

The fluent Asia scholar? Language and area studies 2.0

As the ominous truism goes, area studies – and the humanities in general – is in crisis. Our last resort against the besieging hordes of reorganization-prone bureaucrats, we are led to believe, is a wholesale reconfiguration of its core tenets. Enter the New Asia Scholar, whose noble desire to innovate carries more than a whiff of Darwinian survival and adaptation. And, as the field of Asian Studies continues to reinvent itself, the question of how language will feature in its future manifestations becomes relevant once more.

Tom Hoogervorst

A roadmap to credibility

Language is central to an informed understanding of culture and cultural context. It facilitates research and in fact shapes it. At times, language proficiency may even offer some protection against the pitfalls of over-analysis and exoticification. From the outset, several Asian Studies programmes prioritized teaching and acquiring competence in at least one widely spoken national language. Doing so, it was believed, would permit a deeper engagement with the people being researched. More controversially, it also enhanced observations and analyses of their history, economy, power structures and political climate. This idea went hand-in-hand with the expectation that (predominantly) western researchers would, at one point, indulge in long-term immersion in 'the field'. At this almost ritual space, they developed what is now known as 'regional expertise'. The cultural and linguistic credentials thus acquired would often sustain them throughout their further academic career.

Asia Scholars from Asia – now in the majority – are clearly overqualified in this regard, unless they work on societies other than their own. From the very beginning, Asian Studies departments in Europe, North America and Australia were quick to welcome these perceived insiders in their midst. Their knowledge of cultural and linguistic detail was superior, yet for long their alleged inability to maintain an objective distance lingered around as a point of contention.¹ Over the past decades, such lines – between 'insider' and 'outsider', Asian and Western, 'self' and 'other' – have been blurred by decolonization, new waves of migration, and global trends in academia. Few scholars would now argue that non-westerners are unable to speak for themselves, although the stigma of voicelessness seems to have shifted to several types of 'subalterns'.

Besides changes in the demography of Asian Studies programmes worldwide, the role of language is inextricably – and unsurprisingly – linked to economic considerations. In general, much funding now goes to team-based research projects. The delegation of fieldwork to native-speaking assistants or field data collectors has already become general practice in many academic disciplines, reducing the occasions at which direct communication with informants is needed. (These local collaborators are at best listed as co-authors and at worst acknowledged in a footnote, if at all.) In this light, today's academic realities may well require the New Asia Scholar to just pick up some of the most important lingo before proceeding with the 'real' work. The question of *how much* language should be taught is increasingly turning into *whether* language should be taught, rather than outsourced to private institutions or relegated to the domain of self-study. In general, the push to learn foreign languages – other than Mandarin and English – is declining. In all honesty, so are the associated career perspectives.

Indispensable inequalities?

A somewhat different reason to divert resources away from language teaching is the idea that the acquisition of near-native competence in such languages as Hindi, Japanese, Malay or Arabic is a high impossible, life-long endeavour. Many western-trained scholars, of course, do publish and present in the national languages of 'their' countries of research – and some acquire a semi-legendary status by doing so. Yet the requirement to pick up excellent English – for many an equally laborious enterprise – seems to be much more self-evident. The status of English as the lingua franca of Asian Studies is, *grosso modo*, a fait accompli. And while undeniably constituting "a discriminating factor in the unequal distribution of access to intellectual production across many disciplines",² more sensible alternatives are yet to be proposed. Indeed, in the hierarchy of academic inconveniences, the hegemony of English ranks well beneath commercialization, intransparent recruitment, and the exploitation of early-career researchers.

Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to reflect on the centrality of English for prolific academic theorization, known less charitably as "the franchising of ideas".³ In no small part, theoretical sophistication within Asian Studies relies on circles of scholars "who push each other's ideas into the academic marketplace",⁴ often moving the discussion further and further away from the daily realities of the people they describe. At the most recent EuroSEAS keynote speech, Benedict Anderson made the point that scholars "cherish an ugly language which is not understood by the general population". Indeed, the excitement of,



Left and below: multilingual signs in Penang, Malaysia (Malay, English, Chinese, Tamil, Punjabi).

