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A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Mongolian Language Education Policy Shifts in Inner Mongolia (2020-2023)

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Abstract. This study examines the 2020 language policy reform in Inner Mongolia, which replaced Mongolian with Mandarin as the medium of instruction for key subjects. Using Fishman's EGIDS and Bourdieu's concept of Linguistic Capital (LC), this study argues that the reform constitutes a policy-contingent shift that weakens Mongolian's vitality and academic legitimacy. The analysis shows how the policy eroded Mongolian's institutional value in education, accelerated intergenerational language shift, and reshaped family linguistic practices. Evidence from comparative studies on Korean, Zhuang, and international instances reveals that the sustainability of minority languages depends not only on community will but also on institutional systems that preserve their LC within the broader linguistic landscape.

Keywords: Mongolian language, language policy, linguistic capital, EGIDS, bilingual education

1. Introduction: policy tension and the language of power

The Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (IMAR), which is officially designated to protect the cultural and linguistic tradition of the Mongolian ethnic group, holds a complex geopolitical and cultural space within the People's Republic of China (PRC). For many years, ethnic schools in the region used Mongolian as the primary medium of instruction (MOI). This policy helped preserve the language and culture while also supporting students' academic development. It is worth noting that for families and communities, the presence of Mongolian in schools provided not only practical educational benefits, but also a sense of cultural continuity and belonging, which is a subtle but powerful reinforcement of identity in daily life. However, this system rested on a fragile linguistic ecology, which was abruptly destabilized by a major curriculum reform announced in August 2020 [1].

This reform required Standard Mandarin (Mandarin) to replace Mongolian as the MOI in Mongolian-medium primary and secondary schools for three core subjects: Chinese Language and Literature, Morality and Law, and History. It also introduced nationally unified textbooks, written solely in Mandarin, to replace regional Mongolian-script materials [1]. While the technical description of the policy may appear straightforward, the social implications were anything but simple. For local people, this top-down intervention was often perceived as an intrusion into everyday linguistic life and as a signal that the Mongolian language was being repositioned within

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the educational hierarchy. The policy quickly ignited strong social reactions and widespread concern across the region, focusing on the potential implications for the status of the Mongolian language and cultural identity [2].

The central problem this paper looks at is the short- and long-term impact of the 2020 reform on the vitality and social position of Mongolian language. In order to understand these changes, this study uses Fishman's Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS) and Bourdieu's concept of Linguistic Capital (LC) to see how the reform affects the transmission of Mongolian across generations, and the systematical devaluation of this language in the Chinese educational system. In addition, the reform is placed in the domestic and international context of language policy to explore viable alternatives. In sum, it can be argued that the 2020 curriculum reform in Inner Mongolia is not just an educational change, but a government-led political move that undermines the region's linguistic ecological system. It diminishes the status of Mongolian and pushes younger generations further toward Mandarin, reflecting a wider ideology of assimilation and centralized control through education.

2. Theoretical frameworks

To understand the dynamics of language status in IMAR, this paper draws on tools from sociolinguistics and critical theory, treating the region not as an isolated case but as a site where established frameworks can be tested. While many studies on Mongolian language shift adopt postcolonial critique, this paper takes a different approach. Postcolonial readings are useful for revealing historical power relations, but sometimes they overlook the concrete mechanisms. In reality, policy changes are felt in classrooms, homes, and public spaces, where language choices have tangible effects on identity and social mobility. By combining EGIDS and the concept of LC, this study instead focuses on how institutional change simultaneously affects language vitality and the social standing of its speakers, offering a more fine-grained view of the everyday consequences of policy interventions.

Language vitality, or the general well-being of a language in a community, can be evaluated using the Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS). This framework, building on Fishman's earlier 8-level Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS) model, offers a robust 13-level diagnostic tool ranging from 0 (International) to 10 (Extinct), to categorize a language's status based on intergenerational transmission, institutional support, and social use [3]. Applied to Mongolian prior to 2020, EGIDS suggested an intermediate position: the language was not fully endangered, but it was also not secure, as its continuity depended heavily on government scaffolding [4]. Put differently, Mongolian thrived within a bounded institutional space, but remained sensitive to shifts in policy and demographic pressures. The language's health was contingent, delicate, and susceptible to abrupt disruptions. The 2020 reform constituted an institutional shock. By abruptly eliminating the support required to maintain a middle EGIDS level, it accelerates disruption, transforming what might otherwise have been a slow sociological trend into a direct policy-contingent outcome.

