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Clement Paligaru:

Hello, I'm Clement Paligaru and welcome to *Ear to Asia*, the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia Research specialists at the University of Melbourne. In *Ear to Asia* we talk with researchers who focus on Asia and its diverse peoples, societies and histories. In this episode, deciding what's a language in Tibet. Can we call a language that's not officially recognised as such, a language?

In areas of the world with great linguistic diversity, who decides what is a language and what is a mere variant of the broader tongue? What factors, whether cultural, linguistic, or political, drive the verdict? Our guest on *Ear to Asia*, anthropologist Dr Gerald Roche has spent many years researching and writing about the predicament of minority languages in the language rich Tibetan plateau. He describes what he has encountered as the language ecology of Tibet where cultural diversity mixes with history and geography to create a surprisingly abundant yet precarious linguistic tableau.

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As for the language we call Tibetan, researchers like Gerald Roche argue there is no such single language, and in fact many Tibetans in China speak neither a Tibetic language nor Chinese. So, what sorts of languages do they speak? Are they recognised and given official support? And can they, should they, stay vital in an era of change where assimilation is ongoing?

Dr Gerald Roche is a research fellow at Asia Institute where he focuses on ethnicity, assimilation and language vitality in Tibet. Gerald, welcome to *Ear to Asia*.

Gerald Roche:

Thank you very much for having me.

Clement Paligaru:

Now firstly, let's talk about the Tibetan Plateau. It's where you do your fieldwork and it's a place of diverse peoples and languages as well as landscapes. Can you set the scene by telling us a bit about the Tibetan Plateau?

Gerald Roche:

Sure. I think the important thing to realise about Tibet is that it's an enormous and diverse area, not just in terms of the physical landscapes but also in terms of the people that live there. There is a province inside China which is called the Tibet Autonomous Region, but the place which is inhabited by Tibetan people is much broader than that rather restricted area. And Tibetan people actually live in an area about three times the size of France, stretching across the Tibetan Plateau inside China.

So, that area includes a range of physical environments from high altitude deserts all the way down to sub-tropical jungles. And people have come to live in those environments and adapt their lifestyles and cultures to those environments. So, we also find a really high degree of linguistic and cultural diversity throughout the area.

So, we might think of Tibet as just being inhabited by Tibetan people but in fact there are also other ethnic groups, some of which people would be familiar with like Mongolians. But there are also other smaller ethnic groups who are less well-known outside of Tibet. One example would be the Monguor people who live on the north-eastern Tibetan Plateau. There's about 200,000 of them living in a very small area up on the north-eastern Tibetan Plateau.

Clement Paligaru:

Yes, on the linguistic front, what's the official view of language in Tibet?

Gerald Roche:

Within China, they recognise 56 ethnic groups which includes the dominant Han majority as well as Tibetan. For each of those ethnic groups, they are guaranteed the right in the constitution to use their language. And this tends to give rise to the assumption that each of those ethnic groups actually has only one single language, when in fact the reality is much more diverse than that.

Clement Paligaru:

And from the outside, how is it seen?

Gerald Roche:

From the outside, there also tends to be a tendency to reproduce this idea that Tibetan people have a single language, and that's largely due to the way in which Westerners have encountered Tibet. There's a long history in the West of studying the written Tibetan language, of studying Tibetan religion or Tibetan Buddhism as the core of Tibetan culture. And so, there tends to be this association that the written language is the only language of the Tibetan people.

But on the other hand, the Tibetan language is also whatever it is that Tibetan people happen to speak and that's where we get into this issue of which one is more important to people's identity. So, when you ask a Tibetan person what their language is, what are they referring to? Are they referring to the written language or the language that they actually speak?

Clement Paligaru:

Let's talk about the minority languages that you've referred to. How many are there?

Gerald Roche:

Sure. It's difficult to really say with any certainty how many of those languages there are because languages are not something which we can count unambiguously. Languages don't really exist by themselves just as objects. They have a social life and a political life and the boundaries are drawn by people.

And so, what I've tried to do in some of my research, I've written a paper with linguist Hiroyuki Suzuki where we surveyed different bodies of literature and looked at different estimates made by different people as to how many languages there are, these minority languages.

