

The linguistic situation of a Hmong community in the North-West of Vietnam

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In the North-West of Vietnam, a large numbers of ethnic groups have been living close to one another for a long time; as there are no clear-cut boundaries between their areas of residence, the linguistic situation – the actual day-to-day linguistic experience of minority people – is of no small complexity. To take the example of the Hmong : each Hmong community bears the stamp of its linguistic environment. Wherever there is a Hmong community, Hmong tends to become the common language of the area, the language used for inter-ethnic communication; that does not imply, however, that Hmong people have no knowledge of languages other than their own. This paper does not investigate the many questions raised by the present situation; its scope is restricted to an overview of the situation of the Hmong community in Ban Pho district, Bac Ha area (province of Lao Cai).

1. Sociological facts

Ban Pho is exclusively populated by Hmong people. The population numbers 2,574 (481 families). The male-female ratio is a reasonably balanced 49%/51%.

(Note: We have taken care to ensure that we have not counted people who do not usually live in the district.)

- 1.1 Ban Pho lies 3 km outside of Bac Ha. It consists of 4 villages: Ban Pho 1, Ban Pho 2, Phia Bung, Quan Din Ngai. Around Ban Pho, there are three districts: Na Hoi, with several ethnic groups : Tay-Nung, Phu La, Dao, Hmong ; and two other districts, Ta Van Cho and Hoang Thu Pho, only populated by Hmong people. In the district, 60 of the 481 families have a TV set, and one third have a radio set, used to listen either to the Vietnamese programs or to programs in Hmong (the latter raise questions that go beyond the scope of this paper).

- 1.2 There is a school in Ban Pho, with four smaller buildings scattered in the villages. There is also a nursery school. There are hopes that Ban Pho district can join in the league of the « top 11 » districts in the Bac Ha area that offer extensive primary schooling and will soon do away with illiteracy.

Level of instruction (%)

Level	Sex		Total
	male	female	
Primary education	319	184	503 (19,5)
Secondary education	157	31	188 (7,3)
High- school	3	1	4 (0,16)
University	7	3	10 (0,39)

2. Multiple-language situation in Ban Pho

2.1 Principles of investigation

By convention, "mastering" a language here means fluency, and an adequate vocabulary. With respect to Vietnamese, for example, it means understanding, speaking, reading and writing as well as a child in primary school (from 6 to 10 years of age), and that in many different situations.

The survey comprehends 400 people in Ban Pho, from 5 to 100 of age. Five age groups can be distinguished.

Multiple-language situation in Ban Pho
(Sex distinguished %)

Sex	Lan- guages Used	Age Group				
		5-14	15-30	31-45	46-60	61-100
male	Viet	51 (92,7)	82 (97,6)	25 (96,2)	27 (96,4)	10 (71,4)
	Tay	2(3,64)	14 (16,7)	11 (42,2)	8 (28,57)	7 (50)
	Dao	1(1,28)	6(7,14)	2(7,69)	1(3,75)	0(0%)
	Chi- nese	0(0%)	0(0%)	3(11,5)	2(7,14)	0(0%)
	Phu la	0(0%)	1(1,19)	1(3,85)	0(0%)	0(0%)
Fe- male	Viet	37 (88,1)	51 (66,2)	26 (66,7)	11(2,7)	2(15,4)
	Tay- Nung	5(9,77)	4(5,2)	3(5,38)	2(0,49)	0(0%)
	Dao	4(9,52)	2(2,6)	0(0%)	0(0%)	0(0%)
	Chi- nese	0(0%)	0(0%)	1(0,25)	0(0%)	0(0%)
	Phu la	0(0%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	0(0%)

Multiple-language situation in Ban Pho (%)

