
The language olicity of minority languages in Vietnam

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0. Introduction

The most important ethno-linguistic feature of Vietnam is that during about four thousands years, throughout the very long historical period of foundation, protection and development of the country, the ethnic groups in Vietnam were living side by side in peaceful harmony and unity, without any ethno-linguistic war between the Viet and minorities, or between the minorities themselves.

In this ethno-linguistic aspect the history of Vietnam is the history of interaction of languages following the tendency of convergence and intergration for forming an ethno-linguistic union in Vietnam. That tendency is strengthened in new historical, political, economic and socio-cultural conditions of Vietnam in XX century.

Vietnam is a multiethnic, multicultural and multilingual country comprising 54 ethnic groups(ethnicities): 01 majority the Viet(the

Kinh) and 53 minorities, but about 100 minority languages/dialects. A couple of ethno-linguistic communities, such as the Hoa(Chinese) and the Khmer, have alinguistic relationship with China and Cambodge, in which countries Chinese and Khmer are the national languages. The Tay, Nung and Thai have genetic relations with the Choang(Zhung), Thai, Shan in South China, Laos, Thailand and Burma. The Hmong are about 550 thousands in Vietnam, a few millions in China, a few thousands in Thailand and Laos, and even a few hundreds of thousands Hmong people in USA, Australia and France.

Since independence in 1945 the language policy in Vietnam has reflected a strategy of preservation, promotion and development of spoken and written languages, including both Vietnamese and minority languages. This paper briefly focuses on the language situation and language policy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam(1975~2005).

Every multiethnic country has its "own" ethno-linguistic situation, the special features of which should be considered in making the state language policy. In Vietnam, they can be indicated as follows:

- multi-component situation(54 ethnic groups and about 100 ethnic languages)
- unequal situation(majority language as Vietnamese - minority language as Thai, Hmong, Cham, Khmer)
- native language situation(Vietnamese, as a national language, is indigenous)
- linguistic typological similarity situation: all ethnic languages in Vietnam belong to the same linguistic "isolating type"(not "flexional type" as Indo-European languages)

1. The ethno-linguistic situation in Vietnam

1.1. Ethnic population size and ethno-linguistic distribution

In Vietnam the Viet(Kinh) group is about 87% of state population, and the minorities groups are 13%. In general the population size of each ethnic group, on average, is small(in detail see Annex 1). Of the 53 ethnic minorities:

- only 02 groups, the Tay and the Thai, have over 1,000,000 people
- 05 groups have over 500,000 people
- 05 groups have over 100,000 people
- 09 groups have from 50,000 to 100,000 people
- 33 groups have under 50,000 people
- some groups have only a few thousands or a few hundreds, as the La Hu, Khang, Pa Then, Lo Lo, Co Lao, Bo Y, Cong , Si La, Pu Peo, Mang, Brau, Ro Mam, O Du * .

Unconcentrated and mixed habitation is crucial feature of ethno-linguistic picture of minority groups in Vietnam, especially in the North. The most dispersed in distribution are the Yao people, located in 1035 communes, the Hmong located in 745 communes, the Nung in 988 communes. Many districts have over 10 ethnic groups, many communes have 4, 5 ethnic groups, in some provinces a few dozens ethnic groups are located together side by side in the same district. The multi-ethnic location leads to the marriages forming mixed and bi- or multi-lingual families. Recently, different migrations of Vietnamese and minority peoples strengthen the unconcentrated and mixed habitation of ethnic groups and their languages.

In comparison with the majority language(Kinh/Vietnamese) the minority languages have a lower status and a smaller number of social

functions. A good example of the unequal bilingualism is the Hmong (Miao). Fieldwork of Vietnam Linguistic Institute in 1994~1995 years at four places in Lai Chau and Ha Giang provinces has shown how many languages the 805 Hmong people use in every day life and which function each language has. The results are in the following table:

* It should be noted that **the population size** of ethnic minority groups differ from **the number of native speakers** who can use the mother tongue. Within each ethnic group there are small local groups whose members can speak different (but related) languages /dialects, or speak not their mother tongue but use a language for interethnic communication in their local area. For example, nowadays many people of the Ksinh Mul, O Du groups have forgotten their mother tongue and speak Thai language. Even the language of Red Co Lao people (a very small group of Co Lao ethnicity) in North Vietnam has absolutely disappeared. It means that the population size of ethnic groups are bigger than the number of native speakers who can use their mother tongue.

