

## On Language Recognition, Geographical Names and Ethnic Clustering

Ailin Xie<sup>1</sup>, Yulian Xu<sup>2</sup>, Qingming You<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Nanchang Institute of Science and Technology, Nanchang, Jiangxi Province, China.

<sup>2</sup>College of Science and Technology, Nanchang University, Nanchang, Jiangxi Province, China.

**Keywords:** ethnic areas; geographical names; language; recognition; clustering.

**Abstract:** Language and geographical names are closely related. Place names are always expressed through language. In addition to the function of marking specific places, geographical names can also convey other important meanings and realize national feelings, thoughts, cultures and values. Through analyzing the language of place names, this paper can identify nationalities, clarify the general regions and tracks of their changes and migrations, and realize the clustering of nationalities lived in the places.

### 1. Introduction

According to professionals, language is the material shell of thinking. Proper nouns, including place names, must be expressed through language. In the Course of Linguistic Anthropology, Jun-fang He put forward, “language is the building material of place names and other proper nouns. Without language, there will be no place names. Specific culture creates specific place names; place names reflect the specific culture.”<sup>[1]</sup> In fact, in ethnic areas, the language function of place names is relatively large, which is of great significance to the construction of political, economic, cultural, social and ecological civilizations. It is of great theoretical and practical significance to reveal the common spirit of nationalities, to identify ethnic settlements, to verify ethnic migration and population changes, to investigate national cultures, to review historical events, to incorporate ethnic names and to cluster ethnic groups.

### 2. Language and the Ideographic Function of Geographical Names

Language and place names are closely related. Place names are always expressed through language. In addition to the function of marking specific places, these names can also express other important meanings. Geographical names in ethnic areas are important material and spiritual treasures of ethnic groups. These areas are rich in geographical names resources which have great economic values. Taking Yunnan, Guangxi, Qinghai and Hunan as examples, in 2018, the tourism revenue of Yunnan reached 899.1 billion yuan; Guangxi reached 743.6 billion yuan, Qinghai 46.6 billion yuan and Hunan 825.5 billion yuan. For the international community, the place names of ethnic minority areas in China also have a great attraction. According to the data released by the National Ethnic Affairs Commission, in 2016, the number of international tourists visiting ethnic minority areas accounted for 20.99% of the total number of tourists in China. Place names in ethnic minority areas also have great cultural and historical values. They witness a large number of historical events, and record important cultural history. They are valuable cultural heritage of ethnic minority areas. For example, “Shizhu” and other place names record rich national history and culture contents, and express the meaning of the peaceful, unified, harmonious and integrated development of national areas. Geographical names in ethnic areas reflect the knowledge, memory and emotion of people, and record their production, labor, life and wisdom. The folk place names of Dong villages in Huanggang can be analyzed as the example. “Dang” means “pond” or “fish pond”; “Dang Lao Hou” and “Dang Ming An”<sup>[2]</sup> are the names of fish ponds. “Lao Hou” and “Ming An” are the names of the people who excavated the fish ponds. Fish ponds are named by the names of people who excavated the ponds. The place names reflect the property rights and productive labor, and show the distinction between people. Another example is “Ji De Nao”. “Ji” means “mountain or

on the mountain”; “De” means “get”; “Nao” means “fight for land”. The whole place name means “the forest fighting for land with the yellow border”. The place name of “Ji Diu” means that a man has no water to farm. His woman does not love him anymore, and the man begs the woman. “Ji Jia” means the place where birds are kept. Jia means birds. “Ji Tai Gong” is very slippery mountain; people can fall from the mountain and die. Tai means a very slippery mountain; Gong means fall dead, corpse at the bottom of the mountain. “Ji Chang Bu” is a mountain where melons grow. Chang means planting; Bu means melons. “Ji Jiao Duan” is a place where charcoal is sold. Jiao is the place where charcoal is sold; Duan means charcoal. “Gi Jie Shao” means a break up mountain, in which the woman does not love her husband anymore. Jie means the woman does not love her husband. Shao means Husband. “Ji Gou” is a mountain in which someone is whistling. Gou means a person whistles on the hill. “Ji Yi” means taking eggs to the mountains. Yi is the layer of membrane after the eggs are peeled. “Ji Ah” is a mountain in which people are yelling. Ah means people go up to the mountains and scream. “Ji Gei” means the mountain is given to the people.<sup>[3]</sup> The naming of these places directly reflects local people’s memory of events, life and production activities, and also reflects their basic understanding of signs and emotions. Some folk customs are also reflected in place names.

