

## BILINGUAL LIFE OF CONG AND HA NHI ETHNIC MINORITIES IN THE NORTHWEST\*

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Discussing the bilingual feature of minority groups in Vietnam, the linguists who are interested in this field in our country have said that there are differences reflecting specific characteristics of each group with respect to local culture, residential area, and population. The process of formation of bilingualism and the operation of bilingualism have a close relationship with the local socio-economic development of ethnic minority groups (Hoang Tue, 1985; Tran Tri Doi, 2000).<sup>1</sup> This conclusion implies that caring about bilingualism means not only to have more explicit understanding of bilingualism and its significance to the development of ethnic minority groups, but also to help recognize new features of existing national relationships in our country.

Our analysis focused on the process of bilingual formation and the role of the Vietnamese language as a means of communications and as a national language in different environments in two Ha Nhi villages and one Cong village which belong to the Tang-Mien language family. The research was carried out in March 2002 and May 2003 in three upland villages in the Northwest, 600 km from Hanoi.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the linguists, there are three bilingual forms existing in minority groups: bilingual community with the first language being its mother tongue, reaching the level of *literary language* (1); bilingual community with the first language being another language than its mother tongue (2); and (3) *naturally bilingual* community.

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### 1. Some Socio-economic Features of the Research Areas

The three areas selected for our research included Nam Ha A village of the Ha Nhi minority group, Po Lech village of the Cong minority group in Kan Ho commune, Muong Te district, Lai Chau province; and Chon Then village of the Ha Nhi minority group in Y Ty commune, Bat Xat district, Lao Cai province.

Nam Ha A and Po Lech are two among nine villages of Kan Ho commune. With thirty households and 185 people, the total agricultural land area of Nam Ha A is 0.9 hectares, the upland field area is eighteen hectares, and the average farming area per capita is 148m<sup>2</sup>. In contrast, the Cong people in Po Lech village have only one type of farmland, upland field land, and a lower population (34 households, 128 people). The average farming area per capita in Po Lech village is 250m<sup>2</sup>, approximately double that of Nam Ha A.

Agricultural production is the main source of livelihood of the local people. In both villages, no household earns additional income from trading of agricultural products and commodities. In addition to the income from the main rice crop - with average productivity of 6 tons/ha (two seasons) for paddy rice, and about 1.3 tons/ha for upland rice, local people also gain income from

maize (4 tons/ha) and cassava (22 tons/ha). Forest product collection and hunting prove to be of less effectiveness but provide an important source of food for the Ha Nhi and Cong people.

Although only eight out of thirty households are suffering from hunger during the period between crops, the living standard of the Ha Nhi people in Nam Ha A village is considered poor. The living standard of the Cong people in Po Lech village is even lower, with a majority of the households considered very poor. In 2001, the whole village had seventeen households lacking food for three months or more; nine of which were lacking food for eight to ten months. According to a report from the commune authorities, average per capita income of the local people in Nam Ha A and Po Lech villages ranges from 52,000 VND to 64,000 VND/month, which is considered one of the lowest levels in Muong Te district. The poverty rate in Kan Ho commune at the time of the study was 52%; and the respective rates for Nam Ha A and Po Lech were 74% and 85%.

The Ha Nhi people in Nam Ha A have more frequent contacts with Kinh people than those in other villages of Kan Ho commune. This environment of language contact enables the Ha Nhi people in Nam Ha A to be more fluent in Vietnamese than other groups in the commune. However, Nam Ha A is still a rather closed community, with its own cultural lifestyle and specific phonetic system.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> According to Ta Van Thong and Le Dong (2001), there are differences in vocabulary and phonology among Ha Nhi Co Cho and Ha Nhi La Mi and Ha Nhi Den groups in the Northwest of Vietnam.