Yet vitality alone does not capture the full picture. A language may remain intergenerationally transmitted and institutionally present while still being assigned a marginal position in the social hierarchy. This gap points to the limits of EGIDS: it measures health, but not value. To explain why vitality does not necessarily equate to prestige or mobility, Bourdieu's concept of Linguistic Capital becomes essential. LC, understood as a specific form of cultural capital derived from the proficiency and legitimate use of a certain language variety, determines whose voice carries authority and social standing. In other words, a language may be taught, spoken at home, and even examined in school,

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yet still be unable to provide its speakers with the economic and social advantages granted to those fluent in the dominant language. In a given linguistic market, such as the national educational or employment system, this capital is convertible into economic, social, and symbolic rewards [5]. From this perspective, operated in ways that effectively diminished the institutional recognition of Mongolian LC. By removing the classroom as the primary site where Mongolian was legitimized and reproduced, the policy disrupts the formation of a valued Mongolian social position while ensuring the inculcation of a Mandarin-centered status necessary for upward mobility. This shift interrupts the capital exchange that the previous bilingual system had enabled, effectively restricting the channels through which Mongolian proficiency could yield concrete social and economic benefits.

3. Historical baseline: Mongolian linguistic capital (pre-2020)

Before the 2020 reform, the linguistic status of Mongolian was characterized by a crucial duality: it possessed significant local academic value but offered limited applicability beyond the autonomous region. This fact demonstrated its fragility within the wider national linguistic market. Despite this regional constraint, Mongolian language education still served as both a vehicle for ethnic preservation and a foundation for academic success in IMAR. In practice, students could rely on their mother tongue to grasp complex subjects, develop literacy skills, and engage confidently with local social and administrative institutions. Mongolian language acquisition typically began in kindergarten, anchoring it as the primary medium of early education. It also served as the MOI for core subjects in designated ethnic schools, while Mandarin instruction was introduced early as first grade, and English by grade three [6]. This arrangement simultaneously preserved ethnic identity and provided practical academic advantages, positioning Mongolian proficiency as a form of local LC. The value of this capital was further reinforced through affirmative action policies: for example, students who completed the Gaokao (national college entrance examination) in Mongolian received bonus points [7]. These mechanisms granted legitimized Mongolian LC, enabled its conversion into educational and early career advantages. In short, a localized reward system for Mongolian proficiency existed: the language carried real-world benefits, albeit within a bounded sphere.

Despite this institutional support, Mongolian's convertibility into broader social or economic capital was significantly limited by Mandarin's dominance as the national language. This structural imbalance fostered a sense of "linguistic anxiety" among ethnic Mongols, who were aware that their linguistic assets were conditionally valuable. Many feared that the growing influence of Mandarin would undermine the symbolic bastion of their ethnic identity. Retrospective surveys confirmed that widespread bilingualism with Mandarin had already taken root among Mongolian speakers [4], suggesting that these concerns were justified. While a full-scale shift had not yet occurred, the demographic trends among cohorts born after 1980 created conditions that allowed the government to implement more assertive institutional language policies in subsequent generations [4]. Thus, even before 2020, the Mongolian language existed in a precarious balance, dependent on policy and community effort to sustain its functional and symbolic roles.

4. Institutional devaluation: the mechanism of status erosion (post-2020)

Socio-linguistic studies placed Mongolian within the higher vitality range of the EGIDS scale (Institutional to Stable), largely because of its institutional role in education [3]. Yet the widespread bilingualism suggested underlying vulnerability. The 2020 policy reform acted as a mechanism of institutional revaluation, gradually redefining the linguistic hierarchy within the education system

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and undermining Mongolian's former status as a central medium of academic instruction. Under the August 2020 directive, at the primary and junior secondary schools in IMAR, a phased transition began by introducing nationally unified Mandarin-medium textbooks for selected core subjects: first Chinese Language, then Morality and Law, and later History, all of which are central to political and ideological education [8]. Though technically framed as a "pilot" approach, the reform's implications extended far beyond the classroom: it was a public declaration of the centrality of Mandarin literacy in intellectual and civic life, implicitly suggesting that Mongolian, though officially acknowledged, would no longer occupy the same institutional position.

