

*Language Policies in Asian Countries: Issues and Tensions**

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Many Asian countries are multilingual and multi-ethnic and have gained political and economic independence only in the last half of a century or so ago. They have the common goals of nation building, full integration with the global economy and full participation in international politics. Therefore, when formulating language policies, these countries have been confronted with similar issues though they have responded to their specific sociopolitical contexts in different ways. This paper outlines some of the major issues. One is the continued domination of English after gaining political and economic independence resulting from a complex interplay of endogenous as well as exogenous factors. The endogenous factors pertain to the need to balance the interests of social and political groups within the country whereas the exogenous factors pertain to globalization and the use of English as the lingua franca. Another major issue is the asymmetrical power relationship between those who have access to English and those who have not, both intranationally and internationally. The third major issue is the tension between cultural assimilation brought about by the domination of English and the preservation of national and ethnocultural identity.

The language of a nation, or an ethnolinguistic group, is a symbol of its identity and allegiance. It is an embodiment of its values, culture and

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traditions. Language policies are therefore emotionally charged and highly political. Decisions regarding which language(s) are given official status, which to adopt as working language(s), and which to use as the medium (or media) of instruction are shaped by sociopolitical processes of which they are a part. Therefore, in order to make sense of their development, formulation and implementation, it is essential to situate language policies and the debates surrounding them in their sociopolitical contexts, which cannot be separated from their historical contexts.

Many countries in Asia¹ have suffered a colonial past or foreign invasion. Many of them gained political independence or were freed from the threat of foreign invasion only in the last half of a century or so ago. As such, Asian countries have a great deal in common. Many were confronted with the task of nation building after decolonization or after invasion by foreign countries. Many have as their national goal full integration into the global economy and full participation in international politics. The colonial past exerts a powerful influence over language policies in these countries. Equally, the development of global economic structures, global mass media, and global political institutions is crucial in shaping their language policies (Tollefson & Tsui, 2004). Many Asian countries are multilingual and multi-ethnic. The issue of communication in ethnically and linguistically heterogeneous nations is yet another powerful shaping force. The interaction between these forces is extremely complex. While each has been grappling with issues that are specific to its own sociopolitical contexts and each has come up with its own solutions, there are also some issues that are shared. The aim of this paper is to outline some of these issues.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXTS

The histories of the language policies of Asian countries that have a

¹ What constitutes Asia depends on whether one is using geographical or geo-political criterion. The discussion of Asian countries in this paper refers mostly to countries in East-Asia, particularly post-colonial countries.

colonial past, in fact, of all former colonized countries, show remarkable similarities. The imposition of the language of the colonizer on the colonized is most symbolic of colonization, commonly realized through the medium of instruction. In colonial states, the colonial language was made available to an exclusive group of indigenous people, mainly through its adoption as a medium of instruction by a small number of schools. This exclusive group joined the elite of the society who had access to power, wealth and status, and acted as auxiliaries to the colonizers and as brokers between the colonizers and the colonized. In the later days of colonization, formal education was also provided by colonial governments through indigenous languages (to a greater or lesser extent), either as an alternative or a transitional medium of instruction, in order to spread western knowledge and values, to secure good will towards the colonizers and to produce a loyal working force. Formal education in indigenous languages, however, was mostly limited to basic education. Tertiary education was mainly provided through the colonial languages, hence ensuring the linguistic assimilation of the local elite. Such characteristics of the colonial language policies have given rise to a number of issues in the language policies in the post-colonial period.

THE CONTINUED DOMINATION OF ENGLISH AFTER DECOLONIZATION

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the language of a nation or an ethnolinguistic group is a symbol of its identity and allegiance. It is a unifying force and is therefore an essential element in nation building. The first Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mahatir Mohamad, made the following pronouncement upon gaining independence:

It is only right that as a developing nation we should want to have a language of our own. If the national language is not introduced our country will be devoid of a unified character and personality – as I could put it, *a nation without a soul and without a life* (Wong & Hong, 1975, p. 7, cited

in Gill, 2004, p. 137).

