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Conflict, Language Rights, and Education: Building Peace by Solving Language Problems in Southeast Asia

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Introduction: Context and Setting

The term *peacebuilding* is generally understood to involve a range of measures to reduce the risk of a lapse or relapse into conflict by addressing causes and consequences of conflict. This brief report discusses peacebuilding in relation to language rights for ethnic and indigenous minority populations in Southeast Asia, and more broadly points to the possibility of an activist democratic language planning practice that aims to produce peace-promoting language policies in conflict-affected areas.

This brief is based on my work since 2012, and much earlier in Sri Lanka, on one class of language problems that are urgent and extreme: ethnic civil strife in three multilingual states of Southeast Asia—Malaysia, Myanmar (Burma), and Thailand. Much of this work has been done as part of a 4-year (2012–2015) Learning for Peace program—a partnership between UNICEF, the Netherlands, and the national governments of 14 participating countries—and specifically their Language, Education, and Social Cohesion initiative on conflict mitigation and language rights (Lo Bianco & UNICEF, 2016b).

Internationally, while there has been a dramatic surge in interest in language problems, the role of language problems in conflict is often obscured in accounts of political upheaval. This coincides with a global increase in demand for research-based solutions to language problems in societies undergoing globalization, as they become more multilingual, mobile, and porous (Castles & Miller, 2009). In several important historical cases of major political conflict, dispute about language policy has been central.

Conflict and Language

It was a language conflict that provoked the Bangladesh independence struggle. On February 21, 1952, many East Pakistani students were killed by armed forces for demanding equal recognition of Bangla/Bengali with Urdu, the main language of West Pakistan. The government's proclamation of Urdu as the sole national language of Pakistan was the spark for a long bloody war of independence (Mohsin, 2003; Uddin, 2006). Similarly, the announcement of compulsory Afrikaans in teaching school arithmetic and social studies in South Africa on June 16, 1976, was "the immediate cause of the . . . Soweto uprising" (Jukes, 1995, pp. 147–149), which hastened the end of apartheid (Alexander, 1989; Soudien & McKinney, 2016), just as language policy had been a central aim of "breaking up the black people into a large number of conflicting and competing so called ethnic groups" (Alexander, 1989, p. 21).

Many contemporary conflicts are internal to nation states, in effect subnational, and language issues are almost always implicated, with conflict specialists calling for better understanding of language problems (Parks, Colletta, & Oppenheim, 2013). In a watershed study of relations between language, identity, and social conflict, Brown and Ganguly (2003) found most examples of policy making around language in conflict-affected societies to be a sequence of technical failures and political disasters. The researchers collected data across 15 Asia–Pacific countries to understand ethnic violence that they attributed to *survival* (minority groups' sense of existential threat), *success* (research showing mother tongue education reduces education inequali-

ties), and *symbolism* (language recognition legitimizing equal citizenship).

A key conclusion was that national elites often adopt self-serving language policies and grossly disadvantage poor, rural, and ethnic communities. Yet despite the scale and duration of this research, the authors concede that it only scratches the surface of language and society dynamics, that government policies fail to recognize that language issues are invested with ideological, symbolic, and ethnicity associations (Askew, 2008), and that general policy prescriptions do not apply. In all but 2 of the 15 cases in Brown and Ganguly (2003), governments dealt with ethnic language issues either *poorly* or *disastrously*. Writing on conflict in India and Israel, Harel-Shalev (2009) has commented:

In a deeply divided, bilingual or multilingual society, the tension that accompanies the ethnic or national division is reflected in linguistic and educational policy. After all, a language is a national symbol and one of the most important social institutions in a state. Language signifies deep cultural associations, employment opportunities and other important aspects of the state. (p. 954)

The above comment focuses on how “linguistic and educational policy” is an accompaniment of division, while it correctly identifies language as both symbolic and practical and points to the ideological and material links between language and conflict. My research is finding that the relationship is not just reflective, through language mirroring extant problems, but that language questions and language itself are productive of conflict. I describe this as both “slow and fast acting,” so that hate speech, for example, can provoke direct and open violent reaction, since it is itself a kind of violence, and inequitable language policy in elementary education can entrench unequal access to literacy and powerful language, entrench intergenerational inequality, and therefore, in a slow-acting way, produce chronic tension and stoke conflict. My research has also found that conflicts are highly differentiated when it comes to the role and presence of language questions. The formulation I have used in relation to language/ethnicity/education conflicts in Malaysia, Myanmar, and Thailand is that some aspect of language is present in many conflicts, some kinds of conflict involve many aspects of language, and some conflicts are only about language.

