

LANGUAGE ENDANGERMENT AND ENDANGERED LANGUAGES IN VIETNAM

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Abstract: By adopting an interdisciplinary approach, which is language-culturology, language-ethnography/ anthropology, along with a sociolinguistic approach, the researchers based themselves on two main methods, namely field research methods of linguistics and expert interviews to comprehensively study the existence of 53 languages in Vietnam, evaluate the "vitality" of languages, thereby indicating ethnic languages that are in danger of extinction. The article presents six main reasons why ethnic languages in Vietnam fall into the endangered state, including: the ethnic communities' needs for livelihood and economic development; the small ethnic minority population; ethnic groups living intertwined, creating quite strong language contact; the scattered living areas of ethnic minority residents; the suppression of vigorous languages; and the impact of the globalization wave. The article proposes measures to save endangered languages, including prioritizing socio-economic and cultural development, strengthening transmission, creating scripts, using minority languages in community activities, preserving folklore, and raising ethnic pride and awareness about language preservation.

Keywords: Interdisciplinary approach, language endangerment, endangered language, severely endangered language, definitely endangered language, critically endangered language

1. Introduction

Linguists say that there are nearly 7,000 languages in the world today, and at least half of them might disappear in a few generations because these languages are not taught to children as first languages (Austin & Sallabank, 2011). Such languages are considered endangered languages. Ladefoged (1992) estimated that half of the world's languages have disappeared within the last 500 years. Romaine (2007), in an article published in the journal *Language and Linguistics*, confirmed the risk that more and more languages in the world are being lost. According to Romaine, 60% to 90% of the world's 6,900 languages might face extinction within the next 100 years. Similarly, Bartholet (2000) claimed that about half of all languages are likely to be lost in an unprecedented wave of destruction. In the list of global languages, there are 52 languages each of which speakers include only one native person and 426 other languages which are almost extinct, meaning very few people speak them (Grimes, 1988). According to Bartholet (2000, p. 50), this number is "split" by continents as follows:

North America: 103, including Canada (12), Mexico (16), and United States (75).

South America: 53, including Argentina (4), Bolivia (8), Brazil (18), Chile (1), Colombia (3), Ecuador (1), Guyana (1), Peru (10), Suriname (1), and Venezuela (6).

Central America: 8, including Costa Rica (1), El Salvador (2), Guatemala (1), Honduras (2), Nicaragua (1), and Panama (1).

Europe: 4, including Germany (1), Italy (1), Norway (1), and Sweden (1).

Africa: 39, including Cameroon (8), Central African Republic (1), Chad (5), Ethiopia (2), Guinea (2), Kenya (2), Nigeria (13), São Tome and Principe (1), Sierra Leone (1), Somalia (1), and South Africa (3).

Asia: 59, including Afghanistan (2), India (4), Indonesia (23), Israel (1), Japan (1), Laos (1), Nepal (5), Philippines (3), Russia (9), Taiwan (6), Thailand (1), Timor (1), Uzbekistan (1), and Vietnam (1).

Oceania: 160, including Australia (140), New Caledonia (1), Papua New Guinea (12), Solomon Islands (2), and Vanuatu (5).

The numbers above might not be complete and accurate. In the list above, the America and Oceania are the places with the largest number of lost languages. Nonetheless, in the above statistics, that of China was not mentioned, implying that the number of lost/endangered languages in Asia might be much bigger. In fact, data from China could be employed to prove this. In mainland China, at least 9 out of the 55 ethnic groups have endangered languages (18 languages), in addition to 102 other endangered ones, representatives of which belong to different ethnic groups (Nguyen, 2018). Similarly, in Vietnam, the number of endangered languages might be more than 1, not as stated in Bartholet's (2000).

According to Bartholet (2000), some prominent linguists predict that between 80% and 90% of the world's languages will disappear within the next 200 years (p.50). According to UNESCO researchers, many languages of the world's ethnic groups today are actually facing the possibility of extinction by the end of this century (UNESCO, 2003). The Worldwatch report warns that there are about 6,800 languages in the world, of which between 3,400 (50%) and 6,120 (90%) are at risk of extinction by 2100 (Austin & Sallabank, 2011). On the occasion of International Mother Language Day (February 21 every year), UNESCO published the results of a study that showed that of the 6,000 languages spoken worldwide, 50% are in danger of dying out.

A number of questions have been raised: Does language endangerment affect different aspects of social life? And should language endangerment be researched carefully? There are those who claim that they have no sense of loss about the loss of a certain language, and that having many languages in a country only leaves so much trouble for people - most clearly, disagreement, even war. For example, the Democratic Republic of Congo is a place where over 200 languages exist simultaneously. If 50 million people in this country speak the same language, its economic and social life would be able to develop more considerably.

However, that is only the argument of outsiders and those who see the problem in a one-sided way. For insiders, i.e. indigenous people whose languages have disappeared, the loss of their mother tongue is a pain (Mai, 2009). Marie Smith Jones, aged 81, the only person left who can speak Eyka (in the Gulf of Alaska) confided, "Sometimes I just want to hear what they sound like (i.e., Alaskan words)." So she often recalled the Eyka in her head and sometimes read it aloud (Bartholet, 2000).

Sharing the concerns of native speakers of lost languages are scientists - first of all, linguists, ethnologists, anthropologists, culturists and social and humanities scientists in general.

