

## Book Review

Rappa, A. L., & Wee, L. (2006). *Language Policy and Modernity in Southeast Asia: Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand*. Springer. (163 pages)

*Kornwipa Poonpon*<sup>1</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

Published among rapid spread of global languages, this sixth volume of the Language Policy series highlight the ways in which modernity challenges and informs language policies of major Southeast Asian countries. The book is particularly intended to not only discusses impacts of modernity on the status of indigenous languages in Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand, but also draws attention to the ways in which these nations handle with the spread of English and accommodate their local languages at the same time. Rappa and Wee organize their discussion in six chapters. Chapter 1: Introduction, Chapter 2: The federation of Malaysia, Chapter 3: The Republic of the Philippines, Chapter 4: The Republic of the Singapore, Chapter 5: The Kingdom of Thailand, and Chapter 6: Conclusion.

### SUMMARY

In Chapter 1, Rappa and Wee outline a framework for analyzing dilemmas in the context of language policies and modernity in the four Southeast Asian countries. The authors initially situate their idea regarding

---

<sup>1</sup> Chair, English Program (BA), Humanities and Social Sciences, Khon Kaen University

modernity as “the rise and spread of the products of rational activity” (p. 2) which includes scientific, technological, and administrative activities performed by state and non-state actors. The authors view that individual nation-states have different goals and means for attaining these activities since they have distinctive traditional practices and cultures. In this respect, the state’s nationalist ideology plays a mediating role in legitimizing specific language policies and in coping with the spread of English as the language of modernity. A challenge for the Southeast Asian nation-states then is to find a balancing act between the desire to maintain the traditionally-valued status of indigenous languages and the need to manage the language of modernity (Fishman, 1989). In order to understand the balancing act or ‘narrative of modernity’ of the case studies, the authors introduce three relations including equivalence, displacement, and complementarity. The equivalence relation is found in a situation where the mother tongue(s) of major ethnicity(ies) is given equal support and emphasis from the government (e.g., in Singapore). The clear evidence of displacement shows an acceptable co-presence of the national language and the English language (e.g., in Malaysia). In this case, the choice over one language as the dominant language promotes the cultural and traditional values associated with an ethnic group. The complementarity or non-competitive situation is obviously found in a state where English and the mother tongue(s) are assigned to serve separate functions in the language policy (e.g., in Singapore).

Along with the notion of the balancing act, the authors hypothesize the equal role of both English and indigenous languages in the four countries as ‘linguistic instruments’. On one hand, the use of English as a tool to access scientific and technological knowledge and communicate in world markets identifies its instrumentalist value. On the other hand,

the modernity enforces policy decisions on what should be the primary language in education and this leads to competition between English and the indigenous languages. Consequently, local languages are not viewed as markers of ethnic identity but rather in specific utilitarian values.

In the next four chapters, the authors use the framework of modernity narrative to discuss how each nation-state employs its uniqueness of traditions in establishing independent path to modernity, what relations are performed in its balancing act, and how indigenous languages are treated in linguistic instrumentalism terms.

Chapter 2 examines the language policy of Malaysia, a modern state of great social and cultural disparities and political contradiction. In this predominant Malay-Muslim state with an economically powerful Chinese population, Malaysia has a commitment to a bumiputera policy which promotes ethnic Malays. Despite internal conflicts of ethnicity, Malay has been the language of choice over other indigenous languages such as Chinese and Tamil since its independence in 1963. The Malay language, with the backing of political power, not only represents the language of nation building but also the concept of traditional cultural practices or 'adat-istiadat'. This 'adat-istiadat' concept causes difficulties for Malaysia to merge its traditional elements with the challenges of modernity. To handle with this dilemma, the Malaysian state decides to use both Malay and English languages to negotiate the tensions arising from the internal factors of ethnicity and the external forces of globalization. Malay is therefore used as the national cultural language and English as the international language of modernity. Apart from this fact, the language policy in Malaysia is also hoping to represent Malay as an instrument to access to greater socioeconomic mobility, and not just traditional Malay culture. This can be seen in the acceptance and validation of Bahasa

Malaysia as compulsory in all Malaysian schools and as the medium of instruction at all institutions of higher education, while English is used as 'a' medium of instruction instead of 'the' medium of instruction in education. Here the language policy shows clear evidence of displacement where the co-presence of Malay and English languages is unacceptable. In this case, the choice over Malay language carries with it all the cultural and traditional values associated with the ethnic Malays.