	Sphere of communication	Language used in communication	Number of users	Proportion
1	Talking to relatives in family	- Hmong	753	93.5%
		- Vietnamese	17	2.1%
		- Hmong and Vietnamese	35	4.3%
2	Cultural and religious activity (songs, dances, worships...)	- Hmong	596	74%
		- Vietnamese	52	6.4%
		- Hmong and Vietnamese	157	19.5%
3	At the market, shop, post	- Hmong	677	84%
		- Vietnamese	84	10.4%

		- Hmong and Vietnamese	44	5.5%
4	At the meetings in the village	- Hmong - Vietnamese - Hmong and Vietnamese	788 13 4	97.8% 1.6% 0.5%
5	Communicating with the Vietnamese	- Vietnamese - Hmong	440 365	54.6% 45.3%
6	Communicating with other ethnicities not Vietnamese	- Hmong - Vietnamese - Quan Hoa - Tay	609 116 68 12	75.5% 14.4% 8.4% 1.5%
7	Communicating with Hmong people from other places	- Hmong - Vietnamese - Hmong and Vietnamese	561 53 191	69.6% 6.5% 23.7%
8	At school	- Vietnamese	230/230	100%

Here we can see that for the Hmong people their mother tongue is the most important medium of communication, and the status of Vietnamese in Hmong villages is lower than at school or in talking to Hmong people coming from other places. The number of people speaking only the Hmong language is similar to the number of people who can speak two languages (mostly, Hmong and Vietnamese).

1.2. Genetic and typological relations of ethnic languages in Vietnam

Thanks to special historical and geographic conditions, during thousand years, in the Southeast Asia region, Vietnam has become a three-way crossroad of different ethnicity migrations and of language contacts, lying between the two civilizations of China and India,

between the mainland and islands, hence creating such a diversified picture of ethnic languages. It seems to be a microcosm of ethnic groups with their languages in SEA region.

In Vietnam there are 05 main representatives of language families of the region:

1. Austroasiatic
2. Austronesien
3. Tai - Ka dai(Tai, Kam-Tai, Daic)
4. Hmong- Mien(Miao-Yao/Dzao)
5. Sino - Tibetan

Out of 53 ethnic minority groups, 23 use different Austroasiatic languages which have genetic relations with Vietnamese. This fact provides favourable conditions for an easy contact among the languages of the same origin to improve bilingual capability and enhance Vietnamese role in the development of ethnic minority languages.

In the respect of linguistic typology the most crucial feature of ethnic languages in Vietnam is that all these genetically different languages belong to the same “isolating type” unlike the Indo-European languages of “flexional type”. Being the isolating languages, they share the common characteristics of phonology and grammar. Moreover, having been formed and evolved for thousand years, the ethnic minority languages in Vietnam tend to have common changes in their structures such as monosyllabism or formation of tones. Not only these characteristics help ethnic minority groups easily contact and learn from one another, but also offer them favourable conditions for an appropriate integration of language development.

From the point of view of genetic relations the ethnic languages in

Vietnam can be divided into language families, branches, sub-branches and groups including languages and their dialects (see Annex 2 below).

1.3. Writing systems of ethnic minority groups in Vietnam

Among 53 ethnic minority groups there are 26 ethnicities having a script, while 27 ethnicities do not have a writing system, as in the following table:

	Ethnic group	Writing system
1	Tay	Nom Tay, and Romanized Tay-Nung script created 1961
2	Thai	Traditional scripts and versions of Romanization
3	Hoa	Chinese script
4	Khmer	Traditional Sanscrit script
5	Nung	Nom Nung script and Romanized Tay-Nung script created 1961
6	Hmong	Romanized script created 1961
7	Gia Rai	Romanized scripts created before 1945, 1965~1975
8	E De	Romanized script created before 1945
9	Bahnar	Romanized script created before 1945
10	Cham	Traditional Sanscrit script and versions of Romanization
11	Xo Dang	Romanized script
12	Hre	Romanized script
13	Ko Ho	Romanized script created before 1945, 1975, and 1985
14	Raglai	Romanized scripts created before and after 1975
15	Mnong	Romanized script created by SIL