In many post-colonial countries in Asia, although a national language was defined upon gaining independence, there was little or no attempt on the part of the governments to rid themselves of the colonial past by minimizing the role of the colonial languages. Quite the contrary, they were chosen as official languages and some of them effectively functioned as the dominant working languages. Although ethnic and indigenous languages were also established as the official languages, these languages were often more symbolic than substantive (Fishman & Fishman, 2000).

In Asia, English was chosen as one of the official languages in many post-colonial countries. For example, in India, although there are a dozen regional languages that are official languages at the state level in addition to English and Hindi, English continues to play a dominant role. It is used in all three forms of mass media – newspapers, radio and television – and is the only language taught in all states and in the largest number of schools.

In Singapore, Malay was chosen as the national language, and English, Chinese, Tamil and Malay were designated as official languages. However, English has become far more important than the other three official languages and has virtually replaced Malay as the national language. We can say that English is its *de facto* national language. Not only has it become the dominant working language and the *lingua franca* for inter-ethnic communication, it is actually learned as a first language whereas the rest of the official languages are learned as second languages. Despite the efforts made by the Singapore government to ensure that each child learns his or her ethnic language as a second language so that s/he becomes an “English-knowing bilingual”, the prestige and economic value of English has led to a language shift whereby English is the dominant language in the community as well as at home, especially among the younger generation (Pakir, 2004, p. 120).

In the Philippines, efforts have been made by the government to establish one of the indigenous languages, labeled Filipino, as the “national” language

to symbolize national independence. However, English is used as the sole medium in many domains, including higher education and science and technology. The rest of the regional languages have insignificant role to play. Yet there appears to be little dissatisfaction amongst the non-Tagalog speakers (Nical, Smolicz, & Secombe, 2004). As Smolicz, Nical and Secombe (2001) observe, the relationship between Filipino and the vernacular is overshadowed by the prestige of English as the language of higher education, business and globalization.

In Hong Kong, although there is already a national language, the written form of Modern Standard Chinese and the spoken form of Putonghua, which unifies Hong Kong with the rest of China, English has been retained as an official language under the language policy of “trilingualism and biliteracy”. English is still used in government, education and law. Very often government documents are first drafted and released to the public in English and subsequently translated into Chinese. Despite the efforts made by the government to raise the prestige of the national language by making Chinese medium education mandatory for three-quarters of the secondary schools in Hong Kong, the cry for raising English standards and the condemnation of the mother-tongue education policy have not abated.

The continued domination of a former colonial language is, of course, not peculiar to Asian countries, and not peculiar to English, although for a number of reasons, which will be spelled out later, English seems to have a much stronger sustaining power than other colonial languages. In sub-Saharan African countries, for example, the colonial languages (English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese) continued to be the official languages after independence, and are used as media of instruction even though they are spoken by a very small percentage of the population in these countries (see Alidou, 2004). In post-apartheid South Africa, although eleven languages were declared official languages, English is the preferred language of the media and education, and is used almost exclusively as the official language (see Webb, 2004).

There has been a debate regarding whether the domination of English has

been driven by decisions made by the non-English speaking world for their own benefit, or by efforts made by the English speaking world, mainly represented by Britain and the United States, to retain or erect neocolonial superstructures internationally for their own benefits. The former has been referred to by some as the “national-functional paradigm”, articulated by the work of Fishman, Conrad and Rubal-Lopez in their edited volume, *Post-Imperial English* (1996), and the latter “the international-critical paradigm”, articulated by the works of Phillipson, Skutnabb-Kangas and Pennycook (for example, Pennycook, 1998; Phillipson, 1992; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000; Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 1994) (see Clayton, 2002). The former is being criticized by the latter for ignoring the fact that the domination of English is driven by pragmatic needs of the non-native English speaking countries themselves and the benefits that English brings to them. The latter is being criticized for obscuring the exploitative potential of the domination of English under the guise that it is “natural, neutral, and beneficial” (Pennycook, 1994, p. 9; see also Spolsky, 2004).

As far as post-colonial Asian countries are concerned, the continued domination of English in Asian countries in the post-colonial era is a complex interplay of factors that are both endogenous and exogenous.

