

THE STUDY OF S.E.ASIAN LANGUAGES IN VIETNAM

Prof. Phạm Đức Dương

1. Since the decision of the Committee of Social Sciences of Vietnam for the foundation of the Department of SEA (5-1973) the Institute for S.E.Asian studies has lasted more than 17 years. For the first time in Social Sciences of Vietnam side by side with special branches, a branch was born for the study of a region. This fact proves a new need in the development of the country and of social sciences. The branch of S.E.Asian studies, since its beginning has received the collaboration of many scientific organs at home and abroad for SEA is a historico-cultural area in which Vietnam was born and developed with her neighbours whose relations of origin and of contact with her have been very close. At present this cultural community has become a modern strategic area having vital relations to each country in the area and attracted the concern of all countries in the present day world. S.E.Asian studies as a branch of basic science will contribute to the understanding, discovering spiritual values, laws of development and relations between Vietnam and SEA, to the awakening of national pride, friendly cooperation for building a peaceful, stable SEA. At the same time, by making use of scientific data, this study will contribute to a more enlarged, study on problems of Vietnam's social sciences by a comparison, of achievements in surrounding countries to enrich the common theoretical treasure. The Institute for S.E.Asian studies is a place for experiencing a global view by an interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary approach. It will enable to understand SEA as a whole in which history is a frame for the analysis, economy and sociology are the basis together will other disciplines studying culture which are different systems of explanation. As a result, we has a common system of reference for the discovery of laws governing the movement and the development of the whole area as well as of each country from the past to modern times. On the other side, from the angle of Vietnam we can look at the situation in SEA, in Asia and in the world to discover relations, behaviours of all peoples, countries in the past and at present. With this approach we can start from the present to study the past and foresee the

future by a dialectical combination of synchrony and diachrony, the whole and the part.

At present, with new achievements of many basic disciplines, human sciences have determined a SEA as a historical, cultural zone by the side of other great civilizations of Asia (of China, India etc...). This zone in the north had reached both riversides of Yangtse, in the west a part of Northeast India (Assam), in the East and the South it had included peninsulas and the insular world near Oceania and extended to Madagascar in Africa. This civilization had special sources and characteristics. It is the wet rice agriculture civilization with a complex of three elements : the culture of the mountain, of the sea and of the plain whose last element of later appearance is the main factor. Processes of divergence and convergence had taken place and had led to new common complexes of the whole region, the later convergence step being higher than the former one at the same time many local shades appeared. A striking characteristic of S.E.Asian culture is a "unity in its diversity" and the convergence process started from different centres, therefore its culture did not have a unilinear character but a multilinear one (despite the different role of each line) in which contacts created convergent lines, different ethno-cultural mechanisms. The development of languages did not exceed the limit of this cultural background (1). To study such a culture, a description of each culture in isolation, then a comparison between different cultures will prove insufficient. We should have a global view and make use of interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary methods to build up ethno-cultural structures and put forth hypotheses on the origin, the cultural history of each ethnic group, of each country. This method will allow us to make use of different documents from different disciplines and their decoding will discover secrets in the system we have to study. Linguistics plays a very important role in this approach.

2. Vietnam is so to speak a SEA in miniature.

Here we find almost all ethnic groups speaking great language families of SEA : Austroasiatic, Thung-Thai, Malay families with fairly typical branches like Miao-Yao, Viet Muong, Cham..., which despite discussions during two centuries cannot find a suitable place in the classification of languages. On ethno-linguistic viewpoint, many peoples have undergone different evolutions. A people had been master of an ancient country whose culture was famous in history and whose influence had spread all over indochinese peninsula : the Cham whose language of Malay substratum yet

functions according to a mon-khmer mechanism. Cham had been the language of Champa kingdom with an early writing, many epigraphies, manuscripts. At present, owing to the change of the social function, in contact with Vietnamese this language develops within the frame of an ethnic minority, and is undergoing a process of monosyllabization to become a language having a tone system. By the side of the Cham, there exists a many ethnic groups of continental Malay branch like the Ede, the Yarai, the Raglai, the Choa together with ethnic minorities of Mon-Khmer branch in Truong Son mountain of Tay Nguyen highland still preserving many old cultural vestiges of "Proto-Indochinese" culture.

