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**Southeast Asia: Linguistic Perspectives**

Meng Vong

*National Language Institute, Royal Academy of Cambodia, Cambodia*

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Meng Vong<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*National Language Institute, Royal Academy of Cambodia, Cambodia*

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## Abstract

Southeast Asia (SEA) is not only rich in multicultural areas but also rich in multilingual nations with the population of more than 624 million and more than 1,253 languages (Ethnologue 2015). With the cultural uniqueness of each country, this region also accords each national languages with language planning and political management. This strategy brings a challenges to SEA and can lead to conflicts among other ethnic groups, largely owing to leadership. The ethnic conflicts of SEA bring controversy between governments and minorities, such as the ethnic conflict in Aceh, Indonesia, the Muslim population of the south Thailand, and the Bangsa Moro of Mindanao, of the Philippines. The objective of this paper is to investigate the characteristics of the linguistic perspectives of SEA.

This research examines two main problems. First, this paper investigates the linguistic area which refers to a geographical area in which genetically unrelated languages have come to share many linguistic features as a result of long mutual influence. The SEA has been called a linguistic area because languages share many features in common such as lexical tone, classifiers, serial verbs, verb-final items, prepositions, and noun-adjective order. SEA consists of five language families such as Austronesian, Mon-Khmer, Sino-Tibetan, Tai-Kadai, and Hmong-Mien. Second, this paper also examines why each nation of SEA takes one language to become the national language of the nation. The National language plays an important role in the educational system because some nations take the same languages as a national language—the Malay language in the case of Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore.

The research method of this paper is to apply comparative method to find out the linguistic features of the languages of SEA in terms of phonology, morphology, and grammar.

*Keywords:* Southeast Asia, multilingual, language planning, linguistic area

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## Introduction

Southeast Asia has more than 1,253 languages (Ethnologue 2015). This region includes Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar (Burma), Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. With the cultural diversities of uniqueness of each country, the SEA also takes their national languages differently for their own nations. The national language or official language is based on language planning and language policy because each society varies in terms of situation. This strategy brings challenges to SEA and can lead to conflicts among ethnic groups, largely due to leadership policies.

The ethnic conflicts of SEA are controversial between the governments and the minorities, such as with the ethnic conflict in Aceh, Indonesia, the Muslim population in the south

of Thailand, and the Bangsa Moro of Mindanao, in the Philippines (see Snitwongse and Thompson 2005). In addition, the leaders of SEA country try to deal with social stigma from ethnic minorities of their own country in order to find problems and to promote their identities for development. Here, the Universal declaration on linguistic rights of the World Conference on Linguistic Rights, article 41, states that “all language communities have the right to use, maintain and foster their language in all form of cultural expression” (UNESCO, Art 41, UDLR, Barcelona, Spain, 9 June 1996). The objective of this paper is to investigate the characteristics of the linguistic perspectives of SEA.

This research examines two main problems. First, this paper investigates the linguistic area referred to as a geographical area in which genetically unrelated languages have come to share many linguistic features as result of long mutual influence (Emeneau 1956 quoted in Goddard 2005). SEA has been called a linguistic area because languages share many features in common, such as lexical tone, classifiers, serial verbs, verb-final items, prepositions, and noun-adjective order. The SEAn region consists of five language families such as Austronesian, Mon-Khmer, Sino-Tibetan, Tai-Kadai, and Hmong-Mien. Second, this paper examines why each nation in SEA takes one language to become the national language. Languages of the nations of SEA are rich because each country within SEA is multilingual and multicultural. National language plays an important role in the educational system because some nations take the same languages as a national language-- the Malay language is used in Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore.

This paper uses a comparative approach in the analysis of the grammatical unit. By looking at the word formation process of each language and sound system, it locates similarities and differences.

The organization of the paper is as follows: Section II provides the context of Southeast Asia as a linguistic area by describing the geographical areas of the region and the language families. In Section III, I describe the national languages in SEAn nations by examining how the language has been taken into account for each state. Finally, I conclude with SEA’s position to take the language of the region and to promote national language studies among the nations and to enhance Chinese language studies both locally and internationally.

