

Asean from a geolinguistic perspective

Dinh Van Duc*

College of Social Sciences and Humanities, VNU, 336 Nguyen Trai, Thanh Xuan, Hanoi, Vietnam

Received 5 May 2007

Abstract. The paper focuses on the following:

1. Geolinguistics addresses the mixture and distribution of languages from a geographical perspective that is always associated with economy, population and society. A geolinguistic perspective, therefore, can shed more light on the specificities of a certain socio-political space in existence and development. Such is the case with ASEAN.

2. ASEAN originally (1967) was a political alliance for military confrontation. Regional and international political changes in the last few decades have gradually turned it into an alliance of partners for economy and security of the whole area of South East Asia. Geolinguistically, however, this space is rather special: it is more diverse than uniformed, more divergent than convergent. ASEAN comprises two groups of countries: those on land and on islands; their populations are accordingly varied. Geographical influences from China and India result in apparent economic and cultural consequences, and the language map shows obvious geographical segregation, which provides almost no grounds for assembly and linkages.

3. Unlike African, Latin American, Carribean and Arabic communities which have always had very close geographical and linguistic linkages, South East Asian space, both in history and at present, has seen more distinctions than uniformity in their languages in terms of structure; and their inter-contacts have brought about different conceptualizations as well as practices of language policies in order to harmonize various interests for development.

4. Geo-regionalism in language contact also has created cultural counter-flows - the invasion of the Sanskrit writing system from the Indian sub-continent and the squarish Sino characters from the Chinese continent, and later the forced contact with English, French, Dutch and Spanish brought along by colonialism.

5. It is difficult to find among the native languages a common, popular language for ASEAN in the future. The existence of cultural gaps underlying the language distribution is also of importance and interest.

6. The paper concludes with forecasts of language trends which may strengthen in the geographical region of ASEAN.

1. Originating from Europe, geolinguistics had contributed to identifying the dialect map of Germany in the 19th century before it

was adopted by modern linguistics, particularly in methodological aspect, which helps reveal the mixture and distribution of regional languages from a geographical perspective that is always associated with economy, population and society. A

* Corresponding author. Tel.: 84-4-8589679
E-mail: dinhvanduc2002@yahoo.com

geolinguistic perspective, therefore, can shed more light on the specificities of a certain socio-political space in existence and development. Such is the case with ASEAN.

2. One Chinese saying goes, "Domains under heaven, after a long period of division, tends to unite; after a long period of union, tends to divide" (Luo Guanzhong's opening statement in *Sanguo [zhi] yanyi*, Three Kingdoms or Three Warring States or Romance of Three Kingdoms). At the age of 40, ASEAN is uniting, enhancing and expanding cooperative and integrating activities. A retrospective look reveals that this is originally a political alliance of military colors that reflects the confrontation of the Cold War period and the Vietnam War. The name "Association of South East Asian Nations" (ASEAN, 1967) displays the ally relationship without many geographical, economic and cultural criteria. Yet currently it is aiming at those criteria and wants to forward on those bases.

3. ASEAN geographically comprises a group of countries on land, peninsulas and islands forming a wok-like shape between India and China, situating in the middle of the East-West marine trajectory, linking the Indian and the Pacific Oceans, which is very convenient for trade and is significantly important geo-economically and geo-politically. However, in terms of population and culture, this region is not an amalgamation. Its diversity and multidimensionality, even the cultural distinctions among the nations, diffuse the possibility to move toward a type of unity like Europe, West Asia, Carribee or South America.

4. There exist three big issues relating to geolinguistics in this region. First, the

regional language map distributes diversely, distinctively and non-concentrating. Second, language contacts with the outside world vary considerably and are diverse and multidimensional, which exerts decisive impacts on traditional language policies of each nation, and on a broader, regional sense, will influence ASEAN language policies in the integration process. Language diffusion is probably an obstacle to overcome on the way toward a community of the Association member states.

