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## The Integrative Function of Language: Do We Need a National Language to Unite Us?

TEODORO A. LLAMZON

The role of language in the task of nation building has frequently been exaggerated. There are those who claim that unless a country speaks one language it will never be united in purpose and endeavor. On the other hand, there are those who say that in its struggle for national identity it is immaterial whether a country has a *de facto* common language or not.

The purpose of this study is to investigate whether language is a function of a people's effort to attain national character and solidarity. In other words, we would like to know whether a national language is absolutely necessary for a people to achieve national unity.

There are various ways of approaching this problem. For our purpose, I suggest that we take a number of case-histories of nations and study the role that language played in their successful or unsuccessful bid for national unity. It is generally recognized that the language problems facing new nations like ours are not unique; parallels can be found from all periods of history and all parts of the world.

Let us consider first the case-histories of Modern Israel and Indonesia. Both these countries succeeded in setting up national identities.

When Eliezer Ben Yehuda, the founding father of Modern Israel, landed at Jaffa in 1881, he was faced with a gigantic problem. The Jews who came to resettle Palestine spoke different languages — German, Polish, Russian, Spanish, French, Arabic, etc. They could hardly communicate with each other. None of them spoke Hebrew. So Ben Yehuda decided to revive the ancient tongue of the prophets, which had gone into desuetude

for nearly two thousand years. He had, however, to decide first which of the two varieties of Hebrew — the Sephardic (once spoken by the Spanish Jews) or the Ashkenazic (once spoken by the Jews from Central and Northern Europe) — they should adopt as the language of the country.

Partly because of the beauty of its sounds, and partly because Ashkenazic Hebrew reminded the people of the sufferings of the Diaspora, the decision was made in favor of the Sephardic.<sup>1</sup>

Once this decision was made, Yehuda and his friends decided to speak nothing else but Hebrew. To help develop the language, Yehuda set up a daily newspaper, which reported all the news in Hebrew. If words were lacking, loanwords were used, or new words were coined. In those days, it was not an uncommon sight to see sellers and buyers in the market place looking up what the new words meant in the pocket dictionary that Yehuda and his friends compiled to help their readers understand what they had written.

By the time Yehuda died in 1922, Hebrew was not only used at home, but was the medium of instruction in the schools and the language of government, business and industry throughout Israel. The Jews could now communicate with one another in a common language. They were one people, speaking one language.<sup>2</sup>

The case-history of Indonesia is another success story as far as establishing a single national language and a unified country is concerned. After the Japanese rule, the Indonesians resisted all the attempts of the Dutch to regain control of the archipelago. Finally, on December 27, 1949, the Netherlands transferred sovereign rights to the new Republic of Indonesia. In his inaugural speech, President Sukarno proclaimed "one people, one language, and one country." The language was called Bahasa Indonesia — a language based on Malay, much as Pilipino, the National Language of the Philippines, is based on Tagalog.

Since then, Bahasa Indonesia has become a *de facto* common

1. S. Morag, "Planned and Unplanned Development in Modern Hebrew," *Lingua* 8 (1959): 247-63.

2. Robert St. John, *The Tongue of the Prophet: The Life Story of Eliezer Ben Yehuda* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1952).

language of the young Republic. It has been developed into a medium not only on all levels of education, but also in government, commerce, and industry. It took less than fifty years to do this.

Undoubtedly, one of the chief factors in the spectacular development of Bahasa Indonesia was the fact that Indonesians saw in the language a symbol of their struggle for independence from foreign domination as well as of their quest for national identity. The Malay language, on which Bahasa Indonesia was based, was not the majority language, but it was readily accepted because it had prestige by virtue of its rich literature and tradition and the fact that it was spoken everywhere in Indonesia and Malaysia<sup>3</sup>. The government actually did not have to pass laws to help develop Bahasa Indonesia into a national language. The people themselves developed it of their own accord.

Now, let us consider the case histories of other countries who have not quite succeeded in setting up a single national language, namely: India and Malaysia.

Today, the Indian Constitution recognizes fourteen official languages, of which ten are Indo-Aryan (Hindi, Marathi, Gujarati, Punjabi, Bengali, Assamese, Kashmiri, Oriya, Urdu, and Sanskrit) and four are Dravidian (Tamil, Telegu, Malayalam and Kannada). With the exception of Punjabi, Kashmiri and Sanskrit, these languages have more than 10 million speakers each.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to these fourteen official languages, there are three languages whose native speakers number in the millions, namely: Santhali, Gondi, and Bhili. Moreover, there are several languages whose speakers, although few, are quite influential, e.g., Sindhi speakers, who have achieved considerable power in the economic life of Bombay and Delhi. The 1951 Census listed 845 languages or dialects spoken in India.

3. Joshua A. Fishman, ed., *Readings in the Sociology of Language* (The Hague: Mouton, 1968). See especially section 7: "The Social Contexts and Consequences of Language Planning"; and in this section, M. M. Auxman, "Some General Regularities in the Formation and Development of National Languages."