LANGUAGE POLICY AS A POLITICAL BALANCING ACT

In multilingual and multi-ethnic countries, the formulation of a language policy is a political balancing act in which the interests of the various ethnic, social and political groups should be catered for and which, if ill managed, can lead to social and political unrest. In many cases, the colonial language was chosen as one of the official languages and has effectively functioned as the dominant working language and the lingua franca for inter-ethnic communication on the ground that it is ethnically neutral and therefore, theoretically, is politically neutral. Rubal-Lopez (1996) studied linguistic heterogeneity as a predictor of the spread of English in former colonies and

non-colonies and found that it is a predictor in the former but not in the latter (cf. Fishman, Cooper, & Rosenbaum's earlier study (1977) where linguistic heterogeneity is a predictor of the use of English as a medium of instruction in primary and secondary schools, and the study of English as a subject in primary schools). In other words, the domination of English is likely to be a result of the interplay between linguistic heterogeneity and colonization.

The adoption of a colonial language as one of the official languages, or a working language, may be ethnically neutral, but it is by no means politically neutral. In Singapore, the adoption of English as the dominant working language and the replacement of Chinese medium education by English medium education in higher education, which led to the demise of Chinese medium education in basic education in the seventies and early eighties, were political moves. The most symbolic act was the disestablishment of Nanyang University in 1980, which was set up with donations from early immigrants from the People's Republic of China. It was a move to sever the strong emotional ties between the ethnic Chinese, which made up more than 70% of the population, and their counterparts in the People's Republic China. The construction of a Singaporean identity on a former colonial language, English, rather than on its national language, Malay, was another political move to establish its independence from Malaysia.

In India, the non-committal stance taken by the Indian government towards replacing English by Indian languages as a medium of instruction was motivated by the political agenda of avoiding the conflict between ethnic and social groups with different political interests: the conflict between the English educated bureaucrats and professional elites who wanted to retain English as the language of prestige, and the emerging elite who wanted to empower their own regional languages; and the conflict between speakers of regional languages who could benefit from the use of their own languages as media of instruction, and speakers of minority languages who saw English medium education as a way of resisting the domination by the speakers of regional languages (Annamalai, 2004).

In Hong Kong, the apparent contradiction between the mandatory mother

tongue education policy and the emphasis given to the importance of English is the epitome of a political balancing act. The Chief Executive of the Hong Kong SAR has been entrusted with an unprecedented social and political project of “one country two systems”. Different political and social groups have been emphasizing either the “one country” side or the “two systems” side of the project to advance their own interests. On the one hand, the traditional “patriotic” camp (often referred to as the “pro-Beijing” camp by the media), consisting largely of non-elites in the colonial regime who had been disenfranchised from social and political participation, has been pushing for “one country” because this is the means by which they could and have risen to power. The implementation of mother tongue education, amongst others, is perceived by this camp as an essential means to achieve their political end (Matthews, 2001). On the other hand, the business sector, the English educated top administrators and the professionals have been resisting the policy vehemently as undermining the English standards of students and hence jeopardizing the competitive edge of Hong Kong as an international city. They emphasize the importance of protecting “two systems” and champion maintaining a high standard of English as one of key features that distinguish Hong Kong from other major cities in China. Top government officials paid lip service to mother tongue education but were in fact more concerned about maintaining the English standards of Hong Kong. These are the elite of the elites who were given access to power and wealth during the colonial days. It is definitely in their interest to maintain the supremacy of English. Parents see access to English as crucial to the future prospects of their children, and schools see English medium education as a means to recruit best students. They have been calling for the government to abandon the policy and give schools the freedom to choose the best medium of instruction, which is English medium. To balance of the interests of these groups, the Chief Executive continues to hold firm the mandatory mother tongue education policy though it looks less and less likely that this policy will be sustained. At the same time, the government has been pouring resources into raising the English standards in Hong Kong. Some of the

major measures include extending the Native English-speaker Teacher Scheme, which is a scheme to recruit native-speaker English teachers to teach in schools, from secondary to primary level this year; requiring English teachers to pass the English benchmark test within a specified period in order to stay on the profession; and providing financial aid to employees in the workplace to attend language courses.

