

Investigation on the Language Usage of the Oroqen Nationality with An Advanced Degree in China

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Abstract

The Oroqen nationality is one of the ethnic groups with the least population living in the northeastern part of our country. According to the statistics of the fifth national census in 2000, the population of the Oroqen ethnic group was 8,196. The Oroqen language belongs to the Tungusic branch of the Man-Tungus language family of the Altaic language family and has no words. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the Oroqen people gradually transformed from a hunting civilization and directly entered the socialist stage. The Oroqen people's production methods and language use have undergone major changes. Chinese has become a necessary skill for the Oroqen people in social transformation, but at the same time, the Oroqen people are not willing to completely abandon their language and culture. The bilingual teaching system of the Oroqen nationality came into being. In this study, a questionnaire survey was used to collect feedback from 40 Oroqen people. The study found that most of the Oroqen people have received bilingual education, of which the basic bilingual education is in Chinese and Oroqen. Oroqen people usually learn the Oroqen language through oral transmission from their parents, but they use the most Chinese in daily life. It is only possible to use the Oroqen language at home or when communicating with people of the same ethnic group. However, the Oroqen people have a strong desire to protect their culture and language. It is also hoped that the state will introduce more effective measures to protect the Oroqen culture.

Keywords

Oroqen; Language usage; Language policy; Language preservation.

1. Introduction

The Oroqen is one of the ethnic groups with a small population in China. According to the 1990 census, there were 6,965 Oroqen people in China. In 2000, there were 8,196 people, and in 2010, there were 8,659 people. Oroqen is an ethnic group that used to live upon primary productivity like hunting and fishing. However, since the 1960s, especially the reform and opening-up policy in 1970s, with the development of the Chinese economy, more and more Oroqen people use Chinese as their daily language because they are more connected with non-Oroqen people.

Language, especially language usage of minority ethnic groups is influenced by social changes. The Oroqen people are typical examples of this statement. The Oroqen ancestors created their language and passed it from generation to generation. The Oroqen language belongs to the Tungusic branch of the Mantonggus family of the Altaic language family. Oroqen people used to live in mountains and were isolated from other civilizations. Therefore, though the Oroqen has no written language, their language can be passed by generations in a semi-closed state. However, with more interactions with the outside world after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, a more practical language is needed. In such a way, they become a bilingual group and skip the feudal stage and evolve directly from a hunting nation and capital country to a socialist society. In such social conditions, the Oroqen people confront another problem:

how could Oroqen language which bears Oroqen culture and history be preserved and protected in modern society.

This sociolinguistic research aims at exploring the language usage of Oroqen people by conducting a questionnaire and reviewing online materials. This study attempts to figure out the following several questions:

1. What is the current language usage situation of the Oroqen people?
2. How do Oroqen people think of Oroqen language preservation?
3. How could the Chinese government do to help to preserve the Oroqen language?

This study contains four chapters. Chapter one introduces the current situations of the Oroqen people and the Oroqen language. Chapter two reviews previous studies and illustrates the significance of this study. Chapter three demonstrates the major findings of the questionnaire. It includes the current bilingual language usage of Oroqen people, the language policies of the Oroqen language and some expectations of Oroqen people. Chapter four concludes some major findings and also offers some suggestions for minority ethnic language preservation. Besides, chapter four also shows some limitations of this study and gives advice for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Review on the Studies About The Language Usage of Oroqen People

In the past few decades, many studies about the language usage of minority groups are conducted, including some surveys about the Oroqen people. It is found that more than 69% of Oroqen people is under bilingual education which are mostly taught by family cultivation. And it is also found that Oroqen people's expectations and the reality they are facing are asymmetric. Their strong expectations of protecting the Oroqen language are contradictory with the fact that many Oroqen people do not use the Oroqen language as a daily language. More than 72% of people believe that it is necessary to teach their children the Oroqen language but over 90% of Oroqen people speak Chinese in public. Now Oroqen people had realized that their language is endangered. It can be clearly seen that Oroqen has become a bilingual nation that usually uses Chinese to communicate with others.