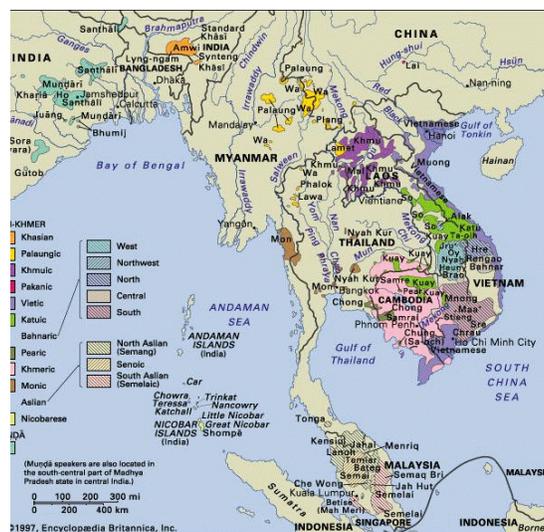


Figure 1: Map of languages of Southeast Asia

## Linguistic areas and Language Families

### Linguistic Areas of SEA

SEA encompasses Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar (Burma), Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, China south of the Yangtze River, and Northeast India. This region is not only rich in cultures and languages but also in their disciplines (Pepinsky 2015, 216). In addition, this region also has been called as the linguistic area because there many language families that have been living together for thousands of years and “they often tend to converge in their phonology, lexicon, and grammar” (Goddard 2005, 39). “A linguistic area is defined as a geographical region in which neighboring languages belonging to different language families show a significant set of structural properties in common, where the commonality in structure is due to contact and where the shared structural properties are not found in languages immediately outside the area” (Enfield 2005, 190). The areas with most examples of languages are the Balkans, South Asia, and Southeast Asia.

The members of the Balkans belong to four genetically quite distinct subgroups of Indo-European languages: Bulgarian, Macedonian, part of Serbo-Croatian (all Slavic); Romanian (Romance); Albanian; and Modern Greek (Hock 1991, 494). South Asians have been living together for centuries. Goddard (2005) mentions that “one of the classic examples of a linguistic area is South Asia, where Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, and Munda languages have been co-located for 3,000 years. Languages of all three families now share many features—in vocabulary, phonology, and grammar” (2005, 39).

Similarly, Southeast Asia is a linguistic area because the languages of this region share many features among the different language families, and this region is a particularly striking case. “Many languages in this area—including Burmese, Thai and Vietnamese—are so similar in their structures that linguists believed for a while that they must all be related in a single family. But careful investigation has revealed that they are not discoverably related to each other at all; they all have true relatives elsewhere which are not very similar to them, and the striking resemblances result purely from convergence among neighboring but unrelated languages” (Trask 2007, 153). What they have, many scholars of this region have proposed, are typological features in common (Pinnow 1960; Henderson 1965). Pinow (1960) listed areal features of Southeast Asia by contrast with features that he found in South Asia such as genitive postposed elements, head-modifiers, noun-adjective-genitives, verb-objects (object postverbals), no extensive morphology, predominantly prefixes (tendency towards monosyllabicity), no dental/retroflex distinction, and a tendency to develop tonemes (quoted in Migliazza 2004, 4).

Furthermore, SEA is a linguistic region replete with typological characteristics. Henderson also contributed to that this region is the linguistic region, after extensive work on the typological division on phonological and morphological criteria of Southeast Asian Languages. She described that this region shares six characteristics. First, tone (presence or absence) correlating with grammatical purposes, initial/final consonants, vowel quality/quantity, and phonation type. Second, register (present or absence) correlating with initial consonants, phonation type, and pitch. Third, the initial consonant patterns and their distribution with aspiration, voice/voicelessness, retroflexion, pre-glottalization/nasalization, vela-uvular series of initial consonant distinctions, initial fricative/nasal/clustering patterns, and the grammatical use of any of these. Fourth, syllabification patterns correlating with major/minor syllables (tonic and

pre/post tonic), and consonant restrictions in the major/minor syllable. Fifth, vowel systems correlating with incidence and distribution of back unrounded vowels, vowel length distinctions, diphthong patterns, initial/final consonants, tone and register, and the grammatical role of these vowel quality differences. Sixth, final consonant patterns and their distribution with final palatals incidence, use of voice distinction, and final clusters, and the grammatical use of final consonants (see Henderson 1965, 400-434).

