The Language Difference

Language and Development in the Greater Mekong Sub-Region

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Preface

It is implicit that to speak is to exist absolutely for the Other (Fanon, 1967: 17).

Language is at the nexus of marginalisation and vulnerability. Only through language can we hope to reduce poverty in real terms. Non-recognition of the languages in which people organise their everyday life and socialise with their children means that these people are denied the tools to make their voices heard and the opportunity to shape their own destiny. It is also language that provides the critical means of ensuring control and coordination of all development activities. This defining role of language in capacity and nation building has caused nation-states to appropriate it, wherever possible, in order to articulate varying socio-economic and political objectives. Therefore, language cannot be allowed to be viewed as peripheral to the development needs of emerging nations, and it is crucial for language policies to be grounded in a concern for inclusion and quality for all. Language as a factor of vulnerability has a direct effect on education, health, the economy and governance. It plays an important role for equitable and participative access to valuable socioeconomic and political spaces (real and virtual). Hence, rather than a distraction from the core issue of economic development, the language question is integral to the socioeconomic, political and cultural realities of many within the nation, and brings to the fore the significance of the local context and the necessity of local participation in the development process.

I have made this argument at length elsewhere, in the case of Africa, but I had to pause for reflection when looking at countries in southeast Asia, where the issue of the national language seems to have been resolved, but where development issues remain a major concern, and ask whether language is indeed at the heart of development. Are students of language being too precious about the place and role of language in society?

Fences to Take Down

The development process in a country is often predicated on the assumption that we know what its economic and political realities are, and the literature dealing with development pays little attention to the language question. There is a general lack of interdisciplinarity between economists, educationists and sociolinguists, whose respective research tends to focus on one area, rather than look at the interrelationships and attempt to understand the interplay between language and issues of development. Economic studies aspire to a status of pure science and are expressed in the cloak of the 'fetishism' that figures bring; the more 'specialised' they are, the more credible they look. Such a bias obfuscates the possibility of a realistic, holistic approach to the actuality of everyday life that can help in the formulation of practical solutions to the challenges of development. Especially so when economic growth and free-market economics, regarded as the backbone of development in the new world order, have shown their limits with the latest economic downturn (2008–2009), and demystified pseudo-scientific and unsocial economics that worship figures and the maximisation of profits at all cost as the be-all and end-all of human endeavour. There is no doubt that economic growth and poverty reduction are linked, but no consistent relationship exists between the two, as economic growth approaches to development have, to date, failed to alleviate poverty. Although a country's average per capita income may rise, the benefits are not necessarily proportionally distributed, and the population of poor people often remains unaffected by such growth. Corrupt and inefficient officials aggravate the lot of such people. Indeed, according to the UK Department for International Development (DFID, 1997; Paragraph 1.9), globalisation has left some 1.3 billion people in extreme poverty (i.e. with less than US$1 a day).

This lack of interest in language is reciprocated, with educationists and sociolinguists showing a complete disregard for development economics (Williams & Cooke, 2002: 298), at least until the early 1990s (Arcand, 1995; Coulmas, 1992; Bruthiaux, 2000; Bunyi, 1999; Djité, 1993; Grin, 1996; Rassool, 1999; Robinson, 1992; Wagner, 1995; Webb, 1999).

This compartmentalisation has been all too prevalent in the analysis of development in Third World countries around the world, with the economy always edging out all other factors. No single index can capture all of the issues involved in development, and everyone is agreed that development should expand the capabilities, choices and quality of life of all its actors and agents. These capabilities, choices and quality of life

lie in much more than economic growth alone; they also lie in the level and quality of education, the availability and quality of health care services and the ability for all to take an active part in public life. Economic growth that does not lead to meaningful and sustainable improvements of this kind in people's lives and does not solve real life problems cannot be called development.

