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To cite this article: Angela Rose Cincotta-Segi (2011) 'The big ones swallow the small ones'. Or do they? Language-in-education policy and ethnic minority education in the Lao PDR, Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, 32:1, 1-15, DOI: [10.1080/01434632.2010.527343](https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2010.527343)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2010.527343>



Published online: 13 Dec 2010.



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## **‘The big ones swallow the small ones’. Or do they? Language-in-education policy and ethnic minority education in the Lao PDR**

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*(Received 5 April 2010; final version received 20 September 2010)*

The Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) is one of the most ethnically and linguistically diverse nations in Southeast Asia. The post-1975 government’s policies regarding ethnic minority peoples are often considered to represent an ideological shift from earlier monocultural orientations to a discourse of interethnic equality and solidarity. Yet a deeper reading of official policies, combined with an examination of planning measures, reveals a persistent discourse of ethnic Lao centrality.

This paper first examines the apparently contradictory official discourses on language, ethnic minorities and education in Laos, and how these discourses are reproduced, adapted or contested on the ground by teachers and students in ethnic minority classrooms. I first present a discourse analysis of selected policy documents, supported by interviews with key policy-makers followed by an analysis of teacher code choice in three ethnic minority classrooms together with data from teacher interviews. The paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Nalae district, Luang Nam Tha Province and five years of experience working in education development in the Lao PDR.

**Keywords:** code choice; ethnic minorities; language policy; minority education; discourse analysis; Lao PDR

### **Introduction**

The Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) is one of the most ethnically and linguistically diverse countries in Southeast Asia, with speakers of up to 230 languages from four linguistic families<sup>1</sup> and only around 55% of the population self-reporting as ethnic Lao (Lao National Statistics Centre 2007). Since its victory in 1975, the Communist government of the Lao PDR has articulated a concern with ethnic minorities, which appears greater than that of previous regimes. Yet this heightened concern is accompanied by discourses of ethnic Lao centrality and dominance. A close reading of government policy reveals a tension between the discourse of interethnic solidarity and the discourse of ethnic Lao superiority and centrality. Likewise, an examination of language planning measures in ethnic minority education reveals a discourse of ethnic Lao cultural and linguistic dominance.

This raises the question of what the dominant official discourses on ethnic minorities, their cultures and languages are in the Lao PDR: is the discourse of

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solidarity or that of ethnic Lao dominance prioritised by government actors, or how are the two discourses reconciled? Furthermore, are the same discourses articulated on the ground among the minority people whom the policies address? This paper explores these questions with specific reference to language in Lao education. It examines policy documents addressing ethnic minority issues in general and education specifically, and some discussions around these documents by key policy-makers and planners. The paper then moves on to a consideration of language use in three ethnic minority primary school classrooms in northwestern Laos.

To date, almost no academic research has been carried out on the topic of ethnic minority education in Laos. The literature consists of a book chapter describing an AusAID-funded ethnic minority teacher training project (Souvanixay et al. 2002) and two comparative papers on ethnic minority education in Laos, Thailand and Cambodia (Benson and Kosonen 2010; Kosonen 2005). This lack of academic research means that the extensive efforts which are being made to improve education for ethnic minorities in Laos – including donor efforts to introduce bilingual education – are grounded on a lack of deep understanding of the Lao government's policy and planning orientation, and how teachers and students respond to it in classrooms.

### **Theoretical framework**

This paper (and the larger study on which it is based)<sup>2</sup> aims to present a picture of language and ethnic minority policy in Laos from its official articulation to its local enactment, or from what is commonly conceived of as 'policy' to 'practice'. The research design was informed by Lo Bianco's model of policy as 'text, discourse and performance' (Lo Bianco 2008, 157). The research examines several key policy documents as 'text', the discussions around these documents (as expressed in interviews with key policy-makers) as 'discourse', and the implementation of the policies by teachers and students in classrooms as 'performance'. This is not to suggest that policy texts are not discourse. Clearly they are, just like the discussions around them, and the same can be said for classroom practice. Indeed in the following discussion, discourse analysis is carried out at all three levels. Rather, Lo Bianco's model is used here to focus attention on the multidimensional nature of policy. The model reminds us to direct our analysis of policy as much to the construction of texts at the government level, as to actions and conversations within the working spaces of government agencies and elsewhere, as to everyday interactions, in this case in the classroom.