As a result, regional Mongolian-script materials for these three subjects were replaced with Mandarin-language counterparts. The policy was justified by government as a necessity to help minority children improve their Mandarin proficiency and achieve long-term development in their future academic pursuits and careers [2], demonstrating how the existing structural limitations of Mongolian LC was linked to potential socioeconomic benefits. Many parents found this reasoning pragmatically persuasive, acknowledging the tangible advantages that Mandarin fluency could offer in education and employment. Yet, simultaneously, it generated a quiet, persistent tension: the need to reconcile cultural continuity with perceived economic progress became an intimate, daily negotiation within households [6]. Parents found themseves navigating between ethnic pride and practical concern for their children's mobility, a situation that subtly reshaped familial emotion and intergenerational communication.

The core mechanism of devaluation was the elimination of convertible LC [5]. Once Mongolian was excluded from the production of academic knowledge in the three core, high-stakes subjects, the policy effectively undermined the capacity of students to utilize Mongolian script for the Gaokao examination, even where that option technically existed. The academic vocabulary and intellectual discourse necessary for higher-level standardized content could no longer be built in Mongolian. In other words, the students were placed in a position where the tools for intellectual development in their mother tongue were systematically removed, forcing them to internalize a new hierarchy of linguistic value. Consequently, students were structurally compelled to adopt the Min Kao Han (minority taking exams in Han Chinese) track, which offers a wider range of choices in institutions and programs nationally, but requires full immersion in the dominant Han linguistic practices and norms [9]. This transition was not merely administrative; it carried emotional dimensions. For students who had grown up learning Mongolian as a medium of thinking, reading, and communication, the shift to Mandarin signified a subtle yet powerful transformation in how they could articulate complex ideas, grasp abstract knowledge, and connect with their cultural heritage. The classroom became a space where the implicit hierarchies of language were performed daily, rendering the policy deeply personal, even if no individual agent intended harm.

In this way, the development of valued Mongolian academic practices is gradually curtailed in favor of the nationally accepted model. The process can be imagined as a slow but persistent displacement: the everyday experience of learning, writing, and reasoning in Mongolian is incrementally interrupted by the institutional privileging of Mandarin [2]. This produces a subtle but powerful form of normative pressure, one that shapes not only educational outcomes but also the emotional landscape of students, teachers, and families alike.

Institutional restructuring also extended to resources, personnel, and pedagogy. The mandatory adoption of Mandarin-language textbooks weakened Mongolian's perceived capacity for intellectual discourse, leading to a noticeable reduction in the production of Mongolian-language educational materials [2]. Meanwhile, the recruitment of Mandarin-speaking teachers from other provinces, coming often with competitive incentives, reconfigured local staffing patterns, leaving many native

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Mongolian educators in need of retraining or reassignment [6]. The resulting professional shifts were not simply technical adjustments; they carried a human dimension. The resulting professional shifts were not simply bureaucratic changes; they carried a deeply personal dimension. Teachers who had spent decades building Mongolian-language curricula suddenly found themselves in a professional world where their expertise was pushed to the margins, bringing with it feelings of unease and loss of purpose. For local communities, this transformation diminished the visible presence of Mongolian in schools, quietly reinforcing the sense that Mongolian knowledge and teaching authority were less valued than their Mandarin counterparts [10].

This progressive removal of institutional infrastructure renders it increasingly difficult for Mongolian to sustain high levels of vitality (e.g., EGIDS level 4). Although there is not yet a consensus on the exact EGIDS level for Mongolian, another important Mongolic language in the region, Daur, already faces significant pressure to slide from its current EGIDS level 6a to 6b, indicating a “Threatened” status [11]. These patterns suggest that, without meaningful action, the long-standing role of Mongolic languages as vessels of culture, intellect, and shared memory will continue to erode. The consequences reach beyond education itself: language loss becomes one of the quiet ways that social hierarchies are reproduced and normalized.