Po Lech village of the Cong people, situated on the right bank of the Da River, is also similar to Nam Ha A in terms of closeness. One of the symbols of closeness is the interlacing marriage and family ties within the village. Until the time of the research, the majority of marriage ties of the Cong people in Po Lech occurred within the village, followed by those ties with lineage groups in Khao village in the same commune.

Unlike Nam Ha A and Po Lech, Chon Then village is situated near the Vietnam – China border, belonging to Bat Xat district, Lao Cai province. This group of Ha Nhi people has some differences from the group in Lai Chau in terms of language, customs and habits, and social relations. The Ha Nhi people in Y Ty commune in particular, and in Bat Xat district in general, have many ethnological features that can be distinguished from those of the same lineage in Muong Te district (Nguyen Van Huy, 1985). Y Ty commune consists of thirteen villages with 583 households and 5,131 people. The commune is about 100 km north of Lao Cai town and borders Kim Binh district of Van Nam province, China. Ten out of thirteen villages in the commune are Ha Nhi villages, including: Chon Then, Ngai Cho, Mo Phu Chai, Lao Chai 1, Lao Chai 2, Pha Can Su, Ta Gi Thang, Nheu Co Dan, and Sin Chai with 360 households and 2,060 people. Chon Then village, the selected research site, has forty-two households and 260 people. The area of paddy rice in the village is 18.2 hectares. In addition, there are also maize, bean, and cassava fields. The main economic activity of local people here

is paddy rice production with the productivity rate of 6.5 tons/ha (two seasons). In general, the Ha Nhi people in Chon Then have better economic conditions than people in other villages in the commune.

The Ha Nhi people in Chon Then belong to the U Mi group and their migration from China to Vietnam was after the migration of the people of the same lineage in Nam Ha. For this reason, they still maintain family relationships with the Ha Nhi group in Ti Xi Po commune, Kim Binh district, Van Nam province, China. Regarding marriage and family relationships, besides the interlacing relationship with most of those in the same lineage in the commune, there are four households of Ha Nhi people in Chon Then that still maintain family relationships with Ha Nhi people in China. These relationships have created the specified bilingual feature of this group compared to the Ha Nhi group in Muong Te district.

## **2. Real Situation of the Bilingual Life**

### ***2.1. Elements Affecting the Formation of Ha Nhi - Vietnamese and Cong – Vietnamese Bilingualism***

School environment, especially in boarding schools, plays a very important role in Vietnamese language learning and speaking for the Ha Nhi and Cong people in all three villages of Chon Then, Nam Ha, and Po Lech. Our investigation with local leaders, teachers, health officers, and officers working with the committee for population, family and children showed that their Vietnamese language skills were obtained mainly from their schools. Having

had the chance to study in boarding schools, they are very skilled in using Vietnamese, from pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar to their way of using words in certain communicative circumstances.

In Nam Ha and Chon Then, those Ha Nhi people in the age group of 35 – 55 who are now working as local management officials, health officers, and teachers all studied in the boarding school of Muong Te district and participated in other professional training classes. Three people who are now retired had been working in the army. These people joined the army during the war against the French colonialists and they studied Vietnamese during their time in the army. In Po Lech, six Cong people (out of ten interviewed people) can speak Vietnamese, as they had the chance to study in boarding schools in Muong Te district (one village leader, one commune cum village health officer and one grade seven student who had to quit school as his family is very poor; all of them are male). Four Cong women in the village can speak Vietnamese fluently because they learned Vietnamese from their husbands and others in the family.