So we came up with a number of different estimates. The estimates range anywhere between 14, which would be adopting the Chinese state's one ethnic group, one language approach, and at the other end of the spectrum we can find that the contemporary linguistic literature, primarily in English, identifies as many as 60 distinct linguistic varieties spoken in Tibet today.

Clement Paligaru:

Are they all linked to each other in any way at all? Or are they quite distinct?

Gerald Roche:

So I would say that they are quite distinct from Tibetan, they're quite distinct from Chinese. There are clusters of similarities within those languages. So, let me give you two examples. One of the languages that I've worked on is called Manegacha. This language is actually an archaic and ancient form of Mongolian. And so, this language, even though it couldn't really be easily understood by people speaking Mongolian today, it has historical relationships that still bears a similarity to types of Mongolian.

Another language that I've worked on called Gochang which is spoken on the eastern Tibetan Plateau, that language is more closely connected to a group of languages on the east Tibetan Plateau which are called the Gyalrongic languages.

So, what we have in these different clusters, you have a group of varieties that are related to each other and it's not really clear exactly where the pie should be cut between the different varieties to distinguish different languages. So, different linguists have different estimates. If you speak to different people locally, they will have different estimates about what constitutes a language and what is just another type of whatever they speak?

Clement Paligaru:

Are they all around the same size when it comes to the size of these speaker populations?

Gerald Roche:

There's a real spectrum of the size of the languages. So, at the low speaker number we have one language where there are two estimates of how many people speak this language according to two different linguists. One of them says that there are nine fluent speakers remaining and another linguist contest this and says there are zero fluent speakers remaining. So, that would be the extreme low end of the spectrum.

Then we also have larger languages up to as many two million people. So, we're not talking about tiny languages here. Some of them are spoken by significant numbers of people. But on average, if you trim off the upper and lower end of the spectrum, most of these languages have speakers in the tens of thousands.

Clement Paligaru:

Gerald, you also divide the minority languages of Tibet into three categories, extra-territorial, enclaved and unrecognised. Can you unpack this for us?

Gerald Roche:

The basis of this classification system tells us something about the relationship between that language and the state and to what extent those languages are recognised by the state. So, the three categories we can first of all divide into two groups, those which are recognised by the state and those which are not. The ones which are recognised by the state we can divide then into further two groups.

The enclaved languages are recognised by the state, they're spoken by non-Tibetan people, but they're spoken inside Tibet and nowhere else. So, that means that these languages basically exist surrounded completely by Tibetan people, Tibetan speakers and also by a political environment which is dominated by concerns over Tibetan culture and language. And we have really just a few languages which are in this situation.

The extra-territorial languages are slightly different because they are recognised by the government, they're spoken in Tibet but most of their speakers actually live somewhere else. They live outside Tibet, in other parts of China or in other cases outside of China.

So, in both of those cases of the enclaved languages and the extra-territorial languages, they receive some support from the government but the support is limited by the fact that they are not really the dominant language of the Tibetan part of China.

Clement Paligaru:

And the unrecognised?

Gerald Roche:

The unrecognised languages are not recognised by the government, which means that they do not receive support, by which I mean those languages would not be taught in school, they would not be used in school, you can't hear them on the television or the radio, they don't appear in newspapers. If you go into a government office you're

unable to use those languages. I've also called those languages invisible languages. So, that means that in the eyes of the state, if they look at a Tibetan, they see someone who should speak a single Tibetan language, that actual spoken languages are invisible to the eyes of the Chinese state in those instances.

Clement Paligaru:

Which of these would be considered at risk today?

Gerald Roche:

I would put all of the languages in the unrecognised category, I would classify all of them as being at risk to some extent. And the basis of that risk is the lack of recognition from the state. In the contemporary world, there's a sense that for a language to be viable, to continue to be spoken, it needs to have some connection with these modern institutions, such as education and media. It has to have an economic function. It has to have some place in the world beyond the home, beyond the village. And the lack of recognition really denies the language those places in the broader world.

Clement Paligaru:

I'm Clement Paligaru and on *Ear to Asia*, we're speaking with Asia Institute research fellow and anthropologist Dr Gerald Roche about the diversity and precariousness of languages found in the Tibetan Plateau.

Now, you did mention the categories and we were talking about extra-territorial and enclaved coming under protection or really recognition by government. I mean, how much is that guaranteed in any case? How long does that continue on? Have you looked into that?

