Chapter 8

One language, two systems: On conducting ethnographic research across the Taiwan Strait

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Abstract: Mandarin Chinese has been regarded as one of the most influential symbols of the cultural unity and cohesion of Chinese civilisation; however, a rather different picture unfolds when one is in China. Besides the presence of local variations of Mandarin as well as non-Mandarin dialects throughout the country, even the writing system, praised for its unchanged features across places where different dialects or languages are spoken, is not so homogeneous as it is often claimed to be. Building on my experience as a researcher travelling between Mainland China and Taiwan, this chapter will shed light on the challenges a researcher may face when conducting ethnographic fieldwork in a country celebrated for its cultural and linguistic continuity, yet divided by the presence of subordinated groups which use language as a way to assert their political identities. To reach this objective the chapter will look at language not as a mere coding system and manifestation of the culture of a nation but rather as a realm where power and politics intersect to serve the interests of a dominant group, and which may have an impact on the research process and outcomes.

Introduction

As a student in the Department of Oriental Languages and Civilisation at the University of Venice in the early 2000s, I became familiar with one of the world's most ancient civilisations by studying its main traditional cultural features, such as arts, literature,

philosophical thought, religions, and language. The last of these is definitely one of the most fascinating aspects of Chinese civilisation. Traceable back to the third millennium BCE, it has been regarded as one of the most influential symbols of the cultural unity and cohesion of this ancient civilisation (Norman, 1988: 1). This is particularly relevant if we consider the writing system. Indeed, Chinese ideograms are acknowledged to be a stable and unaltered system, independent of phonetic changes which may occur in different places and throughout history.

During my university studies, I was trained to regard language as a coding system and a manifestation of the cultural environment of a social group. I acquired information about the existence of dialects and minority languages. In a history course, I learnt about the colonial history of Macao and Hong Kong, and the special relations between Beijing and Taipei. Yet, framed as secondary themes within history and society classes, it was hard to gain an in-depth understanding of how these sub-groups could use language to claim their political identities in opposition to the official discourse promoted by Beijing. Furthermore, with increasing work and study opportunities in a previously sealed environment (the People's Republic of China, or PRC), most of my work and study experiences remained limited to the territory governed by Beijing, reinforcing, in this way, a knowledge of Chinese culture and society as it manifested itself in Mainland China (the PRC).

When I decided to move to Taiwan (Republic of China, ROC) thanks to a scholarship opportunity, however, a different social, political, and linguistic reality unfolded before my eyes, despite an easily identifiable cultural continuity across the Strait. If linguistic diversity reflects the language policies introduced in the last century by the governments ruling each side of the Strait, social and political differences could be explained in light of the opposing political ideology each government built on during the Cold War era. On top of this, a ban on social and economic exchanges across the Strait from 1949 until the end of the 1980s further increased the linguistic, social and political distance, which still exists to

this day. If, after the lifting of the ban in 1987, social and economic integration across the Taiwan Strait has increased exponentially, allowing more hybridity and fluidity between the two societies (Harding, 1993), the whole picture is problematised by the political interests which are at stake in cross-Strait dialogues.

Once in Taiwan, through the process of re-learning a language I had previously mastered and adapting to the new environment, I discovered that the image of China I had built through my university studies was an abstract and apolitical entity which reflected the position of the PRC, but did not consider the other Chinese identities which may or may not recognise their inclusion into the PRC. Consequently, I began to take a critical look at how these themes are addressed in courses on Chinese culture and civilisation in Western academia.

Against this background, the aim of the following chapter is to explore two main themes: the issues arising when conducting ethnographic work across social and political realities that are not sufficiently problematised within Western academia; and the strategies that seem to be the most appropriate for dealing with the linguistic problems engendered by fieldwork experience in this specific context. My main objective, throughout the chapter, is not only to problematise the process of doing ethnographic research in a cultural and social context where the operative language is not a researcher's mother tongue, but also to shed light on other implications that arise when language acquisition occurs in a teaching environment lacking a degree of reflexivity about how politics and power relations could shape the use of language in a society and how this could also impact the whole research process. This chapter is framed within socio-linguistic debates looking at language not just as a coding system, but also as a manifestation of social processes and political ideologies. In other words, the chapter discusses the complex ways in which power, knowledge production and language intersect during ethnographic fieldwork to shape the way research is framed and develops.

