Languages, Regional Conflicts and Economic Development in South Asia

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17.1 Introduction

The relation between economic development and linguistic diversity has been a topic of inquiry among social scientists, with implications for language planners and policy-makers, for a number of decades. In the aftermath of decolonization, researchers informed by the modernization paradigm of development tended to view ethnic and linguistic diversity within newly independent Third World countries as a hindrance to economic development. Daniel Nettle (2000, p. 336) points to the ‘famous studies’ by Joshua Fishman (1968) and Jonathan Pool (1972) as the standard bearers of the paradigmatic negative correlation between linguistic diversity and economic development in the field of language policy and planning. Fishman (1968), the doyen of sociolinguistics, gave an impressionistic overview of cross-polity datasets that became available in the mid-1960s and that included a measurement of ‘linguistic homogeneity’. Pool (1972) followed up with a statistical analysis, employing techniques that helped fill in gaps in the data.

While noting the problematic definition of ‘linguistic homogeneity’ in the datasets, Fishman (1968, p. 60) nevertheless summarized his overview as follows:

One cannot help but come away from this recitation of findings with the decided impression that linguistic homogeneity is currently related to many more of the ‘good’ and ‘desirable’ characteristics of polities than is linguistic heterogeneity. Linguistically homogeneous polities are usually economically more developed, educationally more advanced, politically more modernized, and ideologically-politically more tranquil and stable.

Fishman (1968, pp. 61–64) acknowledges political variables as having the most explanatory power for both linguistic and economic variation across polities. He notes, for example, while political stability and political freedom are...
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correlated to a higher degree with economic development than with linguistic homogeneity, ‘political enculturation’ has a higher correlation with linguistic homogeneity and ‘sectionalism’ (i.e. ‘the presence of significant, politically nonassimilated minorities in extreme opposition’) with linguistic heterogeneity than either has with economic development (measured by per capita GNP) (ibid., p. 63). This leads him to conclude that ‘the simultaneous pursuit of the advantages of higher economic status coupled with the protection or maintenance of valued cultural-linguistic differences is not a will-o’-the-wisp’ (ibid., p. 64). In other words, Fishman takes the position that maintaining linguistic diversity is not at odds with economic development for Third World countries.

Pool (1972, pp. 224–225) contrasts Fishman’s prescription with that of Karl Deutsch, a ‘modernization’ political scientist who predicted increased conflict in a rapidly economically developing country with a high degree of linguistic diversity (Deutsch, 1953). Pool concludes from his analysis of the correlation between linguistic diversity and economic development that the Fishman–Deutsch disagreement is a moot point: in the early 1960s, there were no instances of linguistically diverse countries that were also economically developed, with the possible exception of South Africa and its racialized economic development. He identifies a negative relation between low linguistic ‘uniformity’ (measured by percentage of population of largest native-language community) and economic development (measured by per capita GNP), although he warns of the ‘static’ nature of the correlation and the problematic definitions of both variables. He also cautions against making spurious correlations, advising instead to identify ‘intervening variables’ (Pool, 1972, p. 225).

Although Fishman and Pool were careful in generalizing from their analyses of the data, they both tended to adhere to the modernization assumption that, on face value, linguistic diversity was a problem for developing countries. Coined the Fishman–Pool hypothesis by Nettle (2000), the assumed problematic nature of linguistic diversity for developing countries has been glossed more recently by William Easterly and Ross Levine (1997) as the ‘growth tragedy’. Relying primarily on the ethnolinguistic fractionalization index as their measurement of ‘ethnolinguistic diversity’, Easterly and Levine (1997) suggest that many developing countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, are condemned to low growth given their high degree of ‘ethnolinguistic fragmentation’. They take language as the marker of ethnicity; linguistic diversity is their independent variable, presumably ‘causing’ poor economic performance, which is the dependent variable. The Easterly–Levine update of the Fishman–Pool hypothesis remains the product of the modernization paradigm: linguistic diversity is seen as a problem rather than a resource (Arcand and Grin, 2013).

Easterly and Levine’s analysis has generated on-going debate, primarily among economists and political scientists. Daniel Posner (2004) has raised questions about the calculation and relevance of the ethnolinguistic