

Diglossia, Linguistic Culture and Language Policy in Southeast Asia

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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 'politicolinguistics', '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,

not a result of it. And since it is not part of the explicit policy, it is not amenable to change in the same way that more explicit aspects of policy might be. In some parts of the world, diglossia perhaps might be eliminated with minimal social disruption, but it is clear that in Socialist Vietnam (to pick one example) no authority would ever attempt such a move, let alone even contemplate it (Luong 1988). Were such an attempt to be made, it would surely fail. That is, certain issues that seem to be policy issues (in the sense of what governs language use or choice) are in fact not susceptible to overt political intervention or manipulation, and multiglossia in Southeast Asia is one of these.⁴

The more attention that is paid to these aspects of language use in Southeast Asia, the more obvious it becomes that to search for explanations of why certain polities have certain language policies, we must look more deeply into their linguistic histories, in particular those aspects of language that I am referring to as 'linguistic culture.'⁵

2 The locus of language policy.

It is the basic tenet of this paper that language policy is ultimately grounded in **linguistic culture**, i.e., the set of behaviors, assumptions, cultural forms, prejudices, folk belief systems, attitudes, stereotypes, ways of thinking about language, and religio-historical circumstances associated with a particular language. Linguistic culture also is concerned with the transmission and codification of language and has bearing also on the culture's notions of the value of literacy and the sanctity of texts. That is, the beliefs that a speech community has about language in general and its language in particular are part of the social conditions that affect the maintenance and transmission of its language.⁶ Therefore, typologizing language policies without looking at the background in which they arise is probably futile, if not simply trivial. In this light, works like that of Falch (1973) explain nothing about why a particular polity exhibits a particular policy. It is as if the choice of

language policies was totally *random*, from 'off the shelf', as it were, without any relationship to the historical, social, cultural, educational, religious conditions extant in a particular area. There may indeed be such an appearance of randomness in certain polities--certainly there have been autocratic rulers and megalomaniacs who made single-minded decisions, but even so, we can demonstrate that such autocrats are usually the products of their own culture; they are deeply embedded in some sort of cultural tradition. These traditions may be part of the 'great tradition' of the culture, or may be less highly respected, or even officially or internationally despised aspects of culture, such as widespread anti-semitism, racism, or chauvinism of any sort. These policy-makers may be simply responding to certain conditions in their background that they may be unaware of, or consider perfectly natural and appropriate. This is particularly true when inappropriate policies are handed down with the expectation that they will be implemented without regard for local conditions.

In 19th-century Czarist Russia, for example, the *de jure* policy was one of Russian only, and on the surface, this is what prevailed. In actuality, deviations from this policy occurred. We know from anecdotal evidence, for example, that teachers often taught in Polish or other languages and dialects, but when the school inspectors visited occasionally to see if various aspects of school policy (including language policy) were being carried out, they trotted out the best students (i.e., those knowing Russian best) to perform for them.⁷ Similarly, in the primary schools in northern Thailand, Standard Thai is the official language of public schooling, but Kam Myang, the home language of the children is in competition with it; children and teachers usually negotiate which language to use in the classrooms in this area, but the outcome is usually that the teachers speak Thai and the children speak Kam Myang. Overtly the notion is preserved that the official language policy (Standard Thai only) is operative, but covertly something else is happening. These are examples of diglossic language use (in the Fishman 1967 sense) in the classroom; the notion that official policy is or was being preserved is only half the picture.

In Madurese speaking areas of Indonesia, as Alan Stevens has pointed out in a comment to this paper, the Madurese typically only pay lip service to Bahasa Indonesia as an official language, and in schools on Madura education actually takes place primarily through the medium of Madurese, with only occasional 'lip-service' to Bahasa Indonesia.⁸ If we were to believe only what people *say* about language use in the Madurese area, we would have a skewed picture indeed of language choice there.

However, to hold that school policy in northern Thailand (or Myanmar, Czarist Russia, and Franco Spain) is or was 'multiglossic' is not accurate either. One could claim that language policy in these areas is the result of ongoing negotiation, i.e., it is the product of interaction between speakers of majority and minority language groups. This means that the study of multiglossic languages must be in actuality a study of the linguistic culture of the area where that language is used, rather than of the language or of the overt language policy per se. To speak of a particular language as multiglossic or not, is at best imprecise, since a language (e.g., English) as spoken in one part of the world may exhibit no multiglossia, while the same language (again taking English as an example) as used in a colonial polity (such as Malaya under the British) would have to be considered to be part of a multiglossic relationship. Multiglossia is therefore a characteristic of linguistic communities, not individual *speakers* of a particular language. And, I think it can be shown, it is the beliefs and attitudes about the language that determine and condition the maintenance of multiglossia as a fact of linguistic culture. In Indonesia, there is multiglossia between Indonesian and other languages (such as Javanese, Sundanese, Madurese, etc.) with Indonesian increasingly being treated as the appropriate language for *public* use while other languages (e.g., Javanese) continue to be maintained as in-group vehicles of various other linguistic groups (Errington 1989). This division of labor, or domain distribution, is deeply rooted in Indonesian society (indeed in Southeast Asian society in general) and is not just a recent phenomenon. To confine the study of language policy

