

A Bilingualism and Language Vitality Survey of the
Gan Yi in the Yi Mei Duo Village of the
Shilin County of the Yunnan Province of China*

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Abstract

A partially random sampling survey of the Gan Yi people in the Yi Mei Duo village of the Stone Forest County was conducted. A pilot-tested questionnaire was used as the survey instrument. Although the Gan Yi can understand a basic level of Sani Yi, they might find it more difficult to understand more complex Sani Yi materials. Language shift to Chinese is evident in this Gan Yi village.

1. Introduction

Lehonkoski (2003) says that the Gan Yi have “branched off from the Neisu and, hence, their language belongs to the Eastern Yi Cluster.”

According to the village leader, the autonym of the Gan Yi is Yi Ching. The Gan Yi language is similar to Black Yi. In the Yi Mei Duo village where the sampling was taken, there are thirty-three households and 126 people. They are relatively poor because of the mountainous location of the village. The average population density is one person per 1.4 acres. There are also Gail Yi, Sani Yi, and Chinese in this village.

This is the only Gan Yi village in the county. They moved into this county from the Gan Yi communities of Luo Ping and Shi Zhong. They have relatives there and some of the families still visit one another. In those communities, Gan Yi is spoken much more in their everyday life. There, even the children know how to speak Gan Yi.

Several local people gathered the data in the Yi Mei Duo village on 10 Nov 2003.

2. Purpose

There were two purposes for this survey:

- 1) To investigate whether the Gan Yi people in the Shi Lin area could understand materials in Sani Yi. Further, we wanted to investigate their attitude toward the Sani Yi language.
- 2) To investigate the future viability of Gan Yi in the Shi Lin.

3. Approach

In order to achieve the first purpose, we needed to assess the bilingual situation of the Gan Yi with the Sani Yi in terms of:

- the degree of understanding
- geographical factor
- trading activities

To address the second purpose, we assessed factors that have a bearing on the present language vitality:

- homogeneity of community
- age distribution
- number of people

- proficiency in another language
- attitude toward another language
- education in another language
- use of another language
- the language spoken in the home

We will also look at factors that indicate sociolinguistic trends.

4. Questionnaire

An oral questionnaire was developed to gather the answers to the research questions. The questions used in the questionnaire are as follows:

- 1) Gender?
- 2) What is your age?
- 3) What is your education level?
- 4) Where did you grow up?
- 5) Where else have you lived?
- 6) Other than Chinese, what other language do teachers use in the schools?
- 7) What language did your father speak?
- 8) What language did your mother speak?
- 9) What language do you speak at home?
- 10) When you meet a Sani Yi, what language do you speak with him/her?
- 11) Does your child have Sani Yi friends?
- 12) What language do they use when they are together?
- 13) When a Sani Yi woman marries into the village, what language does she use?
- 14) When Sani Yi people are joking together, do you understand?
- 15) How much do you understand?
- 16) How often do you speak Sani Yi?
- 17) In what situations do you speak Sani Yi?
- 18) Do you participate in the Sani Yi torch festivals?
- 19) Can your whole village speak Gan Yi?
- 20) Other than Sani Yi, does your village have Han?
- 21) Can they speak Gan Yi?
- 22) Can all the people in your village speak Chinese?
- 23) When you are with a Han, what language do you speak?

5. How the questionnaire was conducted

The questionnaire questions were pilot-tested in another village. After revision, we used them in this survey.

Using random sampling, we composed two groups, with six participants in each group. We expected a high level of non-response because many people would be working in the field instead of at home. Therefore, within the chosen households, we decided to take a systematic sample, in which half of the participants were older (age 36 and above) and half were younger (age 35 and below). We predetermined that we would get an older participant from the first household and a younger participant from the next, and so on. Our survey team separated into two sub-teams of two persons each. Each sub-team collected six participants.

6. Questionnaire results

The following table displays the results from the questionnaires.

A number of the cells show no data because in some cases the data collected did not match the question format.

