



## Research Article

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Received: 20 July 2023 / Accepted: 3 October 2023 / Published: 5 November 2023

# The Study of Yi Minority Language in Mengzi from the Perspective of Eco-Linguistics

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36941/ajis-2023-0155>

## Abstract

*The Yi language is a unique language spoken by the Yi minority in China. Despite Mengzi City having one of the largest Yi populations in Yunnan Province, there are very few studies about the Yi language from an ecolinguistics perspective in this region. The primary aim of this study is to investigate language competence, language use, and language attitudes among young people aged 14-28 from Mengzi. Fieldwork research was conducted to collect data, which involved administering a series of questionnaires, interviews, and observations with a group of 104 Yi teenagers. Research findings highlighted that the language ecology in the Mengzi region is changing, with the original mother tongue-dominant type gradually shifting toward a Chinese-dominant type. Although 58.6% of participants claimed fluency or semi-fluency in the Yi language, only 18.8% of them could read and write Yi characters. Due to its inferior status in modern society, the use of the Yi language was limited to family and religious domains. Furthermore, although participants showed a positive inclination toward the Yi language, they held a higher regard for the status and function of Chinese (Mandarin). In conclusion, external forces motivating young speakers to shift from their native language to Mandarin encompass social and economic advancement, as well as national language policies. The significance of the study lies in documenting Yi's mother tongue and its role in raising awareness about the preservation of endangered languages in China.*

**Keywords:** Yi minority language; language ecology; language competence; language use; language attitude

## 1. Introduction

This study was conducted in Yunnan province, which is home to the largest number of ethnic minorities in China. Yunnan's minority population totals approximately 15 million, with the Yi people

accounting for around 5 million, ranking first among the 26 ethnic groups in the province (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2021). The Yi people have their own language—also known as Yi, which belongs to a branch of the Tibetan-Burmese language group of the Sino-Tibetan language family. According to a linguistic survey conducted by Dai (2009), in regions where the Yi people live, the Yi language is commonly used in everyday life, including in primary schools, transactions, and administrative offices. However, according to Fan and Li (2012), Yi has been assessed as an endangered language. This assessment was further supported by Wang and He's (2020) research which indicated that the Yi language was at risk of disappearing in Guangan County. The majority of proficient Yi speakers were elderly individuals in their 70s and 80s, while many young people could only comprehend portions of the Yi language but were unable to speak it fluently.

Mengzi, situated in the southeastern part of Yunnan, stands out as one of the cities with the largest Yi ethnic minority population in the region. It is home to approximately 130,000 Yi people, comprising roughly 50% of the minority population in the city (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2021). The Yi people living here usually call themselves Nisu and Nasu, and speak the southern dialect of the Yi language. To our knowledge, the study of the Yi language in the Mengzi has not been reported in academic papers. In recent years, tourism has emerged as a prominent industry in this city, attracting numerous visitors from China and abroad. This has promoted the development of the local economy and culture. With the continuous migration and mobility of people speaking different languages in Mengzi, there is an inevitable interaction and even fusion with individuals from various cultural groups. This increased contact and collision between different cultures ultimately leads to language contact and influence among these groups (He, 2005). Given the varying use of the Yi language across different regions, this study applies the Haugen model of ecolinguistics theory to analyze the language ability, use, and attitudes of the Yi people in this city.

The construction of this article can be summarized as follows: Firstly, an overview of the Yi minority in Mengzi City is provided. Secondly, existing literature related to the study is presented. Next, the theoretical framework of ecolinguistics is provided. Fourthly, the methodology of this study is outlined. Then, the language ecology of Mengzi City is evaluated from three key perspectives, namely, participants' language competence, language use domains, and language attitudes. The study concludes with a discussion of the findings and their implications for the future of the Yi language, raising awareness for the preservation of endangered languages in China.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Language maintenance and language shift