Lan- guages	Age Group					Total
	5-14	15-30	31-45	46-60	61-100	
Viet	88 90,7	133 82,6	51 78,5	38 65,5	12 44,4	322 78,9
Tay- Nung	7 7,2	18 11,1	14 21,5	10 17,2	7 25,9	56 13,5
Dao	5 5,15	8 2,48	2 3,08	1 1,72	0 0%	16 3,92
Chinese	0 0%	0 0%	4 6,15	2 3,45	0 0%	6 1,47
Phu La	0 0%	1 0,62	1 1,54	0 0%	0 0%	2 0,49

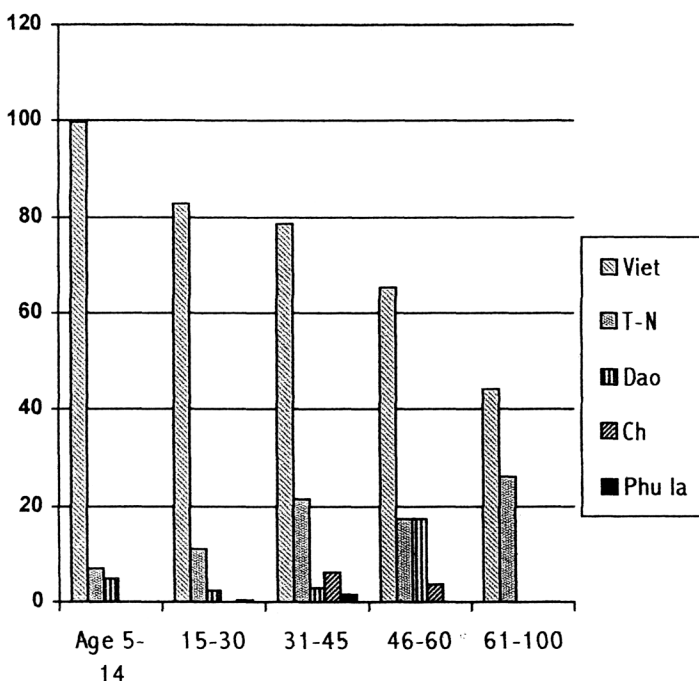
2.2 Analysis.

Vietnamese dominates, among women as well as among men. Men are more proficient than women, who never get to learn Phu La and very rarely know Chinese. People between 15 and 45 are the most proficient, no doubt because that is the time of life when the need for intercourse with other groups is greatest, and the range of exchanges is at its broadest. (Such exchanges seem to be more intense nowadays.)

Among women, it is the youngest that speak the most Tay-Nung; the figure decreases with age, reaching complete ignorance among the oldest. It is quite the opposite with men (under 61). That appears to be because children and young women go to school, go to the market and leave the village for a while, which gives them an opportunity to speak other languages. These opportunities are lost after 30, whereas they still exist for men. For some Hmong men, learning other languages may become a necessity: if they are to communicate with other linguistic communities for a long time, they may soon be up against the limitation of their partners' knowledge of Hmong (the traditional « common language » of the area), and so do the effort to learn their partners' language.

The knowledge of Chinese (more accurately: of the Chinese dialect of Guan Huo) is extremely limited. Only some people between 31 and 60 can speak it. That could mean that Chinese was more widespread 20 or 30 years ago. These twenty years, because of obvious political reasons, intercourse at the Chinese border is severely limited, and so the knowledge of Chinese has waned, but there are signs that it could regain an important role. Communication in Chinese between non-Chinese ethnic groups seems to be a rarity.

Chart #1: Multiple-language situation (%)



The chart shows clearly that Vietnamese dominates the other languages. For the youngest (under 15), it is the language of communication with children of the other ethnic groups. Vietnamese, the national language, is perceived by minority people as a language that all should learn. It is indeed

becoming standard in inter-ethnic communication. The fact that the 5-30 are the age group among which Vietnamese is most widespread reflects the effects of schooling. It is an easy guess that Hmong-Vietnamese bilingualism will be the standard pattern in future.

The oldest people (61-100) do not have opportunities for sustained contact with other languages, so that they are the least proficient in languages other than Hmong. They still know some Tay-Nung, confirming that that language used to have a large role in the area.