		(Summer Institute of Linguistics-USA)
16	Stieng	Romanized script
17	Bru-Van Kieu	Romanized scripts created before 1975, and 1985
18	Co Tu (Ka Tu)	Romanized script created before 1975
19	Lo Lo	Traditional script
20	Gie Trieng	Romanized script created by SIL
21	Ta Oih (Pa Co-Ta Oi)	Romanized scripts created before 1975, and 1985
22	Ma	Romanized script created by SIL
23	Co	Romanized script created by SIL before 1975
24	Cho Ro (Chro, Chrau, Chau)	Romanized script created by SIL before 1975
25	Chu Ru	Romanized script created by SIL before 1975
26	Lao	Traditional Sanscrit script
27	Muong	Different versions of romanized script
28	Yao/Dzao	Nom Yao script
29	Cao Lan	Nom Cao Lan script
30	Tho	No having script
31	Kho Mu	No having script
32	Giay	No having script
33	La Chi	No having script
34	Phu La	No having script
35	La Hu	No having script
36	Khang	No having script
37	Lu	No having script
38	Pa Then	No having script

39	Chut	No having script
40	Mang	No having script
41	O Du	No having script
42	Co Lao	No having script
43	Bo Y	No having script
44	La Ha	No having script
45	Cong	No having script
46	Ngai	No having script
47	Si La	No having script
48	Pu Peo	No having script
49	Ro Mam	No having script
50	Brau	No having script
51	San Diu	No having script
52	Ha Nhi	No having script
53	Ksinh Mul	No having script

It should be noted that having a script / writing system does not mean using an alphabet for the written communication in an ethnic minority community.

Writing systems of ethnic minority in Vietnam can be divided into three groups:

- Group of 'Nom' scripts created on the base of Chinese ideograms(characters): Nom Tay-Nung, Nom Yao. Today this kind of script is not used in everyday life for written communication, only a few local intellectuals of minority ethnicities know it.
- Group of traditional scripts: the Chinese of the Hoa people: Cham, Khmer and Thai scripts created on the base of Sanscrit. Nowadays these scripts are used in everyday life for written communication and are learned at school.
- Group of romanized scripts created in XX century, as Bahnar, E De, Gia Rai, Ko Ho, Mnong, Stieng, Tay-Nung, Hmong, Co Tu, Bru-Van Kieu, Pakoh-Taoh, Today these scripts are used in everyday life for

written communication, but only a few of them are learned at school.

In the period 1945~2005 a few dozen romanized scripts have been created in Vietnam for ethnic minority groups it is a breakthrough in the development of their language. Thanks to these scripts, social functions of ethnic minority languages have been enlarged, the vocabulary has increased, the language of literature step by step formed, new functional styles have taken shape, and innovations in word formation and sentence complex have appeared.

2. The policies of ethnic minority languages in Vietnam

2.1. Overview

In Vietnam, there are witnessed ten Legal Documents on languages, including two Government Decisions considered to be important on creating, improving and using scripts of ethnic minority languages(No. 153-CP dated Aug.20th, 1969; and No. 53 dated Feb. 2nd, 1980).

Before and after the Independence 1945 Vietnam Communist Party had the policy of ethnic minority languages in Vietnam: it can be seen in two following documents:

+ Extracted from Resolution on Ethnic Minority Group Work, National Congress I, March 1935: "All ethnic minority groups () are entitled to use their own mother tongues in daily economic, political, and cultural activities."

+ Extracted from Politburo's Resolution No.4 and No.5 1949: "Spoken and written languages of ethnic minority groups should be taken seriously. Those groups already have had their own scripts; they can use them for teaching at elementary level of education. And those who

have not, national languages in form of dialectal transcription should be used instead.”

