

School of Oriental and African Studies

London, Sept 18 - 21, 2008

The 41st International Conference on
Sino-Tibetan Languages and Linguistics

**Size Doesn't Matter:
Language endangerment in China**

Picus Sizhi Ding

University of Hong Kong

<http://web.hku.hk/~picus/handouts/STC.html>

What is an Endangered Language?

A language that has a small number of speakers, say under 100.

For the last eight years I have been working almost exclusively on recording the phonetic structures of endangered languages, languages that are likely to be no longer spoken 100 years from now. ... Over a quarter of the languages of the world are spoken by fewer than 1,000 people.

Ladefoged (2001: 138)

A Widespread Misconception

The fewer speakers a language has,
the more likely it is endangered;

conversely, the more speakers a
language has, the less likely it is
endangered.

*It is a mistaken and outdated assumption to think
that the larger the size of a speech community, the
lesser the degree of its language endangerment.*

Size of Language Community

Many languages have existed in Papua New Guinea for centuries with a small (e.g. ~300), but stable, number of speakers (Sumbuk 2006: 87).

If a language were losing its vitality, the large size of its community would have little effect on the fight against language death. In the past a large-sized language could mitigate such a threat but nowadays television broadcast has covered remote areas in China where roads have yet to be built. Formal education has been introduced rigorously to every village.

Community Size & Language Endangerment

Language endangerment/survival does not hold a necessary correlation with the size of the language community.

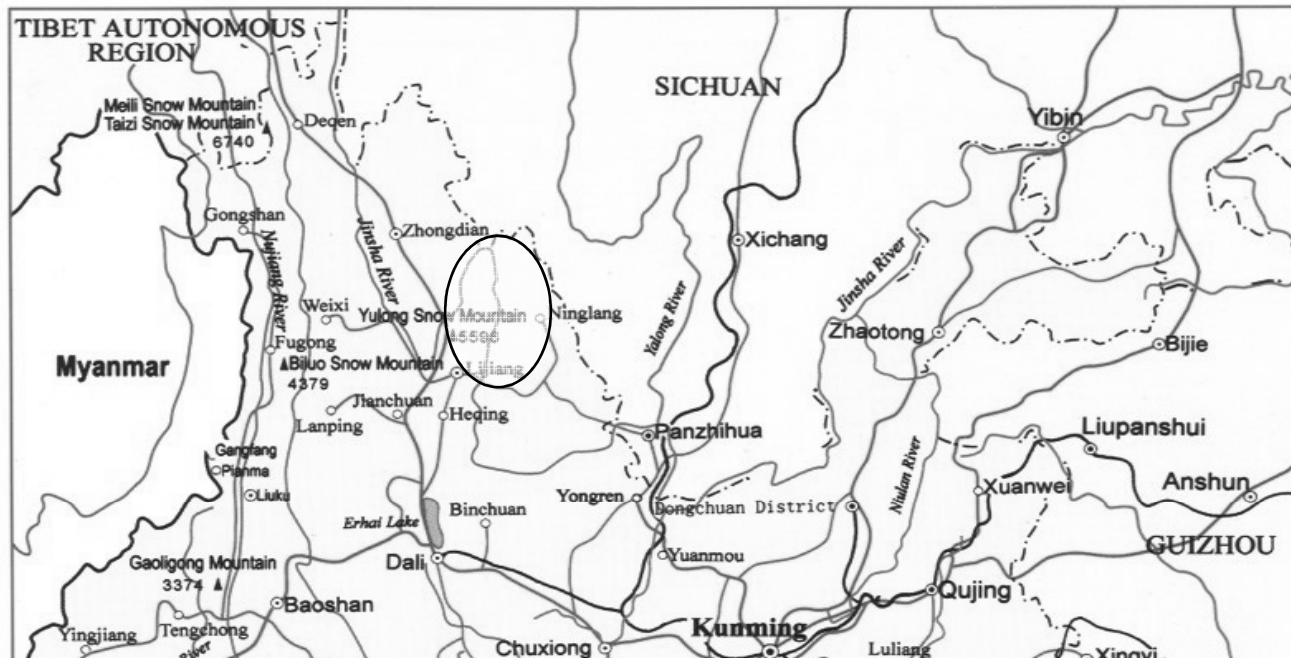
In modern China a minority language with 30,000 speakers is not much safer from language death than those with just 300 speakers.

For languages with over 500,000 speakers, there might be a slight delay of one or two decades in language loss. However, such delay would be like the postponement of one's life for one or two more hours, insufficient to make significant difference.

Language Size in Context

Instead of taking language size in terms of the absolute value of number of speakers, a more indicative and appropriate use of the figure would be calculation of the number of speakers against the total population of the inhabitant areas at different levels, such as the proportion of speakers of a language at the national level and at the regional level where the language is spoken.