4. Gerald Kelley, "The Status of Hindi as a Lingua Franca," in *Sociolinguistics*, William Bright, ed. (The Hague: Mouton, 1966), p. 299.

In the midst of this linguistic diversity, there was a felt need for a national language. Accordingly, the Constitution specified that Hindi, written in Devanagari script, was to become the official language of the union by 1965. English was to continue as one of the official languages until that date; at which time Hindi was to become the principal official language. This attempt to set up a national language was originally part of India's struggle for independence and national unity. Since Hindi was already spoken by 42% of the population, and since it was closely related to many of the other regional languages, it seemed the most logical choice for a national language. The particular variety of Hindi which the Commission recommended was the "Delhi Standard" or *Khari boli*.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, the nation as a whole did not see in Hindi a symbol of unity, but rather a means of the Hindi-speaking people to promote their regional interests. Consequently, the Constitutional prescription met resistance. This resistance soon became bitter, emotional, and finally, violent. We know the rest of the story. Bloody riots erupted all over India as a result of the national language issue. Today, India has still no single national language, and the nation is as divided as ever.

The case-history of Malaysia is somewhat different from that of India, but there are some similarities between the two. The Federation of Malaysia was formed in 1963 out of the states that made up the former Federation of Malaya together with the British colonies of Singapore (which seceded soon after), Sarawak, Brunei (which, likewise, seceded later) and Sabah. The initial hostility of Indonesia to the new nation served to unite (as perhaps no other event could have done) the various races of Malaysia to some extent. As of this date, however, one can safely say that complete unity is still to be realized.

The majority of the inhabitants of Malaysia were recent immigrants. Each of the three largest groups — the Malays, the Chinese, and the Tamils — spoke the language of its own culture and traditions, as had most of the smaller groups.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 300.

In attempting to unite the people, the Malaysian parliament in 1957 completed the constitution which declared Malay to be the National Language and Islam the National Religion. The Constitution provided that the Malay language should actually be used as the medium of instruction in the schools within ten years. In the meantime, English could still be used for all official purposes, and the Borneo states (i.e., Sarawak and Sabah) could implement the National Language policy up to 1973.<sup>6</sup>

Up to May 13, 1970, there was bitterness and animosity between the Chinese and the Malays, on the one hand, and between the Malays and the Tamils, on the other. The Malays resented the Chinese economic domination, and both the Chinese and Tamils objected to the legislation by "extremist Malay nationalists." This situation finally erupted into an enormous riot on May 13th, causing a big toll of lives and property.

However, after May 13th, the situation changed. There seemed to have been a gradual realization on the part of the people that they had to remain united or fall apart as a country. This realization grew partly as the result of the external threats to the nation's existence and the internal dissension which were shaking the country's foundations. From an attitude of resentment towards the national language, therefore, there slowly emerged a willingness to implement the law. After all, three fourths of the country in fact spoke Malay, and provisions were being made to provide adequate materials and trained teachers.

Today, the University of Malaya has begun to use Malay in many of its courses, gradually replacing English as the medium of instruction. Moreover, right across the site of the University of Malaya has arisen a new university — the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia — which uses Malay as its sole medium of instruction.

All this does not mean, however, that Malaysia has achieved solidarity and national identity through the Malay language. This is still the goal Malaysia is aiming at, though it is certainly much closer to it than India.

6. R. B. Le Page, *The National Language Question* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 78.

From the case-histories of the four modern countries given above, one can now perhaps say something about the role of language in the task of nation building. Clearly, the case-histories of Israel and Indonesia have demonstrated that language is an important factor in the task of nation building. It is undeniable that the citizens of a country need a common language with which to communicate, and which can serve as a symbol of a people's struggle for independence, unity, and national identity.

On the other hand, the case-history of India has shown that unless the people themselves support a National Language, it is powerless by itself to unify a country; and Malaysia has shown that governmental action can give a big boost to the acceptance and propagation of a National Language.

It seems safe to say that, in general, a country needs something more than just a common language to achieve unity. The Italian language, thanks to the great writings and literary output of Dante, had become a standard language throughout Italy for nearly three centuries, before Garibaldi succeeded in uniting the various city states into a single and united country. And even today, we have many countries which have no single national language; as for example, Canada, Belgium and Switzerland.

What seems to be absolutely necessary to unite a country is a feeling of ethnic unity. Israel and Indonesia achieved national unity because their people had this feeling of ethnic solidarity and spiritual kinship. In addition, they shared cultural traditions and succeeded in setting up for themselves an image of common destiny. Such sentiments were the indispensable factors in the formation of their self-government states.

The Jews, who came to resettle Palestine, considered themselves one people ethnically and somehow succeeded in setting for themselves a common national goal. This was also the case of the Indonesians. It was not the case, however, with the Indians and the Malaysians. The Dravidians of southern India did not enjoy kinship ties with the Hindus of Aryan stock in the north; neither did the Chinese, Malays and Indians of Malaysia completely achieve sentiments of solidarity with each other.