Theoretical framework: language, politics and power

Earlier theories of language, developed in the context of European Enlightenment, saw a close relation between language, community and place. Building on the notion of the Herderian Triad, these theories associated language to a specific national community to the point that an ideal model of society was seen as mono-lingual (Blommaert and Verschueren, 1992: 362). This conceptualisation clearly reflected the social and political changes that occurred in Europe in those years. Indeed, with the emergence of nation-states, language was used as a means to 'give identity and boundedness to each community' (Canagarajah, 2013: 21).

Yet, more recently, literary and cultural critiques have opened new paths of interpretation. Language is not anymore seen solely as a neutral feature of national identity, but it is critically investigated in its power to shape inclusion and exclusion and patterns of domination (Bermann, 2005: 4). Language is not just a coding system and part of the cultural heritage of a given society; it may also reveal significant details about political interests and the relationships of domination and subordination between social groups within that society (Diaske et al., 2016; Phillipson, 2007). As Edelman (1984: 46) points out, although language is not perceived as political at all, it is a manifestation of power and politics as it ‘structures perceptions of status, authority, merit, deviance, and the causes of social problems’. In a similar vein, Grillo (1989: 8-9) identifies two dimensions where power manifests itself through language: at the macro-level it is possible to explore how language is used by and can influence major institutional formations; at the micro-level it is important to assess how language is used by people in interpersonal relations to exert their power. For instance, the fact that certain languages are more acknowledged than others by the international community reflects the status a nation may hold in the hierarchy of power between nation-states. This affects people's everyday lives, as

individuals who can speak global or majority languages have considerable advantages over people whose mother tongue is not a major language (Craith, 2007: 2). In a study exploring the status of a few major languages within the European Union, Phillipson (2007: 70) asserts that there is a 'European linguistic apartheid', a de-facto hierarchy of languages favouring the exclusion of minority mother tongues from schools and public services. Similarly, within a national community, language policies favouring certain languages may tell us about the status of social groups speaking minor languages. Obviously, this is not just a one-way process, as social groups may also have a degree of negotiating power with respect to their governments. Taking the case of non-English languages within the United Kingdom, Grillo (1989: 106) argues for instance that Welsh, Irish and Scottish communities may use their native language as a way to define their national identity against the administrative, legal, social and economic dominance of the English language.

Applying these reflections to the specific case of the Chinese language, it is important to take into consideration how power and politics may significantly affect language choices at the national level and how social groups may respond to these. Narrowing down to the specifics of the cross-Strait case, this chapter will explore the reasons behind linguistic differences between the PRC and Taiwan and the impact this diversity may produce when scholars conduct research on both sides of the Strait.

Two systems, many languages?

Taiwan and Mainland China, divided (or brought together) by a stretch of sea, the Taiwan Strait, share certain ethnic, cultural and linguistic features. They are both populated by a majority of ethnic Han people, they are characterised by a prevalent Confucian culture and their official national language is Mandarin Chinese. Overall, after a

liberalisation of social and economic exchanges across the Strait, the two sides have never been as integrated as they are today (Harding, 1993; King, 2011). Yet, on closer view, it is clear that the two societies differ extensively from each other, despite these shared general cultural and linguistic features. As a matter of fact, the two sides of the Strait are not only ruled by different governments, holding antagonistic views with regard to each other's legitimacy over the Chinese nation and territory, but they also have gone through dissimilar processes of economic, social and political development, as a consequence of at least one hundred years of separate histories. These contradictions emerge clearly when looking at the use of the official language in its written and spoken forms, across the Strait.

