Insider perspectives on indigenous social media and language/culture maintenance: A case study of WeChat use among the Naxi of China

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The Naxi of China

• Population: 520,000 (2010 census)
• Language family: Tibeto-Burman, Na (Jacques & Michaud 2011)
• Language vitality: Threatened/Vulnerable (Zhao 2012)
• FAMED conditions (Lewis & Simons 2015):
  - Functions: daily life in informal domains
  - Acquisition: oral transmission in home and community
  - Motivation: strong perceived benefit for oral use, less so for written
  - Environment: affirms oral use, but limited investment in written
• Differentiation: use of Mandarin creeping into informal domains

Do Naxi perceive ethnic social media as supporting their language/culture maintenance?

Results

Q1: Investment, functions, value of WeChat groups:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose for joining the group (n=168)</th>
<th>Most interesting topics (n=168)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maintain my “Naxi” identity</td>
<td>Meet Naxi workers, parents, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn more Naxi language</td>
<td>Naxi culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help young people to learn Naxi</td>
<td>Naxi pinyin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn more about Naxi culture</td>
<td>Naxi pinyin</td>
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</tbody>
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Research questions

Q1: How do users describe their investment in the groups, the functions of the groups, and the value of being part of the groups?

Q2: What role, if any, do members perceive the Naxi WeChat groups playing in Naxi language/culture maintenance?

Q3: What challenges and tensions do they identify in using the groups to reach their goals?

Conclusion

Summary of results:
• Naxi create and participate in Naxi WeChat groups because they want a vibrant, sustainable, Naxi-speaking community
• WeChat groups are perceived as supporting current levels of oral language functions, acquisition, motivation and environment
• Not widely perceived as encouraging Naxi literacy
• Concern about decreasing use of Naxi as groups grow larger

Further questions:
• What is the relationship between users’ perceptions of WeChat groups and their actual behavior?
• How can the Naxi encourage Naxi use in their groups?

Methodology

Online survey: n=89
• Procedure and sample: 38 questions (in Chinese), anonymous online survey
• Respondents: 84 language/culture, 26 village, 3 moderators
• Questions:
  - Q1: closed questions on Naxi use, attitudes, group purpose, topics, modes (Naxi recording, Chinese written, Naxi written)
  - Q2: Respondents evaluate WeChat group’s support for each FAMED condition, using 1-5 Likert scales

Semi-structured interviews: n=10
• Procedure, sample, questions:
  - Conducted in Naxi, translated into Chinese
  - 7 language/culture interest group members, 3 village group members
• Q1, Q2: Open-ended questions
• 11,000 words
• Analysis: "Imagined community" (Norton 2000): what kind of community the respondents aspire to join/create

References


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