

LITERACY IN MULTILINGUAL SOCIETIES: AN ENDNOTE

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Abstract: Is there more illiteracy in the world? Or is being literate so much more complicated, more demanding than before? Common to societies is the view that, in school and out, children and adults can profit from a wide range of experiences. When those experiences present themselves in the dress of different languages and dialects (in a multilingual environment) a demanding and complicated challenge emerges. Being literate in a society that hosts many languages is a multilayered phenomenon full of intriguing scenarios: (a) you are monolingual and literate, (b) you are trilingual and illiterate, (c) you support the introduction of indigenous languages in pre-school and early primary school but send your own children to special private schools where English and French are taught (not the mother tongue), (d) you formulate policies for literacy in a mother tongue which competes with other mother tongues, (e) the alphabet or orthography of a language chosen for literacy promotion is disputed as distorted grammar and unrepresentative of the correct sound system. Literacy in one national language is an honest belief. It is a force of unity and unification, it challenges tribalism and regionalism, it is the panacea for communal discord. Conversely, literacy in a designated national language can be an instrument of the suppression of minority languages and cultures, the rejection of language diversity, a policy that relates to political or religious power and rivalry.

Key words: literacy, multilingualism, postcolonialism, indigenous languages

“Any fact becomes important when it’s connected to another.”
— Umberto Eco, *Foucault’s Pendulum*

WORDS, SIGNS AND UMBERTO ECO

Any language becomes important when it is connected to another. Language is a fact and Umberto Eco’s proposition that facts in combination carry the weight of more significance can surely be applied to language. It is not that a language is essentially solitary, and thereby lacking, but rather than languages together become strategic, inquisitive, reflected in a mirror. This is the nature of the word. A word is a kind of sign. When a word is placed in context it becomes a complex sign. It acquires new meanings and new readings. Umberto Eco suggests that words do not have meanings that are simply lexical, but rather, meaning is continually deferred. A sign is, therefore, a vehicle of possible worlds and a producer of meaning: a text to read and interpret endlessly. A sign is both a fulfillment and an expectation. A personal name, for example, is a word full of significations. It encodes the past (how the name came uniquely to me), the present (public associations surrounding this shared name), and the future (what it can intend for bearers of the name). A place-name also tells the tale of the land because the land is a palimpsest upon which different peoples in different era inscribe their activities, their values, and their names.

READING THE SIGNS IN MACAO

In Macao, we read time codes in bilingual street signs such as *Calçada da Igreja de S. Lazaro* or the trilingual *Terminal Marítimo do Porto Exterior*, *Macao Ferry Terminal* and 港澳碼頭. The reverberations of this signage-sign touch the fringes of history and culture, economics and politics. The bilingual/multilingual sign admits several realms of meaning.



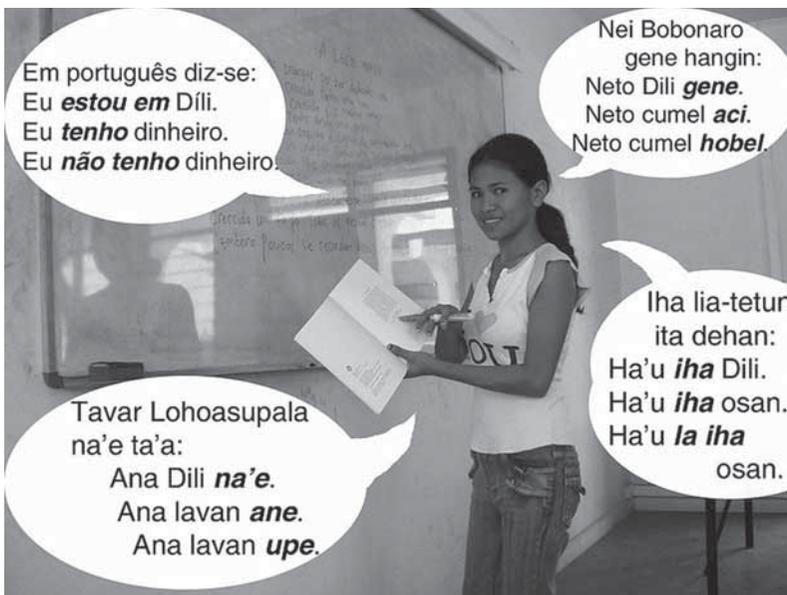
We stop and wonder. Portuguese? Chinese? English? Each display of language is part of a narrative and each language has come into view, in historical episodes, like a river rounding a bend. The sign is a textual realization of