According to scientists, language differences do not cause conflicts. On the contrary, it is the loss of languages that is the greater threat to the general well-being of mankind. Scientists argue that while biodiversity is now considered vital to human health on Earth, so is cultural and intellectual diversity. According to Krupnik (2019), language is the temple of knowledge. It is easy to see that by protecting language, people preserve traditional knowledge, i.e. knowledge of history, culture and science. Such knowledge may exist in oral form, i.e. folklore or it may be recorded in writing for languages that already have a script. In short, from great experiences in production and struggle to small secrets in daily life such as a traditional folk song, all the extremely valuable information about all aspects of life is "crystallized" in language. And all that treasure will be lost when human language disappears. Thus, the phenomenon of language loss has become a burning issue that deserves attention. This is the reason behind the researchers' decision to add their voices to the issue under consideration.

2. Literature review

There have been quite a few authors discussing language endangerment and endangered languages. Some familiar names can be mentioned such as Ladefoged (1992), Grenoble and Whaley (1998), Lenore and Lindsay (1998), Bartholet (2000), Crystal (2000), Wurm (2001), Xu (2001), Bradley and Maya (2002), Wunderlich (2002), Brenzinger (2007), Romaine (2007), Whaley (2009), Moseley (2010), Sallabank (2010), Austin and Sallabank (2011), and etc. In Vietnam, studies of endangered languages have been conducted mainly at the Institute of Linguistics, the Institute of Dictionaries and Encyclopedias and two other universities, the University of Education (under Thai Nguyen University) and the University of Social Sciences and Humanities (under VNU). Typical authors interested in this issue include Nguyen (1999), Mai (2009), Tran (2012), Nguyen (2014), Nguyen (2017), Ta and Ta (2018), Duong (2018), Vuong (2018), Trinh (2018), etc.

The common point among all researchers is that they clearly highlighted the alarming situation regarding the risk of extinction of many ethnic languages in the world, even in developed countries (such as the US, Japan, Canada, Australia...) as well as in developing countries. At the same time, studies also warned readers about an uncertain future in which about half of the world's languages may be lost. Scientists (in the fields of linguistics, ethnology, anthropology, sociology, history, and culture) all agree that the loss of a language is the loss of a culture, gradually reducing ethnic cultural diversity-which UNESCO and governments are trying to protect (UNESCO, 2003). In addition, some scientists have proposed initial urgent measures to "save" languages that are on the verge of the abyss.

Building on the achievements of scientists who are interested in the issue under consideration, the authors of this article will delve into a comprehensive study on the overall picture of the existence of languages in Vietnam. From there, we can assess the "vitality" of languages, identify ethnic languages that are in danger of extinction, analyze the causes leading to the risk of extinction, and initially offer solutions to protect weak languages from the risk of being lost.

3. Data and methods

Vietnam currently has 53 ethnic languages, of which Vietnamese, the language of the Kinh people (ethnic Vietnamese), has become the national language, with the Kinh ethnic group

making up the largest proportion of the population (85.4%, or around 100 million people). The remaining 52 ethnic languages are spoken by 14.6% of the population. The materials for this article were taken from 52 ethnic minority languages of Vietnam¹. Specifically, the researchers collected data on ethnic languages in five areas where ethnic minorities live:

- Firstly, the Tay Bac region, according to ethnic-cultural characteristics, includes the provinces of Son La, Dien Bien, Lai Chau, Lao Cai, Yen Bai and part of Hoa Binh province. Compared to other regions across Vietnam, the Tay Bac region is the most linguistically "dense", meaning that it has the greatest number of ethnic languages. There are 22 ethnic languages here; some provinces like Lai Chau and Dien Bien have up to 15 ethnic languages. The most common languages are Tai and Hmong.

- Secondly, the Viet Bac region includes the provinces of Cao Bang, Bac Can, Tuyen Quang, Lang Son, Thai Nguyen and Ha Giang. The Viet Bac region is also an area with many ethnic minority languages. The total number of languages in this area is 16. The province with the most languages is Ha Giang with 12. The most common language is Tay - Nung.

- Thirdly, the Central region of Vietnam, a long and narrow strip of land, includes the provinces of Quang Binh, Quang Tri, Thua Thien-Hue, Quang Nam, Da Nang, Quang Ngai, Binh Dinh, Phu Yen, Khanh Hoa, Ninh Thuan, and Binh Thuan. Many ethnic languages in this area belong to the Mon-Khmer group (Bahnar, K'ho, O'du, Paco - Ta'oih, Bru - Van Kieu, etc.) and Malayo-Polynesian (Cham, Raglai, etc.).

- Fourthly, the Truong Son-Tay Nguyen region includes the provinces of Kon Tum, Gia Lai, Dak Lak, Lam Dong and Dak Nong. This is an area with many Austronesian languages, which are related to those spoken in Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei (Rhade, Chru, Jrai, etc.).

- Fifthly, the Nam Bo (Southern) region of Vietnam includes provinces surrounding Ho Chi Minh City and Can Tho City such as Dong Nai, Binh Duong, Long An, Tien Giang, An Giang, Kien Giang, Ben Tre, Tay Ninh, Hau Giang, Binh Phuoc, and Ba Ria-Vung Tau. In this area, Khmer is the most common language, spoken in 10 provinces. In addition, this area also home to languages such as Stieng, Maa, Choro, and Mnong.

