

Social Justice and Language Policy in Taiwan

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Introduction

Taiwan is a linguistically diverse country with a history of debates about language policy. Mandarin Chinese currently serves as the lingua franca for most Taiwanese people, with more than 95% of all Taiwanese citizens considering themselves to be proficient in Mandarin. Mandarin is also the first language, or “mother tongue,” of a number of Taiwanese, but it is far from being the most prevalent first language. That distinction belongs to the Min-Nan language, which is sometimes referred to as Taiwanese and is spoken by approximately 75% of the population. Another 10% speak Hakka, and a small number of people (less than 2% of the population) speak indigenous languages of Austronesian origin.¹

Since 1945, Mandarin has been employed as the principal language of public institutions. From 1945 until the 1980s, it was promoted very aggressively by government policy. Mandarin was taught in schools, used in government offices and other public institutions, and privileged in the broadcast media. At times, other languages have been actively discouraged, but since the 1980s there has been greater toleration of them and some willingness to consider their use by public institutions. In recent years, there have been several proposals to officially raise the public status of languages other than Mandarin.²

How should citizens and officials think about these proposals? Should Mandarin continue to be the sole official language of Taiwanese public institutions? Or should Taiwan elevate Taiwanese, and perhaps one or more minority language, to official status alongside Mandarin? My aim in this paper is to comment on this question from the standpoint of political theory. Since my perspective is very much that of an outsider to Taiwanese society, and since the right policy choice depends in any case on various empirical factors, I won't push very hard on a specific policy recommendation. My focus will be on using the tools of political theory to clarify what is at stake. In the process, I hope to show that those tools, while developed in the context of North American and European debates concerning language policy, are also pertinent in the Taiwanese context.

Political Philosophy and Language Policy

Political philosophers have tended to neglect debates over language policy, although this has started to change in recent years.³ Language policy choices are actually connected with some of the most fundamental questions in politics.

These include: How to encourage the formation of a single political community in which citizens feel a sense of connection and solidarity with one another? How to facilitate democratic participation and deliberation? How to promote conditions in which all citizens can enjoy equal opportunities? And how, and how far, to respect and make space for individuals and communities who want to pursue their own commitments and enjoy and express their own attachments in their

own ways? Depending on how these general questions of political philosophy are answered, various implications for language policy follow immediately or under particular empirical conditions.

Broadly speaking, it is useful to distinguish two competing principles of language policy. The nation-building principle calls on public institutions to privilege a common language to be shared by all citizens of the political community. This is the language to be used in government offices, by public officials, and in the courts, military and in public media. It is the language of public education and is expected to be the language used by major economic actors in conducting their business (in financial markets, large department stores, on the factory floor of big corporations, and so on). The nation-building principle can be pursued in a more or less liberal fashion. A liberal principle of nation-building is tolerant of non-public uses of other languages and offers assistance and accommodation to people who are still learning the common language.

The alternative to nation-building is the principle of plural language recognition (or *pluralism* for short). Emphasizing the idea of language *rights*, the pluralism principle calls for public institutions to create spaces and structures in which several different languages can be used. There might still be a society-wide lingua franca that all are encouraged to learn. But public institutions are designed and operated to promote and to accommodate the use of languages other than the lingua franca as well. The pluralism principle can be framed in stronger or weaker forms depending on how much deference is paid to the

distinct goal of creating a common public language. In its purest form, minority language recognition calls for rigorous equality in the recognition of different languages spoken by citizens, even if this means that no lingua franca is established. Weaker versions seek to balance the values associated with minority language recognition and those associated with having a lingua franca by offering some spaces and structures to citizens whose first language is not the lingua franca while still privileging the lingua franca in some respects.

Both approaches to language policy can appeal to ideas of social or distributive justice to justify their principles. The nation-building approach emphasizes the *instrumental* importance of language for distributive justice. From this perspective, although language policies and patterns of language use are not themselves a matter of distributive concern, these or other linguistic facts may be consequential for the distribution of that which does matter for justice. The pluralist approach, by contrast, attaches at least some non-instrumental importance to language. From this point of view, part of what *makes* a distribution just is that it appropriately attends to the interests that people have in the use, the success, and/or the treatment of their first languages.