In the period of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam(1975~2005), positive results of the language policy have been recognized. For example, in education, during 1980~2005, seven ethnic minority languages are regularly teaching and learning at school: Khmer, Hoa, E De, Cham, Hmong, Gia Rai(Jrai), Bahnar. And during 1990~2005 there are eleven ethnic minority languages used at central and local broadcasting stations: Hmong, Khmer, E De, Gia Rai, Bahnar, Xo Dang, Ko Ho, Thai, Cham, Dza, Mnong. From 2002 until today ten ethnic minority languages are used on Vietnam Television(VTV5): Hmong, Thai, Khmer, Cham, E De, Gia Rai, Bahnar, Xo Dang, Ko Ho, Stieng.

2.2. Status and functions of Vietnamese and of minority languages

Legally, the policy of ethnic minority languages in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam has:acknowledged and assured the entitlement of having their own spoken and written languages, acknowledged and assured the entitlement of ethnic language equality, and minority groups are entitled to preserve and develop their own spoken and written languages, provided favourable conditions to enable minority groups to use their own spoken and written languages in various fields of social life, encouraged all ethnic minority groups, on a optional principle and observation of language equality and freedom, to acquire Vietnamese, making it a common medium for communication among different ethnic groups, i.e. a national and official language that does act as means of unifying to strengthen the solidarity and unanimity of fraternal groups throughout the country.

The language policy was clearly manifested in the new Vietnam's Constitution(1992): "All ethnic minority groups are entitled to use their own spoken and written languages, to preserve ethnic characters as well as to bring good traditions and cultures, customs and practices into full play."

The status and functions of the Vietnamese and of minority languages is presented in the Government's Decision No. 53(dated Feb. 2nd, 1980): "Vietnamese spoken and written language is the common language of the community of ethnic groups in Vietnam.(.). Therefore, all Vietnamese citizens are under an obligation and entitlement to study and use their common language. All ethnic minority spoken and written languages not only can be seen as their own treasure but also a cultural heritage of the whole country. In localities inhabited by ethnic minority groups, their own spoken and written languages and common language are simultaneously used."

The policy on bilingual education is noted in the Article 4 of Law on Primary Education(1991): "Primary Education is carried out in Vietnamese, but the ethnic minority groups are entitled to use their own spoken and written languages for implementing Primary Education as well."

2.3. Assessment and recommendations of the policy on ethnic minority languages in Vietnam

The policy on ethnic minority groups in general, and the policy on ethnic minority languages in particular, which have been executed for the past few years, are helping ethnic and mountainous areas to make more progressive changes in terms of economy, culture and society.

Vietnam is a country with many ethnic groups, cultures and

languages, which are diversified but unified in peaceful co-existence. It must be considered as the mainstay to determine and establish a legal foundation for each ethnicity and each citizen in terms of duties and interests. As far as language is concerned, it is essential to identify the role that Vietnamese plays as a national language and the particular status of ethnic languages with their social functions. Though the Government's viewpoints and guidelines on ethnic minority spoken and written languages were determined rather early in a creative and proper way, it is unlikely to institutionalize them as a Law(Language Law) or a Policy(Language Policy). Moreover, the unconcentrated and mixed habitation as crucial feature of ethno-linguistic picture of minority groups in Vietnam(especially in the North) and the poor life in some areas of ethnic groups make difficulties for the activities as 'script teaching' at school, 'script nourishing' in press and mass media, illiteracy eradicating.

There should be proper guidelines on traditional and romanized scripts of ethnic languages, which should be encouraged in conservation and planned for alternately using with Vietnamese, preparing plans for delivery and put them into practice effectively. Among the languages without writing system/script should be created for those which are spoken by a majority or those who wish to formulate their own writing. As for ethnic languages spoken by fairly small groups, there should be special measures taken to preserve them or probably use the script of another relative ethnic language in an optional way.

Obviously, the most important(and most difficult) task is language education especially bilingual education, to carry out the goals of equal development in the government's policies on ethnic minority groups and languages. In the short term, it is necessary to implement the popularization of primary education and illiteracy eradication by

teaching Vietnamese and ethnic minority languages.