In its examination of policy documents and discussions, the research presented here uses text-based discourse analysis inspired by the micro-level linguistic detail of Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (1989, 1992, 2004). However, the present work aims to achieve a more sophisticated understanding of social context than much CDA by incorporating in-depth ethnographic and historical investigation. It also rejects CDA's neo-Marxist distinction between the 'ideology' in texts and the 'reality' unmasked in the analyst's reading, preferring instead to suggest that every text, including the analyst's, is socially constructed and can be read critically.

In its analysis of policy 'performance', the research is influenced by the codeswitching studies of Heller (1988, 1995, 1996, 1999, 2001), Lin (1996, 2006) and Woolard (1985, 1988); Woolard and Schieffelin (1994) and the classroom language studies of Hornberger (1988, 2003, 2007), Hornberger and Chick (2001)

and Simon (2001), among others. However, the analysis of codeswitching here is primarily based on a grounded theory, which was devised through the process of ethnographic research in this context.

## **Research methods**

### ***Policy texts and discourses***

The texts selected for analysis as part of the present study include: the Lao Constitution; the 1992 'Resolution of the Party Central Organization Concerning Ethnic Minority Affairs in the New Era' (hereafter referred to as the 1992 Minorities Act), issued by the Party Central Committee; and the 2002/2005 Education Law, ratified by the National Assembly.<sup>3</sup> The meaning of any text is not in the text itself, but in how that text is read. For this reason, semi-structured interviews were carried out with the texts' key producers and consumers. Interviewees included: the Head of the Gender and Ethnic Minority Unit, Ministry of Education (MoE); the Deputy Head of General Education, MoE; the Head of Teacher Training, MoE; the Director of the National Research Institute for Educational Sciences; and the Head of the Ethnic Minority Education Unit, MoE. Interviews focused on MoE officials' understandings, interpretations and attitudes to the policy documents and to language in ethnic minority education more generally.

It should be noted that due to the extremely centralised nature of the Lao education system, official language-in-education policy and planning powers reside in the MoE: provincial and local authorities have no official control over the medium of instruction. Rather, local authorities serve as communication channels for policy messages from the central level. While provincial and district authorities could conceivably take advantage of this 'implementational space' (Hornberger 2002) to appropriate the national policy and actively sanction the use of the mother tongue in teaching, over several years working with them I never saw or heard any evidence of this happening. In fact, even where local authorities are officially permitted to influence the curriculum, this opportunity is not generally taken: primary education policy allows for 20% local content to be devised at the district level, however, at the time of this research there was no evidence that this had been done at the research site or elsewhere. This high level of centralisation is taken into account in the design of this study, which focuses on policy texts and discourses at the national level.

### ***Policy performance***

Data on classroom language use were collected in seven primary school classrooms in Nalae District, Luang Nam Tha Province, in northwestern Laos, with three of these selected as focal case studies. In Nalae, a remote highland area, around 75% of villages are inhabited exclusively by ethnic Kmhmu people (Évrard 2006, 99). Residents of the three villages described here were observed to speak their respective Kmhmu dialects at all times in the villages except in the classroom and in interactions with outsiders who did not know the language – a situation which is rare in Nalae, where most people have some proficiency in Kmhmu. In contrast, many Kmhmu villagers in Nalae have little or no Lao language proficiency<sup>4</sup> and children generally start school with only a few words of Lao, if any. Most non-Kmhmu residents of Nalae self-identify as Lue, a group in the same linguistic family

as Lao, and speak mixed language variants ranging from more Lue to more Lao at either end of the continuum, although as mentioned, they generally have some Kmhmu language proficiency too.<sup>5</sup>

Two of the teachers in this study were Tai-Lue and one was Kmhmu. All of the teachers speak and understand both Kmhmu and a northwestern variety of Lao fluently. The research involved regular bi-weekly visits to their classrooms over a period of 10 months, where lessons were video-recorded and observation notes taken. Lessons were then transcribed in full and analysed for codeswitching patterns.

Each of the teachers in this study was interviewed at least twice. As with the policy interviews, teacher interviews provide a ‘reading of readings’. That is, they allow us to consider how teachers read the (spoken) texts of the classroom: what their conscious motivations and understandings are of the ways in which they and their students use language. Teacher interviews were also designed to provide some insight into teachers’ more general attitudes and orientations to minority ethnicity and language in the local and national contexts.