For this study, the researchers adopted an interdisciplinary approach, namely language-culturology, language-ethnography/anthropology. The reason for adopting this approach is that the issue of the vitality and existence of ethnic minority languages lies not only within the scope of linguistics but also involves issues in anthropology, ethnography, and culture. With an interdisciplinary approach, the issue of vitality and existence of ethnic minority languages is examined in a more comprehensive and inclusive way. Additionally, within the field of linguistics, the researchers also addressed issues from a sociolinguistic perspective.

The two primary research methods employed in the study were the linguistic field research methods and expert interviews. Fieldwork was conducted intermittently between 2018 and 2023.

The linguistic field research methods involve going to locations where ethnic minorities live to collect real-world data on the vitality of their languages. Key questions included: How many people use the language? Is the language used within families or in broader society? Within the family, who (grandparents, parents, children....) can use the mother tongue? Is there a writing

system? Is this writing system taught in schools? What are the aspirations of native speakers regarding the maintenance and development of their mother tongue?. A diverse group of indigenous individuals – young and old, male and female and with varying levels of education participated in the study. Fieldwork took place in some provinces from Truong Son Tay Nguyen, Tay Bac, Viet Bac, Central Vietnam, and Southern Vietnam, where ethnic minorities are concentrated.

Expert interviews were conducted using an ‘in-depth’ interview technique. In each of the five ethnic minority language regions, five experts were interviewed, totalling 25 experts. These experts included teachers, administrators, leaders, culturists, artists, and researchers. In addition to answering the key questions, the experts were asked for their opinions on issues at hand and possible solutions. Based on the researchers’ fieldwork experience, the views of indigenous intellectuals are particularly valuable, as they serve as the “insiders” voices of their communities. However, to avoid any preconceived assumptions, expert interviews were only conducted after gathering “living” data from ordinary indigenous people. Having this “living” data in hand allowed researchers to tailor questions for experts more effectively. In addition, special attention was paid to the insights of shamans, fortune-tellers, and healers who frequently use the native language in their practices.

In addition to the two main methods – linguistic field research methods and expert interviews, the researchers also employed several other techniques commonly used in linguistics. Firstly, a theory synthesis method was used to collate, evaluate, and combine theories for practical application in the study. The synthesis took place in three stages: (i) synthesis preparation, in which relevant theories were selected and summarized; (ii) synthesis, in which similarities and differences were analyzed and reconciled; and (iii) synthesis refinement, in which the synthesis was examined for deeper insights. This method helped to collect and refer to key issues related to language endangerment in general and endangered ethnic minority languages in Vietnam in particular. Secondly, through analysis and description, the study presented a detailed picture of the vitality of Vietnam’s languages including specific classifications and their characteristics, as well as major causes of ethnic minority language endangerment. Thirdly, deductive and inductive reasoning was applied to accumulate knowledge, form interpretations, and draw conclusions leading to proposed measures for saving threatened and critically endangered languages from extinction. With the research methods outlined above, the following section presents several key findings from the study.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1 Current situation: An overview of Vietnamese language vitality

The survey results of 53 languages present in Vietnam today showed that, in terms of “vitality”, languages are classified into 5 categories: 1) Very vigorous, 2) Vigorous, 3) Endangered, 4) Critically endangered, and 5) Extinct.

- *Very vigorous languages*: This is the case with Vietnamese, the national language of Vietnam. It can be said that there is not a single citizen who cannot speak Vietnamese. Unlike the time before independence (1945) when some ethnic minorities living in remote areas still had people who could not speak Vietnamese, today, Vietnamese people of any ethnic group can speak Vietnamese. Like other national languages in Southeast Asia such as Thai in Thailand, Lao in

Laos, Melayu (Malay) in Brunei, Filipino (Tagalog) in the Philippines, etc., the Vietnamese language has "covered" throughout the national territory, demonstrating the strength of an independent, united, and solidary country. Vietnamese is spoken by all Vietnamese people, regardless of ethnicity. It was "excitedly", and happily accepted as a matter of course; there was no "resistance" of any ethnic group when Vietnamese was honored as the national language². Vietnamese, therefore, has well taken over all social functions (communication, education, preservation and transmission of Vietnamese culture, etc.) of a language with a long and influential historical tradition. Therefore, Vietnamese is the only language that is classified as a very vigorous language. Likewise, the national languages of Thailand (Thai), Laos (Lao), Cambodia (Khmer), Philippines (Filipino), Malaysia (Malay/ bahasa Malaysia), Brunei (Malay/ Bahasa Melayu), Indonesia (Bahasa Indonesia), among others, are all considered very vigorous.

- *Vigorous languages*: These languages serve as the lingua franca of their regions. Examples include Tai in the Tay Bac region, Tay-Nung in the Viet Bac region, Rhade in the Tay Nguyen region, and Khmer in the Southern region of Vietnam. As mentioned above, each area within the territory of Vietnam usually hosts many ethnic groups, and thus many languages coexist. In each such area, there are typically one or several ethnic groups with larger populations, more developed economies, and therefore greater influence than those with smaller populations and less developed economies. This coexistence among ethnic groups has led to a situation in which smaller ethnic groups have gradually and spontaneously adopted the language of the largest ethnic group in the region. Over time, the language of the dominant group "naturally" becomes the regional language. Consequently, languages that serve as the lingua franca of a region are considered as vigorous languages. In addition, some languages with more than one million speakers are also among the vigorous languages such as Muong and Hmong. In Southeast Asia countries, the languages of large ethnic groups are also considered vigorous, such as Chinese spoken by the Chinese in Malaysia and in Singapore, or Malay/Melayu spoken by the Malay/Melayu in Thailand and the Philippines.

