

The Language of Memory

By Yuxuan Hu

Adapting to new linguistic environments challenges most people, including me, but losing the language and culture of one's first home due to assimilation actually presents equal or perhaps greater adversity. I've never been able to speak the dialect of Hunan province, my hometown, since I moved to Shenzhen City along with my family at the age of four. In the city of international harbors and splendid skyscrapers, busy and decent dwellers speak only Mandarin in public places such as schools and companies. Fearing that my Hunan accent that might hinder my studying and living in Shenzhen, my parents would never speak their dialect with me present, let alone let me use it. Gradually, the ridiculing yet casual tone of Hunan people faded away in my memory, together with some of the delightful moments that happened before I was four years old.

The dialect of Hunan has never spread out of the province because compared to Mandarin, it sounds less elegant. According to my limited knowledge in Chinese history, the province was once a source for bandits and rebels in ancient China. Poverty and chaos developed a tough characteristic among the Hunan people, and thus an exaggerated cadence, prolonging of syllables and a rough adoption of vocabulary for the dialect, which can reasonably be attributed to the necessity of bartering and arguing. The province of Hunan has the “Xiang” cuisine that uses abundant chili peppers. On the same ground, people from other places call the “spicy” and stimulating language there as “Xiang” Chinese. In high school, I tried to do an impression of the “Xiang” Chinese for a couple of friends. “It sounds like you are blaming us, with immense anger,” they commented.

Once I went back to Hunan for Chinese New Year. While I was walking on the sidewalk with my cousin who grew up there, an amiable middle-aged man came to us, smiled, and said: “I’m telling you, tell me where the supermarket is.” I stared him in astonishment for several seconds, because his gentle voice, friendly appearance, yet such a crude sentence made the whole scene in front of me paradoxical. My cousin showed him the way calmly. Then he thanked us and walked away. I asked my cousin why she didn’t find that man’s rude words irritating. After figuring out why I was confused, she laughed and said: “He’s being rather decent. And to remind you, that’s how you spoke when you were three years old.” I tried to debate her and argue that I had never spoken so rudely, but I suddenly realized all my memories in Hunan were somehow soundless. With images coming up, I could not recall a word or a sentence. The process of recalling was like a fill-in-the-blank question which only accepted Hunan dialect but not Mandarin. Feeling embarrassed for not coming up with any refutation, and incredulous about the Hunan words and deeds that had once been mine, I turned around and walked against the freezing breeze of February.

Memory is, without a doubt, one of the most important properties to whether a person or a family, and the language you speak dominates the sounds in your memories. Hence, despite the fact that Mandarin speakers may censure “Xiang” Chinese as rude, people from Hunan still rely on it in certain occasions, including my parents. I unexpectedly encountered my hometown language during the celebration for my parents’ 10th marriage anniversary. We had home-made Hunan spicy dishes as dinner, with the chandelier above turned down to a dim shimmer. And suddenly, my parents started to talk in Hunan dialect in a nostalgic mood. When words and intonations that I had not heard of in several years overwhelmed me, I realized what I lost due to the abandonment of my mother tongue. They used an intense and coarse accent, but talked about

some casual and mild memories-- for the 30% of content I could understand. Later, while my father was recalling the following story, my mother translated his foreign Xiang words for me.

About the time they had just met, my father was a graduate student at Hunan's medical school, and my mother worked as an accountant there. When father was in his youth, he was obsessed with playing cards, but my old-school maternal grandmother preferred a more motivated man for my mother. So she would check his dormitory randomly, to see if she could catch him irresponsibly playing cards in the lounge. Every time my granny's figure showed up at the gate, my mother would yell from the second floor ahead of time: "I'm telling you, my mooother is coming." And my father yelled back in his corny dialect: "What? My butt is stiill cold." That meant he had only just sat down to play. Then, he grabbed the book he took down, rushed to the study room with full speed, burst in and sat down to open to the next chapter. If possible, he would sit next to the window, so when my granny saw my father, he could pretend to indulge in reading, which made her satisfied. My father turned out to be a reliable man a few years later by getting a PhD and becoming a doctor, and my family have often shared this experience as a private joke. After my father narrated it vividly in the Hunan dialect, my mother gazed at him, couldn't help smiling and said, "My mother poured her saliva on (harshly blamed) me after that, but I kneew I was right about you."

