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## REVITALIZATION OF DUOXU: A FIRST-HAND ACCOUNT

Katia Chirkova (CNRS-CRLAO)

How can we revitalize a language that is unwritten and nearly extinct, a language that has no documentation record and is not officially recognized, and hence lacks any kind of institutionalized support? The chances of successfully revitalizing such a language are slim. One language that meets this dire description is Duoxu, the subject matter of this chapter. Under normal circumstances, revitalization of Duoxu would have little chance to take root. Yet, in spite of weighty objections, revitalization may be possible in the Duoxu case, albeit to a limited degree. Currently, revitalization of Duoxu is in the early stages of implementation. The encouraging lessons of Duoxu are that revitalization always remains a possibility, even under the most unfavorable conditions, and that efforts of individual community members dedicated to the cause can and do make an important difference. What matters is how to sustainably support grassroots revitalization initiatives and make the most out of the potential they offer.

### 1. BACKGROUND ON DUOXU

Duoxu (/do<sup>33</sup>ɕu<sup>33</sup>/) is a Tibeto-Burman language traditionally spoken by a small eponymous ethnic group living in the Anning River valley—the largest mountain plain and the main agricultural strip of Southwest China.<sup>1</sup> The Anning River valley lies in the historically multi-ethnic borderlands between China and Tibet. Unsurprisingly, given this context, the history of the Duoxu people is marked by contact with these Chinese and Tibetan groups as well as its local ethnic neighbors (most importantly, Nuosu, also known as Yi). The arrival of ethnic Tibetans in the area dates back to the 7th century, when the traditional Duoxu settlement areas became the south-eastern border of the expanding Tibetan empire. Long-standing cultural and religious ties with Tibet had a lasting impact on the development of the cultural identity of the Duoxu people, who to this day mostly identify themselves as Tibetans. Starting with the Mongol conquest of China in the 13th century, Duoxu areas came under ever-increasing administrative control of the expanding Chinese empire. From the 14th through the 18th century, the Duoxu group was part of the Native Chieftain System that the Chinese established to exercise some form of control over their southwestern frontier areas.<sup>2</sup> During that period, as a group that provided one of the chieftains, Duoxu were at the peak of their power and influence, enjoying considerable autonomy from the Chinese state and belonging to the local frontier elite. From the 17th century onwards, China intensified its presence in the southwestern regions and consolidated its control over semiautonomous indigenous frontier societies. As a result, the Native Chieftain System was disbanded in order to incorporate those areas more solidly into the Qing. The system's disintegration in the

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<sup>1</sup> The name Duoxu is based on the Chinese spelling of the autonym of the group. The language is also known under the name Tosu (Nishida 1973). According to a traditional belief, the Duoxu group has its origins in Tibet, but migrated and settled in the Anning River valley as early as the beginning of the Common Era (Han et al. 2014).

<sup>2</sup> The Native Chieftain System is an institution created during the early Ming dynasty (1368-1644) to extend Chinese state control over the non-Han peoples beyond China's administrative borders (Herman 1997: 50-51).

second half of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) coincided with a major demographic change in the area resulting from a considerable influx of ethnic Nuosu (who were historically the southern neighbors of the Duoxu). Nuosu settled in many traditional Duoxu areas in the Anning River valley, thereby cutting those areas off from the Tibetan-speaking cultural region to its northwest. In the course of the 20th century, Nuosu and Chinese gradually outnumbered Duoxu in the areas where Duoxu traditionally settled.

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, Duoxu were surveyed as part of the PRC's State Ethnic Classification Project, which laid the foundation for the currently recognized framework of nationalities (see Harrell 1995; Bradley 2005; Sun et al. 2007: 16-29). The Duoxu group was not granted the official status of "national minority," as it was grouped into the Tibetan nationality. This is because final decision making in the process of ethnic identifications often relied on traditional distinctions that were already part of folk beliefs (Harrell 1995: 66, see also Sun et al. 2007: 30-32), including the purported historical relatedness of groups, as in the case of Duoxu and Tibetans.

