

Language and identity in Bhutan

George van Driem

In 1812, the famous linguist Wilhelm von Humboldt wrote that the difference between nations is most clearly manifest in their languages. In 1856, August Pott wrote that language is the key trait defining nationhood. In 1987, Emil Cioran wrote that we do not really reside in a country, but in our language. Our true fatherland, he said, was nothing else than our mother tongue. Most of our thoughts and much of our identity are language-mediated and depend directly on our language. Our native language is where we grew up and how we came to know and understand the world. Our mother tongue is our mind's conceptual homeland.

All of us are familiar with the example of the grandchildren of immigrants in Australia or America who effectively speak only English. Their grandparents never really mastered the language and are fast forgetting what they did once manage to learn. The nationality gap between grandparents and grandchildren becomes painfully apparent. The grandparents cannot share their thoughts in the exact way that they think them because their grandchildren inhabit a different linguistic and mental world.

What about our national language? Are some of us not speaking more English than Dzongkha nowadays? What if our native language happens to be a Bhutanese language other than Dzongkha? How is our language a defining feature of Bhutanese national identity? Is our national language not an important part of what it means to be Bhutanese? Is Dzongkha an essential part of our culture? Why can't we just translate everything into English or Mandarin Chinese? There are real answers to these questions, but it requires some reflection to appreciate the significance of these answers. (The author uses first person in his capacity as an advisor to the Dzongkha Development Commission)

Language and national identity

The first point is that Bhutan is a multilingual nation boasting at least 19 different indigenous languages, maybe more. Bhutan is also a polyglot country because most Bhutanese speak more than one of these languages.

Does that mean that the Bhutanese have 19 different national identities? This particular question is surprisingly easy to answer. The answer has two parts.

Bhutan is one nation. In comparison to most nations on our planet, Bhutan is one of the oldest nation states. Bhutan was a nation state long before Germany, Italy, India, the United States, Indonesia, Norway and most other countries emerged as nation states. As a nation, Bhutan has solid historical credentials. The Bhutanese people have experienced a sense of national identity for centuries more than people of most nationalities which are recognised in the world today. Whatever makes up national identity, Bhutan has a lot of it. Bhutan's national identity is grounded in a shared history and culture and even in two shared languages, Chöke and Dzongkha.

The second answer is that language is of vital importance to national identity. Not only do many people feel this way, this view is also the official standpoint of many governments. Nonetheless, language is not the defining characteristic of nationhood. If language were taken to be



The Lhop from the south western part of Bhutan. The Lhop represent a culture different from the mainstream Bhutanese culture

the defining trait of a nation, then each and every European border would have to be redrawn. Only Iceland would survive intact as a monolingual island nation in the middle of the North Atlantic. Likewise, India, China, Indonesia, Nepal, Thailand and most other countries of the world would be fragmented into different states if language borders were taken as international frontiers.

In sum, Bhutan is one of the world's oldest and best-established nation states with a well-defined national identity. Language is extremely

important to its national identity. For historical reasons, the national language is Dzongkha, even though Dzongkha is not everybody's mother tongue. At the same time, Chöke unites the nation as a shared liturgical language. Yet Dzongkha and Chöke are not one and the same language, and language is not everything.

So, where do we go from here? What is the role of language in shaping and sustaining Bhutanese national identity? This issue is urgent because modern Bhutan faces serious problems on the language front today which the nation has never faced before in its long history.

The modern multilingual society

For Bhutan, the best and most relevant example comes from another mountain state with historical credentials that are just as old and solid as those of Bhutan. Switzerland, one of the oldest nation states in Europe, is just as big as Bhutan. Comparing the Swiss case with the Bhutanese situation is not an argument in favour of managing Bhutan the Swiss way, nor does it represent a polemic for running Switzerland the Bhutanese way. Rather, it can be instructive to study somebody else's example, especially when they have a winning formula.

Switzerland is like Bhutan in that there are very few language related tensions. The Swiss linguistic situation is harmonious and stable. Like the Bhutanese, the Swiss have no severe language conflicts, very much unlike Belgium and the Ukraine. Although there is no open hostility across language boundaries, the reality in Switzerland is more complex than meets the eye. The Bhutanese situation and the Swiss case can be profitably compared and contrasted.