Language maintenance and language shift are two key concepts in the field of survey in sociolinguistics. Language maintenance refers to the process by which a language continues to be used by a specific language community even “in the face of competition from regionally and socially powerful or numerically stronger languages” (Mesthrie, 1999, p.42). There are common scenarios observed in language maintenance: firstly, individuals may continue to use their native language in all domains; secondly, individuals may become bilingual, using their native language and the dominant language for broader communication in the new registers. Although the number of domains where the native language is still used is decreasing, language maintenance occurs constantly in such speech communities. Language shift is defined as “the process of replacing one language with another as the means of communication and socialization at both an individual and community level” (Ong, 2018, p.34). The speakers stop using their first language, which leads to language loss or death, bringing prosperity to the dominant language. Language shift is both a process and an outcome for a language (Pauwels, 2016). This shift occurs over generations, rather than happening suddenly. As a result, speakers cease to use their first language for an extended period. In the worst-case scenario, the language may become lost or dead, indicating the complete abandonment of the first language within the community. However, the language shift rate and

speed differ among diverse communities. Since Fishman introduced the concepts of language maintenance and language shift, numerous relevant studies have been conducted around the world. In New Zealand, the preservation of minority languages faces enormous challenges. On the one hand, public schools provide fewer resources for minority language learning, such as teachers and courses. On the other hand, the heritage language input from grandparents still has an unexplored systematic collaboration with language maintenance in young learners (Buckingham, 2021). Unlike Buckingham's research, Zou (2022) studied the language ideology and family practices of three Hakka families who immigrated to Guangzhou (the capital city of Guangdong Province) and concluded that grandparents constituted the source of Hakka input for children and played significant roles in the process of teaching Hakka to the younger generation. According to Jee, Park, and Cheon's findings from 2023, participants in Australia, New Zealand, and Hawaii used less Korean (as a heritage language), despite their strong sense of identity. They tended to use English more than Korean in their everyday activities, indicating a perceptible shift in language towards English.

In the case of China, researchers investigated smaller ethnic groups that had experienced language shifts over the course of a century. One of the Altaic languages that have been heavily influenced by Chinese is the Dongxiang language. There are abundant loanwords in the Dongxiang language on account of the encirclement of the Sino-Tibetan language family. Min (2022) believed that Dongxiang people had gradually abandoned their mother tongue and switched to Chinese. The Bulang people in Jingsan Village, Jinghong City, abandoned their native tongue and switched to speaking Dai due to their affiliation with the Dai culture and their close economic and cultural ties (Chen, 2020). By analyzing the language use of the Bai people in the Shalang Bai community, which is far from the concentrated distribution area of the Bai ethnic group, Xie (2022) concluded that there was language interaction in this area. The Bai people are conscious of shifting their language due to their unique geographical location, inter-ethnic marriage, export-oriented economic model, and the popularization of Chinese compulsory education, among other reasons. Chinese is used more regularly and willingly by young and middle-aged persons than the Bai language. Most people only use Chinese in public. The areas where the mother language is used become more limited. Compared with the instances involving language shift, students in Luo and Yue's (2013) survey still showed deep feelings for the Bai language, despite experiencing culture shock from Chinese (Han) and Western cultures. They will continue to inherit and develop their mother tongue.

## 2.2 Previous research on Yi language maintenance and language shift in China

Based on the investigation of Dalongtan Township in Eshan Yi Autonomous County, Yunnan Province, Luo (2018) summarizes the transition rule of the Yi language into Chinese: monolingual Yi language → some Chinese components borrowing → Yi language and Chinese (bilingualism) → Chinese and Yi language (equally bilingual) → switching to Chinese. The internal reasons for switching to Chinese are the weakening of Yi language inheritance consciousness and the weakening of social communication function. Long-term language contact, social, economic, and cultural development, and school education are all external reasons for a cause in language shift. In Mopan Village, Sichuan Province, the Yi language was frequently used in the family domain, and Yi people spoke different languages depending on different occasions, but Chinese was their first choice. The Yi language was used in the traditional activities of the Yi people, while Chinese is mostly used in daily life, such as employment, education, and transaction (Zhuang, 2015).

