

## Authenticating 'Mother Tongue' in a Multilingual Minority Community

### What this research was about and why it is important

Identification of a 'first language' or 'mother tongue' can be less than clear for bi/multilinguals. Some critique the concepts of first language, mother tongue and native speaker as being based on monolingual norms which are not appropriate in an officially bilingual setting because these terms either equate history with competence or evaluate competence without considering their languages in the individual's life and identity. This study examines mother tongue in a multilingual region which includes a national language, a recognised ethnic minority language, and multiple other minority languages (including so-called 'dialects'), and English. We probe into practices and perceptions of one designated ethnic minority group in China across domains of family, community and education through a process of authentication. The analyses suggest that 'mother tongue' is a misnomer in many ways as it is not associated with one's first language, mother's influence or family heritage but is based in (primarily monolingual) ideologies which do not adequately represent multilingual individuals and communities. Our findings challenge understandings of 'language' as structurally defined and of linguists as top-down arbiters of authenticity. We propose a conceptual framework to expand our understanding of the authentication of mother tongue and the resilience of minority/minoritised language, problematised by monolingual ideologies.

### What the researchers did

- The study used a mixed-methods research design, surveying 576 participants in eight universities in Guangxi and interviewing 48 participants in an ethnic minority specialist university in Guangxi. One overarching research question leading to four sub-questions were investigated:

Research question: How do tertiary students in this region authenticate their mother tongue?

Sub-questions:

- 1) What do these tertiary students report to be their multilingual practices at the community, home or school level?
- 2) How are these multilingual practices related to a mother tongue as reported/perceived by users?
- 3) How do language planning efforts at the community, home or school level affect the users' perceptions of mother tongue?
- 4) What intersubjectivities emerge in relation to mother tongue authentication?

### What the researchers found

- In response to the overarching research question, authentication of a mother tongue is based in intersubjective social practices which are linked to language status and identity which are, in turn, discursively constructed. Thus, authentication is based in individual, family, community perceptions of multilingual practices, actual language practices, and attempts to plan for those practices.
- Our data show that the policies and ideologies around recognised minority languages can make it difficult for speakers to name or claim their 'mother tongue'.
- Subjectivities are dynamic with tactics of intersubjectivity coming into play in ways that are interactive - leading to a variety of designations of mother tongue and of means to authorise mother tongue.
- A conceptual framework that surfaces integration of authentication, through the tactics of intersubjectivity, and in relation to language resilience was put forward as 'user centered framework' to leave open the option of many possibilities of mother tongues.

### Things to consider

- A more diverse sample of other minority language groups would be useful to more comprehensively understand the authentication of mother tongue in multilingual contexts.
- Future studies may engage with other minority groups in China and with other age groups to find out more about the intersubjectivities of mother tongue, especially in comparison with other studies of language vitality in China would be helpful.
- Further work that collects data to support analyses of mother tongue functions as realised, not only as perceived, along with perspectives of other community members would add depth to the analyses.