2.2. Review on Government'S Policies in Saving Minority Languages

Policies in saving minority languages carried out by the Chinese government are also frequently mentioned in previous research. It is discussed that the national government sorts out the Oroqen languages in the Heilongjiang River Basin and makes them into videos as language teaching resources. Besides, some scholars also compile Oroqen readings to raise the interest in learning Oroqen. It is also mentioned that now technology is combined in saving minority languages. Many apps based on language repositories offer online courses if learning languages. In such a way, the government completes the basic knowledge framework which fulfills the blank in minority languages theoretical systems. In previous research, some studies discuss the role of the ethnic school in saving endangered languages. Disappointedly, it is found that ethnic schools also confront many problems. High quality of teachers and the reawakening of cultural identity are needed.

Most previous studies focus on minority languages, in which only little attention is given to Oroqen language. Those who particularly give attention to the Oroqen language only focus on language usage without demonstrating the underlying reasons. Many previous studies conclude the key points of online materials about the Oroqen and the minority languages. However, only a few of them use first-hand statistics to present their situation of language and culture protection.

Therefore, this study conducts a questionnaire and receives 40 Oroqen people's feedback. This questionnaire aims at exploring the details of their bilingual learning and language usage and

more importantly, their attitudes towards protecting the Oroqen language. In such ways, this study may be helpful in giving suggestions in Oroqen language protection.

3. Methodology

This study is based on a questionnaire that consists of 21 questions, aiming to gain first-hand data to directly demonstrate current situations of Oroqen language usage. The questionnaire is designed into three sections. The first section is about the basic information about the surveyed, including their nations, genders, ages, living places and education. The second section is about their language usage, which is the most important one of this questionnaire. In this section, this study investigates the first and second language of the surveyed and compares the frequency of utilization of Chinese and Oroqen and explores the mastery of their first and second language. In this section, this research also figures out the daily scenes when they speak Oroqen and the methods in which they learn Oroqen. The final section of this questionnaire aims at exploring their attitudes towards learning the language of Oroqen and their feedback of policies carried out by the government to protect minority language.

Sociolinguistics is an umbrella term which covers a variety of different interests in language and society, including the social functions of language and the social characteristics of its users. Sociolinguistics is the study of characteristics of language varieties, the characteristics of their functions, and the characteristics of their speakers as these three constantly interact and change within a speech community. This study is sociolinguistics research, exploring functions of different languages in the Oroqen community and figure out the characteristics of Oroqen users.

4. Results

Based on the feedback of the questionnaire and some online official materials, the results section also contains three parts: basic information, bilingual education and attitudes towards language protection.