Mirroring the history of the group, the history of the Duoxu language has all along been marked by intense contact with its neighboring languages. As an unwritten language, Duoxu has always co-existed with written languages of administration, including, in this order: (Sde dge) Tibetan; Chinese; for a brief period in the 1960-70s, Yi; and at present, again, Chinese. During the Duoxu chieftainship period, the Duoxu language must have enjoyed high prestige as the language of the local frontier elite, as it was selected as one of the local languages recorded in the 18th century as part of the vocabularies *Xifan Yiyu* [*Tibetan-Chinese Bilingual Glossary*] in Chinese and Tibetan transcriptions (Nishida 1973). Later in its history, however, the association with the Duoxu chieftainship had a negative effect on the Duoxu language, as it was stigmatized and virtually forbidden during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) for representing a "feudal" or "capitalist" culture of traditional China. By the end of the 1970s, Duoxu practically went out of use, being solely restricted to communication in Duoxu households.

As ethnic Duoxu came to be classified as members of the Tibetan nationality, their language was formally recognized as a variety of Tibetan, which is in stark contrast to the distant genetic relationship between Duoxu and Tibetic languages. In the mid-1970s, the PRC government reopened the ethnicity and language issue and accepted new applications from ethnic groups not designated as national minorities in the 1950s. These included applications from ethnic groups in Southwest China which (similar to Duoxu) shared religion and culture with Tibetans, but spoke their own languages. These groups also included two closely related sister-languages of Duoxu: Ersu and Lizu.<sup>3</sup> Although none of the applications succeeded, and none of the groups obtained the official status of "national minority," their languages were surveyed and received a de facto recognition in linguistics as independent Tibeto-Burman languages. These languages were thereupon grouped together as members of the Qiangic subgroup of the Tibeto-Burman language family (Sun 1983; Bradley 1997: 36-37; Chirkova 2012). That generated enduring interest and research in these languages both in China and abroad. By a sad twist of fate,

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<sup>3</sup> Lizu is spoken to the northwest of Duoxu in the counties of Mianning, Muli, and Jiulong. Ersu is spoken to the northeast of Duoxu in the counties of Ganluo, Yuexi, Shijian, Hanyuan, all in Sichuan Province.

however, this new situation brought little improvement to the case of Duoxu. The already weakened and outnumbered Duoxu was grouped together with Ersu and Lizu as three dialects of one Ersu language (Sun 1982, Wu Da 2015). According to the general linguistic policy for developing national minority languages, when a language has multiple dialects, only one dialect is generally selected as a “standard” variety to subsequently receive attention in documentation and research. In the case of Ersu, the choice fell on the Ersu “dialect,” presumably owing to the large community of Ersu speakers, and leaving Lizu and Duoxu understudied.

At present, Duoxu are a small minority of circa 2,000 people who live in Mianning County, which is situated in a Yi nationality autonomous region (Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan Province), and which is home to majority populations of Chinese and Nuosu. Hardly any of the 2,000 Duoxu people speak the traditional language of the Duoxu community. In fact, the Duoxu language is currently spoken by no more than 9 elderly speakers, and hence is critically endangered. There are practically no published data on Duoxu from before the language went out of use: the entire documentation record consists of two short lexical lists of 14 words (Sun 1982: 242) or 30 words (Nishida and Sun 1990:17) and one grammatical sketch (Huang and Yin 2012). Given that background, and unless urgent measures are taken, the Duoxu language is likely to disappear without a trace once its last speakers fall silent.

## **2. ASSESSING PROSPECTS FOR REVITALIZATION OF DUOXU**

Previous studies in language revitalization identify a number of key variables in assessing the possibilities for the revitalization of a particular language (e.g. Grenoble and Whaley 2006: 21-49). These include variables on the national level (national language policy, education policies, regional autonomy, federal support) and variables on the local level (language attitudes, human resources, religion, literacy). None of these appear favorable in the case of Duoxu.