LINGUISTIC ASSIMILATION AND THE SUPREMACY OF ENGLISH

Another factor that contributed to the dominant role of English after decolonization has to do with the exclusive use of the colonial language as the language of government, law and education during the colonial rule as part of the machinery of subjugation. This policy left very little room for indigenous languages to develop into languages that could fully function in all domains. Consequently, these languages have to be standardized and codified before they could be used in domains such as education, law and government. This has also led to a paucity of teaching materials and the lack of a literacy environment for the speakers of these languages. The long-standing low status that indigenous languages were accorded, the negative experience with which they were associated, and the prestige that the former colonial languages enjoyed, have together resulted in a lack of confidence in the indigenous languages as adequate working languages and languages that are suitable for schooling.

In the Philippines, as reported in Smolicz and Nical (1997) and Nical, Smolicz, and Secombe (2004), there is a lack of confidence among the Filipino regional language speakers in the maturity of their own language as a medium of academic study, and economic and scientific advancements. In Malaysia, despite the Malaysian government's determination and systematic planning, English remained the official language for 10 years before being relegated to a second language. It took 26 years for the transition from the use

of English to the use of Bahasa Malaysia as a medium of education at all levels in order to allow for more efficient language planning, and to allow for the development of a corpus in Bahasa Malaysia to cope with the learning of science and technology (Asmah, 1979; Gill, 2004).

In many cases, such difficulties have been used as an excuse by policy makers for their non-committal stance towards the use of indigenous languages as the medium of instruction even after decolonization.

For example in India, despite the consensus that Indian languages should replace English in education, government and law at both federal level and state level, no time frame was laid down for the change in the medium of education as it was for law and government, particularly at tertiary level (Annamalai, 2004). Instead, phrases such as “as early as practicable” and “urgent steps” were used. The argument put forward by the government was that the Indian languages were not ready to be used for academic study. In order for tertiary education to be delivered through the Indian languages, the argument continues, these languages must have the requisite technical terms to encode modern scientific knowledge and there must be materials, textbooks and reference books in Indian languages. Teachers need to be linguistically equipped to teach academic subjects, especially science subjects, at tertiary levels. In Hong Kong, the lack of adequate teaching materials and textbooks in content subjects in Chinese, and the teachers’ lack of competence in teaching content subjects through the medium of Chinese had always been put forward by the colonial government for not mandating the implementation of mother tongue education.

GLOBALIZATION AND ENGLISHISATION

The most powerful force that has shaped language policies in Asian countries in the last two decades is globalization. The dominant role of English speaking countries, particularly the United States, in international economy and politics, and the use of English as the “lingua franca” on the

Internet, has aggravated the pull towards English as a much sought-after commodity, at national, sub-national and supranational levels (see Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas (1999) on Englishisation in globalization). The impact of globalization on language policy can be seen not only in former colonial states but also in countries which had long resisted foreign influence but are now yielding to the pressure of globalization, and are giving English language teaching and learning much greater prominence in their language policy.

Japan is a very good example. Ever since the Meiji reform, Japan has functioned exclusively in the national language. The unity of nation, state, and language has always been taken for granted (Coulmas, 2002). In the 70s, because of its rapid economic development and influence, and its aspiration to strengthen its international status, the Japanese government poured resources into the promotion of the teaching of Japanese as a foreign language, both within Japan and overseas, and the use of Japanese in international conferences and meetings (Gottlieb, 2001). However, since the 80s, under the pressure of globalization, the Japanese government has started to introduce foreign languages in the school curriculum, with the bulk of the resources being allocated to English. In 1987, the first batch of native-speaker English teachers were recruited to work in Japan under the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program. Ten years later, in 1997, English was introduced at elementary level as part of the informal curriculum. In a report of the Curriculum Council in Japan, it was explicitly stated that the primary purpose of the national curriculum standards reform was “to help a child cultivate rich humanity, sociality and identity as a Japanese living in the international community.” (Monbusho, 1998, cited in Gottlieb, 2001, p. 44). The cultivation of “Japanese with English abilities” is part of the Basic Policies for Economic and Fiscal Management and Structural Reform 2002. By 2005, there will be 100 super English language high schools which use English as the medium of instruction (Tanabe, 2003). TEFL has now become a major private industry in Japan.

