

Foreword

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 <https://doi.org/10.1075/impact.35.002for>

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Education in Languages of Lesser Power: Asia-Pacific Perspectives

Edited by Craig Alan Volker and Fred E. Anderson

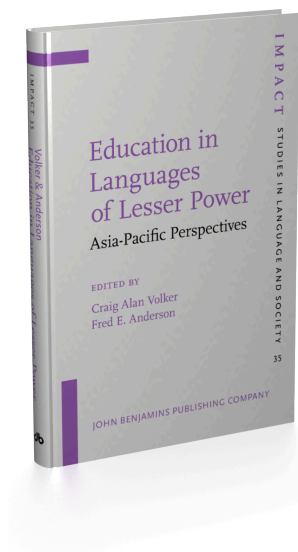
[IMPACT: Studies in Language, Culture and Society, 35]

2015. xv, 300 pp.

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Foreword

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Humanity is one, but at the same time, humanity is many.

There is one human species, and all members of it – once mature – have some language (though some may also use gesture rather than voice). All spoken languages are doubly articulated: they each use only a subset of the possible vocal gestures, and use distinct sequences of these to convey ideas. In any one of these languages, through greetings, statements, questions, commands and wishes, a community addresses human concerns of family and friends, earning a living, ordering society, the enjoyment of arts and entertainment, the pursuit of knowledge and (at least until recently) the worship of unseen spirits.

Yet no language is quite like any other, or even in direct correspondence, on the level of word or idea. They differ in the use they make of sounds, and how those sounds are articulated in repeating patterns. They differ in the cultural contents, which structure their priorities and illustrate their view of the world. And they differ in their relations to neighbouring languages, whether spoken by the same people, or by other communities of people that they know.

All this diversity is represented in this book. It is projected onto the screen of the Asia-Pacific region of the world, but this is such a wide region as to be almost a proxy for the world itself.

And this book is doubly themed, so that this diversity is viewed from two particular aspects. It is viewed from the aspect of education, the procedures and institutions by which languages, along with much other culture, are deliberately transmitted to the rising generation; and from the aspect of power, the relations of dominance and hegemony among communities and individuals, which make the use of different languages consciously unequal, so that one language community may be – in different ways – confined by another.

The studies in each chapter of this book are descriptive of various language situations, often painting a vivid picture in words. They challenge the presumptions of anyone brought up in any one tradition; but they are also entertaining to an open mind, showing a range of possible attitudes to language and education, and usually reflecting the need to accommodate more than one language in daily life.

Implicitly, too, they are political, and perhaps even – if considered deeply – have an insidious force. They show how power among communities implies inequality, greater options for some communities than others. There is a lurking question, at the very least, of how all participants in such situations can cope with them, to meet their concerns without disrupting or tearing the fabric of mutual relations. There may also be an issue of how the balance between the groups may be changed, to give a juster outcome, or a more productive one that will benefit everyone concerned.

But the languages of the more powerful do not have everything their own way. The forms of education described in this book are often directed to acquire languages of lesser power – languages which have typically not been languages of wider communication. And so they give good evidence for the characteristics of a kind of situation which I have previously seen as untypical.

A lingua-franca is usually seen just as a language of wider communication. But in my book *The Last Lingua Franca*, I characterized it crucially as a language which is acquired deliberately, for some external purpose. (By contrast, a mother-tongue is simply transmitted unconsciously, usually in a family environment.) By this definition these languages of lesser power become, through participating in institutional education, lingua-francas.

By participation in a school system, speakers are put deliberately in touch with their own traditions, much as a typical lingua-franca acts as a bridge between speakers who otherwise do not share a mother-tongue. And as such they are directly comparable with the dominant languages with which they co-exist. Education becomes a new source of radical equality among languages insofar as it is available to all languages, and not just the privileged, respected ones.

But the lingua-franca status is not just a name. Besides giving artificial support to ancient language communities, and their inherited content, education makes those languages, and their cultures, more widely available to all. It is interesting, therefore, that in Fred Anderson's contribution, he concludes that – to escape the fate of marginalization – users of languages of lesser power must be educated bilingually or multilingually. If this can be achieved, then knowledge of a language of lesser power becomes quite clearly an extra asset, a passport to specialized knowledge and close relations not automatically available to all – rather than (as often in the past) a mark of living in a restricted, old-fashioned world, without access beyond it. If so, a language of lesser power reinforced by a place in a multilingual education programme will itself become a lingua-franca, and rightly thought of as a bridge-language in its own right.

As a human species, we seem in recent decades to have made irreversible progress towards a globalized future, in which every part of the world is potentially, and more and more actually, in contact with all the other parts. If such a

future world is to hold on to the value of human diversity, it will have to be a multilingual world. And this multilinguality cannot be restricted to polyglossia, the gross fact that there will (for a time) be many languages, so many islands of difference, where some people remain restricted in local idiosyncrasy, with no access to wider knowledge. What will increasingly be needed will be education to create multilinguality, whereby everyone has access to lingua-francas, without disrespect to those local languages of smaller communities.

And perhaps, in an ideal future, the access that the local languages give to special things will make them seen no longer as languages of lesser power, but rather as languages with distinctive wealth.