How did many language families of Southeast Asia share elements in one geographical region? Southeast Asia is the one region situated to the east of the Indian subcontinent and south of China. It consists of two sides—Mainland Southeast Asia (MSEAA) and insular Southeast Asia. Mainland Southeast Asia includes Cambodia, Lao, Peninsular Malaysia, Thailand, Myanmar, and Vietnam, along with areas of China south of the Yangtze River; this region consists of five major language families: Sino-Tibetan, Tai-Kadai, Hmong-Mien, Austroasiatic, and Austronesian (Enfield and Comrie 2015, 1-6). MSEAA is rich in mountain ranges and rivers. From a linguistic (but not geographical) point of view, Southern and Southwestern China belong to mainland Southeast Asia, in the sense that they are part of the same linguistic area (Goddard 2005, 41).

Insular Southeast Asia consists of Brunei, East Timor, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, and Singapore. The Malay language is a language in the Austronesian language family and it belongs to the national language of Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, while the Philippines take Filipino or Tagalog (also Austronesian language family) as a national language. These countries also share their histories: “The East Indies (present-day Indonesia) was ruled by the Dutch, the Philippines by the United States (which had replaced Spain), and East Timor by Portugal. The modern-day map of Southeast Asia, with its nation states and borders, was not drawn up until after the Second World War” (Goddard 2005, 42-43).

### The Language Family of SEA

The Southeast Asian region has a linguistic richness and diversity almost unmatched anywhere else in the world. Except for maybe by the Indian subcontinent, it is doubtful if any other similarly sized area in the world has as much diversity in language, and in the amount and depth of contact among these languages (Migliazza 2004, 2). The languages of this region consist of five language families; Austronesian, Mon-Khmer (a sub family of Austroasiatic), Sino-Tibetan, Tai-Kadai, and Hmong-Mien (Enfield and Comries 2015, 6; Migliazza 2004, 2). In contrast, Goddard (2005) classified Sino-Tibetan into two sub-families—Tibeto-Burman and Sinitic (27-38). Sino-Tibetan has been classified into different sub-families: Tibeto-Burman and Sinitic family (Steinbergs 2001, 374). Steinbergs (2011) also described that within the field of linguistics, three different approaches to language classification are used: Genetic classification, linguistic typology, and areal classification. To classify the languages into language families, we base our work on genetic classification. Genetic classification categorizes languages according to their descent. Languages that developed historically from the same ancestor language are grouped together and are said to be genetically related (Steinbergs 2001, 348-349). The language families in the SEA are described as follows:

## Austronesian

The Austronesian family contains approximately 1,222 languages with 324,680,782 native speakers (Lewis, Gary, and Charles 2016). This language family stretches from the island of Madagascar halfway across the world to Southeast Asia, Hawaii, Easter Island, and New Zealand. This language family is the largest and most widespread globally as many countries speak this language. The countries in Southeast Asia which belong to this family are Indonesia and Malaysia (200 million speakers), Javanese (75 million speakers), Sundanese (30 million), and Filipino in the Philippines (Tagalog) (50 million, 17 million as a first language). There are hundreds of other closely related languages in Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines (Goddard 2005, 30). There are two subgroup language families: Formosan and Malayo-Polynesian in this family. The Formosan language family includes Paiwan, Amis, Atayal, Seediq while Malayo-Polynesian contains Malagasy, Malay in Indonesia, Tagalog in the Philippines, Javanese, Sundanese, Balinese, Samoan, Tahitian, Hawaiian, Fijian, Motu, and Ponapean (Steinbergs 2001, 375).