For one thing, Switzerland has no one national language. Switzerland has four national languages. German, French, Italian and Romansh are each equal in principle. There are daily television news broadcasts in all four languages. Swiss passports and the airplanes of the national airline are adorned with the name of the country in each of the four languages: Schweiz, Suisse, Svizzera, Svizra. Yet the reality is that the languages are not equal in practice. When you board a Swiss airplane, the in-flight entertainment system will tell you Bainvegni "Welcome" and Buon Sgol "Good flight" in

Romansh, just as it greets you in Italian, French and German. But that's where the equality stops. You can choose Japanese, English or Mandarin as the interface language for your in-flight entertainment system, or you can choose one of the Swiss national languages Italian, French or German, but no in-flight entertainment is available through Romansh.

Just as in Bhutan, history and demography are important factors. Half of one percent of the Swiss population speaks Romansh. There is very little literature in Romansh. All speakers of Romansh speak German as a second language. Romansh language rights are respected and promoted wherever possible. The federal and cantonal governments do everything they can to protect the language rights of the Romansh speakers. The general attitude of people in Switzerland is that it is compassionate to protect Romansh as part of national linguistic heritage and to advance the tongue of a vulnerable language community speaking an endangered language. Not all the Romansh speakers are satisfied though. Some of my students speak Romansh as their native language. Some of them feel quite strongly that more should be done.

How does this compare to Bhutan? In Bhutan, the smallest languages with the least speakers include Gongduk, Lhokpu and Black Mountain Monpa. The Royal Government of Bhutan under the Dzongkha Development Commission does everything possible to study and document these languages. Good documentation and sound grammatical description are needed if we wish to preserve a detailed and accurate record of the language for posterity, but also if we aim to conserve the language as a living tongue by developing learning materials for primary education in the mother tongue and producing dictionaries, grammars and other resources.

Such work requires linguistic expertise, time and funding. Even if we invest heavily in stimulating endangered languages, will these tongues be able to survive the onslaught of globalisation? The speakers are outnumbered. If they strive for socio-economic success, they need to gain a mastery of Dzongkha and English. Many also learn Tshangla and Nepali.

In Switzerland today, there are no monolingual speakers of Romansh. In Bhutan, I have met monolingual speakers of Gongduk, Lhokpu and Black Mountain Monpa. I spoke with them with the aid of an interpreter, and

all these monolingual speakers were already quite elderly. Young people in these language communities speak at least one and usually several other languages. In future, there will be no monolingual speakers of these languages.

Romansh is spoken only in Switzerland. Speakers of Gongduk, Lhokpu and Black Mountain Monpa are found only in Bhutan. At one time, the Lhokpu speaking area extended into the duars when the duars were still Bhutanese. Such native minority languages are, therefore, perhaps more Swiss and more Bhutanese than larger languages, such as Tshangla, which has speakers outside of Bhutan, or Dzongkha, which closely resembles the Dränjoke language of Sikkim.

The Swiss model and the Bhutanese model

When I recently entered the Swiss embassy in Kathmandu for a business appointment, the lady asked me Deutsch ou français? “German or French?” I responded Oh, les pauvres tessinois! “Oh, the poor Ticinese!” The inhabitants of Ticino constitute 6% of the Swiss population. Their native language is Italian. Unlike Italian speakers across the border in Italy, the Ticinese tend to learn German as a second language. Most Ticinese also speak French. In Switzerland, Italian enjoys the same official status as French and German, but in practice the reality is different. The actual choice is most often just between German or French, just as in the question posed to me by the lady in the Swiss embassy in Kathmandu.

The contrast with the Bhutanese situation is quite clear. Some of the smaller languages, such as Kurtöp or Dzala, are significant regional languages. Nonetheless, they do not have the strength of numbers that Tshangla or Dzongkha enjoy. Yet we cannot compare the position of Kurtöp or Dzala in Bhutan to the status of Italian in Switzerland. Neither Kurtöp or Dzala can boast an old and rich literary tradition. In fact, neither is a written language, and their speakers do not expect to receive government documents and learning materials in their own language.

Happy to speak each other’s language

Aside from Romansh and Italian, about three quarters of the Swiss population speak a Swiss-German dialect as their native language, and one

quarter of the Swiss speak French as their mother tongue. The people who want a job in the federal government must speak both French and German, but many do not seek such a career. Many French speakers notoriously do not care to learn German. Instead, historically, the Swiss German part of the population has been more inclined to learn French, leading to a majority that behaves as if it were a linguistic minority.

