

Language Policy and Planning in Bhutan¹

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Introduction

Dr Johnson, the lexicographer who wrote *A Dictionary of the English Language*, published in 1755, said: “I am sorry when any language is lost, because languages are the pedigree of nations”. Nothing could be more truthful than this because in language, in the vein of human being, there is life and there is death; and language is the lifeblood and soul of a nation. Every nation has to be acutely conscious of this and have proper language policy and planning in place. A popular Bhutanese saying *ro kha 'mashê rang kha bjang* “Not knowing others’ language, one’s own language is lost” is a beautiful piece of advice. To provide an exegesis of this saying, if you make any attempt to switch over to using another language, you can never fully acquire that language; but, in the process, your own language can be threatened with extinction and can be lost altogether.

This paper will describe and analyze the language policy and planning of Bhutan using Spolsky’s (2004) Theory of Language Policy as a theoretical framework; and it will be argued that, to keep up with the times, reversing the idea of that traditional saying and following *ro kha shê rang kha ma-bjang* “Know others’ languages, but never lose one’s own” would be a sensible thing to do; and a language planning model will be suggested on the basis of the language needs, the language constellation, and the linguistic culture of Bhutan.

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Language Constellation of Bhutan

Bhutan is a small country with a land area of 38,394 sq km and a population of less than a million, but it is a linguistically rich country with over nineteen different languages spoken. An apparent reason for the emergence of these diverse linguistic groups in Bhutan, besides through natural language change and evolution, is the nature of its geographical terrain. The movement of people from one place to another might have been difficult attributable to the presence of mountains, thick forests, and rivers in between; and the dialects of different villages might not have been in close contact to the point of remaining completely mutually intelligible although they descended from the same language family.

All the indigenous languages of Bhutan belong to the Tibeto-Burman language family while Lhotshamkha (Nepali), a language spoken across the southern border, belongs to the Indo-Aryan language family. van Driem (1998) lists Bhutanese languages under Central Bodhish, East Bodhish, Bodic, and Indo-Aryan. The Central Bodhish languages are Dzongkha, Cho-ca-nga-ca-kha, Brokpake, Brokkat, Lakha, and Bökha. The East Bodhish languages include Bumthangkha, Khengkha, Kurtöpka, Nyenkha (Henkha), Chalipakat, Dzalakha, Monkha ('Olekha), and Dakpakha. The Bodic languages are Tshangla (Sharchokpalo), Lhokpu, Gongduk, and Lepcha. The Indo-Aryan language is Lhotshamkha. The latest edition of *Ethnologue* lists 23 languages as languages of Bhutan; it counts languages like Adi, Assamese, Bantawa, Hindi, Santali, etc., as the 'Immigrant Languages' of Bhutan and English is listed as one of the two principal languages of Bhutan, the other being Dzongkha.

In the early days, people spoke in whatever language in use at the time, Dzongkha at the official level and other native languages at the grass-roots level. When the First King, Ugyen Wangchuck (1907-1926), started a few schools for the first time in Bhutan, Chökê (Classical Tibetan) and Hindi (Hindustani) served as the mediums of instruction. Dzongkha was not a written language and English was too foreign at that time, so the obvious choices were Chökê and Hindi. Although Chökê was used as an official language, it did not become a medium of mass communication because

it was only a literary language with no native speakers in Bhutan; and the majority of the population, apart from a few with classical education, did not understand the official language at that time. Be that as it may, Chökê still is the main medium of instruction for monastic education and it is still used to some extent in other spheres of life in Bhutan. During the Second King, Jigme Wangchuck (1926-1952), the number of schools in Bhutan increased manifold and, around that time, English had become quite popular in India; in Bhutan also, English was gradually becoming an important foreign language and was chosen as one of the mediums of instruction besides Chökê and Hindi. The Third King, Jigme Dorji Wangchuck (1952-1972), felt the need for an official language to serve as a *lingua franca* in Bhutan. There was also a need for a language to represent the nation when Bhutan joined United Nations in 1971; so, the Third King decreed Dzongkha the national language of Bhutan. Dzongkha was an obvious choice because of its traditional role as the spoken vernacular of the royal courts, the military, educated nobility, government and administration; and because of the common literary tradition with Chökê (van Driem 1994).