4.1. Introduction of the Basic Information about the Surveyed

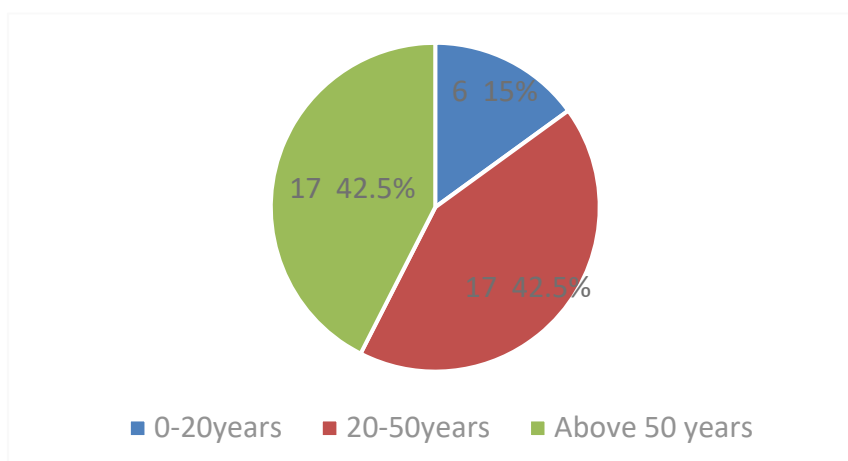


Figure 1. Age distribution of the surveyed

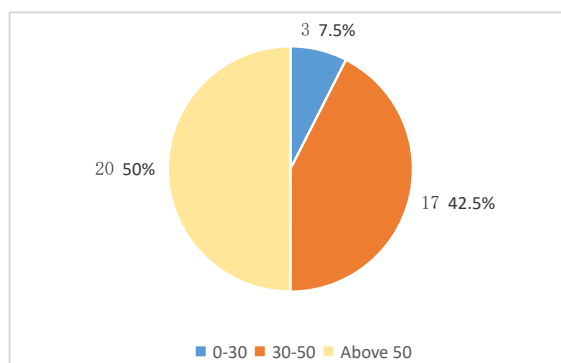


Figure 2. The living duration of the surveyed people

Among the 40 people who fill out questionnaires, 10 of them are male and 30 of them are female. Nearly all of the surveyed are Oroqen people with exception of a Mongolian and a Han who can speak the language of Oroqen. Figure1 shows their age distribution and it is showed in figure2 that most of the tested people have been living in Hei Longjiang province for over 20 years, and the longest living duration can be over 61 years.

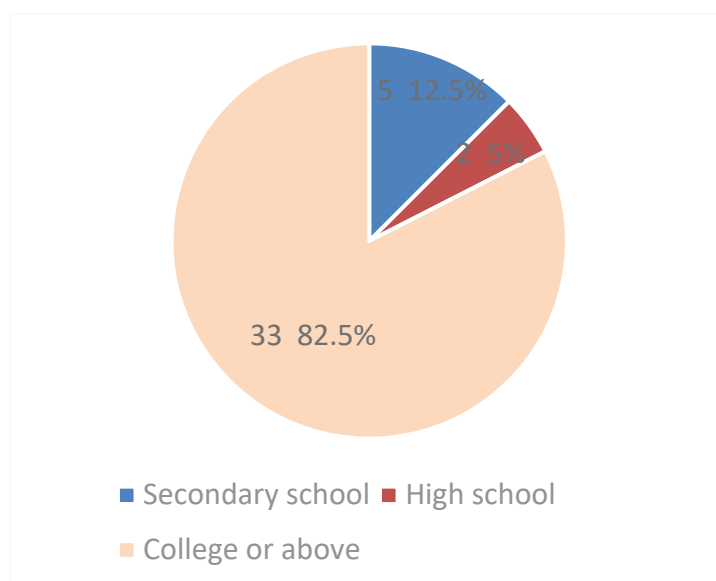


Figure 3. Education of the surveyed people

It is found that more than 80% of the surveyed Oroqen people are exposed to higher education. Only a few of them never go to high schools (Figure 3). Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China, more connections and interactions are naturally formed between the Oroqen and other nations and since the publishing of compulsory education. More Oroqen people exercise the right to education. Therefore, most of the Oroqen people are well-educated and go to college.

4.2. Analysis of the Bilingual Education of the Oroqen People

In 2001, a survey of the villages inhabited by the Oroqen nationality found that the number of people who master the language of the ethnic group is inversely proportional to the age group, and the number of people who do not understand the language of the ethnic group increases as the age group decreases. In recent years, due to the changes in the living environment and production methods of the Oroqen people, the Oroqen language has become less and less used

in life and work. To fulfill the need to live in a more open society and to communicate with other nations, almost all Oroqen people learn Chinese at a young age.

