Chapter 9
Future Directions and Prospects for the Macau Language Ecology

9.1 Introduction

At the time of this volume’s completion, Macau was in a potentially different socio-cultural environment than the one described throughout most of the volume. The 2019/2020 academic year was the final year of implementation of the new curricula for primary and secondary schools in Macau, but much of face-to-face teaching in the second semester of the academic year had moved to online learning. On 22 January 2020, the first imported case of the ailment that would later be named COVID-19 was discovered in Macau, and the number of cases rapidly grew to 10 within the next ten days (Macao SAR Government 2020). The virus had reached Macau just a few days before the Chinese (Lunar) New Year (CNY) celebration, a holiday that normally fills hotels and casinos and boosts the economy. The government moved quickly to suspend all casino operations for 15 days on 4 February. Schools and universities did not reopen for face-to-face classes after the CNY holiday and all instruction turned to on-line classes. The World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the coronavirus infection a global pandemic on 12 March 2020 (WHO 2020) and Macau moved to close borders to almost everyone except temporary/permanent residents. Casinos, hotels, restaurants and all the infrastructure built to propel Macau to the top of the world’s gaming market were still in place and operational, but tourists were only allowed to trickle into the territory at incrementally increasing rates as the pandemic spread worldwide. By mid-August the city had experienced only 45 total cases of COVID-19, all of which were imported into the city without any local transmission (Macao SAR Government 2020).

The experience of the lockdown of the city during the final six months of this volume’s preparation have highlighted a number of the points made throughout the volume. First, Macau is a very small territory and cannot easily sustain itself throughout a crisis that closes the borders. All food, electricity, water, supplies, etc. must be shipped to the territory either by sea or land ports. To close those ports to shipping traffic essentially isolates the city from resupply of resources. Stories of how the city was isolated at the beginning of the eighteenth century and then again...
during the second world war are eerily reminiscent of the self-imposed isolation of 2020. Second, the casino integrated resort and gaming economy has given the local government a deep well of monetary resources that can easily be held in reserve for emergency use. Although the casino and border closure put Macau’s economy on indefinite hold, financial reserves have allowed the territory to survive for at least the first 6 months of an economic recession that will likely continue for many more months. Finally, closure of the economy allowed the MSAR government to reaffirm its service to the local community and its commitment to development of that community. Recent years had seen a flood of non-resident workers and tourists from the People’s Republic of China (PRC) entering the territory and transforming the demographics of the city, including the linguistic ecology. The measures taken to protect the city from the spread of COVID-19 have slowed economic growth for 2020, but ultimately preserved the welfare of the city’s residents. This closing chapter will briefly examine the likely future development of multilingualism within Macau’s multilingual ecology and recommend some possible directions for language policy and language planning.

9.2 Chinese

The point of view proposed within the volume on linguistic ecology in Macau is that the Chinese language is not a single unified language, but it is instead a complex nexus of several largely mutually-unintelligible varieties that are genetically and historically related and that largely share a common writing system. The dominant varieties in Macau are Cantonese, Putonghua and Hokkien, although there are a number of other varieties that have not been fully accounted for within the DSEC (i.e., ‘Statistics and Census Service’) reports. There has been strong pressure in recent years to move toward a standard of Putonghua in both education and industry. The tourism and gaming industries rely upon visitor arrivals from the PRC, and these visitors are accustomed to using Putonghua as a lingua franca in China. Likewise, a shortage of teachers has forced local secondary schools to hire teachers (usually, in subjects like Mathematics or Science) from the PRC, and these teachers, who work on non-resident worker permits, are usually unable to teach in any language other than Putonghua. The scenarios of language shift away from varieties of Chinese like Cantonese or Hokkien toward Putonghua is a very real and familiar experience of Chinese dialect communities within China, and of overseas Chinese communities in places like Singapore and Malaysia. As Putonghua becomes more highly regarded as an essential element of educational achievement, schools, and eventually families, shift away from other varieties of Chinese toward Putonghua as the usual language. There is, however, little evidence that families are abandoning the use of Cantonese in favour of Putonghua in Macau and the institutional status that Cantonese enjoys as a standardising language ensures its continued use within the territory for the foreseeable future. Furthermore, although Putonghua is used by several tertiary institutions within the territory—most notably the Macau University of Science and Technology
(MUST) and the City University of Macau (CityU)—those schools cater primarily to students from the PRC with only a minority of local Macau secondary school graduates matriculating into those institutions. Putonghua becomes a lingua franca for all interactions at those large private institutions, but they are not typical of the scholastic experience in Macau tertiary institutions, where the majority of students are from Macau (see Zhang 2020). Furthermore, in University classrooms where a majority of students are Cantonese speakers from Macau, Putonghua does not dominate in the same way; instead, Cantonese is more likely to be adopted as the lingua franca with Putonghua only used with speakers who cannot speak Cantonese. In the same way that a majority of local Macau students who speak Cantonese as their usual language shapes the interactions at local university classrooms like the University of Macau’s, a majority of local Cantonese-speaking teaching staff at these institutions also influence the choice of language within the classroom and ensure that Putonghua is unlikely to replace English as the teaching medium. Although Cantonese might serve as a viable teaching medium in classrooms where teachers and a majority of students speak Cantonese as their usual language, it is not as effective for the 20–25% of students in the classroom who do not speak Cantonese. These Cantonese-speaking local students and teachers are generally not accustomed to using Putonghua as a lingua franca and, while they might prefer to use Cantonese as the medium of instruction, they are generally more comfortable with English as the medium of instruction (MOI) and more actively preserve EMI education. Consequently, there is little direct challenge from Putonghua of English as the essential language of higher education within the local Macau community.