The Writing Systems

Dzongkha uses the same Ucen Script used for writing Classical Tibetan. Ucen 'head-seriffed' is one of the two scripts first developed by Thonmi Sambhota in the 7th century, the other being Umê 'Un Head-seriffed'. Sambhota was the son of Anu of Thonmi clan from central Tibet who became a minister of the Tibetan king Songtsen Gampo. The King sent Sambhota to study Sanskrit in India. He studied the Indian linguistics, including the Paninian, at the feet of Pandit Devavidhayasinha and Lipikara; and after returning to Tibet he invented the two types of scripts, Ucen by basing on the Devanagari script and by modelling on the Lantsa Indian letter forms, and Umê, possibly by basing on the Wartu script of North India. This writing system consists of thirty consonant symbols and four vowel symbols.

Another type of script known as Joyî, which is unique to Bhutan, was first developed by Demang Tsemang in Bhutan in the 8th century. Demang Tsemang accompanied Guru Rinpoche to Bhutan on the invitation of Sindhu Raja, a local king of Bumthang in central Bhutan. Although the Joyî letters appear different to Ucen letters, the difference is only to the extent of the difference between the lower-case letters and the upper-case letters of the Roman alphabets; Joyî has exactly the same number of consonant and vowel symbols and those Joyî symbols represent the same phonemes as the Ucen script.

Since the number and the type of phonemic inventories of the Bhutanese languages are quite similar, albeit some with few extra ones, this script can be used to write Dzongkha and other languages of Bhutan with almost the same degree of consistency and economy. Dzongkha is the only officially written language of Bhutan. Other native languages are written sporadically for interpersonal communication in informal settings and in social media. Lhotshamkha is written using the Nepalese script (Nepal Bhasa), one of the Brahmic scripts of the Kathmandu valley of Nepal.

Besides the native writing script, Roman (Latin) script is used as an optional writing system to write Dzongkha and other languages of Bhutan. This system is used predominantly for writing personal names and geographical names. Both transliteration and transcription, the two methods of Romanization, are used. Transliteration, the mapping of one-to-one character from the source language to the target script, is used to represent a text from one script in another and is restricted mainly to academic purposes. Transcription, the systematic representation of a language in written form either phonemically or phonetically, is used to enable one to pronounce the source language reasonably accurately; and it is used largely to write personal names and geographical names in Bhutan besides using it for representing conversations in native languages on the social media and other informal settings.

Despite the practice of adopting Romanization as an optional writing system, there is no standardized Romanization system in the country. There are a few

organizations which directly or indirectly use Romanization. The Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs (MoHCA) maintains the records of personal names and place names in both Dzongkha and Roman script in its civil registry. Likewise, the Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB) is another organization which maintains the records of place names both in Dzongkha and Roman script for electoral purposes. The Land Commission of Bhutan maintains the records of geographical names in Roman script for maps and other cadastral purposes. Romanization systems, followed by all these organizations are neither phonemic nor phonetic and are, at best, how a native speaker would transcribe without any linguistic rules. Although the Dzongkha Development Commission (DDC) circulated an official guide to Dzongkha Romanization in 1991 to reduce inconsistency and ambiguity, it has not become popular. As this guide suggests employing some diacritics, in accordance with the phonological and phonetic features of our languages, the rules appear quite complicated to the general people. In 1997, the MoHCA circulated a booklet containing some samples of the geographical names of Bhutan in Dzongkha and Roman script; but, again, this lacked phonological bases and precision. As a result, the Romanisation of Dzongkha and Bhutanese languages continues to be arbitrary and inconsistent. For example, a personal name /Ngödruḡ/ with a single meaning ‘accomplishment’ and with an unambiguous Dzongkha spelling དངོས་གྲུབ་ (*ngos grub*) is written /Ngoedrūb/, /Ngedrup/, /Ngidrūp/, /Nidrūp/, /Nidrūb/, /Nguldrūp/, etc.; and both /'lam/ meaning ‘Buddhist Master’ and /lam/ meaning ‘road/footpath’ are written /lam/ with no tone distinction.