5. Possibly no other regions in the world are as narrow as South East Asia and yet with such a high density and diversity of languages. ASEAN can be divided into two groups: continental and island/peninsula countries. Those on land lying between the two sub-continents - India and China - have distinctive linguistic features. Even though some were originally related to Austroasiatic (like Vietnamese), typologically, they are mostly isolating and tonal languages (Vietnamese, Laotian, Thai, Burmese, etc.), while Austronesian and peninsula languages (Melayu, Tagalog) from Sumatra to the Philippines have partially agglutinating morphological structure. Around the ASEAN 'wok' are hundreds of ethnic minority languages influenced by various language families: Sino-Tibetan, Meo-Yao, Mon-Khmer on land and Malay-Polynesia on the sea. They might have had certain contacts or migrated, but basically they localized geographically. Language, culture and religion intermingled in accordance to international isoglosses which distinguish the status of each area of inhabitants. In the past, due to low and slowly growing productivity, economic exchanges in the region were low and totally unmatched with each nation's

potentials. When economic capitalism appeared, contacts and exchanges with the outside world were predominant, but the volume of goods and intra-regional transactions were very limited. Prior to 1945, most of the region was magnetized to the orbit of colonialism (the UK, France, the Netherlands, Spain, the US), and commercial and cultural transactions in the colonies were primarily oriented to mother countries; regional exchanges, therefore, were even more restricted. "Houses are standing back to back, yet their entrances are miles away" was the case for a long time among South East Asian nations.

6. Language contact is a geo-linguistic universal. The situation of language contact in ASEAN geographical region is dissimilar to that in Europe, West Asia or Carribee. Two major issues emerge: language and writing in the contacts. Linguistically, due to typological diversity (language structure), together with historical opportunities and risks, language contacts here contain both intra-regional and transregional contacts. Throughout the historical process, transregional contacts were influenced by migration, commerce and religion. The two major routes of contacts remained Indian and China. On the regional scale, Sino (Chinese) language had had contact with Japanese and Korean, and Vietnamese in the south for two thousand years, and even further south with Austroasiatic languages of Malay and Singapore. However, due to differences in the form of contact, there appeared in Vietnamese a way of Sino-Vietnamese pronunciation, which was unique and did not recur in southern nations. In Malaysia, Singapore and part of the islands, a number of communities spoke Sino as part of the

national languages; nevertheless, contact between Sino and indigenous languages was not significant and did not result in considerable diffusion nor a remarkable product both in terms of structure and function. Vietnam did not have such a Sino language-inhabitant community. Cho Lon precinct in Ho Chi Minh City has large Chinese Diasporas, yet Vietnamese remains the official language in all transactions and social activities. Languages from the Indian sub-continent moving to South East Asia did have certain inter-typological contacts and interchanges. These interchanges, apparently having occurred on the islands from Sumatra to East Timor (former territory in Indonesia), and trans-island/peninsula areas in Malaysia, were open, and contacts in language structure (vocabulary and morphology) were more evident than those relating to Sino and Thai. In the 17th century, when western capitalist economy developed, new contacts emerged in South East Asia. Commercial transactions and Catholic missionaries brought European languages to exotic shores. Spanish, Portuguese, English, French, Dutch languages one by one came into contact with indigenous languages. Immediately afterward, these contacts were segregated in accordance to colonial regions: Indochina with French, Myanmar and Malaysia with English, Indonesia with Dutch, the Philippines initially with Spanish and then English (when they became a US colony, 1898). Such contacts blew a new breeze into indigenous languages, but colonial segregation led to increased situation of "houses are standing back to back, yet their entrances are miles away" among the nations up till now.

7. With regards to intra-regional language contacts, the language panorama is also

pieced and patched: 5 nations on land (3 Indochinese countries, Thailand and Myanmar), despite territorial borderlines, the language map is extensively covered by Thai, Vietnamese and Mon-Khmer languages, and language contacts were obvious. Languages of Austroasiatic origin present in some areas (In *Tay Nguyen* - the Central Highland in Vietnam, for example) were restricted only in certain geographical localities and had little contact with Vietnamese. Meanwhile, in Austronesian areas, the largest intra-regional contact occurred with Meleyu, originally the language of part of Malaysian and Indonesian population. Influenced by Islam outreach, contact of this language brought about evident results: the geographical expansion of Melayu language use in Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei and Singapore as a distinct space from continental countries. A language with large groups of speakers on the *Eastern Sea* (South China Sea), Tagalog in the Philippines, though having contact with continental and island regions in the west (with Meleyu language), continued eastward to make contact with languages originating from West Pacific. Historical differences in the writing systems among the nations naturally resulted in cultural distinction (on New Guinea islands and austronesian region).