Another example is China where English had been condemned as the

language of the imperialists during the Cultural Revolution. Since the open door policy in the eighties, resources have been put into enhancing the English curriculum. Foreign publishers have been invited to collaborate with Chinese publishers in producing curriculum materials. The increasing participation of China in international organizations, trade and politics, such as joining the World Trade Organization and hosting the Olympics in 2008, the demand for English is greater than ever before. The Ministry of Education has proposed that English be introduced at primary level from Grade 3 onwards across the whole country. It has been reported that the Ministry of Education stipulated that by the year 2004, 5% to 10% of the university curriculum should be delivered bilingually, particularly in disciplines such as science and technology, foreign trade, finance and law. The former Premier Zhu Rongji made public his views on this: "I hope all the classes will be taught in English. I don't worship foreign languages, but we need to exchange our ideas with the rest of the world." (*South China Morning Post*, September 20, 2001, cited in Gill, 2004). The College English Test who was introduced some ten years ago has rapidly increased its candidature. It now has 8 million students taking the test each year and it is increasingly used by employers as a prerequisite for employment (Yang, 2003). In a recent international conference on corpus linguistics in foreign language teaching (October 2003, Shanghai), the majority of the papers presented by researchers in China were on comparing specific aspects of the learner corpora compiled from College English Tests, both spoken and written, with native-speaker corpora such as the British National Corpus. This shows that getting students to acquire native-speaker competence in English is a major concern in China.

In Vietnam and Cambodia, conscious efforts have been made by the French to revive its influence and the French language in Indo-China by providing substantial financial aid and attaching the condition of using French as the medium of instruction in higher education. However, once these countries opened up themselves to international collaboration in trade, business and politics, the demand for English became very strong. In Cambodia nearly all enterprises incorporated in Cambodia to facilitate

foreign trade use English as the language of communication. Consequently, in 1995, the students demonstrated against the use of French as a medium of higher education and demanded the use of English as a medium on the ground that English is the language of international communication and trade. The participation of Cambodia in ASEAN where English is the lingua franca further intensified the demand for English (see Clayton, 2002). In Vietnam, English is still the most desired language because it is the lingua franca of ASEAN and APEC countries. It is no longer seen as the carrier of decadent culture. The government has lifted heavy taxes on expatriates and has tried to attract overseas Vietnamese (the Viet Kieu) who are fluent in both Vietnamese and the language of their adopted country, mainly the US, Australia and France, to return to Vietnam (Wright, 2002).

In South Korea, the importance of English gained recognition in the 70s and 80s as it became a major trading partner with many countries, especially the United States. In 1994, the seventh Korean government launched a campaign to enhance internationalization and globalization within the country. One of the measures was to enhance English language teaching at all levels. According to Shim (1994), English classes in middle schools take up about 11% of instruction time which is just next to Korean classes which take up 13%. In high school, English instruction time is even one percent higher than Korean. In 1997, English was made a compulsory subject in all public primary schools and a national English curriculum was introduced (see Jung & Norton, 2002). According to Shim (1994), English is now “an essential tool for education, power, and success in (South) Korea” (p. 225), and the ability to speak English well is associated with higher status and therefore much desired. Similar to Japan, native-speakers of English teachers have been brought in.

The change in language policy in Malaysia is the epitome of the power of globalization. Among the post-colonial countries, Malaysia went through the most radical and thorough change in its language policy after decolonization. The reversal of the policy in the last few years is most indicative of the force of globalization. Malaysia made the most vigorous effort to establish a sense

of national identity and unity through replacing English with Bahasa Malaysia as the official language. It also systematically replaced English with Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction starting from primary level in 1958, moving up to secondary and eventually to tertiary level in 1983. The transition took 26 years to complete, and at no point during these 26 years did the government renege on its policies or allow any compromises that would undermine the policy. In addition to the medium of instruction policy, the Malaysian government also provided professional and economic opportunities to raise the status of Bahasa Malaysia. There was an agency dedicated to the promotion of the use of Bahasa Malaysia for academic and technological purposes. This agency came up with a corpus of linguistic terms in science and technology in Bahasa Malaysia and academic books were translated into Bahasa Malaysia. Therefore, although English was retained as an official language for 10 years after independence, it was eventually replaced entirely by Bahasa Malaysia as a medium of instruction and English became only a school subject that students needed to take but not to pass (Gill, 2004).