Bhutanese Linguistic Culture

In order to understand the language policy of a nation-state, we need to know its linguistic culture because language policy is often determined by, or grounded in, its linguistic culture. Schiffman (1996: 149) describes the South Asian linguistic culture as “the sum totality of ideas, values, beliefs, attitudes, prejudices, myths, religious strictures, and all other cultural baggage that South Asians bring to their dealings

with language from their culture". In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, there is a belief that Adam was directed by God to name things. According to this tradition, God created linguistic diversity in response to human arrogance. Bible is God's Word and, therefore, it contains only truth, and nothing may change or contradict it (Schiffman 1996).

In Bhutan too, language and script are entwined with religion. In the Lankavatara Sutra, it is stated: "If things were not given names, the world would be bewildered; so Lord Buddha, skilled in means, gives names to various phenomena". *Kangyur*, one of the main texts of Buddhism, means 'Translated Buddha-word'; and, therefore, whatever is said in the *Kangyur* is true and nothing may contradict it. Chökê, the language to which the teachings of Buddhism were translated from the Indian texts literally means "Dharma Language"; and the Bhutanese people have deep reverence for this sacred language of Dharma. This Dharma language and Bhutanese languages, including Dzongkha, have many cognates; so all the languages can be perceived to be equally sacred. Bhutanese people also have deep reverence for the traditional script. It thrives on one of Buddha's statements in the Avatamsaka Sutra: "...I will appear in the form of letters. Consider them as identical to me; and treat them with due respect". Because of such a belief, people were against the rule of writing vehicle numbers in both Dzongkha and English when it was introduced for the first time by the Road Safety and Transport Authority.

de jure and de facto

The language policy of a nation can be analysed on the basis of its overt as well as its covert policies. The overt policy is a policy which is explicit, formalised, codified, or manifested while covert policy refers to the implicit, informal, unstated, or latent aspects of policy (Schiffman 1996).

The language policy framework for Bhutan is enshrined in its Constitution, the mother of all laws. The Section 8 of Article 1 of the Constitution states, "Dzongkha is the national language of Bhutan"; and, in Section 1 of Article 4, "language" and

“literature” are enumerated along with the other cultural heritage of Bhutan to be preserved, protected and promoted. This official, *de jure*, or overt language policy of Bhutan, as stated in its Constitution, is especially a sound language policy. It provides a clear framework for developing and promoting Dzongkha as the national language of Bhutan and it also provides a clear framework for preserving the other languages of Bhutan as the rich linguistic and cultural heritage of Bhutan.

In point of fact, the groundwork for this noble language policy was originally laid covertly by His Majesty King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, the Fourth Druk Gyalpo, when the office of the Dzongkha Development Commission (DDC) was instituted at His behest in 1989. Since its inception, the DDC has been carrying out the national language planning activities within this complementary language policy approach under the guidance of the Fourth Druk Gyalpo. George van Driem, presently the Chair of Historical Linguistics at the University of Berne, Switzerland, was the first foreign linguist to be officially commissioned by the Royal Government of Bhutan to carry out linguistic works in Bhutan. In his paper *Language Policy in Bhutan* (1994), he describes the language policy of Bhutan as a balanced approach, characterised by two complementary policy lines. The two complementary policy lines, according to him, are: 1) the promotion of Dzongkha as the national language; and 2) the preservation and study of the country’s rich linguistic and cultural heritage. This covert but noble language policy of the Fourth Druk Gyalpo later culminated in the form of two explicit sections in the Constitution.

Today, under the far-sighted leadership of His Majesty the Druk Gyalpo, the DDC continues its national language planning works with that policy framework as the guiding principle. The DDC has defined a set of positions, principles and decisions in the form of an official document titled “National Policy and Strategy of Dzongkha Development and Promotion”. With this policy document and the Constitution of Bhutan as the guiding framework, the DDC has identified four policy objectives in its Annual Performance Agreement (APA) with the government. The four policy objectives are: 1) to enhance Dzongkha competency of the Bhutanese people; 2) to enhance Dzongkha-English bilingual competency of the Bhutanese people; 3) to

develop and promote the national language through the other native languages of Bhutan; and 4) to develop and promote the national language through Information and Communication Technology. Under each policy objective, it carries out a number of national language planning works.