Gerald Roche:

So the recognition is not guaranteed and even when the recognition is provided, it doesn't necessarily guarantee the vitality of the language. So, we're dealing with issues of language policy here. But when we try and figure out what the language policy of a country is, we can't merely rely on the documents and the statements that the government provides.

So, for example, I mentioned previously that the Chinese constitution guarantees that minorities have the freedom to use and develop their languages and this is attached to formally recognised languages. Now, that doesn't necessarily mean that freedom to use and develop languages is always guaranteed because other priorities might override that.

There are two examples where other priorities will over-ride those guaranteed freedoms. One is national security and the other one is economic development. So, if a local government for example is having to make a decision about whether they invest in protecting and promoting a locally spoken minority language, or job creation schemes, economic development, building a dam, or building a road, more often than not, those public works, those economic development programs are going to be prioritised over the development and protection of those languages.

Clement Paligaru:

What about social transformations?

Gerald Roche:

Right. Well what I'm thinking about in those instances is that if you went to a lot of these communities across the Tibetan Plateau in the middle of the last century, what you would have found is communities that were basically living a subsistence lifestyle, people's lives were tied to their villages, there were a few people who undertook long distance trade and pilgrimage but people's lives were really lived within the space of the village and their fields and a few local monasteries.

Their economy was one based on acquiring enough to live and continue living. What we see now is that with the drive to develop the Chinese economy, its rise to prominence globally, that people's lives are really being torn out of that subsistence economy. That means that there is greater mobility, greater reliance on education as a means of social mobility, more interaction with people that is mediated through things like television, radio, electronic communication forms.

And so, what we see is that through this process of social transformation that the environment that once supported those languages, these small village communities, these very insular worlds, are really breaking down. And what that means is that the language no longer has the environment in which to live unless you do something to support it.

Clement Paligaru:

And with these forces in the background, or in fact in the foreground, are there any of the speakers of these endangered languages seeking the preservation or revitalisation of the languages as all of this is happening?

Gerald Roche:

Right, there are many cases where speakers of these languages are worried about their languages, but there is a sense I think that speakers are really just not sure what to do about it. There is the sense of the sort of the monumental nature of the challenges that are being faced by these speakers of these languages. But there are a couple of case studies where communities have organised to undertake projects to do something for their languages. There have been the development of community writing systems, people have tried developing textbooks in their languages and generally there have been movements where people are trying to encourage each other to simply continue speaking these languages.

Clement Paligaru:

Is there evidence of some of these languages picking up? I mean if you think of a graph you might imagine that there is a dip and as a result of these efforts has there been a growth at all in these minority languages?

Gerald Roche:

Unfortunately, as far as I'm aware, I don't think we see any such pick up in any of these minority languages. In fact, what we see universally across all of those minority languages is really a dip in their vitality. So, one way to think about the vitality of the language is to look at the extent to which it is still being transmitted across generations. This is the key to the survival of a language. If people are still passing that language to their children, then the language will continue to be spoken.

And in the situations where I have been able to, for example, do survey work to find out are people still teaching the language to their children, what we often find is that there is a declining rate.

So, I mentioned this language Manegacha before and in surveys that I've done in the villages where Manegacha is spoken, we find that now about one-third of households are no longer transmitting that language to their children. Instead, they're actually transmitting some form of Tibetan.

Clement Paligaru:

You write about language loss but also about the possible emergence of new languages over the coming century. How will these new languages come about and what will they sound like?

Gerald Roche:

This idea that the social transformation that is taking place across the Tibetan Plateau, although it will be characterised by considerable loss of linguistic diversity, it doesn't simply mean that existing languages are going to replace the languages which are being lost. We are going to see the emergence of new types of languages amongst Tibetans in the coming century and I think there is already evidence that we see this happening in fact.

Throughout Tibet now, there are appearing new cities, and these cities are drawing their population from the surrounding countryside. And so, most of the people coming to live together in those cities are Tibetans. Now, the Tibetans that come to live together in those places don't all speak in exactly the same way. There is this very finely grained texture of dialect and language diversity. There's a saying in Tibetan basically that every village has its own dialect.

When those people come together in these cities, they come to form new speech communities and build new languages that didn't exist before. Usually, they're based on one of the languages that was already spoken in that area, perhaps the demographically dominant population will form the basis of the new language which is spoken in that place. Often, it's a mixture of different varieties.