In contrast, the Yi language in Wuhuodei village, Yunnan province, had good sustainability and high inheritance for several reasons. Firstly, the village was remote, making it difficult to reach. Secondly, there was little intermarriage among ethnic groups. Thirdly, school enrollment rates were low, which led to low proficiency in Chinese. Finally, ethnic identification was strong (Yuan, 2020). Li (2011) claimed that, on the one hand, due to the low education level of Yi teenagers in Santai Township, fewer people went out to study and work; on the other hand, Yi teenagers generally borrowed a considerable number of words from Chinese, expanding the expressive function of Yi

language and reviving the development of the language, meaning that the local Yi language was well preserved.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

Ecolinguistics is an interdisciplinary subject combining ecology and linguistics and an inevitable outcome of developing linguistics into the phase of cross-linguistics (Huang, 2021). "Language does not exist in a vacuum (Wendel, 2005, p.51)" but is shaped by the dynamic interactions between speakers and the environment in which the languages are used. An ecological approach to language considers the complex interconnectedness between the environment, languages, and their speakers. This approach highlights that numerous cultures and related languages are effectively preserved and safeguarded by multilayered functional relationships between speakers' communities and the protean quality of language around the globe (Wang, 2021). Haugen highlighted the importance for linguists to adopt a holistic approach to understanding human language, as it is intricately linked to and embedded in historical, social, and political contexts (Ong, 2018).

An analogy between two sets of elements (biology and linguistics) exists in the term 'language ecology'. In biology, there are interactions between organisms and their natural environment. From a linguistic perspective, language intertwines with the speakers who use it within a community. In summary, according to Haugen (1972), a language is like a living organism; it has a life span and will be born, flourish and eventually die. Thus, a language is not just a physical setting but also refers to the social and cultural setting in which the language is used.



Figure 1: Analogy of ecology

Mufwene (2014) categorized language ecology into external ecology and internal ecology. External ecology refers to the natural, social, and humanistic environments; internal ecology refers to the nature of the relationship between the specific language units and principles of a linguistic system. Haugen claimed that people focus more on language phonology, lexicon, and grammar rather than concentrating on the "social status and function of the language in question" (Haugen, 1972, p. 325). External ecology explores how the interactions between biological creatures and the environment produce language, concentrating on the cognitive abilities that underlie organisms' adaptable, flexible behavior. He (2020) divided this approach into three main categories: language users (language abilities), language use domains (family, friendship, religion, education, and work), and language attitude. In studying the language ecological environment of the Hainan Li language Qi dialect, Feng & Gong (2015) also discussed this minority language from three perspectives, including language attitude, language ability, and language choice. Due to changes in the economic and social environment and the impact of language contact, the external ecological environment of the language can be better understood by analyzing these three aspects. Thus, the present study also investigated three aspects of language ecology in Mengzi City and answered the following three questions:

1. What is the level of language competence among the Yi youth?
2. What is the language use of Yi youth in different domains?
3. What are the attitudes of Yi youth towards the Yi language and Chinese?

#### 4. Methodology

##### 4.1 Research site and respondents

This study was conducted among Yi youth in Mengzi City. The selection criteria were individuals with an official ethnic identity as Yi on their ID documents and aged between 14 and 28. The definition of youth adopted in the present research is the stipulation of the *Constitution of the Communist Youth League of China*, that is, teenagers are those aged from 14 to 28. Also, they needed to have fair capability in digital literacy. A total of 104 students, 40 males and 64 females, aged 16 to 28, participated in the study (Table 1).

Until December 31, 2020, Mengzi City had jurisdiction over five towns and four subdistricts (see Table 1). Questionnaires were distributed to all these nine regions.

**Table 1:** Characteristics of Participants (n=104)

Characteristics		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	40	38.4
	Female	64	61.5
Street / Town	Wenlan	29	27.9
	Wencui	11	10.6
	Guanlan	15	14.4
	Yuguopu	6	5.8
	Caoba	9	8.7
	Xinansuo	10	9.6
	Zhicun	11	10.6
	Lengquan	7	6.7
	Mingjiu	6	5.8

##### 4.2 Instrument

An online questionnaire was posted on Wenjuanxing (a Chinese online questionnaire platform) to collect data on the Yi young people's language competence, language use, and language attitudes. The new questionnaire was created based on Shang's (2018) language vitality of the Tujia language questionnaire. Since all respondents could understand Chinese, this questionnaire was only available in Chinese. The Cronbach Alpha value was 0.932, which was greater than the 0.7 threshold for the questionnaire. Besides, interviews and observations would be used as supplementary means to complete the content of the questionnaire.

##### 4.3 Data collection and analysis procedures

The online questionnaires were sent to the researchers' friends, and the snowball sampling method was used. In order to ensure that respondents could participate voluntarily and confidentially, the purpose of the study was explained through messages on WeChat (a social media application in China) and face-to-face conversations, then those who met the selection criteria were invited to join the study.