Vietnamese learning in boarding school not only helps people to communicate well in their local working environments but also enables those with a literary language level to continue their studies at higher levels. School is the factor that has had the greatest impact on the modern ethnic bilingual progress in both ethnic groups in three surveyed villages. This process is similar to the ethnic language progress reflected through the data collected

in the ethno-sociological survey carried out in four minority groups, the Tay, Nung, Thai, and Muong groups in Lang Son, Bac Thai (former), Hoa Binh and Son La in 1982. Among the interviewees in that study, the number of people who reported learning Vietnamese in school was 1.3 times higher than that of those learning in the family and 2.1 times higher than that of those learning through production activities. Specifically: 50.5% of Tay people, 52.4% of Nung people, 59.5% of Thai people, and 73.3% of Muong people reported that they studied Vietnamese in schools.<sup>3</sup>

## ***2.2. Scope of Ha Nhi - Vietnamese, and Cong - Vietnamese Bilingual Communication***

Upon direct observation of language behaviour by some Ha Nhi people in Nam Ha and Cong people in Po Lech, specifically communication with their family members and children's communication in public entertainment activities, we can see a diverse bilingual picture. People of various age and sex groups are very flexible in choosing whether they use Vietnamese or their native languages to communicate in different circumstances. We can even see language cipher mixing and shifting within one communication progress, and subjectivity in bilingual education for children within a family scale.

### *2.2.1. Flexibility in Selecting the Language of Communication within the Family*

Right after arriving in Nam Ha, one colleague and I were received by the head of

one Ha Nhi household who is the village leader. He is over forty years old and has not finished lower secondary school. After one hour talking, as our discussion was becoming more open, a relative of his from Nam Ha B came to visit. Suddenly, the host started to talk with the other man in Ha Nhi language. Through their conversation, we could also guess that he was introducing us to the other man: who we are, what we do, and where we come from (because in the conversation we could hear the words like... central people... Hanoi... custom and habit... officials, etc.). The other man also spoke in Ha Nhi language and he was smiling. After that, the host continued talking to us in Vietnamese. Our discussion continued for another half an hour. The other man joined the conversation when the village leader talked about population-based allocation of land for rice production in his village with reference to Nam Ha B village. The guest spoke in Vietnamese and explained that prioritizing some plots of terraced field for families receiving social welfare is a good thing. A second situation which happened during our discussion was the participation of the village leader's wife in the meeting. She brought out a plate of boiled corncobs and talked to her husband in Ha Nhi language. Then the host and the other man invited us to enjoy the corn, speaking in Vietnamese. The host's wife smiled and also said, "...please have some boiled corn" in Vietnamese.

In Po Lech village, another remarkable case happened in the family of Mr. Lo Van Hon (32 years old, education level 5/12, Cong minority group, health officer in Kan Ho Health Station).

<sup>3</sup> Ethno-sociological survey data in 1982 with the sample consisting of 500 in 2 provinces of Bac Thai (former) and Lang Son. Documentation in the Department of Ethno-sociology, Institute of Anthropology.

Throughout the day working and discussing in his house, I found that he only spoke Cong language to his sons while they were playing with each other (the first one is eight years old and the second one is six years old). However, when I gave him some candies for the children, he thanked me in Vietnamese. After that, he called the children to give them the candies and spoke to them in Cong language. When being asked which language he will use when helping his children with their homework, he said “When I guide them in doing their homework I use Vietnamese. However, if the exercises are too difficult then I use Cong language to explain.” We were able to observe this situation in which they selected the language which is considered to be most suitable to their purposes in specific communication cases.

Through the above mentioned communication cases, we can see that the speakers are very flexible in choosing Ha Nhi language, Cong language or Vietnamese. The listeners, depending on conditions and circumstances, can understand the appropriate language. Language mixing or selecting is actively used by communication objects during the communication process. However, this situation mainly happens with those who can speak Vietnamese fluently and have more chances for social communication.

In interracial families, shifts in the language of communication play a special role. For example, in the family of Mr. Hu Trang Trung, the husband is Ha Nhi (a nurse of Kan Ho commune, 33 years old, education level 7/10), and the wife is Kinh

(Thai Binh province origin, grocery seller). The use of language in communication between them is very flexible. The wife can only speak Vietnamese but when customers come from other ethnic groups, the husband can speak and explain in Ha Nhi, Thai or Hmong language all in the same linguistic exchange.

