



## Students' Attitude Towards the Varieties of Language: An Empirical Study of the Li Ethnic Group

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### Abstract

Baoting County in Hainan Province is an area where ethnic minorities live in concentrated communities, with a significant proportion of the *Li* people. They usually come into contact with Mandarin, Hainanese, and their own *Li* language, forming a diverse language environment. However, with the continuous improvement of education popularization and the widespread promotion of Mandarin, the *Li* language, which carries the profound cultural heritage of the *Li* ethnic minority group, is facing unprecedented challenges in inheritance. Therefore, the protection and inheritance of the *Li* language urgently require the attention of all sectors of society to ensure the continuation and development of this valuable language resource. This study focuses on middle and college students from Baoting County, Hainan Province, and uses a combination of questionnaire and in-depth interviews to explore their language attitudes and the underlying influencing factors. The research results show that although the young students have a positive evaluation of *Li* language, its average evaluation score is lower than that of Mandarin and Hainanese.

Keywords: minority language, language attitude, language use, language inheritance.

### 1. Introduction

Baoting County in Hainan Province is a gathering place for ethnic minorities, with the *Li* and *Miao* ethnic groups as permanent residents. Among them, the *Li* ethnic group accounts for a relatively large proportion. The local *Li* people usually come into contact with three languages,

including Mandarin, Hainanese, and *Li* language. *Li* language refers to the language used by the *Li* ethnic group, Mandarin is the commonly-used language in formal situations, and Hainanese is the most widely used and widely spoken dialect in Hainan. With the popularization of education and the promotion of Mandarin, the education level and frequency

of exposure to Mandarin among teenagers have increased, resulting in a situation where they cannot recognize their ethnic language. In the long run, the *Li* language will be in a dangerous situation. To ameliorate this situation, gaining insight into the language attitudes of local speakers holds significant value. By deeply understanding and analyzing people's attitudes towards their own language, we can more accurately grasp the current situation of ethnic language inheritance.

The purpose of this study is to analyze language use and language attitude of young people in Baoting County, so as to consider effective measures to promote the inheritance of the *Li* language. Overall, this paper aims to address the following two questions. First, what's the language attitude of local young students towards *Li* language? Second, what factors affect their language attitude?

## 2. Literature Review

According to Wang (2002), in bilingual and multilingual societies, influenced by factors such as social or ethnic identity, emotions, purposes and motivations, and behavioral tendencies, individuals develop specific perceptions or make evaluations regarding the social value of a particular language or script. Such perceptions and evaluations are generally referred to as language attitude.

The series of factors mentioned above have become the research perspectives of researchers. Ma and Luo (2017) focused on the intrinsic connection among ethnic identity, language proficiency and language attitude, and found that significant positive correlations existed between them. Siebenhütter (2021) found that younger groups used the minority language less frequently in daily life, which was only used at home and in the community. Yin and Li (2021) demonstrated that the youth were more pessimistic than their parents about the solidarity and vitality of the minority language, but shared their parents' optimistic perceptions of the minority language's status. Yang and

Wang (2023) found that Min Nan had been severely constrained in the communicative space of the public sphere, but over half of Min Nan people hold an optimistic attitude towards the future of Min Nan. The findings of Banguis, Evangelista, Domato-Macarao, Manlangit and Ulla (2025) suggested that positive language attitude do not necessarily mean strong language vitality, especially in formal settings.

These studies have laid a certain foundation and provided inspiration for later studies on the inheritance of minority language. However, up to now, no research has focused on the study of the registered young student population in Baoting County, Hainan Province. As a minority autonomous county, Baoting County has a significant proportion of *Li* people, and the preservation and inheritance of ethnic languages in the area have great academic research value and urgently need to be explored in depth.

## 3. Methodology

Questionnaire is a major tool to investigate the language usage, language proficiency, and language attitude of the young students. After that, more targeted interview questions are designed.

### 3.1 Participants

Participants in this study are the young students of *Li* people, aged 15-24 with registered residence in Baoting County, Hainan Province. The students in this age group are middle and high school students as well as college students.

