Problems of language contact in Vietnam

(The Main Features of Language Change)

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1. Introduction

1.1. Like most of other countries in Southeast Asia, Vietnam is a nation of many languages and peoples. According to figures from the General Government Statistics Office and the Ethnology Institute of the National Center for the Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam today has 54 nationalities (see Appendix 1) comprising hundreds of regional groups.

1.2. Ethnic Vietnamese, or Kinh, have historically been concentrated primarily in the delta and coastal regions which stretch the length of the country. Today, Kinh are present in nearly all of Vietnam’s provinces, although their level of distribution is uneven. Nearly all of ethnic minority peoples live in the forest and mountain regions of the North, the highland and border areas to the West, and the Southwestern part of the country. Only two minority groups - the Cham and the Khmer - live in the delta areas intermingled with the Kinh. The Cham live in the two provinces of the South Central region, with a number also settled in the Mekong Delta provinces of Angiang, while Khmer live in the provinces of Mekong Delta. For different reasons and due to different waves of migration, more than 920,000 ethnic Chinese are settled throughout the various regions of Vietnam. There are a few groups living in the mountain, some other groups living in the lowland countryside while others living in the urban areas. The economic activity of the Chinese vary according to their place of residence: mountain cultivation, lowland farming, trade, and business (see Map Appendix 2).

1.3. Today (mid 1990s), these fifty-four ethnic groups combine to form a community of about seventy million people: The Vietnamese community. This community has formed gradually over many millennia. With a few peoples forming the original nuclei, many other groups were integrate into this community at different points of the time and for different reasons: ancient migratory movements, expansion of inhabited areas, economics, geography, society, history... Of course, at whatever time and for whatever reason, each people or group of peoples who become a part of the
community made a distinct contribution to the cultural and linguistic storehouse shared by all.

1.4. Certainly, this is a feature of nearly all areas in the world with mixed immigrant populations, including all of Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, the form and outcome of integration depend on the pattern of language contact and on the relative position and relationship between the different peoples who are the owner of contact languages.

II. Language Contact in Vietnam during the Building of the Ancient Vietnamese State

2.1. As a scientific approach originating from the field of socio-linguistics, the theory of language contact allows us examine the reasons, evolution, and results of linguistic processes by relying not just on linguistic structures, but also on factors outside of language. This approach is particularly necessary for examining prehistoric linguistic activity in Vietnam.

In this paper, extra linguistic factors refers to historical legends, archaeological artifacts, and historical sites reflected in the name of places, rivers, and mountains.

2.2. According to the legend, the union between Lac Long Quan (Lac Dragon lord), the prince of the sea, and Au Co, a princess of the mountains, produced the Hung royal line. Examined from the perspective of linguistic activity, this legend makes it possible to see the first contact between ethnic group living in the lowland and the highland regions of Vietnam. With the emergency of the Hung kings, different tribes were unified to form the state of Van Lang, a development which also provided the first nucleus for the concentration of the Vietnamese language. A number of historians and linguistics have determined that these tribes spoke different dialects with Austro-Asiatic characteristics (Hoang T.C, Ha V.T, Pham D.D, Taylor K.W). Thus, a linguistic cradle (Koine) stemming from the Austro-Asiatic family emerged in the territory of Vietnam.

2.3. Scientists have verified the existence of the Ancient Au-Lac state and the historical figure of An Duong Vuong, who replaced the Hung line as King. Linguistically, this enables us to think about expansion of the sphere of language contact on a new scale. It is possible that these two large tribal groups which did not stem from the same linguistic family, Austro-Asiatic and Kadai for example, developed a language for the tribal alliance.
Examinations of contemporary and ancient population distribution patterns in the areas to the south of the Yangtze River show, as many scholars have already asserted, that a number of Austro-Asiatic and Kadai peoples are descended from the different populations which comprised the ancient Bach Viet homeland. The intersection between Kadai (Thai) and Austro-Asiatic in Vietnamese language (Haudricourt A.G., Phan H.L.) certainly stems from this period of language contact.

2.4. The legend of the magic crossbow, the tragedy of My Chau and Trong Thuy, and historical documents about Trieu Da’s conquest and domination of Au Lac for more than sixty years are indirect evidence of the first contact between the ancient Vietnamese language and Chinese. This contact was certainly neither deep nor widespread among the entire population. It may only have occurred among those of echelons of Au Lac society which had direct relations with the officials and military garrisons dispatched by Trieu Da. At that time, language contact between the Au Lac peoples and the Bach Viet populations had already begun to be controlled by Trieu Da’s strategy of Sinicization (Phan H.L., p. 214).

Although the population in Nam Viet descending from Trieu Da numbered less than half that of Au Lac (Phan H. L., p. 215), naturally the composition of the population was quite diverse. Although there have been migrations over the centuries between the time of Trieu Da and the present, the overall picture of population distribution has not changed much (Taylor K.W., page 13-17). From the arguments above, it is possible to hypothesize that during the historical period of Trieu Da’s occupation of Au Lac, Ancient Vietnamese, having already interacted with Kadai, had become to have contact not only with Chinese, but also with the broader group of peoples comprising Bach Viet, among them Hmong, Dao, and Tibetans.

Although we still need historical and linguistic evidences to support the above hypothesis, the information we do have enables us to acknowledge the existence of quite extensive linguistic contact at the dawn of Vietnamese civilization from prehistoric to early feudal times.

III. Linguistic Contact During the Period of Vietnam’s Domination by the Chinese Empire
3.1. The scheme of Sinicization begun during the Trieu Da period was intensified significantly, especially following the merciless repression of the Trung sisters revolt (40-43 A.D) by Ma Vien. During this time, in addition to Han military garrisons, many other types of people were permanently settled in the territory of Giao Chi (ancient Vietnam) to form plantations, farms, towns, and neighborhoods of overseas Chinese. Along with the regions around the chief towns and stations, Vietnamese-Han language contact also occurred in a number of population areas. The Han officials, nobles and literati who came to administer or make their livings in Vietnam established schools for their children. A number of Vietnamese who were allowed to attend these schools (Ly Tien, Ly Cam, Truong Trong ...) displayed significant ability and were even appointed as mandarins. Under the rule of the Chinese governors Tich Quang, Nham Dien, and Si Nhip** Confucianism was strongly propagated through the construction of "School teaching culture". At that time, a person on Giao Chau passed the Confucian exams. The emergency in Vietnamese society of a Han-educated intellectual class meant the Vietnamese-Han language contact occurred not just through the spoken language, but also through literature. This new factor gradually became the primary vehicle for Vietnamese-Han language contact until the time of Vietnamese independence.

3.2. With the formation of the Luy Lau Buddhist center and the appearance of traders and Buddhist clergy from India during the first century A.D., Buddhist entered Vietnamese society. This, in turn, created an opening for Vietnamese-Hindu language contact. Although not as extensive as that between Vietnamese and Chinese, Vietnamese-Hindu language contact contributed a series of Buddhist terms which were Vietnamized: But (Buddha), bo de (bodhi tree), Bo tat (Bodhisattva), phu do (Buddha's relics), chua (pagoda), thap (tower), tang gia (Buddhist priest), etc., as well as a number of terms from daily life, such as ya xoa (yaksa, or evil spirit).

3.3. This history raises an important question: during thousands of years domination marked by an aggressive program of Sinicization and close cultural contact under the domination of a vast empire, how were the conquered 'people able to preserve their spoken language?' This situation

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