

**AN OVERVIEW OF
LANGUAGE
ISSUES
IN SOUTH-EAST
ASIA
1950-1980**

Edited by
RICHARD B. NOSS

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An Overview of Language Issues
in South-East Asia
1950–1980

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Singapore
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RICHARD B. NOSS

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I

Historical Sketch

THE present study of language issues in South-East Asia attempts to cover roughly the period 1950 to 1980, and concentrates primarily on five representative countries of South-East Asia: the current members of ASEAN. During or just before the period under study all of these countries except Thailand achieved their independence; the Philippines was the first to do so (1946) and Singapore the last, becoming a separate political entity only in 1965. Major changes in the educational systems of all five countries, and indeed in all the other countries of South-East Asia as well, have taken place since 1950, and many of these changes have affected the use of various languages in education, and ultimately the very roles of these languages in the societies concerned and in the region.

Not all of the language issues dealt with here, however, are confined to educational policy and planning. Some of the issues would exist, in fact, even if there were complete agreement on the best languages to use and teach in the schools and universities of each country. The planning of the *roles* of different languages in a given society or nation, and the planning or development of the *forms* of language that will best satisfy these roles are often inextricably intertwined, and both the forms and the roles of various languages must be considered in the formulation of language policy. Only when the implementation stage has been reached can the role and the form of a given language be successfully disassociated.

Thus education is often affected by issues which have more to do with social, economic, political, cultural, and religious questions of a general nature than they have to do with education for its own sake.

The period 1950 to 1980 can be conveniently divided into two equal parts: 1950 to 1965, which saw many different language policies tried and some found wanting; and 1965 to 1980, during which all the countries were now independent,

regional associations began to take shape, and three of the countries (Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines) made major new policy decisions with firm implementation strategies attached to them. Since the first-half period is already fairly well documented with respect to language issues in the region (e.g., Noss, 1967 and Le Page, 1964), the present chapter will therefore concentrate mainly on the second-half period, from about 1965 to 1980, with references to the earlier years included only when they are particularly relevant to an institution, a policy change, or implementation strategy.

The chapter is divided into six sections: the first two sections trace the history of language policies in the region; the next three sections are mainly concerned with the implementation of policies through national and regional institutions and through contributions from outside the region or from the private sector; the last section summarizes the results of policy formulation and implementation up to 1980. The South-East Asian countries which are not ASEAN members—namely, Brunei, Burma, Kampuchea, Laos, and Vietnam—though not covered in detail by the present study, will be mentioned occasionally in connection with regional issues and with the historical period up to about 1965.

1 *Official and Unofficial Language Policies*

Before sketching the history of language policy in the region and in the individual countries, it would be well to define some of the key terms. *Official language policy* consists of statements by duly constituted governments about the use, form, or role of various languages in the territory under the jurisdiction of the government concerned. There are three main vehicles for such official policy statements: (1) constitutional law; (2) statutes or laws passed by legislatures; and (3) edicts, decrees, orders, or guide-lines issued by executive or administrative arms of the government at various levels. Thus official language policy can operate at national, sub-national (e.g. regional or provincial) or even local levels, but it cannot operate at the regional (in the sense of South-East Asian) level, because there are as yet no political, judicial, or executive bodies at this level with the authority to issue statements about language policy. This book will focus on official language policy at the *national* level.

Educational language policy is a sub-category of official language policy which concerns the use, form, or role of

languages in public and private education. Because many of the issues in South-East Asia and elsewhere revolve around educational institutions and associated ministries, such as those concerned with culture, youth, sports, and education itself, it is worthwhile having a separate term for this type of policy. *Official* language policy can then be taken to mean policy covering more than just education. The last term needed here is *unofficial* language policy, which will serve to cover any *ad hoc* or universal practice—for example in the areas of commerce, mass media, or non-formal education—for which no legal or administrative basis or precedent is evident.