The online questionnaire link was posted on WeChat moment and sent as messages to researchers' contacts individually. One hundred four questionnaires were collected from February 10th, 2023 (30 days). All the data were typed into Excel to do the descriptive statistics analysis. By calculating the mean and variance, it would be possible to roughly describe and summarize the current situation of using the Yi language in Mengzi City.

## 5. Results

### 5.1 Self-perceived language competence

From the perspective of ecolinguistics, language competence focuses on the content composition and realization means of language and emphasizes interaction, dialogue, and coordination between language users and the environment (Huang & Wang, 2020). Language competence is exhibited through language skills, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In the present study, participants' language competence in their mother tongue, Chinese, and foreign languages will be shown in self-perceived language competence data.

### 5.2 Yi language competence

The participants' ability in listening and speaking was assessed using the Yi language, while their ability in reading and writing was evaluated based on their proficiency in Yi characters.

**Table 2:** Level of Proficiency in Yi Language (listening and speaking)

Do you understand the Yi language?			Can you talk with people in Yi?		
Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
fully understand	41	39.4	fluent	36	34.6
basically understand	24	23.1	advanced	25	24.0
can understand everyday expressions	16	15.4	moderate	15	14.4
can understand basic phrases	18	17.3	a little	20	19.2
cannot understand at all	5	4.8	none	8	7.7
total	104	1	total	104	1

**Table 3.** Level of Proficiency in Yi Language (reading and writing)

Do you understand the Yi characters?			To what extent do you master Yi characters?		
Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Most	6	5.8	can read and write	6	18.8
a few	26	25.0	can read but not write	20	62.5
none	72	69.2	can write but not read	6	18.8
total	104	1	total	32	1

According to Table 2, 39.4% could fully understand their first language, and 23.1% could basically understand it. Besides, 34.6% were proficient in using their mother tongue to communicate, and 24% could basically talk in their first language. It was evident that Yi teenagers' competence in the Yi language was pessimistic. As shown in Table 3, nearly 70% of participants could not understand Yi characters. Thirty-two participants understood Yi characters, but only 18.8% of them knew the skills in reading and writing Yi characters. To further understand the language abilities of Yi youth, the participants were asked, "Do you often use Yi characters?". The results turned out that only 20% often used Yi characters, and the proportion of those not using Yi characters reached 75.3%. The researchers also found that some road sign boards, and government agencies' logos have three languages: Chinese, Yi, and Hani. However, most people did not know or care about these languages.

### 5.3 Chinese competence

The survey of the respondents' Chinese language competence also involved four questions on

Chinese listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Table 4 showed that 99% of the respondents were capable of comprehending Chinese completely or basically. Almost all of them could communicate in Chinese. There is a trend of bilingualism for all among the Yi minority. This is consistent with the results presented in the 2019 report of Zhou Rong, Director of the Yunnan Provincial Department of Education, which showed that the promotion of Mandarin has achieved milestones in the fight against poverty. In addition, all of the 104 people who participated in the survey could read and write Chinese characters.

**Table 4:** Level of Proficiency in Chinese (listening and speaking)

Variables	Do you understand Chinese?		Variables	Can you talk with people in Chinese?	
	Frequency	Percentage (%)		Frequency	Percentage (%)
fully understand	96	92.3	fluent	89	85.6
basically understand	7	6.73	advanced	15	14.4
can understand everyday expressions	1	1.0	moderate	0	0
can understand basic phrases	0	0	a little	0	0
cannot understand at all	0	0	none	0	0
total	104	1	total	104	1

#### 5.4 Foreign language competence

Two questions in the questionnaire were designed to investigate whether participants have learned a foreign language and what language it is. The data showed that of 104 participants, only 2 never learned a foreign language before, 93.3% had learned English, and 4.8% had learned Japanese.

