○ **A. RAPPA AND L. WEE, *LANGUAGE POLICY AND MODERNITY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA (MALAYSIA, THE PHILIPPINES, SINGAPORE AND THAILAND)***

(NEW YORK: SPRINGER. 2006. PP. 159.)

One of the potentially most frustrating aspects of any work on national language planning and language policy is to balance the broadly political and wider social-ethnic-global perspectives with the educational aims of implementation. This is crucial for a deeper appreciation of the range of factors working with and sometimes against declared policies. This volume by Rappa and Wee [R & W] employs this most useful approach as it delves into the language policy frameworks and implementation in four regional nation states – Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. Both authors come from varied backgrounds in political science and language and combine well to give this necessary wider perspective.

R & W also concentrate on the impact of modernity, and this combination of both language and modernity provides the core justification for using these four case studies, particularly as each nation state has had to grapple both with local languages and with wider pressures for economic development – a process that in the latter half of the 20th century inevitably led to questions over what to do with English, a language that has featured so often in regional moves in economic and political change. R & W note that keeping English out has not been an option (p. 126), but there is always tension over how far to let it into the local linguistic equations. In similar vein, the authors note (p. 24) that this ‘tension’ naturally revolves round how to establish and maintain ‘space’ for indigenous languages vis-à-vis what may be seen in very Fishman-like terms as the ‘hegemony of languages of wider communication (LWCs)’, something that Fishman in the late 1980s saw as more likely in cases where the LWC was seen as ethnically neutral. One other key theme that permeates this study is that of instrumentalism, particularly the role of English in many of the case studies in ensuring a level of international connectivity and competitiveness.

Turning to Malaysia, over the last decade there has been a flurry of activity on (re)introducing English in such areas as science and technical teaching, and this has flowed back into tertiary education as well. Of course, not all of this has been plain sailing, despite the many calls by now retired Prime Minister Dr Mahathir for Malaysians

and especially Malays to 'modernise' and be effective participants at the frontiers of knowledge and technical expertise. The route to this goal was perceived as being via better access to and expertise in English, but NOT at the expense of the national language. All this was implemented against the backdrop of the economic crisis of the late 1990s, the internal pressures surrounding the abrupt sacking and jailing of the former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, the 'shock' of the 1999 national elections and its subsequent reversal in the 2004 elections under Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi, and the external maelstrom generated by various Islamist movements in the post-September 11, 2001 world. However, a strong argument could be mounted that this more recent move to revive some level of English language competence could never have happened without the series of post-1970s measures, including the closure of English-medium schools, to boost the status of the National Language – an argument that R & W do tease out and also note that Malay/Bahasa Malaysia/Bahasa Melayu is not under serious threat at this stage, although it will be interesting to watch just what happens in the future. It is also intriguing to see the ongoing public rhetoric over Dr Mahathir's highly inclusive term 'Bangsa Malaysia' and how this will eventually fit with the ongoing linguistic evolution that is Malaysia of the 21st century. The 'bangsa' here is a long way removed from the earlier more typical semantic field of a particular – and exclusive – ethnicity.

The Philippines presents a quite different scenario which naturally incorporates a quite different historical perspective too, one that has been heavily influenced by a significant Christian influence in the north, but which is counterbalanced by clear Islamic areas to the south. As well, the Philippines has a geography that covers geologically unstable areas and extends over some 7000 islands which 'house' at least eight major linguistic groupings and some 80 to 120 languages. Especially over the post-colonial post-World War II years, various Philippine governments have encouraged English in quite instrumentalist terms in that it is seen as opening up wider opportunities for investment and science and technology. In larger political terms, the authors argue that language policy in the Philippines has suffered from a lack of continuity as various administrations and their constitutions have swung between relatively short term language policy foci to periods of complete neglect. Nonetheless, the Philippines has also exhibited all the typical tensions of post-World War II modernity as it struggles to find the ideal language choice that will be a suitable mediator between the various competing languages without appearing to marginalise any significant linguistic community. In this process, there is a strong risk that indigenous languages, while seen as culturally important, will also be seen as languages of the past rather than of modernity. An additional factor for the Philippines is the role of the other official language, Filipino, vis-à-vis English and the

rest of the linguistic playing field. R & W argue that in the end there is a strong reliance on the role of local languages underpinning culture and the Catholic religion, hence ensuring that Filipino and English will not 'kill' indigenous languages. But operating across all this is what R & W see, in more political terms, is an entrenched patron-clientalism that tends to deflect attention from the formation and implementation of any sustained language policy.