### **Official discourses: selective diversity**

Whereas the pre-1975 Royal Lao Government is said to have largely ignored minorities in favour of the mainly ethnic Lao, lowland population, the Communist Pathet Lao movement and later the government of the Lao PDR is often claimed to have won the revolution due to the minorities’ support and, at least until recently, to have espoused a ‘radically egalitarian’ nationalism with respect to ethnic minorities (Stuart-Fox 1997, 79–80). However, the degree of interethnic egalitarianism actually espoused by the communist regime immediately post-revolution and more recently has been questioned by some, who identify Lao-centric discourses on national identity in government documents and imagery as far back as 1976 (cf. Evans 2002; Pholsena 2006, 58). So to what degree can an orientation towards interethnic solidarity and egalitarianism be identified in the official discourses of the Lao PDR, and to what degree is it compromised by one of ethnic Lao centrality, both immediately post-revolution and more recently?

### ***Equality and solidarity?***

Post-1975 government measures indicate a commitment to ethnic minority issues. Policies emphasised the need to increase numbers of ethnic minority Party cadres and government officers, particularly at the local level (cf. Political Bureau of the Central Party Organization 1981), and high profile members of minority groups were included in the new Party and government apparatus in Vientiane. In addition to this, health and education services were expanded across the country to include the mainly ethnic minority highland areas.

With particular reference to education, the total number of schools is reported to have increased dramatically immediately after the revolution and the education system to have penetrated remote areas previously ignored (cf. Bouasivith et al. 1996; Chagnon and Rumpf 1982), although this says nothing about the quality of education being provided in those institutions. The newly founded Communist regime focused on drawing ethnic minorities into the national system not only by increasing the number of schools in minority areas, but by calling for bilingual education for the two largest non-Lao ethnic groups: the Hmong and the Kmhmu

(cf. Political Bureau of the Central Party Organization 1981). Sporadic bilingual education programmes had been undertaken among the Hmong from before the communist victory, supported both by foreign missionaries and the Royal government, but had been interrupted by the turmoil and displacement caused by the war. The new regime's official calls to consolidate and systematise the approach seem to indicate a commitment to fostering interethnic equality in terms of educational access and thus social mobility. Interestingly, the recent National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy (Government of Laos 2006) has also called for bilingual education for ethnic minority students, a call which was echoed in the Education For All National Plan of Action (Lao Ministry of Education 2005).

Government policy texts from shortly after the revolution until more recently also articulate what might be called a discourse of interethnic equality and solidarity. The 1991/1996 Constitution and the 1992 Minorities Act, along with all other policy documents published under the Lao PDR, and most official releases such as newspaper articles, refer to the Lao populace as *pasa:son la:o banda: phao* or 'the multiethnic Lao People'. This addition to Lao political discourse at once prioritises and entrenches the government's vision of Laos as a multiethnic society. By adding the modifier *banda: phao* [lit. various ethnic groups] rather than simply using the term *pasa:son lao* [Lao People], the text producers make explicit reference to their commitment to an ideology of multiethnicity. By adding this term as a modifier rather than, for example, a dependent clause, they create the conditions for its acceptance. That is, they create a sense of taken-for-granted multiethnicity by building it into the noun phrase where it is less likely to engender a negation.

Another common collocation in the policy texts is *vatthanatham an di: nga:m* [lit. culture CLASSIFIER good beautiful], which is translated in the Constitution as 'fine customs and cultures'. For example, in Article 8 of the Constitution we find:

All ethnic groups have the right to protect, preserve and promote their fine customs and culture [*vatthanatham an di: nga:m*] as well as those of the nation. (3; official translation)

The phrase suggests a positive valuing of ethnic minority cultures in the Lao context, a concept which we might render in English using a non-restrictive relative clause, for example in the sentence 'The Lao government values ethnic minority cultures, which are good and beautiful'. This would be consistent with the already identified discourse of interethnic equality in official text and practice.

### ***Centrality and power***

Yet parallel with this discourse of interethnic equality in government policies and initiatives, we find another discourse. Despite initial moves to include members of minority groups in the administration, the government remains predominantly ethnic Lao (Evans 2002, 212). Visual representations of multiethnicity are pervasive, but so is the ethnic Lao centrality underlying them: local billboards portray ethnic minority people always gathered around a central ethnic Lao figure – even in districts with no ethnic Lao communities. Similarly, ethnic minority representatives sing and dance on government-sponsored stages, but join in a final ethnic Lao *lamvong* dance to consolidate their part in the Lao 'national culture'.