In the development of an appropriate integration, language convergence could result in making endangered languages spoken by too small groups or used in a limited area gradually vanish. The preservation, promotion and development of ethnic minority cultures and (spoken and written) languages is now regarded as an urgent problem for quite a few countries and a huge challenge for improvement of ethnic minority languages in Vietnam as well.

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Annex 1: The population sizes of ethnic minority groups in Vietnam

	Ethnic group	Population size
1	Tay	1,190,000
2	Thai	1,040,000
3	Muong	914,500
4	Hoa	900,100
5	Khmer	895,200
6	Nung	705,700
7	Hmong	558,000
8	Dzao	473,900
9	Gia Rai (Jrai)	242,000
10	E De	194,700
11	Bahnar	136,800
12	Cao Lan	114,000
13	Cham	98,900
14	Xo Dang	96,700
15	San Diu	94,900
16	Hre	94,200
17	Co Ho(Koho)	92,100
18	Raglai	71,600
19	Mnong	67,300
20	Tho	51,200
21	Stieng	50,100
22	Kho Mu	42,800
23	Bru-Van Kieu	40,100
24	Co Tu(Ka Tu)	39,900
25	Giay	37,900
26	Gie-Trieng	26,900
27	Ta Oi (Pakoh-Taoih)	26,000
28	Ma	25,400
29	Co	22,600

30	Cho Ro(Chro, Chrau, Chau)	15,000
31	Ha Nhi	12,400
32	Ksinh mul(Xinh Mun)	10,700
33	Chu Ru	10,000
34	Lao	9,600
35	La Chi	7,800
36	Phu La	6,500
37	La Hu	5,300
38	Khang	3,800
39	Lu	3,600
40	Pa Then	3,600
41	Lo Lo	3,100
42	Co Lao	1,400
43	Chut	2,400
44	Mang	2,200
45	Bo Y	1,400
46	La Ha	1,400
47	Cong	1,200
48	Ngai	1,100
49	Si La	590
50	Pu Peo	380
51	Ro Mam	280
52	Brau	230
53	O Du	194

Annex 2: The language families, branches, sub-branches
and groups including languages and their dialects

Language Family	Branch, Sub-Branch, Group	Language/ Dialect
Austroasiatic	Branch Mon-Khmer I. Sub-Branch Vietic	1. Kinh(Vietnamese): Dialects: North, Central, South 2. Muong : Dialects: North, Central, South 3. Nguon 4. Poong 5. Tho

		6. Cui 7. Dan Lai, Li Ha 8. Ruc 9. May 10. Sach 11. Ma Lieng 12. Kri(Phoong) 13. A Ream
	II. Sub-Branch Palaungic	1. Mang; Dialects: Muong Te, Sin Ho, Muong Lay
	III. Sub-Branch Khmuic	1. Kho Mu 2. Ksinh Mul(Puoc, Pu Hooc) 3. Khang(Khang, Khang in Quang Lam) 4. O Du(Tay Hat, I Duh)
	IV. Sub-Branch Katuic	1. Bru (Bru-Van Kieu, Van Kieu, Mang Coong, Khua, Tri(So), Ka Lo 2. Pa koh(Pa Co) 3. Ta Oih(Ta Oi) 4. Ka Tu(Ca Tu); Dialects: High Ka Tu, Low Ka Tu, Phuong)
	V. Sub-Branch Bahnaric 1. Group North Bahnar	1. Bahnar(Ba Na). Dialects: To Lo, Go La, A La Koong, Jo Long, Krem 2. Cua(Kor) 3. Ka Dong 4. Ha Lang 5. Gie(Jeh); Dialects: North Gie, South Gie 6. Trieng 7. Xe Dang(Xo Dang, Hteang, Htea, Steang) 8. Ro Ngao 9. Ta Kua(Ca Tua, Kta) 10. Hre