In Singapore there has been a relatively long-term language policy seeking an English-knowing bilingualism whereby Singaporeans are to be bilingual in English and their 'mother tongue' – a mother tongue anchored in their father's ethnicity. While not having the level of linguistic diversity of the Philippines, Singapore nonetheless works with three major official mother tongue languages – Mandarin Chinese, Malay, and Tamil – with Malay also labelled as the national language. The latter was the result at the time of its largely reluctant 1965 separation and sudden independence from Malaysia of an acute appreciation of its geographic position in a largely Malay world. Ethnically, Singapore's population of approximately 4 million comprises 77% Chinese, 14% Malay, 7% Indian, with the remainder being Eurasians and Others. Singapore has always actively developed and refined its overall language policy and implementation and so language policy and planning has never suffered from any governmental neglect or distraction.

The difficult birth of the nation state also sparked the general assumption that linguistic diversity was a large obstacle to progress and ongoing racial harmony, a view consistently expounded by foundation Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. English then became a key vehicle of economic development and also as a neutralizing inter-ethnic link language. Over the years, and in the light of concerns about linguistic diversity, Mandarin Chinese has been promoted as the key ethnic language for Chinese Singaporeans – with other versions of Chinese 'demoted' as being 'dialects'. One sign of an increasing English-knowing bilingualism is that since 1987, all schools have been English-medium – as had the university system since the early 1980s. Of course, there are curiosities too, for example, the fact that ethnic Indians, no matter what their actual linguistic origin, are deemed to have Tamil as their mother tongue – unless they can successfully petition for another language as their mother tongue. And English is not officially seen as a mother tongue for anyone, a fact that has caused some mild expressions of dissatisfaction from some Eurasians. But perhaps the most interesting factor for Singapore is that a local 'standard' form of English is well recognised and often fiercely distinguished from the more colloquial Singlish – a variety that senior government figures are often at pains to urge Singaporeans to avoid, with the real intent being that Singaporeans ought to at least

acquire competence in the higher status variety, despite the obvious local identity and cultural weighting of Singlish.

There are now annual Speak Good English campaigns to back this, with the current Chair, Koh Tai Ann, spotlighting the instrumentalism of much of the policy, saying that Singapore could lose its competitive edge if its people cannot make themselves understood among other users of English (Koh Tai 2006). Perhaps, too, Singapore's language policy has been a little too successful as there have been moves in recent years to modify the curriculum requirements of the other languages, a factor reflected in the increasing use of English in the more private domain of the home environment. And more recently there was a revealing comment from a young commuter in the aftermath of a breakdown (July 24, 2006) in an underground [MRT] train that led to passengers having to be walked off the tracks. He was quoted as saying that the older 'aunties' could not understand the instructions as they were given only in English. Singapore has changed considerably since 1965.

For the last case study in the volume, Thailand, there is no real issue about English swamping local languages, and there is no question that Standard Thai is the language of choice for use 'inside' Thai society. While there is an ethnic diversity and some other 80 languages are in use, there is much evidence that suggests that for example local ethnic Chinese, who make up 20% of Thailand's population, are more likely to opt for Thai than Chinese. In the case of ethnic Malays largely from the south, the picture is more complicated, given that Islam is a crucial part of the construction of identity for many Thai Malays, and as a signal of separateness, there have also been frequent secessionist moves from Pattani Malay speakers. Overall, though, Standard Thai is a clear marker of Thai identity, an identity very much linked to the Thai Royal Family, while English plays a critical role in wider business and diplomatic links with the West. English has been present in Thailand for a century, but it is still viewed very much as an important but nonetheless *foreign* language. R & W argue that this role for English is perhaps the result of Thailand never having been colonised by Western powers, and that for most aspects of modernity, Standard Thai is successful, with recourse to English allowing linkages to the world at large.

The volume has encapsulated a neat range of linguistic policies and demands, and with the diverse frames that the authors can apply, there is a lucrative series of discussions and analyses.

Review by Brian Ridge, Campion College, Sydney

REFERENCES

Koh Tai, A. 2006. *Speak good English*. Speech given at the launch of the Speak Good English Movement on 25th July 2006. Singapore. Accessed 8 December 2006. Available from: <http://www.goodenglish.org.sg/SGEM/archive/speech/chairman2.htm>.