

Speaking in Tongues?

Multilateral institutions and language policy in the South Pacific

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Limitations on people's ability to use their mother tongue – and limited facility in speaking the dominant or official national language – can exclude people from education, political life, and access to justice.

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)
Human Development Report 2004, p. 33

The South Pacific is one of the most linguistically diverse areas of the world. While there tends to be several local languages or dialects in Polynesian countries, in Melanesian countries there are hundreds of local languages, as well as pidgins used as lingua franca. In addition, the 'metropolitan' languages of English and French from the former colonial times are now widely used as official languages.

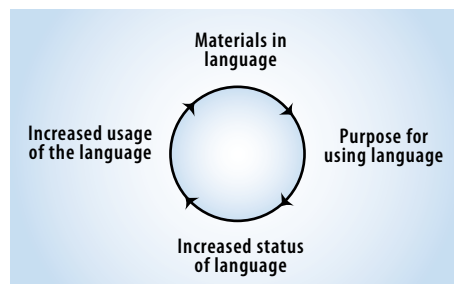
There is now a widespread acknowledgement of the importance of people's ability to use their mother tongue, as expressed in the UNDP's 2004 *Human Development Report*, but the reality of maintaining this diversity is more problematic.

Two main trends can be identified as working against linguistic diversity in the Pacific. Increasingly, the global dominance of English is a threat to Pacific languages. This is partly because for countries such as Niue or Tokelau, the home population is now far smaller than the overseas population living in English-speaking countries; other Pacific countries also have large English-speaking diasporas. In addition, Pacific governments and education systems often emphasise English in their policies, rather than local languages. Most interactions with international organisations take place in English.

A second major trend, which has a negative effect on linguistic diversity worldwide, is the emphasis on national unity in modern democracies. This issue tends to be discussed in the context of industrialised countries. However, differences between those countries and the size, location, and particularly the wealth of Pacific countries mean that the multilateral organisations may exert even greater power than individual governments in determining language policies in the Pacific region.

So, what can multilateral organisations do to support linguistic diversity? A simple way is providing copies of documents such as reports, policies and plans in local languages. This will not only allow for the most effective communication of the ideas in the documents, but will provide a purpose for using the language (through reading the document, discussing the contents, etc). It will then lead to increased status of the language and therefore its increased usage, which will in turn be a reason for providing further documents in the language (see diagram). In this way, languages can be strengthened and diversity supported.

LANGUAGE STATUS CYCLE



BELOW: Bilingual sign in Apia, sponsored by both local and regional institutions. Would positioning Sāmoan above English re-emphasise the text as a local message, or would it reduce the status of the message? Photo: Hilary Smith



The cost of documents and other materials in many languages is obviously a factor that organisations must consider. However, the ultimate cost of not translating them should also be considered – if local people cannot easily understand them, then the only readers of the plans, policies or reports will be those people in the organisations themselves, and local elites.

Several multilateral organisations, such as the World Bank, have developed policy strategies for the translation of documents and dissemination of information, and others, such as the Asian Development Bank, are in the process of developing such strategies. These strategies focus on the benefits of communicating to as many people as possible. It remains for them to also be concerned about linguistic diversity.

CASE STUDY: DOCUMENT TRANSLATIONS

The complexity of language issues is highlighted in the translations of the *Priorities of the People* series published by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in 2004. These booklets report on a set of participatory assessments of hardship and poverty in the Pacific, leading to priorities for each country to include in their national strategies. The reports are downloadable from the ADB website (www.adb.org). All are available in English.

- Only English reports are available for Samoa, Tonga, Tuvalu and the Federated States of Micronesia. The assumption is probably that people in these countries can understand the English versions. However, without the status of use in the ADB booklet, the status of the local written language may be lessened.
- The Vanuatu and Marshall Islands booklets are produced in the local languages, Bislama and Marshallese. Vanuatu's pidgin Bislama ensures readability and confers status on the language (which is not always high for pidgins). There is no translation into French, the other former colonial language, which indicates its lessening status. There is probably an assumption that it would not be feasible (or possible) to translate the document into the many other languages used in Vanuatu.
- Papua New Guinea's booklet is available in both Hiri Motu and Tok Pisin, the country's two local pidgin languages. This confers some status on those languages, with similar issues to Vanuatu.
- The Fiji document is available in Fijian and Hindi. While this seems to allow accessibility for both of the major ethnic populations of Fiji, in fact, few Indo-Fijians understand the Hindi booklet's formal Shudh Hindi script. The alternative Roman script developed by Indo-Fijian writers could have avoided this problem.

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