The Language Difference

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The Language Difference
Language and Development in the Greater Mekong Sub-Region

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Preface

It is implicit that to speak is to exist absolutely for the Other (Fanon, 1967: 17).

Language is at the nexus of marginalisation and vulnerability. Only through language can we hope to reduce poverty in real terms. Non-recognition of the languages in which people organise their everyday life and socialise with their children means that these people are denied the tools to make their voices heard and the opportunity to shape their own destiny. It is also language that provides the critical means of ensuring control and coordination of all development activities. This defining role of language in capacity and nation building has caused nation-states to appropriate it, wherever possible, in order to articulate varying socio-economic and political objectives. Therefore, language cannot be allowed to be viewed as peripheral to the development needs of emerging nations, and it is crucial for language policies to be grounded in a concern for inclusion and quality for all. Language as a factor of vulnerability has a direct effect on education, health, the economy and governance. It plays an important role for equitable and participative access to valuable socioeconomic and political spaces (real and virtual). Hence, rather than a distraction from the core issue of economic development, the language question is integral to the socioeconomic, political and cultural realities of many within the nation, and brings to the fore the significance of the local context and the necessity of local participation in the development process.

I have made this argument at length elsewhere, in the case of Africa, but I had to pause for reflection when looking at countries in southeast Asia, where the issue of the national language seems to have been resolved, but where development issues remain a major concern, and ask whether language is indeed at the heart of development. Are students of language being too precious about the place and role of language in society?

Fences to Take Down

The development process in a country is often predicated on the assumption that we know what its economic and political realities are, and the literature dealing with development pays little attention to the language question. There is a general lack of interdisciplinarity between economists, educationists and sociolinguists, whose respective research tends to focus on one area, rather than look at the interrelationships and attempt to understand the interplay between language and issues of development. Economic studies aspire to a status of pure science and are expressed in the cloak of the 'fetishism' that figures bring; the more 'specialised' they are, the more credible they look. Such a bias obfuscates the possibility of a realistic, holistic approach to the actuality of everyday life that can help in the formulation of practical solutions to the challenges of development. Especially so when economic growth and free-market economics, regarded as the backbone of development in the new world order, have shown their limits with the latest economic downturn (2008–2009), and demystified pseudo-scientific and unsocial economics that worship figures and the maximisation of profits at all cost as the be-all and end-all of human endeavour. There is no doubt that economic growth and poverty reduction are linked, but no consistent relationship exists between the two, as economic growth approaches to development have, to date, failed to alleviate poverty. Although a country's average per capita income may rise, the benefits are not necessarily proportionally distributed, and the population of poor people often remains unaffected by such growth. Corrupt and inefficient officials aggravate the lot of such people. Indeed, according to the UK Department for International Development (DFID, 1997; Paragraph 1.9), globalisation has left some 1.3 billion people in extreme poverty (i.e. with less than US$1 a day).

This lack of interest in language is reciprocated, with educationists and sociolinguists showing a complete disregard for development economics (Williams & Cooke, 2002: 298), at least until the early 1990s (Arcand, 1995; Coulmas, 1992; Bruthiaux, 2000; Bunyi, 1999; Djité, 1993; Grin, 1996; Rassool, 1999; Robinson, 1992; Wagner, 1995; Webb, 1999).

This compartmentalisation has been all too prevalent in the analysis of development in Third World countries around the world, with the economy always edging out all other factors. No single index can capture all of the issues involved in development, and everyone is agreed that development should expand the capabilities, choices and quality of life of all its actors and agents. These capabilities, choices and quality of life

lie in much more than economic growth alone; they also lie in the level and quality of education, the availability and quality of health care services and the ability for all to take an active part in public life. Economic growth that does not lead to meaningful and sustainable improvements of this kind in people's lives and does not solve real life problems cannot be called development.

Hence, education, health, the economy and good governance interact in complex ways, and the complexities of social sciences transcend disciplinary categories and ultimately require an understanding of all the factors that impact on the process of development and on economic growth itself. Therefore, the challenges every student of language is presented with are epistemologically and pedagogically profound and call for a fundamental rethinking of our discipline. There are a myriad of ways in which language and development are connected, and the broader socio-political context in which language issues are debated need to be fully examined. Language, education, health, the economy, governance and development are therefore intimately related, even though the nature of the relationships is rarely examined.

The Sociolinguistics of Development in a Needed Time

This is the gap that the Sociolinguistics of Development aims to fill. The Sociolinguistics of Development is an attempt to look into and beyond the economic problems faced by developing countries and understand the dynamics of education, health and governance in terms of how they interrelate. Indeed, development is itself a dynamic and multidimensional paradigm, which requires a multidisciplinary approach. Economic growth, levels of literacy and education, status of health and quality of governance are all part-and-parcel of a development that is human and sustainable in the long term. In this context, the use of local languages is not necessarily a self-aggrandising political statement. It only seeks to enhance the self-confidence and skills that people need to initiate and manage practical change in their lives and own space.

In the history of developed countries, the consolidation of the state and the economy, and the development and spread of the national/official language seem to have occurred almost simultaneously. Hence, most developing countries have sought to replicate this model. The promotion of a single national language has marginalised other language varieties within the polity; and, sure enough, the same is occurring in those developing polities that have sought to copy what happened 200 years ago, when the relationship between language and development

economics was even less understood, and when the notion of 'One Nation = One Language' was the overriding equation. The marginalisation of these language varieties has meant the consequent marginalisation of their speakers from socioeconomic betterment and from power. The language needs of others are not always considered a key element of communication. Is the price of development the denial of distinctiveness (linguistic, cultural or otherwise) and the discounting of local knowledge? Must all others sacrifice their linguistic and cultural uniqueness for the sake of economic growth?

