, countries and the world.

#### **5. Conclusion**

Language is an important form and way of transmitting culture. Language plays a role of communication in the process of communication, and it also symbolizes a nation's culture, history and civilization. Ethnic minority languages emerged and developed in the long-term production and life practice, reflecting and recording the historical traditions and cultural ideas of ethnic minorities, so they have high protection and inheritance value. However, with the development of China's economy, society and modern civilization, the living space of minority languages has been greatly threatened, and some minority languages are on the verge of extinction. Therefore, strengthening the protection of minority languages is not only a national issue, but also the key to maintain the diversity of languages in the world. At the same time, we should also be aware that the protection

and inheritance of language is a systematic project, which requires the local government, superior departments, experts and scholars from the academic community, the Language Protection and Development Association and the awakening of the language awareness of ethnic minorities themselves, and the joint efforts of all mankind. Minority languages must follow the laws of "natural selection" and "contextual adaptation". While respecting the right and freedom of individuals or groups to choose languages, they should give full play to their subjective initiative and actively protect and inherit minority languages. Finally, with the development of the new era, to do a good job in the protection and inheritance of minority languages, a large number of language workers need to go into the vast field, pay close attention to the ecological problems of minority languages, constantly explore more abundant forms of inheritance, and take practical actions to maintain and improve the language ecological environment of minority languages, so as to improve the quality of inheritance of minority languages.

## References

- [1] Zuo GM. Protection of minority languages from the perspective of linguistic ecology. *Guizhou Ethnic Studies*. 2018; 39(2):4.
- [2] Yu X, Peng X. Research and inheritance of Gan Dialect based on language ecology. *Journal of Jiujiang University: Social Science Edition*. 2019; 38(3):3.
- [3] Rao W-ZH. Ecology research on the protection and inheritance of Hakka Dialect in west Fujian from the perspective of Language Ecology. *Journal of Xinxiang University*. 2021; 38(4):4.
- [4] Zou XY. Language Investigation and language education planning in Chinese Dialect Areas from the perspective of language ecology. *Journal of Xi 'an International Studies University*. 2020; 28(3):5.
- [5] Bai XJ. Ecological reflections on the endangerment of minority languages in China. *Guangxi Ethnic Studies*. 2020; 156(6):8.
- [6] HAUGEN E. The ecology of language [C] // DILANWAR S. The ecology of language essays by Einar Haugen. Stanford: Stanford University Press. 1972: 325-339.
- [7] Feng GY: Introduction to linguistic ecology. People's Publishing House. 2013:12-14.
- [8] Salikoko S.M: Ecology of language evolution (Revised Translation). Commercial Press. 2017: 250.
- [9] Zhu YH. Analysis of the inheritance mode of minority languages in China. *Guizhou Ethnic Studies*. 2018; 39(3):8.
- [10] Zou XY, Chen JL. Tracking and prospect of language ecology research in China from the perspective of ecological civilization construction. *Journal of Shangrao Normal University*. 2020; 40(2):6.
- [11] Li WB. Ecolinguistics-based linguistic ecological niche construction. *Foreign Language and Literature*. 2018; 35(5):10.
- [12] Zhang YL, Feng GY. Some concepts of language ecology. *Hubei Social Sciences*. 2010 ; (9): 125-127.
- [13] Yang LY, Li JF. Current situation and development trend of Gelao Language in China, *Guizhou Ethnic Studies*. 2019; 40(6): 190-195.