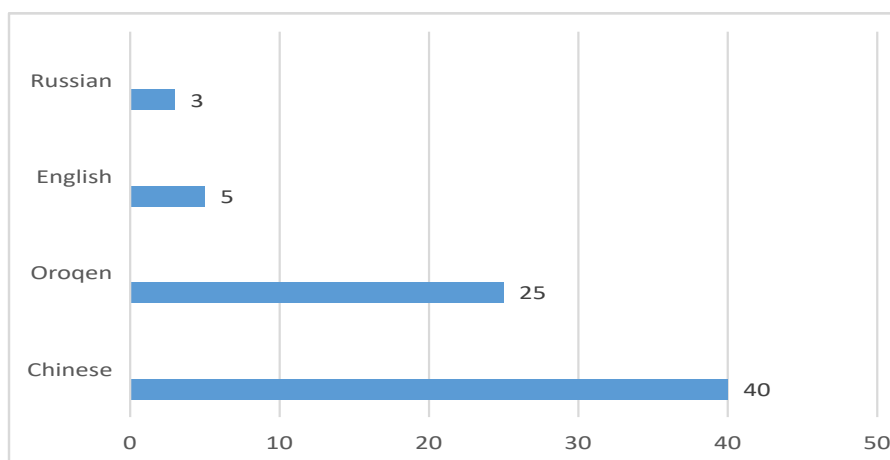


Figure 4. The mastery of the language of the surveyed people

It can be seen from figure 4 that all of the surveyed people can speak Chinese because it is a necessity in modern society where Chinese is the standard language of Chinese society. It can be also seen that among the 40 surveyed people, 25 of them can master Oroqen while 5 of them can speak English, 3 for Russian. It is understandable that many Oroqen people cannot speak Oroqen as they hardly use it in their daily life but more than half of the surveyed people still continue learning it, which is the sign that indicates the strong desire of the Oroqen people to protect their language. Some people can speak English because it is an important course in high education. Because Hei Longjiang province has frontiers with Russia, it can be predicted that few of them can speak Russian.

One question in the questionnaire asks whether they receive bilingual education when they are young. According to the feedback, 60% of the surveyed people receive bilingual education while 40% of them don't. And among the 40 people, the first language of 28(70%) of them is Chinese and the first language of 12(30%) of them is Oroqen, which indicates that Chinese may has taken place of Oroqen in Oroqen people's first language education at their childhood.

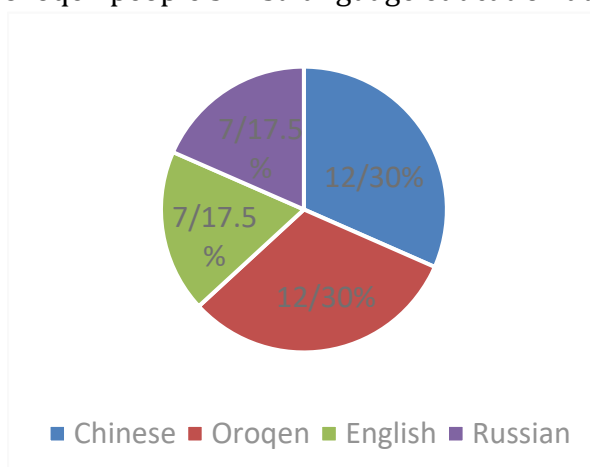


Figure 5. Second language of the surveyed people

However, the conditions of the second language of the Oroqen people are very different from that of their first language. Basically speaking, Chinese, Oroqen, English and Russia are all their possible second languages (Figure5). Among them, Chinese and Oroqen are the two major

second languages of the Oroqen people. Therefore, it can be concluded that Chinese and Oroqen are important in Oroqen's bilingual system.

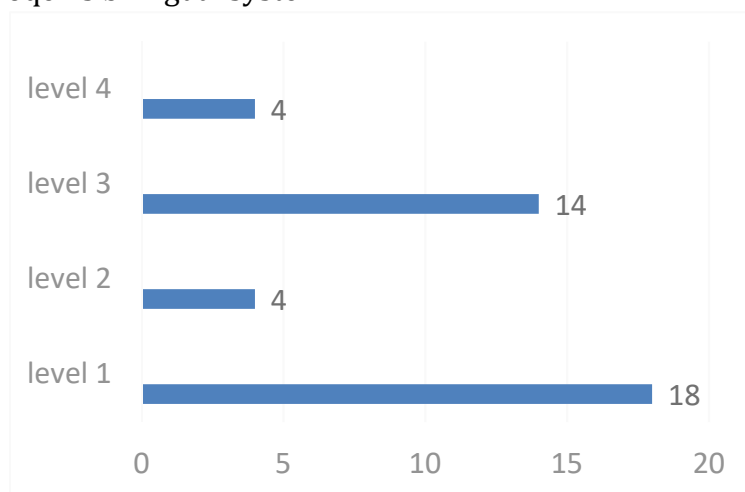


Figure 6. Mastery of Oroqen

Though Oroqen people are still learning Oroqen as their first or second language, the mastery of this language for each individual varies. In Figure 6, four levels in this study are demonstrated. Level 1 symbolizes the mastery of both speaking and understanding Oroqen. Level 2 for those who only understand but cannot speak Oroqen. Level 3 for those who can only understand a little of Oroqen. Level 4, however, represents those who cannot master Oroqen at all. It is showed that most Oroqen people know more or less about Oroqen, but 14 of them can only understand a little Oroqen. Only 4 of them cannot master Oroqen at all. It is worth mentioning that 39 of 40 surveyed people have a good master of Chinese. It can be concluded that though some Oroqen people are proficient in the language of Oroqen, it cannot be neglected that a large proportion of the surveyed people are not very familiar with the language of Oroqen.