Political scientists, conflict analysts, historians, and sociologists who document conflict often operate with a reductive or shrunken notion of language and either minimize its role in conflict or fail to see it altogether.

Increasingly, research finds both correlation and causation relationships between language grievances and threats to social cohesion, but what is the nature of these relationships? The research challenge is to specify precise dynamics, direction, and multiple and sequential roles of the language/conflict relationship, yet this remains elusive in political and historical analyses of the problem. An instructive case of this involves interpretations of Sri Lanka’s bitter ethnolinguistic conflict (DeVotta, 2003; Lo Bianco, 2011), in which terrorism and civil war were the “whirlwind” reaped by language policy (De Silva, 1998). The 1956 Official Sinhala Act repudiated the compromise of bilingualism in Sinhala and Tamil that had been advocated by a pre-independence commission, removed English from government, and imposed Sinhala for education and public administration. We can get a measure of the challenge by looking at what I will call the Bostock–Laitin interpretations.

Despite studying the same setting and time frame (Ceylon/Sri Lanka, late 1950s to 2000s), Bostock (1997) and Laitin (2000, 2007) reach opposite conclusions. In Bostock’s analysis, Tamil “language grief” was a driving force in fighting during the decades following the adoption of the 1956 law, but in Laitin’s analysis, language was relatively unimportant.

The National Settings

In Thailand, the research has focused on the long-standing ethnic and political insurrection in the “Deep South,” where 80% of the population is Muslim and Malay speaking (McCargo, 2008), whereas Muslims comprise only 2.5% of Thailand’s population. A distinctive component of the violent conflict involves the deliberate targeting of schools and teachers, directly impacting and marring educational opportunities for children (Premasiriat, 2015; Suwannarat, 2011).

The Malaysian component of the LESC Initiative has focused on the language grievances, both from vernacular populations (Chinese and Tamil) and indigenous groups. Education as a state activity is closely linked to creation of national unity through the management of ethnic differences (Haque, 2003; Singh & Mukherjee, 1993). Access to language and certain notions of language

rights are implicated in the continuing existence of un-integrated elementary school systems serving different communities, the majority through Malay-dominated national schools and two large vernacular communities of Tamil and Chinese students (Munusamy, 2012). Other issues tackled under the LESC Initiative include entrenched disadvantage and impoverished educational outcomes for indigenous peoples in Peninsular Malaysia (the Orang Asli), and lack of access to education and low school persistence of stateless children, particularly in Sabah and Sarawak (Nicholas, 2010).

In Myanmar (Burma), where most of my work has been located, five decades of insurrection and several simultaneous civil wars have marred the post-colonial history of the country. These conflicts are linked to demands by groups locally known as the *national races*, occasionally translated as “national ethnic races.” These indigenous and ethnic populations, considered to have historic presence in their territories, are in search of various forms of autonomous governance. They exclude groups seen as immigrants, especially the highly contested category of Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine state. Grievances are often if not always linked to claims for autonomous management of language and culture (Ganesan & Hlaing, 2007). Abrogation of pre-existing language recognitions by successive military governments has politicized issues of language and culture and exacerbated intergenerational educational and economic inequalities and disadvantage for many of Myanmar’s minorities (Callahan, 2003). According to Aye and Sercombe (2014), the overarching policy has been one of *Myanmarization*, more commonly called *Burmanization*, terms used to account for enforcement of a single national identity onto the large, unwilling, and geographically distinct main ethnic clusters, reinforced through repressive policing and administration across all social spheres. Groups not considered national races have been subject to additional kinds of repression such as denial of citizenship.

Language issues in general and language policies in particular are not merely implicated in wider questions of social relations and conflict but are often the signal expression of these conflicts. A key finding of the research under the LESC Initiative has been that disputes around language problems often represent a positive opening as well, sometimes the means whereby entry to solutions can be explored using an engaged and democratic language planning practice.

To elaborate the case of Thailand briefly, the ethnic insurrection in the Deep South has cost more than 7,000 lives since 2004 (Jitpiromsri, 2014; Jitpiromsri & McCargo, 2008; Vaddhanaphuti, 2005) with a strong but not fully understood role of language grievances in the bloodshed (Joll, 2010; Lo Bianco & Slaughter, 2016; McCargo, 2008). Education has been in the firing line in a direct and literal way, with some 200 teachers assassinated, schools destroyed, and staff and students often escorted to garrisoned school buildings by Thai military convoys.