5. Socio-linguistic impact: linguistic anxiety and symbolic violence

The policy shift turned the government’s directive into real, lived social and emotional consequences, most visibly through the quiet internalization of symbolic violence and the deepening of social stigma. Over time, these forces slowly weakened the shared system of Mongolian linguistic practices. This was not an abstract policy outcome or a distant phenomenon: it echoed through daily life, influencing how people understood themselves, their children, and their place within the community.

Socio-linguistic analysis suggests that the politicization of language has produced persistent, widespread linguistic anxiety among ethnic Mongols. This unease arises from the awareness of the heavy economic, educational, and emotional burdens tied to preserving one’s language within a linguistic environment that often feels unwelcoming or unequal [10]. The government policy toward minority languages often operates as an ideology of contempt, which, while officially recognizing ethnic nationality, systematically reconfigures its defining linguistic features [2]. In practical terms, this means that speakers are made aware, often tacitly and subtly, that their language, though officially permitted, carries less social weight, fewer opportunities, and diminished prestige in critical domains of life.

The long-term social consequence, therefore, is the profound fear of becoming a “deinstitutionalized, depoliticized, and deterritorialized 'ethnic group’” [10]. This fear is neither distant nor imagined. It is felt in everyday life, carried quietly through the small negotiations of routine and conversation. Parents, grandparents, and children alike absorb these signals, often without realizing it, yet their influence seeps into family dynamics and social relationships in deep and lasting ways.

This fear is realized at the intimate level of the family unit. When Mongol parents, recognizing the economic imperative of Mandarin fluency for their children's national mobility, choose Chinese schools [6]. This choice, while rational in the dominant linguistic market, is analyzed as an act of internalized symbolic violence [5]. This pragmatic decision often leads to communication breakdowns between children (who speak only Mandarin) and their grandparents (who converse in Mongolian), generating affective tensions and illustrating the powerful mechanism by which institutional policy encourages participation in the devaluation of one’s own linguistic capital [5].

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The emotional impact of these choices is quiet yet tangible: children may begin to lose ease and fluency in Mongolian at home, leaving elders disheartened and weakening the bonds that once held generations close. Conversations that once flowed naturally now require translation both in words and in feeling across the family. Over time, this subtle shift can create a quiet ache, a mix of loss and unease, even as families go about their daily lives.

These experiences reveal that language policy extends far beyond the classroom, seeping into domestic life, shaping how people think, feel, and connect one another. It reinforces both symbolic pressure and a fragile sense of linguistic insecurity among Mongolian speakers. Recognizing its dual nature, that is, its structural reach and its emotional resonance, reveals how language policy silently organizes social life, guiding affective worlds as much as institutional ones.

6. Comparative perspectives and policy implications

The implementation of the 2020 policy provoked noticeable concern and debate within local communities, as parents, students, and educators expressed resistance to the new curriculum. Nevertheless, the reform was rapidly and comprehensively enforced throughout the region, reflecting the government's focus on policy consistency and uniform educational planning [1]. Overtime, public discussions gradually moved from open protest to subtler cultural responses. Communities explored alternative ways, such as Mongolian-language music, literature, and poetry, to preserve their linguistic identity amid institutional change [10]. These creative efforts, though in quiet tone, served as meaningful forms of cultural resilience, helping to maintain pride in the Mongolian language outside formal educational settings.

The Mongolian experience contrasts sharply to that of other ethnic minorities in China, highlighting how linguistic diversity is tolerated or encouraged only when a language is perceived as nationally useful rather than regionally confined. The Korean minority in Jilin Province exemplifies this distinction. Korean language education remains institutionally protected and firmly embedded in bilingual policy frameworks. Korean proficiency is officially recognized through national assessments such as the China Accreditation Test for Translators and Interpreters (CATTI), which places it on near-equal footing with major foreign languages and provides strong economic incentives for learning [7]. This institutional validation transforms Korean into a form of convertible linguistic capital (LC), strengthening both career mobility and social prestige [5]. Framed as a tool for international engagement and economic cooperation, Korean maintains high vitality on the EGIDS scale and continues to thrive among younger generations. By contrast, the Zhuang language in Guangxi faces a more precarious linguistic environment. Despite being China's largest minority group and having partial educational support at the tertiary level, the vitality of the Zhuang language is severely constrained by the dominance of Mandarin in public life. With the spread of Mandarin and the acceleration of urbanization, the functional space of Zhuang has been increasingly compressed. Many Zhuang families, concerned that their children might face communication difficulties due to mixed language use, encourage them to prioritize Mandarin, leading to a steady decline in the number of Zhuang speakers. Among younger generations, fluency in the language has significantly weakened, signaling an emerging crisis of intergenerational transmission [12]. This demonstrates that institutional recognition without systemic integration into the national linguistic economy offers little protection for minority language vitality, since its LC holds limited convertible value in the dominant linguistic market.