Austronesian languages are shared by the more conservative languages in all regions and were probably features of Proto-Austronesian. The phonemic systems of these ranges from average to extreme simplicity. Nasal + stop is the most widespread type, and lexical morphemes are typically bisyllabic. Morphological complexity is likewise average to low. Nouns are suffixed for pronominal possessors in almost all Austronesian languages, although in Oceanic languages this is restricted to one category of possession. Word order in Austronesian is predominantly verb-initial or verb-second and prepositional (Clark 2009, 786).

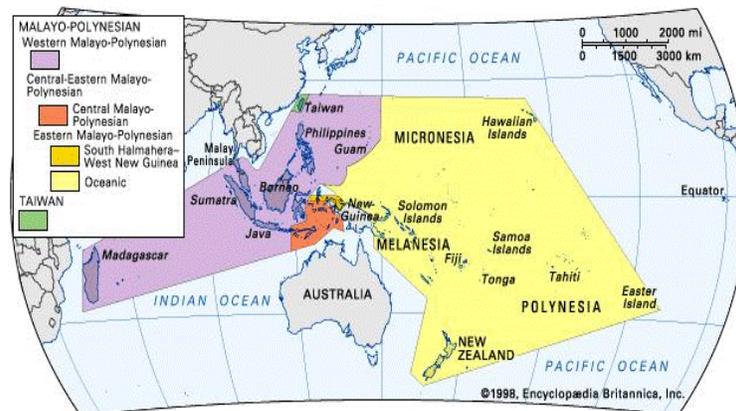


Figure 2: Map of Austronesian Languages

## Mon-Khmer (MK)

The Mon-Khmer languages are one branch of the Austroasiatic language family (AA). The AA includes the Mon-Khmer and Munda languages. Mon-Khmer is probably the oldest language family in SEA because the well-known languages Mon, Paluang and Wa in Myanmar and central Thailand, and Khmer, belong to present-day Cambodia with more than 15 million native speakers, Khmu in northern Laos, and the so-called Muong languages of northern Vietnam (Goddard 2005, 33; UN 2015 ).

This MK include Monic, Aslian, Niboarese Khmeric, Bahnaric, Katuic, Vietic, Khmuic,

Plaungic, and Khasian (Diffloth quoted in Sidwell 2010, 121). In contrast, Adams (1982) classified the Mon-Khmer subfamily into Khasi, Palaungic, Mon, Khmuic, Khmer, Bahnaric, Katuic, and Viet-Muong (143) while Peiros (1998) listed 14 languages in the Mon-Khmer and these are Jeh, Bahnar, Chrau, Kui, Semai, Mon, Nyakur, Vietnamese, Ruc, Wa, Deang, Khmu, Ksinmul, and Khmer (1998, 112). The classification of Mon-Khmer languages are different from one scholar to another but these are still being investigated by linguists of Mon-Khmer. However, Vietnamese is still controversial in being classified into this group and even native scholars might not agree with this as Vietnamese has the tonal system (Steinbergs 2001, 374). Specifically, Dalby (2004) also argues that

Much more controversial has been the inclusion of VIETNAMESE and MUONG (with some tiny minority languages of Vietnam and Laos) in the Austroasiatic family. This because Vietnamese—the only member of this Viet-Muong group on which much work has been done—has for two thousand years been under the influence of Chinese. Whatever its shape at the beginning of this period, Vietnamese is now a tonal language with a sound pattern rather resembling that of Chinese. Moreover, it was traditionally written in Chinese script and its grammar and style had adopted many Chinese features. Some thought it a Sino-Tibetan language or tried to trace links with the Tai group. The resemblance between Vietnamese and its Ausgthroasiatic neighbours were had to see; yet they have now been demonstrated to the satisfaction of nearly all specialists...(Dalby 2004, 45)

The special characters of Mon-Khmer languages constitute complex vowel systems. In addition, the morphological features include infixes, no inflection, and postposition of adjectives to modify nouns, while syntax focuses on SVO patterns (Steinbergs 2001; Goddards 2005).