If, in the above mentioned language communication circumstances that occur within a family, the bilingual phenomenon of *Ha Nhi - Viet*, or *Cong - Viet* is common, then on a larger scale, there is also the phenomenon of bilingual and multilingual linguistic exchanges. *Ha Nhi - Viet - Thai* or *Ha Nhi - Viet - Hmong*, language usage, like the above mentioned case, is also possible. There are quite clear rules regarding when to use one language and when to use the other language.

Talking about the bilingual life of Ha Nhi and Cong communities also means talking about the relationship between culture and language change in these communities. The frequency of local language use in childrearing is a manifestation of the family’s culture recreated through the teaching of native language to the next generations. Vietnamese, on the other hand, is used mainly for the purposes of learning and adapting to the society of Vietnamese people.

There is no kindergarten in Nam Ha, Po Lech or Chon Then communes, so children at this age level are taken care of at home. Ha Nhi or Cong language is mainly used in everyday communication between grandparents, parents or elder sisters and children. When asked the question: “In which case do you normally use Vietnamese

to communicate with your children?”, up to 98.70% of the respondents said that they only use Vietnamese when guiding children to do their homework. Thus, the children only start to learn how to speak and write in Vietnamese when they go to school. The rest (1.3%) said that their children are taught Vietnamese by the grandparents, parents or elder brothers and sisters before going to school. These cases are found in interracial families, mainly with a Ha Nhi husband Kinh wife (in Nam Ha) or in families in which the mother is a primary teacher or the father is a communal health official (Po Lech and Nam Ha communes).

In trying to understand why these families use Vietnamese to communicate with their children, we found two specific reasons. The first reason is to familiarize them with Vietnamese so that they will do well in school. The second reason is that their native languages are not very widespread, and it will be very difficult for them to go anywhere and do anything if they cannot speak Vietnamese. Families of those who are communal officials or social workers normally pay more attention to the education of their children than farmer families. According to these officials, learning Vietnamese will help the children have wider knowledge about society so that they will be more courageous and self-confident when communicating. It is still a widely held opinion in most families that have no members working outside the home or participating in social work, that only the boys should go to school and the girls should stay home to do housework.

Families with at least one member working outside the home or working in management and professional positions have a more positive attitude towards the education of their children than do farmer families. This has a great influence, from the very beginning, on their teaching and use of Vietnamese with their children.

As we may know, the native language is widely used in bilingual ethnic communities from the moment children can speak. When the children grow up, they are very fluent in their native language with expressive language depth, contributing to the development of thinking and speaking ability of each individual. To a certain extent, the personality of each individual will be shaped and they will perceive their family and community culture from the point of view of that language. In order to understand the transformation of language and the teaching of native language to children in relation to family and ethnic culture, we ask as the following questions: Why is it necessary to teach children how to speak their native language? What is the reason for using Ha Nhi/Cong language in communicating with children in the family? Collected information shows that the first reason is to distinguish their ethnic group from other ethnic groups. The last reason is to preserve their customs and habits.

One noteworthy question is whether the bilingual phenomenon of *minority language - Vietnamese* in interracial families is *mostly* re-created in family activities or not. For this question, a definite affirmative answer is impossible. The reason is that there is only one case of interracial marriage (Ha

Nhi - Kinh) in Nam Ha, while most Ha Nhi and Cong people have lineal marriages. As analyzed above, the environment for learning Vietnamese varies across different groups. The occurrence of interracial families is very rare. Generally, children only start to learn Vietnamese when they go to primary school, when they also receive support from parents or elders in the families. Thus, here the family is one of the sources for the re-creation of the bilingual situation of *minority language - Vietnamese*. However, the family is not the first factor in the transmission of the bilingual situation of *minority language - Vietnamese* among the generations.

