

Development and the national language question: a case study¹

PAULIN G. DJITÉ

Abstract

Having gone through a colonial history and colonial language policies similar to those of many African countries, Cambodia, the Lao PDR, Myanmar and Vietnam have all chosen a different path when it comes to language policy, opting against retaining a European language (i.e., English or French) and choosing instead Khmer, Lao, Myanma and Vietnamese respectively, as their national and official languages.

Taking a closer look at the linguistic situations in these countries, this paper asks whether a national language policy makes a difference when it comes to a multilingual context. In other words, is there a perceptible difference in the language policies of these countries and those of most African countries that can be attributed to the choice of the national and/or official language? More importantly, can a national/official language policy resolve the fundamental issues of development in multilingual contexts?

Keywords: language; development; Greater Mekong Sub-Region; Africa.

1. Introduction

That language is central to development is a truism. Nevertheless, in the Third World, this truism requires the study of the nature of the specific sociolinguistic situation, the processes leading to linguistic hierarchisation and how this linguistic hierarchisation affects resource allocation within polities. It is along these lines that we have looked into the broader question of the mechanisms of linguistic hierarchisation in the Greater Mekong Sub-Region (GMS) (Djité 2011), with a view to finding out whether the adoption of a national language in Cambodia, the Lao PDR, Myanmar and Viet Nam has afforded these polities a much better chance of achieving their development goals, compared to

African countries that have instead adopted the languages of the former colonizer(s) (i.e.; English, French or Portuguese). Having argued that local languages, rather than European languages would improve the quality of education, the status of health, the performance of the economy and the mode of governance in Africa (Djité 2008), we thought that the countries of the GMS offered a point of comparison worth investigating. So, does the national language make a difference, when it comes to development? Is there a perceptible difference in development between these countries and African countries? Are those differences attributable to the choice of language? The upshot of these questions is whether monolingualism, local or “borrowed”, is a better option than the inherent multilingualism that both the GMS and African countries share.

2. What do the data tell us?

2.1. Language, literacy and education

The first striking statistic when it comes to the nexus between language, literacy and education in the GMS is that, overall, Cambodia, the Lao PDR, Myanmar and Viet Nam spend less than the minimum 6 percent of GDP as recommended by UNESCO on education. The data show that, despite relatively high levels of official literacy, Cambodia and the Lao PDR achieved a low 0.778 and 0.753, respectively, on the Education For All Development Index (EFA/EDI; UNESCO 2008a) and were ranked 104 and 108 respectively, out of 129 countries on the UNESCO’s EFA/EDI in 2009, due to low primary education enrolments, low adult literacy and poor gender parity rates.² In 2006/2007 alone, more than 50,000 elementary and secondary Lao students dropped out of school in the Lao PDR (PonNgern 2007).

Cambodia, on the other hand, is at serious risk of not attaining universal literacy by 2015. Whilst its net primary school enrolment ratio reached 93.3 percent in 2008, the survival or retention rate stood at 52.5 percent, falling short of the 100 percent Millennium Development target for 2010. Its net enrolment rate for secondary school in the same year was even worse, reaching only 34.8 percent, or less than half the 2010 target of 75 percent (Boulet 2009). Around 40 percent of Cambodians do not complete primary school and the quality of education in the country is quite low: primary education ranked 122nd out of 134 countries, whilst higher education and training ranked 127th (UNDP HDR 2009a). In its (2009) Country Report, the UNDP urged Cambodia to reform its education system urgently, if it wanted to improve a workforce productivity (UNDP 2009b) that remains one of the country’s main concerns in terms of sustainable development. Viet Nam, for its part, experienced a sig-

nificant drop in its net enrolment ratio in primary education, from 96 percent in 1999 to 93 percent in 2004 and with its recent decision to introduce monthly tuition fees in kindergarten, high school, teacher training colleges and universities, it is feared that these levels of education will also experience a decrease in enrolments.³ Although Myanmar achieved a medium EDI of 0.895 and was ranked 84 out of 129, its official literacy rate of 89.9 percent is not reflected by the reality on the ground. Together with Viet Nam, whose official literacy rate is 90.3 percent, it was amongst the 28 developing countries with over 500,000 children out of school in 2007/2008.