The Khmer in Mekong Plain (South Vietnam) despite a long life in the community of peoples of Vietnam, still keep relationship with their relatives in Kampuchea who are masters of the Republic of Kampuchea. They still make use of Khmer language and writing, the writing of Angkor Kingdom whose culture has been the object of admiration of all the world.

Some ethnic groups like the group Tay-Nung-Thai live on a very large area belonging to many countries (from China to India) whose languages despite differences are still fairly unified : they can easily understand one another not like mon-khmer peoples. The social function of these languages are different : Thailand and Lao are national languages, Shan and Chwang are languages of autonomous regions. Thai in Vietnam is the language of an ethnic minority whose writing is used by many ethnic groups in North-West Vietnam as a common means of intercourse.

Many ethnic minorities live mixed with one another especially many little groups have the danger of losing their mothertongues which are very important in determining the origin of great branches. Examples : the Laha, the Pupeo, the Klao, the Lachi, that group called by P. Benedict as the Kadai group and used by him to build the Austro-Thai family in opposition to the Austroasiatic family, the group May, Ruc, Sach, Malieng, Arem, Poong... belonging to the Viet-Muong group whose the author of this article has borrowed documents to reconstruct the Proto Viet-Muong, Khang of Mon-Khmer substratum and of Thai mechanism corresponding to Viet-Muong languages still maintains many old elements very important for the study of the origin of Vietnamese and Thai. Other ethnic groups on account of their nomadic life have given up their mothertongues : the Yao have given up their tongue to speak either Chwang (they are called Caolan) or Cantonese (they are called Sanchi) or Hakka, a Han

dialect (they are called San Yiu); whereas the Tong (Thung-Thai group) has given up Tay-Thai language to speak Yao. The vast majority of Red Klao, Tudi speaks Kwanhoa, and Klao language remains but in some prayers unknown even by the natives. The Sec in Ban Tong (Central Lao) have given up their mothertongue (belonging to Viet-Muong groups) to speak Phu-Thay.

With rich and various documents of ethnic group languages in their long and complex contacts in Vietnam which are then compared with languages in other countries in SEA we try to reconstruct the panorama of S.E.Asian languages by a dialectic combination of synchrony and diachrony, to find typologic characteristics contributing to general linguistics. These documents, especially those of ethnic minorities are useful to reconstruct the history of area languages.

As F. de Saussure said "In a fairly important measure, language makes up the people" (2). Otherly speaking, the history of a language is closely bound to that of the people. As a characteristic feature of a ethnic group, a main means of intercourse, a sign system in all cultural signs, language contains vestiges of the development of a people and of his culture. S.E.Asian ethnologists in order to study ethnic groups begin to by a study of languages to put forth hypotheses on relations between ethnic groups. A study of ethnonyms is a valuable document on their process of formation.

The toponymy with its phonetic form more or less altered and with the meaning either lost or explained by popular etymology is a useful document to reconstruct the ancient dwelling place of ethnic groups. If we base ourselves on typology in North Vietnam like Duống river (in Tay duong means "great"), Nhã Nam district (which in Tay means water herb), Dinh Bàng village (which in Tay means sugar-palm)... we may suppose that the area around Hanoi was inhabited by the ancient Tay.

We have also found that the system of words for wet rice culture in present day Vietnamese language is common with Tay, Thai. Together with the professor of history Trần Quốc Vượng, the professor of ethnology Từ Chi and the professor of agronomy Đào Thế Tuấn we have built up agricultural ecosystems and a pre-state and primitive-state power structure of ancient Vietnam corresponding to the wet rice ecosystem of Tay-Thai type in the valleys" (3).

We have made use of the interdisciplinary method to study relationships of Tibeto-Burman group of languages in Vietnam and have come to this result :

though starting from the plain area in North West China and having led a nomadic life in a period (their basic vocabulary in this sphere is fairly unified), but in the process of emigration to SEA this group had followed two directions : the group Lolo came to Kwangtung, Kuangsi (China), then entered North West Vietnam, and in contact with the inhabitants there it became an agricultural group, therefore their vocabulary in this sphere is not unified between the languages of the same group (4). The branch of linguistics and that of ethnology in the Institute are cooperating with the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore of the Academy of Sciences of Czechoslovakia to study the theme "Relations between language and culture" and publish a series of books entitled "Language and ethnic group".

