

Diglossia, Linguistic Culture and Language Policy in Southeast Asia

Harold F. Schiffman
University of Washington

1 Introduction: Language Policy and Linguistic Culture.

1.1 The Study of Language Policy

The study of language policy has evolved into an interdisciplinary field involving social psychologists, political scientists, linguists, demographers, economists, geographers and anthropologists along with such pioneering sociologists of language as Kloss, Fishman, Weinreich. The emergence of newly-independent nations since World War II and decisions confronting them about which language(s) to use in education, in administration, and in particular how to function with widespread multilingualism among their populations has intensified the study of policy affecting language. Most of the nations of Southeast Asia achieved 'independence' after World War II, but the resolution of issues around language has continued to plague many of them to this day, while in others (Indonesia is a notable example) a switchover to an indigenous language (Bahasa Indonesia) was achieved with relative ease. Even among the less problematical polities of the area, however, there have been continuing issues around minority language groups, and with the movement of some groups (e.g., refugees) across political boundaries, new issues have arisen.

1.1.1 Defining the Issues

Language policy is usually thought of in a somewhat narrow way, i.e., as the formulation of plans for dealing with language issues in a given polity, and though viewed in principle as an interdisciplinary area of study, is in practice often carried on by

researchers trained in only one academic discipline. Indeed, as different humanistic and social science disciplines have approached the study of language policy, the supposedly central interdisciplinary approach often gets lost, and the outcome of the study takes on the characteristics of the individual disciplines. Many researchers, however, myself included, prefer to think of language policy as a much broader phenomenon, involving not only overt decision-making regarding language, but also more subtle kinds of societal forces that I will subsume under the notion of 'covert' or 'implicit' policy.

I feel that it is most insightful to view language policy as a dichotomy between *overt* (explicit, formalized, *de jure*, codified, manifest, written) policies and *covert* (implicit, informal, unstated, *de facto*, grass-roots, latent, unwritten, unofficial) components of the policy. I borrow this distinction from Benjamin Lee Whorf (1964:131), who used it to describe distinctions between overt and covert classes or categories in the grammar of a language; but I refrain here from psychologizing about 'world views' or the role of language in 'defining experience'. There is also a parallel in the notions of 'latent' and 'manifest' culture proposed by Becker and Geer 1960, in the notions of overt and covert prestige promulgated by Labov 1972 and elaborated in Trudgill 1983:89-90, and perhaps also the distinction between deep and surface structure proposed by Chomsky 1965. Tollefson (1988) has also referred to covert aspects of US language policy toward refugees, and Peddie (1991) puts forth the notion that a coherent national language policy for New Zealand can and is emerging without any overt governmental planning. Noss, in his overview of language issues in Southeast Asia (1984) also emphasizes the importance of unofficial policy in such areas as commerce, mass media, and internal administration (especially police and military activities requiring knowledge of unofficial languages, etc.). Also, for my purposes, the term language *planning*, though defined by some researchers as 'decision-making about language', I reserve for such activities as those carried on by language academies, language planning boards, i.e., those policies that are essentially oriented toward the future (Eastman

1983:3), especially as they involve overt *goals* and timetables for the introduction of new vocabulary, changes in status of different varieties, planning the implementation of educational policy, etc.

I see language *policy* therefore as not only future-oriented, but as deeply rooted in the past, especially in what I am calling the *linguistic culture* of the language speakers in question. I view linguistic culture as a powerful force that may underlie and guide the formulation of both overt and covert action on behalf of language, and I see it at work in many areas of linguistic activity that are not usually thought of as policy-related per se.¹

I therefore seek to reemphasize the interdisciplinary focus of language policy study, and to reassert the primacy of cultural and historical conditions underlying its operation. There is a sizable body of literature that is referred to by some researchers as 'sociology of language', by others as 'sociolinguistics', with overlapping into subfields of other disciplines such as 'politico-linguistics', 'demo-linguistics', and 'ethno-linguistic geography' (Breton 1991), not to mention the extensive literature in the field of anthropological linguistics. I consider all of these to have bearing on the study of language policy, and not just the narrowly-construed study of language law, constitutional law, administrative codes, or whatever.² The work of Fishman, Ferguson, Gumperz, Hymes and Kloss are fundamental in this approach.

1.2 Where do Language Policies Come From?

Much recent work on language policy has borrowed methodologies and theoretical underpinnings from economic (Marxist) and political-science models, and focuses on decision-making ("rational choice theory"), game theory, and cost-benefit analysis. In the process of discovering these universals, however, these researchers have in my opinion unnecessarily shortchanged those important aspects of language-policy study that I consider crucial, in particular the individual socio-cultural or sociolinguistic characteristics of the groups or polities in

question. In the attempts by some researchers to isolate universals that can explain why such disparate language policies as that of the U.S. and that of Vietnam operate (or do not operate) in the same way, according to some underlying universal principles, it often seems as though some researchers were interpreting reasons for various developments as *outcomes* of policy when to me it is clear that they are *givens*, i.e., elements *underlying* the policy. That is, conclusions were being drawn about supposed *outcomes* of certain policies that should perhaps be considered to be part of the basic underpinnings of the policies.

In Southeast Asia, for example, the existence of sharply-differentiated spoken and written varieties (registers, ranges, social styles) of a given language, sometimes referred to as *diglossia*³ cannot fail to have an effect on language policy, especially policy specifying which varieties can be used in education, publishing, the courts, etc.

It seems to be typical in various polities to have an overt policy specifying the rights and domains of specific languages, by which is usually only meant the literary or standard language. In this they ignore the existence of all kinds of non-official uses of spoken language of all sorts--L-varieties of the H-language, other languages, standard or non-standard, tribal, foreign, or whatever, all of which have their own domains, but none of which are mentioned in the overt policy. In other words, the overt policy is only the tip of the iceberg, and if we wish to *explain* how the overt policy does or does not have an affect of language use in the policy, it often bears little resemblance to the observable linguistic behavior of the people in question. Can anyone then claim that the overt policy has any validity or any verifiable reality, when whole categories of linguistic behavior are ignored?

I would hold then that the *persistence* of diglossia (multiglossia, register-diglossia, or whatever) in an area like Southeast Asia is therefore not an *overt policy* issue at all, but rather is a deep-seated cultural behavior towards language. That is, diglossia has to be considered to be a given, an underlying assumption, an input to the policy-making process,