Language Revitalization and Identity Politics: a case study of Siraya in Taiwan

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The Siraya people

- Out of 26 indigenous peoples (Austronesian), only 15 are recognized by the national govt.
- Siraya is one of the 11 unrecognized Ping-pu (low-land) peoples.
- Current Siraya population is around 6,000
- Location: Tainan County, Taiwan
Major historical events

- Dutch East India Company (1623 -1662): In 1661 Protestant missionary Gravius translated St. Matthew’s into Siraya.
- Zheng occupation (1662 - 1683)& Qing occupation (1683 - 1895): segregation policy; mass Han immigration from Mainland China, along came Southern Min and Hakka languages.
- Japanese occupation (1895 - 1945): segregation and then assimilation
The Siraya language

- Native speakers: 0
- Other languages in the region:
  - national lg - Mandarin (a.k.a. Chinese)
  - regional lg - Southern Min (a.k.a. Taiwanese)
- “extinct” or “dormant”
In Tavocan village, a Presbyterian community

Uma and Edgar

Has worked on Siraya revitalization since 1997:

(1) Onini band (since 1997)

(2) Musuhipapa summer camps (since 2002)

(3) Dictionary (Nov, 2008)
The Siraya Movement

- TPSCA’s language revitalization effort is part of the general Siraya Movement.
- The Siraya Movement is part of the Ping-pu Movement, which is an identity-based rights movement. Its goal is to attain official status for the low-land peoples.
Identity discourse - international

- Silenced (b/c Taiwan-ROC does not exist due to China-PRC’s pressure)
- E.g., UN
Hsieh (2006: 47-49)

Watan Baser was the first Taiwanese indigenous person who attended the 6th Session of the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations [in 1988]. Since 1997, however, Taiwanese indigenous peoples are no longer allowed to use the “Delegation from Taiwan” status.

Yahani Iskakavut, a representative to the 1996 WGIP delegation, detailed the event he witnessed. Chairperson Ms. Erica-Irene Daes called him to the platform, but first walked down from her seat and requested that Yahani delete the first section of the speech. Yahani refused. Yet, when he spoke, the UN’s official interpreter stopped translating his speech from the Chinese language to other UN official languages. That same day a Chinese government UN representative spoke publicly and asserted that Taiwan’s statement was irrelevant in any way to indigenous rights and that the statement was based on the “evil” and incorrect idea of separatism. China’s representative further stated that “Taiwan is a province of China, a fact that is widely accepted.”
Identity discourse - national

- Chinese nationalism (in Mandarin “Chinese” language)
- “We are all Chinese”??
Identity discourse - national

- Taiwanese nationalism (in Southern Min “Taiwanese” language)
- “We (except the Mandarin-speakers) are all Taiwanese”??
Identity discourse - local

- The Siraya people today are mostly in favor of Taiwanese nationalism because most locals do speak S Min, that is, the “Taiwanese” language, as their first language.
- Co-option can also provide an opportunity for negotiation: examples on the regional (Tainan County) level.
Naming the people

- The history of *fan/fwan-a* (“savage” in the Chinese languages). From “Formosan people” (Dutch) to “civilized/Hanized savage” (Qing) to “cooked savage” (Japan).
- Mr. Pan’s story. “We could be nice human beings, why would you want to be a savage?”
“I’d rather be a savage!”
Naming the individuals

- Han last name: co-option (as honor) and imposition
- Last name *Pan* (潘) derived from *fan* ("savage")
- Fake "family history book" - Chinese root (as part of the nationalistic ideology)
- Import of patriarchy
- Reclamation through self-naming
Diversity Within: an example of religion

- The discourse of “ONE = SAMEness” vs. “diversity within”
- Religion is often overlooked in language revitalization. But in many cases it in fact plays a significant role. In the Siraya case, religion affects people’s attitude towards language revitalization.
The Siraya Alizu religion

- **Alizu**: Native form, foreign (Han) interpretation
- E.g., generic term “alid” → the one highest “Alizu” above all Han gods, but hidden behind them as if it’s shameful.
- **Villages**: Soulang, Gabaswa, Danei
The Christian religion of the Siraya

- **Christianity**: foreign form; native interpretation.
- Role on language documentation & preservation
- Syncretism vs. fundamentalism: “Uma is our Inib!”
- Villages: Tavocan, Makatao
Summary

- **Alizu**
  1. Not so keen about lang revitalization b/c religion alone serves the identity claim.
  2. Focus on revitalization/ preservation of religious rituals

- **Christianity**
  1. Language revitalization as the main means of identity reclamation

- **Both of them call the god “alid”!**
Discussion and Conclusion

- Collective effort with honest appreciation of differences
- The “ONEness = SAMEness = WHOLEness” discourse is informed by Mandarin Chinese linguistic postulates. Siraya language actually enables us to talk about “collective effort” without privileging “ONE SAMEness” b/c Siraya has a mandatory verbal prefix *maki*- for any collaborative action that does not presuppose univocal consent from all parties.
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