in Indonesia to the overt policy regarding Indonesian, and ignore the attitudes, beliefs and myths about the antiquity, purity and uniqueness of Javanese that are held in common by the people of Java would be a sterile enterprise, in my opinion.⁹

2.1 Theoretical and Methodological Elements of my Approach.

The theoretical focus of my research is that language policy is rooted in linguistic culture. The methodology I propose as a way of approaching the study of linguistic culture borrows from some already existing work within the paradigms of the Sociology of Language and Sociolinguistics; I also propose to examine some aspects of linguistic culture that have fallen between the cracks, as it were, and have received little or no attention either from theory-driven approaches nor from the Sociology of Language or Sociolinguistics. Some of these approaches have been given attention in other parts of the world, but have not been applied in Southeast Asia.

In order to get an idea of what aspects of linguistic culture underlie ways of thinking about language and language policy in the area, we need to focus on such areas as religion and myth; attitudes about literacy; folk attitudes about language, or what has been termed 'Folk Linguistics'; autobiographical and anecdotal evidence concerning values related to language (e.g., of language reformers or 'ideologists' (Fishman 1991)); and the notion of particular linguistic cultures (Smolicz 1979) in which language is seen as a "core" value in the definition of ethnicity.

Folk linguistics as an area of study has been around since the mid-1960's (Hoenigswald 1971) though little exploration of this idea, especially with regard to Southeast Asia, has been attempted. The study of Folk Linguistics would involve asking such questions as 'What do people think about language? What do they think about their own versus other languages? Is their language part of or intelligible with languages in another language family? What do they think of multilingualism? What do they know about (or think about) language differences that are correlated with social differences (age, sex, race, etc.)?'

Where do NAMES come from, and what power derives from naming people or things?

The study of attitudes about language began in the early 1960's, when social psychologists developed the 'matched guise' technique: bilinguals are recorded in their different language 'guises' and other members of the culture are asked to rate them according to various characteristics.¹⁰

In Indonesia, Vietnam, and Thailand, for example, the question might be, 'What attitudes do teachers display toward standard accented speech and does it have any effect on their success in qualifying as teachers in the schools of (Indonesia, Vietnam, etc.)'? We need to look into such belief systems as 'Where does language come from?' and 'Where does writing come from?' The question of how children learn language, (and what the culture 'thinks' about how children learn the 'mother tongue') and its implication for educational policy, will also be an area of strong focus for my project. The salience of origin myths, and their implication for language policy, is illustrated by the case of the Karen, who have a myth about Y'wa, the divine power who creates nature.

. . . Y'wa is said to have given books to his various children, sometimes said to number seven, who are the ancestors of the major ethnic groups in the world known to the Karen. This gift of a book was, of course, the gift of literacy. The Karen, however, are negligent with the book given to them and it is eaten by animals Y'wa offers the Karen the consolation that at some future date, "foreign brothers" will bring the gift of literacy--in the form of a golden book--back to them (Keyes 1977:52).

When American Baptist missionaries began to work among the Karen in the early 19th century, they found a fertile field for their missionizing, and the Karen, for their part, found the gift of the golden book as the fulfillment of a promise told in myth. It should not be hard to imagine what resistance to the implementation of Burmese and Thai national language policies

might be like among the Karen and other peoples of this area, where similar myths are widespread. Where Karen was previously thought of as a language without history, writing, and literature, the Karen could then view their language as being on an equal footing with those of its neighbors. Karen's gift of literacy is thus not a latter-day accident but the restoration of a former condition. The implications of this for the workings of language policy in the area can not be minimized.