There are three reasons for choosing this group. Firstly, there are close connections and high cooperation among these students, and the validity of the questionnaire responses can be guaranteed. Secondly, young students constitute the core force in language inheritance, and their unique advantages endow them with an irreplaceable position in language protection and inheritance. They possess both abundant vitality and a strong enthusiasm for cultural exploration, naturally paying close attention to

ethnic languages. Meanwhile, young students excel in learning and adapt quickly to new things, enabling them to master language systems efficiently. Thirdly, as the younger generation of the ethnic group, their language attitudes will directly affect the development of the *Li* language. By investigating students in this age group, we can gain a deeper understanding of their degree of willingness to learn ethnic minority language, predict future trends in language use, and provide forward-looking guidance for language protection, educational planning, and policy-making.

### 3.2 Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire consists of three parts. The first part is personal information, including gender, age, education level, family composition, etc. The second part is about language usage and language mastery. The third part is about language attitudes towards Hainanese, Mandarin, and *Li* language.

In the third part, the evaluation of language attitude refers to the language attitude survey conducted by Shan and Li (2018), which evaluates the language attitude from the emotional and rational dimensions. The survey format adopts the Likert Five Scale, which

consists of a set of statements with five response options for each statement, usually “strongly agree”, “agree”, “undecided”, “disagree”, and “strongly disagree”, with scores of 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5, respectively. A score of 3 or above indicates a positive evaluation, and the higher the score, the higher the positive evaluation. A score below 3 indicates a negative evaluation, and the lower the score, the higher the negative evaluation. In addition, some scenario questions are designed to help analyze the factors that influence language attitudes.

### 3.3 Interview

After the questionnaire survey is completed, representative samples are selected to determine the interviewees. Interviews are conducted through phone and WeChat to explore the language attitude and the influencing factors behind it. And the interview conversations are transcribed into text for analysis.

## 4. Data Analysis and Discussions

Analysis of the data is from three dimensions, namely language usage, language proficiency, and language attitude.

### 4.1 Language Usage

Table 1 Language Usage of Respondents

Language Type	Percentage of Respondents
Mandarin	100%
Hainanese	58.33%
<i>Li</i> language	16.67%

100% of the respondents said they could use Mandarin, 58.33% said they could use Hainanese, and only 16.67% said they could use *Li* language. This reflects the strong influence of Mandarin as a national lingua franca and its importance as a medium of communication in modern society. Hainanese, as a dialect of Hainan region, has a relatively wide range of usage, while *Li* language, as the ethnic language of the *Li* ethnic group, is more limited to specific community and within ethnic group.

When asked which language to use in conversations with family, more than half of the respondents choose Mandarin, followed by Hainanese and *Li* language. This may be related to the interviewee's family background. The survey result shows that less than half of the respondents' parents are both *Li* ethnic. This means that most people have only one parent from the *Li* ethnic group, and using the *Li* language in the family may cause difficulties in understanding. What's more, under the

question of “which language do you usually use when chatting with relatives/acquaintances of our ethnic group”, very few people choose *Li* language, and the majority choose Mandarin, followed by Hainanese. This result further indicates that language choice is not solely determined by the identities of both parties, but is more influenced by language proficiency. Respondents may be more inclined to use Mandarin in cross-cultural and interethnic

communication due to its proficiency and universality.

Similar finding was reported in Song’s (2017) earlier survey conducted in other regions, which shows that Mandarin has emerged as the primary language among *Li* ethnic adolescents. This indicates that the decline in *Li* language usage also exist in other regions and has persisted for several years.

#### 4.2 Language Proficiency Level

**Table 2 Self-evaluation of Proficiency in Hainanese, Mandarin, and *Li* language**

	fluent and accurate oral proficiency	moderate fluency but inaccurate oral proficiency	disfluent oral proficiency	adequate comprehension with weak oral proficiency	limited comprehension with weak oral proficiency	no comprehension or oral proficiency
Hainanese	0.00%	8.33%	16.67%	25.00%	41.67%	8.33%
Mandarin	53.70%	46.30%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
<i>Li</i> language	0.00%	0.00%	8.33%	8.33%	33.33%	50.00%

Adopting the language proficiency scale designed by Liu and Li (2020), the above table shows that the respondents have a strong ability to use Mandarin, and they all indicate that they are proficient in using Mandarin for communication. As for the level of mastery of Hainanese, almost no one can achieve fluency and accuracy, and most people say they can understand some but are not very good at speaking.