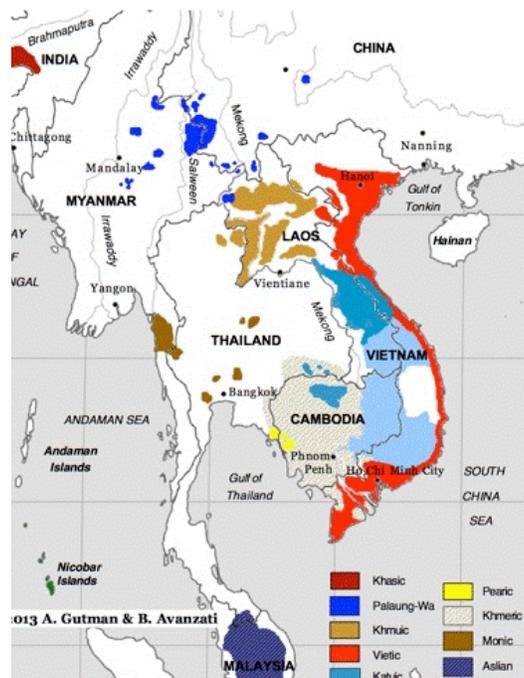


Figure 3: Map of Mon-Khmer languages from Alejandro Gutman and Beatriz Avanzati 2013

## Sino-Tibetan

The Sino-Tibetan family is one of the largest language families in Southeast Asia. This family is the biggest family after the Indo-European language family in the world as this language family is widespread across areas of East and Southeast Asia, and across the northern mountains of South Asia. The people who speak this language family include Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Thailand, and Viet Nam. There are around 451 languages with a population of approximately 1,373,805,394 people globally (Steinbergs 2001; Lewis, Simons and Fennig 2016).

There are two major sub-language families: Tibeto-Burman and Sinitic. The Tibeto-Burman includes Tibetan, Burmese, Yi, Sharpa while the Sinitic contains Mandarin in and around Bijin, Szechuan, and Nanking, Wu has dialects in Shanghai and Suchow, Min (which includes Taiwanese, Amoy, Hokkian and Fukian), Yue (Cantonese), Xiang (Hunan), Hakka, and Gan. In contrast, Hale (1982) listed the four sublanguage families, which are Bodic (Bodish, East Himalayan), Baric (Kamarupan and Kachinic), Burmic (Rung, Naxi and Lolo-Burmese), and Karenic (quoted in Delancey 2009, 695). The Sinitic languages share linguistic features such as the syntactic SVO languages and tone, and are predominantly isolating, having many monomorphemic words. In addition, Goddard describes the Sinitic language families from a morphology and syntax perspective, being agglutinating and verb-final. In SEA, however, this observation does not really apply, because many Tibeto-Burman languages in this region share areal features such as the tendency towards tone systems, classifiers and serial verbs constructions (2005, 33-35).



Figure 4: Map of Sino-Tibetan Languages from Gutman and Avanzati 2013

## Tai-Kadai

The Tai-Kadai language family contains 92 languages with more than 80 million of its speakers living in China, India, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Viet Nam (Lewis, Simons, and Fennig 2016). The major languages of this family are Thai, a national language of Thailand, with about 67 million speakers, and Lao with more than 6 million. There are three subgroups in this family, including the Tai group, the Kam-Sui group (in mainland southern China), and the Kadai group (which includes Li and Be living on Hainan Island). Moreover, these languages has linguistic features in common, such as tone, SVO order, lack of inflection morphemes, compounding and reduplication, and classifier construction (Goddard 2005, 36; Steinbergs 2001, 374).