In theory, all is peace and harmony, but in reality some people in bilingual communities along the language border are quite sensitive about language issues. They demand that their language rights be respected. Yet the situation is not as polarised as in Belgium. As a language, French does not have to play second fiddle in Switzerland.

In general, the Swiss are modest about their good command of languages. In practice, they happily speak the language of the other language community as best as they can. Herein lies an obvious similarity with the Bhutanese situation. People like to show how well they can speak Tshangla, Dzongkha, Nepali, English and any other language which they happen to know, not to show off their language skills but just to communicate and share.

A big difference with Bhutan is that in Switzerland the cantons are sovereign in most matters, including language. The language of Geneva is French. The language of Zürich is German. The language of Ticino is Italian. A canton such as Bern is bilingual in French and German. In Bhutan, the language policy does not officially differ from one dzongkhag to the next.

A major challenge for Bhutan

Is English a bane or a blessing? In Switzerland, sometimes young people from different language communities speak to each other in English nowadays. Historically, this never used to happen. People just spoke one of the big national languages French, German or Italian. That is the way it is supposed to be, but now the Swiss are worried that people might in future communicate between themselves using a non-Swiss language as a lingua franca. English is an intrusive and unwelcome alien tongue. Today English is considered to be a necessary evil but also felt to represent a blight on the pristine Swiss linguistic landscape. The Bhutanese problem is far more severe.

Even when compared with Singapore, metropolitan Bhutan is arguably the most English speaking country in Asia. Bhutanese English is as good as Australian or American English. So, let us remind ourselves. Was Dzongkha the national language of Bhutan, or was it English? Could Dzongkha be an endangered language? The first step in language endangerment is bilingualism. The second step is the loss of domains of usage to the dominant language.

Young polyglot Bhutanese are generally quite competent in English, often more so than in Dzongkha. English has pride of place in many domains of language usage, and Dzongkha already cedes these domains of usage to English in the Bhutanese schools, where English is used as the primary medium of instruction. In most nations, the medium of school instruction is the national language. So, the threat to the national language in Bhutan stems first and foremost from the national school system.

As in Switzerland, things in Bhutan are democratically decided. But has there been a national debate about the use of the national language as the medium of instruction in the national school system? Perhaps not, because the status quo strikes many Bhutanese as natural. Actually, the Bhutanese school system is unusual, but not unique.

Malaysia once used to use English as the medium of instruction and then the schools switched to Malay. People feared that the switch to the national language would reduce the general level of English, and they have been proved right. Levels of English proficiency have gone down in Malaysia, but schooling in Malay made education more accessible. Malay is easy, especially for Malays. Yet some Bhutanese think that Dzongkha is difficult. This brings us to yet another challenge.

A second major challenge for Bhutan

The Bhutanese press has for years featured items complaining about “the problem with the national language”. In which other country could such headlines appear except for Bhutan? How could the national language present a problem to anyone? How could anyone find their own national language difficult to learn? The Bhutanese people who say and write such things are on to something though. Dzongkha is not difficult. Yet Dzongkha spelling is unnecessarily cumbersome. It may come as a surprise

to some people that most languages are written in fairly simple, logical and straightforward spelling systems. As far as spelling systems go, Danish and Thai orthography are troublesome. Yet French and English spelling are unsystematic to the point of being arcane. Only Dzongkha spelling is more difficult.

In this regard, we must not confuse Dzongkha with Chöke. Chöke is a sacred liturgical language, and its orthography cannot be changed. Chöke should be taught as a subject in Bhutanese schools if we wish our youth to retain a connection to our own national cultural heritage. Dzongkha, on the other hand, is a living spoken language, and Dzongkha spelling can be rendered both easy and straightforward by following a one-to-one correspondence between the phonology of the spoken language (the living sound system) and the spelling in 'Ucen script.

Such a straightforward spelling system in Bhutanese script was developed just over twenty years ago but never formally introduced. Experts in the Dzongkha Development Commission marvelled at the system's simplicity and its ease of use for writing Dzongkha, but we shelved it because we thought that it would be much too controversial at the time. None of us wanted to create an uproar.

Meanwhile, multi-party democracy has been introduced, and the loud laments about the national language in the Bhutanese media have not ceased. Perhaps the time is drawing nigh to dust off the cobwebs and to present the system to the public at large so that the Bhutanese people can decide for themselves. Like most national languages, Dzongkha too could have a phonological orthography.