

Language development and language revitalisation: An educational imperative in Asia¹

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Abstract

Language is the key to learning. It is woven into the fabric of individual and group identity. Who we are is intimately linked with the language or languages we speak. Research demonstrates many cognitive advantages to those people who speak more than one language. Language diversity, then, is one of the world's great human resources.

However, the world's linguistic diversity is being seriously—perhaps disastrously—threatened in the 21st Century by the rising tide of economic and cultural globalization. Several results can be seen in countries throughout Asia and the Pacific. One is the loss of indigenous languages and cultures on an unprecedented scale. Another is the unacceptably high attrition rates of ethnic minority learners in majority language education programs and their increasing social, political and economic marginalization. The degree to which educational opportunities in the region can be made more accessible, realistic and effective for minority language communities will largely decide the degree to which members of those communities can actively participate in national and regional development.

This paper highlights the need for language development and revitalization within the context of linguistic human rights. It also touches on current efforts for achieving “Education for All” that includes everyone—minority as well as majority language learners—and the potential impact of minority language education on key social and education issues such as gender equality, HIV infection, and the lack of educational opportunities, especially at the higher levels of the system. Emphasis will be given to UNESCO's recent restatement of the rationale and principles that underlie and promote mother tongue education as the most pedagogically sound approach to quality education in this region's multilingual societies.

Introduction

Language -- oral and written -- constitutes the focus of this conference: *language* development, *language* revitalization, and education in multiple *languages*. This is appropriate since throughout the world a dynamic, living language (singular) is seen as being essential to the well being of any human society.

But language (plural) is another question. Languages are in trouble. Nine-seven percent of the world's people speak only 4% of the world's languages – which means that only 3% of the world's people speak 96% of its languages³. And the linguist Michael Krauss predicted in 1992 that, *if nothing is done*, 90 percent of the world's living languages will pass out of use over the next hundred years. He estimated that there are approximately 6000 living languages in the world – 1/3 of which are found in Asia. Fifty percent of these he classified as “moribund” (i.e., the language is not being taught to/learned by children of the language group) and another 40% as “endangered” (i.e., the conditions exist that, if not interrupted, will result in these minority languages not being passed on to the next generation during this century). Thus, only 10% of the world's total languages can be reasonably classified as “safe” (i.e., languages

¹ © Sheldon Shaeffer, 2003

² With thanks to Dennis Malone of SIL International for his contributions to this paper.

³ Bernard, H. Russell (1996). Language Preservation and Publishing. In N. Hornberger (Ed.), *Indigenous Literacies in the Americas: Language Planning from the Bottom Up*, pp. 139-156. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

which have very large numbers of speakers and official state support). Linguistic diversity – as with cultural diversity and biological diversity – is under serious threat around the world.⁴

“*If nothing is done*” is the key phrase here. If nothing is done, these languages and their cultures will die. But some things *are* being done, and one purpose of this conference is to provide all of us with a perspective on what has been done, what is being done, and what still needs to be done if Asian societies are to avoid an unprecedented loss of their linguistic and cultural diversity over the course of the new century.

What would be the loss?

The world’s small ethnic minority language communities represent a relatively large percentage of the world’s illiterate population. Why? In part, because ethnic minorities are frequently marginalized from the mainstream of their nation’s social, economic and political life and institutions. They are allowed into that mainstream life—if at all—only by leaving behind their ethnic and linguistic identity and taking on the language and culture of the dominant society. This is not a new process. It is the long, well-known, well-documented, and sad history of minority communities throughout the world.

A noted scholar on language death discusses why minority language speakers give up their language:

The heart of the matter is this: Most people feel a degree of attachment to their ancestral language, and many feel a very strong attachment. If conditions are reasonably favorable, people identify with their own language and do not seek a preferable substitute. In cases in which people have changed to another language and given up their own entirely, it has nearly always been due to a local history of political suppression, social discrimination, or economic deprivation. More often than not, all three have been present. Recognition of this underlies Joshua Fishman’s strongly stated position: “Uniformation [i.e., everyone speaking the same language] is never an optimal human situation. It necessarily involves subjugation of the weak by the strong, of the few by the many: in short, the law of the jungle” (Fishman, 1991:31).⁵

So when the brutal choice between livelihood or political participation and language results in shifts in language use and eventually to the death of a language, what is lost -- not only to the minority community but also to the nation as a whole?