### 3. Language and the Analysis of Geographical Names

Geographical names in ethnic areas are of great significance to the analysis of ethnic migration, language division and ethnic distribution. Especially for research obstacles brought about by the long history, the ethnic dispersion and language changes, we have to carry out retrospective study, comparative study and pedigree study through place names. In fact, significant progress has been made in the research of place names, which is also supported by good evidence. For example, the verification of place names, meaning of place names, syllables of place names, words of place names, as well as founders, origins, pedigrees and dates of establishment and original names can solve some major difficult problems. As in the Zhuang language, [na<sup>2</sup>] means “field or paddy field”. This syllable can be found in a large number of place names: Na Ma, Na Ji, Na Lu, Na Bai, Na Niao, Na Huai, Na Liang and Na He. The same syllable can also be found in place names in Guangdong, Hainan, Yunnan, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand and Myanmar; examples include Na Zhou in Zhuhai, Guangdong Province, Na Men in Hainan Province, Na Long in Myanmar, Na Shan in Laos and Na Jia in Thailand. It can be inferred that in the long river of history, the ancestors of the Zhuang people once lived in these areas. These places retain the obvious features of the language of the Zhuang people. In other places, it is labeled as “Da” and pronounced as [da<sup>2</sup>], such as Da Nan and Da Luo. But it still means “paddy field”. There are also places labeled as “Duo”, which brings major problems in language traceability. According to the research of scholars, this is the result of the development and changes of national languages under the influence residences, social development as well as the history and culture. For instance in Lingao dialect, [na<sup>2</sup>] (paddy field) has been pronounced as [nia<sup>2</sup>]; [na<sup>2</sup>ven<sup>2</sup>] has been pronounced as [nia<sup>2</sup>ven<sup>2</sup>]. Because no corresponding Chinese characters have been solidified, some tags have been written as “Duo Wen”.<sup>[4]</sup> Therefore, it is believed that the historical southward migration of Dai, Tai and Zhuang started from Guangdong and Guangxi, and went into Vietnam and Laos through Sichuan, Guizhou and Yunnan.<sup>[5]</sup> The opinion is supported linguistic evidence. The change of dialect may lead to some changes in language, but the basic pronunciation, meaning and form are relatively solidified in place names. Among the place names in some ethnic areas, “Na”, “Yu”, “Da”, “Shi”, “Duo” and “Zhi” have only two pronunciations, namely [na<sup>2</sup>] and [ta<sup>2</sup>]. They both mean “paddy fields”. Some people have compared the language of the Zhuang nationality with those of other nationalities, and made historical linguistic comparisons and traced back to their etymology. The words all came from the pronunciation of [nta]. In Chinese, the pronunciation of “Na” was [nai] in ancient times, and [na] in the middle ancient times. Therefore, it can be basically determined that the “Na” of Zhuang and Hainan Li languages is the medieval pronunciation of [na<sup>2</sup>]. In syllable records, influenced by dialects, the word is marked as “Shi”, “Duo” and “Zhi” in some ethnic minority dialects. But these words have the same pronunciation.<sup>[6]</sup> Similarly, from place names in Xinjiang, Tibet, Inner

Mongolia, Liaoning, Jilin and Heilongjiang, traces on the living and migrating situations of Manchu, Tibetan and Mongolian nationalities can also be found. For example, through the identification and tracking of [bayan] (means fertile and abundant) and [aobao] (heaps, stones, earth heaps and wooden blocks heaps), researchers can study the ethnic migration of the Mongolian people.

#### 4. Language Recognition and Ethnic Clustering

To investigate the distribution of nationalities, we can use census and registration method, or obtain basic information through household registration data. From the academic point of view, the distribution of place names can also be analyzed from the unique language system of each ethnic group from the perspectives of form, sound and meaning. The naming of geographical places embodies and solidifies information about unique national languages, national thinking habits and national customs. The naming can also reflect national history, cultures and specific events. Therefore, the distribution of ethnic groups can also be distinguished and determined from the perspective of geographical names in ethnic areas. For example, “Kouke Ban” is a place name in Inner Mongolia. “Kouke” means “blue” in Mongolian. There are Mongolian people in this place. Similar examples include “Hohhot” (“Hoh” means “blue” in Mongolian, “hot” means “city”), “Ulanhot” (“Ulan” means “red” in Mongolian), “Xilinhote” (“Xilin” means “hills”), “Erenhot” (“Eren” means “gorgeous, fantastic, pattern”) and “Bayanhot” (“Bayan” means “rich”). Thus it can be completely determined that the Mongolian people live in Inner Mongolia, which is basically credible. Another example is the place name “Yang Gai Ban”. “Yang Gai” means “white” in Tibetan, which indicates that Tibetans have lived in this place. Similarly, there is a place called “Meidai Zao”. “Meidai” is a Tibetan name; “Zao” refers to “Lama Temple”. It can be seen that Tibetans have lived or preached here and made a great difference. There are also places directly named after “Lama”, such as “Lama Camp (Zi)”, “Lama Bay”, “Lama Guai” and “Ban-ding Camp” (“Ban-ding” means “Little Lama” in Tibetan). Thus, it can be basically determined that there are Tibetans living in Inner Mongolia. Other examples include “Zhang Gai Ying” and “Jialan Ban”. “Zhang Gai” in Manchu language means “the title of a general, an official name, or a military position”; “Jialan” is also an official title in Manchu language, means “the leader or assistant leader”. Some places are named as “Zhalan”, such as “Zhalantun”. In the place name “Xing’an League”, “Xing’an” in Manchu language means “snow-white mountains, the Changbai Mountain”. “Yakeshi” in Manchu means “fortress”. “Shangdu” in Manchu means “eddy in water”. For the place name of “Alashan League”, “Alashan” in Manchu means “horse”. “Kulun” in Manchu means “country, tribe”. Through these place names, it can basically be determined that Manchu people lived in these places.