Hence, education, health, the economy and good governance interact in complex ways, and the complexities of social sciences transcend disciplinary categories and ultimately require an understanding of all the factors that impact on the process of development and on economic growth itself. Therefore, the challenges every student of language is presented with are epistemologically and pedagogically profound and call for a fundamental rethinking of our discipline. There are a myriad of ways in which language and development are connected, and the broader socio-political context in which language issues are debated need to be fully examined. Language, education, health, the economy, governance and development are therefore intimately related, even though the nature of the relationships is rarely examined.

The Sociolinguistics of Development in a Needed Time

This is the gap that the Sociolinguistics of Development aims to fill. The Sociolinguistics of Development is an attempt to look into and beyond the economic problems faced by developing countries and understand the dynamics of education, health and governance in terms of how they interrelate. Indeed, development is itself a dynamic and multidimensional paradigm, which requires a multidisciplinary approach. Economic growth, levels of literacy and education, status of health and quality of governance are all part-and-parcel of a development that is human and sustainable in the long term. In this context, the use of local languages is not necessarily a self-aggrandising political statement. It only seeks to enhance the self-confidence and skills that people need to initiate and manage practical change in their lives and own space.

In the history of developed countries, the consolidation of the state and the economy, and the development and spread of the national/ official language seem to have occurred almost simultaneously. Hence, most developing countries have sought to replicate this model. The promotion of a single national language has marginalised other language varieties within the polity; and, sure enough, the same is occurring in those developing polities that have sought to copy what happened 200 years ago, when the relationship between language and development

economics was even less understood, and when the notion of 'One Nation = One Language' was the overriding equation. The margin-alisation of these language varieties has meant the consequent margin-alisation of their speakers from socioeconomic betterment and from power. The language needs of others are not always considered a key element of communication. Is the price of development the denial of distinctiveness (linguistic, cultural or otherwise) and the discounting of local knowledge? Must all others sacrifice their linguistic and cultural uniqueness for the sake of economic growth?

The national/official language, and often the sole language of education and administration, divides those in the country who have access to it and those who do not. Hence, far from being a source of unity, it becomes a source of national disunity; far from being a bridge to endogenous and sustainable development, it becomes a major stumbling block to such development. If attempts to communicate across languages can appear at first as an obstacle, having a shared language of governance or administration does not necessarily guarantee that meaningful communication takes place. Language can be both a facilitator and an impediment to effective communication. It is all a matter of how it is strategically managed and used. It can give some sections of society the power to act as gatekeepers. In this role, they can facilitate communication or, in what Myers (1993) refers to as 'elite closure', play the counter-productive role of deliberately filtering or distorting and even blocking information transmission. Many developed countries, especially within the European Union, are now rediscovering the value of the richness embedded in language diversity and are trying to right the wrongs of this monolingual ethos. Languages should therefore be viewed in strategic terms, because they affect the ability of the nation to build an inclusive knowledge society and achieve its development goals. Combating communicable diseases like malaria and pandemics like HIV/AIDS requires the use of the languages of the target populations concerned for any measure of success to be achieved.

Language is the vehicle for the transfer of knowledge, and this transfer of knowledge is conditional on the efficiency of communication. Hence, the Sociolinguistics of Development is an approach anchored on the premise that language is not neutral, and that the discipline of sociolinguistics itself only makes sense within the relevant socio-political and economic constraints of a polity. The Sociolinguistics of Development emphasises local participation in the process, at every level, and argues that language is an explicit contributing factor to development with a human face. Language-related issues in education are relevant to health, and both of

these have a direct flow-on effect on the economy and the mode of governance. Indeed, good education, health, economy and governance are all conditional on efficient communication. Language, in this sense, constitutes a key ingredient in creating a favourable context for sustainable and long-term endogenous development and, ultimately, the development of the nation-state.