The Instrumental Approach

An instrumental account of linguistic justice brackets the question of whether language is itself an object of distributive concern. It posits a language-independent conception of social justice, and then explores the ways in which

language diversity might help or hinder the realization of justice so conceived. There are a variety of different causal mechanisms that might link language and justice in this instrumental fashion. Some are broadly supportive of the nation-building principle. Others support, or at least are consistent with, the pluralist principle.

The pro-nation-building mechanisms include the following:

(a) *Social exclusion*. In a country like Taiwan, with a dominant lingua franca, a person would be at a serious disadvantage if he or she were not relatively fluent in Mandarin. Insofar as justice frowns upon such disadvantages, there is a justice-related reason to ensure that knowledge of Mandarin is universal. Policies that privilege Mandarin in public institutions are an effective means of advancing that goal.

(b) *Integration*. Language difference sometimes overlaps with, and seriously complicates, socio-economic difference. Where linguistic difference coincides with low socio-economic status, there is justice-based reason to avoid creating linguistically separate public institutions and practices. Insisting on a single language of public usage promotes the integration of all citizens into a single framework of socio-economic opportunity.

(c) *National identity*. In various ways, it is good for a society when all of its members share a common sense of identity – a sense of being a unified community or people who have strong obligations of social solidarity to one another. All else being equal, democracy should function better and people should be more willing to shoulder burdens on one another's behalf when there is a strong sense of common identity. Linguistic differences can impair the formation of such an identity, while the existence of a single common national language can encourage it.

Each of these causal mechanisms supports the hypothesis that there is an instrumental relationship between a nation-building approach to language policy – one that privileges a single common national language – and the realization of social justice.

There are instrumental considerations that pull in the opposite direction, however. Consider the following:

(d) *Bilingualism*. The social exclusion and national identity mechanisms are premised in part on the idea that there is a trade-off between fluency in the national lingua franca and public use and recognition of other languages. But of course personal bilingualism is a very common trait throughout the world. It is possible that a society could have a widely accepted lingua franca *and* still manage to give a place in public institutions to other languages.

(e) *Ethno-linguistic identity*. Just as people can speak multiple languages, they are also capable of having multiple identity attachments. A person could think of herself as both Taiwanese and as a member of a particular ethno-linguistic group. So, as with the point about bilingualism, there isn't necessarily a contradiction between promoting a strong sense of national identity and recognizing languages other than the national lingua franca. In fact, a person's sense of national identity might be *strengthened* by the assurance that the national framework recognizes and protects his or her particular ethno-linguistic identity. And national identity might be weakened by a widespread belief that it is in *conflict* with particular ethno-linguistic identities.

As this brief (and incomplete) list of causal factors indicates, the instrumental relationship between language policy and social justice is very complicated. There are different causal mechanisms and they can pull in different directions depending on specific empirical features of the society in question. It is certainly tempting to think that, on instrumental grounds at least, the nation-building project of promoting a national lingua franca ought to be the main concern of language policy makers. But three important qualifications need to be noted. First, while privileging a single lingua franca might advance important interests in equal opportunity and national identity, such an approach may not be the least burdensome means of advancing those interests. The interests may be

adequately secured through a policy that extends language rights to languages other than the lingua franca (that is, through pluralism). Second, the nation-building policy may actually be counter-productive from the standpoint of realizing the interests in question. As was just noted, it might be more promising to construct a national identity around linguistic pluralism.

The third point that needs acknowledging is that instrumental considerations may not exhaust the relationship between justice and language policy. There may be non-instrumental aspects of the relationship that matter too. It is to this question that I want to turn now. We shall see that there is indeed a non-instrumental dimension to linguistic justice and that once this dimension is appreciated any preference for nation-building needs further qualification.

A Non-Instrumental Framework: the Neutrality Model

How might language be considered an object of distributive concern in its own right?⁴ To begin with, we need to distinguish several different interests that people have with respect to language policy. One such interest is an interest in communication. If public institutions operate in a language that a person cannot understand or speak, then he or she is excluded and disadvantaged in a variety of significant ways. I set this interest aside, however, because I assume that, in a society such as Taiwan, this communicative interest is adequately served by use of the lingua franca Mandarin. If there is a justice-based reason for extending

language rights to other languages, it is not grounded in the communicative interest.