However, there is evidence that the number of speakers of other Chinese languages—most notably Hokkien—may be under threat within Macau. Speakers of other Chinese languages are already quite small within the territory and, with the exception of Hokkien speakers, not generally organised into visible communities of speakers. Some effort should be made to suggest ways to preserve the multilingual heritage of Macau speakers of Hokkien and other Chinese languages. Within institutions of higher learning, these languages are typically seen as impediments to students’ use of Putonghua and the highly valued Standard Written Chinese (SWC) that is intimately connected to Putonghua. Academy support for the use and study of these languages would be a first initial step that would go a long way toward the eventual documentation and preservation of the linguistic diversity represented by these Chinese languages.

9.3 English

Harrison’s (1984) proposal that Macau would benefit from a wider adoption of English within the territory has essentially been implemented within the 20 years since the handover of the territory to Chinese administration in 1999. The number of English-speakers under the age of 55 within the territory, according to the 2016 by-census report, is essentially 50%, and the number is steadily climbing each year
(DSEC 2017). Within government and other services industries, English can be expected as a normal feature of the industries, and this is a clearly visible change within the territory over the past 20 years. Although there are pressures to use more Chinese-language instruction within government tertiary institutions like the University of Macau, the local Macau community has expressed an implicit support of EMI higher education by enrolling local students within the government-funded institutions that use English as the sole language of instruction and avoiding the private institutions that claim to use EMI, but do so in name only. While there is widespread recognition that Hong Kong English is a legitimate and authentic variety of English, Macau English does not enjoy the same widespread recognition (Moody 2008). English-language learning and use might enjoy further support in the territory from recognition that the language is already an accepted variety and that so-called native-speaker norms do not necessarily dictate legitimate uses of the language within the territory. Furthermore, there are a number of opportunities for local English speakers to expand their uses of the language. Although English is an important part of local businesses and education, local speakers enjoy only limited exposure to the language within the broadcast media. More direct support of English-language broadcasting, in either radio or television media, would be a good initial step to encouraging a more localised use and acceptance of English.

9.4 Portuguese

The loss of the Portuguese language within the territory of Macau is one of the most confounding and perplexing problems presented within this examination of the territory’s linguistic ecology. Although Portuguese is highly visible and present within with the territory’s linguistic landscape (Qi 2019), the number of residents who speak the language has continued to decline since the 1999 handover, when only 4.1% of the population had ability to use the language (DSEC 1997). Nevertheless, local Macau students at the University of Macau have demonstrated their strong interest in learning Portuguese when they are given a sufficient freedom to do so with their elective credits.