Multilingualism already exists in the societies of the Greater Mekong Sub-Region. Colonisation and neo-colonialism have also impacted negatively on the survival of many languages, and globalisation in the 21st century is putting even more pressure on speech communities to assimilate. Most governments are resisting the implementation of multi-lingualism in education, health and governance, thereby increasing the poverty gap, the school dropout rate and the worsening of the health status for the ethnic minorities they purport to try to lift out of poverty. Language policy that embraces and encourages the use of minority languages can bring about better efficiency and profitability in the utilisation of human resources. The demands of a modern, skilled labour force does not run counter to such a policy. On the contrary, it makes it even more necessary and urgent. Capacity building for public manage-ment and community development in a multilingual context requires innovative approaches to leverage the existing knowledge base and great human potential of minority ethnic groups. There is strong international evidence that investment in people, in all people – including ethnic minorities – pays off, and that it is preferable for investment in human resources to lead, rather than lag behind, other investments and development initiatives (ADB, 1997; Birdsall *et al.*, 1995).

The challenge of inclusiveness is in the promotion and maintenance of the active participation of all citizens in the running of the public affairs of the nation-state, for development cannot and will not occur suspended from existing sociolinguistic realities. When all are seen as actors and agents of development, rather than subjects or obstacles to development, including minority ethnic communities, then language becomes uncon-troversial and cannot be overlooked as a means of achieving the ultimate goal of endogenous and sustainable development. In saying this, I realise that there is no single path forward. No one event, in and by itself, can define success; but implementing multilingualism where it already exists will help expand civil society and improve economic and educational opportunities for all, and provide a better approach to deal with the issues of participatory government, national security, peace and prosper-ity. Divisive and dysfunctional language policy can only lead to alienation and disintegration (Williams, 2008: 75).

Introduction

Does language make a difference when it comes to development, or is there a perceptible difference in development between countries that is attributable to their choice of language? In *The Sociolinguistics of Development in Africa*, I argued that African languages are the missing link in the continent, and proceed to show their place and role in the areas of education, health, the economy and governance. I conclude that no economic development can occur in Africa outside the linguistic, social and cultural contexts of its speech communities. Language is a most sensitive issue in the developing world, because language choice and behaviour are integral to the social, economic and political stability of multicultural societies. To what extent does this argument hold?

Economists, politicians and various social commentators often claim that African countries could or should emulate the development performances of Asian countries. By Asian countries, they often mean the east Asian Tigers (i.e. Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and South Korea); however, the historical, economic and linguistic backgrounds of these countries are vastly different from those of African countries. A closer examination of the facts suggests that only a few countries in the Greater Mekong Sub-Region (GMS) (mainland southeast Asia), namely, Cambodia, the Lao PDR (formerly Laos), Myanmar (formerly Burma, and part of British India) and Viet Nam share similarities with African countries in their colonial past and linguistic make-up. The British expanded their southeast Asian interests into Myanmar in the 19th century, while the French were penetrating into the delta areas of southern Viet Nam (Cochinchina). The second and third opium wars of 1856–1860 led to the military conquest of Saigon, followed by the establishment of protectorates over Cambodia and six Vietnamese provinces. The French expanded their protectorate over Annam and Tonkin later in the century, to cover all of today's Viet Nam. At the turn of the century, as Viet Nam and Cambodia were brought together in 1887, the Lao PDR was added in 1893, forming what became known as the *Union Indochinoise* or French Indo-China, covering a territory of 740,000 km^2, with 10–11 million inhabitants (present-day Viet Nam, Cambodia

and Lao PDR). All these countries happen to have a national language: Khmer for Cambodia, Lao for the Lao PDR, Myanma for Myanmar and Vietnamese for Viet Nam. Indeed, the link between development and a national language runs very deep in the GMS, and the colonial legacy inherited by all these countries in the area of language planning has further entrenched this link. While there are still questions as to whether education in the native languages can be a viable alternative to education in the languages of the former colonisers in the case of Africa, Cambodia, the Lao PDR, Myanmar and Viet Nam have answered these questions in the positive. Their national languages are used as the main tools of education, up to university level, and for health, the economy and governance. However, except for Viet Nam, Cambodia, the Lao PDR and Myanmar are classified by the United Nations as 'least developed countries' (LDC). An LDC is defined by low levels of per capita income, low levels of human resource development and lack of economic diversification.