This example leads naturally to a focus on the role of religion in language policy. In Southeast Asia two great religious traditions, Buddhism and Islam, have been firmly embedded in the culture for centuries, and the attitudes inherent in these religious traditions towards texts, towards literacy,¹¹ and towards education in these traditions exert strong influences on language policy in the area.¹² Attitudes toward the Quran strongly affects the linguistic culture of Malaysia and Indonesia; attitudes toward other religious traditions (Buddhism and pre-Buddhist texts) affect policy in Thailand (and, of course Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar). Under Islam, devout Muslims are expected (required?) to learn Arabic, which strengthens ties between Indonesians/Malaysians and the Arab world. Much political resistance now takes the form of religious resistance, accompanied by debate and confusion about what is 'Islam' and what is 'Arab culture.' In Indonesia and Malaysia, the hijab or head covering has become an important symbol of defiance of young Indonesian women, and the wearing of it is increasing despite the fact that Malay women never traditionally covered their heads. In contrast, in Thailand, the liturgical language that devotees of Buddhism learn (if they learn any) is Pali, a conserved ('dead') language having no political ties with any modern polity, and is thus less controversial, serving as a symbol of more indigenous religious behavior.

Another way to determine attitudes about linguistic culture is to consult the autobiographies of well-known bilingual individuals or products of multilingual environments; such accounts will reveal information about schooling practice, about covert language policy, and about linguistic culture. Another

important focus would be the writings of well known language-planning pioneers (Fishman [1991:390] refers to them as 'language ideologists') such as Pham Quỳnh for Vietnamese, Raniri for Malay, and early Indonesian journalists/writers such as Amir Hamzah and S. Takdir Alisjahbana, as among Southeast Asian planners, political leaders, writers and language reformers that can be revelatory of grass-roots conditions and cultural attitudes that have not been adequately explored.

The most important notion I wish to keep in mind is that that kind of research I am advocating is not some kind of airy-fairy construct, but is and must be *empirically based* and therefore the notion of linguistic culture (and its impact on language policy) is *empirically verifiable*.

3 Toward a Study of Language Policy in Southeast Asia.

Although there have been some ground-breaking studies on language policy¹⁴, in particular in terms of those aspects of linguistic culture that underlie development policy, it is clear to me that the study of language policy in Southeast Asia still suffers from a number of inadequacies.

First of all, the study of language policy in the area tends to be country-oriented and therefore fragmented; there is little comparative work or work on the region as a whole. Work often focuses only on those polities that have had to oust a colonial language and change their overt policies (e.g., Indonesia or Malaysia); where a polity exhibits straight-forward long-term policy, there is little work being done, except where this impinges on minority languages (Thailand). Research to date on the area often tends to be descriptive and case-oriented, and focuses on one analytical framework or one explanatory element (e.g., Marxist economic theories). In many of these approaches, language is treated like a 'black box', with no internal factors or language-determined social motivation that could have any effect on human behavior, much less language policy. In addition, many of the studies are ahistorical and

acultural; 'thick' explanations and descriptions are eschewed in favor of 'thin' ones (economists in particular prefer elegant formulae).

Many of the extant studies take overt policies at their face value; decision-making is assumed to occur at the highest levels (in the language academy or the language planning board, such as the *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka* in Malaysia), rather than throughout all layers of society. Studies of the ways planning and policy decisions are implemented and accepted (or not accepted) by language users ignore grass-roots attitudes (linguistic culture) and look only for economic explanations for failures of policy. And occasionally we find examples of ethnocentrism: western notions of the 'efficiency' and 'logic' of monolingual policies are often preferred (at least by official planners) over linguistic diversity and multilingualism. Examples: notions about official language in Vietnam assume the need for a highly standardized language, with no regional or cultural features. Does this policy only accidentally resemble French language policy (i.e., for French in France) or has there been some influence on the way the Vietnamese think about language from the decades of French colonialism? In the Philippines, the idea that Tagalog fills the bill as a national language is accepted because it appears to be 'anti-imperialist' (i.e., anti-US and English) even though non-Tagalog groups sometimes see it as a new kind of Manila-based imperialism.

Some studies, especially those not rooted in linguistics or psychology, ignore developmental aspects of language; little or no attention is paid to studies of language acquisition by children, or to early childhood education, which would show what values about language the culture explicitly and implicitly expects young speakers to internalize in order to become culture bearers themselves.

3.1 Conclusion

The traditional study of language policy, focusing on the polities themselves and how their (overt and explicit) language policies affect various aspects of society is a 'top down'

approach. It looks at the power structure, the dominant ethno-linguistic group, the educational system, the colonial history and independence movement (where pertinent), the relationship between the dominant religion and attitudes toward literacy and language, and determines how the goals of the policy are implemented, taking into account any impediments (usually seen as irrational) there are to the implementation of the goals. I see this approach as necessary but not sufficient for the understanding of language policy in the area. Noss (1984) has already done excellent footwork on this, but this needs to be expanded on. Now we need to look at all the ways that *unofficial* (covert, implicit, etc.) policy colludes with or contradicts unofficial policy, in order to see how linguistic culture in Southeast Asia actually operates. We need to look at child-language acquisition and language loyalty issues among minority groups; we need attitudinal studies on such topics as language use in advertising, language and gender, age, profession, class, and all the other social-markers of speech that subtly underlie commonly held beliefs about language. There is no room here for an exhaustive list; but the goal is to construct a view of what actually constitutes a linguistic culture, to then begin to elaborate a theory of language policy for Southeast Asia. The kinds of studies listed in the appendix to the bibliography of this paper illustrate important aspects of what is usually thought of the 'sociolinguistic study' of Southeast Asia. We need to integrate more fully these kinds of studies into our study of policy in order to complete the picture.