**Table 5:** Level of Proficiency in Foreign Languages (listening and speaking)

Can you understand the foreign language you learned?			Can you converse with people in the foreign language you learned?		
Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
fully understand	8	7.8	fluent	4	3.9
basically understand	21	20.6	advanced	18	17.6
can understand everyday expressions	43	42.2	moderate	37	36.3
can understand basic phrases	24	23.5	a little	33	32.4
cannot understand at all	6	5.9	none	10	9.8
total	102	1	total	102	1

**Table 6:** Level of Proficiency in Foreign Languages (reading and writing)

Reading			Writing		
variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)	variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Can read books, newspapers	18	17.6	Can write articles	11	10.8
Can understand simple sentences	40	39.2	can write sentences	24	23.5
Can understand everyday expressions	9	8.8	Can write everyday expressions	31	30.4
Can understand a few words	19	18.6	can write a few words	22	21.6
none	16	15.7	none	14	13.7
total	102	1	total	102	1

In Table 5, of the 102 people, only 28.4% could comprehend the foreign language they have learned completely or mostly. 42.2% of them could only comprehend daily expressions. Merely 21.5% could speak fluently or communicate simply in the foreign language they had learned, and 36.3% could have some daily communications with others. Table 6 showed that 17.6% could read a book or newspaper in a foreign language, 39.2% could read simple sentences, and less than 10% could comprehend daily language. Less than 11% could write an essay in the foreign language they learned, and 23.5% could write some simple sentences. 30% of respondents could write in daily language. It was clear that the respondents' overall listening, speaking, reading, and writing abilities were low.

### 5.5 Language use

For the family domain, participants' families have constantly used the Yi language, remaining the primary tool for communication among family members. For example, we observed a mother and her daughter cooking in the kitchen, and all their conversations were in the Yi language, except for the names of vegetables that could not be expressed in Yi, like asparagus and white gourd. However, some young people who returned home from school or work elsewhere often used words transliterated from Chinese in their sentences in the Yi language to communicate with their families. Meanwhile, the data in Figure 2 also showed that participants in their family talks had used Chinese. Moreover, the proportion of Chinese used in their talking with their brothers, sisters, and guests, especially those from other ethnic groups, was increasing. In contrast, the proportion of Yi language used was decreasing. There has been a trend of changing into bilingual families.

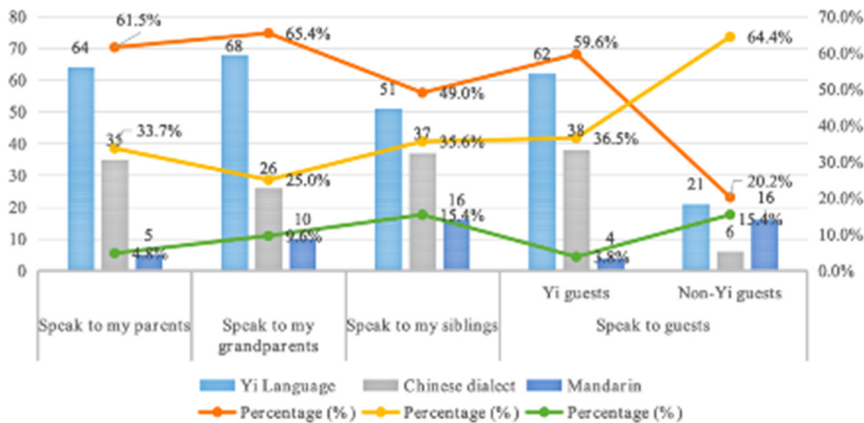


Figure 2. Language choices of Yi youth in the family domain

In terms of the education domain (Figure 3), in contrast with language use at home, the proportion of respondents using Chinese at school has increased significantly, and the proportion of the use of the Yi language has decreased further, which was less than 10% of the responses to each question in the questionnaire. The use of language in education has become dominated by Chinese. The Yi language has gradually withdrawn from school communication, with a trend towards a monolingual school dominated by Mandarin. According to the researchers' observations, in some secondary schools, foreign language classes (e.g., English, Japanese) were taught in foreign languages, and students were asked to raise and reply to questions in foreign languages they have learned.