These figures are even more concerning because, based on national averages as is always the case, official literacy rates hide variations across regions. That concern grows even more when these official rates are examined from the point of view of the “tested” literacy rates, which show significant gaps between the “reported” and “tested” rates of literacy, as well as the total “secure” literacy rate.⁴ These gaps suggest that there are serious systemic problems in the educational systems of the GMS. The tested literacy rates bring into focus the practice of most governments, international agencies and bilateral donors, who insist on literacy in the national and/or official language and highlight the critical importance of literacy programs in the languages of ethnic minorities.

The language-in-education policies of all four countries point to some glaring language-based inequities. The standard curricula in Cambodia, the Lao PDR, Myanmar and Viet Nam are designed in the languages of the dominant ethnic groups — the Khmer Leu, the Lao, the Bamar and the Kinh — and do not attempt to meet the needs of other language groups. The languages of ethnic minorities are virtually invisible in the schools, not only because the socialist ideology of ethnic equality (especially in the Lao PDR, Myanmar and Viet Nam) is misinterpreted as ethnic unification, but also because it is believed that these languages cannot be used for any meaningful purpose and are not adapted for expressing modernity.

Just as is the case throughout Africa, this belief is reinforced by a growth-influenced education and linguistic homogenization in the name of economic development. Although the use of the languages of other language groups has increased in Cambodia over the last decade, mother tongue-based bilingual education is still not part of public language-in-education policy and is essentially left to international Non-Governmental Organizations for experimentation, as is the case in Cambodia (Djité 2011: 30). When they do exist, literacy programs in the other languages are only transitional and meant to build on the first language to teach the national language, leaving children from ethnic minorities to carry the burden of undergoing extra schooling, in preparation for mainstream education in the national language and not being able to perform to their full potential in the school system as a result, because the language of instruction does not support their learning.

Table 1. *Total fertility rates in the GMS (2000–2005)**

Country	Total fertility rate
Cambodia	4.8 percent
Lao PDR	4.8 percent
Myanmar	2.9 percent
Viet Nam	2.3 percent

*Source: Adapted from the UNDP Human Development Report (2007/2008)

Table 2. *Infant and under-five mortality rates per 1,000 live births (2005–2010)**

World ranking	Country	Infant mortality rate (deaths/1,000 live births)	Under-five mortality rate (deaths/1,000 live births)
151	Cambodia	62.7	89.4
137	Lao PDR	51.4	67.5
158	Myanmar	66.0	97.2
93	Viet Nam	19.5	23.3

*Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2011)

2.2. *Language and health*

Issues pertaining to literacy and education in general underscore the links between language and health. The poor health status in the GMS correlates strongly with the low functional and secure literacy rates and low education attainment in all four countries (see Table 3 below), even though they are officially reported to enjoy relatively high literacy rates (73.6 percent for Cambodia, 68.7 percent for the Lao PDR, 89.9 percent for Myanmar and 90.3 percent for Viet Nam). In the case of the Lao PDR for instance, the equivalent literacy rates for females, both reported and tested, are well below those of males; a trend that can be seen across all four countries considering their respective sex ratio.⁵ This does not bode well for the women of the sub-region or the children they tend to have in large numbers and especially for those who live in rural and remote areas, where there is limited access to health care services. Indeed the fertility rates for all four countries are quite high, as shown in Table 1.