- colonial history, annexation
- continuity and change
- political circumstances of reintegration with China and Chinese sovereignty
- language policy formulated by the local government
- the importance of tourism as an agent of capital
- language equality among two co-official languages

A sign denotes something, somewhere. It is a place on a map. A multilingual sign expresses the relational identity of a city and the fact that, for example, Macao is a micro-climate of several languages that serve the social order. Let us see how. Portuguese was the language of the Portuguese settlement from the 16th century but the overthrow of the Portuguese dictatorship, in 1974, led Lisbon to relinquish its overseas possessions and China assumed sovereignty in 1999. In Macao, Chinese (Cantonese) and Portuguese are designated official languages. The Macanese *Patuá* (creole based on Portuguese vocabulary and integrating Malay, Cantonese, English and Spanish) is spoken by a handful of residents. Portuguese occurs in the linguistic landscape as a written form. There are language networks of migrants from the Philippines, Thailand and China and Portugal. The literacy rate of the territory is 93.5%; the illiterates mainly among the senior residents over 65. The younger generation aged 15–29, has a literacy rate of above 99%. There is only one Portuguese-medium school in Macau. English is used in trade, tourism and commerce, and is also the major working language in the University of Macao. In the industrialized world of lifestyle languages, there are changing demands on literacy. It may matter less whether a citizen of the 21st century, compared to the 19th century, is literate in Portuguese, the co-official language of Macao, but the obligation to be literate in English and Chinese, for the purpose

of work, education and civic life is clear. A changing social order implies a new language regime that influences literacy practices in education.

How does this compare to the role of language and literacy in multilingual East Timor? As in Macao, Portuguese is an official language, following the postcolonial way, but now with a quite different set of symbols and expectations. Both Tetum and Portuguese are the official languages of East Timor (Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste). Indonesian which is widely spoken, and English to a lesser extent, are designated as ‘working languages’ according to the constitution. There are also 37 indigenous languages, of which are Tetum, Galole, Mambae, and Kemak. The literacy programme in Portuguese is gaining momentum and works through the medium of other languages. Literacy in East Timor continues to develop. It is reported that two-thirds of women and half of the men between the ages of 15 and 60 are illiterate (United Nations, 2010). More children now receive formal education but up to 30 percent of primary school age children still do not attend school. In the following picture, *Linguas timorenses in Mai ita aprende portugues ho Emilia*, a weekly Portuguese language course in Tetum, lessons published in the East Timorese newspaper *Lia Foun* (2006, February 9), Beatriz Cardoso dos Santos, an East Timorese girl learns Portuguese with reference to East Timorese languages (*uma moça timorense e linguas de Timor*): the languages starting top left clockwise are Portuguese, Bunak, Tetum, Fataluku.



Portugal established colonial control over multi-state Timor in the 16th century and relinquished control in 1975 after which Indonesia invaded and integrated the colony. An estimated 100,000 to 250,000 individuals lost their lives during a brutal campaign of *pacification* during this time. East Timor became independent in 2002 following a bloody separation from Indonesia. In a study of multilingual literacy practices on the armed front, the clandestine and diplomatic fronts, Cabral and Martin-Jones (2008) charted the ways in which literacy in different languages was embedded in the East Timor struggle against the Indonesian occupation. Particular languages were used for different purposes. Tatum

was employed as a lingua franca for informal correspondence and email, for songs and anthems. Whilst Portuguese was banned during the Indonesian occupation it remained a tool of communication with the outside world and among the resistance. Portuguese was used to 'write the resistance' (p.165) and prepare for a future civil society. Significantly, Portuguese moved from being a symbol of a colonial order to a symbol of resistance and freedom. Latterly, it is now supported by Brazil, Portugal, and the Latin Union and the country is a member of Community of Portuguese Language Countries (CPLP), also known as the Lusophone Commonwealth.

INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES AND LITERACY

Strategies and Options

The importance of literacy in local languages is not universally accepted. What Skutnabb-Kangas (2000: 598) called the 'parochial language fallacy' is the belief that single language literacy is the royal road to successful development in multilingual states. She assesses negatively UNESCO advisor Bhola's statement that "literacy in a language other than the national language may doom those involved to a limited, parochial and marginal existence (1984:191) and that "a single language of literacy has contributed to the success of mass literacy campaigns in Burma, China, Cuba, The United Republic of Tanzania and Somalia (ibid.,191). Education through a single language that is not the mother tongue of a community of speakers (i.e. a foreign language) might seem like a pedagogical recipe for illiteracy. And yet, this is common practice throughout the multilingual world. Mulhausler (1996) and Skutnabb-Kangas (ibid) go further in arguing that when one oral language is selected among several others, for writing and standardization, i.e. reducing the spoken language to writing, this also contributes to the reduction of language diversity.

Thus, the individual in a multilingual society may or may not be faced with several possibilities: (1) becoming literate in more than one language, including a mother tongue and another (local) language, (2) adopting literacy in a national or official language that has likely higher status than his own mother tongue. (3) learning to read and write in his mother tongue alone, (4) becoming literate in the national or official language through the medium of a language, bigger than his own, and which is not itself the official language. The International Conference on Public Education held in Geneva in July, 1965 setting out the stall for literacy policy (and the role of linguists and literacy workers), summarized core issues thus:

"In countries where a number of different languages are spoken by the population, the government before launching or extending a literacy programme, may have to decide what language or languages are to be used for literacy in the country as a whole or in particular areas or groups of population; furthermore, where it is decided to use an unwritten language or a language with a deficient orthography or lacking texts, the important task of studying and transcribing the language and preparing basic word lists, grammar and literacy texts must be entrusted to specialized linguists and educators, who must be given sufficient time to carry out this task before the teaching can begin" (UNESCO document Minedlit 6, 1965).

What Writing Systems in a Multilingual Society?

Many local language programmes in multilingual environments, are dedicated to

indigenous language support but there arises the question of what writing systems are appropriate. Kosonen 2008:180-181 notes how in northern Thailand, literacy programmes have been in operation for decades among the population of 60,000 Northern Pwo Karen and, more recently, small-scale literacy initiatives. There is argument, however, about the writing system. Some Pwo argue that the system introduced by NGOs, though readable, does not represent the sounds of the dialect and also that the earlier orthography developed by Christian Pwo is not theirs. Literacy initiatives work differently among the Chong ethnic population in the Eastern province of Chantaburi, Thailand, where Central Thai is the increasing medium of communication, especially among young Chong. To address concern over the declining use of Chong, literacy projects (led by the local stakeholders) were begun involving primary schools, children's story writing, curriculum materials production and writing workshops have been developed. Since Chong is a previously unwritten language, the literacy programme simply employs a Thai-based orthography.

Typically, local languages in Asia, Africa and elsewhere have been written in Roman-based orthographies. Linguistic fieldwork, language instruction and development were frequently done by Western missionaries. In Hokkaido, the northern island of Japan, John Batchelor transcribed the Ainu Bible into Romaji (Roman letters) in 1896 and in the Philippines, the earliest texts in Tagalog, the *Doctrina Christiana en lengua Espanola y tagala*, prayers compiled in 1593 by the Franciscans, were written in both Latin and baybayin scripts.