With reference to education, despite initial calls for bilingual programmes, these were never systematically implemented and by the release of the 2000 Education

Law, Lao language and Lao script were ‘the official language and script for the learning and teaching in all schools and education institutions’ (Lao Ministry of Education 2000, 2005, 7). Although the NGPES and EFA documents call for bilingual primary education, no measures have been taken to implement such programmes or to allow non-government actors to do so and the prospects for formal bilingual education in Laos any time soon remain extremely poor (cf. Benson and Kosonen 2010).

If we look to the policy texts, we find an articulation of ethnic Lao centrality and power consistent with the above. For example, in a Party document titled ‘The Development of Human Resources in Ethnic Minority Areas’, circulated together with the 1996 re-issue of the 1992 Minorities Act, we find the following:

(We must) increase maintenance and expand the good and beautiful cultural heritage [*mu:n sia vatthanatham hi:t khong paphe:ni an di: nga:m*] which is the hallmark of the various ethnic groups. In addition to this, (we) should criticize and consider the restricted [*nyo: tho:*], distorted [*tha: ieng*] and incorrect [*phit khaeo*] (things), the customs which restrict progress [*kot nguang khuam ka:o na:*]. (Lao Front for National Construction 1996, 16; my translation)

Here, the cultures and customs which are valued positively in the Constitution and the Minorities Act are contrasted with their negative counterparts, all the undesirable aspects of minority culture. Thus it is not ‘minority cultures and customs, which are good and beautiful’, with a non-restrictive relative clause, that are being valued in the texts. Rather, it is ‘the minority cultures and customs which are good and beautiful’ – with a *restrictive* relative clause – and not the cultures and customs which are restricted, distorted, incorrect and backward. That is, the text producers (i.e. representatives of the Party and government) do not value all minority cultures and customs, which happen to be good and beautiful, but only the cultures and customs, which they deem to be good and beautiful and not the rest.

The role of the Party and government (being for the most part constituted by ethnic Lao) as judge of a culture’s or custom’s value – its place along a scale of progressiveness and therefore worth – is reproduced in the spoken texts of MoE officials. Below is an example:

Of course backward things [*sing thi: la lang*] have to die out. But we, the Lao government, support cultures and customs which are progressive [*vatthanatham hi:t khong paphe:ni thi: ka:o na:*].

This idea in itself would be no threat to the credibility of a discourse of interethnic equality if it were applied to all cultures in the Lao context equally. But when we consider which cultures and customs are supported by the government and which are left to perish, or are actively discouraged, we see that there is a strong correlation between ‘minority’ and ‘backward’, and ‘majority’ and ‘progressive’. Thus not only is the primary livelihood model of ethnic minorities, swidden agriculture, forcefully opposed in government policy and practice, but markers of non-Lao ethnicity in other domains are likewise discouraged in favour of Lao substitutes. Pholsena (2006, 57) mentions the appearance of Lao style housing in propaganda brochures targeting ethnic minorities and the inclusion of the ethnic Lao greeting, the *va:i*, in school curricula. Some other examples include the depiction of a Buddhist monument in the national insignia (most minorities are not Buddhist), the enforcement of

traditional ethnic Lao dress as official school uniform at all levels of education, the imposition of ethnic Lao dance forms in the government-sponsored spectacles mentioned above, and of course the illegal status of minority languages in education.

The ‘backward things’ quote above points to another official discourse which challenges the assertion of interethnic solidarity and equality: that is the discourse of the naturalness of ethnic domination. While the official’s comment recognises the government’s active support of selected cultures and cultural practices, the ‘death’ of undesirable cultures and practices is represented as a natural phenomenon independent of government action. The same view is expressed by another official with reference to minority languages:

In reality, it’s that the big languages swallow up the small ones and they die off. [*Tua ching, thi: va: pha:sa: nyai kae:n kin pha:sa: no:i ta:i nai tua*]

Here it is ‘the big languages’ which are cast as subjects and agents in the sentence, and which act on ‘the small ones’ free from any human influence. What is in reality the very human and purposeful process of selective support or oppression is represented as a process of nature. Thus when minority cultures and languages suffer under the weight of oppressive government policy such as forced relocation or the lack of mother tongue education, it is represented as an inevitable natural process and one for which the government cannot be held responsible. The concept of interethnic equality sits uncomfortably next to such a discourse, where differential support of ethnic groups and their languages is justified by natural inequalities.