A second interest that does seem relevant for assessing language rights claims is the interest that people have in being able to access the particular options that they value. It is not unusual for people who belong to the same linguistic community to share preferences for particular options, practices, styles, and so on. Of course, co-linguists won't all share the same preferences, but the frequency with which certain preferences are held may be much greater within a linguistic group than outside of it. Think of the way that musical and culinary tastes tend to cluster around particular language communities. In general, people with preferences that are distinctive of their linguistic community have a good reason to care about the ongoing success of that community. The options they care about are more likely to remain available if their language community survives and flourishes than if its members assimilate into another language group.

A third interest that seems relevant might be called the "identity" interest. Many people care about their first language – that is, the language that they learned and used as young children. They self-identify with the (local) community of speakers of the language. They are proud of the language and of the cultural achievements that have been expressed through it. They take pleasure in using the language and encountering others who are willing to use it. They hope that their (local) language community will survive and flourish into the indefinite future.

In some contexts, they feel respected and affirmed when others address them in their language and denigrated when others use a different language. To say that a person has an identity interest is to say that she has an interest in the accommodation of some or all of these preferences and attitudes. And if she does have such an interest, it will clearly not be served by assimilation into some other language (e.g. the lingua franca). A person who identifies with her own language will be satisfied only by the success or respectful treatment of *that* language.

Now the mere fact that people care about their language – either for the options it keeps open, or because of its identity significance – is not sufficient to justify the claim that language matters non-instrumentally to justice. People care about all sorts of things: the car they drive; the clothes they wear; the home they live in; the company they keep; and so on. Theorists of justice would not normally single out the make of the car a person drives as an object of distributive concern just because it is something that some people happen to value.

The bridge between the second and third interests and justice is provided by the idea of state neutrality. Just because the options a person cares about are unavailable does not by itself imply any injustice to that person. Nor need there be an injustice whenever public institutions fail to accommodate some aspect of a person's or a group's identity. But people do have a complaint of injustice when public institutions treat the things that they care about non-neutrally – that is, when they impose more burdens on, or extend fewer benefits to, the pursuit of

their conceptions of the good life than they do to the conceptions that matter to other people. When the state is non-neutral in these ways, it fails to give its citizens a fair opportunity to realize their conception of the good life.

So to recap: individuals have option- and identity-based interests in the public use of their first languages. And they have a claim of justice that these interests be treated neutrally by public institutions. But what does neutral treatment imply for language policy?

Two main answers are worth comparing. According to the first, the state treats the linguistic preferences of its citizens neutrally by siding with none of them. A language is selected for public use that is not anyone's first language, and then none of the languages that are first languages are given any rights to public use. This is roughly the idea behind the recurrent proposal to use a made-up language like Esperanto in European or even global institutions. Since Esperanto is nobody's first language, it is said to be equally inconvenient for everyone. People can continue to use their first language in private contexts, but nobody enjoys the advantage of having their first language adopted for official usage.

The other possible answer is the neutrality requires that the state provide evenhanded, positive support to each of the first languages spoken by its citizens. This is the form of neutrality that is realized when public parks are equipped with a variety of different sporting and recreational facilities, depending on the different preferences and needs of members of the community. The idea

is not to treat all fairly by giving nobody what they want, but to treat each fairly by giving each a fair share of resources and support customized to their particular preferences and needs. In the area of language policy, this approach means extending equal positive recognition to the various first languages spoken by citizens. Such recognition makes it possible to receive government services in one's first language, to send one's children to school in that language, and to participate in public institutions in that language. I won't try to argue it here but I have explained elsewhere why I think that *equal* recognition has to be understood in a pro-rated way: the resources that are devoted to a particular language appropriately depends on the number of speakers of that language and the preferences of those speakers.⁵

Language Justice and Taiwan

In Taiwan, the pre-eminence of Mandarin has been justified on both instrumental and non-instrumental grounds of justice. Instrumentally, the argument is that the privileging of a single dominant language connects all citizens together into a single structure of social and economic opportunity, and binds them together with a single national identity. My comments were meant to suggest that these are respectable considerations, but not necessarily decisive ones. It may be that these goals could still be achieved in Taiwan under a policy that recognized some language rights for languages other than Mandarin.