- *Endangered languages*: These are languages that are gradually losing their functions as a means of communication. They have a narrow range of use, mainly within families and villages, with a small number of speakers (fewer than 1 million), and infrequent usage. The vast majority of ethnic minority languages in Vietnam fall into this endangered category or an even lower one. These languages can be divided into two groups:

(1) Definitely endangered languages: These are languages with tens of thousands to several tens of thousands of speakers, still used by members of the community in daily communication and passed on to the next generation through oral language. These languages, however, tend to be more prone to influence or blending with higher-status languages. Examples include Hani, Yang, Khmu, Churu, Paco, Ta'oih, and others.

(2) Severely endangered languages: These languages are at risk of being lost in the younger generation. Currently, there are only about 1,000 users, most of whom are elderly. Examples include Mang, Khang, Ksingmul, Phunoi, Sila, Laghuu, Pula, Lahu, and so on. This is a very alarming situation as the rate of language decline is both rapid and "simultaneous". In just about ten years, the number of speakers has decreased significantly, and the social functions of these languages have shrunk considerably.

- *Critically endangered languages*: These languages are rarely used. They are only spoken in families and villages and are not used at all by the younger generation. The number of speakers is very small - usually around 100 people to a few thousand people. These languages are under considerable pressure from more dominant languages and could disappear within a few decades. Examples include the languages of the ethnic groups of Pubiao, Gelao, Lachi, Laha, Rmam, Dan Lai, Lyha, Tay Poong, Maleng, Ruc, May, Sach, Arem and others. It can be said that without effective emergency measures, the consequences will be unpredictable. These languages are at risk of disappearing very quickly, although their ethnic groups still exist and may even experience economic improvement.

- *Extinct languages*: These are the languages that survive only in memory. Indigenous people no longer speak their mother tongue but have shifted to another language. In other words, their native language has become extinct. Some examples include the O'du people, who now speak only Tai, the Tudi people (of the Bouyei ethnic group), who speak only Chinese, the San Chi people (of the San Chay people), who speak only Chinese or Vietnamese, the Red Gelao, who have switched to Chinese and Tay - Nung languages. These languages are either no longer spoken at all or spoken by only 1 to 15 people on rare occasions. In some cases, they are preserved by a few elderly individuals for special purposes such as worship and divination (Ta & Ta, 2018).

In general, the vast majority of ethnic minority languages in Vietnam today fall into level 3, level 4 and in some cases, even level 5. This is an alarming situation. In other Southeast Asian countries, many ethnic minority languages are also threatened and critically endangered (level 3 and level 4) similar to the situation in Vietnam. Comparable examples can be found in Laos (e.g., Cheut, Kado, Khang, Brau, Sila, O'du, Phunoi, etc.), in Cambodia (e.g., Shan, Jarai, Rade, Kuy, Tampuan, Cham, Kola, etc.), and in Thailand (e.g., Phunoi, Yi, Mlabri, Mani, Moken, Cham, etc.).

4.2 Main reasons for the endangerment of ethnic minority languages

There are many reasons for the above situation. Some of the main causes are as follows:

First, there are socio-economic reasons. Most young people of ethnic minorities do not want to spend time learning their own language. Instead, they prioritize learning Vietnamese, the national language, to quickly integrate into modern society, find employment more easily and gain opportunities to move from their villages to cities and economic-cultural development centers. In a typical three-generation family, grandparents speak their ethnic language fluently. For them, their mother tongue is their flesh and blood and their life. The parents' generation often speaks both their ethnic language and the national language. Meanwhile, children tend to speak Vietnamese better than their ethnic language and in many cases, they cannot speak their ethnic language at all. The need for livelihoods and economic advancements is the main reason why young people focus on learning Vietnamese and foreign languages, while simultaneously neglecting or even "rejecting" their ethnic languages.

Second, demographic factors play a key role. Vietnam is not a large country in terms of area, but it is home to 54 ethnic groups. The Kinh people make up 85.32% of the population, with more than 82 million people. The remaining 53 ethnic groups constitute only 14.68% of the population, about 14 million people. On average, this means each ethnic group has around 300,000 people. 48 out of 54 ethnic groups have populations of less than 1 million. With such

small population, the number of language users is limited and the influence of these languages is minimal. In the "competition" of social communication, ethnic minority languages are always at a disadvantage compared to the languages of larger ethnic groups. Therefore, these "minor" languages are more vulnerable to endangerment. For example, in the Tay Bac region, the popularity of Tai has put several minor languages at risk, as the Tai people are the majority. In the Viet Bac region, many ethnic languages with small populations are threatened by the dominance of the Tay-Nung language, which has the largest number of speakers in the area. In reality, the smaller the population of an ethnic group, the higher the risk that its language will disappear. Languages at high risk include O'du (428 speakers), Brau (525 speakers), Rmam (639 speakers), Pubiao (903 speakers), and Sila (909 speakers) (see Appendix). This situation also occurs in many other Southeast Asian countries such as Laos, Cambodia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia. In these countries, as in Vietnam, the smaller the population of an ethnic group, the higher the risk of losing its language.

