Resolving ethnolinguistic conflict in multi-ethnic societies

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Language is a common underlying cause of conflict in multi-ethnic societies. Facilitated dialogue — a method of conflict mediation — is being used in countries such as Myanmar to mitigate language-based conflict, acknowledge language rights, and encourage societies to adopt a culture of dialogue.

Language is deeply significant in our personal and collective lives; it not only influences our educational and economic opportunities, civic participation, legal rights and mental health, but also transports tradition and history from the past to the present. Alongside this formative importance of language, multilingualism is sometimes associated with disagreements, problems and conflicts in contemporary life. To redress conflict, tension and violence related to language, and to build new ways to manage multilingualism, facilitated dialogues are being used in countries with a history of language-based conflicts. The facilitated dialogue method has been designed to exploit the deep social importance and universal functions of language[1,2]. Through exercises in narrative, structured conversation, dialogue-based reflection and intense discussion, participants jointly mitigate tension, build partnerships, and collectively author new language policies to support multilingualism and ease social tensions.

Conflict and language

Our planet is divided into 193 discrete political entities into which are squeezed the 7,097 classified human languages[3]. With few exceptions, states favour only a tiny proportion of the languages their citizens speak, granting them privilege and standardization, and cultivating them as national codes of identity (for example, French in France and Japanese in Japan). But official languages do more than serve a juridical or governmental function; they also carry symbolic weight. As national symbols, official languages offer collective affiliation for citizens who are otherwise strangers to each other, yet many individuals and groups remain excluded.

Research on ethnic violence increasingly acknowledges grievances about language policy and alarm among minority populations about survival of their distinctive cultures[4]. Of special concern is how education systems typically ignore the mother tongues of children, leading to educational underperformance, poor learning of official languages, and alienation of children from their family and cultural traditions. Compounding these grievances, research has also found concern among minority populations about social exclusion and economic marginalization[4,5]. Inequality is particularly serious when groups are denied economic and educational agency over their socio-cultural futures and, in extreme cases, are "subjected to prolonged assaults on their identity that contribute to their perceptions of injustice"[5]. Examples include the simmering ethnic conflict in south Thailand, where teachers and schools have been attacked, and decades of violent struggle in Myanmar.

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In south Thailand, 80% of people speak a form of Malay, which is different to that used in neighbouring Malaysia, but children are educated in Thai, resulting in the lowest academic achievement rates in the country. Globally, the children of minority populations live in communities who want to preserve their traditional cultures, yet they are educated in languages they do not know, by teachers who are mostly untrained to support bilingualism. Families in these communities are hopeful that their children can gain school credentials, portable skills, and economic mobility, but to achieve these goals they must attain a strong mastery of official languages they do not speak, and world languages, which they struggle to master. Children are more successful in achieving these goals when education acknowledges the crucial role of the mother tongue in cognitive, social and identity formation. Compounding the pressure on minority languages from official national languages are the global meta-languages, such as English. One outcome of the spread of dominant languages and the pressure from national languages is attrition of the domains in which less powerful indigenous languages are used; of the 7,097 languages currently spoken, over one third are seriously endangered; while one half of the world's population speaks one or more of the 23 'top' languages, the other half speak the remaining 7,074.

Sub-national groups everywhere are engaged in struggles to preserve their unique sense of identity and to integrate into wider political and economic arrangements. In Myanmar, these struggles have been continuous for the past 50 years[1]. Many conflicts involve resistance by minorities to deliberate efforts of sovereign states to homogenize their populations. State policy is typically motivated by calculations that diversity is costly, by prejudice or by historical animosity against particular groups. As a result, minority populations live culturally disrupted and precarious lives, whether from slow-acting, intergenerational assimilation or from violently enforced policies of cultural extinction.

A culture of dialogue

Facilitated dialogues aim to mitigate conflict, acknowledge language rights, and encourage societies to adopt a culture of dialogue; they are a peace-building practice designed to build social cohesion in multi-ethnic societies. The method of facilitated dialogue draws on the multifunctional roles of language to build consensus around language rights and opportunities. Whether it is in literature or in our

personal self-conversation, human beings have invested in language the potential to counter present reality through imagining alternatives, verbal collaboration with others about whether alternatives can be feasible, and co-construction to produce the changes needed[6]. Facilitated dialogue incorporates these deep language functions into its operations in a pragmatic way.

Facilitated dialogue begins with the guided, collective study of evidence and the shared authoring of solutions. Participants represent key stakeholders in a dispute; approximately equal numbers of community representatives, public officials, and various kinds of experts. Ideally, the facilitator explores participants' views before each dialogue, and designs a three to five day 'retreat', repeated two or three times if necessary, during which participants interact with both opponents and supporters. A key aim is to move from mutual understanding, produced through the language function of deep listening, to shared positions, through collective writing, building inclusive conceptions of public life and citizenship along the way. A final agreed text is the manifestation of this process, but not always the most important outcome.