Figure 5: Language of Tai-Kadai

## Hmong-Mien

Hmong-Mien (also called Miao-Yao languages) is a family of languages spoken in southern China (Guizhou, Guangxi, Hunan and Yunnan provinces), Northern Vietnam, Lao and Thailand. This language family has more than 9 million speakers and 38 languages (Lewis, Simons, and Fennig 2016). The major languages in this family are Hmong (also known as Miao) and Mien. The Hmongic language consists of around 5 million speakers and includes Hmong with around 2.7 million speakers who live in Guizhou, Yunnan, and North Southeast Asia, Butu with 400,000 speakers in Northwest Guanxi, Hmu (Miao) with 2.1 million speakers in Southeast Guizhou and North Guangxi, Xong (Qo Xiong) with 1 million speakers in West Hunan, Southwest Hubei, Ho Hte (Ho Ne/She) with 1200 speakers in Southeast Guangdong, Pa Hng with 32, 000 speakers in North Guangxi. The Mienic language (also known as Yao) contains Lu Mien with 900,000 speakers in South China and North Southeast Asia, Kim Mun with 375,000 speakers in Yunan, Guangxi, Hainan, Vietnam, and Laos, Biao-Min with 43,000 speakers in Northeast Guangxi, and Dzao-Min with 60,000 speakers in North Guangdon and

South Hunan (Gutman and Avanzati 2013). In contrast, Chinese scholars classified the groups of this language family differently. They grouped this language family into six groups such as Miao, Bunu, Pahung, Jiongnai, She, and Yao (Wang and Mao 1991, 2-3 quoted in Peiros 1998, 114).

When the Vietnam War occurred in the mid 1970s, the thousand speakers of Hmong-Mien languages migrated from Laos to Australia, the USA, and France (Goddard 2005, 36; Gutman and Avanzati 2013; Ratliff 2016). This allowed linguists to easily gather data from the speakers. The linguistic features of these languages are shared with languages of Southeast Asia, and these elements include lack of inflection, no numbers, no case, no tense, mood, or aspect, presence of numeral classifiers, widespread ellipsis, serial verb constructions, and abundance of sentence particles. The words are monosyllabic and they have initial consonants.