The preeminence of Mandarin might be defended on non-instrumental grounds of justice through an argument that Mandarin is a neutral solution to the society's linguistic diversity. At the end of the Japanese occupation in 1945 there were very few people in Taiwan who would consider Mandarin to be their first language. Mandarin may have seemed like a neutral, "outside" language - friendlier than Japanese – around which to organize communication on the island. By contrast, an attempt to elevate Taiwanese to the national language would certainly not have seemed neutral towards speakers of the smaller language groups. Even now a proposal to elevate Taiwanese to official language status, alongside Mandarin, provokes opposition from speakers of Hakka and of indigenous languages.

On the other hand, many would question the "neutrality" of Mandarin in the Taiwanese context. The adoption of Mandarin as the language of state in the late 1940s coincided with a large immigration of Mandarin-speakers from the mainland, especially in the aftermath of the Communist takeover on the mainland in 1949. It is often suggested that this Mandarin minority proceeded to act like a traditional ethnic group, hoarding opportunities and privileges within the group, and excluding and marginalizing members of other groups. From this perspective, Mandarin doesn't seem like a neutral language choice after all. Even if knowledge of Mandarin became nearly universal in Taiwan, the language was associated with a particular dominant group in Taiwanese society and its use as a language of state was aligned with the interests and identity of members of this

group. To properly realize neutrality, on this second view, then would require the second principle described earlier – in which an attempt is made to positively and evenhandedly extend some official support and recognition to each of the first languages present on the island.

Further observations on language justice in the Taiwanese context

As an outsider to Taiwan, and certainly not a specialist about Taiwanese society or history, I won't try to say which of these interpretations of linguistic neutrality is more justifiable. It does seem to me that any conclusions about what justice requires non-instrumentally with respect to language policy in the Taiwanese context depends on grappling with this issue.

My main aim in this lecture has been to describe a framework for thinking about what justice implies for language policy. The framework has both instrumental and non-instrumental components. Within each of these components, specific empirical issues are highlighted that are salient to thinking about particular cases. I've been illustrating many of the theoretical points with reference to the Taiwanese case, but have avoided pronouncing on what, in the end, linguistic justice requires in Taiwan. This depends on a much deeper understanding of relevant empirical and historical matters than I am able to offer here.

Let me conclude by considering three possible challenges that might be offered against the analysis I've been proposing. Each of them objects that the analysis has left out something crucial to the Taiwanese context.

One general worry about the kind of analysis offered here is that it makes little reference to democracy. For the past quarter century, Taiwan has enjoyed a successful electoral democracy. Presumably, the right way to make decisions about language policy is, at least in part, through democratic institutions – that is, through institutions that facilitate deliberation, contestation, voting, representation, accountability, and so on. An a priori framework such as I sketched above might seem more aligned with an elitist determination of language policy.

But this objection misunderstands the relationship between political theory and democracy. The two enterprises should not be seen as competing with one another. The task of political theory is to clarify and criticize the concepts and moral principles that are used in debate and deliberation by both elites and democratic actors. Of course, it is for the political actors, and not the theorists, to actually decide. But theorists can contribute to deliberation through clarification, criticism, and the articulation of principles and ideals.

The second challenge is more specific to discussing these theoretical questions in the Taiwanese – indeed the East Asian – context. The theoretical framework I've been sketching relies in places on concepts that may strike some as characteristic of Anglo-American liberal political theory. The framework refers

to language *rights* and it relies at a critical point on a notion of state neutrality. To some critics, including some who associate themselves with Confucian political morality, the notion of rights reveals an individualistic, antagonistic, even egoist streak in liberalism. And the appeal to neutrality seems to conflict with claims made by Confucians among others that there are better and worse ways of living a human life, and with the claim that a good state should not be indifferent to which of these paths is chosen by its citizens.

There are obviously some large and complicated issues here, and I can't do justice to them in this brief discussion. Despite its terminology, I do not believe that my argument is dependent on objectionable notions of rights or neutrality. I do use the term "language rights" to refer to a particular kind of language policy with which I have some sympathy. But "rights" as I understand them needn't be individual, nor need they be established within a framework of law that allows individuals to press their own concerns against the needs of the community. To talk of rights in this context is mainly to indicate that individuals have moral *claims* that are weighty enough that others should normally find a way to accommodate them. This might be done through an adversarial, American-style system of legal rights, but it might also be accomplished through wise and just public policy.