Likewise, except again for Viet Nam, Cambodia, the Lao PDR and Myanmar are all on the International Development Association's (IDA) list of Fragile States (2007), with Cambodia and Myanmar making the 2008 list of Conflict-affected Fragile States. Fragile States are countries that lack the capacity or will to safeguard their citizens' human rights and security, and to provide basic services, such as health and education. Their 'governments cannot or will not provide an environment for their citizens to reduce, mitigate or cope with poverty and other risks to well-being' (UK Department for International Development, cited in the *UNU Research Brief*, No. 3, 2008: 1). Some common features of Fragile States are: (1) lower life expectancy; (2) higher child mortality; (3) unstable political institution and poor governance; (4) violent conflict or its aftermath; (5) inability to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015; and (6) potential for adverse impacts on political and economic developments in neighbouring countries, with possible global spill over. Myanmar, in particular, faces serious challenges of nation building and presents a dismal picture of political instability and economic impoverishment. So, to what extent is the claim about the centrality of language – national or otherwise – true, when it comes to the issue of development? Does development automatically follow from having adopted (a) local (national) language(s)? How valid are the comparisons between African countries and countries in the GMS in terms of development performances?

This book sets out to answer these questions by investigating how language has been and is being used in these polities, especially in the

critical areas of education, health, the economy and governance, with a view to finding out whether there is any evidence that the language policies of these countries contribute in some discernible way to development. The book is divided into six chapters, the first five of which cover the areas of (1) language, (2) education, (3) health, (4) the economy and (5) governance in each of the four polities (Cambodia, the Lao PDR, Myanmar and Viet Nam).

Chapter 1 provides an up-to-date description of the language situations in Cambodia, the Lao PDR, Myanmar and Viet Nam. It shows that, although each has an established national language, the socio-linguistic make-up of these countries is not only just as complex as that of other multilingual settings (e.g. Africa), but it also raises difficult issues of language management, socioeconomic and political equity and justice. These issues call into question the capacity of governments in Cambodia, the Lao PDR, Myanmar and Viet Nam to effectively face up to and reduce poverty in the foreseeable future.

Language-in-education policies and their impact on development in the GMS are discussed in Chapter 2. One would be wrong to assume that literacy or education alone can cause development to occur, or that education will necessarily lead to economic success (Azariadis & Drazen, 1990; Djité, 2008; Graff, 1995: 19–22). For instance, the experimental World Literacy programme, organised by UNESCO in 11 countries from 1967 to 1972 (Algeria, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Guinea, India, Iran, Madagascar, Mali, Sudan, Syria and Tanzania), provided evidence that large-scale literacy with no immediate socioeconomic functions is likely to fail (Lind & Johnson, 1990: 71). Although quality education is not a sufficient condition for rapid economic growth and development, education is still regarded as a priority sector, essential for human resources development and capacity building. It plays a central role in educational delivery and is intended to promote the imparting of information and the creation and spreading of knowledge. It is also crucial in developing and maintaining cultural and linguistic diversity, and in converting this diversity from a barrier to communication into a source of mutual enrichment and understanding. Literacy and education in local languages are critical for the most essential kinds of development: basic education, nutrition, health and meaningful enhancement of living conditions (Haq, 1995; Haq & Haq, 1998). Therefore, education can help eradicate poverty. It enhances economic opportunities through easier access to jobs and income and empowers people to take an active part in the exercise of participatory democracy. Social and linguistic equality is a prerequisite for this sort of inclusive process of decision making. That is why literate

' societies are better able to meet the pressing development challenges, as good quality education equips their population with functional skills for life. No country in which the threshold level of educational quality is lacking can manage to achieve rapid growth. Amartya Sen (1982), who defines poverty as 'capability deprivation', sees education as an enabling factor, and illiteracy as a significant obstacle to economic opportunities.