The national/official language, and often the sole language of education and administration, divides those in the country who have access to it and those who do not. Hence, far from being a source of unity, it becomes a source of national disunity; far from being a bridge to endogenous and sustainable development, it becomes a major stumbling block to such development. If attempts to communicate across languages can appear at first as an obstacle, having a shared language of governance or administration does not necessarily guarantee that meaningful communication takes place. Language can be both a facilitator and an impediment to effective communication. It is all a matter of how it is strategically managed and used. It can give some sections of society the power to act as gatekeepers. In this role, they can facilitate communication or, in what Myers (1993) refers to as 'elite closure', play the counter-productive role of deliberately filtering or distorting and even blocking information transmission. Many developed countries, especially within the European Union, are now rediscovering the value of the richness embedded in language diversity and are trying to right the wrongs of this monolingual ethos. Languages should therefore be viewed in strategic terms, because they affect the ability of the nation to build an inclusive knowledge society and achieve its development goals. Combating communicable diseases like malaria and pandemics like HIV/AIDS requires the use of the languages of the target populations concerned for any measure of success to be achieved.

Language is the vehicle for the transfer of knowledge, and this transfer of knowledge is conditional on the efficiency of communication. Hence, the Sociolinguistics of Development is an approach anchored on the premise that language is not neutral, and that the discipline of sociolinguistics itself only makes sense within the relevant socio-political and economic constraints of a polity. The Sociolinguistics of Development emphasises local participation in the process, at every level, and argues that language is an explicit contributing factor to development with a human face. Language-related issues in education are relevant to health, and both of

these have a direct flow-on effect on the economy and the mode of governance. Indeed, good education, health, economy and governance are all conditional on efficient communication. Language, in this sense, constitutes a key ingredient in creating a favourable context for sustainable and long-term endogenous development and, ultimately, the development of the nation-state.

Multilingualism already exists in the societies of the Greater Mekong Sub-Region. Colonisation and neo-colonialism have also impacted negatively on the survival of many languages, and globalisation in the 21st century is putting even more pressure on speech communities to assimilate. Most governments are resisting the implementation of multilingualism in education, health and governance, thereby increasing the poverty gap, the school dropout rate and the worsening of the health status for the ethnic minorities they purport to try to lift out of poverty. Language policy that embraces and encourages the use of minority languages can bring about better efficiency and profitability in the utilisation of human resources. The demands of a modern, skilled labour force does not run counter to such a policy. On the contrary, it makes it even more necessary and urgent. Capacity building for public management and community development in a multilingual context requires innovative approaches to leverage the existing knowledge base and great human potential of minority ethnic groups. There is strong international evidence that investment in people, in all people – including ethnic minorities – pays off, and that it is preferable for investment in human resources to lead, rather than lag behind, other investments and development initiatives (ADB, 1997; Birdsall *et al*., 1995).

The challenge of inclusiveness is in the promotion and maintenance of the active participation of all citizens in the running of the public affairs of the nation-state, for development cannot and will not occur suspended from existing sociolinguistic realities. When all are seen as actors and agents of development, rather than subjects or obstacles to development, including minority ethnic communities, then language becomes uncontroversial and cannot be overlooked as a means of achieving the ultimate goal of endogenous and sustainable development. In saying this, I realise that there is no single path forward. No one event, in and by itself, can define success; but implementing multilingualism where it already exists will help expand civil society and improve economic and educational opportunities for all, and provide a better approach to deal with the issues of participatory government, national security, peace and prosperity. Divisive and dysfunctional language policy can only lead to alienation and disintegration (Williams, 2008: 75).

Introduction

Does language make a difference when it comes to development, or is there a perceptible difference in development between countries that is attributable to their choice of language? In *The Sociolinguistics of Development in Africa*, I argued that African languages are the missing link in the continent, and proceed to show their place and role in the areas of education, health, the economy and governance. I conclude that no economic development can occur in Africa outside the linguistic, social and cultural contexts of its speech communities. Language is a most sensitive issue in the developing world, because language choice and behaviour are integral to the social, economic and political stability of multicultural societies. To what extent does this argument hold?

Economists, politicians and various social commentators often claim that African countries could or should emulate the development performances of Asian countries. By Asian countries, they often mean the east Asian Tigers (i.e. Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and South Korea); however, the historical, economic and linguistic backgrounds of these countries are vastly different from those of African countries. A closer examination of the facts suggests that only a few countries in the Greater Mekong Sub-Region (GMS) (mainland southeast Asia), namely, Cambodia, the Lao PDR (formerly Laos), Myanmar (formerly Burma, and part of British India) and Viet Nam share similarities with African countries in their colonial past and linguistic make-up. The British expanded their southeast Asian interests into Myanmar in the 19th century, while the French were penetrating into the delta areas of southern Viet Nam (Cochinchina). The second and third opium wars of 1856–1860 led to the military conquest of Saigon, followed by the establishment of protectorates over Cambodia and six Vietnamese provinces. The French expanded their protectorate over Annam and Tonkin later in the century, to cover all of today's Viet Nam. At the turn of the century, as Viet Nam and Cambodia were brought together in 1887, the Lao PDR was added in 1893, forming what became known as the *Union Indochinoise* or French Indo-China, covering a territory of 740,000 km^2, with 10–11 million inhabitants (present-day Viet Nam, Cambodia