Similarly, although the national average of infant and child mortality rates has halved across the GMS over the last decade, Table 2 shows that it remains considerably higher than the United Nations average of 49.4 (infant mortality) and 73.7 (under-five child mortality) (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division 2011). Infant and child mortality, de-

Table 3. *Health expenditure and life expectancy in the GMS**

	Cambodia	Lao PDR	Myanmar	Viet Nam
Rank	137	133	138	116
2007 Score	0.593	0.619	0.586	0.725
Public expenditure on health as a % of total government expenditure 2006	10.7	4.1	1.8	6.8
Healthy life expectancy at birth (years) 2007	55	54	52	66
Unhealthy life expectancy as % of total life expectancy	9	16	15	11

*Source: Adapted from the UNDP HDR (2009a)

fined as the number of infant and child deaths per 1,000 live births correlates very strongly is a useful indicator of a country's level of health or development. Cambodia, the Lao PDR, Myanmar and Vietnam are still plagued with child malnutrition, coupled with low attendance of antenatal care for pregnant women and low health and nutrition check-ups for infant and children.

This is not surprising, given that when it comes to public expenditure on health, except for Cambodia, public expenditure on health in the GMS is low. But although Cambodia spends more on health as a percentage of total government expenditure, it is Viet Nam that manages to obtain a reasonable result in terms of healthy life expectancy at birth and an overall ranking well above that of all the other three countries. This is in part because of its relatively developed health care service outreach that Viet Nam has put in place since the 1970s.

2.3. *Language and the economy*

In turn, poor literacy and education and poor health, lead to inequities in economic opportunities (Coulmas 1992; Djité 2008; UNESCO 2008b). This is partly the result of significant socio-political inequities and injustice based on ethnicity and language and partly due to the fact that the economies of the GMS are characterized by the export model, leaving the sub-region vulnerable to any minor external shock. Indeed, the prevailing development model in Cambodia, the Lao PDR, Myanmar and Viet Nam is very much about "market-building" and, in spite of all the official proclamations, not so much about "capacity- or state-building" (Hammer 2009). Skilled human resources, or the lack thereof, is the common Achilles' heel in all four countries.

Nevertheless, in the name of economic growth, the multilingual reality within each of these countries is pushed to the backburner and education and health are starved of resources. The trickle-down theory prevails, as it is strongly believed that equal opportunities may only be extended to ethnic

Table 4. *External debt in the GMS as a percentage of GDP**

	Cambodia	Lao PDR	Myanmar	Viet Nam
2010 ^F	31.8	84	—	36.5
2009 ^e	31.8	93	—	36.0
2008	37.8	93	—	33.0
2007	40.4	101	—	33.4
2006	45.1	97	—	31.5
2005	50.4	113	—	32.7

**Source:* Adapted from the World Bank East Asia and Pacific Economic Update (The World Bank 2010: Vol. 1, 41, 52 and 76)

minorities when all else has been done and when development has finally been attained. In the meantime, external debt as a percentage of GDP is ballooning out of control (Table 4), with countries like the Lao PDR having to rely on development assistance for no less than 60 percent of its investment budget (UNDP 2007: 10).

At the same time, countries like Cambodia and the Lao PDR have highly dollarized economies and large “efficient” informal foreign exchange markets, serving as hot beds for tax evasion.⁶ The predominance of the informal economy in Cambodia, the Lao PDR and Myanmar and its relative importance in Viet Nam, poses major obstacles to the fight against poverty, as this sector becomes a pole of attraction for the poor and the very poor.

2.4. *Language and governance*

The lack of vision in addressing these issues is made evident in the poor quality and inefficiency of governance and transparency in the sub-region. The countries of the GMS all have a poor record in this area and are found wanting on all six dimensions of governance: (a) voice and accountability, (b) political stability and absence of violence, (c) government effectiveness, (d) regulatory quality, (e) rule of law and (f) control of corruption (Kaufmann, Kraay and Mastruzzi 2008). Corruption, in particular, has a significant impact on the economy and society, directly affecting the rule of law and government effectiveness and therefore political stability and issues of voice and accountability. Corruption and inefficiency in Cambodia, the Lao PDR and Viet Nam and corruption and chronic civil conflict in Myanmar, aggravate the debt situation and help expand the informal sector, whilst deepening its negative effects on the economy.

The 2007 aggregate governance indicators for Cambodia, the Lao PDR, Myanmar and Viet Nam showed that Myanmar had the lowest “Control of