There are many complex political and historical factors involved in the multi-causal mix of this particular conflict, but language problems independently and seriously aggravate tensions. Disputes about the following are most clear among them:

- Corpus linguistics: whether to write the local Malay language (Patani Malay) in Thai, Roman, or Jawi script
- Language pedagogy: whether, how much, in what standard forms, and with what age-level transitions to use bilingual education methods in delivering the curriculum, using some combination of Patani Malay, standard Malay, and standard Thai, and what prominence to give the two foreign languages of relevance, Arabic and English
- Low literacy as measured in Thai national assessments and therefore poor employment prospects within the national economy and locally
- Political discourse: nationalist debates that local Malay speakers find excluding
- Linguistic status: whether and to what extent to grant legal recognition to Malay in local administration of the Thai state

(Lo Bianco & UNICEF, 2016)

Re-emergence of Language Planning Scholarship: But What About Practice?

In this critical moment of worldwide demand for practical research and action in language planning, the discipline appears mired in excessive self-reflection and un-confidence. We need currently to work toward a scholarly reconstruction of the discipline but also to focus attention on practical capacity and institution

building for applied language planning. To achieve the latter aim we need to recover the idea of “language problems,” largely eschewed by academic scholars of language planning prone to consider these mere ideological constructs by powerful interests. In a cumulative way, we need to engage in progressive refinement of the main claims about the relationship between language and cohesion/conflict both to understand the phenomena better and to be of practical use to solving language problems and mitigating conflict. Language planning studies appear to be torn between critical perspectives that sometimes paralyze action and the overly technical and descriptive historical inheritance of the field.

During the 1990s and early 2000s, language planning was subjected to relentless criticism for being too descriptive, uncritical of its own approaches, too closely tied to state interests. In tune with a critical turn in the humanities and social sciences, language planning theories and scholars were subjected to criticism for failings both scientific and ethical (Ricento, 2012). Particularly relevant here was criticism related to what counts as a legitimate language problem and who should decide, in opposition to the bulk of post-war language planning, which assumed language problems were relatively objective, pre-determined, or even self-evident facts. Calvet’s (1998) retrospective analysis of post-colonial nation making criticizes first world language planners as mere technicians in search of *in vitro* solutions to messy *in vivo* problems and conflicts, scathingly concluding that “all planning presupposes . . . the policy of those in power. . . . By intervening in language [the linguist] becomes part of the power game” in conflicts that are nothing less than a “civil war of languages” (p. 203). In this view, economic, religious, or territorial struggles are inseparable from language conflicts, often being projected onto and expressed by language differences. Such criticisms were devastating and forced language planning into retreat. Academic programs closed, few conferences offered dedicated sessions, and even field surveys evicted language planning from their coverage, one locating it under political science (Lo Bianco, 2004).

New impetus for language planning—through global agendas, and different societal struggles with language problems, and demand for research to illuminate challenges of multilingualism—has grown exponentially, and today language planning is on the cusp of renewal. In August 2015, the UN General Assembly adopted *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable*

Development, building on the expiring Millennium Development Goals. Among the new Sustainable Development Goals are goals aiming to “promote peaceful and inclusive societies” (Goal 16), “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education” (Goal 4), and “achieve gender equality” (Goal 5). The UN ambassador for Sustainable Development Goals is Malala Yousafzai, co-recipient of the 2014 Nobel Peace Prize for her struggle for education rights in societies where schooling is denied to girls. Yousafzai stresses mother tongue education (Yousafzai & Lamb, 2013), despite the relative silence of the Sustainable Development Goals themselves on questions of language.

What is required for future work in language policy and planning is not more criticism of the top-down legacy of classical language planning, not just a rejection of the orthodoxy of technical protocols and descriptive accounts of language problems as perceived by outside experts and imposed undemocratically on diverse groups of people, not just a claim that language planning research and practice need to be less expert centered, but concrete examples, experiments, and success stories of interactive and dialogue-based alternatives. We need to replace the uni-directional, top-down tradition the field has inherited with a multi-directional approach, fusing top-down (law-centered) language planning with bottom-up and dialogue-centered language planning, converting language planning into a research and dialogical activity tied to law, economics, and economy, foregrounding interaction among researchers, officials, and citizens.

