# Book Review: Standardizing Diversity: The Political Economy of Language Regimes

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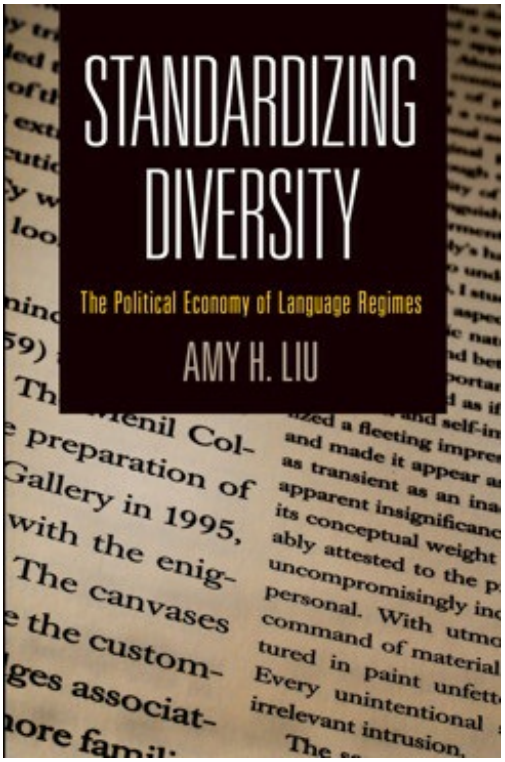
29/07/2015

*What explains the different language regime choices and what are the economic repercussions of these decisions? In* ***Standardizing Diversity: The Political Economy of Language Regimes*** *the author argues we need to pay more attention to the role that a neutral language of inter-ethnic communication plays in generating a sense of fairness, equality and inclusivity in heterogeneous multilingual societies. By focusing on Malaysia and Singapore as case studies,* ***Medha*** *finds this to be a highly readable book that focuses on the role and impact of lingua francas—common, link languages between speakers with different mother tongues.*




**Book Review: Standardizing Diversity: The Political Economy of Language Regimes. Amy H. Liu. University of Pennsylvania Press. 2015.**

In 1949 when Indonesia became independent of the Dutch, in the face of nearly 712 distinct languages, it chose Malay (renamed Bahasa Indonesia), the mother tongue of a small minority, rather than Javanese, the first language of the majority, as its official language. India, faced with a similar linguistic diversity chose to retain English as an official language alongside Hindi, while also granting 22 other languages official status (this policy evolved over time). In Thailand, however, an official decision was taken to standardize what was then called central Thai, the dialect of the monarchy, and declare it the national language. Similarly in Bangladesh all linguistic power is concentrated in Bengali, the mother tongue of approximately 80 per cent of the population. In Canada, on the other hand, despite English being the first language of a majority of the populace, French is accorded an equivalent status.

What explains these different language regime choices and what are the economic repercussions of these decisions? These are the questions that Amy H. Liu, professor of government at the University of Texas at Austin, seeks to answer in her book *Standardizing Diversity: The Political Economy of Language Regimes*. Contrary to nationalism literature, which posits that an autochthonous claim to a common language is key to constructing the nationalist imaginaire, Liu contends that the choice of language for public use is often a politically strategic decision, particularly in multiethnic societies. In particular, her focus is on the role and impact of lingua francas—common, link languages between speakers with different mother tongues.

The salience granted to language as a means of fostering primordial identity in nationalism literature, argues Liu, ignores the fact that among the 104 countries that secured independence between 1945 and 2000, close to half recognized a lingua franca in some capacity within their language regimes. Given this, Liu makes the case that the rather marginal attention to neutral languages of inter-ethnic communication in the literature is a significant omission. Instead, she contends, we need to pay more attention to the role that a neutral language of inter-ethnic communication plays in generating a sense of fairness, equality and inclusivity in heterogeneous multilingual societies. This sense of social capital, combined with reduced transaction costs of investing in the country (by ease of navigation and avoidance of expensive translation costs, for instance), she further argues, has the potential to translate to high economic growth.


Image Credit: Koc Wanita street sign in Malay, My Train Pix. Wikipedia. CC-BY-SA 2.0.

To ground her argument, Liu begins by developing a conceptual typology of language regimes along the dimensions of 'number of recognized languages' (one or multiple) and 'nativity of recognized languages' (mother-tongue or lingua franca). This results in four ideal typical language regimes—power-concentrating, power sharing, power neutralizing and neutralized-sharing. Using the illustrative case of Indonesia, she then theorizes that instead of traditionally accepted explanations of primordial appeals, colonial legacy and imperatives of nation-building, it is factors such as cultural egoism, collective equality, and communicative efficiency that more fully explain the choices and constraints facing postcolonial governments as they make their choice of language regimes.

Moreover, she demonstrates that language regimes are not set in stone, but rather develop over time in response to political and economic requirements. For instance, in the case of India, attempts at designating Hindi as the sole official language in 1965 backfired in the form of widespread protests from Tamil speakers. After a period of mass protests and violence, the government decided instead to officially recognize 15 state languages through an amendment to the constitution. This list was further expanded to 22 via subsequent amendments, and despite intentions to the contrary in the original constitution, English continues to retain its status as a neutral, official language. Often, argues Liu, cultural egoism and quest for power concentration drives the majority to impose its language on the polity, yet the extent to which this move is successful depends on the levels of politically significant heterogeneity in the country. Political expediency and pragmatism compels countries to recognize either multiple languages, designate a neutral lingua franca as an official language, or a combination of the two. States, asserts Liu, behave strategically, preferring regimes that maximize stability and efficiency. These choices have further economic implications.

Liu tests her theoretical arguments through a combination of large N statistical analysis comprising 54 countries across a 60-year period from 1945-2005, and detailed case studies of Malaysia and Singapore. In each case, she uses process tracing to delineate the mechanisms for language choice and respective economic impact. In fact, one of the key strengths of the book is its methodical rigour and detail. The motivation and rationale for choice of cases and each methodical step is spelled out clearly and in detail. Alternative choices and explanations are considered before they are discarded. The limitations of the research are dealt with before they are set-aside or explained away. This makes the book a very good example of keeping the research process accessible and transparent. Remarkably, despite this attention to detail, the book remains highly readable. Relevant examples at the right place keep the narrative engaging. Liu's familiarity with language regimes worldwide certainly shines through.

While one can quibble about specific methodical choices such as the focus on language of public education rather

than other means of determining language regimes, there is no doubt that by bringing to the fore the role of lingua francas in multi-ethnic societies, this book makes a significant contribution to the comparative study of politics of languages and has clear policy implications. Liu not only posits mechanisms for choice of language regimes, but also traces the economic implications of this choice, convincingly arguing that lingua-francas offer multi-ethnic societies the way out of paralyzing heterogeneity by presenting a means for neutralizing and/or sharing linguistic power. In an influential study published in 1997, William Easterly and Ross Levine posited a link between high degrees of ethnic diversity and public policy choices that resulted in low-growth rates. *Standardizing Diversity* poses a direct challenge to this view. Through a meticulous multi-method analysis of language regimes in place in Asian countries, Liu convincingly shows that it is not diversity per se, but the ways in which it managed that determines economic outcome.

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