National Language as Medium of Instruction

Reviewed by S. Gopinathan

This book is a welcome and valuable addition to the very skimpy literature on the use of national non-Western languages in institutions of higher education. It contains 34 papers delivered at the Fourth Conference of the Asian Association on National Languages (ASANAL) in April 1977, where the theme of national languages in higher education was extensively discussed.

The topic of this volume is important, and the issues have wide-ranging cultural, political, and intellectual consequences. Countries such as India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia are all extending the use of their national languages in higher education. The policy decisions have been taken, but comparative educationists and linguists know little of programmes implemented, difficulties encountered, and solutions that are being discussed and attempted. Much of the literature that deals with the use of indigenous languages in education deals with issues at the primary level. While a wealth of material on general language-pedagogy relationships exists for Western countries such as Canada and Belgium, National language as Medium of Instruction is perhaps in first that offers a collection based on Southeast Asian educational experience.

The book is divided into eight sections, among them, “Language as Medium of Instruction”, “Language Intellectualization”, “National Language and Terminology”, “Teaching the Various Sciences in the National Language”, and “Role of Literature and Mass Media in the Development of the National Language”. The papers touch on the issues confronting a variety of languages—Bahasa Malaysia, Bahasa Indonesia, Filipino, Thai, Vietnamese, Tamil—though the core of the papers deal with the experiences of the Malaysian and Philippine national languages. They address such issues as the process of language intellectualization in Bahasa Malaysia and Filipino, the problems of using national languages in teaching social and natural sciences and law, the problem of word counts in languages undergoing standardization, and national language implementation policies. The volume also contains several interesting case studies of actual problems encountered in teaching various disciplines in the national languages.

Three papers address a fundamental issue: Can a language not used extensively for science and technology be so developed and legitimated as to be able to serve as an effective vehicle for teaching and research in science? A paper by Asmah Haji Omar discusses the process of intellectualization of Bahasa Malaysia and reveals how the evolving sentence structure for scholarly discourse shows the strong imprint on English. She makes the obvious, if necessary, point that language development occurs when new demands are made on the language. In a paper on the Philippine situation, Perez details the disciplinary areas in Philippine higher education where a national language has been used; of particular interest is the use of Filipino as the medium of instruction in the University of the Philippines, and Perez notes a large number of translation and original works in psychology written in Filipino as a consequence.

Several other papers deal either explicitly or implicitly with language planning. These offer some comparative data for students of language planning, for both the Philippines and Malaysia are in transitional state. If one accepts Haugen’s paradigm of selection, codification, dissemination, and elaboration, one finds that the Philippine situation does not quite fit. The choice of a national language, thought to have been settled in the 1930s, was raised again at a constitutional convention in the 1970s. Malaysian sensitivities about the national language issue are underscored in that, while two papers deal with Tamil, there is no single language having a colonial phobia, and the new-word creation by-case approach to the creation of the Malay national language by Gopinathan makes the point about having a colonial neurosis. The volume also contains several interesting case studies of actual problems encountered in teaching various disciplines in the national languages. It is perhaps in first that offers a collection based on Southeast Asian educational experience.
Tamil, there is none on Chinese. The paper on Thai makes the point that, while one consequence of not having a colonial history is freedom from "xenophobic neurosis", the negative consequence is that new-word creation occurs through an ad hoc, case-by-case approach. In Malaysia, too, where with the creation of the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka in 1957 one could have assumed systematic and comprehensive word formation and standardization, one finds complaints of a lack of adequate terms, a lack of coordination with the universities, and as a consequence the setting up of independent terminology service units within the several universities.

Valuable also in this collection is the richness of detail and the close consideration given to pedagogical consequences of language decisions. Amir Awang documents the consequences for teacher education arising from the use of Bahasa Malaysia and suggests the following as solutions: prepare and compile lecture notes as monographs and to tape record lectures for subsequent use by students. A paper on teaching geography explores in detail the use of places names in Bahasa Malaysia as sources of geographical information. Two interesting papers from Indonesia deal with literature and sociology. Noer Teogiman's paper explores the parallel development of the national language and national literature in Indonesia and raises the point about using a literary language as the standard for the national language.

Underlying almost all the papers is an acceptance of the enormous problem posed by a lack of materials in the various national languages and the many complex linguistic and practical considerations that even a modest programme of translation demands. Nik Abdul Rashid, faced with the prospect of 98 percent of legal literature being in English and the continued reporting of cases in English, accepts the need for high levels of bilingualism among students and faculty. Abdullah Hassan estimates the financial costs of implementing the Bahasa Malaysia decision at the school and tertiary levels, while the authors of the paper on geography teaching note that, with a specializing terminology exceeding 7,500 terms, geographers of different nationalities are adding new words and concepts into geographical discourse. Finally, the paper by Smith looks at the problem of meaning change that often arises when an attempt is made to translate a concept. His proposal for more effective sociology teaching in Indonesian universities is a programme to supply Indonesian glossaries and lexicons for the materials in English, building up terminological banks that will go further than previous attempts to provide translations of specialized terms and will deal with concepts and situational comparison. "The final objective must be to create an Indonesian language for each of the social sciences so that English materials become a source for useful comparisons rather than a source for concepts which may be culturally-bound or irrelevant."