Decisions about which language(s) to use in education in a multi-lingual context are not always straightforward. Countries have to consider whether and when it is strategically and economically feasible to introduce a national or minority language into their educational systems. These decisions are a matter of long-term political choice that determines who has access to education and the quality of such education. However, research on the quality and effectiveness of formal education has shown that much of the potential is not being realised in developing countries, even for those children who attend school, if only because much of the educational provision is carried out in a language that the children have little exposure to and do not understand. Lack of language competence short circuits the school experience. In other words, education is rendered ineffective when students have insufficient understanding of the medium of instruction. As Benson puts it:

> Some argue that just changing the language of teaching will not solve all the problems of an education system. However, a change in the medium of instruction also brings about other changes: It makes the home culture visible, it allows learners to talk about their prior knowledge and experience and link them to new information, it brings the home and the school closer together, it opens up communication between families and teachers, it facilitates commu-nication and participation in the classroom, it helps learners gain self-esteem and a stronger sense of identity...in sum, using the learner's language goes a long way toward resolving many of the access and quality issues that would lead us closer to reaching Education for All goals. (Benson, 2008a: 1)

We now have enough evidence to show that education is unlikely to be effective when schools impose an unfamiliar language as the sole medium of instruction. Far from being a bridge to quality education, the imposition of any language on speech communities can be a barrier to their socioeconomic well-being and political integration. Education in a language that few learners master detracts from quality and compounds the other socio-political and economic problems.

This why the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 1953) supports the view that education in a language already known to the learners, typically their mother tongue, is more likely to succeed than education in a language that the children come across for the first time in the formal setting of a classroom. Better education delivers a decent life and strengthens the roots of democracy, and multilingual policies in education give the best chance to all learners to gain basic skills in their own language and learn the languages they need to access wider horizons.

However, as is shown in this chapter, the language policy practices in the GMS show that the preoccupation of governments with nation building and the homogenising demands inherent to the concept of development take precedence over the awareness of the existence of ethnic minorities, overshadowing the need for a linguistic space and opportunities for minority languages, and generating much frustration. Formal schooling in the national language continues to be seen as the only reasonable approach to education, with countries like the Lao PDR and Myanmar being particularly wedded to this notion.

For literacy and the resultant education to effect change that may lead to development, it must be linked to changes in other fields, including the health sector. It is well known, for instance, that educated people tend to be healthier, and that healthier people tend to be better educated. It is also well known that illness of the workforce reduces productivity, households' standards of living and their capacity to keep children in school (UNDP, 2006: 9).

Chapter 3 looks at the status of health in the GMS. The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines health as 'a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity'.[1] Health is fundamental to the attainment of sustainable development. Language is an essential element of an effective public health and health care delivery system in multilingual contexts. The inability to understand and/or speak the official language creates a barrier and negatively affects the quality of care for minority language groups. It directly impacts their access and use of primary and preventive care in public health services, because of misunderstanding, misdiagnosis, inappropriate treatment and lack of compliance. Delaying a correct diagnosis because of the language barrier can have devastating consequences for the patient. In emergency room situations, language barriers can have disastrous outcomes for the patients. Overcoming language barriers to health care is therefore critical to the well-being of the population of a nation. This means that the provision of preventive,

curative, promotive and rehabilitative health services cannot be done in a linguistic vacuum, and that communication barriers can unnecessarily complicate the delivery of health care. Effective communication between health care providers and patients is essential to facilitating access to care, reducing health disparities and medical errors, and assuring the patients' ability to follow prescriptions and treatment plans. Therefore, the health care system has to find ways of handling language diversity.

National language policies in the GMS appear to contribute to the quarantining of public health services to first language speakers of the national language, in the urban areas, leaving minority language groups, who are in much greater need of such services, to fend for themselves and, at the same time, negating the stated aim of governments to reduce poverty in these very language groups. Reducing the burden of disease in minority populations improves their chances for education and full participation in other socioeconomic and political activities.

An acceptable level of health for all cannot be achieved by the health sector alone, as there are many interactions and synergies between health status and education, between health and the economy (i.e. poverty), and between health and good governance. The intimate and complex relationship between health and socioeconomic development is most readily demonstrated in the causal relationship between improvements in a country's socioeconomic status and gains in health status and life expectancy (Safman, 2005: 117, citing Folch *et al.*, 2003; Bhagava *et al.*, 2001; Price-Smith, 2001; Watts, 1997). The example of Cambodia demonstrates that the school-health-based approach to public health is an effective tool for the promotion of preventive health measures in schools and in the community.