China has a clear and supportive legal framework for minority languages (see Bradley 2005). In particular, in areas where minority nationalities are concentrated, these nationalities enjoy considerable autonomy and may have local administrative rights and responsibility for education and culture. The system is, however, uniquely designed for the framework of officially recognized nationalities. Consequently, when a group lacks the officially recognized status of national minority, has a small population, and shares its area of residence with an officially recognized national minority, that ethnic group has neither right nor access to any form of official support (see Roche and Suzuki 2017). This is the case with Duoxu. Being formally a language of the Tibetan nationality, spoken in the autonomous prefecture of the Yi national minority, the Duoxu language is beyond any institutionalized framework of support.

Variables on the local level are not favorable either (Han et al. 2014). With regard to language attitudes, parts of the Duoxu community accept the loss of their traditional language as a fact and wish to invest more in their Tibetan identity. They consider Tibetan a better choice for their community language. This decision, in their eyes, is in agreement with their Tibetan nationality status, their strong cultural ties with Tibet, and with the history of Tibetan as a language of administration in Duoxu areas. As an informal implementation of this view, it is common and popular among Duoxu to hire private Tibetan teachers to teach their children written Tibetan during school breaks.

Some other parts of the community have a soberer outlook on the issue of language revitalization. They find it unrealistic to revitalize the moribund Duoxu language or to acquire, as a community, proficiency in the Tibetan language. They call for recognition of the fact that the community has already largely assimilated into the Han Chinese nationality through intermarriage and cultural amalgamation. In their opinion, the Chinese language has already become the community language. Finally, a small part of the community would like to see their traditional Duoxu language revitalized for they worry that a loss of Duoxu could lead to a loss of their cultural traditions and deplete their sense of identity.

Local Duoxu officials are sympathetic to the cause (see below), but they do not have the autonomy to make decisions that deviate from approved national and regional policies.

In sum, the entire Duoxu community is not interested and invested in the cause of revitalization of their traditional language. Taken together with the non-existent support on either federal or regional level and a lack of resources, Duoxu's prospects for revitalization appear rather bleak.

### **3. REVITALIZATION EFFORTS IN THE DUOXU COMMUNITY**

Language is neither the major constructive element of ethnic boundaries nor an exclusive marker of ethnicity (Haarmann 1999: 63),<sup>4</sup> but language does always play a role in ethnic relations. Hence, when threatened with the degradation and possible loss of their distinct linguistic traditions, communities tend to mobilise themselves, if not as a whole, then at least in part. The Duoxu community illustrates this general tendency. Numerous individual efforts within the Duoxu community can be noted on both official and informal levels. These efforts include studying the Duoxu language, collecting linguistic and ethnographic data, and disseminating the results.

Local government officials (whether of Duoxu or Han Chinese ethnicity) have all along carried out important work in collecting and publishing traditional Duoxu songs and stories, albeit in Chinese translation (e.g. Yu 1988). The Gazetteer of Mianning County (Sichuan Sheng Mianning xian Difangzhi Bianzuan Weiyuanhui 2009) is another valuable source of information about the history, culture, and language of the Duoxu group, containing even one traditional Duoxu song in a Romanized pinyin transcription (as used for Standard Chinese) (p. 659).

Remarkable work by individual community members is also carried out on the informal level. One example is the initiative to collect Duoxu vocabulary lists recording the speech of the last fluent Duoxu speakers. Although recorded in Chinese transcription, hence being phonetically imprecise and at times difficult to interpret (Chirkova and Han 2017), Duoxu words on these lists are still sufficiently recognizable. Two unpublished manuscripts, both compiled in the 1990s, are particularly notable:

(a) *Liangshan zhou Zangzu jianshi: Mianning xian Zangzu Duoxu zhi pu* [*A Brief History of the Tibetans of Liangshan Prefecture: The Duoxu Tibetans of Mianning county*] by Wu Wancai

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<sup>4</sup> See also Chirkova (2007) in relation to Tibeto-Burman communities in Chinese Southwest.