Media is also playing a role in this. Even though the Tibetan language is typically recognised as a single language in the way that it's used in media, the government basically recognises three major varieties of Tibetan. So, where I have lived and worked on the north-east Tibetan Plateau, the dominant type of Tibetan is called Amdo Tibetan. Now Amdo Tibetan again is not really a language that is spoken by any one particular population. It's an ideal type.

So, when the state is providing media services in Amdo Tibetan, they're often using what is essentially an invented language where they are taking a certain type of pronunciation of a particular Amdo Tibetan variety which is considered prestigious and then they are using that pronunciation to speak the written language.

So, we have this form of Tibetan now which has only emerged and used in media contexts and isn't really a language that anyone speaks naturally. But as that language is used more often and in more contexts, it will come to be seen as a natural language and people will come to use it more and more. If that language enters into the classroom then people will be learning that language until eventually what was at one point a non-existent language that was artificially created will become people's mother tongue.

Clement Paligaru:

Let's look at the endangered languages again here. What determines whether a language is endangered?

Gerald Roche:

We need basically a methodological tool to assess what that is. The tool that I've used in a lot of my work is a tool that was developed by UNESCO where they have a model which includes nine factors that we can look at to decide whether or not a language is endangered or not.

Those factors include things like how many people speak the language, what kind of situations can they use that language in, how do they feel about that language, what policies exist around the language. I think the main thing is that we have to try and get at the vitality of a language from a number of angles.

One thing that we have to be careful about when looking at language vitality is often that people's feeling about their language and the objective situation of that language are very different from one another. So, for example, there are movements in the United States that consider English to be an endangered language, or I lived in Sweden previously and there are people in Sweden who consider Swedish to be an endangered language because of the dominance of English.

Clement Paligaru:

Why is language endangerment undesirable?

Gerald Roche:

There are two ways of answering that question I think. Linguists tend to focus on what it means to lose a language in itself. We might look for example about what it means for our understanding of the nature of language whenever a language disappears; what unique features might a lost language have taken with it that diminish our capacity to understand the nature of language?

Linguists might also want to look at, for example, what knowledge is embedded in the language that might be lost. For example, knowledge about the environment, names for different animals and plants and so on. My perspective as an anthropologist is somewhat different in that I'm really more interested in the experience that speakers go through when they lose a language. So, when a person, when a population loses a language, that often involves a process which takes place in a situation where there are constraints on the choices that people are able to make.

So, when people have this experience of growing up speaking a language but the social conditions don't enable them to transmit that language to their children, where the social conditions don't enable them to use that language within their community anymore, when social conditions don't enable that community to persist, that situation often involves some sense of regret, shame, emotional and psychological suffering. I think those are the things that we should really focus on when we think about what is lost when a language disappears.

Clement Paligaru:

Gerald, how did you get interested in the minority languages of Tibet?

Gerald Roche:

My interest in these languages really came out of my personal experience. I lived and worked on the north-eastern Tibetan Plateau for eight years. I went there as a volunteer English teacher. I stayed on working with Tibetan communities, assisting them in projects to document language and culture, and it was really through the experience of getting to know people who spoke those languages and to hear about what it is like to grow up in those communities and what it is like on a personal level to face those challenges, which got me interested in trying to learn more about this situation.

But a second thing that really I think has driven me to try and think about this through a more scholarly framework is looking at what has happened in Australia and other countries historically, and the way that loss of languages proceeded in those places. Many of the endangered languages that we think about and talk about in Australia might have five or three or even one speaker.

I think that the situation in China is at a point where a lot can still be done to maintain those languages. As I said previously, most of those languages have tens of thousands of speakers. That's a lot of people still speaking those languages. There are still enough people, there is still enough vitality within those languages that something can be done to maintain them. But I think we're reaching a critical threshold where if nothing is done those languages will face an increasingly difficult future as China's economic development deepens, as it spreads through Tibet. As China becomes increasingly globalised, the challenges that those languages are facing today are only going to deepen in the future.

Clement Paligaru:

I admire your perseverance. Gerald Roche, many thanks for your time here on *Ear to Asia*.

Gerald Roche:

Thank you so much.

Clement Paligaru:

We've been speaking with Dr Gerald Roche, an anthropologist and research fellow from Asia Institute who specialises in Tibetan ethnicity and language.

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