Since 2012, facilitated dialogues have been run across Southeast Asia, as part of an effort to address the role of language in ongoing ethnic struggles between indigenous populations and the central authorities. One focused on populations displaced from Myanmar now living in Thailand, bringing together 68 participants from 22 different organizations, for a 3-day retreat conducted in 6 languages. The outcome was a 35-page position statement on ethnic rights for minority Myanmar displaced populations, creation of a coordinated grassroots representative council, and training in how to advocate effectively for language rights with public authorities. The representative council remains active in what has since grown into a nationwide movement to introduce a national language policy to recognize and support Myanmar's many language minorities.

What makes a language-centred facilitated dialogue different from other kinds of conflict mediation is the close study of language functions. Activities depart from the regular formats of a workshop, seminar or other kinds of group discussion. Key features include: collective establishment of the rules of discourse; problem naming and ranking by participants; identification of different ways participants have knowledge of problems, identification of knowledge needed to tackle the problems; reflection on available research, commissioning or conducting of original research; speech to

writing sequences; and collective building of new words and phrases to give life to new perspectives and interpretations of problems. Since 2012, 35 such dialogues across Southeast Asia — funded by the Netherlands and administered by UNICEF (http://go.nature.com/2pfq535) — have exposed the urgency of responding to language and ethnic grievances in multi-ethnic states and revealed the positive potential of this emerging method of structured dialogue[7].
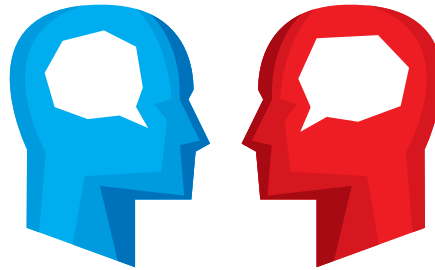
Reflection

Most conflicts, especially chronic, intergenerational ones, are multicausal in origin, with many contributing factors. Although language is not always present in conflicts, in many parts of the world diverse forms of language oppression result in the obliteration of cultural distinctiveness and directly contribute to subnational conflict[2,8].

Because dialogue is a universal feature of culture, language disputes represent a point of entry to foster general forms of conflict mitigation. Conflicts that are specifically about language issues, such as what is the appropriate orthography for a minority language; whether and how the mother tongue of minority children is used in education; how official and national languages are taught; which foreign languages should be taught; and how to achieve multilanguage literacy, tend to be amenable to research-based solutions. Decisions about language education interrelate with wider questions such as: how local populations are integrated into national imagery, history, and symbolism; how ethnic differences are represented and understood in narratives of national identity; and what wider official or national role should be extended to non-dominant languages. Language also serves as an early warning signal of potential mass violence, such as when discourse between groups is poisoned by vilification and hate speech.

In facilitated dialogue, participants can produce new ways to talk about multilingualism, social coexistence and cohesion. Several of the UNICEF facilitated dialogues have produced alternative policies and set up systems to guide their implementation; others have stimulated

research programmes conducted jointly by parties in disagreement to collectively build solutions. Language inequalities can be tackled through local policies that progressively build successful multilingualism and multiliteracy for minority groups. Achieving this begins with the mother tongue — the spoken 'home language' of local populations — and extends to official and global languages. Strong literacy in the home language supports acquisition of dominant languages and improves academic achievement. Facilitated dialogues help to organize local solutions through the comparison of best-practice models, in-depth local research, the involvement of key stakeholders and the commitment to legitimization of democratically produced policies. At the official level, nation-specific exploration of language rights, in concept and in practice, has also been an outcome of facilitated dialogues, designing socially cohesive and economically productive laws and policies.

The importance of language in many chronic, intergenerational ethnic conflicts necessitates the general promotion of multilingualism. In multi-ethnic states this will require that subnational minority populations gain access to languages and systems of power and opportunity as well as securing the intergenerational maintenance and cultivation of their unique languages. This ambitious goal can be achieved through the practical use of language-based reasoning in facilitated dialogue to address contemporary society's gross language inequalities. If such approaches to understanding problems, and discussing their solutions, are not already shared by participants, the facilitated dialogue itself creates norms for communication in the process of tackling the language problem. In this way facilitated dialogues are innovative. By responding seriously to legitimate grievances and countering oppression, a peace-promoting practice of language planning can emerge.

It is no exaggeration to say that among the most pressing social concerns of the world today are questions of intercultural understanding and civil coexistence. Every effort possible should be invested in mutual understanding, conflict resolution and consensus building. Much more research and practical support to better understand and utilize the critical role of language in conflict mitigation and social cohesion is urgently needed. ❑

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Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.