Bottom: English, Bengali and Tamil on a sign in Little India, Singapore.

say, Indonesian undergraduate students reading the work of esteemed academic superstars tends to quickly dissipate when they come to realize that, at least with regard to their own society, "They theorize, we understand".

Yet new opportunities loom on the academic horizon. I am most familiar with the situation in the Indonesian humanities. In this field, western-trained scholars who supply Indonesian translations of their articles on their Academia.edu profile, or publish in Indonesian to begin with, will soon realize that these works are downloaded substantially more often than any of their 'quality journal' writings. This presumably holds true for other non-Anglophone settings as well. In the light of the alarmingly low impact of the average journal article,⁵



this should at least satisfy some of the impact-obsessed funders populating contemporary higher education. Unfortunately, such efforts rarely 'count' as academic core activities and are at best considered 'outreach'.

Some prospects

Most fieldwork-based research in Asia remains strongly determined by the linguistic fluency and cultural competence of the researcher, while gender and physical appearance play important additional roles.⁶ This beckons the question in which domains language remains crucial to the study of Asia 2.0, as well as other cultural areas. It is a question I can only answer incompletely, based on my personal experience.

Foremost, some exciting possibilities surface in the area of reconstructing non-Eurocentric pasts. A language-centric approach offers the analytical tools to move beyond the constraints of the nation-state in determining the origins, contact-situation and self-image of human populations. This is predominantly an exercise in philology, oral traditions and historical linguistics. Here, New Asia Scholars finds themselves in the good company of experts on Africa, who face very similar challenges. Language is also key to the increasingly salient field of popular culture. The urban space often becomes the stage for new types of music, street art, media production and other manifestations of non-elite culture. The language of young people in Asia, Africa and other parts of the world not only provides insight into these processes, its study is also a largely neglected academic category in itself.

This brings us to the final domain: language for the sake of language. Leaving aside such bonuses as 'cultural fluency', Alzheimer's prevention, and the pedagogical advantages of learning how to listen, speak, read and write on multiple levels, the study of languages provides one of the most tangible ways to make sense of an otherwise rapidly homogenizing world. The vast majority of today's roughly 7000 languages is spoken in Asia and Africa. Some have become strong markers of local or trans-regional identity. Others are marginalized and vast disappearing. This should be a concern to all who seek to understand human knowledge in its full diversity. The death of each language, to end with another ominous truism, means the loss of a stored repository of history, story-telling, music, traditions, culture, and world-making.

Tom Hoogervorst is a researcher at the KITLV in Leiden (the Netherlands) where he focuses on language contact and Malay linguistics (hoogervorst@kitlv.nl)

References

- 1 Focusing on Southeast Asia departments, these and other tensions are discussed in detail by Ariel Heryanto: Heryanto, A. 2002. 'Can there be Southeast Asians in Southeast Asian studies?', *Moussons* 5:3-30.
- 2 Ibid., p.13.
- 3 So called in the *LeidenGlobal Lecture* of 12 May 2015 by Michael Herzfeld. The professor admitted to only passing his PhD students after they had given at least one academic presentation in the national language of the country they worked on.
- 4 Robert Cribb's superb analysis of these dynamics within the field of Indonesian Studies merits emulation in other academic domains: Cribb, R. 2005. 'Circles of esteem, standard works, and euphoric couplets', *Critical Asian Studies* 37(2):289-304, see p.289.
- 5 One study has it that 50% of papers published in academic journals are read exclusively by their authors, referees and editors, while as much as 90% are never cited: Meho, L.I. 2007. 'The rise and rise of citation analysis', *Physics World*, January, pp.32-36.
- 6 See for a recent study on the impact of language, physical appearance, gender and other factors on the researcher's positionality in the field: Tanu, D. & L. Dales. 2015. 'Language in fieldwork: making visible the ethnographic impact of the researcher's linguistic fluency', *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*. doi:10.1111/taja.12150