In Chapter 3, Rappa and Wee argue that "Philippine society is characterized by the politics of clientelism, a tenuous democratic transition, and reluctance on the part of most elected presidents to fully engage the issue and questions pertaining to language policy" (pp. 59-60). The authors then illustrate how religious relationships between a patron (the majority Catholic Filipino) and a client (the minority Muslim Filipino) have resulted in the on-going local war. This politics of clientelism has a great impact on language policy in the Philippines. Whereas the patron values English language, the client opposes to the use of this modern language and wants to preserve their indigenous languages. Although both Filipino and English are declared as official languages in the Philippines, they are treated differently. Whereas Filipino is considered a prominent local language of a dominant class, the use of English is considered a threat as it has marginalized and terminated many indigenous languages in the Philippines. From this point, Rappa and Wee refer to complementarity and displacement relationships between indigenous and Western elements in the narrative of modernity. The language policy in the Philippines promotes a relationship of complementarity between English and Filipino, where the former serves the largely instrumentalist goal of ensuring international economic competitiveness and the latter serves to mark the national identity. For a small but vocal minority group at indigenous

level, however, Filipino is seen to displace English and becomes the only language of official communication. As such, the use of Filipino is envisioned to complement the use of a variety of local languages. This linguistic conflict is considered one of the reasons why the Philippines's language policy has failed to be implemented into actual practices. Couple with this, the absence of constitutional continuity due to the Philippines presidents' political apathy towards language policy has shown another evidence of policy failure. Rappa and Wee conclude that the modernity in the Philippines is marked by the lack of a strong and respected state in tandem with a lack of continuity and commitment to a stable and consistent language policy.

Singapore's language policy is the focus of Chapter 4. Singapore has a very unique narrative of Asian modernity due to the interesting origin of the nation-state. After the independence from the Federation of Malaysia in 1965, the country had to seek for a way to survive in a crisis and a pressure of independence without any natural resources. As a result, the Singapore's first prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, emphasized self-sufficiency, where the state was to provide individuals with necessary skills to be economically independent. With this in mind, the Singapore's government has to always ensure its economic competitiveness in the global marketplace by strongly encouraging its people to be bilingual in English. English is thus declared an official language. At the same time, the state's commitment to multiracialism has also influenced the language policy to assign official mother tongues as a sense of unity for the three major ethnic groups (Chinese, Indian, and the national language Malay). The evidence of the four-official-language policy is clearly shown in media (four major local newspapers, one for each of the four official languages) and educational system (students learning English and their

mother tongue, the latter being taught as a second language). Rappa and Wee understand the balancing act of the Singapore's government in both complementary and equivalence values. The former is shown in the relationship between English and the three mother tongues, performing different functions in Singapore society. The latter is demonstrated in the assignation of the three mother tongues to the three major ethnic groups as the way to accommodate the linguistic diversity. Regarding this narrative of modernity, Rappa and Wee notify that, unlike the Philippines, the Singapore's language policy on bilingualism and the use of Malay as the national language experienced success because of the continual and strong support and administrations of its prime ministers towards their nation building.

In terms of linguistic instrumentalism hypothesis, the authors rationalize two factors that will lead the government to value the mother tongues linguistic instruments. When the mother tongues' roles are threatened by the use of English either from a development of a colloquial variety of English in communication (Singlish) or an attempt by some segments of Singapore society to claim English as their mother tongue, the government is likely to promote Mandarin and Malay the key languages to enter the world trade, not just markers of identity. However, the authors conclude that an attempt to maintain this disparity across the mother tongues in the contexts of linguistic instrumentalism will be challenging in the Singapore educational system.