One installment toward such a reinvigoration of language planning is what I am calling “the language-problem-solving facilitated dialogue,” which I have been implementing through the LESC Initiative and the subsequent expansion into a Myanmar-specific project entitled “peace-promoting language planning” financed by the Myanmar office of UNICEF under the auspices of the Myanmar Ministry of Education and some state governments in the country. I have devised this particular type of facilitated dialogue as a kind of bottom-up language planning, building on ideas drawn from two schools of democracy literature—the deliberative and the performative—and my (still developing) understanding of conflict in multi-ethnic societies. Since 2012, under the auspices of the UNICEF Regional Office for East Asia and the Pacific, along with civil society partners and collaborators in Malaysia, Myanmar, and Thailand, I have conducted

some 35 such deliberations involving many hundreds of participants (Lo Bianco & UNICEF, 2016b). A key part of education conflicts centers around language of instruction in early schooling, and specifically around demands by indigenous and ethnic groups for mother-tongue-based multilingual education to replace the dominant practice of assimilationist education using only official national languages and English. Given the nature of two of the societies involved, participation in the facilitated dialogues has included military officers, government and community representatives, parents, local language and culture advocates, and academic researchers.

Facilitated Dialogues on Language Problem Solving

In February 2014 at Mae Sot, Thailand, in a refugee reception center for Burmese displaced persons, a facilitated dialogue on language rights and language policy for Eastern Burma communities, including refugee populations residing in Thailand, was held over 4 days and 3 evenings, using at least six languages. Participating were 68 individuals from 12 ethnic/indigenous groups and 22 organizations. It was based on a combination of mini-lectures, world café deliberation, small and large group discussion, problem-solving exercises, research presentations, field visits, simulations, and other techniques (see Lo Bianco, 2015a, for a list of the approaches and methods used). The outcome was a 32-page language rights declaration and the launch of MINE, the Myanmar Indigenous Network for Education. The press release and supporting documents of MINE state the following:

The Myanmar/Burma Indigenous Network for Education (MINE) was launched on Friday 21st February, International Mother language day. An ethnic education seminar hosted by the Karen Teacher Working Group (KTWG) from 12 – 14 February led to the creation of MINE. . . . Although the promotion of Indigenous language rights is at the heart of MINE, the network also recognises the importance of education in Myanmar and English languages and is seeking a multilingual language policy for the Union. . . . “The recognition of our language and culture rights is important to us, and is also essential if there is going to be peace and stability in Myan-

mar/Burma” [Saw Kapi, a spokesperson for MINE]. (“Mother Tongue Advocacy Group Launched,” 2014)

Thirty-five such deliberations have been held since 2012 across Malaysia, Myanmar, and Thailand, most of them in Myanmar. The immense public importance of the topics participants address in the facilitated dialogue is evident, and because they respond to a drastic increase in demand for attention to language questions in conflict situations, they represent a kind of language planning in action. Ideally, funding authorities would support a stronger research component attached to these facilitated dialogues, one that would include Q-sorting (Lo Bianco, 2015b). Together, Q-sorting, an attitude exploration research method, and deliberation make a radical break with past practice in language planning. They are designed to reflect both deliberative (Dryzek, 1990) and performative democratic innovation (Matynia, 2009), responding partly to the criticisms of language planning practice in the past and the need for field reinvigoration. However, the most important aim is to explore practical methods for seeking solutions to deep conflicts that are producing conflict and violence.

Language problems typically involve several or all kinds of language planning activity. One of the conclusions of the research under the LESC Initiative and the subsequent language planning activity in Myanmar has been that it is important to examine the underlying rhetorical basis of language problems: Who decides what is to be taken to be a problem, and with what capacity do such decisions get authorized in social and institutional life? What arguments, evidence, or reasoning goes into such decisions, and what are the legal, economic, and educational consequences? Initial research along these lines was commenced at the Central Institute of Indian Languages during the 1980s (Dua, 1985; Nahir, 1984) but was largely abandoned both there and in other settings. Dua’s research today appears important for his initial categorization of cultural and ideological processes in the determination of what counts as a language problem and how this, in turn, determines how language problems are treated in social and policy contexts (Dua, 2008). Reinvigorating language planning theory will require returning to the roots of the field’s emergence and its overlooked innovators. It will also require experimenting with new forms of dialogue that bring official decision makers together with com-

munity representatives and academic researchers in an iterative process of proposing alternative policies to the ones causing conflict, empowering local advocates to promote their chosen alternatives, and persuading authorities of the benefits of pluralism and indigenous language rights.