In this manner, the interdisciplinary study "history ethnic group - linguistics" gives us an approach which will shed a light on the history, the culture of ethnic groups at the same time extralinguistic elements will help us to recognize the process of development, the social role of language. This dialectical relation between the cultural elements will set the different aspects of each element .

3. Vietnamese linguistics was born from the need of teaching Vietnamese when the country recovered independence (in 1945). Many teachers have made use of the method of analyzing of French linguistics despite differences of typology between both languages and have come to some positive results. It is due to the fact that Vietnamese grammar has imitated French grammar, as Professor Phan Ngoc has demonstrated in his work "Influence of European grammar on Vietnamese grammar" (5). And the study of ethnic minorities languages was born from the necessity of carrying out the national policy of the Communist Party of Vietnam with an aim to help ethnic minorities in developing their languages and their writings.

No doubt, we have inherited achievements of European scholars in their studies of Vietnamese and S.E.Asian languages. But they have studied S.E.Asian languages with an European reference system and therefore their models are not adequate. We have tried to make use of theories and methods of all linguistic schools (Czechoslovakian, French, Russian, Chinese, American...) but the more we study these theories the more we find an inadequacy between theories from general linguistics and reality in S.E.Asian languages. We have to make regulations in order to have a more efficacious procedure system for isolating, without formal change languages. In phonetics for example,

while following the modern method of determinating phonemes we pay a great attention on the syllable in its composition as well as in its function. Basing ourselves on data of many languages in Vietnam and in SEA, we distinguish two kinds of sound : 1) System of sounds including vowels V, consonants C and supplementary sounds x ; 2) System of tones including tones, half-tones and phonation. We have two basic models :

$C^X C^X V^X C^X$ (without tone)

$^XC^X VC$ (with tones)

According to our experience, in many languages in Vietnam and SEA this model allows us to have a phonemic solution acceptable in diachrony and in synchrony (6). And in grammar, while respecting the form - the word place is considered as a form - we especially pay attention to semantics as the main factor for determining all relations, all structures of the language units. The philologist Phan Ngoc is trying to build semantics of isolating languages to affirm the right of the natives in decoding their languages by basing on their linguistic feeling. According to him, for languages in which the grammatical meaning is not expressed in the word like the case of S.E.Asian languages we should find the grammatical meaning in : a) the word order ; b) the symetry ; c) the meaning of the word ; d) the grammatical elements used to concretize grammatical relations.

In this way, isolating languages have also grammatical agreements but these agreements are semantical ones. In every language semantical agreement is the basis of grammatical agreement, the difference lies only in the fact that inflexional languages these agreements have a material expression in the phonetical aspect of the language (7).

4. Linguists in our Institute have concentrated their efforts in studying "language contact" as a common key to analyze language in particular and culture in general. All the viewpoints and methods of approach as well as many linguistic problems of S.E.Asian linguistics are expressed in the book "Language contact in SEA" of two authors Phan Ngoc and Phạm Đức Dương (8). In this book, however, we have but introduced the results of the history of Vietnamese in a S.E.Asian context in 3 great periods : origin and development of Vietnamese in ancient times ; development of Vietnamese in Dai Viet period through the context with Chinese on the basis of Sino-Vietnamese words ; development of

contemporary Vietnamese in contact with French on the basis of Vietnamese syntax.

From the viewpoint of language contact, culture contact, we present a hypothesis on the change of S.E.Asian language families in morphology. It is the change of affixation in two opposite directions : loss of affixes and development of affixes, which gives birth to different branches of language (Mon-Khmer, Thung-Thai, Malay) and to the formation of new groups on languages (Viet-Muong, Miao Yao, Cham...) by distinguishing 2 main concepts : substratum and mechanism. We have discovered the monosyllabization process of Proto - Viet Muong (a Mon-Khmer language, of CCVC, structure, still preserving affixes) to Veit Muong (a language of Mon-Khmer substratum, of Thung-Thai mechanism, with tones, and no vestiges of affixation) owing to precious data from Chut, Poong languages we have collected in the West of Quang Binh and Nghe An provinces in 1970 (9). It allows us to solve the problem of the origin of Vietnamese and to prepare an etymologic dictionary of Vietnamese.

