

Standard-with-Dialects in the Mandarin Dialect Region: Diglossia and Language Choice in Xinle

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Abstract : Much has been written about the promotion of Standard Mandarin and the negative effects it may have had on the development of non-Mandarin dialects. Less discussed, however, is the fate of northern Chinese dialects that are only marginally different from Standard Mandarin and the effect Standard Mandarin promotion may have had on such dialects. In this paper, we seek to bridge this gap by looking at language preferences in the family and the generational differences that they reflect. Specifically, we survey Mandarin dialect speakers from Xinle county in Hebei province, whose local dialect is similar but not identical to Standard Mandarin. We sample more than 160 families with pre-middle school children and ask the parents a series of questions that probe language behavior, language ability, and language attitude within the family with regard to educating the young. Our study shows that although most parents still speak the Xinle dialect, Standard Mandarin has become the language taught to the majority of children. We also show that only one-third of parents choose to preserve elements of Xinle dialect in the language they teach to their children. We analyze the possible factors (e.g., subjective, geographical, social, and external) that influence language choice and show how these factors collectively contribute to the current state of family language choice for educational purposes. Finally, based on our findings, we offer recommendations for coordinating the promotion of Standard Mandarin and dialect preservation in similar Mandarin-speaking regions.

Keywords : Diglossia, language planning, Mandarin, standard-with-dialects

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