Investment in such research and theory building promises a more focused and systematic response to global and national language problems, conceptual understanding of the distinctive roles of language in social cohesion, and tools of intervention to ameliorate conflict in the increasingly multicultural societies of the 21st century.

Achievements of the Language, Education, and Social Cohesion (LESC) Project

In Malaysia, the first 3 years of the LESC project explored the question of how to renew and gain more public support for language policy, which has come to represent a source of frustration if not social tension. This question was a significant component of the country's 2015 Blueprint for National Unity. In 2016, planning has commenced for a conference on indigenous language education and rights policy to be held in the state of Sarawak in the near future. The calls from the LESC Initiative for review of the separate elementary education streams and for better support for indigenous learners are being debated within UNICEF and Ministry of Education circles. A comprehensive report on Malaysia's efforts under the LESC Initiative was published in January 2016 (Lo Bianco & UNICEF, 2016a).

In Myanmar, the first 3 years of the project have generated national demand for a comprehensive approach to a peace-promoting national language policy, which was adopted as a plan in November 2015 and will be completed by November 2016. One outcome is a major international language policy conference in Mandalay in February 2016, the first of its kind in Myanmar. The conference attracted 384 delegates from 37 countries and was significant in raising long-suppressed questions for open debate (Thu Thu Aung, 2016). It represents a key step in the development of interlocked state and Union-wide language policies already influencing national legislation and local practice, especially strongly so far in the southern Mon and Kayin states and the northern Kachin state.

Through LESC, and also separately, Thailand has taken its own steps toward a multicultural curriculum and toward extending more language recognition to Malay speakers in the south, in the context of a wider national language policy (Kosonen & Person, 2014). However, progress has been significantly disrupted by the events of May 22, 2014, in which the Royal Thai Armed Forces launched a coup and overthrew the civilian government after months of political paralysis. As a result of meetings in December 2014 with representatives of the ruling junta, the National Council for Peace and Order, there are signs that the hopes of a more liberalizing southern administration and openness toward bilingual education and language rights have not been obliterated.

In the three Southeast Asian countries discussed here, as in many other parts of the world, language questions are a repeated and serious grievance among ethnic and indigenous groups. Demands for linguistic recognition, reparation for past injustice, and new policy dispensations take the form of claims for social inclusion, cultural recognition, and alleviation of intergenerational inequality. Officials typically stress overarching needs for national unity and economic or administrative efficiency, and often interpret demands for multilingual rights as socially disruptive, administratively inefficient, or, in the most extreme cases, as politically seditious.

Through a series of facilitated dialogues led by a professional moderator and conducted with the participation of key stakeholders, overt tension can be relieved in many cases, and greater understanding can be promoted. In some cases, a working consensus can be achieved toward collectively written language policy alternatives—compromise positions that advance minority rights through focused and well-prepared interventions. Such collaborative decision-making, informed by research evidence selected for its relevance and applicability to local problems and language disputes, has proven very effective in the facilitated dialogues. This collaborative decision making involves officials, experts, and community representatives engaging in open-ended but guided dialogue to devise new policy positions on questions of language or to modify and improve existing policies.

A wider public acceptance that language is a multi-faceted public resource needs to be promoted so that language policies can include bottom-up processes as well as top-down delivery of decision-making on language.

Bottom-up planning should not be just to gain support or understanding for top-down policies, but a genuine process of decision making in its own right.

Ideally all facilitated dialogues should be preceded by detailed and linguistically informed situation analysis to determine what local language problems can be most effectively dealt with in the dialogues. But funding authorities are typically focused on a more narrow understanding of problem resolution and have not tended to fund these wider approaches.

Toward a New Process for Language Planning and Policy Formation

The facilitated dialogues and the wider sense of engaged policy making that they are part of aim to ground a new language planning in contemporary dialogue studies (Carbaugh, 2013), deliberation theory (Dryzek, 1990), and performative democracy research (Matynia, 2009). This new language planning has hardly been explored, other than in verbal conflict de-escalation (Kriesberg & Dayton, 2012) in applied psychology. The demands for multilingual education rights, especially as they are understood in Southeast Asia using the formulation of mother-tongue-based multilingual education, are by now widespread, with major investment in understanding and advocacy by local educators, ethnic and indigenous communities, and academic experts. When these demands are located within settings of chronic and bitter violent conflict, a new kind of language planning is called for, one that makes the aim of discourse and dialogue toward peacebuilding a central goal, engaging a non-reductive sense of what language is in all its symbolic and practical dimensions.

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