The history of *official* policy during the entire period covered by this study (1950–80) reads very much the same for every country of South-East Asia, if one ignores certain local conditions. The common elements are the following:

1. An early determination, in some cases preceding independence, that a strong national language should be developed that could eventually take over most of the roles occupied by foreign and/or world languages in the countries concerned. With the exception of the Philippines (see below) and Singapore (which in the earlier years was part of Malaysia and hence influenced by the policy decisions of the latter), the identity if not also the ultimate form of the national language had already been decided upon. In the case of Thailand, this determination was mitigated and masked somewhat by the fact that it did not represent a radical change in policy, but only a continuation and strengthening of non-colonial responses to language issues that had long been observable.

2. A realization that, especially in science and technology, commerce, and international relations, continued use of languages of wider communication, none of them indigenous to South-East Asia, was a fact of life and would continue to be so for some time to come.

3. A consistent refusal to accept any form of Chinese, from the point of view of official policy, as either an indigenous language or a language of wider communication. This refusal was common not only to the ASEAN group of countries covered by this study (until Singapore, with its overwhelming ethnic Chinese majority, became a separate political entity) but also to Burma and the three Indo-Chinese countries.

4. A very late realization that other Asian languages, including Japanese and the major South-East Asian regional languages themselves (but not Chinese) might have a role to play in areas covered by official policy, such as commerce,

science and technology, and various cultural fields, and that some of these languages might also have a role to play in intra-regional communication.

The explanation for official attitudes of the entire region with regard to the importance of Chinese (3) is of course partly political: every country of the region still has sizeable populations of Chinese-speaking citizens who, in addition to having what is often seen as disproportionate economic power, are thought to constitute a political threat because of the sheer size and proximity of what is presumed to be their 'mother country'. But the failure to realize the usefulness of Chinese is partly tied up with point (4) above, and in some respects it persists even in Singapore today. To a lesser extent, the same kind of official attitude has applied, separately in each country of South-East Asia rather than regionally, to the importance of languages of wider communication other than those associated with a particular colonial power: i.e., English, French, Spanish and Dutch. Only recently, for example, have world languages like Russian, German, and Arabic received the attention from official policy-makers that they undoubtedly deserve.

The history of *unofficial* language policy in the region also exhibits some striking similarities from country to country, but the common ground here differs sharply from the common ground just observed with regard to official policy. In fact, one might almost say that unofficial practice has complemented the role of official policy in all the crucial cases. This is nowhere better demonstrated than in the domains of commerce, the mass media, non-formal education, and internal administration. A few examples under each of these headings will now be considered.

In *commerce*, for example, the importance of such dialects as Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hakka, and (quite recently) Mandarin has long been recognized, in countries where official policy has nothing to say, or only negative things to say, about Chinese dialects. Evidence for this assertion is to be found in 'help wanted' advertisements of daily newspapers throughout the period under study—e.g., 'knowledge of Teochew required', 'familiarity with Chinese dialects an advantage', etc. Outside of Malaysia and Indonesia, where 'bazaar' or lingua franca Malay has much in common with the official national languages, a knowledge of this variety of Malay can be an asset in many countries of the region. In order to function in markets at all levels, in fact, a knowledge of major vernaculars is required in addition to the official languages of the country

concerned; Javanese in Indonesia is probably the most convincing example here. In addition, tour operators and guides in every country have acquired a working knowledge of such languages as Japanese, German, and (outside Indo-China) French, and this is by no means a recent phenomenon.