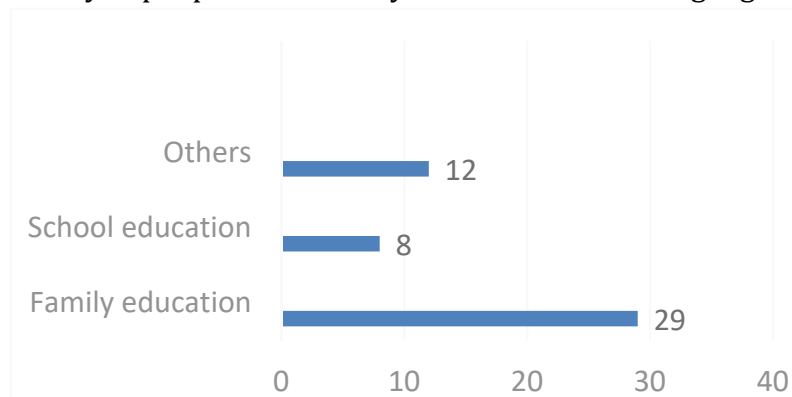


Figure 7. Methods to Learn Oroqen

In this study, most of the Oroqen people learn Oroqen through Family education. And only 25% of the surveyed people learn Oroqen by school education. This phenomenon indicates that in the bilingual education system of Oroqen people, Chinese is often taught in school while Oroqen is often taught at home. Compared with Oroqen, Chinese is more frequently used in daily public communication, therefore, such balance of the bilingual system seems to tilt to the side of Chinese.

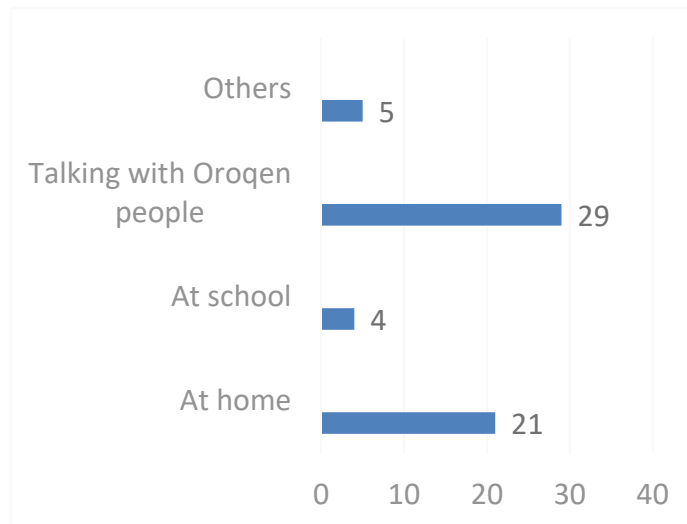


Figure 8. Scenes that people will use Oroqen

Figure 8 clearly shows that the major scenes when they speak Oroqen are the time at home or the time when they speak with Oroqen people. Only 10% of the surveyed people speak Oroqen at school. It can be predicted that the places and opportunities for Oroqen people of speaking their ethnic language are restricted. Therefore, they are forced to turn to bilingual language education.