That the image of a common destiny and feelings of ethnic

and spiritual kinship are the basic elements in the life of nations is demonstrated, for example, by the Armenians. Whether living under Turkish or Russian rule, or in dispersion in the countries of the Near East, Europe, and the Western Hemisphere, these people have preserved a feeling of group unity and attitudes of solidarity and communality.<sup>7</sup>

It is the case, of course, that the big and powerful countries of today speak one language. Examples are the United States, Russia, Japan, France, and Great Britain. It is also true that the countries which have several national languages such as Canada, Belgium and Switzerland have internal conflicts between the subgroups whose subcultures are reflected by their various languages. On the other hand, we have the case of the Philippines, where the various ethnic groups speak different languages, but whose people have feelings of ethnic solidarity.

It seems safe to say, therefore, that in this latter case, this feeling of ethnic solidarity will eventually be reflected in the development of a common National Language, whatever that language may be.

We started by asking the question what function language has in the task of nation building and the struggle of a country for national identity. Some answers can now be offered. We can start by saying that first of all, a national language fulfills an important function in that it provides a country with a means of communication among its citizens. This function is essential if the citizens are to develop a common feeling of ethnic solidarity and a sense of national purpose. The second function of language is to serve as a symbol and expression of their national identity. It is not surprising, for example, that the rise of nationalism in Europe in the late 18th century which gave rise to various nations also gave rise to various national languages. Thus, whereas there were only six languages in 950 A.D., there were thirty

7. Joseph Bram, *Language and Society* (New York: Random House, 1955). See especially chapter 5: "Social Organization and Language"; and chapter 6: "Languages in the Life of Nations."

languages by 1900 A.D. half of which developed at the height of the nationalistic movement, i.e., 1800-1900 A.D.<sup>8</sup>

The next question which arises is: what factors are necessary for a language to attain the stature of a National Language? From sociolinguistic history, it seems clear that several factors are necessary: first of all, the designated language, which is usually one of the indigenous languages, must have prestige over the other rival indigenous languages. This prestige is usually the result of the prestige of its speakers as well as the prestige of the place where it is spoken. Thus, for example, it is not surprising that the variety of English which became standard in England was the London dialect; that the kind of Japanese which became standard in Japan and the type of French which became standard in France was the Tokyo and Paris dialects, respectively.<sup>9</sup> Secondly, it must be spoken and accepted by the majority of the citizens of the country. For this to happen, the aid of mass media as well as the firm guidance of the government, even up to the point of legislation, if not absolutely necessary, is certainly helpful. Thirdly, the language must be in possession of great literature. Without such literature, the users of the language will be impoverished.

In a recent survey of the language situation of developing nations, Joshua Fishman (1969), one of the leading socio-linguists today, described three types of countries:<sup>10</sup> (a) the UNIMODAL nations, who have one great tradition at the national level, and who are attempting to create a national language by modernizing one of its indigenous languages under the impetus of traditionalism as well as nationalism; (b) the MULTIMODAL nations, who have several great national traditions, and who have to modernize several indigenous languages as a compromise

8. Karl W. Deutsch, "The Trend of European Nationalism — The Language Aspect," *American Political Science Review* 36 (1942): 533-41.

9. Werner F. Leopold, "The Decline of German Dialects," *Word* 15 (1954): 130-53; John L. Fischer, "Social Influences on the Choice of a Linguistic Variant," in *Language in Culture and Society*, Dell Hymes, ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), pp. 483-88.

10. Joshua L. Fishman, "National Languages of Wider Communication in Developing Nations," *Anthropological Linguistics* 11 (1969): 111-35.

in order to achieve political integration and at the same time preserve the separate authenticities of the rival traditions; and (c) the AMODAL nations, who have no integrating great tradition on the national level, and who use a language of wider communication, e.g., English, French, or Spanish as its permanent national symbol. The pattern of movement today among these countries seems to be towards the first type, i.e., the UNIMODAL nations. The multimodal and amodal types are only transitional types. The reason is that the National Language is viewed by all three types as furthering the socio-cultural integration of the various elements within the country at the national level.

Perhaps, we can end this study by a quotation from Gunnar Myrdal's monumental and insightful study of the developing nations in Asia. This is what he said about the role of language especially with regard to India, but which apply equally to the Philippines:

Looked at from the point of view of the modernization ideals, which are the value premises of this study, the improvement and effective utilization of the state languages is not only desirable but necessary. The isolation of a small intellectual elite — defined and held together by mastery of a foreign language that can never become the popular idiom in any part of India — must be broken, and the masses brought into active participation. But there can be no real national consolidation and responsible participation in local and sectional self-government and in cooperatives if administration, representative assemblies, law courts, and schools continue to employ a language the masses do not understand.<sup>11</sup>

11. Gunnar Myrdal, *Asian Drama: An Inquiry into the Poverty of Nations*, 3 vols. (New York: Pantheon, 1968), pp. 85-86. See especially chapter 3, section 3, and chapter 33, sections 3, 4, and 6.