(b) *Mianning Zangzu renmin de lishi he yuyan* [*History and Language of Mianning Tibetans*] by Jin Wanxiang

These manuscripts contain extensive vocabulary lists, thematically organized into numerous subject areas (such as body parts, clothes, house, people). In addition, Wu Wancai's manuscript contains an outline of Duoxu history, language, and culture as well as records of folk stories, proverbs, and traditional song lyrics. The manuscripts circulate in a limited number of copies and are available to all interested community members. The manuscript by Jin Wanxiang deserves a special note as the author is a second language learner of Duoxu, who invested considerable time and effort into his work.

In addition to these local initiatives, efforts of one more community member, Yuan Xiaowen, were most decisive for the currently ongoing revitalization work on Duoxu. Yuan is a Duoxu historian and ethnographer working at the Research Institute for Nationalities of Sichuan Province. Yuan's strategy to safeguard the language and promote revitalization is to actively seek assistance of linguists. As a well-established scholar, Yuan is in a good position to promote the cause, contact scholars, and seek funding. My own involvement in the documentation of Duoxu owes to my meeting with Yuan Xiaowen at a linguistic conference, where Yuan made an eloquent appeal to all participants to lend their assistance in documenting the moribund Duoxu language (Yuan 2010). As I was working on Lizu (the closely related sister-language of Duoxu) at the time, I was interested in joining efforts with Yuan and extending my work to Duoxu. Together with Yuan, I applied for a documentation project which included Duoxu as one of its pillars. Right from the application phase, the Duoxu research component included a clear revitalization agenda, reflecting the views by Yuan and other involved Duoxu community members on the most urgent steps to take. The project received funding from the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme.<sup>5</sup>

Our work on Duoxu proceeded in the following commonsense steps. As a first step, we began with language assessment: a survey of the last speakers of Duoxu (Chirkova 2014, Han et al. 2014). Needless to say, undertaking a survey of that kind required a high degree of organization and community involvement, and would have been impossible were I to work on the language alone. The survey revealed a sad statistic: only nine elderly members of the entire Duoxu community still had some knowledge of the language. All of the last speakers spoke the local variety of Southwest Mandarin as their dominant daily language and had no chance to speak Duoxu regularly. As a result, their proficiency in Duoxu varied considerably, from highly insecure rememberers and semi-speakers to reasonably fluent language users. Quite unsurprisingly, the most proficient speaker, who also happened to be the oldest member of the group (83 years of age at the time of the survey), Mr. Wu Rongfu, had a classical NORM profile, that is non-mobile, older, rural male (Chambers and Trudgill 1980: 33), which usually represents the most traditional section of a speech community.

As a second step, we concentrated on long-term documentation and description work with the most proficient speakers. We attempted to create communicative contexts and relied on previous documentation records (both linguistic and community-based, as

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<sup>5</sup> Project: "Ersu and Xumi: Comparative and Cross-Varietal Documentation of Highly Endangered Languages of South-West China" (ELDP MDP0257), April 2013 – January 2017.

the aforementioned handwritten manuscripts and collections of traditional Duoxu stories and songs) used to prompt and guide elicitations and conversations.

As a third step, on the basis of the collected data we prepared a range of linguistic and pedagogical materials (Chirkova 2014, 2015; Chirkova and Han 2017). Given the number and age of the last proficient speakers, the most appropriate way to assure the intergenerational continuity of the Duoxu language would ideally be an immersion program, similar to California's Master-Apprentice Language Learning Program (Hinton et al. 2002), whereby community members can informally learn the language from the last native speakers. However, the idea of such a program has not yet found much support in the Duoxu community. We opted instead for basic revitalization materials, including a pedagogical grammar with exercises, a Romanization system on the basis of the pinyin transcription used for Standard Chinese (which is familiar to all Duoxu speakers and hence easy to use), reading materials, and a dictionary. The grammar is currently in press (Chirkova and Han 2017), while a collection of traditional Duoxu stories in IPA transcription and Duoxu Romanization system, and a bilingual Duoxu-Chinese dictionary are in preparation. As a rule, all output of the project team is accompanied by sound files, which are in open access with the Endangered Languages Archive (<https://elar.soas.ac.uk/Collection/MPI655546>).