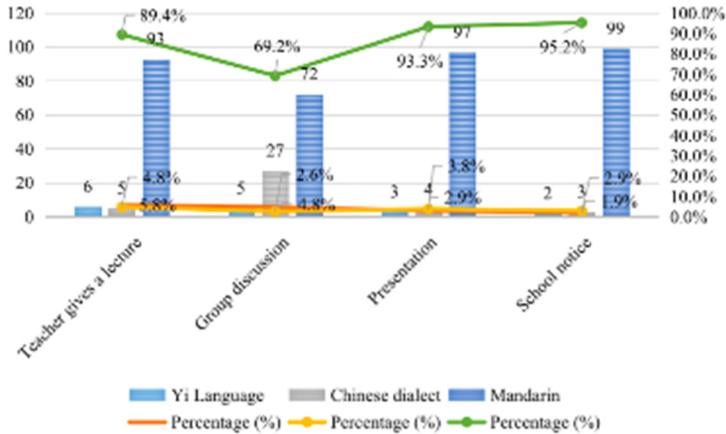


Figure 3. Language choices of Yi youth in the education domain

In religious occasions associated with the Yi people (Figure 4), such as weddings, funerals, and other related religious festivals, the frequent use of the Yi language was close to 60%. It indicated that the Yi language was still the main tool for communication during religious activities. The researcher observed that during many traditional festivals, for instance, the Worship Dragon Festival, the Yi people would follow the process of traditional customs. They performed a series of sacrificial ceremonies with the Bimo<sup>1</sup>, reciting scriptures written in Yi characters. Subsequently, all the Yi people would sing and dance with Yi’s distinguishing features. Although some young people were not fluent in the Yi language, they were still able to sing Yi songs.

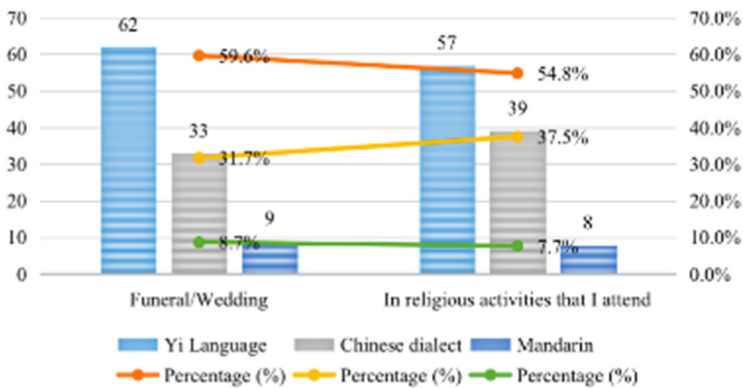


Figure 4: Language choices of Yi youth in the religion domain

Regarding the domains of friendship (Figure 5), over 80% of young people selected to use Chinese, especially Mandarin, to communicate with their friends, whether of their own ethnic group or another ethnic group. During the fieldwork, the researchers also found that the language used by Yi

<sup>1</sup> Among the Yi people, those who master the Yi language both in writing and speaking are called Bimo. In the Yi language, Bimo means teacher and professor (Li, 2011).

people varied depending on the discussion topics. For example, when they talked about a favorite celebrity, especially one from South Korea, many words could not be expressed in Yi language, and their conversations were even interspersed with some popular Korean words.

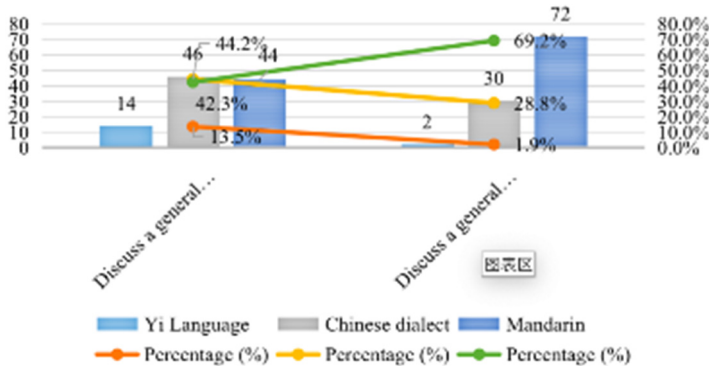


Figure 5: Language choices of Yi youth in the friendship domain

Currently, China’s most popular social media applications include WeChat, TikTok, Sina Weibo, and Kwai (Fitzgerald ET AL., 2022). According to statistics in Figure 6, more than 90% of Yi teenagers chose the language of Chinese on these social apps, and less than 10% used the Yi language. It has also been found that special Yi language input software must be installed in order to use the Yi language on these apps. The program of this input software was complex, and most people did not know Yi characters. Therefore, a small proportion of people use the Yi language in social media.