One noted linguist has this perspective on what is lost when a language “dies”:

Every language reflects a unique world-view and culture complex mirroring the manner in which the speech community has resolved its problems in dealing with the world...With the death of the language...an irreplaceable unit of our knowledge and understanding of human thought and world-view has been lost forever. p. 17.⁶

More personally, an ethnic minority speaker holds this view of the impact of ethnic language shift for ethnic children:

⁴ Krauss, Michael (2000). Preliminary Suggestions for Classification and Terminology for Degrees of Language Endangerment. In M. Brenzinger (Ed.), *The Endangered Languages of the World*. Presented at the Colloquium: Language Endangerment, Research, and Documentation – Setting Priorities for the 21st Century. 12-17 February 2000, Karl-Arnold-Akademie, Bad Godesberg, Germany.

⁵ From Dorian, N. (1999). Linguistic and ethnographic fieldwork. In J. Fishman (Ed.), *Handbook of language and ethnic identity*, pp. 25-41. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁶ Stephen A. Wurm. (1991). Language death and disappearance: Causes and circumstances. In R.H. Robins & E.M. Uhlenbeck (Eds.), *Endangered languages*, pp. 1-15. Oxford: Berg.

If a child decides to abandon her/his language and customs and go around speaking only a foreign language, you can imagine that that child will turn out to be like a bird that just flies around and around [with nowhere to land], not understanding anything. That will be a child with confused thoughts. (p. 2) Aika Rambai, personal communication, 29 July 1995⁷

And again, an ethnic minority language speaker from Papua New Guinea has this perspective on the link among language, culture and identity:

We now know how [our infant children] speak our language. God gives us our language while we are yet in our mother's womb, so that's how we are able to converse in the language and that's good. I love my language because it's my language, the one I love to speak. Our language holds our life...This beautiful language is good and lives in us. Now, if we do not speak this language then death will fetch us and our mouths will be shut. Our language is our strength. (p. 171) Councilor Aika Dopenu, personal communication, 17 November 1995; translated from Umbu-ungu.⁸

To ensure that language remains the “strength” of ethnic minorities, their languages must often be further developed or revitalized – saved from extinction. This is important, David Crystal notes, because we need diversity, because languages express identity, because languages are repositories of history, because languages contribute to the sum of human knowledge, and because languages are interesting in themselves.⁹

So what can be done?

Crystal also suggests several steps to be taken to protect languages from extinction¹⁰. These include:

- *An endangered language will progress if its speakers increase their prestige within the dominant community.* Crystal emphasizes the need for higher visibility of indigenous and threatened languages, often starting with token appearances in advertising and public-service leaflets, leading to use of language for place names, public signs, road signs
- *An endangered language will progress if its speakers increase their wealth relative to the dominant community.* This also increases their status and their authority.
- *An endangered language will progress if its speakers increase their legitimate power in the eyes of the dominant community.* This refers to numerous documents passed by the European Parliament, the Council of Europe, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe that promote minority language rights, and also to the UN and UNESCO including the 1992 UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities and the 1996 Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights which reiterate the rights of learners to be taught in their mother tongues.
- *An endangered language will progress if its speakers can write their language down.* Although the problem of choice of dialect/variety of the language as the basis for the writing system is difficult, in the end, most language revitalization projects include literacy as a necessary component.
- *An endangered language will progress if its speakers can make use of electronic technology.* IT and the Internet—where available—offer minority language communities a new avenue for language development if their language has a writing system.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ From Malone, D. (1998). *Namel manmeri: Language and culture maintenance and mother tongue education in the highlands of Papua New Guinea*. Unpublished dissertation. Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

⁹ Crystal, D. (2000). *Language Death*. Cambridge University, Cambridge, England.

