

# Education in Languages of Lesser Power

## Asia-Pacific Perspectives

EDITED BY

Craig Alan Volker  
Fred E. Anderson

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## Education in Languages of Lesser Power

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### **Volume 35**

Education in Languages of Lesser Power. Asia-Pacific Perspectives  
Edited by Craig Alan Volker and Fred E. Anderson

*for*  
*Michael Forman*  
*Kumu Alaka'i*

# Education in Languages of Lesser Power

## Asia-Pacific perspectives

### Preface

The intensely multilingual Asia-Pacific region extends from the Russian Far East to the islands of Polynesia. The region includes some of the world's most populous nations, such as China and Indonesia, as well as some of the smallest island nations, such as Timor-Leste. The lifestyles of its inhabitants range from hunter-gatherer to technological mega-city urban societies. In all countries, there are languages whose speakers have limited linguistic power and whose education is in whole or in part in a language that is not their own. This compilation aims to present a representative, if not comprehensive, overview of education in the languages of these communities.

Because of colonialism and territorial annexation, colonial and national languages have been imposed as vehicles of education in all nations of the region. In most cases, this has relegated minority and sometimes even majority indigenous languages to, at best, a marginal role in formal modern education, and at worst actual active repression.

The same has often been the case with the languages of immigrant minority communities. Immigration is not a new phenomenon, as people moved within the region long before European colonialism. Western colonialism brought massive waves of immigration to several countries in the region, as has the movement of migrant workers and refugees to other countries today. While the languages these people speak are often powerful national and even international languages in their places of origin, many times they are ignored or marginalised in their new environments. The languages, like their speakers, often lack power in the educational systems of the countries to which they have been transplanted.

The use of these "languages of lesser [political] power" presents certain challenges. It also offers a recognition of the importance of diversity in the cultural heritage of the region and empowers the next generation of persons in the communities who are identified with these languages. It is our hope that this volume will contribute in a small way to this endeavour.

Craig Alan Volker and Fred E. Anderson  
Editors

# Foreword

Nicholas Ostler

Chairman, Foundation for Endangered Languages

Humanity is one, but at the same time, humanity is many.

There is one human species, and all members of it – once mature – have some language (though some may also use gesture rather than voice). All spoken languages are doubly articulated: they each use only a subset of the possible vocal gestures, and use distinct sequences of these to convey ideas. In any one of these languages, through greetings, statements, questions, commands and wishes, a community addresses human concerns of family and friends, earning a living, ordering society, the enjoyment of arts and entertainment, the pursuit of knowledge and (at least until recently) the worship of unseen spirits.

Yet no language is quite like any other, or even in direct correspondence, on the level of word or idea. They differ in the use they make of sounds, and how those sounds are articulated in repeating patterns. They differ in the cultural contents, which structure their priorities and illustrate their view of the world. And they differ in their relations to neighbouring languages, whether spoken by the same people, or by other communities of people that they know.

All this diversity is represented in this book. It is projected onto the screen of the Asia-Pacific region of the world, but this is such a wide region as to be almost a proxy for the world itself.

And this book is doubly themed, so that this diversity is viewed from two particular aspects. It is viewed from the aspect of education, the procedures and institutions by which languages, along with much other culture, are deliberately transmitted to the rising generation; and from the aspect of power, the relations of dominance and hegemony among communities and individuals, which make the use of different languages consciously unequal, so that one language community may be – in different ways – confined by another.

The studies in each chapter of this book are descriptive of various language situations, often painting a vivid picture in words. They challenge the presumptions of anyone brought up in any one tradition; but they are also entertaining to an open mind, showing a range of possible attitudes to language and education, and usually reflecting the need to accommodate more than one language in daily life.



Implicitly, too, they are political, and perhaps even – if considered deeply – have an insidious force. They show how power among communities implies inequality, greater options for some communities than others. There is a lurking question, at the very least, of how all participants in such situations can cope with them, to meet their concerns without disrupting or tearing the fabric of mutual relations. There may also be an issue of how the balance between the groups may be changed, to give a juster outcome, or a more productive one that will benefit everyone concerned.

But the languages of the more powerful do not have everything their own way. The forms of education described in this book are often directed to acquire languages of lesser power – languages which have typically not been languages of wider communication. And so they give good evidence for the characteristics of a kind of situation which I have previously seen as untypical.

A lingua-franca is usually seen just as a language of wider communication. But in my book *The Last Lingua Franca*, I characterized it crucially as a language which is acquired deliberately, for some external purpose. (By contrast, a mother-tongue is simply transmitted unconsciously, usually in a family environment.) By this definition these languages of lesser power become, through participating in institutional education, lingua-francas.

By participation in a school system, speakers are put deliberately in touch with their own traditions, much as a typical lingua-franca acts as a bridge between speakers who otherwise do not share a mother-tongue. And as such they are directly comparable with the dominant languages with which they co-exist. Education becomes a new source of radical equality among languages insofar as it is available to all languages, and not just the privileged, respected ones.