The *mass media* perhaps provide the most interesting examples of how unofficial policy complements official policy. The process works in two often contradictory ways: (1) by reinforcing weak implementation of national language policy; (2) by filling communication gaps overlooked by official policy. An example of the first effect can be cited from the Philippines: during the many years that unsuccessful attempts were being made to promote the national language, Pilipino, and to counteract opposition from many regions of the country, the language forming the basis of the national language, Tagalog, was making steady progress at the expense of its nearest competitors through the Manila-dominated mass media, and particularly through the film industry (and later, through television). An example of the second effect comes from Thailand. Official language policy in Thailand has consistently refused (until recently) to recognize the existence of at least three main regional varieties of Thai, considering them to be mere 'dialects' of the national language. Yet for many years now entertainment films have been made without sound-tracks, so that actors sitting in booths in the theatre can supply the voices 'live', using the variety of Thai most appropriate for the locality where the film is shown.

Similar examples can be found in all the other countries. Some countries, like Malaysia, permit the publication of newspapers in languages which have no place in official policy, or in scripts other than the standard orthography for the language concerned. Radio stations in many countries are allowed to broadcast in unofficial language varieties, and sometimes even government stations have done so (e.g., in Thailand). In Singapore, in the early 1960s, news programmes were broadcast in at least ten different language varieties. This number has now been reduced to four: English, Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil. But films are still shown in Cantonese, and advertisements in the same language are shown on television in Malaysia, where Cantonese has no official status of any kind. Only in Indonesia does official language policy with regard to the mass media accord closely with unofficial policy, but even here the exclusion of certain languages by the policy (e.g., all forms of Chinese since the attempted communist coup

in 1965) does not entirely accord with media practice elsewhere in the region.

Some of the most curious effects of the discrepancy between official and unofficial policy are to be found in the practice of subtitling films and television programmes. In Thailand, for example, it is not uncommon to see foreign films subtitled in both Thai and Chinese; foreign television programmes, on the other hand, are usually dubbed in Thai. In Malaysia, recent official policy requires all non-Malay television programmes and films to be subtitled in Malay; it is not uncommon to see films with three sets of subtitles. In Singapore, official policy has produced an even more curious anomaly: Chinese films (even those in the Mandarin medium) with Chinese subtitles.

In *internal administration*, official and unofficial language policies are also typically not in tune. This is nowhere more obvious than in the military services, in police work, and in the courts. Military commanders must be able to communicate instantaneously with their subordinates; if military operations are to succeed, they cannot afford to wait until their subordinates have mastered the official languages. When soldiers, sailors, and air force men are recruited or conscripted from the less educated sectors of the population, as is the case in many countries, it is not likely that they will be especially proficient in more than one language variety. In Singapore, for example, the actual make-up of platoons and companies has been dictated more by language considerations than by anything else, although the official policy says that every Chinese ought to be able to speak Mandarin and everybody else ought to be able to speak English, even though Malay is the 'national language'.

Both military and police officers operating in border areas, and police operating in urban areas of most South-East Asian countries, must in addition be able to communicate in unofficial languages—from small tribal vernaculars through regional *lingue franche* to urban vernaculars. In joint military operations and in border warfare or police actions, some commanders have to speak the languages of neighbouring countries as well, whether or not these languages are recognized by official policy of the commanders' own countries. When political, criminal, or civil cases are brought to court, the official language of the court often has to be supplemented by the language of the defendant, and in such cases interpreters are frequently employed.

One result of the shortcomings of official policy is an emphasis on unofficial languages in *non-formal education*. Whenever businessmen, mass communicators, and internal administrators need to learn languages not recognized by official policy and hence not taught in the country's schools, they must seek other means of becoming proficient in them. Private language schools flourish in South-East Asia, and they teach not only official languages but unofficial varieties as well. Many military and police services have been obliged to set up their own language training programmes, outside the formal school system, to deal with their special requirements; in such programmes, languages of neighbouring countries are often included.

2 Educational Language Policies

While there has been little change in the official language policies of the South-East Asian countries during the past thirty years, and while needed changes have typically been rendered unnecessary by adjustments in unofficial policies, there have been significant changes in *educational* language policy in all of the countries. The urgency of language problems in school systems, and especially in government school systems, is apparently perceived as much more pressing, by legislators and administrators generally, than the urgency of language problems in the society at large. Possibly this is explained by the fact that most citizens (and voters) have children in schools, and the parents' aspirations for their children typically outweigh their concern for more smoothly functioning markets, better mass media, and more efficient internal administration. If so, this attitude may well be reflected in the language policy and implementation activities of parliamentary representatives and civil servants, who even in the most centralized form of government must respond in some way to the demands of the public.

