

Lee Hock Guan and Leo Suryadinata, eds, *Language, Nation and Development in Southeast Asia*. Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2007, xvii+229 pp., paperback, ISBN 978-981-230-482-7.

This book is an outcome of the workshop entitled 'National Language Policy and Nation-Building in Southeast Asia' held at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, in 2003. The book encompasses chapters on language policy in the Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Myanmar, and Vietnam. The issues of language policy in Laos, Cambodia, and Brunei Darussalam were left out because of the unavailability of contributors.

On the whole, the book is an important contribution to the study of language policy and nation-building in Southeast Asia, as it gives detailed information and discussion on the issue in each of the seven countries considered. While most countries are represented in one chapter each that covers the chronological process and debates on language policy, the very complicated situations in the Philippines and Indonesia are each presented in two chapters, each by a different contributor who has a different focus. What makes the book particularly useful are Wang Gungwu's introduction, giving the humanistic touch of a scholar who is at the receiving end of language policies, and the concluding chapter on 'Vietnam Language and Media Policy in the Service of Deterritorialized Nation-

building' by Ashley Carruthers. While the former opens the debates that follow in the subsequent chapters, the latter looks beyond the physical territory of the nation, here to the Vietnamese diaspora around the world, which seems to imply a new dimension to the issues of language policies and nation-building.

The introductory chapter by the two editors gives a clear objective of the workshop and overview of the book. In the post-colonial period, Southeast Asian nation-building has centered around one national language 'supposedly' learned and used by all the different ethnic and/or linguistic groups. The factors that determine the chosen language are not limited to the socio-political situations of each nation, but include its economic position as well as its state of development. How the selected language is used to promote the nation's political ideology and economic gains even beyond its physical territory has also become an object of concern, as apparent in the case of the government in Vietnam promoting the language among the Viet diaspora.

Theraphan Luangthongkum in her chapter on 'The Positions of Non-Thai Languages in Thailand' gives a precise picture of the unbalanced ratio between the number of nations and linguistic groups in Southeast Asia: 'There are only a few Southeast Asian countries, but each country comprises several ethnic groups. As a result, both cultural diversity and linguistic diversity are natural.' (p.181) To handle peoples with such diversified and different linguistic

and cultural backgrounds, each nation in the region resorts to different measures based on their colonial background and the outcome of the power struggle within the nation. Each policy, however appears to change from time to time due to shifts in power, competition among people from different linguistic backgrounds, and/or the economic concerns at a given time.

The first two chapters cover the complicated language policy and nation-building in the Philippines. While Andrew Gonzalez gives a chronological description of the situations, T. Ruanni F. Tupas discusses in detail the debates among various social classes and powerful groups in the country over the issue of Tagalog/Filipino and English as a national language and medium of instruction. Placing these two chapters at the beginning of the book is logical as the Philippines seems to be the nation in the region where most of the language policy issues and complications have occurred, ranging from nationalism and the search for one's own identity to the competition among ethnic groups with different linguistic backgrounds, the choice of English as a national language and medium of instruction for its being a 'neutral language' as well as an international one, and the issue of social classes and the access to English-medium education. Given that the country's economy relies heavily on financial inflows from migrant workers, an adequate proficiency in English is especially important as it contributes to Filipino migrant workers being highly marketable abroad.

The next two chapters cover the situations in Indonesia, a country where a minority language, naming Malay, was chosen as the national language during the independence movement and which retains its prestigious status. Like the first two chapters, Lucy R. Montolalu and Leo Suryadinata give a chronological description of the language policy and nation-building in Indonesia, while Melani Budianta focuses on the role of Indonesian literature in nation-building. This adds a humanistic dimension to the book, as well as portraying a clear picture of how healthy the linguistic situation in Indonesia is. A country with a rich and diversified culture with a long history, Indonesia's literary scene is extremely active and embraces the introduction of new genres and language uses. Budianta rightly concludes that; 'This is not a linguistic weakness, but a cultural desire to negotiate between the diverse cultures and language in the global-national-local traffic. This anxiety is precisely what keeps Indonesian language and literature dynamically moving and obstinately diverse.....In this diversified market and in this openness for cross-cultural traffic and plurality lies the future of the multicultural Indonesian literature, where the future of Indonesia as a nation-state will be continuously imagined.' (p.70) This linguistic phenomenon in Indonesia is a good example of the stable and healthy existence of the 'Unity in Diversity' in one of the most a multicultural society in the region, if not the world.