It does not seem likely, given the tone and content of the Portuguese-language curricula introduced at the primary or secondary educational levels, that more widespread learning and acceptance of Portuguese is achievable in the near future. In particular, the language curricula for Portuguese as a second language (PSL) consistently invoke the language of alterity to describe Portuguese speakers as ‘the Other’, suggesting that the curricula’s architects see the language as part of a history of colonial exploitation. This kind of characterisation may strengthen an ethnolinguistic Chinese identity among Macau students, but it also discourages characterisation of the Portuguese language as a local Macau language. The characterisation of Portuguese as a language of oppression makes it difficult to accept simultaneous attempts to encourage use of the language. One method that might be adopted to
improve the learning of Portuguese within Macau schools is the ‘bilingual education’ method that is currently used within Escola Oficial Zheng Guanying ‘Zheng Guanying Government School’ (see Chap. 6). This school has elected to teach certain classes—notably Art and Physical Education—within the mixed mediums of Chinese and Portuguese. Although there are a number of potential risks with this particular method of bilingual education, it does present students with an authentic and indigenous language learning experience, which they might not otherwise have from the institutionalised PSL curricula.

Finally, there are also efforts within Macau to preserve or revitalise Makista (a.k.a. Macau Portuguese Creole) as a natural language of Macau. Although the language has been moribund for nearly a century (Holm 1989), it does represent a rallying point for local-Portuguese and Macanese identity within the community (Clayton 2009; Noronha & Chaplin 2012). In particular Eusébio (2013) describes the efforts of the Dóci Papiçaam di Macau, an amateur theatre group, to stage original productions that highlight the unique features of Makista. The annual theatre performances are extremely popular and sell out every night that they are staged in the Macau Cultural Centre, the largest public venue available for a musical or theatrical production. As an act of postcolonial identity, Morais (2016) notes that the ‘Patua Theatre’ (a colloquial name for the troupe) responds to a desire to creatively re-imagine Makista and Macau’s linguistic ecology. Although the theatre productions are of little interest to language documentarians or sociolinguists, they do highlight the symbolic importance that Makista and, by extension, Portuguese have within the community.

9.5 Other Languages

Other language communities within Macau are small, although some have been established for a very long time. There is institutional support for the learning and promotion of some other European languages in Macau, most notably the Alliance Française maintains offices within the territory and supports the learning of French in Macau (Alliance Française Macao 2020) and the Goethe Institute in Hong Kong frequently sponsors events in Macau in support of German arts and language (Goethe-Institut Hong Kong 2020). A number of individuals enjoy studying and using other languages like Japanese and Korean within Macau, but there is only limited institutional support for the use of these languages within the territory and almost no recognition that some of the languages—most notably, Japanese—have resided within Macau’s language ecology for more than 400 years. Other languages like Burmese, Timorese or Konkani are also still present within the language ecology, but there is little institutional support for documentation or survival of these languages and the long-established communities represented by the speakers of these languages. Support within the academy (i.e., institutions of higher learning) for the documentation and preservation of these languages and language communities would be a good first step to ensuring that the importance of the communities is fully recognised.
9.6 Conclusion

Macau’s linguistic ecology has been, since the founding of the city in the sixteenth century, a complex ecology filled with local and imported variants of different languages. Over time, there have been attempts to simplify the ecology and several standardised varieties have had a role in reducing the overall complexity of the ecology. For example, in the nineteenth century standard Continental Portuguese MOI education was introduced in Macau with the result that Makista, the localised Portuguese Creole of the territory, became critically endangered through a process of decreolisation. Similarly, the introduction of standard English as the MOI and a second language in Macau schools has justified a generation of students to consider Chinese Pidgin English (CPE) as ‘bad English’, ‘Chinglish’ or a corruption of English produced by local norms. Nevertheless, the language was the standard for communication between early English traders and Chinese merchants, and the history of the variety is intimately connected to the history of Macau’s linguistic ecology.

Today, there are two varieties of Chinese that might be thought of as standardising: Cantonese and Hokkien both share some features of standardisation, but are not yet accepted as fully standardised languages. Putonghua, one the other hand, is a highly standardised language and it carries with it much of the prestige associated with being one of the most (if not the most) widely spoken language in the world. As Putonghua enjoys a more valued position in Macau society and education since the 1999 handover, it is not difficult to imagine that it may potentially someday come to dominate the language ecology in the same way that standard Portuguese and standard English have exerted their influence. The choice of a standard language, however, as either an MOI or a subject language, exemplifies the actual purpose of the standard; while there might be competing standards to choose from (e.g., American English or British English; Brazilian Portuguese or Continental Portuguese), only standardised varieties are available to be chosen. Given the threat to multilingual ecologies like Macau’s, steps should be taken to document and preserve the diversity when implementing standards for education.

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