Literacy practices in Asia have continued for a thousand years. When the first explorers and missionaries arrived in the Philippine islands (Errington 35) they were surprised to find local people using "certain characters [which] serve as letters with which they write whatever they wish...The women commonly know how to write with them, and when they write, it is on some tablets made of bamboos which they have in those islands, on the bark. In using such a tablet, which is four fingers wide, they do not write with ink, but with some scribes with which they cut the surface and bark of the bamboo, and make letters" (quoted in Scott 1994: 210). In a world of limited literacy, some languages stand out as textual embodiments of truth, what Benedict Anderson called 'privileged systems of written representation' (1991:14). Latin was paramount as a language of truth in medieval Europe, a vehicle of meaning and a "superterrestrial order of power" (1991:14). The Roman alphabet has usurped that role in the modern era.

HOMOGENIZATION AND LITERACY

A homogenization strategy was fundamental to literacy practice in the colonial era. Whereas Asia, Africa and South America teemed with different dialects it was the duty of the corps of civil servants to create and codify one standard form that would serve as a tool of communication between local populations and their European superiors. This effort began with the selection of an influential local language and making a standard orthography and grammar. Errington describes the ironic situation in Zimbabwe where in 1890 a hitherto unimagined 'Shona language' was cobbled together by the European powers out of a chain of selected Bantu dialects. The policy backfired when a similarly invented 'Shona ethnicity' emerged, unexpectedly, in the 1950s to mobilize native opposition to colonialism. Shona is taught in schools in Zimbabwe and has acquired a literature; the first novel in Shona, Solomon Mutsuwauro's *Feso*, was published in 1957.

During the American colonization of the Philippines, English was made the medium of instruction nationwide; independence and liberation in 1946 being made conditional upon the acceptance of wide-ranging military and economic by the United States government. The backlash, during the 1960s, called for the establishment of a national language policy: ultimately, Tagalog-based Pilipino because of, as Tupas (2008: 236) writes, the dominant presence of anti-colonial, nationalist rhetoric which advocated the use of a national language through which a homogeneous set of ‘national’ ideals and dreams would flow”. This would only serve to cripple the cultural standing of some 150 local languages that would be moved aside by the pragmatics of the new political economy.

Popular understanding of ‘language diversity’, linking notions of ‘biodiversity’ and ‘cultural diversity’, continues to evolve in nation states and the globalized world. Whilst regional dialects were once considered inferior and unwelcome deviations from the standard language now they are viewed as authentic alternative forms. Some have brand status. Kansai’s Osaka-*ben* and London cockney are cool. Multilingualism is a social and political presence. It involves the recognition of regional dialects that were hitherto designated unwelcome deviations from the norm, older mother tongues, newcomer languages, and newly standardizing languages. Multilingualism in a society is greater than the sum of its languages. It resides less in the celebration of micro-ethnicities, but in a growing awareness of life-style hybridity and portable ethnicities that ‘play’ with language, a *jouissance* (like soft drinks machines in Osaka that say ‘thank you’ in local dialect) than appeal to industrial strength ‘difference.’ Multilingualism is inclusive. In most societies, it involves a zone of interaction between several languages and dialects. Let us consider this further.

WHAT IS A MULTILINGUAL SOCIETY?

A multilingual society is a place, somewhere, at some time, where language contact occurs between two or more languages. A Turkish Deaf signer in the Berlin metro reads a German newspaper and signs a piece of news to his friend across the train. A man from the Gaeltacht sings a song in Irish walking down the street in bilingual Galway city. A Tagalog-speaking Filipino man operates an all-English call centre in Shanghai. Multilingualism occurs when several languages are used in a particular location or society. There are approximately 4500-5000 languages in the world divided among 193 countries. Multilingualism is the social norm despite the fact that most countries recognize a small number of ‘national’ languages and (differently) ‘official’ languages (de Varennes 1996). Languages have different functions (e.g. temple, school, workplace) and different social distribution among people (the deaf, ethnic minority). When multilingualism is found within an individual speaker it is termed ‘bilingualism’. A theory of societal bilingualism is the answer to the question posed by Fishman (1965): *who chooses to speak to what language to whom and when?* It can be heard in the streets of most cities in the world. It is visibly present in the written signs of cityscapes in Tokyo (Backhaus 2005). In every country, in every age, multilingualism is a normal part of life. Much contact is taking place. The result of languages in contact is multilingualism - a society that possesses several languages. Languages are not all equal but vary according to power and prestige. These involve factors such as geographical spread, ‘socio-economic’ importance, cultural significance, number of native speakers and foreign language learners. It is likely that no society on earth can be called ‘monolingual’.

