

1-6. Another Type of Diversity: Languages in the Mekong Basin



A Mon temple in Ratchaburi Province, western Thailand (September 2012).

A total of 398 languages are spoken in 5 of the Mekong countries (Burma, Lao PDR, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam). This is equivalent to 5.8% of all the 6,909 languages in the world listed in *Ethnologue*. On the other hand, the number of speakers in these 5 countries is only 3.2% of the world's population, so this means 3.2% of speakers speak 5.8% of the world's languages. This falls short of the Pacific (0.1% of speakers, 18.1% of languages) and the North and South American continents (0.8% of speakers, 14.4% of languages), but in comparison to Europe (26.1% of speakers, 3.4% of languages) or Asia as a whole (60.8% of speakers, 33.6%

of languages), it can be said that there is a wide diversity of languages in proportion to the population in the Mekong region¹.

Country	# of speakers	# of languages	# of Languages with fewer than 10,000 speakers	Examples of minority languages
Cambodia	13,511,970	23	12	Brao, Samre, Sa'och
Lao PDR	5,349,894	84	47	Aheu, Arem, Chut
Burma	47,319,800	111	35	Anu, Tawr Chin, Hpon
Thailand	51,668,997	74	28	Bisu, Chong, Plang
Vietnam	75,650,099	106	42	Arem, Chut, En
Total (5 countries)	193,500,760	398	164	
World total	5,959,511,717	6,909	3,524	
Percentage	3.2%	5.8%		

Table: Language diversity in 5 countries of the Mekong Basin

Minority Languages Support Diversity

Of the 398 languages spoken in the 5 countries of the Mekong basin, 164 (41.2%) have fewer than 10 thousand speakers². While a language's survival is not solely determined by the number of speakers (Nettle and Romaine 2000), after calculations from comparative examinations, Crystal (2000) estimates that 50% of the world's languages will disappear in the next 100 years, and the percentage of languages that have fewer than 10 thousand speakers is precisely 51.0% (3,524 languages). Therefore, there is a possibility that 164 languages spoken by ethnic and indigenous peoples in the Mekong Region will disappear during the 21st century. This calculates to a disappearance of 1 or 2 languages each year in the 5 countries of the Mekong Region alone. Languages have continually gone extinct and evolved throughout human history, but the rate of extinction has increased tremendously over the past 500 years and is a concern (Nettle and Romaine 2000).

What are the Threats to Minority Languages?

The biggest factor threatening minority languages in the Mekong Region is the rapid proliferation of predominant languages like national and official languages. In particular, public education encourages or even requires use and acquisition of predominant languages. While children of minority groups need to learn national and official languages and have the right to do so, it is a problem that teachers and parents overtly or covertly try to impede the use of minority languages. This leads children to question the value of their birth and upbringing. As a result, minority languages are not used at school, and not even at home, so the language is not passed to the next generation. In addition, predominant languages expand and exercise influence through television, radio, newspapers and other mass media, as well as pop culture in movies and music. In addition, with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) integration coming up in 2015, the already predominant “international” language of English is positioning itself as the predominant means of communication in the Mekong Region, making it all that much more difficult to bring attention to the value of minority languages.



Kmhmu women in Pak Beng District, Oudomxay Province in northern Lao PDR.

Conflict and civil wars, natural disasters, epidemics, and (forced) relocation due to large-scale development such as dam construction are also threats to the survival of minority languages. Speakers of Moken, a minority language used by indigenous people living in southern Burma and Thailand, were hard hit by the earthquake and tsunami of December 2004. Before that, they were already economically and socially disadvantaged, but Moken speakers, particularly those living along the coast who lost their essential boats and homes to the tsunami, are facing a crisis (Skehan 2012). Also, villages of speakers of Ugonng—a language in the Sino-Tibetan language family—living in western Thailand were forced to resettle for the construction of a dam by the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT). As a result, the cohesiveness of the local community was weakened, creating more obstacles to maintaining language and identity (Bradley 1989).



Nyaheun women in the Xekong River Basin, southern Lao PDR.

The languages of indigenous and minority peoples are filled with wisdom and knowledge accumulated through generations of traditional lifestyles and surviving in nature. Some researchers say people are born with a right to language and culture (McCarty et al. 2007). With the disappearance of a language, the wisdom it contains is lost, and there is the danger of denying people their rights to their culture. We are facing a crisis not only of biological diversity, but also of language diversity.

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1. In Africa, 12.2% of the world's speakers use 30.5% of the world's languages.
 2. Nettle (1999) reported that the percentage of languages with fewer than 10,000 speakers is 92.8% in Australia/Oceania, 76.5% in South America, 77.8% in North America, 36.4% in Central America, 32.6% in Africa, and 30.2% in Europe. The global average is 59.4%, and the average in Asia is 52.8%.