I asked my father why he had told the story in dialect. He thought for a while and then explained: "The story happened in Hunan, and we experienced it in Hunan's dialect. There are some things I want to share in the story, which can only be expressed by the dialect and can only be understood by people who speak the dialect. At least, if I tell the story in Mandarin, it will be less funny." Indeed, the story told by my father showed not only how my parents coped with my rigorous granny concertedly, but also the bold and unconstrained disposition of Hunan people. I

can never image a man in Shenzhen shouting “my butt is still cold” in public, nor an old woman blaming her daughter in a furious tone ceaselessly for one hour in Mandarin. Although it sounded like a foreign language to me, the Hunan dialect revealed the features of a populace I had once belonged to, and showed me a part of the cultural landscape in my hometown. By encountering with the language that I was forced to discard at the age of four, I felt the affinity within the freewheeling personality of Hunan people for the first time. I couldn’t help recalling that time I tried to debate my cousin about the vulgarity of Hunan dialect, and she revealed my forgotten tongue. I was thinking about how many other memories I lost. I once did a talk-show in front of the whole kindergarten in Hunan dialect. I could remember the faces of my friends, the applause by all the audience, and the blaring lights of the hall. I could even recall the warmth of the limelight and smell of the make-up on my face. But most of the sounds and all my feelings were missing, making the entire scene look like a numb mime. Comparing my mutilated memory and the emotionally rich story my father narrated in dialect, I realized that people use a language not only for convenience or habits. Words and sentences in a dialect carry priceless and unique reminiscences, which can never come up if the language is switched. Although sometimes, we have to adjust to a new linguistic environment, we must sustain our mother tongues at the same time, in order to preserve and cherish our memories.

While many people, like my parents who prohibited me from Hunan dialect, believe that there’s an incompatibility between dialect and the commonly used, official language, I would say forcibly choosing only one of multiple languages is unnecessary. As a matter of fact, preserving a language inside an area or a family makes the memories carried by it is even more precious and complete. According to the journalist Raveena Aulakh, “Communities are continuously switching to politically and economically more powerful languages.” I agree with that statement,

as I have experienced it myself. Even though Hunan was the hometown of the first president, Mao, and he announced the founding of the country in “Xiang” Chinese, its dialect didn’t become the official language of China. In my opinion, the rough language with implicit emotions is inefficient, and can’t represent the modest Chinese people. After a family education of Mandarin for over ten years, I spontaneously support regulations that restrict dialects in official circumstances, while nonetheless steadily insist that dialect used at home should never be forgotten. In the essay “Aria” by Richard Rodriguez, this non-fiction writer and son of Mexican-American immigrants recalls feeling the intimacy toward his parents when, as a young child, he could use Spanish at home; he remembers: “the voices of his parents and sisters and brother “insisting: You belong here. We are family numbers. Related. Special to one another. ... We are speaking now the way we never speak out in public--we are together” (29). During school time and everyday life, the bilingual identity obstructed Rodriguez from assimilating into the American society. Unlike him, I have never walked on the school bus with anxiety or held my breath while the teacher called out my name, but I have never experienced the particular intimacy either since I moved to Shenzhen as a kid. I feel upset about the fact that I can’t communicate with my parents in my hometown language, and I feel alienated when I can’t understand the smiles on my parents’ faces as they recall their past in Hunan dialect. People will nurture recognition by an exclusive usage of a dialect or foreign language, which the majority around them don’t understand. And memories shared by them, carried by the language essentially compose this linguistic recognition.

In the future, my next generation might never know the “Xiang” Chinese, not to mention to speak it, but the discontinuity of my mother tongue won’t concern me. As long as my children don’t forget the Mandarin language that distinguishes us, they can share emotions and memories

that belong to us. If I take my children to the United States when they are four, I will allow, even encourage them to use Chinese at home, so that during Christmas Eve or Chinese New Year, I can tell them funny stories about my youth in Mandarin and receive their genuine laughter instead of questions such as “Why do Chinese people speak like this?” As they grow up, they will feel the recognition within our family, and won’t have any incoherence in childhood memory. However, they, like most immigrants who face bilingual situations on a daily basis, would face the realistic choice: either to forget their mother tongue or to include an accents in the official language. After all, not many people can easily switch languages at home and outside. As my empirical admonishment: though you might face the adversity of prejudice from others, you should not lose your family’s language as the cost for integrating into the society. That distinct and crucial language allows you to open your heart to your family and create exclusive emotions. It’s the language of intimacy and memory.

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