Language contact is taking place all the time and everywhere: in Macao, as we have seen. In neighbouring Hong Kong, for example, English and Chinese are both official languages of under the Hong Kong Basic Law. All official signs are bilingual, English language is widespread in education, publication and the media whilst Cantonese is the de facto official spoken variety of the population (97%). This co-exists with migrant and sojourner community languages such as Filipino (112,000), Indonesian (87,000), Japanese (25,000 speakers), Korean, Vietnamese, and Thai (Census 2006).

We distinguish between ‘official’ multilingualism (e.g. Switzerland, South Africa) and ‘de facto’ multilingualism (e.g. Japan). Multilingualism involves cultural and intellectual life, politics, education, history, personal identity. Many nations have been linguistically diverse in ancient and pre-modern history. The lines of cultural and linguistic flows influence geography, social and regional dialects, food, music, local history and tradition. There is a complex interaction between spoken and written forms complicated further by their distribution among mainstream varieties compared to other (‘sidestream’) languages. Consider Japan, for example, such as JSL (Nihon shuwa), Korean, Ainu, Chinese, Ryukyuan and others. Japan also has a tradition of Pidgins and Creoles (e.g. Japanese-JSL). Some pidgins are extinct (e.g. Yokohama Pidgin, Ogasawaran, Nagasaki Pidgin, Hamamatsu Pidgin) and some emerging (migrant worker pidgins). As Japanese society becomes increasingly multicultural, political and educational policy is still struggling to build an adequate social framework: replacing the previous monocultural, monolingual ideology to a new paradigm based upon 21st century linguistic and cultural diversity.

Multilingualism reflects population movement, for a variety of reasons, for example, work and education, migration. The U.S. Census Bureau reports that 36.7 million of the nation’s population (12 percent) were foreign-born, and another 33 million (11 percent) were native-born with at least one foreign-born parent in 2009, making one in five people either first or second generation U.S. residents. This means that there are many different types of language users with different needs. A person might come to be classified in a jumble of interconnected ways. L2 writer = second language writer, NNS = nonnative speakers, LP = limited proficiency, LL = language learner, bilingual = speaker of two languages, multilingual = speaker of two or more languages or generation 1.5 = someone who was born in another country but moved to the US and obtained some literacy education in US schools.

THE MOTHER TONGUE vs THE NATIONAL LANGUAGE

There is increasing evidence that, for young persons in multilingual societies, literacy skills in a home language are not only beneficial for the mother tongue but that they provide a more fluid and effective transition to the school language: learning is better and faster. The Threshold Project in province of KwaZulu-Natal South Africa (Macdonald 1989) indicated that literacy in English was enhanced when the cognitive and academic skills in local languages are such as IsiZulu linked up with school language. Butheleze (2002:1) has written that in South Africa, for example, resources in South African schools are inadequate and there is not the underpinning of culture of reading Literacy campaigns such as Masifunde Sonke (a Zulu phrase meaning “let us all read”) was launched in 2000 to develop a such a culture but encountered difficulty owing to a lack of available reading

especially for the poor, lack of support from publishers (for whom indigenous language publishing is a financial loser) politicians, labor movements, and business. This issue will be taken up further. We must ask, at the outset, what factors control and influence the choice of a languages in a multilingual situation? Bowers (1968: 385-387) provides an intelligent classification of what factors impinge on the choice of languages for literacy. In addition to the complicated choices faced by governments about which languages and mother tongues to adopt and which to pass over, there are other considerations.

