

LANGUAGE STATUS PLANNING IN THE ASEAN COUNTRIES¹

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This paper is an examination of some possible links between the political motivations in articulated language policy and the sociolinguistic status of official languages. A distinction must be made first between linguistically homogeneous and linguistically heterogeneous states. The cut-off point for homogeneity is of course arbitrary, although the identification of such states is in fact easier in practice than in theory. In a linguistically homogeneous state, one language is spoken as a sole native language by the overwhelming majority of the nationals. Fishman (1968b:55) sets homogeneity at 85% given that there is no significant minority. Examples of such countries would be the United Kingdom or Japan. Linguistically heterogeneous states are diverse, and have been classified in a variety of ways, most interestingly for the purposes of this paper, by Kloss (1969). The ASEAN countries are all heterogeneous except Thailand. There, as in other 'homogeneous' states, the homogeneity in this sense does not preclude the existence of minority groups who may have an importance not suggested by their small size, while not all native speakers of the dominant language are speakers of the standard variety. Thus in homogeneous countries dialect differences become more important.

However, the language issues of linguistically homogeneous states and those of linguistically heterogeneous states will differ considerably (Fishman 1968a), linguistically heterogeneous states normally having more difficult decisions to make about language policy. The choice of official language(s), which is the aspect of language planning with which this paper is concerned, is characteristically more difficult, more hazardous, but more open to social engineering in a linguistically heterogeneous state.

WHAT IS AN OFFICIAL LANGUAGE?

For Garvin (1974) the defining characteristic of an official language is recognition by some governmental authority, i.e. a language is official because the government says it is. The official language or one of several official languages may in addition be designated as 'national language', and Garvin distinguishes two common usages of this term:

- (1) a national language is a language serving the entire territory of the nation (in contrast with a regional language)
- (2) the national language is the language which functions as a national symbol.

As several writers have pointed out however (Fishman 1969, Whiteley 1971, Conrad and Fishman 1977), there is tremendous variation from country to country

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in the use of these terms, and in the rigidity with which legally sanctioned languages are used to the exclusion of those without any overt official recognition. Nevertheless, whatever the *de facto* situation in a state may be, the *de jure* situation is in itself of interest, as being an articulation of intentions, wishful thinking, or direction of development. Formulae of the sort proposed by Stewart (1968), Ferguson (1966) or Kloss (1968) fall short of really characterising the situation in a given locality if an assumption is made of a match between the real situation and the legalistic one.

Governments designate languages by one or more of the following terms:

- (1) national (in either of the senses given by Garvin, but usually the second)
- (2) official (either countrywide or regional; either a sole official language or one of two or more equal or unequal official languages)
- (3) working (this is the status of English in Sri Lanka - this designation normally has about it a sense of being an unsatisfactory interim measure while a more suitable language, usually a national language, is being promoted).

These categories of course overlap (one language may be all three) and not all countries use all of these terms. A linguistically homogeneous country may even have *no* articulated language policy for the majority language. Typically, minority groups in such countries (especially indigenous minority groups, and particularly those who were or who feel they were there before the majority group) agitate for limited (often regional) areas of recognition for their own languages, and in particular for the promotion of education in their languages (e.g. Welsh in the UK, Breton in France, Basque in Spain). In this paper I have not distinguished between national and official language unless I have so specified.

Kloss (1968:79) further points out that *below* the level of legalistic official recognition, the relationship between a language and the government may be one of three further sorts:

- (1) "promoted"

A language may be to a limited extent promoted by the government, although not designated as official. It may be used in some official broadcasts, brochures, or other media used to reach the citizens, and it may be used in the early stages of education.

This latter use may allow most children to have their first education in their native language. This is usually felt to be educationally desirable, though in countries such as Singapore, or in the urban concentrations of many linguistically heterogeneous states, it is probably too involved and expensive to be feasible, owing to the multitude of small groups, their geographical dispersion (rather than concentration), and often the difficulty of ascertaining what a child's native language is in a situation of near-universal bi/multilingualism. Furthermore there are situations where the undesirable social consequences of giving every child an education in the native language would outweigh the possible educational benefits to the individual.

There are many examples of 'limited government promotion' - for example the use of Urdu in the UK. There are TV and radio programs in Urdu, and brochures about such things as post office services for distribution to readers of Urdu.

(2) "in no way promoted by the state ... but ... [not] restricted"

A language not promoted in any way may nevertheless be tolerated, and is to be found in use between citizens in private clubs, in films, in religion, in private schools, or simply between persons in public.