In the end, polyglossy is found mostly among the 31-60, with one speaker who knows as much as six languages (including Hmong).

Multiple-language abilities

#	Multiple-language abilities	Total
1	Vietnamese-Dao-Tay (and Nung)-Chinese	1
2	Vietnamese-Dao-Tay	9
3	Vietnamese-Tay-Phu La	2
4	Vietnamese-Tay-Chinese	2
5	Vietnamese-Dao	6
6	Vietnamese-Chinese	3
7	SVietnamese-Tay	23

3. Individuals' Linguistic Abilities

Ban Pho presents no case of anyone being able to speak only Vietnamese. That situation has been known to occur when a child (with one or two Hmong parents) is brought up away from Hmong communities, among the majority ethnic group (the Kinh, whose language, Vietnamese, is the official language of the country) : then it can happen that the child speaks no Hmong at all.

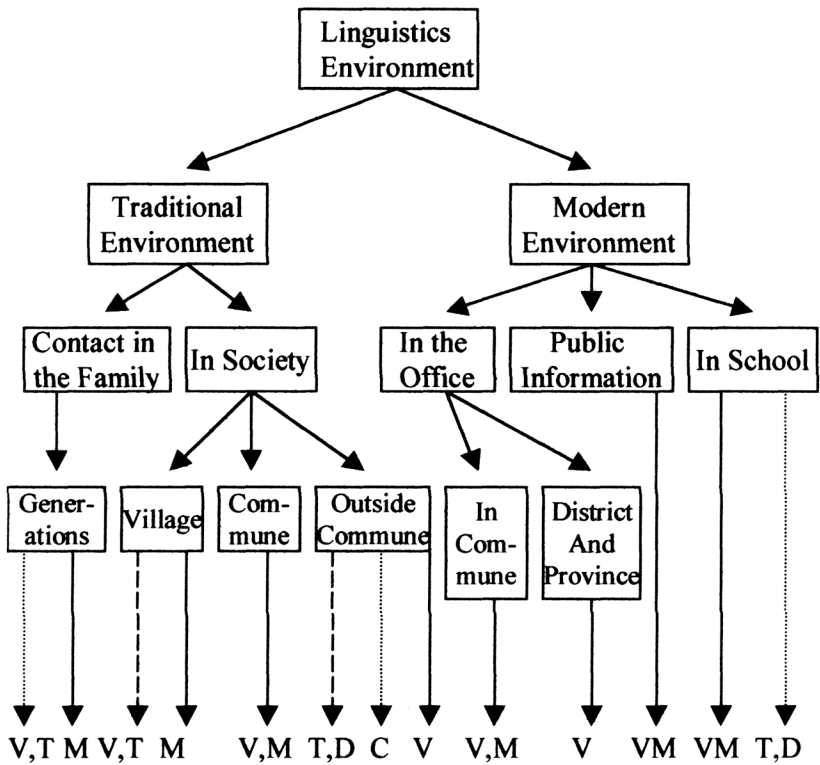
Although there is a nursery school in Ban Pho, it seems that children under 5 speak Hmong, their mother tongue, and very little Vietnamese indeed.

Vietnamese is the language of the mass media, and also of the administrations. In the school environment, in the first and second years (6 to 7 years of age), pupils still resort to Hmong to come to terms with Vietnamese; from the 3rd class onwards, they do not need to use Hmong in class anymore.

Among themselves Hmong people basically still use Hmong, so that the language should maintain itself quite firmly.

The chart on the following page comes as a conclusion, showing the use of language according to each situation, and so revealing the development of language skills of our Hmong compatriots.

The Linguistic Situation of a Hmong Community in Ban Pho



Note:

V: Vietnamese
T: Tay-Nung
M: Hmong
D: Dao

.....▶ Used very limitedly
-----▶ Used very limitedly (Auxiliary)
————▶ Used actively
C: Chinese