Understanding Language Size in China



Population of Yunnan (National census of 2000):

Han Chinese 28,206,000 (66.59%)

25 minority nationalities 14,153,000 (33.41%)

Population of Lijiang: 1,127,000

The Case of Lijiang, Yunnan

Population of Lijiang: 1,127,000 (census of 2000)

Latest population (2007): 1,216,000

Minority nationalities: 691,500 (58.6%)

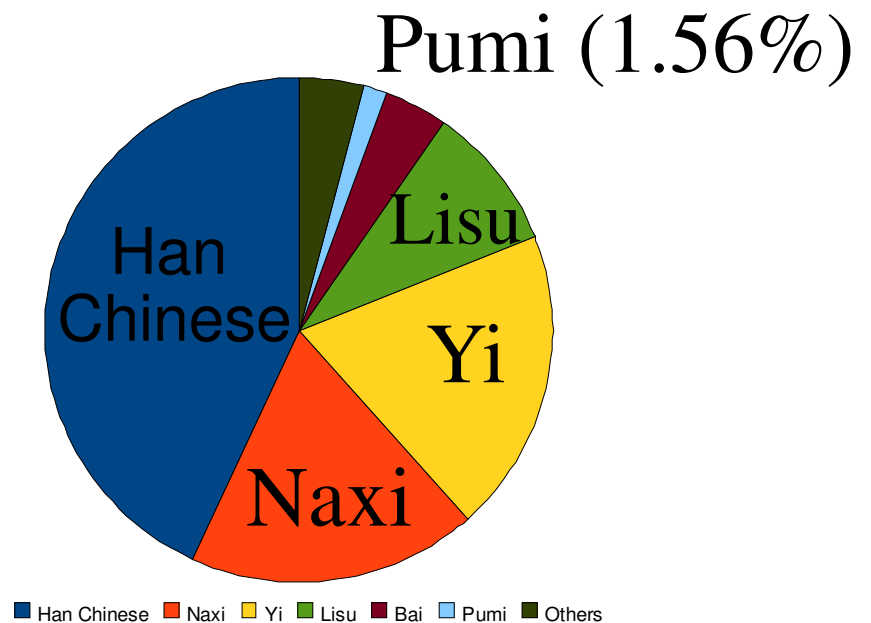
Naxi: 223,800

Yi: 237,000

Lisu: 112,900

Bai: 49,000

Pumi: 19,000



Indicative Language Size of Prinmi

National level $\frac{23600+39000}{1265830000} \Rightarrow 0.005\%$

*Provincial level
(Sichuan)* $\frac{39000}{83290935} \Rightarrow 0.047\%$

*Provincial level
(Yunnan)* $\frac{33600-12600}{42359000} \Rightarrow 0.050\%$

*Regional level
(Lijiang)* $\frac{19000-3000}{1216000} \Rightarrow 1.316\%$

Figure sources: www.stats.gov.cn/tjgb/rkpcgb/

Assessing Language Vitality/Endangerment

General criteria for classification:

- Number of speakers *Indicative language size (ILS)*
- Age of speakers;
- Transmission of the language to children;
- Functions of the language in the community/
society. (Tsunoda 2005: 9)

ILS of Prinmi (Yunnan): ~0.05% [21000 speakers]

ILS of Lomaiviti (Fiji): ~0.078% $\frac{1627}{880874}$

Conclusion

- Language size cannot be construed on the face value of number of speakers.
- Indicative Language Size, based on the proportion of speakers within the community/society, will be more useful in assessing language endangerment.

If size doesn't matter, what may matter?

Linguistic Ecology — Law of Language Continuation

Given secure living space, a language will pass on regardless of the language size; language shift is human adaption to destruction of linguistic ecology.

Selected References

- Bradley, David. 2006. Endangered languages of China and South-East Asia. In Cunningham *et al* (eds), pp. 112–120.
- Cunningham, Denis, D. E. Ingram & Kenneth Sumbuk (eds). 2006. *Language Diversity in the Pacific: Endangerment and Survival*. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.
- Ding, Picus S. 2006. Approaches to linguistic diversity and biological diversity: A critical comparison. Presented at the Language Culture and Mind Conference (II). École Nationale Supérieure des Télécommunications.
- . 2007. Challenges in Language Modernization in China: The case of Prinmi. In M David *et al* (eds.) *Working Together for Endangered Languages: Research Challenges and Social Impacts*, pp. 120-126. Bath, England: FEL.
- Hajek, John. 2006. On the edge of the Pacific: Indonesia and East Timor. In Cunningham *et al* (eds), pp. 121–130 .
- Ladefoged, Peter. 2001. *Vowels and Consonants: An introduction to the sounds of languages*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Sumbuk, Kenneth. 2006. Papua New Guinea's languages: Will they survive? In Cunningham *et al* (eds), pp. 85–96.
- Tsunoda, Tasaku. 2005. *Language Endangerment and Language Revitalization*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.