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**Review**

# *Individual Language Policy: Bilingual Youth in Vietnam*

**Trang Thi Thuy Nguyen (2022)**

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*Reviewed by Lanting Wang*

Trang Nguyen's *Individual Language Policy: Bilingual Youth in Vietnam* is the latest addition to the literature on language policy with a focus on bilingualism, ethnicity, and identity, particularly in the Global South. Central to the book is the emerging notion of 'individual language policy' which functions as the key theoretical concept. Individual language policy is a desirable extension of language policy at the microlevel. Nguyen defines individual language policy as 'a kind of policy that individuals discursively construct and apply to themselves in their daily language behaviours (practices and beliefs)' (p. 10). Although language policy at the individual level is more implicit and informal, its importance has been indicated or confirmed by other scholars. For example, without explicitly mentioning the concept of individual language policy, Spolsky (2009) suggests that language policy starts at the individual level in the form of choosing which language to use. Following this, Nandi (2018) highlights how pro-Galician parents' 'under-the-radar participation' (p. 221) agency, together with collective linguistic practices, in family language policy significantly influences their children's language learning and the immediate society's language behaviour. In his later work, Spolsky (2021) provides an updated theory in which individuals are seen as the starting point and fundamental layer of the complex language policy circle for examining multilevel language policy moving across various contextual domains. This theory also indicates that individual language policy,

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gearing towards maintenance and/or transformation orientations, is not necessarily independent of external forces (Hamid, 2019). Consequently, without devaluing individual agency, Van Mensel's (2016) study emphasises how the agency of transnational parents is constrained by structural forces in Brussels. In alignment with these arguments, Nguyen provides a much wider perspective by bringing multilevel language policy into discussion. In this way, the interactions between individual language policy and higher-level language policy are highlighted, making the discussion comprehensive. Adhering to these views and emphasising the importance and complexity of individual language policy, the book sets out to explore the ways in which the ethnic minority of bilingual youth in Vietnam construct, reconstruct, and negotiate their individual language policy in their language life in different domains.

Focusing on bilingual minority Vietnamese youth who live in a subtractive language environment, the book explores how they draw on their whole language repertoires to wander between the two language orientations in terms of 'maintenance – maintaining their values of ethnicity, and transformation – embracing the common values of the mainstream society' (p. 6) in order to fit into various contextual domains. Based on ample empirical evidence gleaned from interviews with 28 bilingual youths and informal conversations with their parents as a supplementary source, the author draws a vivid picture of the bilingual youth navigating their language life on the 'bumpy language voyage across ethnic and mainstream worlds' (p. 113). Persuasively depicting the ways in which bilingual youth navigate their language repertoire to maintain loyalty to their ethnic language and culture and, at the same time, actively pursue membership in the mainstream society mediated mainly by Vietnamese, Nguyen successfully makes an argument that the minority bilingual youth travel across diverse linguistic and cultural spaces to strike a balance between ethnic preservation and mainstream participation.

Distinguishing her study from previous studies related to individual language policy, Nguyen pays particular attention to the interconnections between different levels of language policy by providing 'comprehensive descriptions of how the construction and appropriation of individual language policy by bilingual youth are influenced by external forces' (p. 12) and language interventions by other individuals. Focusing on individual language policy, the analysis emphasises the centrality of individual agents in negotiating contextualised individual language policy in response to their internal need to preserve their ethnic features and the external pressure to transform themselves to the mainstream language and culture. Meanwhile, the author draws on a wide and thorough grasp of research in language policy, bringing multilevel and multiple perspectives

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into discussion to reveal interplays between them. By exploring the complex interrelationship between bilingual youth's individual language policy and social reality in terms of other individuals' interventions and higher-level language policies, such as national and institutional language requirements, this book encourages readers to further examine language policy at the individual level from a much broader perspective. Apart from that, the author links individual language policy with language maintenance and shift to reveal the impact of individual language policy on the fate of minority languages in a subtractive language environment where minority languages are marginalised and their speakers are disadvantaged. As such, it is a useful book for researchers working on language policy and minority language maintenance.

The author's main argument is that the minority bilingual Vietnamese youth travel between the maintenance and transformation lines which 'are not always parallel or separate, but sometimes twist or overlap' (p. 7) to respond to the subtractive language environment that devalues their home languages, moving closer or further from the two orientations to claim a position of being in-between. Focusing on this argument, the author develops a clear and logical structure. The book starts with an introduction to the research background and social context of the study, which is followed by an explanation of the theoretical approach it uses. The next sections elaborate on the theoretical guidance to present the language lives of the young people in different domains and situations. In the final part, a deeper and wider analysis is presented to make sense of the bilingual youth's discourses.