Generally, bilingual recreation in daily schoolchildren's activities requires that the parents can speak both languages (including families where the parents and elder brothers and sisters can speak Vietnamese, of course). Ethno-sociological quantitative survey data shows that there are five Ha Nhi families using Vietnamese in their daily activities to guide and teach children compared with one Cong family using Vietnamese for this purpose. This imbalance also reflects the level of bilingual communication in production activities.

### 2.2.2. *Bilingualism outside the Family*

When asked the question, "Which language do you normally use at work or in public places such as the medical clinic, the market, and entertainment places, your native language or Vietnamese?" people from the age of 45 upwards (both men and women) said that they use both Vietnamese and their native language (accounting for 2/3 of the surveyed population). On the contrary,

young people mainly use Vietnamese. Thai language is only used in direct communication with Thai people. Kan Ho commune was the only place where more than half of the Ha Nhi people who were interviewed said that they use Vietnamese exclusively or both Vietnamese and their native language at work. On the contrary, the Cong people almost never use Vietnamese at work. Generally, depending on the communicative circumstance (with certain types of people) the speakers will use one language or the other.

In Y Ty, before the 1960s, Quan Hoa language was the most prevalent language of communication among minority groups such as the Hmong, Yao, Ha Nhi, Phu La, and other groups across the border. However, when communicating with Ha Nhi people in China, the Ha Nhi people in Y Ty only used the Ha Nhi language and rarely use Quan Hoa language. From after the 1970s until now, there has been a big change in the use of communicative language. Vietnamese plays an increasingly important role in communication in all fields such as working places, medical clinics, markets, restaurants, public entertainment places, and schools. However, according to our observation, at the time of the research, Vietnamese had not yet become widespread in Ha Nhi villages. According to the interviewees, sometimes Quan Hoa language still plays the role of the main communicative language among groups sharing the same residential area, especially with people from the age of forty up. This is not out of line with the norms of communication: in a bilingual environment with many people speaking different

languages, depending on the age and the level of language fluency, the speakers can use the appropriate language for specific cases (using the language that is appropriate for listeners or for communication).

In general, occupation and gender and social classification data reflect distinct differences in the use of Vietnamese and other languages between the Ha Nhi group and the Cong group. If a detailed sociolinguistic analysis is carried out, these differences have an important significance in terms of theory. For example, in terms of gender, the rate of Vietnamese usage in public places, markets and medical clinics by Cong women is lower than that of Cong men (32.3% and 47%); in the case of Y Ty, the rate for Ha Nhi women is 20% and Ha Nhi men is 34%. Vietnamese use analyzed in terms of people's occupation also shows distinct differences among the groups in two localities. Detailed analysis of the case of farmers shows that the use of Vietnamese in daily communication outside the family of Ha Nhi women in Y Ty commune is 1.5 times lower than that of Ha Nhi men; and 1.7 times lower than that of Cong women in Kan Ho commune. However, the rate is similar for male management officials and professional officers such as health officers and teachers (Kan Ho: 46% and Y Ty: 48%).

### **3. Attitudes of the Ha Nhi and Cong People toward Vietnamese Language and their Native Languages**

In addition to their capacity for using language in different communicative and behavioural circumstances, the bilingual status of the Ha Nhi people in Nam Ha and

the Cong people in Chon Then and Po Lech is also reflected in the interrelation between Vietnamese and their native language. To approach this issue, we raised the question: "Which language, Vietnamese or your native language, will you use when talking to children who have not yet gone to school?" The interviewees all said that Vietnamese and Ha Nhi language or Vietnamese and Cong language would be used. However, native languages are almost always used as the main means of communication (91.5% with children under six years old). The number of people in all three research sites who stated that they use both Vietnamese and their native language to talk to the children accounted for only 8.5%. They are commune officials, teachers, health officers, retired people, and people in a Viet - Ha Nhi interracial families. However, we must take into full consideration the fact that the level of Vietnamese use in each communication case accounts for only a moderate portion. Survey results show that no one said that he or she use only Vietnamese to talk to the children or others during community activities (except one case in Nam Ha where the mother is Kinh so she has to talk to her children in Vietnamese). Here, once again we want to emphasize that the dominance rests in the use of native language to teach children and there is no sign of vacillation in Ha Nhi and Cong groups in Y Ty and Kan Ho communes. This reflects the fact that at the village level in mountainous areas, if there is only one minority group then the frequency of using Vietnamese for teaching children, communication and community activities is very minimal (and sometimes even none).