On both sides of the Taiwan Strait, Mandarin Chinese is the official language. It is used for official dialogues, economic and cultural exchanges, as well as social interactions. If we look at the usage of Mandarin Chinese across the Strait, it may be hard to frame it within existing linguistic theory. A condition named ‘diglossia’, when different languages or different variations of the same language are spoken by a national community, has been identified in Mainland China and in Taiwan, due to the co-existence between Mandarin Chinese, local dialects and the languages of various ethnic minorities (Norman, 1988: 250). However, the fact that there are not substantial differences between the way Mandarin Chinese is spoken in Taiwan and in the PRC makes it hard to apply this concept to the use of Mandarin Chinese across the Taiwan Strait. Neither could the use of Mandarin Chinese in the cross-Strait context be framed within what Ferguson (1966: 310–311) has defined as a minor language or a language with a special status, or what Craith (2007: 10) has referred to as a minority language or a dialect, since on both sides of the Strait Mandarin Chinese is not only the official language but also the language of the hegemonic group, imposed on other ethnic and social minorities for decades. It is also difficult to look at Mandarin Chinese as an international or intralingual language (Ammon

1991, cited by Craith, 2007: 3), mainly because Taiwan only has de facto recognition as a state and it is difficult to address the cross-Strait case as an international relationship.

The truth is that, in its spoken form, there are not crucial differences between Mandarin Chinese in the PRC and in Taiwan. Yet, since Mandarin Chinese is written in an ideographic script, a division between spoken language and written form exists. In this way, despite a degree of continuity of oral Mandarin Chinese across the Taiwan Strait, difference exists in terms of written characters: while in Taiwan a traditional form was preserved linked to ancient characters, in Mainland China a simplified form of Chinese characters was introduced with the establishment of the PRC.

This differentiation is a consequence of decisions taken by the two ruling governments after the national territory was split into two parts, the ROC governed by the Nationalist government in Taiwan and the PRC governed by the Communist government on the mainland. Thus, while in Mainland China the Communist government pushed for a detachment from traditions and, amongst other reforms, introduced a simplified version of Chinese characters, which would favour the advance of literacy in society, in Taiwan the Nationalist government launched several assimilationist policies intended to transform the island into a protector of Chinese traditions and values. Traditional characters, still officially used on the island today, are a legacy of these policies and have gradually become an important element in asserting Taiwanese identity in contrast to the PRC.

The picture became even more complex after a shift of power that occurred in Taiwan in the late 1980s. With native Taiwanese people acquiring increasing control over national politics, a process of Taiwanisation led to greater recognition and tolerance of local languages (Scott & Tiun, 2007: 57). Consequently, local dialects and aboriginal languages, previously banned, acquired increasing recognition on the island (Scott & Tun, 2007; Norman, 1988: 251; Ramsey, 1987: 107). Clearly, the political implications of these new trends are not welcomed by Beijing as they challenge the status of Mandarin as the

national language and, above all, they threaten the ideal of ‘one China’ (Scott & Tiun, 2007: 59).

From this example, it is clear that language should not only be interpreted as a coding system or a manifestation of culture; it is also a realm reflecting the interests of states and relationships of domination and subordination between social groups. It is important, when learning the language and culture of a civilisation, to take into consideration these matters, as they may shape the whole understanding of that society. In the next section I am going to explore my experience with the Chinese language, especially in its written form, as a student, worker and researcher.

One language, two systems

During my university studies I learnt to read and write the simplified version of Chinese characters. In Western Academia, the teaching of simplified characters has become more prevalent as a reflection of the economic development of the PRC on a global scale. My guess at the time was that, once I had acquired a reasonable knowledge of Chinese characters in either their traditional or simplified form, switching to the other system would be unproblematic. Furthermore, I was confident I could overcome this problem easily thanks to a couple of courses on ancient Chinese that I took during my university studies. Yet, when I moved to Taiwan for the first time, faced with daily frustrations in recognising or writing even the simplest characters, I realised that to switch from one system to the other was not as straightforward as I had thought.