From the viewpoint of contact we analyze the contact between Vietnamese and Chinese (same typology), between Lao, Khmer-Thailand languages with Pâli, Sanskrit (different typologies) in the ancient times. We have found that most of free Sino-Vietnamese monosyllables when entering Vietnamese had lost their freedom and become bound syllables on account of the synonymous conflict with Vietnamese monosyllables, which had existed as free words. The latter do not allow Sino-Vietnamese syllables to become free words and Sino-Vietnamese syllables are reduced to elements to form other words. This is the reason of the appearance of semi-affixes. And a distribution of functions appears : monosyllables (often called purely Vietnamese words), polysyllables whose majority is Sino-Vietnamese. Monosyllables are concrete, image of reality, easy to be understood, on the contrary their Sino-Vietnamese synonyms being polysyllables are abstract, difficult to be understood, of learned and solemn character.

The contact with Chinese literature has given birth to all kinds of poetic genres, and all Chinese rhetorics almost intact in Vietnamese literature (10).

Lao, Khmer, Thailand have followed the same way. Borrowings from Sanskrit, Pâli are for the greater part polysyllables and the same linguistic phenomena appear : conflict of synonyms, distribution of functions and influence of Indian rhetorics (11).

The situation in Indonesia and Malaysia is more complex. Bahasa Indonesia was built on the basis on

Malayian whose use spreads on a large area with trading boats all over the eastern sea. These two countries had contacts with Indian and Arabian cultures. In their languages, therefore, we find words borrowed from Sanskrit, Pâli and phenomena similar to those in S.E.Asian countries appear (12). At present, in Vietnamese 60% of words are Sino-Vietnamese. In languages of Lao, Khmer, Thailand the percentage of Sanskrit, Pâli words is about 40% and is going on increasing. The percentage of borrowings from Arabian in Indonesian, Malaysian is lower. In countries of SEA two negative currents appear : an abuse of borrowings and an obstinate attitude against borrowings.

The problem of writing, especially of ancient writing is also interesting on the viewpoint of cultural contact. As far as we know, there exist 4 systems of writing in SEA borrowed from abroad in different historical periods, all these systems are present in Vietnam and the Chinese and the indian systems are the most interesting for they have been used by the natives to create their own writings to record the national culture. The Lao and the Khmer have borrowed indian writing (which is used for transcribing polysyllable, flexional languages without tone, with a simple vowel system and a complex consonant system) but Lao had made use of signs to express high, middle, low consonants combined with 2 signs to transcribe 6 tones, whereas Khmer had made use of two systems of consonants called khosak or akhosak to transcribe its very complex vowel system. Lao and Thailand writings have the same indian origin, but Lao writing has undergone a process of democratization and is near to the pronunciation while Thailand writing has the tendency of preserving the original writing and therefore is somewhat far from the contemporary pronunciation.

In Vietnam, there exist 3 writing systems borrowed from India : Khmer, Cham, Thai (with many different writings) ; 4 writings systems based on chinese writing and formerly used by Vietnamese, Yao, Tay, Nung. A special institute studies the nom or ancient Vietnamese writing based on Chinese one (Sino-nom Institute).

An urgent task is to collect and preserve the texts. Apart from a number of texts brought abroad, the remainder is in danger of destruction. We have collaborated with cultural offices in South Vietnam to investigate and classify ancient Khmer texts still preserved in provinces of Mekong valley for in Kampuchea they have been severely destroyed under Pol Pot regime. Ethnic groups still preserve many ancient Vietnamese, Khmer, Lao, Thai texts. We hope to have the

assistance of international organizations to collect and preserve them.