To further understand the reason why this happens, and the awareness of speakers when choosing which languages to teach children who are at the age of “learning,” we discussed with two groups of people who were classified by their behaviour: (a) the people who only use their native language, and (b) the people who use both their native language and Vietnamese in communication.

Group (a) gave three main reasons for using only their native language: i) to distinguish themselves from other minority groups; ii) to prevent the forgetting of their native language; and iii) to preserve their customs and habits.

Group (b) gave four main reasons for using both their native language and Vietnamese: i) to study; ii) to broaden their knowledge; iii) to communicate with friends and others; and iv) to read books, listen to radio, and watch television.

Regarding the quantitative aspect, in both groups of Ha Nhi and Cong peoples, the number of people in group (a) is ten times higher than that of group (b). This is an important indicator. However, from the case study and survey about the children’s aspirations for studying and the need for communication in business and cultural exchanges in two groups show that there is an increasing tendency to adapt to Vietnamese society. The problem here is, in such a context, which language will be used in communication by people in these two groups? Leaving out the differences in the frequency of using Vietnamese and native languages in the linguistic exchanges of each

group and the geographic conditions, we can see that the selection of language has its own purpose and is suitable to certain communicative situations. Both Cong and Ha Nhi peoples want their descendants to be good bilinguals when they grow up. What parents expect from their children is that they can preserve their native language and respect traditional culture. However, in any element of ethnic bilingual progress there are also potential contradictions.

Unlike the Ha Nhi group, although the relations of internal language communication of the Cong group do not have any difficulties caused by local language factors they do have specific characteristics. Due to a small population and mixed residence with other groups, except for the use of Vietnamese in school, local people use both Vietnamese and their native languages in communication depending on whether the listeners are Thai, Ha Nhi, Hmong, Yao, Si La or Kinh people. In this case, there are specific rules regarding when to use one language and when to use another.

In summary, the reality in Nam Ha, Po Lech, and Chon Then shows that in the process of the natural transformation of bilingual environments, there is beginning to be a transformation from the use of “regional common” language (in community, social, and family communication) to the widespread use of Vietnamese, specifically from the use of *Ha Nhi - Thai bilingualism and Cong - Thai bilingualism* to *Ha Nhi - Vietnamese and*

*Cong - Vietnamese*.<sup>4</sup> The situation in Y Ty is still not out of the rule. The difference is that the “regional common” language of this Chinese border area is Quan Hoa language. The transformation process from Ha Nhi - Quan Hoa bilingualism to Ha Nhi - Vietnamese bilingualism is not the same as in Kan Ho commune in terms of time and level. However, it should be admitted that although Vietnamese is the national language, its position in the Cong and Ha Nhi groups is not yet appropriate with regard to its necessary role. In such a condition, awareness of the role and use of Vietnamese is not the same in different social groups. Reality shows that communication using *Cong - Vietnamese* bilingualism and *Ha Nhi - Vietnamese* bilingualism is closely related to and in direct proportion to Vietnamese language universalization and socio-economic development in each area.

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<sup>4</sup> It should be noted here that although Cong people in Po Lech did use Thai language (the so-called “regional common” language) in the 1970s and earlier, this is only for the purpose of communication outside the community scale, like the case of Ha Nhi language. In internal village communication, especially in ancestor and deity worship they only use their native language. This is also the case for Ha Nhi people in Nam Ha.

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