¹⁰ Ibid.

- Finally, *an endangered language will progress if its speakers have a strong presence in the education system.* “If [the minority learners’] only experience of speech and writing in school is through the medium of the dominant language, it will not be surprising to find that the indigenous language fails to thrive.” (p. 136)

Education systems play a critical role in whether languages become extinct – or are able to survive and thrive. Because the education systems of nation-states reflect the values and aspirations of the dominant society, the children of ethnic minority people encounter a major barrier to their participation in the life of the nation when they arrive at the door of the school. Most formal education systems, in fact, are inappropriate for, or even hostile to, indigenous minority groups and their languages. This is especially true in relation to the use of such languages in school.

It is therefore critical, both for cultural and linguistic development and for academic achievement, that early education and initial literacy -- even for adults -- be conducted in the learner’s first language or mother tongue. There are many reasons for this:

- The science of learning asserts that it is necessary to begin school from where the learners are; the starting point of learning how to read and write is the language spoken and understood by the learner. In other words, begin with the known and move to the unknown.
- Practically speaking, it is impossible to teach the majority of children how to read and write in a language they do not understand
- The results of research overwhelmingly support bilingualism or multilingualism. Recent research by the International Institute for Educational Planning of UNESCO in Paris came up with these lessons:
 - “A strategy of bilingualism produces better learning outcomes and higher rates of internal efficiency in schools...
 - Pupils’ skills in the first language of instruction should be consolidated for a lengthy period (at least three years of study) so that they can be transferred effectively to the second language of instruction.
 - Using the language understood by learners as the medium of instruction not only builds trust, initiative, and participation in the learning process but also promotes participatory teaching methods...
 - Encouraging the use of an [ethnic] language as the medium of instruction stimulates the production of school and cultural materials in that language, broadens the body of knowledge to be learned to include local knowledge, and facilitates learners’ integration into social and cultural life...
 - Monolingual schools, whether they work in a Western or an [ethnic] language, perform considerably less well.”¹¹
- Education in local languages can contribute very much at the political level to improving relations between the political leaders and the base of the society’s multilingual population.

But there are also many doubts and challenges:

- First is the fact of the political, social, and economic dominance of the language of wider communication – often the majority language or the official language of a country. This

¹¹ IIEP Newsletter; vol. XXI, No. 3, July-September 2003, p.4, International Institute for Educational Planning, Paris.

dominance is seen by some as necessary for the sake of “national unity”, with the maintenance of minority languages seen as a threat to this unity. As a result, there is often indifference -- even opposition – from the majority group based on lack of concern for the languages and/or on fear of “tribalism” and divisiveness and/or a desire for nation-building no matter what the cost to languages and cultures.

- Second is the lack of orthographies and alphabets or the problem of multiple scripts (especially if minority scripts are different from that of the majority language).
- Third is the concern for cost – the need to develop mother tongue instructional materials, especially graded reading materials, and to recruit and train teachers from, or in, the minority languages.
- And finally there is also indifference and even opposition from within the minority communities themselves based on the assumption that children need to learn the dominant language as quickly as possible for economic gain and/or on the misunderstanding that learning in the first language will mean less learning of the second.

Many of the presentations in this conference will address these challenges to the use of the mother tongue in multilingual education and development situations.

Education in a multilingual world

At the 31st Session of the UNESCO General Conference (October 2001), the unanimously adopted Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity recognized a relationship among biodiversity, cultural diversity, and linguistic diversity. UNESCO’s action plan for this Declaration recommends that Member States, in conjunction with speaker communities, undertake steps to ensure the following:

- “sustaining the linguistic diversity of humanity and giving support to the expression, creation, and dissemination of the greatest possible number of languages;
- encouraging linguistic diversity at all levels of education, wherever possible and fostering the learning of several languages from the youngest age;
- incorporating, where appropriate, traditional pedagogies into the education process with a view to preserving and making full use of culturally-appropriate methods of communication and transmission of knowledge; and
- where permitted by speaker communities, encouraging universal access to information in the public domain through the global network, including promoting linguistic diversity in cyberspace.”¹²

UNESCO’s 2003 statement, *Education in a Multilingual World*, establishes guiding principles based on a variety of documents, agreements, declarations, and recommendations which represent its current approach to language and education and can serve to state the position of the international community. These principles include¹³:

1. Support for *mother tongue instruction* as a means of improving educational quality by building upon the knowledge and experience of the learners and teachers.