Bilingualism is widespread throughout S.E. Asian countries between national languages and languages of ethnic minorities because all countries in this area are multinational ones. This problem is a difficult one when national economy is low and nationalism is still very strong in many social strata. It is natural that all ethnic minorities in a country must learn the language of the ethnic majority as the common means of intercourse. Each ethnic group should however preserve and develop its mothertongue as one of the most characteristic features of the group and only this mothertongue can transmit its culture from a generation to another one. In Vietnam, linguists have contributed to the resolution of two problems : 1) Preserving and developing of language system 2) Enlarging its social function and its spheres of use. To carry out the language policy toward ethnic minorities, in Vietnam, writing has been created for a number of languages still not having writing, the publications of bilingual dictionaries of books for teaching languages, programmes for liquidating analphabetism, for enlarging the use of people's languages in all spheres of life... are being carried out. From investigations of Đặng Minh Phương 99.9% Tay, 86.2% Nung, 71% Thai know Vietnamese on different degrees. The bilingual process in Vietnam evolves in favourable conditions : 1) Languages in Vietnam have had long contacts and therefore common elements exist in every aspect of the language ; 2) Since long, Vietnamese has been the common language of all the country despite an unequal use according to ethnic groups, to different ages... Especially since the August Revolution and during two wars of resistance social contact and moving of population have reached an enormous scale with hundreds of cadres, soldiers, reclaimers settling in out of the way places and living among ethnic minorities.

Two evolutions are taking place : 1) When the language belongs to Viet Muong branch (like Sach, Poong, Chut...) owing to contact and especially to education system in schools, the language will gradually change to become a Vietnamese dialect. This situation is analogous to that of Tay - Thai languages in Lao, Thailand. Thus these languages after being product of the separation of many dialects from one language to become different languages are evolving in an opposite direction to become again different dialects of the same language ; 2) Vietnamese is becoming a factor constantly influencing on the internal structure and above all on vocabulary of

languages in Vietnam, is stepping up their development and they are becoming nearer to one another. An investigation by Đặng Thanh Phương in Cao Lang province (14) shows that in Tay 36% of the vocabulary are Vietnamese (including also Sino-Vietnamese, Tay-Vietnamese words). This quantity changes according to different styles : in usual texts there exist about 40%, in political texts 60% Vietnamese words ; in compound words about 50% are Vietnamese compound words. Our study shows that Cham while maintaining the malayian substratum is evolving from a mon-khmer mechanism to a Vietnamese one. We can see this process by comparing the pronunciation of words transcribed in Cham writing (CCVC) with that used in present spoken language (CVC). We often find in Cam-Vietnamese-French Dictionnary 2 different forms. The Cham divide the syllable into 3 classes : a) heavy-light syllables (with or without a final consonant) ; b) long-short syllables (with a long or a short vowel) ; c) high-low syllables (with a voiced, unvoiced stop initial or with a half voiced stop initial). At present, the opposition between 3 classes of stops has become an opposition between 2 classes (voiced-unvoiced) and the opposition of high-low register in the syllable has become an opposition of tones. Almost all researchers on Cham consider Cham as a language with a tone-system;3) if in its historical development process Vietnamese has adopted elements from languages of surrounding ethnic groups (in the substratum as well as in the mechanism), this process has enriched Vietnamese and brought it nearer to ethnic languages.

From bilingualism viewpoint, we concern ourselves with contacts between national languages in SEA and international ones. This contact was intense in colonial period but based on unequal principles. Because of the objective action of contacts the vocabulary of these national languages has adopted a number of words, especially the scientific terms. On the other side their syntax has been modified to answer the development of sciences and technics. The process of development of languages in SEA has been different, Vietnamese has been used in universities as well as Lao and Khmer after the revolution has triumphed. English however is playing a main role in the Philippines, Singapore. In Thailand, the national language is used in universities but English is widespread. As a result in Vietnam, Vietnamese meet great difficulties in their relations with foreigners. Practice shows that a bilingual model (national language + an international language) is quite necessary for the development of the society as well as for every individual.

These are a number of problems that the Department of Linguistics in our Institute has to solve. They follow two directions : 1) Studying languages to find their development and contact, in which contact is regarded as the main factor ; 2) Studying languages as systems of signs in the whole of cultural signs. Our researches are still in the beginning, but we have achieved a number of works : bilingual dictionaries between Vietnamese and S.E.Asian languages, books for teaching S.E.Asian languages to Vietnamese students (15), monographies on languages (16). Besides, together with linguists from the Institute of Linguistics and, Hanoi, HoChiMinh City Universities we are trying to study languages of Viet-Muong, of Tay-Thai group, the Kada, Cham, Mon-Khmer groups (17).

In this great work we hope to have the assistance and subvention of scientists, research organs at home and abroad.

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(1) These works except those with an asterisk are written in Vietnamese.