

5. Speech communities and sociolinguistic issues

Even though the Kam populace is spread across three provinces geographically, Kam speech communities are, in fact, densely connected. Also Kam residents tend not to mix with other ethnic groups within one village. So the community boundary among different ethnic groups is, in general, relatively clear-cut. Another fact that is noteworthy is that the Kam language has been exposed to Chinese influence since 700AD, and, at the same time, the Kam people have occupied a relatively rich land area in comparison to neighboring groups so as to develop economically and socially, which has led to a higher self-esteem among the people. All these facts have supported language use in Kam for a long time. As a result, Kam language has remained highly significant in people's daily lives.

5.1. Dialects

There are two Kam varieties: the southern Kam with four lects, and the northern Kam with three lects. The main isogloss lies along the longitude line from Datong to Qimeng in Jinping, Guizhou, where Kam, Hmong, and Han Chinese live together. The following is the detailed classification of Kam varieties and their lects:

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- a. the first lectal area includes Rongjiang Zhanglu, Liping Hongzhou, Jinping Qimeng in Guizhou, Tongdao in Hunan, Longsheng and Sanjiang Dudong in Guangxi;
- b. the second lectal area includes Liping Shuikou, Congjiang Guandong, Rongjiang Pingjiang in Guizhou, and Sanjiang Heli in Guangxi;
- c. the third lectal area includes Zhenyuan Baojing in Guizhou;
- d. the fourth lect area is in Rongshui, Guangxi (Long & Zheng 1998 pp: 181).

--- Northern

- a. the first lectal area includes Tianzhu Shidong, Sansui Kuanchang, and Jianhe Xiaoguang in Guizhou;
- b. the second lectal area includes Tianzhu Zhuxi in Guizhou;
- c. the third area includes Jinping Datong in Guizhou.

The difference between the two main varieties is significant in the sense that intelligibility between Northern and Southern speakers is very low. Mainly differences are found in phonology and lexicon as well as some differences of grammar: Northern Kam does not have vowel length contrast and the velar coda *k* of the south has either been dropped, or changed to the alveolar *t* or to glottal stop *ʔ*. Some syntactic rules also differ. For example, the modifier possessive pronoun precedes the head noun in the north and there are phonetic changes in classifiers, some numerals, nouns, and verbs in the north. Recent research has shown, however, that at least one Southern location possesses similar phonetic changes (Tongyin Yang 1999).

People from different lects within a variety can comprehend each other well, since the difference in phonology, lexicon, and syntax are minor.

5.2. Language Use

Kam is still the native and everyday language for most people in the southern area and many in the northern villages such as in Tianzhu, Jinping, Zhenyuan, Jianhe, etc. At the same time, more and more Kam have learned local Chinese and Putonghua through school education and interaction with other peoples. Zheng and Long (1998) have classified language use among the Kam into the following three types:

- a. Kam people who can only speak Kam and no any other language(s). “Most of these live in the southern dialect area or are old people, women, and children living in the mountain villages of the northern area far from Han Chinese centers. There are also some young men from these remote northern areas who have never attended schools, seldom leave their homes, and rarely come in contact with the outside world. ” While these descriptions are still fairly precise nowadays, the evaluated 50% of the population seems too high. Of the 2.5 million Kam, 30-40% may fall into this group. As the society opens more and more to the outside world, the percentage goes down steadily.
- b. Kam people who cannot speak Kam but Chinese only. Most of them are in northern, such as Yuping, Sansui, Tianzhu, etc. Of the 2.5 million Kam, over 30% may fall into this group.
- c. Kam people who can speak both Kam and Chinese or other languages such as Hmong and Mien. Of the 2.5 million Kam, 30% may fall into this group. As the public school education in Kam area improves slowly and the interaction among peoples intensifies, both the total number of people in this group the percentage among the populace will only go up.

Obviously there is a kind of gradient diglossia among the two languages. Although the exact number of speakers of the above three Kam groups may be hard to define, their domains in use are clearer. Within the villages where the old people and children cannot speak Chinese, all members use native Kam in daily life. Even government documents are interpreted into Kam for monolinguals. Speaking Chinese might be either just for entertaining outsiders or used to demonstrate ones language skill by showing off. Of course, Han is the language of the school classroom and professional government offices. Other exceptional uses of Han include speaking to non-Kam persons. It is interesting to observe that since the Kam show tenacious language maintenance in preferring their native language, many Han Chinese have learned some Kam in order to work with local people. For example, since almost all the daily fresh food supply is provided by Kam women in Shuangjiang township, Tongdao County, Hunan Province, many Han Chinese learn some basic Kam to help the trade process and get better deals in the markets.

5.3. Literacy Effort

Kam did not have its own orthography before 1958. Some Kam intellectuals used Chinese characters to record Kam, the so-called ‘hànzǐ jì dòng yīn’ ‘Recording Kam in Chinese characters or demotic Chinese for recording Kam.’ There are three ways of doing the recording (Long & Zheng 1998 pp: 211):

- a. Use Chinese characters with identical or similar pronunciations to Kam words. For example, 拣考 jiǎnkǎo (literally ‘pick-test’) is used to record tɕan55 ʔeu31 ‘to eat (rice);

- b. Use Chinese characters with identical meanings to Kam words. A sign is usually added around the character to indicate that this is Kam with the same meaning as as the Chinese character but with different pronunciation. For example, 深 x shēn (literally ‘deep’) is used to record jəm55 ‘deep (water), difficult’;
- c. Use *Fanqie* (反切), the Chinese tradition of combining the initial of the first character and the rhyme and tone of the second character to represent a word. For example, 尼亚 nǐ yà to represent ɲa55 ‘river’.