¹² UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages (2003), Language Vitality and Endangerment, document submitted to the International Expert Meeting of the UNESCO Programme on Safeguarding of Endangered Languages, Paris, 10-12 March.

¹³ UNESCO (2003), *Education in a Multilingual World*, Paris.

- Mother tongue education is essential for initial instruction and literacy and should be extended to as late a stage in education as possible. Thus, every pupil should begin formal education in the mother tongue, and adult illiterates should make their first steps in literacy through their mother tongue.
- Literacy can only be maintained if there is an adequate supply of reading material, for adolescents and adults as well as for school children, and for entertainment as well as for study. Thus, the production and distribution of teacher materials, learning resources, and any other reading materials in mother tongues should be promoted.
- All educational planning should include at each stage early provision for the training, and further training, of sufficient numbers of fully competent and qualified teachers who are familiar with the life of their own people and able to teach in their mother tongue.

2. Support for *bilingual and / or multilingual education* at all levels of education as a means of promoting both social and gender equality and as a key element of linguistically diverse societies.

- Communication, expression and the capacity to listen and dialogue should be encouraged, first of all in the mother tongue, then in the official or national language in the country, as well as in one or more foreign languages

3. Support for language as an essential component of *inter-cultural education* in order to encourage understanding between different population groups and ensure respect for fundamental rights.

- The educational rights of persons belonging to minorities, as well as indigenous peoples, should be fully respected, through the implementation of the right to learn in the mother tongue
- Education should raise awareness of the positive value of cultural and linguistic diversity

CONCLUSIONS

In summary, the organizers of this conference hope that you will leave it with a number of new understandings and appreciations, as follows:

- To understand and appreciate that the diversity of a multi-ethnic society is a richness and a treasure, and that preservation of that diversity is promoted and nourished by the spread of literacy in both the minority language and the national language;
- To understand and appreciate that learning to read and write in the language of the home can be the *most effective and efficient approach to learning to read and write in the national language*;
- To understand and appreciate that literacy in both the ethnic minority language and the national language will have an *integrative effect* on the society -- economically, socially, politically, culturally -- *not a disintegrative effect*;
- To understand and appreciate that through improved integration, poor ethnic minority communities can become net contributors to national economic and social development;
- To understand and appreciate that in order for local communities to draw benefits from the school system, these communities (provinces, districts, villages) need to have a significant influence on the governance of schools and the determination of the content and methods of instruction.

Let me close with a final plea from the parent of a child in a mother tongue medium school in Papua New Guinea (Malone, 2001: 7)

When children go to school, they go to an alien place. They leave their parents, they leave their gardens, they leave everything that is their way of life. They sit in a

classroom and they learn things that have nothing to do with their own place. Later, because they have learned only other things, they reject their own... They look down on those things. There are big changes in the children now. They don't obey their parents; they become rascals. And this is because they have gone to school and left the things that are ours. Now my child is in a Tok Ples [mother tongue] school. He is not leaving his place. He is learning in school about his customs, his way of life. Now he can write anything he wants to in tok ples. Not just the things he can see, but things he thinks about, too. And he writes about his place...When he writes these things they become important to him. He is not only reading and writing about things outside, but learning through reading and writing to be proud of our way of life. When he is big, he will not reject us. It is important to teach our children to read and write, but it is more important to teach them to be proud of themselves, and of us. (Parent, Laitrao Village Tok Ples School, Buin, North Solomons Province, in Delpit and Kemelfield, 1985, p. 29-30)

And, I would add, proud of their nation which encouraged them to develop and revitalize their language and their culture for the good of the country as a whole.