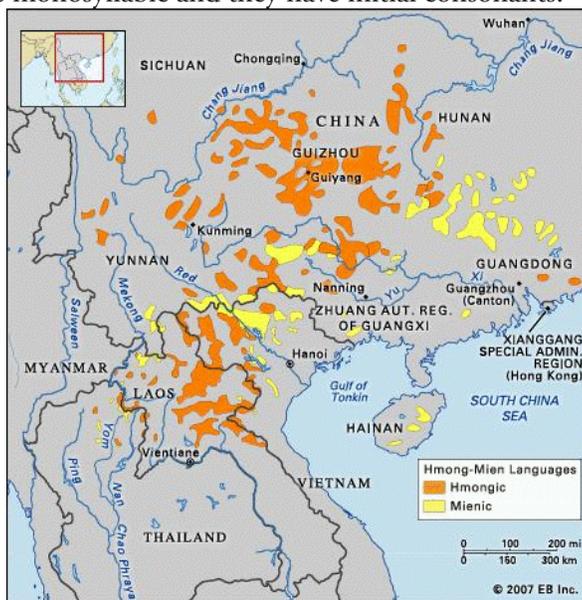


Figure 6: Hmong Mien Languages from Britannica Dictionary Online, 2016

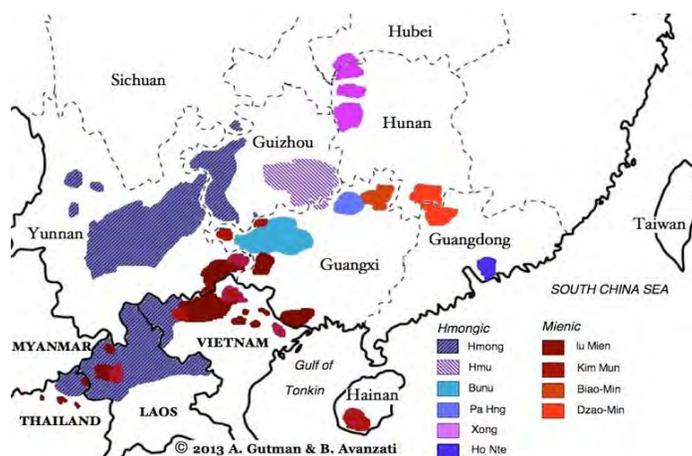


Figure 7: Hmong-Mien Languages from Gutman and Avanzati 2013

## National Languages in Southeast Asia

This section gives a general overview of national languages and official languages of countries in SEA. SEA falls into two parts: Insular Southeast Asia and Mainland Southeast Asia. We use the data and statistics from Ethnologue website. Specifically, national language plays an important role in educational system because young generations can learn the language smoothly. Moreover, national language can bring harmony to the country and region.

National language refers to a language associated with a particular country where it is recognised as a symbol of national identity. In many postcolonial states the language of the former colonial power was retained after independence as an official language, while indigenous languages of wider communication were chosen as national languages. In Kenya, English is the main official language and medium of instruction; Kiswahili, the East African lingua franca, is promoted as the national language. It is used in parliamentary debates and is taught as a school subject. In some countries more one national language exists. Switzerland, for example, has four national languages: German, French, Italian and Romansh” (Swann et al 2004, 219).

The languages of SEA are rich because this region has multilingual communities, so that each state has struggled to adopt a major language for education. In addition, the struggle of government and people have been challenging for nation-states. From this point of view, we investigate how nations claim their own national language.

The process of selecting and establishing a common national language usually involves two key aspects, legitimation and institutionalization (May 2001; Nelde, Strubell and Williams 1996 quoted in May 2006, 261). Legitimation is understood as the formal recognition accorded to the language by the nation-state—usually, via “official” language status. Institutionalization, perhaps the more important dimension, refers to process by which the language comes to be accepted, or “taken for granted,” in a wide range of social, cultural, and linguistic domains or contexts, both formal and informal. Both elements, in combination, achieved not only the central requirement of nations-states—cultural and linguistic banishment of ‘minority’ languages and dialects to the private domain (May 2006, 261). Before and after the colonization by European and powerful countries in Southeast Asia countries, leadership and politics attempted to push and enhance the national language from the colonizers as most of the colonial rule pressured the states under their control and attempted to alter local languages by using Romanization. Regarding the national languages selection, Anshen (2007) argued that “there appear to be four major factors at work in the selection of a national language. These are: nationalism, ethnic self-interest, linguistic demographics, and the prestige of languages involved. Often there is a combination of the first two, with the second frequently masquerading as the first” (704).

### Insular Southeast Asia

Brunei Darussalam. This country, located in Borneo adjacent to the Malaysian states of Sarawak and Sarawak, contains a population of 423,000 with three principal languages. Arabic language should be included as a fourth main language, and is very closely related to Islam, the official religion of Brunei.

East Timore. The newest and the smallest nation in Southeast Asia, East Timore contains more than 1 million people and around 20 languages. This country was colonized by Portugal,

and had been under the control of Indonesia from 1975 up until its independence in 1999. Its official languages are Tetum (sometimes spelt Tetun) and Portuguese (Goddard 2005, 45).

Indonesia. The biggest and largest country in Southeast Asia, Indonesia has 719 languages. This country claimed its national language as Bahasa Indonesia following its national movement from the Dutch colony. By far the largest regional language in Indonesia is Javanese (75 million speakers, but the nationalist movement deliberately chose not to impose this or any other ethnic language as a national language (Sneddon 2003 quoted in Goddard 2005, 43).

Malaysia. With a population of more than 30 million people and with 136 languages, achieved independence from the British in 1957. Because the majority of the population is ethnic Malay, Bahasa Malayu (but labeled “Bahasa Malaysia” for political purposes) is the national language.

The Philippines. The Philippines consists of more than 100 million people as its population, and has 187 languages. The national language of the Philippines is Filipino. This language developed from Tagalog, which is native to the southern part of the island of Luzon.