My mind was shaped into the simplified characters system and I faced difficulties in understanding the logics of the traditional one. I was obliged to attend beginner lessons, despite the fact that my oral language skills were too advanced for this. These technical problems also impacted on other practical spheres of my daily life. For instance, in an era in which mobile phones were a major device for communication, I found it hard to send

text messages as I was used to the Pinyin input method, commonly used in Mainland China, but not in Taiwan. Struggling with these practical issues, my whole confidence in using the Chinese language decreased considerably, as I could not recognise several ideograms on the news and on the street or when communicating via computer or sms with my friends and informants. This intersected with some differences in oral language. A number of expressions that are common in Mainland China are not used in Taiwan and vice-versa. This includes nouns, such as tomatoes (*xihongshi* in the PRC, *fanqie* in Taiwan), potatoes (*tudou* in the PRC, *malinshu* in Taiwan), as well as words that could generate rather unpleasant situations if used improperly; for instance, the term *xiaojie*, which in Taiwan is used to refer to a service assistant, may be offensive in the PRC, where it could mean prostitute.

The crucial point is that language, along with behavioural standards, may function as a symbol of national identity and could be used as a way to define the limit between those who belong and those who do not belong to the Taiwanese nation. For instance, using the word *fuwuyuan*, meaning service assistant in the PRC, may arouse some contempt from Taiwanese people, who would associate it with a manifestation of Mainland Chinese identity, which is stigmatised in Taiwan. Also, behavioural patterns which are peculiar to Mainland China are not applicable in Taiwan and vice-versa. For instance, being polite and gentle towards your interlocutor, an approach that generally is rewarded in Taiwan as it was influenced by Japanese culture in the first half of the twentieth century, is not so effective in the PRC. As Cargile and colleagues (1994: 227) point out, as a social phenomenon language may contribute to establishing differences between social groups when terminology, norms and conventions, which are developed and accepted within a given group, tell its members what is ‘right’ and what is ‘wrong’ within that community, and therefore who belongs and does not belong to the group. This is particularly important in the cross-Strait context. If I could overcome my insecurities related to oral Chinese

relatively quickly, it took years to gain a degree of confidence with reading and writing skills. Even after several years immersed in the traditional character system of Taiwan, my mind still finds it easier to identify simplified characters. Obviously, it was not only a matter of switching from one to another written or spoken code. The presence of linguistic differences, indeed, is only one of the several consequences of dissimilar political ideologies across the Strait, which may also include different standards of behaviour, cultural practices, national identities. These may in turn imply dissimilar ways of conducting fieldwork.

For instance, my identity as a foreigner who could speak Mandarin Chinese was perceived differently across the Strait. In Taiwan, a context characterised by freedom and democracy, my identity as a foreigner, along with my language skills, proved crucial in facilitating my access to informants, organisations, data and resources. Above all, as I was expected, as a foreigner, to face more difficulties with the language, my informants and interlocutors consistently showed great concern and patience towards me. Thus, this condition as insider (determined by my ability to speak their language) and outsider (as a consequence of the recognition of the fact that Chinese was not my first language) helped me considerably during my fieldwork in Taiwan.

However, this high degree of freedom and easy access to data and people, which characterised my fieldwork activity in Taiwan as a foreigner, did not occur in Mainland China. As a matter of fact, in the PRC my language skills did not help in a consistent way. Other important factors, such as personal relations, the legacy of the responsibility system, the political sensitivity of certain themes, could affect the success, or lack thereof, of encounters with my informants – to the extent that, in certain situations, especially outside the university environment, my language skills would turn out to be useless and my foreign identity would be perceived as a problem. For instance, seeing my frustration due to the difficulty of setting up an interview with a government official at the provincial level, one of

my Chinese colleagues reminded me that in this context, my identity as a foreigner could also hamper the success of my attempts.

The fact that my research interest, cross-Strait migration for marriage, could cross the line of politically sensitive subjects such as cross-Strait relations, could also contribute to the different challenges I faced as a foreign researcher in Taiwan and in Mainland China. From the perspective of Taiwan, cross-Strait marriage migration is treated as a cross-border phenomenon and it is believed to have an impact not only on the island's demographic, social and economic structure, but also on its future as a sovereign nation (Friedman 2010; Yang & Lee 2009). Despite the sensitivity of the subject, my research interest never became a problem when searching for data and for informants in Taiwan.

