

Speaking Hoklo not the new smoking

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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On Thursday, the right to use one's mother tongue made headlines when academics and language advocates stood up against two National Taiwan University professors who on July 30 shut down a student representative who spoke Hoklo (also known as Taiwanese) in a university Cooperative Shop board meeting.

The professors insisted that only Mandarin be used and in a previous meeting motioned that people using any other language would not be allowed to speak, and their words would not be recorded in the minutes.

From a practical perspective, it is reasonable to question the point of speaking in a language not understood by everyone at a meeting. Even before the Japanese colonial government and Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) regime imposed Japanese and Mandarin respectively on Taiwanese, not everyone in Taiwan spoke Hoklo, as Hakka and Aboriginal languages were also spoken.

Unfortunately, due to oppressive language policies, many Hoklo people, who comprise the nation's majority, do not speak their native tongue or speak it poorly.

The government must do all it can to remedy this situation through language education and other policies, such as the National Languages Development Act (國語發展法), and promote native languages in the media and other cultural avenues so that people can once again be proud of speaking them.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs should be applauded for amending the Enforcement Rules of the Passport Act (護照條例施行細則) earlier this month to allow people to romanize their names in Hoklo, Hakka or Aboriginal languages in their passports. Previously, only Mandarin names could be romanized.

However, the point of holding a meeting is communicating ideas. Mandarin, like it or not, is the lingua franca in Taiwan, spoken fluently by everyone except some elderly people and new immigrants.

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Even if there were interpreters, using different languages would bog down a meeting and could lead to misunderstandings.

And what happens when an interpreter cannot be found? It might be easier to find a Hoklo interpreter, but that might not be the case for Aboriginal languages, which, for example, are spoken by few people in Taipei.

It is not that Mandarin must be used, but it is the most efficient way to conduct a meeting. Nevertheless, the use of other languages should warrant a conversation on how to proceed without trampling on people's right to speak their mother tongue.

The main problem is the professors' attitude. Silencing the student and insisting that Mandarin be used without allowing any room for discussion is indeed disturbingly reminiscent of past governments' oppression of Taiwanese culture that continued up to just a few decades ago.

Even worse, agricultural economics professor Jerome Geaun (郭建宏) justified his motion by comparing speaking Hoklo to smoking cigarettes.

That is simply not acceptable. It is blatantly discriminatory, and a huge insult to those who have suffered government oppression as well as to government officials who have been making great efforts to promote the use and survival of these languages.

Mandarin is indeed the most-spoken language in Taiwan, but it is by no means superior to any other language and there is no place for this type of cultural bullying in today's society.

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