Cognitive Factors. Knowledge of a second language (a national or international language) enhances prestige and widens the scope of communication and career opportunities. An illiterate person may already be fluent in second or national language. Needless to say, the case for primary literacy in the mother tongue is persuasive. It is easier and quicker to connect written symbols to known sounds and concepts than to those of an unknown or foreign language. Thinking in an unfamiliar language is disadvantageous, fluency of communication is slowed down, personal expression is handicapped. In adult literacy programmes in developing countries, typically held in the evening, poverty, distance from school, tiredness after work may play a part, the speed of progress helped by learning in the mother tongue is an incentive.

The language corpus and the literary status of the language. How is the language documented? Does the language have an accepted alphabet, dictionaries, a grammar and texts of stories and poetry. Preparatory work needs to be done if such materials of the language is not available. Where an earnest documentation of the language exists, such as dictionaries and grammars constructed by amateur linguists, the alphabet may be unsatisfactory or in a dialect which may be not be an acceptable standard accepted form of the language.

Teachers of Literacy. Volunteers, schoolteachers, specialists and non-specialists are the typical population involved in teaching literacy. This diversity can pose problems. Teachers of literacy require specific training appropriate to the teaching of either adults or children. Teachers are sometimes called upon to work with a language they do not speak, read and write fluently or correctly. In a multilingual situation, a 'bilingual elite' capable of dealing with two languages may be enlisted to teach literacy in a second language.

Materials and Workers. The availability of teaching materials is crucial for a programme adapted to the needs of learners. Assuming that the basic materials (a dictionary and grammar) are available and a satisfactory basic teaching kit is ready there follows other desiderata such as continuity of production of materials, cost and the workforce. Workers, cost, time, printing, computer access, the training and employment of teachers form the axis of success or failure in literacy projects.

MOTHER KNOWS BEST?

There are practical problems associated with the 'Mother Tongue knows best' formulation. Literacy in multilingual societies highlights the conflict between the importance of the mother tongue and the demands of a national language. On the one hand it is widely accepted that the proper development of a child's education is consonant with the continued use of a language used in the environment from an early age. This makes for

easier transition from home to school, enhanced cognitive skills, the internationalization of concepts, and reading readiness for the second language. However, in a society of multiple mother tongues or a society of increasing upward mobility of the middle class, which language will be designated the main medium of education? Many countries have tried to avoid the *huis clos* of a strictly either-or scenario. Complex situations reach for a hybrid solution. In many countries, the mother tongue is used as an early medium of instruction (pre-school, elementary school) and higher education is conducted in another language in a national or international language.

In Cameroon, home to 230 languages, Cameroonian Pidgin English as well as Camfranglais (Frananglais) are lingua franca. However, English and French are the official languages and a bilingual education approach is employed. Following independence, education was operated along language lines: English medium in the western Anglophone part - with one English- medium university - and French in East: although now the six state-managed universities in Eastern part are bilingual institutions. This contrasts with the national policy on education in neighbouring Nigeria a “nation of nations” comprising several ethnic groups and unrelated languages, where language policy favours the mother tongue at pre-primary and primary school up to level three as an essential part of the educational cycle and in order to achieve a permanent literacy and numeracy. Specifically, the government’s strategy requires among others: the development of orthography for many Nigerian languages, the production of textbooks in Nigerian languages. Things are not so straightforward. The use of indigenous languages at the early levels, as indicated in a study of language attitudes by Fakeye and Soyinka (2009) proves unattractive to parents who prefer their children to be taught in English especially since (a) teachers may be alien to the mother tongue of the pupils and (b) some pupils are from different ethnic groups where indigenous languages are not the same. Kolawole (quoted in Fakeye and Soyinka 1997) reported that “Many members of the educated elite in English-speaking West Africa countries who take part in the formulation of policy are loudest in praising the virtues of education in the mother tongue. Yet, when it comes to sending their children to school they settle for the special private schools where English and French are taught (but not the mother tongue).” It is likely that such paradoxes of literacy management in multilingual societies will continue.

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