But the lingua-franca status is not just a name. Besides giving artificial support to ancient language communities, and their inherited content, education makes those languages, and their cultures, more widely available to all. It is interesting, therefore, that in Fred Anderson's contribution, he concludes that – to escape the fate of marginalization – users of languages of lesser power must be educated bilingually or multilingually. If this can be achieved, then knowledge of a language of lesser power becomes quite clearly an extra asset, a passport to specialized knowledge and close relations not automatically available to all – rather than (as often in the past) a mark of living in a restricted, old-fashioned world, without access beyond it. If so, a language of lesser power reinforced by a place in a multilingual education programme will itself become a lingua-franca, and rightly thought of as a bridge-language in its own right.

As a human species, we seem in recent decades to have made irreversible progress towards a globalized future, in which every part of the world is potentially, and more and more actually, in contact with all the other parts. If such a

future world is to hold on to the value of human diversity, it will have to be a multilingual world. And this multilinguality cannot be restricted to polyglossia, the gross fact that there will (for a time) be many languages, so many islands of difference, where some people remain restricted in local idiosyncrasy, with no access to wider knowledge. What will increasingly be needed will be education to create multilinguality, whereby everyone has access to lingua-francas, without disrespect to those local languages of smaller communities.

And perhaps, in an ideal future, the access that the local languages give to special things will make them seen no longer as languages of lesser power, but rather as languages with distinctive wealth.

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## CHAPTER 1

# The diversity of Asia-Pacific language ecologies

Craig Alan Volker

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The Asia-Pacific region is culturally and linguistically extremely diverse. Many languages are spoken by indigenous or immigrant communities with little political power and some are in danger of becoming extinct in the near future. Government policies regarding the use of the languages of these communities of lesser power vary greatly, with an overall trend towards homogenisation and a strengthening of the nation-state and its language. Choices made about the place of languages of lesser power in education have a profound effect on the self-image and identity of the speakers of those languages. Failing to include them threatens the richness of the cultural diversity of the region.

### 1. Introduction

The Asia-Pacific region—defined here as the region comprising northeast Asia, the ASEAN countries, Australia, and Aotearoa New Zealand and the other island states of the Pacific—is one of the most diverse regions in the world.<sup>1</sup> Although commonly grouped together in institutions such as APEC and the Asia Development Bank, the culture and worldviews weave a rich tapestry of human development. The region's languages and language ecologies reflect this rich diversity.

In this region people follow indigenous religions such as Indonesian *adat* or Japanese Shinto, as well as seven world religions that have come from outside the region: Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Sikhism, Islam and Bahā'ī, with one state, North Korea, officially atheist. Political philosophies range from extreme forms of communism to the various forms of Westminster or American-style parliamentary democracy (with or without hereditary monarchs) of the majority of countries in the region. Levels of personal freedom and choice

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1. The country named “New Zealand” by British colonists was originally and is still called “Aotearoa” by indigenous Māori. Following the example of many Māori academics such as Margie Hohepa (Chapter 14), in this book that nation is called Aotearoa New Zealand.

similarly range from the very limited choices available to North Koreans to the very open societies of countries such as Australia or Aotearoa New Zealand. Levels of individual affluence range from countries such as Singapore and Japan with some of the world's highest per capita incomes to some such as Papua New Guinea or Timor-Leste, where the majority of people live on less than US\$2 a day.

Political units range from large multi-national land "empires" such as China or Russia, relatively homogenous nation-states such as Japan or Korea, or multicultural nations such as Australia and Indonesia. Some of the world's largest nations, both geographically and in terms of population, are located here, as are some of the world's smallest. Cultural factors can place emphasis on cultural and linguistic differences between geographically small ethnic groups such as in Melanesia or favour conformity in geographically large societies such as China or Japan.

Modern life in this region is a product of colonialism, but the types and degrees of that colonialism vary immensely. Japan and Thailand, for example, were hardly touched by outside colonialism, whereas much of the rest of the region was colonised by European powers (such as Malaysia and Aotearoa New Zealand), by other Western nations (such as the Philippines and Norfolk Island), or by neighbouring Asian nations (such as Taiwan and Korea). In most countries in the region, the majority of people are indigenous, but in some, such as Malaysia, there is a mix of large indigenous and large non-indigenous populations, and in a few, such as Singapore, Taiwan, or Australia, indigenous people are far outnumbered by the descendants of people who arrived as a result of colonialism. Some colonised countries, such as Samoa, have an identity that long predates colonialism, whereas others, such as Papua New Guinea, are completely colonial inventions.

Immigration is not only a matter of history in this region. For some nations, contact with the outside world today includes a noticeable amount of on-going immigration by groups of people from other countries or regions. Some, such as Australia, and Aotearoa New Zealand, see themselves as historically nations of immigrants with today's immigration a continuation of a long historical process, while for others, such as Japan, having large numbers of ethnically different immigrants is a relatively new, and sometimes unsettling, phenomenon.