Language planning in Bhutan may be understood as an initiative by the government or by its authorised agency, the DDC, to make Dzongkha serve the language needs of the people in accordance with the advancement of society and the development level of the nation. Since there is virtually no need for the DDC to carry out status planning, it focuses on the corpus planning so that the use of Dzongkha may be extended in the areas of government, education, trade, and other spheres of human life. As part of corpus planning, the DDC writes official grammars, dictionaries, orthographic guides and other language reference books. It also works towards meeting the need of translation by preparing bilingual dictionaries of Dzongkha vis-à-vis English and other native languages and, as part of its implementation activities, distributes its language planning products to the civil servants, students, and the general public. It also renders support in the development of Dzongkha curricula in schools, institutes, and university colleges. With Dzongkha standardisation as its immediate goal, the DDC also commissions publications, with specific conditions on the usage of grammar and spellings. It also conducts trainings, prize contests and merit awards besides providing support to individuals and private companies who are involved in the development and production of language materials.

Besides this official, *de jure*, or overt language policy of Bhutan, we also need to look at its covert or *de facto* language policy – the policy that is put in place at the practical level. The Ministry of Education (MoE) in Bhutan, like in other countries, is in charge of carrying out the national language acquisition planning. A Dzongkha Division was established within the MoE in 1971 to develop materials for instruction in Dzongkha, the national language. That division was responsible for developing Dzongkha textbooks and learning materials for both primary and secondary education. Today, that division has metamorphosed into a full-fledged department called Department of Curriculum, Research & Development (DCRD) with

curriculum development as its main mandate. In the intervening period, English remained the only medium of instruction and Dzongkha was taught only as a language subject; nowadays subjects like social studies and environmental studies are taught in Dzongkha at the primary level. Once it was decided to teach history in Dzongkha up to the middle secondary level, but that decision was somehow withdrawn; and, as a matter of fact, the role of national language in the mainstream education is rather limited. Still, English is the main medium of instruction and Dzongkha is yet to play its due role in the education system. Christopher Fynn (personal communication), a native English speaker who worked in Bhutan as a Dzongkha font developer for a long time, points out that Bhutan is the only nation in Asia to be not using its national language as one of the mediums of instruction; and he further points out that it is the only non-colonized nation to be adopting only English as the medium of instruction. In the Non-Formal Education, Dzongkha is the main medium of instruction; in fact it was the only medium of instruction, but, of late, English has been included in the curriculum of Non-Formal Education as well.

Over the years, the UNESCO has been recommending mother tongue-based bilingual and multilingual approaches in education quite vigorously. The UNESCO says that mother tongue-based education has positive impact on learning and learning outcomes; and it says that multilingual education, first in one's native tongue and then transition to other languages, including national language and international languages, works extremely well in several developing countries. It has been found out that students who received early education in their first language tend to do better in their later years of education, even if they have to make transition to foreign languages. In Bhutan, multilingual approach to education is conceptually unfamiliar; however, the other native tongues are used as spoken languages at the grass-roots level.

Endangered languages of Bhutan

Linguist Michael E. Krauss, cited in one Wikipedia article (“Endangered language”, n.d.), defines three levels of language endangerment: “safe” if it is considered that children will probably be speaking them in 100 years; “endangered” if children will probably not be speaking them in 100 years; and “moribund” if children are not speaking them now. Linguists say that more than half of the 7102 languages of the world (Ethnologue, 18th edition) will be extinct or moribund within the next 100 years; and it is said that half the world’s languages have less than 7500 speakers. Perhaps, all the languages of Bhutan with the exception of Dzongkha, Tshangla, and Lhotsham, fall under the category of “endangered” languages. Three languages, namely Monkha, Lhokpu, and Gongduk, are critically endangered. One dialect known as Olekha, a variety of Monkha spoken in Rukha under Wangdue Dzongkhag, is moribund; and, with the death of Aum Chödrön who is over 85 years old and possibly the last speaker who has full command of the language, and with the death of a handful of others who have partial command of this language, Olekha will become a dead language.