Third, ethnic groups in Vietnam live in what is known as a "comb-tooth" type. It means that their communities are interspersed like the teeth of a comb. This intertwined settlement inevitably leads intense language contact. We completely agree with scholars such as Thomason (2001), Musken (2013), and Ithemere (2013) that language endangerment is a consequence of language contact. Thomason even argued that long-term language contact can result in language death. In Vietnam, the three regions with most intense language contact are Tay Bac, Viet Bac and Truong Son – Tay Nguyen areas. In each of these areas, dozens of ethnic groups live together and language contact takes place daily. This daily interaction creates a high risk of smaller language disappearance. In fact, nearly all of the endangered and extinct languages in Vietnam are found in these three regions. Obviously, increased exposure to dominant languages weakens small languages and accelerates their path toward extinction.

Fourth, ethnic minorities in Vietnam are not only small in population but also geographically dispersed, often scattered in many places. The scattered lifestyle, often interspersed among larger ethnic groups, has made it easier for ethnic minorities to abandon their own languages and adopt the dominant languages of other ethnic groups. One example is the Bouyei people. Since members of this group are dispersed across provinces such as Ha Giang, Tuyen Quang, and Lao Cai, many have switched to speaking Tay-Nung and Yang instead of their native language. Today, economic development and improved transportation make relocation easier. After the reunification of Vietnam, many people from ethnic minorities moved to seek better job opportunities or more favourable living conditions. Some even relocated from the Tay Bac, Viet Bac regions to the Tay Nguyen region, thousands of kilometers away from their original homes. As a result, dispersion has become even more widespread. Once in a new location, ethnic minorities rarely use their native language, putting it at serious risk of extinction.

The fifth reason is the suppression of vigorous languages. After gaining independence, Vietnam, like many countries around the world, promoted the development of a national language. This was a necessary policy aimed at fostering national unity and solidarity. We can see similar efforts across Southeast Asian countries including in Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Laos, the Philippines, etc. This has been a significant achievement. However, as the national language becomes the strongest "force" that unintentionally exerts tremendous pressure on ethnic minority languages. In addition, the growing importance of foreign languages, especially

English³, has introduced another pressure. As a result, ethnic minority languages in Vietnam are being "squeezed" by at least three vigorous languages, namely Vietnamese (the national language), the common language of the region (e.g., Tai in the Tay Bac region, Tay-Nung in the Viet Bac region) and foreign languages (e.g. English). This is one of the important reasons why so many ethnic minority languages have become endangered. In language contact situations, vigorous languages with large speaker populations tend to gradually "squeeze" smaller, weaker languages.

Sixth, another key cause is the impact of globalization. Many scholars compare globalization to a force that accelerates the disappearance of minority languages. As English has rapidly become an indispensable language in modern life due to its central role in the scientific and technological revolutions, many other languages have been "downplayed". The revolutions of aviation, telecommunications, broadcasting and the Internet and Industry 4.0 technologies have amplified the global spread of languages of dominant economies and cultures. In Vietnam, this does not only apply to English. Other foreign languages such as Korean, Chinese, and Japanese have also become popular due to the presence of multinational corporations from these countries. Consequently, many ethnic minority students no longer use their native languages, but spend time learning these dominant foreign languages. Thus, globalization contributes to pushing ethnic minority languages closer to extinction.

4.3 Measures to save endangered languages

To save and develop endangered languages, certain concrete and feasible measures need to be taken.

First of all, it is necessary to prioritize socio-economic and cultural development for ethnic minorities. Once the socio-economic and cultural life of the ethnic minority community is improved and ethnic groups escape the risk of being "wiped out" and falling behind, their language will gradually come out of the "alarming" state. Prioritizing socio-economic and cultural development for ethnic minorities has become a major policy of the government and local authorities. However, this needs to be more than just a slogan, but must become specific policies that really go into people's lives, both contributing to poverty reduction and improving their socio-cultural life. In this regard, Vietnam has achieved remarkable initial achievements, contributing to the fact that ethnic minority languages that are in an alarming state have been saved from extinction. Also related to socio-economic issues, there is another problem for the government, which is to invest in funding for the implementation of policies to protect, maintain, and develop ethnic minority languages, especially languages that are in danger of extinction. In fact, this problem is not only for Vietnam, but even for other countries, for example, China, where the implementation of the policy on ethnic minority languages faces great difficulties due to lack of funds. In the immediate future, ethnic minorities in Vietnam are in dire need of substantial funds to create scripts for ethnic groups who have not yet developed a written language, organize writing classes for local people, compile textbooks and dictionaries, foster ethnic minority language teachers in schools, etc. These tasks require a lot of money. Therefore, in addition to the budget from the government, there should be an additional budget from the localities (province, district), companies, social organizations, etc. With a developing country like Vietnam, which is a poor country, many things related to ethnic minority language policies need to be socialized to mobilize funds for the whole society.

Second, it is necessary to strengthen the transmission of ethnic minority languages. Without teaching, endangered languages will sooner or later perish. Transmission needs to be done in both the family and society. Within the family, the mother tongue needs to be taught on a regular basis between generations. There must be an end to the situation where children are born and grow up without being taught their ethnic languages by their parents and grandparents. In the social sphere, for ethnic groups with very small populations, whose mother tongue teaching is not organized in schools by the government, it is possible to organize small teaching classes within the community. For the larger ethnic groups, the government needs to plan the instruction of ethnic languages in a methodical manner, with careful preparation given to both teachers and textbooks. In Vietnam, in recent years, schools have officially introduced 8 ethnic languages. However, these languages are not endangered.