While the measures taken by the Malaysian government were powerful in raising the status of its national language, the very fact that advancements in science and technology have been available mostly in English, and international business has been conducted mostly in English seriously undermined the sustainability of its language policy. The pace of translation could not keep up with the generation of knowledge in science and technology. The Malaysian government was concerned that their graduates, particularly the Malay graduates, most of whom studied in Malay medium public universities, were not competitive enough because of their inadequate level of English competence, and that this would prevent Malaysia from becoming a developed nation (Gill, 2004). Consequently, in 1993, the Malaysian government had to allow the use of English in science, engineering and medical courses at tertiary level. This change in policy met very strong resistance amongst Malay intellectuals. In order to gain their support, the Malaysian government had to argue that the reinstatement of English as a medium of instruction would actually safeguard rather than undermine the

status of Bahasa Malaysia as the national language. The former Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, asserted that "... once we (Malaysia) have become a successful race, our language by itself will gain the respect of others. On the other hand, a race, which is not successful, will not be able to gain the respect for its language even though they hold strongly to it." (Mohamad, 1993, December 28, p. 2, cited in Gill, 2004). As Gill (2004) points out, "despite the strong feelings of traditional nationalism still found in certain quarters, the positioning of the English language in Malaysia has come almost full circle, back to the status that it previously enjoyed, equal to the national language, Bahasa Malaysia" (p. 147).

In the discussion so far, I have, at the risk of gross simplification, outlined some of the ways in which the endogenous and exogenous factors have shaped the language policies of Asian countries. In the ensuing discussion, I shall outline some of the common tensions that Asian countries are faced with.

LINGUA FRANCA AND THE BIG DIVIDE

The adoption of a colonial language, such as English, as the lingua franca by a multi-ethnic, multilingual developing country may serve the purpose of providing an ethnically neutral language for communication. The access to English by developing countries, irrespective of whether they are former colonies or not, facilitates their economic development, particularly their participation in the world capitalist system, as Fishman (1996) points out. However, it raises the issue of (in)equality at the intra-national as well as inter-national levels.

First of all, the term "lingua franca", as Phillipson (2000) points out, is somewhat deceptive. It refers to a common language that people use to communicate with each other, and it implies that the language can be accessed by everybody. This hides the inequality between those who have access to the language and those who do not.

The asymmetrical power relationship among the official languages in post-colonial countries perpetuates social, economic and political inequality, and favors speakers of the colonial languages, at national, sub-national and supranational levels.

The Intra-national Divide

In developed countries, such as European countries, the ability to speak the lingua franca, English, separates the haves and the have-nots. A European Commission reports that only 41% of the continent speaks English and only 29% speaks it well enough to carry on a conversation. “The result is an English gap, one that divides Europe’s haves from its have-nots. In the 19th and 20th centuries, Europeans brought peasants into the workforce by teaching them to read and write the national language. These days the equivalent challenge is to master Europe’s international language. Those that fail – countries, companies and individuals alike – risk falling far behind.” (Business Week, *The Great English Divide*, 2001, August 13, p. 36, cited in Gill, 2004, p. 149).

In postcolonial Asian countries, the consequence of globalization in deepening the Big Divide is even more serious. This is because typically the new ruling class consists of the elite who had access to the colonial language and therefore were able to participate socially, politically and economically during the colonial regime. As mentioned earlier in this paper, these elites would naturally want to protect their own interests by advocating the importance of maintaining the use of English in education, government and law. The growing importance of English in the era of globalization is often used as a justification.

In India, the elite of the society who continued their education beyond secondary level consisted of only 6% of the population (Annamalai, 2004). These elite had access to the colonial language and thereby came to power and wealth during the colonial regime. Scientific knowledge and modern

values continue to be disseminated through the English educated elite to the rest of the population after decolonization. The dual language stream in schools in which only the select few have access to English perpetuates social inequality. This inequality is further reinforced by the use of English in science disciplines and professional studies such as medicine, and the use of Indian languages in the study of arts and humanities in college. The students of the latter are usually less able academically and come from families of lower socio-economic status. It also “perpetuates an unequal linguistic dichotomy in terms of language ideology” (Annamalai, 2004, p. 190). During the colonial regime, English was projected as the language of rationality, progress and modernity because it was the means for transmitting knowledge from the West. The Indian languages were projected as the language of cultural traditions, values and emotion. This ideological divide between material progress and cultural roots contributed to further social inequality.