Singapore. The national language of Singapore is Malay (Goddard 2005, 46). Singapore consists of more than 5 million people with more than 24 languages in use, including English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil, which are the official languages of Singapore.

#### Mainland Southeast Asia

Cambodia. With more than 15 million people, Cambodia consists of 24 languages, where its national language is Khmer, due to the fact that the majorities speak Khmer. There are 6 indigenous languages approved for use in primary schools; Bunong, Kreung, Brao, Tampuan, and Kravet, with partnerships with the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports, and with UNICEF, International Cooperation Cambodia (ICC) and the Care International in Cambodia. Some ethnic language groups belong to the Austronesian language family, such as Cham. Some indigenous people speak Mon-Khmer and some speak Chinese, Vietnamese.

Laos. The official name of Laos is Lao People’s Democratic Republic. Laos consists of more than 6 million population with more than 84 languages. The immigrant languages of Laos are Central Khmer (10,400), Mandarin Chinese, Sedang (520), Vietnamese (76,000), Yue Chinese. The national language of Laos is Lao, but Lao is essentially unstandardized (Enfield 2000a quoted in Goddard 2005: 48).

Myanmar. The official name of Myanmar is the Republic of the Union of Myanmar. Myanmar contains of more than 53 million people as its population, and has 118 languages. Burmese is the national language of Myanmar, and has many major ethnic languages such as Karen, Shan, Mon, and Kachin. Many of ethnic minority languages of Myanmar are found in the hills and mountain.

Thailand. Thailand contains more than 67 million people in its population, and has 72 languages. Thai is the national language of Thailand and only approximately 25 per cent of the population speak Thai. The immigrant languages of Thailand are Burmese (828,000), English (324,000), Hindi (22,900), Japanese (70,700), Kayan (180), Lao, Rohingya (100,000), Samtao, Sinhala, Tai Daeng, Tamil, and Vietnamese (8,280).

Vietnam. The official name of Vietnam is the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Vietnamese is the national language of Vietnam as the majority of its population speak Vietnamese as a native language. Vietnam has 109 minority languages. The Government of Vietnam issued Decision

No. 121-TCTK-PPCD, the “Nomenclature of Vietnamese Ethnic Groups”, on the 2nd of March, 1979, and identified its majority ethnicity as Kinh-Viet, and 53 minority groups.

## Conclusion

Today SEA has become not only a political, economic, and social cooperation in the region but has also become a cultural and linguistic location. The richness and pluralism of these societies bring powerful countries to pay much attention to their plight of interacting with the region. This interaction has been both benevolent and selfish on the part of the powerful countries. While linguists focus on language studies, other experts emphasize politics, economy, and security. Pepinsky (2015) described SEA as a discipline of studies for scholars. In the 19th century, Westerners colonized SEA and where colonizers led some SEA countries to learn more of western society.

Linguistically, SEA has extended its territory not only in the region between the China and India, but also to cover Southern and Southwestern China and the East of the Indian subcontinent. Some parts of China have the Sino-Tibetan language family while the Indian subcontinent has the Austroasiatic language family. These two language families belong to the language family which exists in Southeast Asia. In addition, Southeast Asians have their own national language or official language for both the majority and for special purposes. Some nations have taken one national language, such as in the case of Cambodia, Vietnam, Lao, Myanmar, and Thailand, while others have applied three or four national languages or official languages such as in the case of Brunei Darussalam, East Timore, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore.

Compared with the European Union, SEA differs significantly as SEA's cultural and linguistic developments are still controversial due to its complexity and diversity of languages and cultures. Some indigenous states in this region have attempted to obtain independence, such as in the case of East Timore from Indonesia, and Aceh from Indonesia. As a solution for peace in the region, a national language policy for SEAn states should be promoted in order to understand the dynamics of these societies, where this procedure will allow for a deep sharing and communication. Importantly, English and Chinese have a dominant influence both linguistically and economically, where, through the growth of the Chinese economy and national strength, both in China and elsewhere in regions such as in SEA, Southeast Asian nations will benefit for their own development in the future.

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