The joint documentation project is presently coming to an end, but neither Duoxu community members nor myself are planning to stop our work on the Duoxu language. A new documentation project is underway on the Duoxu community side, sponsored by a Chinese funding agency, while I continue to analyse and publish collected Duoxu data.

In sum, despite the unfavourable revitalization context, the Duoxu community showed itself resourceful and successful in actively working on the preservation of their language and implementing a beginning revitalization program.

#### **4. DISCUSSION**

What lessons can be learned from the Duoxu case? The most important lesson seems to be that of the significance of individual efforts at the community level directed at the preservation of the community language. As persuasively argued by Leanne Hinton (2001a: 6), “[a]ll that is really needed for language revitalization to begin is a minimum of one person who is dedicated to the cause. That one person can do a great deal with no support from the community ... Community support may come later, after the prime mover has accomplished something the community can trust. Even if it does not, that one interested person can produce something of value that future generations may appreciate more than that person's peers.” The Duoxu case nicely illustrates this point. Naturally, not all communities can necessarily be as resourceful as Duoxu or have community members who are in a strategic position to search for research collaborations and funding. However, in my experience working with small Tibeto-Burman communities of Southwest China, all communities have concerned members who work in one way or another on preserving their languages, collecting vocabulary lists, writing down stories and proverbs, and — with the advent of mobile phones and internet — also conveniently recording and disseminating linguistic data on blogs and other social media. Hence, the potential for revitalization is always there, waiting for an opportunity to realize itself.

The second lesson is that with these individual efforts in place, revitalization always remains possible (Hinton 2001a: 6). Even when everything seems to be

conspiring against the cause, much important work can still be accomplished. The sobering reality of the current endangered language crisis is that policy-making and economic development are not commensurable with the speed of language endangerment and loss. That means that in the majority of cases of language endangerment, conditions for successful revitalization simply cannot be met. That being the case, many communities naturally may have more pressing priorities and concerns than their language preservation. In such situations, it is unrealistic to opt for the top levels of Fishman's (1991) famous Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale with the goal of creating new speakers and re-establishing the language as the main language of communication. At the same time, it is possible to strive for and attain more modest goals: collect word lists, prepare teaching materials, produce language-learning programs or simply assure that a language continues through a few speakers per generation (e.g. Hinton 2001a, Grenoble 2013: 50-51). Accomplishing these smaller goals naturally lays foundation for reaching higher levels on Fishman's revitalization scale, once circumstances become more favorable and/or the community at large recognizes the importance of individual revitalization efforts.

The third lesson is that a close collaboration between community members and linguists is a promising way to carry out revitalization work even under most unfavorable conditions. This asserts the need for a closer integration of linguistic work with the community needs, uniting documentation and revitalization (e.g. Grenoble and Whaley 1996: 220-221, Hinton 2001b, Grenoble 2013). This further entails that in her work a linguist needs (a) to focus on collection of a wide range of information, including pragmatic and paralinguistic, and (b) to measure descriptive and documentary adequacy of collected data by the possibility for a learner to extract sufficient information from those data to become a fluent speaker (Grenoble 2013: 53). This also means that a fieldwork linguist needs to accept work as part of a language revitalization team (writing teaching materials, helping with teacher training, and teaching the language) (Gerdtz 2010). In addition to furthering grassroots revitalization, such an approach yields an enriched and more representative documentation corpus, which is essential for adequate analysis of lesser-known languages of smaller communities, such as Duoxu.

The story of Duoxu has an open ending, as the revitalization of Duoxu is in its infancy. Will the community succeed in keeping their traditional language alive? How much of the language can still be documented and explored before the last speakers fall silent? Which step on the revitalization scale will the Duoxu community be able to reach? The first results of the revitalization efforts are encouraging, but a lot of work remains to be done.

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