In Malaysia, the bifurcation in the medium of instruction in tertiary education has serious social and political consequences. It is divisive socioeconomically because private universities, which are English medium, are much more expensive than public universities which are Malay medium. It is also divisive ethnically since the majority of the students in private universities are Chinese who can afford expensive education whereas those in public universities are mostly Malays who cannot.

In Hong Kong, the social divide between the haves and the have-nots is intensified by the much easier access to English medium education by middle class children, as compared to working class children, through various avenues, including public, private and overseas schooling.

Fishman (1996) raised the question of whether the persistence of English after decolonization might better be termed “the democratization of a formerly elitist resource” (p. 7). The evidence from Asian countries discussed in this paper shows that the elitist group might have grown slightly bigger after decolonization, but there seems to be little evidence a formerly elitist resource is being democratized.

The Big International Divide

At the international level, the term “lingua franca” hides the inequality that is inherent in a system that is supposed to serve both the native and non-native speakers of the language equally well, but clearly serves some better than others.

Phillipson (1992) coins the term “linguistic imperialism” to describe the domination of English worldwide, which he defines as “the dominance of English as asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages” (p. 47). He observes that linguistic imperialism is analogous to economic and military imperialism, except that it is even more pervasive and penetrating because the domination is not just economical but also cultural and ideological.

Phillipson’s notion of “linguistic imperialism” has been heavily criticized by Conrad (1996) for suggesting that “English needs to maintain its dominance (as if a language were somehow conscious of its own status), and therefore, “interested” parties, i.e., exploiters, promote inequalities between English and local languages” (p. 24). Fishman (1996) observes that the continued domination of English in former British and American colonies is not necessary externally imposed but rather driven by their own internal needs and interests. He argues that it is important to situate the domination of English in each country in its specific contexts and not make sweeping generalizations (see also Spolsky, 2004).

While Fishman and Conrad have grounds for saying that the domination of English is not always consciously driven by native speakers of English with an ulterior motive of exploitation, it is undeniable that decisions regarding language policies in developing countries are influenced and constrained by the preferences of international political, economic and development enterprises who have set the parameters for the language choice of developing countries. Most of these enterprises have set a preference for English because of the powerful influence of English native speaking

countries in economy, technology and politics. Very often, the so-called “native-speaker model” of English is preferred. This results in an asymmetrical power relationship where the lack of access to English disenfranchises a country from international participation. This is why so many non-English speaking countries, including Asian countries, are pouring resources into the learning of English. Seen in this light, one cannot help but wonder whether Fishman’s (1996) proposal of reconceptualising English as a multi-national tool rather than an imperialist tool, and as “the lingua franca of capitalist exploitation rather than the vehicle of imperialism or even neo-imperialism” (p. 8) does indeed hide the asymmetrical relationship between countries where English is a native tongue and those which are not.

LINGUA FRANCA AND ETHNOCULTURAL IDENTITY

By equipping the nation with the language(s) of modernization and technological advancement, developing countries are better able to keep abreast of developments in developed countries, and smaller states are able to integrate better with bigger states. This creates tension between cultural assimilation, in varying degrees, and the preservation of national and ethnocultural identity.

Conrad (1996) argues that English cannot be tied to any shared culture or any “ethnic” identity. He maintains that English is the “inter-national language par excellence at the close of the twentieth century, and the first language of millions of people who are neither historically nor culturally related to Britain Many people, ..., of Africa, India and Europe are fully fluent in English, even speak it as their principal language, with no loss of their cultural identity...” (p. 21).