The discourse of interethnic solidarity and equality articulated in the Lao government policy documents, initiatives and discussions thus appears to be overshadowed by a discourse of ethnic Lao centrality and power. According to the latter, ethnic cultures and languages are classified along a scale of worthiness as determined by the powers that be, but their position on the scale is deemed to be the result of inevitable natural processes.

### **Local discourses: diversity on the ground**

Teachers in Nalae engage with these official discourses in multiple ways: they listen to Lao radio and, when in the provincial capital, watch Lao TV; they attend meetings where official documents are read to them; they participate in teacher upgrading workshops and other education projects often designed and delivered by Ministry staff, and – perhaps most importantly – they work with a curriculum and materials which have been produced by (and reproduce) those official policy discourses. The classroom case studies below demonstrate the complexity of teachers’ responses to these discourses. While all of the teachers reproduce a discourse of Lao linguistic centrality to some extent, they also adapt or contest this discourse by creating or allowing a space for minority language and identity in the classroom.

### ***Saisana***

#### *Monolingual teacher talk*

Saisana<sup>6</sup> is a young Tai-Lue teacher who was born and lives in the district centre and teaches in a Kmhmu village along the roadside a few kilometres from there. Some of



the language choices in her small combined first and second grade class demonstrate how Saisana reproduces the discourse of Lao centrality, both for ideological and pedagogical reasons, which in fact are not easily distinguishable.

During seven hours of recorded and three hours of unrecorded lessons, Saisana was observed to use Kmhmu with her students on only four occasions, each time for only a single utterance. The first of these occurs when she has moved into the final stage of the lesson, where first grade students are copying the shapes they have been taught into their exercise books. Until now, the entire lesson (47 minutes) has been conducted by the teacher in Lao. As Saisana walks around checking the students' work, the following exchange takes place:

T: (To S1) Bɔ: tɔ:ng khian Ceng:  
Don't write, Ceng [student's name].

(Taking book) Bɔ tɔng khian Ceng:, ao pa vai.  
Don't write, Ceng. Put it away.

S2: **Ô pe khien**  
**I'm not writing.**

T: **Eh hmeh pe khien? Mm? Eh hmeh pe khien?**  
**Why aren't you writing? Hm? Why aren't you writing?**

S2: **(?) hooy. (?) guaac (?)**  
**(?) playing (?) scratching (?)**

T: (To S2) Bɪng, hai khu: bɪng. (Taking book) Ni:, bɪng cha:k an ni:, pi:m an ni: ni:.  
Let me see, let me see. (Taking book) Here, look at this one, this book here.

In this instance, Kmhmu (shown in bold above) is used as part of a management interaction with an individual student. The teacher is hurrying to check everyone's books and responds to this student's comment in Kmhmu perhaps as a way of achieving the intended management outcome most efficiently in a situation where there has been a breakdown of sorts (the student's not writing). Saisana uses Kmhmu to elicit information quickly from the student, but switches back to Lao for the more predictable and routine purpose of giving instructions.

It is important to note that the Kmhmu exchange is not a content teaching exchange, nor does it involve the entire class, and nor is it a routine classroom interaction. It constitutes an unexpected glitch in classroom proceedings. As such, it could be classed as 'off stage' language, a term used by Arthur (1996) to refer to language which is relegated to a secondary and unofficial status.

Except for such rare diversions away from lesson content and from the dominant language of the classroom, Saisana uses Lao for her teacher talk. While students carry on a parallel discourse in Kmhmu among themselves and even with her, Saisana refuses to answer them in Kmhmu except for the example above and one similar instance. When students provide correct answers in Lao she usually confirms them by repetition, whereas when correct answers are given in Kmhmu, she either continues to call for responses or reformulates them in Lao. As she says when interviewed:

If I speak [Kmhmu], it's during breaks, or when we go outside the school, we speak it then. It's like that. But when we're in class, I don't really like to.