In a region with so much social and cultural diversity, it is not surprising that this diversity is mirrored in both a diversity of languages and a diversity of social, political, and historical environments in which those languages are situated. By analogy with biological diversity and ecologies, these can be called their "linguistic ecologies" (see Mühlhäusler 1995 for a discussion of this concept). Many of these ecologies involve dynamics of power so that we can speak of languages of greater and lesser power. By this we mean do not mean that any one language is intrinsically superior or inferior to another, but rather that a particular language finds itself in a linguistic environment in which its speakers enjoy greater or lesser power to use that language. Of course, this is linked to greater and lesser power in

society in general. These dynamics of linguistic power are especially evident when choices are made about the language(s) used in schools and the language subjects taught in schools.

It is far beyond the scope of this book to attempt to describe all the languages and language ecologies of the region, but it does contain descriptions of the use (or non-use) in education of languages of lesser political power in a dozen Asia-Pacific countries that typify some of the diversity in the linguistic ecologies of the region. This diversity is reflected in the different inherited links between languages, the different types of languages, the different sizes of speaker populations, the different rates and histories of literacy, the different degrees of bi- or multilingualism, and different government policies regarding multilingualism and the use of languages of lesser political power, especially in formal education.

## 2. Inherited links between languages

Traditionally linguists have looked at languages as members of genetically related families, i.e. as groups of languages with shared characteristics (especially phonological and lexical) as a result of being derived from a common ancestor. Because of migration or other factors causing isolation, dialects within this ancestral language became so divergent that they were no longer mutually comprehensible and were therefore new languages, which themselves sometimes diverged into several dialects that eventually became even more new mutually incomprehensible languages. Linguists can study the depth of divergence and the geographical areas of relative linguistic divergence and homogeneity to outline the movement of language groups and their speakers (For a discussion of the concept of language family see Anttila 1989 and Crowley & Bowerman 2010: 108–120).

The Asia-Pacific region is the home of the world's second most geographically widespread family of related languages, the Austronesian language family, which originated in Taiwan and neighbouring islands and spread south and then to the west and east to cover Madagascar, the Philippines, most of Indonesia, Malaysia, much of coastal New Guinea, and the Pacific islands (see Blust 2009).

Two other large language families indigenous to this region are the Sino-Tibetan and Austro-Asiatic language families, both families whose status as coherent language families is quite well established, but whose internal classifications remain to some degree controversial (see Thurgood & La Polla 2003 for Sino-Tibetan & Sidwell 2009 for Austro-Asiatic). As the name suggests, the Sino-Tibetan family includes the Chinese “dialects” (actually separate languages) as well as many other languages of China and southern mainland Asia, including Tibetan and Burmese. Because of China's large population, this language family is second only to Indo-European in the number of people speaking its languages (Lewis, Simons & Fennig 2013: Table 5).



The Austro-Asiatic languages include the Mon-Khmer languages of Indochina (including Vietnamese and Khmer) and a number of smaller minority languages in mainland southeast Asia, the Nicobar islands, southern China, and the Indian subcontinent. Their scattered locations today indicate that they are probably the descendants of the earliest languages of southeast Asia and that therefore this family predates the arrival of Sino-Tibetan, Austronesian, and Indo-European languages.

While not indigenous to this region, the Indo-European language family is now firmly entrenched in many Asia-Pacific countries. Because of colonialism, English in particular is widely spoken as a first language by majorities in several countries and is official in many more. It is by far the language of greatest power in the region. It is also learned as a foreign language for intraregional and international communication throughout the region (see Nunan 2003). Other important Indo-European languages backed by the power of the state are French, official in three French territories in the South Pacific (see Dreyer & Juan 2009) and Portuguese, co-official with Chinese in Macau and with Tetum in Timor-Leste (see Leach n.d. and Chapter 7 in this book). Several Indo-European languages are also spoken by sizeable immigrant communities in the region, but without official recognition and therefore in positions of lesser power, such as Hindi in Fiji or Greek in Australia.

In addition to these large language families in the region, there are a number of smaller language families. Several indigenous language families of various sizes are found in eastern Indonesia and New Guinea, one of the world's most intensely multilingual regions. In Malaysia and Singapore, the Dravidian language family of southern India is represented by the Tamil and, to a lesser extent Malayalam, diaspora (see Chapter 9). There are also some languages in the region that defy any genetic linkage to other languages. These range from Japanese and Korean, national languages spoken by millions of speakers, to minority languages such as Kuot in Papua New Guinea, spoken today by only several hundred people.

### 3. Types of languages

Besides classifying languages in terms of their genetic relationships, we can classify languages according to the type of language that they are, "natural", pidgin, or creole. By "natural" we mean the vast majority of languages spoken in the world, languages that developed slowly and as a result of the type of gradual divergence discussed above.

Pidgin languages are languages not spoken as native languages by any of their speakers. They begin as improvisations when groups of people come together who