If we study the pronunciation and meaning of place names in ethnic areas, we can also get information about the migration and distribution of ethnic groups. As for the migration of nationalities, above-mentioned study of the ethnic origin and migration of Dai, Tai and Zhuang through the semantics of “Na” and other specific syllables is a good example. If we follow the idea that place names are the specific heritage of national languages and cultures, we can also investigate the ethnic distribution of a nation. For instance, “Longyang” is a place name of Huangnan Prefecture in Qinghai Province. It means “abyss and cliff” in Tibetan. The place name of Haidong District in Qinghai Province means “ditch” in Tibetan. “Doba Songdu”, a place name in Yushu of Qinghai Province means “converge of the Doba River and the Baqu River”. In the Shenshan of Aba in Sichuan Province, the place “Nianbao Yuze” means “dangerous and gorgeous peak” in Tibetan; the “Dooke River” in Aba of Sichuan Province means “stone valley” in Tibetan; the Ganglong in Ganzi Prefecture of Sichuan Province means “snow valley” in Tibetan; the Maqu in Gannan Prefecture of Gansu Province means “Yellow River” in Tibetan. Qunke in Gannan Prefecture of Gansu Province means “the neck of the shore of Yellow River” in Tibetan. “Zaqing” in Changdu, Tibet means “big rock pass” in Tibetan; “Za’angba” in Anduo County, Tibet means “light yellow rock mountain” in Tibetan; “Za’nama” in Luolong County of Tibet means Black Rock Peak; “Zagala” in Zhongba County of Tibet means “white stone pass”. From above place names we can preliminarily determine that Tibetans live in provincial units of Tibet, Sichuan, Gansu and Qinghai.

Thus, the provincial units which are mainly distributed by ethnic minorities can be preliminarily listed.

## 5. Conclusion

The language recognition of geographical names and the common spiritual home have great internal consistency. Place names in national areas are the foundation of national vitality, creativity and cohesion; they are the pillar of common life and the source of power. They are also the treasury of spiritual motive force which produces endless local feelings, and helps ethnic groups to survive and develop from generations to generations. Some studies believe that the common spiritual homeland of the Chinese nation should be located on the “national identity culture”.<sup>[6]</sup> Place names in ethnic areas are just the historical, realistic and future foundations in which the basic orientation and construction content can be nurtured and grow. They are the common support for the survival and development of the nation. At the same time, they also reflect the political, economic, cultural, social and ecological civilizations. In real life, they also embody the infinite feelings of the residents. In 2010, Yong Gao and his colleges from the Zhou Enlai School of Government, Nankai University pointed out that “national identity expresses the emotional connection and sense of belonging between individuals and the nation, which is manifested by the attachment of individuals to the native lands where they were born and grew up”.<sup>[7]</sup> “The formation of national identity must be based on the emotional carrier of the attachment to their native land... Without this kind of attachment complex, the construction of the national identity consciousness among all members of all ethnic groups will definitely fail.”<sup>[8]</sup> Therefore, the construction of the shared spiritual homeland needs a good combination of ethnic names and languages, so that spiritual wealth can be generated, inherited, innovated and carried forward together with all material wealth. In the process of sharing and co-construction, the values, cultural spirit, home identity and national feelings should be integrated into the great construction of the country. The connection between different nationalities should be continuously strengthened. In the course of mutual respect and pluralistic cooperation, we can find national identity, cohesion and destiny, build a stable common spiritual home for the Chinese nation and form a common sense for the national identity of the Chinese nation. Language is a long-term spiritual bond.

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