*Acquiescence to Kmhmu voices*

Despite Saisana's preference for Lao talk, her students maintain a parallel discourse in Kmhmu throughout each lesson. Students use Kmhmu to talk to each other during class, but they also use Kmhmu with their teacher, even when she uses Lao with them and when they are able to produce the same utterance in Lao. At times, this even becomes a struggle between teacher and students over code choice. In one lesson, the top student offers answers to Saisana's text comprehension questions in Kmhmu, even though those questions stay close to the original phrasing of the Lao text and require only direct quotes in response:

T: M̄ia ma h̄o:t h̄ian, Khamsi: vao kap m̄e: va: n̄e:o dai?  
When he gets home, what does Khamsi say to his mother?

S: **Un ma ȳèng p̄wm.**  
**That she look at his book.**

T: Vao n̄e:o dai?  
What does he say?

S: Bing p̄i:m.  
Look at [my/his] book.

T: Bing p̄i:m het nyang?  
Why should she look at his book?

S: **Ȳèng dé' khane:n.**  
**To look at [his] mark.**

T: Thao Khamsi: vao kap m̄e: va: n̄e:o dai?  
What does Khamsi say to his mother? [p2] M?

S: Va: lu:k keng.  
That [I'm/he's] a good student.

T: Œ, va: lu:k keng, m̄e:n b̄o:?  
Right, that [I'm/he's] a good student, isn't it?

Here the student uses Kmhmu for his original answers, only using Lao to provide abridged direct quotes. In fact, the motivations for these switches could be varied and complex, but the important point to note here is that the student uses Kmhmu not only initially but repeatedly despite the fact that the text and the teacher are constraining him to use Lao.

Incidents like this occur throughout Saisana's lessons. Students regularly offer information, ask questions, reply to the teacher's elicitation, and scold each other in Kmhmu. That is, despite the teacher's almost exclusive use of Lao, students continuously maintain their Kmhmu voices in the room. Moreover, although Saisana does not legitimize the use of Kmhmu by speaking it herself most of the time, she does not prohibit the students from using it. On several occasions, as seen above, Saisana replies in Lao to students' management-related questions or comments in Kmhmu and at no time does she openly tell students not to speak Kmhmu in the classroom.

Saisana's approach might be called one of passive acquiescence, whereby she quietly allows a degree of Kmhmu communication in the classroom, especially but not exclusively for 'off-stage' communication. Thus we can see that although Lao

has an apparently central role in Saisana's classroom, much of the communicative work undertaken by students is in Kmhmu, including work in which Saisana participates. In this regard, both students and teacher are contradicting dominant official discourses on ethnicity and language, students often through active contestation and teacher through quiet adaptation. With regard to the naturalness or otherwise of Lao linguistic dominance, perhaps Saisana sums it up well:

If you were to say it's forbidden, you're not allowed to speak it, you're not allowed to speak it, it's still their language, you see.

### ***Khamsuk***

#### *Lao as ideal language*

Like Saisana, Khamsuk reproduces the discourse of Lao centrality in the classroom, but in different ways and to a lesser degree. Khamsuk is also a young Tai-Lue teacher. He was born in the village immediately across the river from the district centre, but now lives in his teaching village about two and a half hours' walk from there, where he teaches a combined third and fourth grade class.

Khamsuk's language choices in the classroom indicate that he regards Lao to be the ideal and goal language of classroom interaction. He usually frames lessons and activities in Lao, signalling their beginning and end by introductions and summaries or orations in Lao. Similarly, he confirms final answers to questions in the textbook in Lao, often by reformulating what has been said in Kmhmu into an acceptable official answer. Khamsuk also carries out the routine acts of classroom management in Lao: acts such as giving instructions to sit or stand, eliciting feedback on students' answers, giving feedback, and checking comprehension or attention. This is done even when surrounding speech is in Kmhmu.

In a similar vein, Khamsuk refers to processes specific to classroom teaching and learning, such as written mathematical calculations, in Lao even though they could be expressed in Kmhmu and where surrounding dialogue is in Kmhmu. It can be argued that using Lao words for items such as 'plus' and 'equals' is in fact a case of borrowing into Kmhmu for a specific semantic domain, that of formalised mathematical calculation, which is a common practice among speakers of traditionally non-literate minority languages. However, Khamsuk's comments indicate that he believes the Kmhmu translations to be equivalent in meaning to the Lao items but chooses to use these Lao items instead as they are more appropriate to the classroom context.