The third measure is to create scripts for ethnic groups that do not have a written language. Language transmission and protection will achieve good results if done through scripts. According to modern understanding, a language is only complete when it has both spoken and written forms. A script is not only an element of culture but also an effective means of recording ethnic culture. When "protected" by a script, the language will have a stronger vitality. Therefore, creating scripts for ethnic groups that have no written language will be one of the most efficient ways to contribute to the protection of endangered languages. With scripts, language transmission is easier and more effective.

Most of the ethnic groups in Vietnam have written scripts (31 out of 52 languages). The scripts of ethnic minorities in Vietnam are classified into two types: traditional scripts and new scripts. Traditional scripts absorbed characters from China and India. These are precious, rare, and of high value in terms of ethnic culture. Traditional scripts are used and kept by ethnic intellectuals, shamans, fortune-tellers, geographers, healers, etc. Traditional scripts are also used to record the laws of belief, religion, folklore works, customs, traditions, rituals, etc. of the ethnic group. The new script was created based on the Latin alphabet. The benefit of the new script is that it is simple to understand and remember. The dissemination of new scripts among young people is generally favorable. Many new scripts have been introduced into the school's teaching and have brought about good effects. However, up to now, there are still 21 ethnic languages in Vietnam that do not yet have scripts. In principle, these ethnic groups need to have their own scripts, so creating scripts for ethnic groups that do not have a written language is an important and urgent task. Moreover, in Vietnam today, the languages of these ethnic groups are endangered languages. Creating scripts for these languages and teaching them to ethnic minorities will be one of the good ways to "save" those languages from becoming extinct. It also means contributing to "saving" an ethnic culture that is standing on the edge of the abyss. In reality, ethnic languages with written scripts, especially those taught in schools, have better vitality, a better ability to "protect themselves" against the risk of extinction due to the dominance of strong languages.

Fourth is the measure of using ethnic minority languages in community activities, on radio and television. This work contributes to enhancing the role of ethnic languages in social life. For languages with more than 1 million users, their use in national and provincial radio and television is an effective measure. This is what is being done in Vietnam and it has really worked. However, for ethnic groups with a small population, whose language has not been used in radio

and television, their use in community activities is very necessary. In the coming time, villages of ethnic minorities need to strengthen community activities using ethnic languages.

Fifth, it is necessary to preserve and develop folklore activities of ethnic minorities, especially traditional festivals. It is a fact that, until now, every ethnic group in Vietnam wants to protect and maintain their traditional festivals. During the festival, diverse folklore activities have helped to actively preserve ethnic languages. The lyrics, singing, hymns, worship songs, etc. performed during the festival in ethnic minority languages contribute to arousing national pride in their own language. There are currently hundreds of festivals held annually in Vietnam, including both national and village-level celebrations. However, the overwhelming majority are festivals of the Kinh (the Vietnamese) and ethnic groups with a large population. Our field surveys show that many ethnic minorities with small populations aspire to maintain and organize their festivals. It can be said that only in festivals the languages and cultures of ethnic minorities have good conditions to reveal the quintessence of their spiritual life. The festival is one of the important "cradles" contributing to the protection of ethnic languages.

Sixth, it is necessary to raise the sense of ethnic pride and the awareness of protecting the mother tongue among ethnic minorities. This is a measure related to the language attitude of the speaker. Language attitudes, from the perspective of social psychologists, are what individuals engaged in communication do with language and think about their language (Trinh, 2018). It can be said that the attitude of ethnic minorities always plays a huge and decisive role in preserving their ethnic language. Bradley and Maya (2002) believed that all of us could try to change attitudes and help people in minority communities preserve their language only if they want to. However, from our own perspectives, when they decide to "voluntarily" give up their ethnic language, that language is like someone who "commits suicide" and other people cannot help. It is necessary to make ethnic minority communities, especially young people, aware that if they can simultaneously use the national language (Vietnamese) and their mother tongue fluently, they will have a richer and more diverse cultural life. There is an encouraging situation that, at present, according to Tran (2002), ethnic minority people are aware of the role of socio-economic "development" in the national language (Vietnamese) and prioritize the function of "enhancing cultural values" in the use of their mother tongue (Tran, 2002). The above perception is a positive signal that contributes to changing the attitude of native speakers towards their ethnic language. This makes them proud of their mother tongue, thereby having a good sense of protecting, preserving, and developing it.

5. Conclusions

By adopting an interdisciplinary approach namely language-culturology, language-ethnography/anthropology, along with a sociolinguistic approach, the study has some main findings as follows.

Firstly, Vietnam is a multi-ethnic, multi-language country. Among the 54 ethnic groups of Vietnam, the Kinh account for 85.32% of the population and the Vietnamese of the Kinh people has become the national language. Among the remaining 53 ethnic groups, only 6 have a population of over 1 million. The other 47 ethnic groups have a population of less than 1 million, five of which have fewer than 1,000 people. The population is small, and few people use ethnic languages; therefore, the vast majority of ethnic minority languages in Vietnam are threatened

and critically endangered. Some languages are even disappearing. The above situation is alarming about the existence of ethnic minority languages in Vietnam.