This review is but a partial account of the ideas, solutions, and data in *National Language as Medium of Instruction*. It is a volume that deserves a wide and diversified audience of comparativists in education, pedagogy, and linguistics, not to mention planners and politicians.
The sub-title of this compact monograph is “A Case for Religious Education.” This might prompt the reader to suppose that a range of curriculum justifications was going to be advanced, some appealing to a preferred concept of education, others to cultural value and heritage, and so on. This is not the author’s intention. As the main title indicates, Dr. Tan is beginning further back by investigating the epistemological standing of religious knowledge, on the assumption that a “truly liberal education” (p.1) must at least include the promotion of rational understanding. The bulk of this study is therefore straight philosophy, a form of analysis at which Tan shows himself to be a master.

Education is not a discipline but a field of professional practice. Educators are therefore always in something of a hurry to decide what needs to be done and to get on with the job. The temptation, when encountering an area like religious studies, which is characterised by wide differences of opinion, is to put it in the too-hard basket and carry on with other things. Unfortunately, this attitude has the effect of skewing the curriculum towards means rather than ends, the technological rather than the humane. The result is a tacit endorsement of the one-dimensional preoccupation of industrial society with consumerism and short-term material satisfactions, bringing in its wake alienation, boredom and a certain callousness of spirit. Tan’s “case” runs against this tide.

At the same time, it is not a complete case. It moves within the framework established by P.H. Hirst, which justifies certain curriculum inclusions on the grounds of their intrinsic worth as “forms of knowledge”. Amongst these forms Hirst lists religious knowledge, but there are those who deny that religious “truth”-claims are in the knowledge domain at all. It is this allegation which sets the agenda for Tan’s study. Even if we find Hirst’s “forms of knowledge” notion inadequate, as many do, the epistemological enquiry has point, for it affects the kind of curriculum subject we deem religious studies to be, if we let it in the first place. Tan’s limitation of focus should therefore be welcomed rather than regretted, because this issue is such a fundamental one.

As a good philosopher, Tan puts no more weight on his arguments than they are logically bear. In the end he does not claim to have proved that religious knowledge is established as true, but only that it is conceivable and provides “initially plausible insights and conjectures” (p.1). This finding may appear unduly modest, in the light of the evidences he so methodically marshals, but it is consistent with his opening argument boldly asserting that a curriculum confined to domains of established truth would be very stultifying. To exclude “genuine and interesting hypotheses” would, he argues, stunt the very growth of knowledge as such. Tan therefore walks a knife-edge between claiming too much and too little for the evidential data and language of religion; and he keeps his balance well.

Part One tackles the question of whether religious language is actually intelligible: that is, whether it can yield any meaningful propositions at all. Tan knows his sources well and handles them authoritatively. By accepting Puccetti’s insistence that a religion is the “entire tradition from its founder up to the present” (p.16), Tan gives himself the advantage of being able to reject beliefs in particular religions which hinder his quest for a set of universal religious affirmations. He is thus able to side-step many of Puccetti’s objections, but it may be queried whether this move is necessary to his case. In the final section of the book, in fact, Tan concedes that “a syncretisation of different religions would be another religion itself” (p.101). This weakens his earlier argument that an encounter with extra-terrestrial persons would not cause essential discontinuity with previous religious rationales. I also find his attempt to
recruit the non-theistic religions into the theistic camp (pp. 55) unconvincing, but I don't think he needs this argument, or this kind of religious universalism, to sustain his main thesis. In general, Part One upholds the intelligibility of religious truth-claims, against opponents in debates on life after death, suffering, and free will, with plausible ripostes.

Part Two turns to the more substantive area of evidences. Here again, rather than striving for a knock-down argument, Tan aims simply to establish the conceivability of religious claims, confident that if this be conceded, then the inherent significance of those claims — which affirm a Deity who communicates — will ensure that they generate sufficient interest. In this Part, he discusses miracles, special experiences, and attestations from the personal experience of believers. Tan continues to show considerable independence of thought in dealing with both friends and foes in these debates, not daunted by the reputations of philosophers such as Hick, Flew and MacIntyre.

His concluding remarks are therefore warranted, when he claims to have set forth good grounds for teaching “religion in a liberal curriculum as a viable explanatory possibility, like the way we teach interesting scientific hypotheses” (p. 101). I would have preferred him to say “scientific models,” for these are holistic explanations at the same level as religious ones, but this is a minor quibble. The paragraph tails off with some rather uncertain remarks about Tan’s willingness to accept curriculum strategies to accommodate religions without attempting any synthesis, but the book does not stand or fall on these minor sorties into the realpolitik of secular curriculum process.

A more important criticism is that Tan may be under-estimating the coherence of the religious tradition he chooses as his illustrative case-study, i.e. Christianity. He seems to want to follow Hick into an allegedly more defensible universalism (e.g. p. 26) though aware at a later point that many in this same liberal Christian camp have been excessively reductionist. Conversely, he is less than fair to more orthodox Christian apologetic when, having endorsed Wallace’s use of the term “fundamentalist” for a certain kind of rigid literalism (p. 18), he then applies the adjective to so intelligent a thinker as C.S. Lewis (p. 101). One does not have to flee to Hick to escape Puccetti. In fact, in defending the logical possibility of miracles, Tan is closer to Lewis and orthodox Christianity.

In summary, the main case is persuasively set forth, and obliges curriculum developers to look to their epistemological foundations. There is much need for good philosophy in this area, given the too long reign of positivist epistemologies. Dr. Tan’s book deserves to run to a reprint, which I hope it does, because my present poorly sewn copy is already coming apart.

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