#### *Pragmatic bilingualism*

Although he reproduces discourses on Lao language centrality in education to some extent, Khamsuk's language use indicates a stronger contradiction of these discourses than does Saisana's. Much of the interaction between teacher and students in his classroom is carried out in Kmhmu. After introducing content in Lao, Khamsuk frequently switches into Kmhmu for the task of explaining new and complex ideas and carrying out exercises. He also uses Kmhmu to elaborate on complex instructions, or indeed in any situation where a student is not responding to Lao instructions or elicitation. Once engaged in a Kmhmu interaction for these

reasons, even simple, sometimes quite routine acts which would normally be carried out in Lao are carried out in Kmhmu.

Thus while Lao may play a formal role in Khamsuk's classroom, it could not be called a truly central role, or even a dominant one. Rather, Khamsuk takes a pragmatic approach to code choice: Lao is maintained as a goal language, but Kmhmu is used to provide the scaffolding students require in order to understand and work through the material. Khamsuk explains his code choice simply in terms of student comprehension:

For these things, they won't understand some of them if I say them in Lao. Suppose I say 'wash your clothes', some people might not know what 'wash your clothes' means, so I have to say it in Kmhmu. They understand it better.

This attitude reflects Khamsuk's pragmatism, but perhaps it relates to something beyond pragmatism too. In his daily dealings with the inhabitants of his teaching village, Khamsuk shows a ready immersion in their world: he participates in their social life, speaks to them in their language (although most of the men his age can speak some Lao), makes spontaneous exclamations even to himself (but overheard by others) in Kmhmu, and calls the place 'our village' (**kung i**). This suggests a sense of egalitarianism which might underlie his pragmatic language practice. If this is the case, Khamsuk's classroom code choice is indeed a challenge to official discourses: Lao is not central, and nor is it naturally dominant. In fact, it seems that what is natural in Khamsuk's everyday practice within and outside the classroom is the dominance of Kmhmu culture and language.

### **Ceng**

#### *Lao as the language of the classroom*

The association between the national language and academic, thus official, classroom practice is seen to a lesser degree in the language choices of Ceng, a Kmhmu teacher from one of the more remote Kmhmu villages in the district, now living in the district centre and teaching in a village a couple of kilometres away, at the end of the road.

In his combined first and second grade class, Ceng maintains an association between the Lao language and the typical work of the classroom. Like Khamsuk, Ceng carries out the most routine classroom acts such as eliciting the day and date, eliciting and giving feedback, and giving instructions to sit and stand, in Lao. Ceng also uses Lao lexical items for concepts related specifically to the school domain, such as 'lesson', 'study', 'period', and 'subject' as well as mathematical terms like 'numeral', 'method', 'amount' and 'equals'. This might be expected in a language which did not originally have these items before contact with Lao. However, Ceng also uses Lao for some items which do exist in Kmhmu but which he apparently wants to distinguish in their specifically academic sense from the more general sense. An example of this is the word 'remember'. Ceng often implores his students to remember points by saying in Lao: 'Chi dæ' (remember EMPH). Only once does he use the Kmhmu word for remember, '**prneeng**', in the following statement:

*Grwam go pieng, hong hien go je'. La' pwam prneeng dèè, pien dèè.*

[Your clothes are stained and the classroom is dirty. Next time remember, ok, change, ok?]

Here the act of remembering is related to everyday cleanliness, not to a topic of academic learning and for this Ceng uses the Kmhmu term. By regularly associating classroom acts and discourses with the Lao language, Ceng creates a link between the national language and the classroom domain, associating Kmhmu with the everyday, non-academic and non-institutional realm of life.

In response to the question of which language should be used in the classroom, Ceng says:

[We] speak Lao if it's shared [class] work [*viak luam*]. If it's just the usual talking together about other topics or whatever [*l iang nɔ:k l iang nan*], [we] use Kmhmu, if we're all Kmhmu.

### *Kmhmu dominance*

Despite these efforts to mark Lao as the official language of the classroom both through language choices and interview comments, Ceng challenges the notion that Lao is naturally central and dominant to an even greater degree than Saisana and Khamsuk. Although the use of Lao may be symbolically loaded in Ceng's classroom, being emblematic of the academic environment, and although Ceng may want to represent his classroom as Lao-dominant, Lao takes a relatively minor role there. It is used for the most routine of acts, which are few and often far between. The great majority of classroom discourse is instead in Kmhmu.