4.3. Analysis of the Attitude Towards Oroqen Culture Protection and Language Preservation

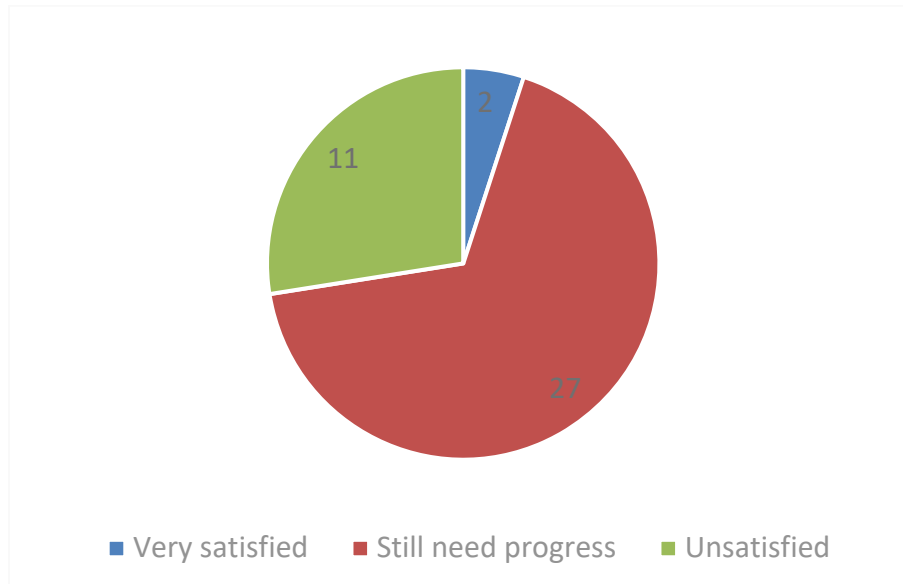


Figure 9. Attitudes towards language protection policy

In this study, 87.5% of the interviewee believe that it is necessary to learn Qroqen, 12.5% of them believe that learning Oroqen is necessary to some extent. It shows the strong desire and high hope of the Oroqen people to protect their language. Figure9 shows the attitude of the surveyed people's attitude toward the present policy about the Oroqen language and culture protection. Nearly 25% of the surveyed people are satisfied with the present policy and achievements, 5% of them are unsatisfied while 67.5% of them believe that despite that some policies have been carried out, effectiveness is limited and more proper solutions are needed.

The most frequently mentioned policy of protecting the Oroqen language is the Oroqen courses in schools. Through those minority language courses or academic seminars. Intangible cultural heritage protection programs also contribute to the preservation of Oroqen culture. However, 20% of them could not list any policy in protecting Oroqen culture.

5. Conclusion and Limitations

5.1. Major Conclusions

This study attempts to figure out the current situation of the language usage of Oroqen people in a fast-changing society. And this research also aims at exploring Oroqen people's attitudes towards language and culture protection and giving suggestions to the cause of minority language protection.

First, it is found that bilingual education has become popular among Oroqen people. And Chinese is the more important language in their life though most of them can also speak Oroqen, English or Russian. In most cases, the Oroqen language acquisition is taught through homeschooling while school education over the language of Oroqen is not very effective. Among those who have received bilingual education, over half of them can not master it very well. The reasons for this can be concluded into two points. On the one hand, Oroqen people learn their language by home schooling but not professionally trained people. On the other hand, the place and opportunities for them to practice speaking Oroqen after they have learned from home are limited. Therefore, though most Oroqen people receive bilingual education in their childhood, their mastery of this language are not very good.

Second, despite that the Oroqen people's mastery of their language is not good, they still show strong desire to protect their languages. Most people are willing to teach their children the language of Oroqen and believe that it is necessary to protect their culture. However, they realize that the present policies are not very effective though some efforts have been exerted.

5.2. Suggestions for the Course of Oroqen Language Protection

Nowadays, the language of Oroqen is mostly taught at home. It is suggested that more professional teachers in minority languages can be cultivated. For example, the major of Chinese minority languages can be set in universities and those graduates are therefore become professional teachers in Oroqen courses. Second, more support in rebuilding the cultural belief of Oroqen is needed. It is suggested that more encouragement of Oroqen festivals and Oroqen internal communication from the government is necessary.

5.3. Limitations of This Study

This study uses questionnaires to investigate the current situation of Oroqen language usage and Oroqen people's attitude towards Oroqen language protection. However, this study has several limitations that future research is suggested to consider.

First, among the surveyed people, most of them are adults. Therefore, it is hard to explore the current children's studies of the language of Oroqen. In future research, it is recommended that all age groups should be interviewed.

Second, this study is based on the feedback of the 40 surveyed people. The total number of the Oroqen people is over 8000. Therefore, conclusions in this studies may not be very accurate. It is recommended that more people should be interviewed in future study.

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