Communication for Development

The purpose of this paper is to examine the problem of language barriers from the most common approach of rural development communication in developing countries, i.e., vertical communication between a small group of people planning and implementing development programmes and a large mass of rural population participating and benefitting from development. In this connection the communication messages are informational and the main channel of communication is interpersonal, by means of oral exchanges or written statements, such as the dissemination of technical information on better practices of agriculture, family planning, health, and so forth, from the government officials. This community development approach is based on the assumption that “the communities can be guided to the path of development if they are given practical knowledge of the social and natural sciences and technology” (Rahim 1976: 153).

Since language is the medium of development communication, the linguistic issue in community development emerges. From a standpoint of language development, terminology planning or the coinage of technical terms to make it possible for dealing with modern science and technology is one of the avenues to modernization and progress. As far as rural development is concerned, one of the most common language problems in communication is the difference between the everyday spoken language of the people and the literary or technical language used by the government officials. The present paper is an attempt to illustrate this problem from an account of some linguistic difficulties between government officials and villagers in a North Indian village as well as a lesson from a Northeastern Thai country song.

Language problems in rural development in Thailand have received only scant attention so far. There is no research on language problems as such underway in this country. Far too little is known about the impact of language on development and modernization. In the present discussion, a case will be made out on a conceptual basis — with special reference to rural development in Northeastern Thailand.

Before going into the cases in point, let me explain briefly the language situation of the Northeast. The spoken lingua franca of the region is Northeastern Thai or Lao,
a distinct dialect from Central or Standard Thai. Communication between the two dialects can be quite non-intelligible, although some comprehension may be attained. However, the Northeasterners who are literate would not face any problems in non-technical communication of everyday matters. A linguistic barriers to successful communication is the use of unnecessary technical jargons, or the highly artificial formal language of the bureaucrats.

A Cautionary Tale of Two Countries

In the discussion which follows, I shall try to illustrate and comment on some aspects of language barriers to modernization which I think have some significance in the wider context of development communication in South and Southeast Asia. A cautionary tale of two countries is presented here: that of India and Thailand.

India is a country of linguistic diversity and cultural heterogeneity. In contrast, Thailand represents languages and cultures relatively of little diverse linguistic and ethnic group, if not homogeneous. However, the two countries are not unique with regard to language problems in rural development.

INDIA: An investigation on language problems in the rural development of a North Indian village conducted by Gumperz (1971) shows that government officials of the Community Development Project cannot communicate effectively with villagers. From the intelligibility tests using a pamphlet announcing a development fair, it was found that the illiterates were able to obtain only the vaguest idea of the messages of the text read to them. The semi-literates did only slightly better, and the literates understand the main part of the passages — however, even they did not know a considerable number of the terms used.

It should be noted that difficulties in comprehension were found to a greater extent in connection with the purpose of the fair which aimed at stimulating interest in new ideas about domestic industries, public health, women's participation in community life, and so forth. Linguistic difficulties of this type are largely in the domain of vocabulary. Some examples from the field observations of Gumperz (1971: 19–20) during his eighteen months of linguistic research in various parts of rural North India are worth quoting in full:

The announcement referring to a baby show read: t în sāl tak kī āyu kē chōte bālkō kē svasty kī pratīyōgitā hōgī, “there will be a show of healthy babies up to the age of three”. This was interpreted by several people as: “There will be a wrestling match of three-year-old children”. The difficulty lies in the use of the terms pratīyōgitā “show” and svasty “health” instead of the common words numāysh and hālat. Another example of the type of misunderstanding that occurred is the following: mahīlā kē liyē ēk din vishē prakār sē rakkhā jāyēgā “a special day will be set aside for women”. The word for women mahīlā is somewhat similar in phonetic shape to the local form mahōllā “neighbourhood”, and the words vishē “special and prakār “manner” were not understood. The common interpretation of the passage was, “people from every neighbourhood are invited”.

A Caudonary Tale of Two Countries . . .