It was noted earlier that a large proportion of the communication in Khamsuk's classroom is also in Kmhmu. In Khamsuk's case, this was explained as pragmatism grounded in an openness to ethnic diversity. In Ceng's case, the high proportion of Kmhmu in the classroom may be in part motivated by pragmatism. Yet Ceng's use of Kmhmu has an added and highly significant interpersonal dimension. Ceng uses Kmhmu to index – and to maintain – his insider status in relation to the students.

Ceng comments informally on the strongly negative response, which is engendered by Kmhmu people who speak Lao with other Kmhmu:

Most of the time I only speak Kmhmu . . . I don't use [Lao]. If I use Lao, they'll say I'm stuck-up [uat], that I'm someone who's stuck-up, meaning I've forgotten my roots [li:m sa:t] . . .

It seems that his use of the mother tongue in the classroom may be based not only on an openness to ethnic diversity or a conceptualisation of the naturalness of minority language persistence, but on a strongly negative orientation (his own and other Kmhmu speakers) to the use of the national language among Kmhmu people, whether this be for official or non-official purposes.

### **Conclusion**

The discussion above indicates that the dominant discourse of ethnic Lao centrality and power in the national context which is (re)produced in policy documents,

initiatives and discussions is reproduced to some extent in teachers' performance. They maintain Lao as an ideal or goal language in the classroom, legitimising it as the official academic code and associating it with the behaviour of schooling. However, they do so only partially and to differing degrees. They and their students simultaneously contest this discourse by using or allowing the minority language, sometimes extensively, for the everyday demands of classroom communication both on and off the academic stage. Furthermore, the notion that Lao cultural and linguistic dominance is a 'natural' phenomenon is not articulated by these teachers and students who, by contrast, suggest that it is more natural for minority language speakers to use their mother tongue.

Of course, pragmatism rather than ideology could be posited as the main motivating factor in the use of the mother tongue. However, teachers choose to use Kmhmu despite an institutional ethos which is unsupportive of bilingual education (at the national and local levels), a lack of training in bilingual education methods, the fact that Lao is the language of the curriculum and materials, and their own often non-native proficiency in Kmhmu. These facts and the teachers' own comments suggest that use of the mother tongue is not simply an easy option, but one which requires a certain degree of ideological consent (or at least acquiescence) to the notion that the mother tongue has a role to play in the classroom.

The research findings demonstrate that policy at the level of text can be complex, multifaceted, and even contradictory. Any attempt to arrive at an understanding of government policy orientations requires a close reading not only of policy documents, but of key actors' readings of those documents. Here, the conceptualisation of policy as 'text and discourse' (and a subsequent discourse analysis) is invaluable.

The research also demonstrates that policy 'performance' is a similarly complex matter. Although policy constrains local actors, it is accepted and contested in different, complex (and sometimes apparently contradictory) ways both within and across those actors' practice. Teachers need to reconcile policy directives with their own ideas about the value and role of each language, the practical demands of their teaching, and their own professional and ethnic identities. The choices which result may reflect different priorities at different moments and across different individuals. Teachers' language choices may also be actively challenged by their students, a fact which creates another set of conditions to which they must respond. Thus teachers and students – minority and majority alike – do not simply unconsciously reproduce policy discourses on cultural and linguistic dominance but actively contest them, albeit to varying degrees, in their everyday linguistic practice.

## Notes

1. The classification of ethnolinguistic groups is a complex matter fraught with practical and theoretical difficulties. The government of Laos officially recognises 49 ethnic groups, while the ADB's 2001 Participatory Poverty Assessment notes that there may be up to 230 languages spoken in Laos. It is clear, however, that the linguistic families represented in Laos are Tai-Kadai, Mon-Khmer, Hmong-Mien and Tibeto-Burman.
2. This paper is based on a doctoral research project.
3. Additional texts were studied as part of the larger research project.
4. This is especially true of women and children, although in the more remote villages or those recently relocated adult men may have very low Lao language proficiency too.

5. Although identities are becoming increasingly complex in the district centre, where people from several groups have come together, ethnic identity in Nalae remains relatively fixed: most of the highland villages are monoethnic and their residents are emically and etically identified by their physical appearance, mother tongue, costume, and cultural and livelihood practices as belonging to one or another ethnicity. In the district centre, which has a population of about 1000, known genealogies and places of origin contribute to similarly stable identities.
6. Teachers' real names are not used here.

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