		11. Mo Nam(Po Noong, Bo Nam) 12. Ve(Veh, La Ve) 13. Ro Mam(Ro Mam, La Mam) 14. To Dra(Xo Ra, Mo Dra)
	2. Group West Bahnar	Brau
	3. Group South Bahnar	1. Ko Ho(Co Ho): Dialects: Sre, Ka Lop, La Ya, Rion, Nop, To La, Lach, ...) 2. Mo Nong(Mnong): Dialects: +Central Mnong: Preh, Biat, Bu Na, Bu Rung, Dih Brih, Bu Dang, +East Mnong: Ro Lom, Gar, Koanh, Chil +South Mnong: Bu Nong, Piang, Bu Dip. 3. Ma (Chau Ma) 4. Stieng 5. Chrau (Chau Ro, Chro, Ro, Ta Mun)
	VI. Sub-Branch Khmer	Khmer in South Vietnam
Tai-Ka Dai	I. Branch Tai 1. Group Central Tai	1. Tay(Tho, Ngan, Phen): Dialects: Tay in Cao Bang, Central Tay, South Tay 2. Nung Dialects: Nung Chao, Nung Phan Slinh, Nung Inh, Nung Din, Nung Giang, Nung An ... 3. Cao Lan 4. Thu Lao
	2. Group SouthWest	1. Black Thai(Thai Dam) 2. White Thai(Thai Don)

	Tai	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Red Thai(Thai Deng) 4. Thai Theng 5. Thai Do 6. Thai in Hang Tong(Tai Muong) 7. Lao 8. Lu 9. Tay Nam 10. Pa Di
	3. Group North Tai	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Giay(Nhang, Dzang, Dioi) 2. Bo Y 3. Tu Di 4. Pu Na
	II. Branch Dong Thuy (Kam-Thuy)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Tong(Dong, Cam) 2. Thuy(Sui)
	III. Branch Ka Dai	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. La Ha: Dialects: La Ha, Ta Mit , La Ha in Noong Lay 2. La Chi Dialects: Black La Chi, White La Chi, Long hair La Chi 3. Pu Peo(La Qua, Ka Beo) 4. Co Lao: Dialects: White Co Lao, Green Co Lao, Red Co Lao 5. Nung Ven
Hmong - Mien (Meo - Yao)	I. Branch Hmong (Meo) 1. Group West Hmong (Xuyen-Kiem- Mien, Hoa Mieu)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Hmong: Dialects: Fluor Hmong(Hmong Lenh), White Hmong(Hmong Do), Black Hmong(Hmong Du), Chinese Hmong (Hmong Sua), Red Hmong(Hmong Si)
	2. Group Central	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Na Meo

	Hmong (Hmu, Hac Mieu)	
	II. Branch Pa Then	1. Pa Then(Pa H
	III. Branch Mien(Yao, Dzao)	1. Mien(Red Yao, Wearing-coins Yao, Yao Coo Ngang, Yao O Gang, Close-fitting Pants Yao, Yao Dai Ban, Yao Tieu Ban... 2. Mun(White Pants Yao, Green Clothes Yao, Yao Ao Dzai, Yao Ha, Yao Tuyen, Dao Lan Ten...)
Austrone -sian	Branch Chamic	1. East Cham(Cham in Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan) 2. West Cham(Cham in An Giang, Tay Ninh) 3. E de(Ra De, Rde, De): Dialects: Kpa, Binh, Mdhur, Krung, Ktul, Die, Epan, Blo, Ko Drao, A Dham... 4. Gia Rai(Ja Rai, Dja Rai): Dialects: Ho Drung, A Rap, Ha Bau, Go La) 5. Raglai(Rai, Noang, La Oang, Ra Dlai, Rac Lay, Ray Glay, Rang Glai): Dialects: North Raglai(in Khanh Hoa and Ninh Thuan), South Raglai(in Binh Thuan and Ninh Thuan) 6.Hroi 7.Chu ru
Sino -Tibetan	Branch Han (Chinese)	Hoa: Dialects: Cantonese, Man (in Phuc Kien), Hac Ka, Ngai, Sang Phang

	Branch Tibeto -Burmese Group Burmese -Lo Lo	1. Lo Lo: Dialects: Lo Lo, Black Lo Lo, Chinese 2. Ha Nhi 3. La H 4. Si La 5. Cong (Phu Noi) 6. Xa Pho 7. Phu La
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