As for *Li* language, half of the respondents answered that they neither listen nor speak it. This confirms the suggestion that language proficiency affects the language use choices of respondents. In the interview, the respondents express their inner feelings, that is, while they clearly recognize that the *Li* language can better enhance emotional connections with their relatives, they have experienced a sense of unfamiliarity with *Li* language as a result of rare

use over time. More importantly, the lack of accumulation and updating of *Li* language vocabulary in daily life has become a major obstacle for them to communicate freely in *Li* language.

#### 4.3 Language Attitude

The questions about language attitude are divided into three parts. Firstly, the respondents’ evaluations of Hainanese, Mandarin, and *Li* language. Secondly, the respondents’ understanding of the relationship between ethnic language and ethnic identity, that is, whether language constitutes the sole or definitive criterion for determining a person’s membership in a particular ethnic group. Thirdly, the respondents’ expectations for the future development of the *Li* language.

##### 4.3.1 Evaluation of Hainanese, Mandarin and *Li* Language

Table 3 Respondents' Evaluation of Hainanese, Mandarin and *Li* language

	friendliness	politeness	usefulness	convenience	significant influence	Symbolism of literacy
Hainanese	4.33	4.17	3.83	3.75	3.33	3.75
Mandarin	5.00	4.75	5.00	4.92	4.67	4.42
<i>Li</i> language	3.83	3.67	2.83	3.25	3.00	2.75

In the first part, the respondents' evaluations of Hainanese, Mandarin, and *Li* language are all above three points, showing a positive trend. Among them, Mandarin has the highest evaluation. The average rating of young students for Mandarin is 4.79. The average rating of Hainanese is 3.86, and the respondents have a high emotional recognition of Hainanese. Compared to Mandarin and Hainanese, *Li* language has a lower average score in terms of emotional identification and practical value recognition.

What's more, when it comes to offering *Li* language courses in local schools, over 80% of the respondents strongly agree. At the same time, a small number of people believe that it is "unnecessary" and "irrelevant". The reason is that they think the course will waste their time for exam preparation, and learning to use Mandarin and Hainanese is sufficient for communication needs.

On the whole, the result indicates that the majority of people hold generally positive evaluation toward *Li* language. It's similar to the research result of Wu (2015), which found that although student's language ability is notably inadequate, most of them have a deep emotional attachment to their own language and are willing to learn and understand their own language and culture.

#### 4.3.2 The Relationship between Ethnic Language and Ethnic Identity

In the second part, two questions are designed to investigate students' understanding of the relationship between ethnic language and

ethnic identity, one being more indirect, and the other being more direct.

The first question is, if a *Li* ethnic student is studying in another city and uses Mandarin instead of *Li* language when talking to relatives at home during holidays, the relatives will evaluate the student as follow: "Why did he come back from somewhere else and then not even speak hometown dialect?" What is your opinion on the evaluation? In this scenario, over 85% do not agree with the "evaluation of relatives". This result reflects the interviewed students' tolerance towards language use and respect for individual choices.

The second question is whether learning to use the *Li* language is a symbol of the *Li* people. When answering this question, most people maintain a neutral attitude.

These two questions reflect the complex understanding of the relationship between language and cultural identity among young students, as well as their respect for individual language choice freedom, that is, although language is closely related to ethnic culture, it is not the only or decisive criterion for judging whether a person belongs to a certain ethnic group. This neutral attitude may stem from respect and understanding of cultural diversity, that is, the belief that a group's cultural identity includes but is not limited to language.

#### 4.3.3 Expectations for the Future Development of *Li* language

The third part is about the respondents' expectations for the future development of the *Li* language. Previously, some scholars have

conducted relevant research. Pan and Zhong (2015) pointed out that from the perspective of ecological linguistics, there are three possible trends of the development of *Li* language: (1) *Li* people give up their mother tongue and switch to Mandarin or Hainanese, which have a wider range of communication, as their first language; (2) The *Li* people still use *Li* as their first language and borrow some vocabulary and expressions from Mandarin Chinese or Hainanese to compensate for the lack of communication function of their mother tongue; (3) *Li* language coexists harmoniously with Mandarin Chinese, Hainanese, and other languages, taking the path of bilingualism or multilingualism.

The third trend is obviously more ideal, and in order to better strive in this regard, it is necessary to understand people's expectations for the development of the *Li* language. According to the results of questionnaire and interview, the expectations of young students for the future development prospects of the *Li* language are surprisingly positive. Within the scope of the respondents, almost no one believes that the *Li* language will not be used in the near future. They believe that with the efforts of various sectors of society, the *Li* language will develop within a certain range in the future, and may even have great potential for development. Through interviews, it's found that although young students are currently unable to proficiently use the *Li* language, they are willing to learn and interact with the language and culture of the *Li* ethnic group.