Chapter 5 considers the ways in which modernity challenges Thailand. Unlike the other countries included in this volume, Thailand has no experience of colonization. Therefore, avoidance of "threats to the country's independence from colonial powers" (p. 106) seems to be one

influence of the state's modernity narrative. Couple with this, the more important keystone lies in Thais' sense of love and respect to the royalty, who are highly literate in Standard Thai. These two major factors have informed language policy to declare Standard Thai as the only national and official language. The policy implementation is clearly seen in the compulsory status of Standard Thai as the medium of instruction in every level of education. Despite the linguistic and ethnic disparity, the government ensures the continued status of Standard Thai by equally considering all other non-Standard Thai as foreign languages. This binary distinction of languages shows a complementarity relationship between the Thai and non-Thai languages, with the former serving primarily as identity markers and the latter serving mainly instrumentalist goals. The same consideration is true with the most popular use of English, among other foreign languages such as Japanese and French, in Thailand's economical and educational systems. Thailand has always appreciated English as a foreign language serving a utilitarian purpose in facilitating international trade and diplomacy. The authors notify this distinctive treatment of English in Thailand and in the other countries (Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore), where English plays a 'nativized' role as an official language used in the local, educational, administrative, and legal systems in the latter group. Rappa and Wee, however, discuss a challenge that Thailand might be facing in the future when more Thais become better English speakers in the globalization. Such challenge might lead to a displacement of Standard Thai. In this regard, it seems inevitable to involve Standard Thai in the country's modernizing process rather than being relegated to the only traditional status. The authors predict that Standard Thai will eventually be seen in instrumentalism terms.

Chapter 6, the concluding chapter discusses some similarities and differences encountered by these four nation-states as a result of modernity. These countries similarly view the role of English as “an agent for change that possesses clear functional results in surviving the pressures of globalization, the vehicle of political, social, and cultural change in modernity” (p. 127). All four countries also share the primary way to carefully handle with the language of modernity by basing their narrative of modernity on the country’s social and political backgrounds. In particular, the ‘threat’ posed by English to indigenous languages has invoked these nation-states to not only appreciate the prestige of the national languages as identity markers but also reconsider them in their ‘local’ utilitarian values as the ways to accommodate local cultural practices. In addition, the authors suggest the complementarity relationship of the English language and the national languages as the most appropriate association of grappling with Asian modernity. The authors finally highlight two possible directions of inquiry arising from the previous discussion in the chapter. First, the discourses of linguistic instrumentalism in the Southeast Asian countries seem to include three significant features of 1) ‘monolithicity’ as shown in the use of the ‘standard’ language in the society, 2) ‘exonormativity’ when ‘incorrect’ or ‘deviant’ versions of the ‘standard’ language used informally, and 3) resource-orientation, the most familiar situation when the target variety identified and ensured to be properly taught in the society. The second point is related to the role of the nation-state under conditions of modernity. Despite the pressures through the communication revolution and the information age, these Southeast Asian countries have demonstrated the ways in which their language policy will play the continuing resilience of the concepts of autonomy and nation-state.



## EVALUATION

As summarized above, this book covers interesting case studies of the Southeast Asian nation-states. The examination of these states reflects on reality that any modern independent nations are encountering in the globalization, the increasing value of English and the internal and external pressures for linguistic rights (Spolsky, 2004). The book uniquely demonstrates how the nation-states which have different historical, social, political, and economic backgrounds seek for the ways to handle with the spread of English in the globalization, and at the same time maintain their indigenous languages. By providing demographic characteristics and historical background of each country, the authors successfully depict vivid and sensible tensions arisen from social and political contexts. They also did an excellent discussion on how these tensions are connected to the construction of language policy in individual nation-states. The authors' explanation of future challenges of these nation-states based on their hypothesis of linguistic instrumentalism is transparent and judicious. As globalization offers inevitable effects on language policy, this book, *Language Policy and Modernity in Southeast Asia: Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand*, will definitely be a good resource for understanding language policies and modernity from political and linguistic viewpoints. The book will be of interest to not only researchers in language policy and political theory, but also upper level undergraduates and graduate students in political science and (applied) linguistics.

## REFERENCES

- Fishman, J. (1989). **Language and Ethnicity in Minority Sociolinguistic Perspective**. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Spolsky, B. (2004). **Language Policy**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.