

## All languages equally important

Written by Taipei Times

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As the government moves to rectify the devastating past suppression of languages such as Hoklo (also known as Taiwanese), Hakka and the various Aboriginal tongues, it has become common to read news reports in which people question such policies and the importance of learning such languages.

Just months after National Taiwan University professors shut down a student representative who spoke Hoklo at a university cooperative shop board meeting, oddly comparing speaking Hoklo to smoking cigarettes, controversy erupted again last week.

The latest incident involves the wife of Kaohsiung Mayor Han Kuo-yu (韓國瑜), the Chinese Nationalist Party's (KMT) presidential candidate.

Lee Chia-fen (李淑芬) called the Ministry of Education's efforts to promote Hoklo a waste of time and resources.

As if her husband's often ignorant comments were not bad enough, Lee has made the news for a number of misguided statements, including erroneously claiming on Monday that elementary-school students are being taught about "anal sex" and "orgasms," and that the Kaohsiung Megaport Festival "has made many mothers weep."

While the comments were not made by Han, there is a certain social responsibility politicians running for president and their campaign team have to maintain. Fervent supporters might believe what Han and Lee say without question, but that does not bode well for society.

However, they are not the only people making outlandish statements.

Taipei Mayor Ko Wen-je (柯文哲) continues to offend people. It seems to be a growing trend among politicians worldwide, which is alarming.

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Lee's comments led to the Democratic Progressive Party and the KMT trading barbs last week, before an Academia Sinica Institute of Linguistics academic tried to debunk Lee's claim on Friday.

It appears that the rationale behind Lee's comment is that learning these languages in school instead of at home would hinder students learning foreign languages, namely English.

That is a totally different problem.

The nation's English education environment has long been incompetent — even when students were only learning Mandarin and English at school — and it definitely needs fixing.

If Han wants Taiwanese students to be better at English, he and his staff should look at how to improve the curriculum and the style of teaching instead of targeting native languages, which are finally getting the respect they deserve after decades of neglect and suppression.

Such an attitude is reminiscent of the colonial mentality brought by the Japanese and the KMT, in which one language is considered more important than another, and it is especially insulting coming from the KMT.

Since passing the National Languages Development Act (國語發展法) in December last year, the government has been doing a great job of leading by example: Last month, real-time Aboriginal-language interpretation was provided for the first time at an official meeting at the Presidential Office.

"The government will do more and bring about changes to make up for the lack of effort in the past so that an Aboriginal-language-friendly environment can be built," President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) said.

This is the correct attitude.

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While current KMT members should not be faulted for the policies their party implemented in the past, they could at least make an effort to be conscious of what happened and be supportive of efforts that seek to undo the damage.

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