TFrom the relative institutional security enjoyed by Korean, to the mounting assimilation pressures on Mongolian, and the effective marginalization of Zhuang, the contrasting experiences underscore that the survival of minority languages in China relies not only on community

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commitment, but also on whether government and societal structures allow their LC to remain functional and meaningful within the wider linguistic landscape.

Looking beyond China, international examples show how different political systems attempt to balance linguistic diversity with national cohesion. In Canada, official bilingualism and French immersion programs illustrate that connecting language skills to real economic and social opportunities can effectively encourage bilingualism. French LC is formally recognized through access to civil service jobs and the social prestige attached to them, making bilingualism both a cultural and economic asset [13]. However, even this model faces practical challenges, such as teacher shortages and debates over equitable curriculum access [13], suggesting that successful implementation requires long-term investment and sustained political commitment.

The United States provides a very different case. Historically, federal policies toward Indigenous languages relied on coercive assimilation, most infamously through boarding schools where Native American children were forbidden and punished for speaking their ancestral tongues. This resulted in deep intergenerational trauma and brought many Indigenous languages to the edge of extinction [14]. The Native American Languages Act (NALA) of 1990 signaled a significant policy shift, formally affirming the right of Indigenous communities to maintain and revitalize their languages, aiming to rebuild intergenerational transmission and restore community control over education. Despite this progress, most Indigenous languages remain critically endangered (EGIDS 7+), reflecting the slow pace and high cost of linguistic recovery. Sustained revitalization continues to depend on long-term policy commitment, local participation, and adequate material resources [14].

Taken together, domestic and international cases demonstrate that language policies function in complex and often paradoxical ways: they may empower communities in one context while deepening marginalization in another. Its lasting influence depends not only on cultural attachment or community resilience, but on whether institutions treat a language as a convertible LC, or reduce it to a symbolic marker of local identity, detached from the national linguistic economy [5]. The comparison of Mongolian, Korean, and Zhuang, along with international examples, suggests that linguistic survival depends less on cultural attachment and more on the stability of institutional and political frameworks that determine whether a language's capital can be maintained, expanded, or effectively erased.

7. Conclusion

The 2020 language policy reform in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (IMAR) has led to significant social and linguistic shifts, highlighting the ongoing tension between national unity and regional linguistic diversity. Moving from a bilingual system to one dominated by Mandarin altered the everyday educational landscape, reducing the institutional spaces where Mongolian could function as a medium for learning and administration. Consequently, its ecological position, as tracked by tools like EGIDS, has clearly declined. This shift has also reshaped the way Mongolian families view education and career opportunities, as the language's institutional and economic relevance steadily erodes, affecting decisions across generations. Mongolian is increasingly confined to informal and cultural settings, while Mandarin continues to expand as the key language for social and economic mobility.

The IMAR experience underscores that language vitality is tightly linked to institutional support rather than cultural attachment alone. When a minority language loses recognized academic and economic value, passing it down across generations becomes much harder, even among communities with strong cultural ties. In contrast, cases like Korean bilingual education in Jilin Province, and international examples such as Canada's French immersion programs, show that when

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institutional commitment ties linguistic proficiency to tangible educational and professional opportunities, minority languages can be effectively maintained.

Looking forward, both policy and community action will be essential for restoring balance. Policymakers could consider strategies that reestablish Mongolian as a recognized medium of instruction in certain academic areas and provide real incentives for bilingual proficiency. At the same time, community-led initiatives that support early childhood exposure and family-based transmission can complement institutional reforms. The long-term resilience of Mongolian, therefore, rests on a twofold approach: one that reinforces its institutional value while also nurturing its social and emotional presence in daily life. With such coordinated efforts, linguistic diversity can be seen not as a barrier to national cohesion, but as a lasting part of cultural richness.

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