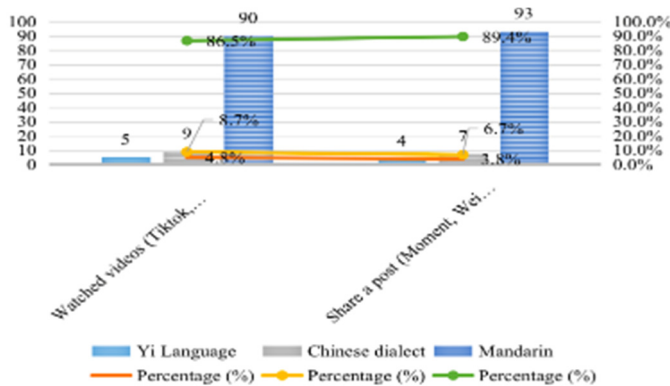


Figure 6: Language choices of Yi youth in the mass media domain

### 5.6 Language attitude

The questionnaire results indicate that Yi teenagers were positively inclined toward the Yi language. They express a preference for speaking the Yi language and believe it carries a sense of intimacy, as evidenced by the average score of 4.16 for item 9. Furthermore, most young people are willing to use the Yi language in public settings, so they only gave item 19 a score of 2.15. Regarding the importance of the Yi language, item 11 had an average score of 4.38, reflecting participants' belief in the need to preserve the Yi language and culture. Some participants emphasized that language serves as a vital

symbol of ethnic identity, making the disappearance of the Yi language regrettable. For the inheritance of the Yi language, young people expressed a willingness to learn and teach it to the next generation, as indicated by high scores of 4.37 and 4.29 for items 4 and 10, respectively. They also support the inclusion of the Yi language in school education, with item 3 scoring 4.26. However, during field investigations, it was found that there were no Yi language courses in Mengzi primary and secondary schools, primarily due to insufficient funds, a shortage of qualified teachers, and a lack of teaching materials, hindering the promotion and dissemination of the Yi language and Yi characters in the Mengzi region.

On the other hand, participants also showed positive attitudes towards Mandarin (Chinese). In items 5, 6, and 7, they showed a strong motivation to learn both Chinese and the Yi language to become bilingual, in order to improve their academic performance and enhance their economic prospects. Nearly half of the participants agreed and strongly agreed that those who only speak the Yi language may struggle to find good employment opportunities. Nevertheless, participants recognize that the preservation of minority languages is often feasible only when economic and political conditions are guaranteed (Shang, 2018). Consequently, when asked about the potential disappearance of the Yi language in their area in the future, nearly 60% of the participants agreed.

Language attitude, as a socio-psychology phenomenon, is influenced by various social factors, including cultural background, age, gender, and education level. Most participants are positive toward the Yi language due to the strong emotional attachment ethnic minorities often feel toward their mother tongue, viewing it as a symbol of their cultural identity (Liu, 2021). Meanwhile, much work has been carried out by the government of Mengzi City to promote the protection of the Yi language and culture, such as the construction of cultural squares and the distribution of cultural pamphlets. These efforts have significantly boosted young people's pride in their ethnic heritage and increased their awareness to protect their culture. However, in terms of practicality, Yi youth consider Mandarin more useful in practice and associate it with a higher status. Many respondents note that an increasing number of young people are migrating to larger cities such as Kunming, the capital of Yunnan Province, and even major metropolises like Beijing and Shanghai. In these urban centers, proficiency in Mandarin becomes crucial for educational and employment opportunities.

Table 7: Language attitude of Yi youth

Items	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Deviation
1. Being able to speak Yi and Chinese is equally important	104	1	5	4.25	1.05
2. I cannot find a good job if I only can speak Yi	104	1	5	3.15	1.35
3. Schools should let Yi children learn to speak both Yi and Chinese	104	1	5	4.26	1.01
4. I am willing to teach the Yi language to my children	104	1	5	4.37	0.96
5. Bilingual Yi and Chinese speakers know more than monolingual speakers	104	1	5	3.97	1.16
6. Being able to speak both Yi and Chinese can earn more money	104	1	5	3.58	1.18
7. Being able to speak both Yi and Chinese helps improve academic performance and get high	104	1	5	3.75	1.15
8. Yi and Chinese can survive in the area we live at the same time	104	1	5	3.21	1.01
9. I like to speak the Yi language because Yi language has a sense of intimacy	104	1	5	4.16	1.05
10. I would like to learn the Yi language	104	1	5	4.29	1.02
11. I am willing to protect the Yi language and culture	104	1	5	4.38	0.98
12. Yi language is challenging to learn and speak	104	1	5	2.97	1.25
13. Yi language is annoying to hear, I would rather speak Chinese	104	1	5	2.18	1.25
14. Yi language is useless in modern society	104	1	5	2.1	1.25
15. It is difficult to learn science and technology in the Yi language	104	1	5	2.86	1.24
16. The Yi language will disappear in the area where we live	104	1	5	2.48	1.30
17. Yi language has value to preserve	104	1	5	4.4	1.08
18. Speaking Yi will be considered rustic	104	1	5	2.05	1.21
19. It would be embarrassing to speak Yi in public	104	1	5	2.15	1.17
20. Yi language is important to our life	104	1	5	4.26	1.07