8. Language contact in terms of the writing systems is another peculiarity of the region. The Indian and Sino writing systems also initiated cultural and religious contacts in the region. The writing system originating from ancient Indian (Sanskrit) was used to disseminate Buddhist canons eastward as far as Tibet and China, and southward to present-day Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos PDR and Cambodia. Such contact, as evident in the current use of Sanskrit-origin

writing system in many nations, entailed an extensive diffusion of influences from Indian-origin languages as well as Tay-Thai and Mon-Khmer language groups, particularly in the lexicon, personal and geographical names. Unlike Sanskrit writing, Sino characters moved south through examination paths and dissemination of Confucianism ideological teaching. Vietnam was the place where Sino writing was the most influential; prior to the appearance of phonological writing system (Quoc-ngu), the Vietnamese people had created the Nom script based on Sino squarish characters, and a few other writing systems of Vietnamese ethnic minorities were formulated in the same way. Differences in the writing systems intensify cultural distinctions among inhabitant communities in the region. Roman writing acquired increasing predominance in the region, which partially strengthened the use of English as a common language in ASEAN transactions.

9. Let us now turn to language policies. Policies involve national planning, and language guidelines derive from each country's reality and desires. ASEAN language map is a complexity. Most countries in the Association are multilingual nations (Vietnam, Laos PDR, Thailand, Malaysia, etc.) In each country, however, a majority language may predominate, but it cannot cover the colors of other languages, and the differences in development levels and language usability in social life exist as a natural necessity. National language policy-making depends on various calculations normally involving, for instance, the majority native speakers, the actuality of language distribution on population basis, historical and current migration, writing traditions,

language contact, native speakers' consciousness, language traditions in artistic poetics, amongst others.

10. Specific language policies, in relation to geolinguistics, of ASEAN nations are quite flexible. On the continent, the three Indochinese countries, Thailand and Myanmar, each has the language of an ethnic majority selected as the national language (Viet over 80%, Laotian 70%, Thai nearly 90%, Burmese 70%, Khmer over 80%), and in each of the national languages the policies are realized in different ways: The Government of Vietnam considers Vietnamese the national language, and purports to develop and preserve the values of ethnic minority languages. Laos also has policies on equality of ethnic languages, while such rules are not explicit in Thailand where minority languages, except Chinese and Malay, seem to be encouraged to integrate into Thai, the national language. This is not the case with island/peninsula nations. In three island nations of Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei, though Melayu emerges as an official language, it is not yet a true representative of the inhabitants' languages. Melayu is of Austroasiatic origin and belongs to Malay-Polynesian language family. Initially, it was the language of Melayu community (Proto-Malay); around 60% of this nation's population was indigenous inhabitants of Indonesia and neighboring areas (it is possible, in a broader scope, to mention such other Vietnam's ethnic minority languages as Cham, Ede, Giarai, etc.). Later, Melayu lexicon was supplemented with more vocabulary from east-west contacts and its scope of use expanded to become a language spoken by a majority of speakers throughout Indonesia (nearly 90% of the 200 million

population). Realizing this fact, the three island nations agreed to strengthen Melayu and coordinated their control through the Trans-National Language Council. It is necessary to add that in these island nations, along with Melayu, there exist hundreds of other indigenous minority languages. Unlike continental countries, however, Chinese and Indian languages are also widely used alongside English in these nations, and in fact, people have the right to use whichever language of their preference in social communication and transaction.

11. The Philippines and Singapore are exceptional. Singapore is an island-city state with diverse population. Chinese people account for nearly 80%, yet Melayu is considered the national language, despite the fact that Malay-origin inhabitants only account for about 15%. In fact, besides Chinese and Melayu, English enjoys a critical status as the foundation of the national administrative language. Flexibility in language policies is one of the dynamics for this country's cultural, scientific and technological development. This is not the case with the Philippines. With more than 80 million population, but as an isolating island state in the west Pacific, the Philippines experiences uneven inhabitant distribution: the Bisai people account for 35%, the Tagal 25%, the Illoca 12%, etc. Among these, Tagalog soars as a well-known language, for Tagalog speakers, though accounting for only 25%, reside in culturally and economically developed areas in central and southern Luzon Island. The Philippines became a colony of Spain quite early, and was transferred to the US in 1898, so the use of Spanish and English along with the indigenous Tagalog language grew naturally