Table abbreviations:

S=Sani Yi C=Chinese YC=Yi Ching (Gan Yi) usu=usually sts=sometimes

Participant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Gender	m	m	f	m	m	f	f	m	m	m	f	m
2. Age	32	58	17	47	29	50	65	41	35	46	31	28
3. Education	prim4	prim2	grade9	prim5	voc 12	prim1	n	grade9	prim	prim	prim	prim
4. Where you grew up	here	here	here	here	here	Hong Lu Kou	here	-	-	-	-	-
5. Lived elsewhere	n	for 8 yrs	Lu4 Nan2	n	Wei2 Ze2	n	-	-	-	-	-	-
6. Teacher spoke in non-Chinese	n	n	n	n	n	n	-	n	n	n	-	-
7. Language father spoke	S	YC	C	YC	deceaseds	-	-	C	-	-	-	-
8. Language mother spoke	YC	YC	S, YC	S	C	S	-	-	-	-	-	-
9. Language spoken in home	C, S	C, YC	C	C	C	C, S	C	C	C	C	C	C
10. Language spoken with Sani	S	S	C	S	C	S	S	-	-	S	S	-
11. Children have Sani friends	y	y	y	y	n	y	y	-	-	-	-	-
12. Language spoken to Sani friends	C	C, S	C	C	N/A	S, C, YC	S, C, YC	-	-	-	-	-
13. Language spoken by Sani women married in	C	S	C, S	S, YC	S, C	S, C, YC	-	-	S	-	-	-
14. Understand Sani jokes	y	y	usu	y	y	y	-	some	-	-	y	-
15. How much Sani do you understand		70%	50%	80%	70%	100%	-	-	-	-	-	-
16. How often do you speak Sani	often	often	n	sts	n	often	-	n	-	seldom		-
17. In what domain do you speak Sani	meet Sani	market	play w/c	w/Sani	N/A	w/Sani	-	-	-	-	-	-
18. Do you participate in Sani torch festival	n	n	y	y	n	n	n	-	n	n	y	n
19. Whole village speak Gan Yi	only 40+	usu	y	50%	50%	n	-	50%	age 40	50%	age 40	age 40
20. Do you have Han in the village	only 1	1	1	n	1	1	1	n	y	y	1	1
21. Do they speak Gan Yi	n	n	n	n	n	y	-	-	-	-	-	-
22. Do the villagers speak Chinese	all	y	y	y	y	y	y	-	y	-	-	-
23. Language spoken with the Han	C	C	C	C	C	C	-	-	-	-	C	C

7. Data analysis

Because answers from each participant are not available for all of the questions, a complete tabulation of the results is not possible. We cannot do a total quantitative analysis. However, the answers we do have permit us to do a qualitative analysis.

7.1 Background

Of the thirteen participants selected, one did not respond. Eight of the participants were males, and four were females. The imbalance in gender probably reflects the fact that many males were working in the field and not at home.

If we divide our participants into young (age 35 and below) and old (age 36 and above), we have six younger and six older. But it is noteworthy that there is only one teenager in our sample. Although we did not ask, a reasonable assumption is that most of the teenagers were either studying at school or helping with farming work.

Nine participants had a primary education or below. Of the seven participants that indicated where their formative years were spent, six said that they grew up in the village itself. Some of them may have traveled to nearby villages or townships, but this is not clear from the data.

7.2 Bilingualism

The primary school teachers who teach Gan Yi students speak only in Chinese and never in Gan Yi. It appears that the language situation is quite mixed in this village. Out of six participants for whom we know each father's language, two fathers spoke Sani Yi, two spoke Chinese, and two spoke Gan Yi. And out of the six participants for whom we have data about each mother's language, two spoke Sani Yi, one spoke Chinese, two spoke Gan Yi, and one spoke both Sani Yi and Gan Yi. Only one participant that we know of had both a Gan Yi-speaking father and mother.

The mixed language situation has affected the home. Even though two participants indicated that they sometimes spoke Sani Yi, and one sometimes spoke Gan Yi, all twelve participants said that they speak Chinese as the common language at home.

In terms of relationship with the Sani Yi, seven of the nine participants said they speak Sani Yi with the Sani Yi. And two said they would communicate in Chinese.

Six of the seven participants said their children had Sani Yi friends. All of the adults said that their children would use Chinese with their Sani Yi friends. Three said they would sometimes use Sani Yi and two said they would use Gan Yi. Four participants said that Sani Yi women who marry into the village would speak Chinese, six would speak in Sani Yi, and only two in Gan Yi. All eight who answered question no. 14 said they would at least understand some of the Sani Yi jokes. The five participants who gave an estimation of their level of Sani Yi all rated their comprehension as above 50 percent. However, their ability to speak Sani Yi is probably lower than their comprehension. Three of the eight participants never spoke Sani Yi, two spoke it sometimes, and three spoke it often. Those who spoke Sani Yi would use it when they meet Sani

people, which usually takes place in the market. Eight of the eleven participants have never participated in the Sani Yi torch festivals, which are annual celebrations in which the whole community participates.