## 5. Discussion

In conclusion, 62.5% of Yi teenagers believe they can fully understand or basically understand the Yi

language. However, only 58% of them can use the Yi language proficiently or at a basic conversational level. Alarmingly, merely 30% of individuals can understand Yi characters, and less than 20% possess the ability to read and write in Yi. These statistics starkly contrast with those for Chinese, where almost everyone has a good understanding and proficiency. The shifting language ecology widens the competitive gap between dominant and non-dominant languages (Feng, 2016). On the one hand, Mandarin has been designated as the common spoken and written language by the *Constitution of the People's Republic of China* and the *Law of the People's Republic of China on the Standard Language*. Consequently, the promotion of Mandarin has become a fundamental national policy. China's foreign language policies require individuals with a junior high school education or higher to learn English, Japanese, or other foreign languages. As a result, students have some basic foreign language skills, thereby expanding the language use domain and increasing the competitiveness of foreign languages. On the other hand, the Yi language itself faces challenges in terms of dissemination and development. For instance, the Yi language often needs to borrow words from Chinese to describe new concepts due to limitations in its vocabulary (Liu & Lu, 2021).

Regarding the language use domain, the use of the Yi language in the Mengzi region has decreased sharply. The minority language only prevails within family settings and religious activities. Local residents seldom, if ever, converse in the Yi language outside their communities. Instead, they use Chinese dialects and Mandarin. The functions of the mother tongue have consequently dwindled, and the language ecology leans towards a Chinese-dominant type. To maintain a harmonious language ecology in the Mengzi area, it is necessary to increase the usage of the Yi language and expand its domain of use. However, the reason why speakers refrain from using their mother tongue is not solely due to the Yi language itself but is primarily a consequence of the minority language's lower status when competing against a new language. This outcome results from a combination of social, economic, and political factors. Demanding that native speakers continue to use or inherit their language without addressing these broader conditions may ultimately lead to reduced competitiveness in adapting to the new socioeconomic order. Therefore, it is not a sustainable strategy. It is essential to construct new language communities based on the evolving social environment (Zhang, 2020).

The attitudes of Yi people toward languages reflect a contradiction between their cognitive and emotional connections to their mother tongue and Chinese. Yi teenagers possess strong feelings for their native language but hold Chinese in higher regard in terms of status and practicality, leading them to prioritize learning and using Chinese in their daily lives. The language ecology in the Mengzi region is continually evolving, with the original mother tongue-dominant type gradually shifting toward a Chinese-dominant type. Failure to address these subtle changes and implement corresponding measures could disrupt the balance of the local language ecology, potentially endangering the Yi ethnic group's mother tongue and, ultimately, leading to its extinction.

## 6. Conclusion

In the natural ecology, various organisms are interdependent and restrict each other, and there are similar complex relationships among various languages and speech communities in the language ecology (Garner, 2017). Mandarin and minority languages are dominant and subordinate due to their different linguistic functions. However, as the main carrier of regional culture, the Yi language exerts the function of emotional attachment and cultural identity, which is disabled to be replaced by Chinese (Qiu, 2021). For Yi language's internal ecology, evident changes were observed in pronunciation and vocabulary (Liu & Lu, 2021). For external ecology, the language attitude, language use, and language competence of the Yi people in Mengzi face severe challenges due to the variations in economic and social environment. This study can be regarded as a preliminary investigation into the language ecology surrounding the shift and maintenance of the Yi language within the ethnic regions of Yunnan.

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