Notes

¹Justification for this is given below.

²See for example Falch (1973), a dry catalogue of types of language policy in Europe, which tells us nothing about why a particular polity exhibits a particular policy.

³The notion of diglossia was proposed by Ferguson (1959) and extended by Fishman (1967). It refers to the situation in some languages where there exist two (at least) different levels

or varieties of language, one formal or 'high' (used for literacy, religious purposes, public performance, etc.) and another informal or 'low' variety (used in non-literate contexts, in the home, on the streets, for jokes, etc.). Fishman extended the concept to linguistic situations where two languages, though unrelated genetically, are in a formal/informal or High/Low relationship (this often being the case in colonial or post-colonial societies). Some writers (e.g., Diller 1985) prefer to categorize the sociolinguistic complexity of different kinds of *phasāa* in the concept of diglossia in Thai, for example, not as classical diglossia (Ferguson 1959) but as 'diglossic register', i.e., the concept of diglossia is seen as appropriate if taken in a broader (Fishman 1967) sense. Errington (1991) argues against the idea that Javanese is characterized by diglossia; in any event, the existence of studies like that of Diller in a compendium of articles on language *policy* underscores the basic thrust of my argument.

⁴The only way to change such policy would be to change the way the culture 'thinks' about language, perhaps by some consensus-building process, rather than by fiat or by legislative decree.

⁵This term and the theoretical justification of it was first proposed in Schiffman, 1991.

⁶See, e.g., Mertz 1982 for an analysis of US language law as being based on a Whorfian folk theory about language, in particular the notion that since language 'determines' thought, US language policy-makers had to be sure that the first language locked into Americans' heads would be English.

⁷Similar conditions are reported for Poland under Czarist Russia and Catalonia under the Franco regime in Spain.

⁸The English term 'lip-service' is in some ways exactly what I want to express with regard to the distinction between overt and covert policies--if the overt policy only gets 'lip-service', then it is a sham policy, a thin veneer that hides the real policy.

⁹I use diglossia/multiglossia in the Ferguson and Fishman senses, knowing full well, as many critics have pointed out (e.g., Errington 1991), that extended diglossia of the Fishman

kind is in many ways inappropriate for Southeast Asia; one of the desiderata addressed by this paper is to try to find new ways to characterize the complexity of language use in the area.

¹⁰The technique was first used to examine attitudes toward French and English among bilinguals in Canada, and has been applied to non-standard speakers in the U.S. (African-American, Hispanic) in order to see what standard American speakers' reactions to non-standard-accented English are (Lambert 1967, Labov 1966).

¹¹The whole notion of what constitutes literacy probably needs to be reexamined as it applies to the linguistic cultures of this area. In the west, literacy means essentially being able to make marks on paper and decipher other marks made on paper. In linguistic cultures where routine memorization of long oral texts is a fact of life, along with the ability to refer to, consult commentaries about, and recite long portions of these memorized texts, the ability to associate marks on paper (wood, stone, copper, leather, palm leaves, etc.) with words and meanings may be trivial compared to the aforementioned proficiencies. We need to ask the question whether mastery of a complex oral tradition is tantamount to literacy in such cultures.

¹²One must also not ignore the influence of Christianity so strongly evidenced in Vietnam and the Philippines, as well as the political consequences of the use of Roman alphabets for minority languages in mainland Southeast Asia because of the tendency to identify the Roman alphabet with Christianity. Thus, we did find the use of romanization(s) rejected for Buddhist non-majority language groups but accepted (with consequences) by non-Buddhist, non-Islamic groups.

¹³We know a great deal from the writings of western ideologists such as Ivar Aasen in Norway, Ben-Yehuda in Israel, Vuk Karadžić for Serbo-Croatian, and Atatürk in Turkey about the kinds of attitudes they worked with (and against) in making policy changes for their linguistic cultures.

¹⁴See the section of the bibliography devoted to sociolinguistic studies of Southeast Asia; Noss (1984) gives a comprehensive overview of official policy.

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