7.3 Language vitality

When asked if the people in the village can speak Gan Yi, one said yes, two said no, four said half of the village can speak Gan Yi, and four said that only the 40-year-olds and above can speak it.

There is only one Han living in the village. Five of six participants said that the Han cannot speak Gan Yi, but one said that that person can. All eight said that the villagers can speak Chinese. All said that the Gan Yi speak to the Han in Chinese.

Most of the girls from this village marry men from Lu Xi or Sani Yi who live in the county. They don't like to marry the men from the same village because of the poverty. Although the reason was not given, there are many Sani Yi women who marry into this village.

8. Survey findings

Factors that are relevant to the first research question concerning bilingualism in Sani are the Gan Yi live in close proximity to the Sani Yi, trade with them in the markets. More significantly, a large number of Sani Yi women marry into this Gan Yi village and continue to speak Sani Yi. Most of the Gan Yi can communicate at a basic level with the Sani Yi. Their comprehension of Sani Yi is better, although it is not at an advanced level (as evidenced by their self-rating).

The second research question is about language vitality and future trends. The village is highly heterogeneous in terms of language composition. Their population is small and they are surrounded by the Sani Yi. Their children are educated exclusively in Chinese. All of the people in the village are proficient in Chinese. Chinese is spoken often, including in the homes. Only the people who are 40-years-old or above can still speak Gan Yi. The younger generations are losing their ability to speak Gan Yi.

9. Conclusions and recommendations

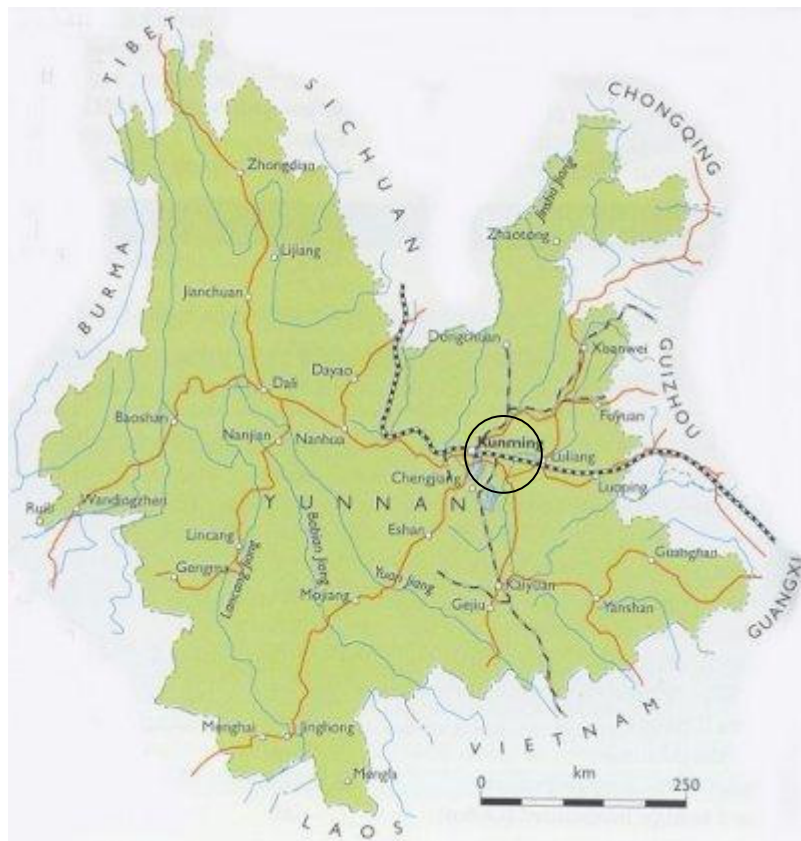
1) The Gan Yi have a basic understanding of Sani Yi. They can probably understand simple materials in Sani Yi, although they might find it challenging to understand more complex materials.

2) The Gan Yi people are in the process of replacing their first language with Chinese. Language shift is taking place in this village. It is likely that the Gan Yi language will disappear in this village in the future.

Appendix 1: Maps



China with Yunnan Province highlighted in red.
 Source: <http://www.paulnoll.com/China/Provinces/Province-Yunnan.html>



Yunnan Province: Shilin County is located within the circled region.