Changes in educational language policy have not only been frequent, over the last thirty years, but have been more varied, from country to country, than the gradual evolution of official policy shared by much of the region would suggest. It is advisable, therefore, to set aside for a moment the regional perspective and examine the educational policy shifts on a national basis, in this order: Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Singapore. Only in the last three countries have the recent changes in educational policy been

really fundamental ones, but significant changes can be noted in all five.

THAILAND

In *Thailand*, the central tenet of regarding Standard (Central) Thai as the only language medium of education and English as the only important language subject, other than Standard Thai itself, has not really changed at all in the past thirty years. In fact, as far as educational policy is concerned, one can say that there are only two categories of languages in Thailand: Thai, and foreign languages. Until very recently, not only were English and other European languages designated by the undifferentiated term 'foreign languages', but so were Chinese, Khmer, Malay, and Vietnamese, despite the fact that speakers of the first three languages have been living in large numbers in Thailand for generations, and speakers of Vietnamese have now been in residence for at least one generation. On the other hand, speakers in the North-East of Thailand, whose language is very close to that of a neighbouring country, Laos, were considered to be speakers of Thai, not of a 'foreign language'. Only occasionally have concessions been made to any of these population groups in educational *implementation* (as opposed to policy), and then only to the Malay and Khmer groups, not to the Chinese and Vietnamese.

In the earliest part of the period under study, educational policy issues tended to revolve around the use of Chinese in *private* schools. The main issue was that the government wanted to discourage this practice while at the same time condoning the use of English in private schools, and this was made difficult by the official terminology which lumped English and Chinese together as foreign languages. As recently as 1970 this issue was still being debated in much the same officially obscure terms (Noss, 1971: 27). In any event, administrative edicts and pronouncements about the use of languages other than Thai in private schools (which are of course subject to the supervision of the Ministries of Interior and Education) have never specifically mentioned either English or Chinese by name, but have always used the term 'foreign languages'.

By the 1970s, however, the Chinese language issue had more or less resolved itself, and attention began to be focused on the teaching of English as a *subject* in the lower schools. This time, an actual change in educational policy was involved, although again the change was masked because English was not referred

to directly. For two decades English had been in fact the only foreign language subsidized by the government, in the sense of being a required subject in the primary and secondary schools, and also a required subject, a resource language and (not very often) an actual medium of instruction in higher education. The point at which students began their required study of English had varied somewhat, both in terms of minor reorganizations of overall curriculum structure and in terms of types of school, but English as a subject had always been initiated in primary school—usually at about Primary 5. The rationale for this early introduction of English was actually twofold: (1) English would be needed as a tool language by those students going on to higher education; (2) for those students who did not continue their education, English would enhance their employment possibilities no matter when they left school. In short, parents believed that English was important, and educational policy reflected this.

There were some rather strong objections to this aspect of educational language policy all along, however, from professionals in the general field of education and even from the English language teaching profession itself. In 1976, the first real change in educational policy was announced. (This was the year that the Thanin government took office.) In one of the new government's decisions it was stated explicitly that all Thai citizens should be given the opportunity to learn Thai (i.e., Central Thai) and use it proficiently and correctly. This was the first official admission that the government schools were not already providing such opportunities. During the same regime, the National Education Council had been requested to draft an Educational Reform Act. In the draft, a brief sketch of formal language teaching recommended the continued teaching of foreign languages. The then Minister of Education, an educationist himself, took exception to this aspect of the proposed educational policy and argued strongly against it. He later announced to the public his own language teaching policy, in which the teaching of foreign language was to be abolished at the primary level and made 'optional' at the secondary level. This simply meant that no English would be taught at primary level in any school, public or private.