Secondly, there are many reasons why ethnic minority languages in Vietnam are falling into a threatened, critically endangered, or even extinct state. Some of the main reasons include: young people's need for livelihood and economic development; the small population size of ethnic minorities; ethnic groups living together in the "comb tooth" position, creating quite strong language contact; the scattered living areas of ethnic minority communities; the suppression of vigorous languages; and the impact of the globalization.

Thirdly, some measures to "save" endangered and critically endangered languages from falling into extinction that need to be taken are: prioritizing socio-economic and cultural development for ethnic minorities; strengthening the transmission of ethnic minority languages; creating scripts for ethnic groups who have no written language; using ethnic minority languages in community activities, radio and television; preserving and developing folklore activities of ethnic minorities, especially traditional festivals; and raising the sense of ethnic pride and the awareness of protecting the mother tongue for ethnic minorities.

Fourthly, in order to achieve the goal of 'saving' endangered and critically endangered languages in time to stop them before the door of extinction, in recent years, the Vietnamese government has introduced many major policies at the macro level, especially the completion of legal documents on language policy in general and policies on preserving and developing ethnic minority languages in particular. In the coming time, the Vietnamese government needs a methodical strategy and highly feasible specific policies, especially increased financial investment for practical activities to protect endangered languages.

Fifthly, the cooperation of people, especially native speakers, is extremely important, if not the most important, in protecting endangered languages. To protect their house from falling when the storm comes, the owner is the one who plays a decisive role. Similarly, in order to protect their ethnic language, the indigenous peoples who speak that language play a prerequisite part. This message should be spread to all ethnic minorities in Vietnam. Ownership of action leads to success. When the owner stands on the sidelines, no matter how hard outsiders try, the results are very limited, even nonexistent.

Notes

1. Ethnographically, Tay and Nung are considered two different ethnic groups. Therefore, Vietnam is regarded as a country with 54 ethnic groups, in which Kinh (the Vietnamese) is the main ethnic group, and the remaining 53 are ethnic minorities. However, from a linguistic perspective, the Tay and Nung languages are the same, referred to as the Tay-Nung language. Therefore, excluding Vietnamese as the national language, there are 52 ethnic minority languages in Vietnam.

2. When governments elevate a language of a particular ethnic group to the status of national language, it is generally accepted by other ethnic groups in the country. However, in some cases, it has led to protests, even violent conflicts. In Southeast Asia, for example, Malaysia experienced ethnic tensions in 1969 between the Chinese, Indian, and indigenous Malay (Melayu) communities after the government implemented a national language policy prioritizing Malay language. After that event, the Malaysian government adopted a more flexible language policy

that improved the social functions of other languages such as Chinese, Hindi, and English. As a result, the situation of Malaysia has remained stable since 1969. In Singapore, under the leadership of Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, the government successfully implemented a language policy that supported economic, cultural, and social development. Although Malay is honored as the national language, English is used as the administrative language, while Chinese and Hindi are used for communication and education in Chinese and Indian schools, respectively.

3. Many linguists and ethnologists have confirmed that the spread and "suppression" of English has significantly contributed to the extinction of many ethnic languages in countries such as the US, Australia, and Canada. Over the past 222 years, English-speaking Australian colonists have "helped" erase 150 indigenous languages and left more than 100 others on the brink of extinction. In the US state of California today, only half of the 100 languages that were once widely spoken are preserved (Bartholet, 2000).

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HIỆN TƯỢNG MAI MỘT NGÔN NGỮ VÀ CÁC NGÔN NGỮ CÓ NGUY CƠ SUY THOÁI Ở VIỆT NAM

Tóm tắt: Bằng hướng tiếp cận liên ngành ngôn ngữ - dân tộc học / nhân học, ngôn ngữ - văn hoá học, hướng tiếp cận chuyên ngành ngôn ngữ học xã hội, dựa vào hai phương pháp nghiên cứu chủ yếu là điều tra điền dã ngôn ngữ học và phỏng vấn chuyên gia, các tác giả của bài viết này đi sâu nghiên cứu một cách toàn diện bức tranh tổng thể về sự tồn tại của 53 ngôn ngữ ở Việt Nam, đánh giá “sức sống” của các ngôn ngữ, chỉ ra những ngôn ngữ tộc người đang có nguy cơ tiêu biến. Bài viết chỉ ra 6 nguyên nhân / lý do chính khiến các ngôn ngữ tộc người ở Việt Nam lâm vào tình trạng mai một, đó là: Nhu cầu mưu sinh và phát triển kinh tế của tộc người; Dân số tộc người ít ỏi; Các tộc người sống đan xen nhau, tạo ra sự tiếp xúc ngôn ngữ khá mạnh; Địa bàn sinh sống của cư dân tộc người quá phân tán; Sự lấn át của các ngôn ngữ mạnh; Sự ảnh hưởng của làn sóng toàn cầu hoá. Bài viết đề xuất các biện pháp bảo tồn các ngôn ngữ có nguy cơ tuyệt chủng, bao gồm ưu tiên phát triển kinh tế - xã hội và văn hóa, tăng cường truyền bá, tạo ra chữ viết, sử dụng ngôn ngữ thiểu số trong các hoạt động cộng đồng, bảo tồn văn hóa dân gian và nâng cao lòng tự hào dân tộc cũng như nhận thức về việc bảo tồn ngôn ngữ.