The experience in some Asian countries, however, does not seem to support Conrad’s observation. In Singapore, “English is made to carry the nation’s voice in a land of many multilingual Asian voices.” (Pakir, 2004, p. 124). The tension between adopting a national identity symbolized by a

foreign language and retaining the ethnic identity and its associated culture and values can be seen very well from the following description by Pakir (2004):

A uniquely Singaporean identity is being crafted in English, but with Asian imagery and imagination.... A major paradox is that English has emerged as the only contender for the supra link language to express a uniquely Singaporean identity and yet it is at the same time perceived to be the channel for avant garde, pseudo-westernized behaviours as opposed to conservative beliefs and practices grounded in and transmitted via ethnic languages. (pp. 124-125)

This tension has generated a debate in the country recently on how to balance the needs of what has been referred to as the “cosmopolitans,” that is, the English educated who have access to power and wealth, and the “heartlanders,” that is, the vernacular speaking core of workers. Underlying this tension is perhaps an even more profound issue of whether and how a national identity built on a foreign language has undermined the ethnic identity of the individual.

In Hong Kong, the question of cultural and national identity is a long-standing issue. Although the resistance to mother tongue education policy by the people of Hong Kong was mainly motivated by pragmatic concerns, underlying this resistance is a more profound issue of the cultural identity of the people of Hong Kong which is at odds with the national identity. The identity of the citizens of Hong Kong as “Hong Kong people” or “Hongkongese” was consciously cultivated by the colonial government in the late sixties after the riot in 1967 organized by the left-wing pro-China camp in Hong Kong to distance its people from their national identity. Over the years, as a result of conscious efforts of the colonial government to position Hong Kong as an international city and the rapid economic development of Hong Kong as a cosmopolitan city, the people of Hong Kong see themselves not as Chinese but as “Hongkongese.” Yuen (1998) reported a survey conducted on Hong Kong people’s identity which showed that only 20% considered themselves

Chinese whereas 40% considered themselves Hongkongese and the rest “Chinese in Hong Kong” or “Hong Kong people in China” (Tsui, 2004, p. 111). Embodied in what appears to be a local identity are western values of freedom and democracy, and western ways of life and western affluence (Matthews, 2001). For the people of Hong Kong, access to English is an extremely important means to maintain what they consider to be the distinctive features of Hong Kong so that it does not become just another city in China. The SAR government has tried hard to instill a sense of national pride and to promote the development of a national and cultural identity through “patriotic education” in the school curriculum, through slogans like “love your country, love Hong Kong”, and through reviving traditional Chinese cultural values. Despite these efforts, the urge from the community at large to maintain its own “local identity”, through maintaining English and the vernacular, Cantonese, has become stronger than ever.

In South Korea, the promotion of English has caused concern in the community, particularly the introduction of English in elementary years because those are the formative years of developing literacy in the Korean language and establishing their national and cultural identity. Lee (1992) (cited in Jung & Norton, 2002) found that there were concerns that the development of the Korean language would suffer and that students might favor the British and American culture rather than the Korean culture. Jung and Norton’s (2002) interview and questionnaire survey on teachers showed that while 90% agreed that English should be a compulsory subject in elementary school, 60% saw English as only one of the foreign languages rather than an international language. Therefore they did not believe that English should be given special emphasis. Many teachers in the survey expressed concern about the students’ preference for English classes and were apprehensive that students’ commitment to the Korean language and cultural practices would be undermined. It is interesting that the Korean government tried to gain public support for introducing English in early education by arguing that doing so would promote a deeper appreciation of the Korean culture and will enhance a better understanding of other cultures

(see Jung & Norton, 2002).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper, I have examined some of the common issues and tensions faced by many Asian countries. At the risk of gross generalization, I have pointed out that despite having gained political independence, these countries still suffer from an asymmetrical relationship with countries in the West. This imbalance is realized through the continued domination of English, although such domination is not necessarily orchestrated by the West in each and every case. I have also outlined some of the common tensions faced by Asian countries that are generated by such domination.

I would like to conclude this paper by pointing out that just as colonization generates resistance from the very local elites who had access to English and to the culture and values associated with it, perhaps the domination of English may also generate resistance against linguistic and cultural domination so that there will be a healthy balance between gaining access to English and the preservation of indigenous languages, and a balance between being open to foreign cultures and values and retaining one's own. But before we can achieve this somewhat idealistic balance, it is important to be aware of and to understand the complex interplay between various forces that have shaped and will shape the language policies in the specific contexts of Asian countries as they strive to play a more and more important role in the international arena.

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