Likewise, for the purposes of this paper, I have a fairly modest understanding of neutrality. Neutrality need not be understood as the opposite of perfectionism (the doctrine that the state should promote the good life for its citizens). It's enough for my argument that the state should be neutral towards –

meaning, should treat fairly – the *worthwhile* conceptions of the good that are pursued by its citizens. How the state should treat *inferior* conceptions of the good is a further and I think more complicated question.

This response might still not go far enough for some perfectionist (e.g. neo-Confucian) critics of liberal neutrality. The non-instrumental view of linguistic justice appealed to the idea that people care about their linguistic communities and suggested that neutral policies are fair ways of helping people obtain the goods that they care about. But this idea that people have an interest in or a claim to obtain the things that they care about seems to make exactly the mistake that perfectionists object to. It does not distinguish between the things that people have good reason to care about and the things that they do not. For all I have said, attachment to one's ethno-linguistic group may belong in the second category: it may be one of those atavistic vestiges of the pre-modern world that is best regarded as worthless in the context of the contemporary nation-state.

However, even if the general perfectionist point is accepted, I do not think ethno-linguistic attachment should be rejected as worthless. One reason for this is likely to have considerable appeal in a Confucian context. Ethno-linguistic communities are often crucial settings for the enjoyment of intra-family, inter-generational relationships. Young people can view themselves as part of a lineage with their parents and grandparents, and can show respect and gratitude to their elders, by learning the language of the older generations and making an effort to experience the present-day incarnation of the family's culture. While I do

not insist that this is something that every individual has a duty to do, it strikes me as a worthwhile and non-atavistic reason for valuing one's attachment to a particular ethno-linguistic community.

Finally, it might be objected that I have overlooked the “elephant in the room” when discussing language policy in Taiwan – namely, the island's present and future relationship with the People's Republic of China (PRC). Indeed, I think it fair to say that the attitudes of many Taiwanese people concerning language policy are shaped by their views about Taiwan's existential situation. For those who favor eventual reunification, a Mandarin-first or even Mandarin-only policy would prepare the Taiwanese people for full and successful participation in a unified China. For supporters of an independent Taiwanese state, the public use of languages other than Mandarin accentuates Taiwan's distinctiveness and strengthens the formation of a separate Taiwanese identity that would make it difficult for the island ever to be absorbed into the PRC.

I certainly do not mean to ignore or downplay these macro-political considerations. But I mention them only now because I think the opposite temptation – to reduce the language question down to the existential political one – is even more alluring. Such a reduction would, in my opinion, be a mistake. For one thing, some claims about the political question *depend* on claims about the linguistic problem. This or that political solution is favored because it is seen as more just from a linguistic perspective (in either the instrumental or non-instrumental sense). This way of thinking about Taiwan's political situation

obviously presupposes some kind of account of linguistic justice, one that isn't itself reducible to calculations concerning Taiwan's political future. Even where claims about the political question do not depend on claims about the language question, considerations of linguistic justice may still exert some independent relevance to all-things-considered judgments about Taiwan's political future. Linguistic justice (again in either the instrumental or non-instrumental variants) may be a *constraint* on particular political solutions and strategies. This possibility again makes linguistic justice a topic worth considering in its own right and at least somewhat separately from the national existential questions that preoccupy Taiwanese political life.

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¹ For an overview of Taiwan’s linguistic situation, see the Government of Taiwan’s *Republic of China Yearbook* (2010), chapter 2, accessed on March 26, 2017 from <https://web.archive.org/web/20110820220526/http://www.gio.gov.tw/taiwan-website/5-gp/yearbook/>

² See Jean-François Dupré, “Mandarin State Tradition and Language Regime Change in Taiwan,” in Selma K. Sonntag and Linda Cardinal (eds.) *State Traditions and Language Regimes* (McGill–Queen’s University Press, 2015).

³ Kymlicka and Patten 2003 is a collection of essays by political philosophers about the normative issues surrounding language policy and language rights. Other treatments of this topic include: Green 1987; Kymlicka 1995, 2001;

Réaume 1991, 1994, 2000; Taylor 1992; Carens 2000; Van Parijs 2000, 2011; Patten 2001, 2003, 2009, 2014; De Schutter and Ypi 2012.

⁴ I draw in this section on Patter 2014, chapter 6.

⁵ Patten 2014, p. 162.