Từ khóa: Hiện tượng mai một ngôn ngữ; ngôn ngữ có nguy cơ suy thoái; đường hướng tiếp cận liên ngành; mức độ suy yếu nghiêm trọng; mức độ suy yếu chắc chắn; mức độ nguy cấp

APPENDIX

Population of ethnic groups in Vietnam in 2019

| No | Names of ethnic groups | Rate | 2009 | 2019 | Growth rate |
|----|------------------------|--------|------------|------------|-------------|
| 1 | Kinh | 85.32% | 73.594.427 | 82.085.826 | 1.09% |
| 2 | Tay | 1.92% | 1.626.392 | 1.845.492 | 1.26% |
| 3 | Tai | 1.89% | 1.550.423 | 1.820.950 | 1.61% |
| 4 | Muong | 1.51% | 1.268.963 | 1.452.095 | 1.35% |
| 5 | Hmong | 1.45% | 1.068.189 | 1.393.547 | 2.66% |
| 6 | Khmer | 1.37% | 1.260.640 | 1.319.652 | 0.46% |
| 7 | Nung | 1.13% | 968.8 | 1.083.298 | 1.12% |
| 8 | Yao | 0.93% | 751.067 | 891.151 | 1.71% |
| 9 | Hoa | 0.78% | 823.071 | 749.466 | -0.94% |
| 10 | Jarai | 0.53% | 411.275 | 513.93 | 2.23% |
| 11 | Rhade | 0.41% | 331.194 | 398.671 | 1.85% |
| 12 | Bahnar | 0.30% | 227.716 | 286.91 | 2.31% |
| 13 | Sedang | 0.22% | 169.501 | 212.277 | 2.25% |
| 14 | San Chay | 0.21% | 169.41 | 201.398 | 1.73% |
| 15 | Koho | 0.21% | 166.112 | 200.8 | 1.90% |
| 16 | San Diu | 0.19% | 146.821 | 183.004 | 2.20% |
| 17 | Cham | 0.19% | 161.729 | 178.948 | 1.01% |
| 18 | H're | 0.16% | 127.42 | 149.46 | 1.60% |
| 19 | Raglai | 0.15% | 122.245 | 146.613 | 1.82% |
| 20 | Mnong | 0.13% | 102.741 | 127.334 | 2.15% |
| 21 | Stieng | 0.10% | 85.436 | 100.752 | 1.65% |
| 22 | Bru – Van Kieu | 0.10% | 74.506 | 94.598 | 2.39% |
| 23 | Tho | 0.10% | 74.458 | 91.43 | 2.05% |
| 24 | Khmu | 0.09% | 72.929 | 90.612 | 2.17% |
| 25 | Katu | 0.08% | 61.588 | 74.173 | 1.86% |
| 26 | Yang | 0.07% | 58.617 | 67.858 | 1.46% |
| 27 | Jeh-Tariang | 0.07% | 50.962 | 63.322 | 2.17% |
| 28 | Ta'oih | 0.05% | 43.886 | 52.356 | 1.76% |
| 29 | Maa | 0.05% | 41.405 | 50.322 | 1.95% |
| 30 | Cor | 0.04% | 33.817 | 40.442 | 1.79% |
| 31 | Choro | 0.03% | 26.855 | 29.52 | 0.95% |
| 32 | Ksingmul | 0.03% | 23.278 | 29.503 | 2.37% |
| 33 | Hani | 0.03% | 21.725 | 25.539 | 1.62% |
| 34 | Chru | 0.02% | 19.314 | 23.242 | 1.85% |
| 35 | Lao | 0.02% | 14.928 | 17.532 | 1.61% |
| 36 | Khang | 0.02% | 13.84 | 16.18 | 1.56% |

| | | | | | |
|--------------|--------|---------|-------------------|-------------------|--------------|
| 37 | Lachi | 0.02% | 13.158 | 15.126 | 1.39% |
| 38 | Pula | 0.01% | 10.944 | 12.471 | 1.31% |
| 39 | Lahu | 0.01% | 9.651 | 12.113 | 2.27% |
| 40 | Laha | 0.01% | 8.177 | 10.157 | 2.17% |
| 41 | Pa-Hng | 0.01% | 6.811 | 8.248 | 1.91% |
| 42 | Cheut | 0.01% | 6.022 | 7.513 | 2.21% |
| 43 | Lu | 0.01% | 5.601 | 6.757 | 1.88% |
| 44 | Yi | 0.01% | 4.541 | 4.827 | 0.61% |
| 45 | Mang | <0.005% | 3.7 | 4.65 | 2.29% |
| 46 | Gelao | <0.005% | 2.636 | 4.003 | 4.18% |
| 47 | Bouyei | <0.005% | 2.273 | 3.232 | 3.52% |
| 48 | Phunoi | <0.005% | 2.029 | 2.729 | 2.96% |
| 49 | Hakka | <0.005% | 1.035 | 1.649 | 4.66% |
| 50 | Si La | <0.005% | 709 | 909 | 2.48% |
| 51 | Pubiao | <0.005% | 687 | 903 | 2.73% |
| 52 | Rmam | <0.005% | 436 | 639 | 3.82% |
| 53 | Brau | <0.005% | 397 | 525 | 2.79% |
| 54 | O'du | <0.005% | 376 | 428 | 1.30% |
| Total | | | 85.844.863 | 96.205.082 | 1,14% |