In Chapter 4, the analysis of the economies of the GMS shows that the formal economy is far from meeting the needs of the populations. Even in Viet Nam, where there is a relatively strong economic performance, economic growth still has a long way to go to achieve the goal of reducing poverty. The analysis in this chapter goes beyond the formal economy, which only requires the use of the official language, and asks how the majority of the labour force, employed in the informal economy, conducts its everyday business in terms of communication. The informal economy has grown worldwide, especially in developing countries, as a result of liberalisation, deregulation, privatisation and globalisation, which pushed out millions of workers from the formal economy. In Asia, and the GMS in particular, the informal economy now provides the majority of non-agricultural employment (65%) (Chen, 2008), and the World Bank estimates that it generates 40% of the gross national product

(GNP) of developing countries and 17% of the GNP of developed countries. The size of the informal economy in multilingual settings is usually an indication of the continued relevance and use of minority languages as is shown in this sub-region, especially in the Lao PDR and Myanmar. It is also an indication that the population cannot and does not rely on the formal economy, and therefore on government policies, to earn a living. At the same time, a large and pervasive informal economy does not bode well for the economic growth and development targets of the countries in the sub-region. Businesses in the informal economy operate, partially or wholly, outside the law, by under-reporting employment, avoiding taxes, ignoring product quality and safety regulations, infringing copyright, and even failing to register as legal entities. As a result, activities in the informal economy are not regulated and protected, and informal workers are left outside the legal framework; in other words, they are not entitled to legal or social protection under the labour legislation.

The relevance of language in the critical area of governance in the GMS is examined in Chapter 5. The World Bank defines governance as:

> the set of traditions and institutions by which authority in a country is exercised. This includes (1) the process by which governments are selected, monitored and replaced; (2) the capacity of the government to effectively formulate and implement sound policies; and (3) the respect of citizens and state for the institutions that govern economic and social interactions among them.[2]

Good governance is defined in terms of legitimacy and inclusiveness. It is not only the ability of people, all people, including ethno-linguistic minorities, to voice their choice of community, regional and national leaders through elections, it is also the existence of an elected legislature, an independent judiciary, a free press and media, a free civil society, an impartial, free, independent, qualified and effective civil service and judiciary and justice system, the absence of corrupt practices and the ability of citizens to gather together in groups and express their common concerns.

At first glance, it looks as though the adoption of a national language in Cambodia, the Lao PDR, Myanmar and Viet Nam has done little to improve governance. The governments of these countries do not seem willing to engage in the politics of recognition and treat all their citizens equally, thus making it difficult for their own people, and especially their ethnic minorities, who are in dire need of basic services in health and education, to receive the aid and support they deserve.

The last chapter, Chapter 6, entitled 'The Language Difference', seeks to separate facts from fiction. It begins with a comparative analysis of language policy in the four polities and contrasts them in terms of management of local languages, assessing the extent to which the use of these languages has the potential of reducing the vulnerability of populations in the GMS to 'things they do not control' (Goulet, 1971). Having explored the same issues in the case of Africa (Djité, 2008), I close this chapter with an attempt at addressing the central questions of this inquiry: are there fundamental differences in the implementing of multilingualism between countries of the GMS and African countries? Is there a perceptible difference in development between the GMS and Africa that is clearly attributable to their choice of (national/official) language? What lessons can language planners draw from any differences or similarities that may emerge from this comparison?

Notes

1. Preamble to the Constitution of the World Health Organisation as adopted by the International Health Conference, New York, 19–22 June 1946; signed on 22 July 1946 by the representatives of 61 States (Official Records of the World Health Organization, no. 2, p. 100) and entered into force on 7 April 1948.
2. On WWW at http://info.Worldbank.org, *Government Matters III, IV, V.* Accessed 22.6.07.

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Finally, I must thank my mother, who has taught me that languages are miracles to behold.