The public outcry against this new policy, especially in Bangkok, was enormous. Many parents believed that the abolition of English at secondary level would soon follow, and saw the whole policy as a threat to the educational and occupational prospects of their children. In any event, both the

proposed Educational Reform and the new language policy came to an end with the demise of the Thanin regime in that very year. But the Minister's action had actually been in line with the advice of many educationists, who saw all too clearly that the teaching of English, especially at the primary level but also at secondary level where qualified teachers were often lacking, was a dismal failure and ought to be deferred for that reason alone (cf., University Development Commission 1968). This abortive attempt to do away with English in the lower grades was not entirely futile, in the long run, and the other recommendations of the Educational Reform draft also stimulated considerable thinking among educational circles.

By 1978, things had calmed down enough for the National Education Council to make a new policy statement concerning languages (Ketudat, 1979). The traditional classification of languages into only two categories, Thai and foreign, was increased to four: (1) national language (Standard Thai); (2) foreign languages; (3) regional languages (in our sense, mainly the three provincial varieties of Thai spoken in the North, North-East, and South); and (4) minority languages. Although this new classification opens the way for indigenous languages such as Malay, Khmer, and Vietnamese to be considered as 'minority' rather than 'foreign' languages, it still leaves the status of Chinese dialects in limbo. Mandarin will undoubtedly continue to be classified (justly so) as a foreign language, but what about the indigenous speakers of such languages as Teochew? Are they minority language speakers, like the mountain tribes, the Malays in the south and the Khmers in the east, or are they foreign language speakers because of the genetic relationship of their languages to Mandarin? By not defining the limits of minority groups in numerical terms, the new policy statement has left these questions open.

At the same time, five principles of educational (and official) language policy were enunciated as follows:

1. *Education*: The psychology of foreign language learning, the acquisition of the mother tongue as a springboard for foreign language learning, motivation, readiness, teacher preparation, et cetera should be considered.

2. *National Security*: The teaching of Thai should be compulsory and begin early.

3. *Racial Integration*: The teaching and learning of Thai as an avenue to national integration should be required at all levels.

4. *Information Dissemination*: English is the most widely used

international language for academic and occupational purposes.

5. *International Relations*: Languages of all friendly nations are regarded as having the same status.

Note that provincial Thai varieties and minority languages are not specifically mentioned in the five principles. Also, the last principle would seem to indicate that such languages as Malay, Khmer, Vietnamese, and Mandarin, since they are languages of potentially 'friendly' nations, would have the same status as English, French, or Japanese—that is, they would still be considered foreign languages despite the fact that they have native speakers whose home country is Thailand.

In the following year, 1979, a National Conference on Language Policy and Language Teaching Implementation was convened by the Bureau of University Affairs—the first of its kind in Thailand. Although the recommendations of this conference at this writing have not been officially acted upon, and are not binding on the government in any case, they are summarized in the last section of this chapter because of their potential importance. For example, this was the first time that representatives of the military services and the Ministry of the Interior had joined the educationists to discuss language policy in an official context. As will be seen (in Chapter II), these other governmental divisions are more influential than the Ministry of Education in formulating official language policy in Thailand.

INDONESIA

The development of educational language policy in Indonesia has been very similar to that of Thailand over the last three decades, although the two countries are quite different in their linguistic composition. The early adoption by Indonesia (even before World War II) of an agreed-upon national language, Bahasa Indonesia, and its use throughout the educational system as a medium of instruction, together with the replacement of Dutch with English as the primary foreign language subject, make the two countries' educational language policies almost identical on the surface. As in Thailand, the great majority of Indonesians speak languages at home which are of the same language family as the national language; the principal difference is that in Indonesia the distances among the related languages are much greater, and the varieties concerned are recognized by both official and educational policy as being separate languages. Another