Now some may think why should we be bothered when a language dies? First of all, an entire way of thinking will be lost when a language becomes extinct. The languages are not interchangeable precisely because a language represents the distillation of thoughts and feelings of its speakers for generations, in fact over their entire history. Our native tongue and thought process are so tied together that what we say in it influences what we think, feel, and believe. Even if we can speak a foreign language, no matter how fluently, we first think in our own language and then translate to that target language. It happens so quickly that we don’t realize this conversion process going on in our mental dictionary. Next, when a language is lost, cultural traditions which are tied to that language, such as songs, myths, and poetry will be lost forever. Such intellectual wealth of one language cannot readily be transferred to another language. This is particularly so in the case of unwritten languages and only about 300 of the world’s 7102 languages have writing traditions. Another perceptible impact will be a weakened social cohesion as the values and

traditions of one linguistic community are replaced with new ones. A borrowed robe often does not fit and even if one wears it forcibly, one will not be comfortable. Then we run a risk of losing ethnicity status because ethnicity is often defined in terms of language; finally, it goes without saying that loss of a language will result in the loss of identity, firstly for the community that speaks that language and ultimately for the nation as a whole. There could be several other dreadful effects.

Knowing these tragic consequences of language losses, the linguists are concerned about the world's languages which are under threat of extinction and they make efforts to document as many endangered languages as possible. Most universities are devoted to the scientific study and documentation of languages of the world in general and endangered languages in particular. The DDC also collaborates with foreign students and scholars who conduct research on Dzongkha and the other Bhutanese languages. Thus far, some linguistic works have been carried out on Dzongkha, Tshangla, Gongduk, Kurtöp, Monkha, Bumthangkha, Khengkha, and others by foreign researchers as well as national researchers under the aegis of the DDC; and, henceforth, the DDC intends to carry out bilingual works of Dzongkha vis-à-vis other languages of Bhutan on its own and as part of its planned activities.

Quadrilingual Model

Spolsky (2004) provides three principal components of the theory of language policy: 1) language practices; 2) language ideology or belief; and 3) language management or planning. Language practices, according to him, are what people do while language ideology or beliefs are what people think should be done. Language management or planning is the direct effort to deal with the language situation.

These three components can be used quite effectively to describe and analyse the language policy of Bhutan. The language practices in Bhutan can be summarized in terms of the following: Dzongkha efficiently serves as the official language of Bhutan while Chökê serves as the language of liturgy; and English is apparently used as the necessary foreign language while mother tongues are used at the grass-roots level.

Language ideology in Bhutan is essentially the same as the language practices in that people believe that that is the way it ought to be; and, of course, with an added belief that all languages in use in Bhutan should co-exist harmoniously. With regard to language management and planning, there is an authorized government agency, the DDC, which is mandated to uphold the practices and ideologies of the Bhutanese community. Besides managing the national language and carrying out its developmental or promotional activities, the DDC has also started conducting research and documentation of the other languages of Bhutan. Regarding the national Language, the DDC carries out works at all levels that make up language such as the pronunciation, spelling, lexical choice, grammar, and style; and it even intends to come up with the management strategies concerning bad language, racist language, obscene language, correct language, etc.

Based on these language practices, language ideology, and language management strategies in Bhutan, the Quadrilingual Model would be an ideal language planning framework for Bhutan. This Quadrilingual Model shall encompass four languages: Chökê, Dzongkha, English, and Mother Tongue. Mother Tongue can be defined as the language of either your father, or the language of your mother, or of both, that you acquire naturally since childhood. Mother Tongue in this model is the sum total of all the mother tongues in Bhutan.

This proposed model is not in the sense of the quadrilingual language model followed in other countries such as Switzerland where all the four languages receive same acquisition planning. The Bhutanese model is unique and each language under the Quadrilingual Model has to operate quite differently in different sociolinguistic domains and therefore should be managed in isolation, albeit harmoniously. Four main sociolinguistic domains can be identified for this language planning model to operate. They are the education sector (school and universities), government (three branches), religion and religious organizations, and family. The education sector has to be the central domain for this language planning model.