Examples of this are innumerable: Punjabi in Singapore, for instance.

(3) "proscribed"

A language may be proscribed and its very use in public dangerous: examples of this, the reverse of official, are luckily rare; so rare in fact that I am unable to give a modern example, and even the historical ones (e.g. Scots Gaelic in late 18th century Britain) are dubious. Limited areas of proscription are however very common, especially the proscription of non-standard varieties in school (e.g. the imposition of a small fine for the use of Chinese varieties other than Mandarin in Singapore schools).

The choice of official language(s) in countries where the choice of official language is not made obvious by the demographic structure can be a powerful tool in social engineering, and there is thus a link between the choice of official language and the political decisions. Quite apart from the actual success of official language policy in terms of its achieving its aims in social engineering, the choice of official language has various legal and political implications, notably those concerning the leaders' perceptions of their country and their ambitions for it.

TYPES OF DECISIONS

A the government wishes to satisfy the articulated demands of its people

This may seem an obvious political goal, but a number of countries find that they have other goals which override it, e.g. B (Malaysia) or F/G (South Africa). Depending on the philosophy of the government, the dissatisfied section of the population may be wooed, pacified, ignored, or oppressed.

B fostering a national identity through language

For many countries language is a main medium for the expression of national unity. However, although many countries in which "the geographical boundaries are far in advance of sociocultural unity" (Fishman 1968a:43) feel it is desirable to promote a national identity through language, and may adopt unpopular and in fact unfeasible schemes to promote it (e.g. India), language is not necessary for the expression of national unity (e.g. Switzerland) and in fact the promotion of a language for this purpose may in some cases be divisive (e.g. India again).

C improving inter-group communication

In a fragmented state, communication between disparate groups may be improved by the careful choice and promotion of an official language. A widely used lingua franca may already be available (e.g. Malay in the Malay Archipelago, Swahili in East Africa), but over the years the lingua franca function of a language may increase, especially in a situation of universal or near universal elementary education (e.g. English in Singapore).

D increasing or maintaining differences between separate groups

In some societies, different groups wish to be identified as different, and given special linguistic recognition (Wales, Singapore, etc.). If the government were not to maintain these differences this might be seen as an attempt to wipe out the culture. In other societies (South Africa is the best example), diverse groups (Zulu, Xhosa, etc.) wish to see themselves primarily as united vis a vis a shared other, and may see government attempts to emphasise their separateness as an attempt to prevent the formation of a larger power base. The Soweto riots were for the teaching of English (the language of intra-group unity) and against the emphasis on Afrikaans (the language of the opposing group) and on African languages (the languages of disunity and of disadvantage). Similarly, there is currently a dispute in the Indian state of West Bengal, where the Marxist state government wishes to abandon the teaching of English in state primary schools, in order to reinforce the separateness of West Bengal from the rest of India, and from the non-Marxist central government, while the opposing faction wishes to maintain the sense of Indianness as embodied in this case in the common use of English. Another effect of the loss of English teaching in state primary schools will be to further enlarge the gulf between rich and poor, as private schools will not be affected.

E aiding a currently or historically downtrodden group

There are of course different perceptions of downtroddenness depending on the group membership of the individual. This motivation often involves either a shift in power, or a differential manifestation of power. The important thing may be the government's avowed intention, though there is normally some element of truth (e.g. Malaysia, Sri Lanka). See also G below.

F keeping a downtrodden group downtrodden

Normally linked with G below. South Africa is the clearest example (see van den Berghe 1968) but this motivation may be deeply hidden behind a variety of official language policies more frequently than might at first be thought.

G promoting the interests of the ruling group

This is often linked with F as in the case of South Africa, but in the case of Malaysia and Sri Lanka it is linked with E.

H improving or maintaining international standing

Although given much importance by politicians in countries which are contemplating the abandonment of a language of wider communication in favour of an indigenous language (usually in the interests of motivation B), this is in fact a very minor consideration. In most countries - Singapore is one of the exceptions - very few members of the society interact with foreigners or work in areas where a non-indigenous language is essential. Furthermore even if a language is not designated as official, it can still be valued, and be taught in schools as national policy (e.g. English in the Netherlands, Sweden, Indonesia).

Official languages can be classified in a variety of ways. Official languages must normally be standard languages (Garvin 1974). If a language is selected to be an official language which at the time of selection is not a fully developed modern standard language, then the government must be prepared to invest time,