In the PRC, under the one-China policy framework held by Beijing, Taiwan is regarded as a province and cross-Strait marriage migration is regarded as an internal form of migration. As I was trying to investigate how cross-Strait families were included in the project of national re-unification and whether they could have an impact on cross-Strait peaceful development, it turned out to be difficult to have meaningful exchanges with my informants in Mainland China. The literature abounds with accounts explaining the challenges faced by scholars when trying to access data in the PRC, especially when a topic is regarded as politically sensitive (e.g. Xu et al., 2013; Liang & Lu, 2006; Polumbaum, 2014). Similarly, during my interviews, any time I asked about the relationship between politics and cross-Strait families, I did not get a reasonable answer beyond some arguments about the fact that marriage is about love and people and not about politics. Compared with the availability of information and informants in Taiwan, it was not easy to adjust to the sealed environment of Mainland China.

While the technical problems I faced with written and oral language at the beginning gradually faded away as I became more involved with my research, on the other hand, several other concerns gradually emerged related to the political nuances peculiar to

cross-Strait relations. As I suggest in the next section, this experience as a researcher between Mainland China and Taiwan may also help to raise some broader reflections on how knowledge production about China and the Chinese language within Western academia had been shaped by these logics.

Language, power and politics

Mainstream scholarship related to Chinese language and culture often lacks a critical dimension concerning how power relations affect the lack of visibility of certain ethnic or political groups within China. These logics also apply to the cross-Strait case. In a context in which the PRC, as a rising economic power, has greater recognition at the global level, the identity and perspective of Taiwan are often overlooked by mainstream literature on Chinese culture and society. In such conditions, as Dirlik (2004: 20) predicted, Mainland China has become a model for understanding Chinese culture at the expense of many other Chinese identities.

It has not been always like this. After the establishment of the PRC in 1949, when 'Communist China' became a sealed environment for most Western scholars due to its isolation (Polumbaum, 2014), knowledge production about Chinese society was based on studies carried out in cultural, political and social contexts that had little to do with the PRC. As a matter of fact, as the literature demonstrates (e.g. Thurston & Pasternack, 1983; Polumbaum, 2014: 191), many researchers used Hong Kong and Taiwan, or the PRC émigrés to these areas, as important sources for understanding China. Things changed after 1971, when Taiwan withdrew from the Security Council of the United Nations and lost its recognition as the legitimate government of China, and the centre of attention, and of most global economic and diplomatic exchanges, has gradually shifted to the PRC (Han, 1995: 173; Li, 2006; Bairner & Hwang, 2011). Since the open-door policy promoted by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s, foreign researchers have gradually acquired

access to an amount of information and sources previously inaccessible, and Chinese scholars have also had access to foreign universities offering important perspectives about doing research in the PRC (Polumbaum, 2014: 191; Thurston & Pasternak, 1983). With these changed conditions, nowadays there is a large amount of data on the PRC, available in both Chinese and English, to the point that the new challenge, for most scholars, is to keep up-to-date with this rapidly expanding scholarship (Polumbaum, 2014). On the other hand, most production on China and Chinese society reflects the social, economic and cultural context of the PRC.

Similarly, the development of a debate on methodological issues scholars may face during fieldwork often reflects the problems experienced in the PRC. For instance, if we examine contemporary literature on ethnographic work in Chinese cultural contexts, there is a great availability of material on the methodological and practical issues related to the political and social reality of the PRC (e.g. Cui, 2015; Dai et al., 2012; Hsiung; 2014; Klotzbuecher, 2014; Liang & Lu, 2006; Polumbaum, 2014; Smith, 2006; Turner, 2010; Xu et al., 2013). The context of Taiwan is often left unexplored.

The emergence of Taiwan studies as an autonomous discipline is a recent phenomenon. As Ohlendorf (2011: 218) explains in her work on the evolution of Taiwan Studies worldwide, the PRC was the first country in the world to institutionalise a field called Taiwan Studies with the purpose of supporting Beijing's nationalistic rhetoric about the island. This led to the evolution of Taiwan Studies globally, often as a distinct field from China Studies and, in certain aspects, subversive of the authority of Beijing. Yet, Taiwan studies still remains a niche subject.

