

Language Choice and Identity Politics in Taiwan. Wei, Jennifer M. Lexington Books, 2015[2008].

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Jennifer Wei's book *Language Choice and Identity Politics in Taiwan* is a wide-ranging book, but at its core it is a book about the phenomenon of "code-switching" by Taiwanese politicians. Code-switching is the alternation between two or more languages (or language varieties) in the course of a single speech act or conversation. Specifically, Wei looks at code-switching between the country's two main languages, Mandarin and Holo (also known as Tai-yu, Taiwanese, or Hokkien), by Taiwanese politicians. In doing so she relies heavily upon the "markedness model" (or "rational choice model") of code-switching as developed by Carol Myers-Scotton: the idea that code-switching is often deployed strategically. Relying on close readings of political speeches, Wei demonstrates that Taiwanese politicians use code-switching either "as a vital means for ethnic mobilization" (76) or, conversely, to accommodate "seemingly opposed ideologies" (72) thus avoiding the appearance of aligning themselves too closely with particular group.

While only three of the book's six chapters are devoted to code-switching, these chapters give the book a solid empirical foundation and establish the core themes of the book. In these chapters Wei makes three important contributions to the literature: First, by analyzing the use of code-switching by Taiwanese politicians she has found an excellent case study which serves as a useful introduction to the study of code-switching. These chapters are well suited to classroom use. (Indeed, this reviewer uses Wei's journal articles to teach code-

switching in his own classes.) Second, unlike ethnomethodological perspectives which restrict themselves to the conversational data, Wei places equal weight on the socio-political context within which code-switching occurs. To this end she offers a useful elaboration of the interrelationship between the observed linguistic phenomenon and the “dialogic socio-political tensions” (25) that exist between the languages being deployed. And third, by deploying contemporary approaches which see code-switching not just in strategic terms but also “as an ideological site where conflicting voices... come into play” (69) she offers an implicit critique of the markedness model, albeit one that is never fully addressed in the text.

The first chapter on the topic of code-switching is actually the second chapter in the book (not counting the introduction). This chapter offers a general overview of the literature on code-switching and sets out the case for the author’s own socio-political approach. Through an analysis of code-switching in former president Chen Shui-bian’s campaign discourse she eloquently demonstrates the political skill within which he deployed “creative ambiguities” (28) in order to mobilize Holo-centric identity politics without explicitly appealing to identity politics. Chapter three continues her analysis of Chen Shui-bian’s language, highlighting the complex ways he uses either Holo or Mandarin to achieve various political aims. For instance, he often uses Mandarin to “lend authority” to a statement, or to make “indirect negative comments” (52). While chapters two and three remain largely within the confines of traditional markedness theory, chapter four embraces the “Bakhtinian notion of ‘translinguistics’” (69). For example, to show how Peng Ming-min’s use of code-switching between Mandarin and Holo gives voice to two different ideologies, “each representing an opposing view on national diplomacy and sovereignty” (75). Using code switching to have them enter into dialog with each other. While this chapter’s move beyond markedness theory is welcome, the overall impression is of chapters written at different points in the author’s career, without much effort to

reconcile the differences between these approaches. The book's failure to directly address the tension created by deploying such different approaches to the study of code-switching means that readers must do it for themselves.

The book's three remaining chapters each grapple with the complex socio-political context within which language choices in Taiwan are formulated. Each doing so in a different way. Chapter one focuses on a single linguistic feature: the word-final -er sound commonly associated with the variety of Mandarin spoken in Beijing but which is largely absent from Taiwanese Mandarin. The author offers a personal account of her own changing attitude towards this linguistic feature, as well as a general overview of the literature on this phenomenon. The "translinguistic" approach later taken up in chapter four is first introduced in this chapter. Although discussed in these two chapters, this concept is largely absent from the rest of the book. Given the roots of the translinguistic approach in literary analysis, it would have been especially interesting to explore how the -er sound is deployed in books, films, and TV shows throughout the Chinese speaking world. This chapter is also unique in focusing on intralingual linguistic variation. The rest of the book is largely focused on interlingual code-switching, without any attempt to compare and contrast the differences between the two.

Whereas chapter one looks at a single linguistic feature, chapter five takes a big picture approach, exploring the shifting linguistic landscape of Taiwan from the Dutch colonial period in the seventeenth century to the present, with particular focus on the rise of multiculturalism following the end of martial law. Particularly useful is Wei's discussion of minority languages, such as the sixteen officially recognized Austronesian languages spoken by Taiwan's indigenous population. In this context she provides a useful discussion of the differences between multiculturalism grounded in individual rights and those grounded in group rights; however, when her attention shifts to a comparative discussion of the English-only movement in the United States and Canadian multiculturalism it seems that these fine-grained distinctions get lost. It would have helped to

more clearly delineate the underlying differences and contradictions between these North American models and the ones discussed in the section on Taiwanese multiculturalism.

Finally, chapter six takes a more polemical and prescriptivist approach, arguing for the adaptation of “a de-nationalized and hybridized Mandarin” (103) as a means of transcending ethnic and national differences. Wei expresses a desire for the Taiwanese people to discard nationalistic narratives in favor of “more pragmatic oriented metaphors in language and identity” (109). The need for such pragmatism is based on Wei’s fears of Taiwan turning into a “Tower of Babel” (105) as a result of linguistic nationalism — fears which strike this reviewer as more imagined than real. More problematic is the fact that Wei never fully squares the circle between advocating for the adoption of some kind of hybridized Mandarin and her simultaneous endorsement of “a multilingual-based language policy” (116). As with the first chapter, this chapter would have benefited from a deeper engagement with literature studies where debates over the concept of the “sinophone” are closely related to some of the issues raised here.

The book’s strength lies in the core chapters on code-switching which collectively do an excellent job at highlighting the complex and varied uses of code-switching in Taiwanese political speech. These chapters provide a clear overview of two of the dominant approaches to the study of code-switching while simultaneously offering important insight into Taiwanese identity politics. The remaining chapters complement this discussion with a useful introduction to Taiwan’s linguistic landscape. Already in a second printing, the book is sure to remain a key text on the sociolinguistics of Taiwan for some time to come.