In chapter five, Eugene K.B. Tan discusses the question in Singapore where English and Mandarin, both being non-native languages of most first generation Chinese Singaporeans, are promoted as official languages alongside Malay and Tamil, due heavily on their importance and status in world economy. Unlike other nations in the region, the language policy in Singapore also requires students to learn what the government calls 'mother tongue', a category that is not based upon conventional linguistic grounds, but more on family. The chapter also discusses the status of the other Chinese languages, the native languages of most first-generation Chinese Singaporeans, and Singlish, a local variant of English that binds all Singaporeans together, the use of which is not encouraged. Tan's chapter gives a clear picture of how instrumental a language policy is regarded in the economic development of a nation.

Lee Hock Guan's chapter on 'Politics, Development and Language Policy in Malaysia' focuses on the ups and downs of the status of English and Chinese as the media of instruction. The re-introduction of English as a medium of instruction for science and technical subjects, and the re-invigoration of the status and function of Chinese in Malaysia is an apparent evidence of how globalization and economics have ultimately determined language policy in a country, by-passing the internal competition between different linguistic groups and power houses.

Kyaw Yin Hlaing's chapter on the 'Politics of Language Policy in Myanmar' discusses how Burmese, the language of the Burmans who constitute the majority ethnic group in Myanmar, has been utilized by both the government and the various ethnic groups with different linguistic backgrounds. It is ironic that while the government instituted Burmese as the official language of the country as an action to assert its power over the other ethnic groups, those groups who are from different linguistic backgrounds also found Burmese a useful and convenient medium in their anti-government communication among each another. The new role of English as the language of modernization in the view of the government, and as a neutral language in the view of Burmese activists based outside Burma, is also informatively discussed.

In chapter 8, Theraphan Luangthongkham describes the language hierarchy in Thailand where Standard Thai is at the top of the hierarchy, followed by regional Thai languages/dialects, and minority languages. The roles of various foreign languages the Thais have been in contact with are also described. This chapter is full of information and statistics, with little discussion, as the linguistic situation in Thailand seems to contribute to social stability, suggesting that the Thais know when to use which language, resulting in a linguistically peaceful society.

As mentioned earlier, Ashley Caruther's chapter on Vietnamese forms a perfect closure of the book, as it takes

the issue of language policy to another level, i.e. beyond the physical territory of a single country. It also makes a linguistic connection between Southeast Asia and the other regions, showing how a government, driven by its economic concerns, tries to extend its linguistic control over the 'assumed citizens' beyond its physical state. However, while this chapter is a fine contribution to the book in presenting the role of Vietnamese in the contemporary world, the part of the book dealing with Vietnam proper would have been more interesting and informative if there had been a chapter before this presenting and discussing the language policy in Vietnam from the pre-colonial to the post-Vietnam war period. Readers would then see the bigger picture of the complicated linguistic situations in Vietnam where foreign languages like Chinese, French, and English, as well as various Vietnamese dialects and minority languages have taken their turn in shaping the language policy along the country's long history.

While the book is a rich resource for those who are interested in learning more about how language is used in nation-building and development in Southeast Asia, as its title suggests, the drawback of the book (and the workshop) is obvious. When discussing in detail how language is used for political purposes, the workshop organizers should have also invited some linguists and language acquisition specialists to give their expert contributions to the workshop (and hopefully to the lan-

guage policy-makers as well). It seems in all the chapters that each government in the region regards language merely as a tool and neglects its intrinsic value. A language seems to be useful only when it can help the government maintain its power, as in the case of the Philippines, Malaysia and Myanmar, unite the different groups in the movement against the previous colonial government as in Indonesia, and achieve economic gain and prosperity as in Singapore (and, in fact, the rest of the countries in the region). No government seems to have resorted to inputs of linguists concerning the linguistic value of any given language, be it from the aspect of historical linguistics, sociolinguistics, psychological linguistics, or applied linguistics. It has always been the case that people who know some languages but not much 'about' languages made a decision about which language to be used or imposed on a country's population that usually comprises diversified ethnic groups with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Lack of knowledge about language acquisition has also resulted in a lack of success in the study of foreign languages in most countries, or in achieving limited success below the desired level. Instead of seeking advice from those who are in the discipline, governments usually blame a scapegoat, as in the case of non-Mandarin Chinese languages and Singlish in Singapore. Local wisdom that can be efficiently passed along from generation to generation through a mother tongue (in the conventional

linguistic definition) gets lost when that mother tongue is not encouraged to be used any more. Inefficient methods of foreign language teaching and learning unnecessarily slow down the language acquisition and as a result also slow down or obstruct the economic gain that governments have aimed for. Any country with a population that cannot call any language its own, and real, mother tongue is also likely to face a perpetual identity crisis.

Titima Suthiwan
