

Taiwanese is the new cool

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) Legislator Sufin Siluko on Monday last week asked Minister of Economic Affairs Shen Jong-chin (孫正人) to speak Mandarin instead of Hoklo (commonly known as Taiwanese) when explaining the government's policies to bail out sectors and people affected by COVID-19, sparking criticism that he had treated the language with disdain.

News about Taiwanese never fails to grab the public's attention, whether it be about a National Taiwan University professor comparing it to "secondhand smoke" or new faces at the legislature being able to speak it fluently. Independent Legislator Freddy Lim (林錫山), a then-New Power Party member, stood out four years ago with his all-Taiwanese questioning of then-premier William Lai (賴清德).

In the case of the new batch of lawmakers, none has caught more eyes in this regard than Taiwan Statebuilding Party Legislator Chen Po-wei (陳柏偉).

The appeal with Taiwanese obviously comes from the "Taiwan-ness" it represents. It was the language spoken by a majority of people before the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) retreated to Taiwan in 1949 and imposed a ban on the language. Many people, regardless of political leanings, can immediately bond with Taiwanese because it is — or was — the language spoken by their parents or grandparents at home.

Despite the ban and ensuing stigmatization of the language, it has managed to survive to this day. Its staying power is so great that people can likely speak or understand it to some degree even if they are Hakka or Aborigine.

During a March 17 question-and-answer session with Premier Su Tseng-chang (蘇貞昌), KMT Legislator Charles Chen (陳昌) deliberately switched to Taiwanese halfway through the segment, saying that "he is from Tainan," where the language is spoken by many. During the exchange, Su twice corrected Charles Chen's Taiwanese, but praised him for his ability to speak the language well enough as a relatively young politician.

Charles Chen favoring a language that was once banned by his party is significant and could signal a rise in the language's popularity: He clearly valued the extra publicity that he would

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gain from it. The move came just days after he and Chen Po-wei had a war of words over whether to ban families of Chinese spouses from using the National Health Insurance system. It is possible that Charles Chen did not want his Taiwanese-speaking rival to outshine him.

A dark horse candidate in the Jan. 11 elections with a unique brand of humor, Chen Po-wei, 34, enjoys a high level of popularity among young people. A champion of Taiwanese independence, a vocal critic of China and a heavy user of memes and wry humor, he and his penchant for Taiwanese have a definite and strong influence on members of the online community.

The problem is that while people consider Taiwanese to be quaint or endearing, they lack the motivation or means to properly learn it. The Ministry of Education's curriculum guidelines stipulate just one class hour per week for Taiwanese education from elementary through senior-high school, which is far from enough to master any language, not to mention that some younger teachers probably cannot speak it well enough to teach it.

For prominent self-determination advocates the ability to speak good Taiwanese goes without saying — it is almost a prerequisite. However, while polls indicate that more young people are identifying as Taiwanese, rather than Chinese or both, the number of Taiwanese-speaking people is diminishing.

Taiwanese, if granted the status of an official language, could be an important means by which Taiwanese can avoid being assimilated by China. Policymakers cannot help but appear complacent by allowing Mandarin to be the sole official language of Taiwan for so long. It is time that the government introduced a serious Taiwanese education policy, starting with increasing the class hours.

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