The education sector, which is the first sociolinguistic domain and the central domain, can use both Dzongkha and English as the medium of instruction. While it

can maintain the status quo with regard to English, it can consider the possibilities of increasing the share of Dzongkha so that the national language plays an increasing role in education; this will enable the students and university graduates to acquire bilingual competency in Dzongkha and English. A rudimentary level of Chökê could also be taught in schools so that students can learn, understand and appreciate basic Buddhist terms and concepts; furthermore, the ones who prefer to specialize in Buddhist studies later on can also make better transition. Whether to incorporate mother tongues as a medium of instruction in the primary education, as promoted by UNESCO, along with English and Dzongkha is for the MoE to consider. In spite of the growing evidence of the success of mother tongue-based multilingual education in the early years of education in other countries, availability of teachers proficient in some mother tongues and development of curriculum resources at the beginning might be some of the challenges in the case of Bhutan.

The government, the second sociolinguistic domain, should include its three branches— the executive, the legislative, and the judiciary. In general, all the three branches of the government can use both Dzongkha and English in the running of public affairs. In particular, the executive can use Dzongkha as the primary language for meetings, official correspondence, documents, internal memoranda, etc.; and English translations and interpretation can be made wherever necessary. The legislative has to continue to use Dzongkha as the only language of parliament whilst authorised translation of parliamentary legislations in Dzongkha can be provided in English. Mother tongue may be used as one of the two languages, besides Dzongkha, by the Members of the Parliament to communicate with the people in one's own constituency. In the judiciary, only Dzongkha can be the language of the Supreme Court, High Court, and district courts; all the proceedings of the law courts can be exclusively in Dzongkha; and the language of judgements, decrees, or orders, in all the districts has to be Dzongkha. In other settings, it can use both Dzongkha and English like the executive and the legislative.

Chökê had been the literary language of ancient Bhutan and it continues to be one of the written languages in modern Bhutan with strong influence on Dzongkha and

other languages of Bhutan. Although there is no exact colloquial form of this language, all the indigenous languages of Bhutan share roots with it and, in addition, much of our earlier literature is in this classical language. So, in the religion or the religious organizations which is the third sociolinguistic domain, Chökê has to be the medium of instruction and the language of liturgy; and Chökê can be considered the sacred and the classical language and it can be cultivated both for religious and other literary purposes. Besides Chökê, Dzongkha and English can be included as language subjects in our monastic education so that our monastic communities can become trilingual or multilingual and can move with the times.

The family, our final and equally important sociolinguistic domain as the first three, can play a pivotal role in meeting our language policy and planning targets, particularly with regard to Mother Tongue, the last of the four languages in our Quadrilingual Model. In this model, Chökê, Dzongkha, and English stand independently while the Mother Tongue, as explained above, is the sum total of all the individual mother tongues in the country. Besides facilitating the learning of Dzongkha, English, and rudimentary Chökê, each family should make every effort to pass on their mother tongue to their children. Only in this way can all the native languages of Bhutan be preserved for posterity.

Conclusion

Children who go to school have grown up at least trilingual—Dzongkha, English, and one's own mother tongue—in Bhutan, albeit varying fluency level in the first two; and, given sufficient motivation and periods of formal study and of course opportunities to use, children in general and Bhutanese children in particular can acquire competency in several languages. So what we need is a policy framework that can meet all our language needs and the proposed Quadrilingual Model, as postulated in this paper, would be the best possible model given our linguistic scenario.

English is a necessary foreign language for us. We need it to communicate with the outside world, to keep pace with the technical progress and we need it for the purposes of higher education and commerce. English is a global language, not just an international language, so it goes without saying that we need to accommodate English in our language planning model. But, our national language and other native languages are equally important as each one of the four languages under the Quadrilingual Model plays specific roles; and we cannot afford to ignore any one of them lest we make a serious mistake in language planning. If we make a mistake in economic policy and planning, although undesirable, it is not a terrible blunder; this is because we can always pool resources and put things back on track in economic planning. However, if we make a mistake in language policy and planning, then it is a mistake forever. A language planning process is often irreversible and, no matter how much resources we allocate or reallocate, reversing a language shift is next to impossible.

In conclusion, the Quadrilingual Model is in consonant with the language needs, traditional multilingualism, and linguistic diversity, of Bhutan. It fits our linguistic culture despite facilitating national, intra-national, and international communication. Furthermore, this mutually reinforcing model is very much in line with our noble vision of Gross National Happiness (GNH) as it directly supports two of its pillars, preservation and promotion of cultural values and establishment of good governance; and, in particular, it can contribute towards achieving GNH through social and community vitality, cultural vitality, education, and good governance.

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