I also was the product of a system which prioritised, without problematising it, the model of the PRC. Thus I learnt simplified characters and I familiarised myself with the historical, social and political issues of the PRC, leaving unexplored the other identities which remained under the shadow of Mainland China. Yet, once I moved to Taiwan, being

constantly immersed in discussions about Taiwanese identity and national sovereignty issues, I became more sensitive to the perspective of Taiwan and, eventually, I interiorised it. I gradually realised that the emphasis on shared cultural background or economic integration, typical of mainstream scholarship on Chinese studies, may be misleading, as there are several points of division within China, in general, and between the two societies that live across the Strait, in particular. These include Taiwan's struggles for recognition against the hegemonic power of the PRC and the fact that many amongst the Taiwanese population do not identify with the PRC and, instead, push for recognition of Taiwan's independence. The permanence of a traditional character system in Taiwan, as well as the different methods of phonetic transcription, are a consequence of a long-term history of cross-Strait relations as well as more recent concerns about national identity and sovereignty in Taiwan.

In short, I was not trained to think about an important dimension of the language I learnt, namely the political interests shaping language choice in China and Taiwan as well as language diffusion on a global scale. In terms of language learning, as a student of Oriental Languages and Civilisations, I was trained to regard language as a coding system and a manifestation of the cultural environment of a social group; I was not trained to think about it as a manifestation of power and politics. What this highlights is the importance of reflecting on and making explicit the logics of knowledge production, as this may help to shed light on issues and identities that otherwise would remain invisible in academic work.

Conclusion

Drawing on my study and work experience between China and Taiwan, this chapter has shed light on the difficulties and issues that can arise for researchers when working in a context characterised by cultural and language continuity, on the one hand, yet tainted by issues of national identity and sovereignty, on the other. As I have shown, I initially

approached the Chinese world as a student of Oriental Languages and Civilisations and I uncritically acquired the position of the PRC with regard to my understanding of Chinese society and culture. Yet, my decision to move to Taiwan opened up a new awareness with regard to what I learned throughout my studies.

The shift between simplified and traditional writing systems, as well as the different methods of phonetic transcription, constitutes the first challenge a foreign scholar may face when moving across the two societies. Yet, this is just the tip of an iceberg, a practical issue, which reflects other more important features, related to power and politics, and which need to be taken into account when conducting research across the Taiwan Strait.

In my first move from the PRC to Taiwan I faced the challenge of re-learning certain practical aspects of a language I thought I had already mastered. Yet, new concerns, questions and problems soon emerged with regard to knowledge acquisition. Not only did the social and political reality of Taiwan have little in common with the ‘China’ I learnt at university, but I also realised that the ‘subjectivity’ of Taiwan had remained unproblematised throughout my university studies in Italy.

More recently, as a researcher exploring the phenomenon of cross-Strait migration for marriage, I felt the urge to go back to Mainland China in order to understand more about the sending society's context. This entailed a number of new challenges. Going back to the PRC, the world through which I accessed Chinese culture and language the first time, proved relatively easy in technical terms. However, having lived for several years in Taiwan, it was difficult to recognise and adapt to the behavioural standards and language nuances peculiar to Mainland China. Moving between these two societies means adjusting each time to the cultural and linguistic standards that each social and political reality offers.

In conclusion, I faced three main problems while doing research between the PRC and Taiwan: the challenge of switching from simplified to traditional characters; the realisation that knowledge about Chinese language and culture in Western academia is based on the

model of the PRC and leaves other social and political realities invisible; the fact that, as language intersects with politics and power, it is crucial to understand these logics in order to make them explicit as part of knowledge acquisition as well as while conducting research. It is clear, from this account, that language for an ethnographer should not only be seen as a technical and cultural feature of a society, but also as a manifestation of the complex ways in which power, knowledge production and language intersect.

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