#### 4.3.4 Factors Influencing the Attitudes

Based on the above analysis, the language attitude of students toward *Li* language, as well as the underlying influencing factors can be identified. Research results show that local young students generally hold a positive attitude towards the *Li* language, which is reflected in their willingness to learn and understand *Li* language, and their confidence in the future development of *Li* language.

However, compared to Mandarin and Hainanese, the status of *Li* language does appear relatively low. This phenomenon contains complex factors, which pose a challenge to the inheritance of the *Li* language. The findings from questionnaires and interviews shed light on these factors.

Firstly, the frequency of contact with *Li* language in the living environment is low. For college students, the language they can come into contact with in their daily lives mostly are Mandarin and Hainanese. For *Li* ethnic college students, due to their small number, it is generally difficult for them to find classmates of the same ethnic group in schools, except for ethnic universities and local universities in Hainan. It is rare for them to meet fellow Hainanese students, so they have a higher sense of familiarity with Hainanese. For middle school students, they prefer to communicate with their peers in school and mostly use Mandarin.

Secondly, the usage occasions of *Li* language are limited. The acquisition of Mandarin and Hainanese meets the communication needs in most occasions. *Li* ethnic students lack opportunities to use their native language in their daily lives, which may lead them to doubt the practicality of their native language and affect their language attitudes.

Thirdly, personal language ability is also one of the important factors affecting the language attitudes. If ethnic minority students have strong language proficiency and are able to communicate freely in their native language in daily life, they may develop stronger confidence and identification with their native language. On the contrary, if their native language proficiency is weak or they encounter difficulties and setbacks in using their native language, they may develop feelings of frustration and resistance towards their native language. The survey result shows that most young students have not learned the *Li*

language, which is why they have a low rating of the practical value of the *Li* language.

Fourthly, family members of young students pay less attention to *Li* language. Family is an important place for the formation of students' language attitudes. The language environment in the family, the parents' language attitude and the degree of emphasis they attach to their ethnic language will have a profound impact on the minority students' language attitude. Students may develop a stronger sense of identity and belonging to their ethnic language if family members regularly use it in their daily lives. The results of the questionnaire reflect the concern of some students that the introduction of the *Li* language curriculum may divert time from "core" or "examination" subjects such as mathematics, Chinese and English. In the interview, some students demonstrate that in today's academic pressure environment, parents believe that making sure students get good grades in major subjects is more important for future education and employment.

## 5. Conclusion

Based on the aforementioned analysis and discussion, it is evident that the young students have notable deficiencies in their oral proficiency in the *Li* language. In addition, although they generally hold a positive and affirming attitude towards the *Li* language and are willing to actively explore its value, the evaluation of *Li* language is significantly lower than Mandarin and Hainanese.

Therefore, it's very urgent and necessary to mobilize the enthusiasm of young students to learn *Li* language. This can be done effectively by exposing them to the *Li* language and culture in forms that interest them. Taking the above findings as inspirations, the following are specific suggestions for motivating young students to learn minority language.

First of all, making full use of the school as the main position. Inspired by Lin and Chen

(2022), ethnic language education can integrate language competence cultivation with ethnic cultural immersion, so creating a good cultural atmosphere can encourage students to pay attention to their own language. According to the interview, local middle schools hold cultural and art festivals every year. Thus, schools can set up cultural exhibition areas to encourage students to display *Li* language and culture in the form of calligraphy, painting, etc. In this way, students have the opportunity to be exposed to *Li* language and culture.

Secondly, encouraging college students to actively participate in the promotion of *Li* culture and language through social practice in their hometowns. Local governments and cultural scenic spots can establish close cooperative relationships, jointly develop social practice plans and provide necessary training and support for college students. In this process, participating in cultural heritage activities helps college students realize their important role in protecting intangible cultural heritage and promoting local economic development.

Lastly, it's necessary to make people aware of the practical significance and long-term value of learning the *Li* language. Proficient mastery of *Li* language not only facilitates the in-depth exploration of local cultural resources but also promotes the development of tourism projects, which essentially realizes the effective conversion of linguistic capital into economic capital.

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