Most of the works are scripts of Kam custom laws, literature works, or personal notices. Since there was no accepted standard among the users, ‘Recording Kam in Chinese characters’ was never publicly promoted or recognized as a true Kam orthography.

From December 1956 to February 1957, the Chinese government conducted the first extensive field survey of Kam language and planning of a Kam orthography in 22 locations, covering 14 counties in Guizhou, Hunan, and Guangxi. In August 1958, the designed draft *Kam Orthography* was adopted officially. This is an orthography written entirely in Roman letters. The southern dialect was taken as the basic and the pronunciation from Rongjiang Zhanglu in Guizhou as the standard. They are thirty-two initials, sixty-four rhymes, and nine tones.

The implementation of Kam orthography was very successful in Rongjiang, Liping, and other Kam areas under the guidance of the government until the Cultural Revolution broke out in 1966. Teachers were trained and assigned to different locations to teach others. Various reference books and reading materials were published during this period, including the *Kam-Chinese Dictionary*, *Chinese-Kam dictionary*, and *Kam Language Textbook*. In 1981, the implementation was resumed and spread to Hunan, and Guangxi Kam communities. Kam orthography played an important role in lowering the illiteracy rate among Kam adults and was introduced into elementary schools in Guizhou as help in learning the Putonghua and Pinyin. More textbooks were published, and journals such as *the Journal Kam Orthography* in Sanjiang, Guangxi were circulated regularly. Not only did many illiterate learn to write in their own script after attending only 100-hour night class, but also the Kam language and orthography were studied in colleges such as the Central Institute of Nationalities in Beijing and the Guizhou Institute of Nationalities in Guiyang. By 1995, 857 classes of Kam orthography were conducted in Qiandongnan Hmong and Kam Prefecture, Guizhou. The total enrollment reached 29,989. Of them 24,873 graduated and were considered officially literate. More than 140 college students majoring in *Kam language, literature, and culture* were graduated, including three graduate students (Chen 1995).

The momentum reversed in the middle of the 1990’s. On the one hand, the government’s financial support for Kam orthography implementation decreased gradually. On the other hand, the growing trend of marketing and looser residence restriction in China triggered a great new *Völkerwanderung*. People, especially younger generations, considered Kam orthography unpractical and less useful than Chinese in employment and economic benefit seeking.

5.4. New Trends in Migration, Media Exposure, and Family Orientation

Historically, the Kam people, like other peoples of China, have been officially rooted in their traditional homelands and have thus not had the freedom to move around. The sedentary lifestyle was implemented with strict governmental residence policies. This regulation is one of the main reasons why Kam language and culture have been fairly well preserved in the closed areas where they have traditionally lived. But in the 90's and perhaps a little earlier in some places, things began to change dramatically. People gained more freedom to choose a profession and a place of residence. More and more young Kam people 'immigrated' to towns in Han Chinese areas and cities along the east coast in Guangdong, Fujian, and Guangxi Provinces to seek their fortunes in the wider world of urban and suburban life. Young Kam of Guizhou Province have not yet been affected by this trend, but there much impetus driving migration in Hunan and Guangxi Kam communities, so that today 70-80% of villagers in the ages from 16-30 may be living away from their original places. Left behind are old people and younger siblings, and also those without enough language or educational skill to allow them to make the occupational change from agriculture to unskilled labor. Although these migration patterns are not yet permanent (usually they come back to visit their families in Spring Festival for one to two weeks and then return to their work places again), the potential affects on Kam language use among the younger generations and the cultural consequences are easy to discern. These "little sisters and little brothers", as they are sometimes known start to learn the language of the work place, especially Cantonese and Putonghua, and many Kam traditional cultural practices fall into disuse, i.e. they are not being transmitted or no longer being practiced by this more citified generation of new urban young, much to the concern of their parents and grandparents. Since most of them will return to their original Kam communities before they become 40, it will be interesting to see how the days they spent in towns and cities will affect their language maintenance and language use in their later lives.

Another considerable input from outside comes from the TV and advertising. It is no more an exotic appliance from the outside world but quite commonly seen even in remote villages. For example, in Yutou, a typical Kam village complex in Tongdao, Hunan with over 3000 people, around 500 households, there are more than 100 TV sets. These bring tremendous amounts of new exposure to Putonghua, even among the older generation, many of whom cannot speak or understand Chinese. All programs, of course, are in Chinese, and more and more of the traditional cultural gatherings are being replaced by communal watching of the "tube".

As society opens further, so does the family, the Kam family has noticeably decreased in size in the past two decades as well. On the one hand, this decrease has affected the cross generational interaction between grandparents and grandchildren, and has led to breakdown in traditional culture, including linguistic shift. On the other hand, old people have suffered an erosion economically as well as in their position of social authority as purveyors of traditional cultural values. Another important force for change is in the different family values portrayed in broadcast media and in the interaction with outside world.

All these new trends in Kam society contribute to accelerating changes taking place in language use, many of which do not portend positively for the future of the Kam language. These problems, however, have been loosed from many sources and are not in

any way unique to the Kam. They are the very same issues confronting hundreds of millions of people worldwide. How does one balance tradition vs. modernization, local vs. global perspectives, and agrarian vs. urban lifestyles? These cosmic problems extend far beyond the Kam to all traditional cultures around the world.

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