The introductory chapter (Chapter 1) provides the research background and clarifies key terminology, including individual language policy and bilingualism, that is frequently used in the remaining chapters, followed by a brief outline of the book. Chapter 2 conceptualises and explains the key theoretical approach – individual language policy – and its components in detail. The author proposes three components of individual language policy together with its three spaces. Specifically, level, agent, and process constitute the three main components which are drawn upon to analyse how the bilingual youth construct their individual language policy. In terms of process, the author suggests a negotiated language policy as a concept, working with Bonacina-Pugh's (2012) practised language policy and perceived language policy, and managerial spaces as a concept, working with Hornberger's (2002) implementational and ideological spaces. Shedding light on the level element, Chapter 3 places the study in the wider Vietnamese society characterised by language hierarchy which has resulted from the influence of geographical, historical, social, and political forces that prioritise Vietnamese while subtracting and devaluing

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ethnic minority groups. The illustration of these external forces and their impact provides information about the wider context where the research participants lived and constitutes the contextual backdrop for the construction of individual language policy. The data sources and the researcher's role in the study are also briefly introduced in this chapter.

Chapters 4 to 6 engage with a detailed account of the bilingual youth's practised, perceived, and negotiated language policy respectively, which subtly aligns with Spolsky's (2004, 2009) three-component model of language policy, i.e., language practices, beliefs, and management. In these chapters, the author examines how these young people exerted their agency across domains to construct maintenance- and transformation-oriented individual language policies. By demonstrating the bilingual youth's domain-specific language practices (the 'level' component), their perceived and negotiated language policy, the author makes the argument that the construction of individual language policy can be understood as a process in which young adults exert their agency (the 'agent' component) to create a dual-line pattern in implementational, ideological, and managerial spaces (the 'process' component) where they make efforts to maintain their ethnic, linguistic, and cultural features while transforming to those of the mainstream society. Chapter 4 demonstrates the bilingual youth's practised language policy in four main domains: the family-ethnic community, the school, the church, and wider society, thus revealing the ways in which individuals as language policy agents 'legitimate their language choice by using various clues and cues in given situations and contexts' (p. 35). Young adults were found to constantly manipulate their language repertoire under individual, institutional, and communal forces and across diverse domains to fit into changing situations. Generally, the youth moved closer to L1 preservation and maintenance in the family-ethnic community and the church, while they tended to shift to the societal language, Vietnamese, in the other domains. As the author observes, despite the distinct patterns of the youth's language practices in these domains, Vietnamese was most likely used across sites and that the youth generally moved closer to the generality in any specific environment.

Focusing on the youth's language beliefs, Chapter 5 presents the youth's narratives that reflect their distinct language beliefs and policy-in-beliefs related to ethnicity, utility, self-esteem, and bilingualism. As agents (the 'agent' component), the youth construct their perceived language policy that encourages their language beliefs to become aligned with the maintenance and transformation orientations in ideological spaces (the 'process' component). The understanding about language beliefs at the individual level, as Nguyen argued in a previous article (Nguyen and Hamid, 2018), is of importance to develop, pursue, and

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implement higher-level language policies. Chapter 6 examines how the youth enact their 'negotiative agency' (p. 96) (the 'agent' component) to construct their negotiated language policy or policy-in-management in managerial spaces (the 'process' component), which was influenced by policies and discourses at the institutional and community levels and the intervention brought by key individuals in their life (the 'level' component). They sustain or adjust their language practices and beliefs under the impact of meso, micro, and individual forces; this process was constructed as a language regulation model used to negotiate language practices in daily life (Hornberger and Johnson, 2011).

Chapter 7 concludes the book with a broader and multifocal discussion of individual language policy. The author understands the youth's individual language policy construction from (self-)identification, (social) contextualisation, and interaction perspectives. Identification emphasises the entanglement between the development of one's self-policy and his/her maintenance- and transformation-oriented identity in terms of self-definition and group affiliation. In terms of (social) contextualisation, the youth 'enacted, interpreted and appropriated conditionally in response to the subtractive language environment where they were living'. The interaction perspective highlights the cross-level interplay between individual language policy and language policies at higher levels. The process of the youth's configuration of dual identity along dual-line language orientations (maintenance and transformation), the reasons behind this process, the challenges they faced and the significance of taking higher-level language policy into consideration are highlighted.

Overall, the book documents cutting edge research that provides sound evidence and convincing arguments in the discussion of individual language policy. As a researcher of language policy and heritage language maintenance in a subtractive language environment, I found a lot of inspiration from this book. I would like to elaborate on the strengths of the book mainly in three aspects: readability, coherence, and persuasiveness. First, it is easy and interesting to read. Key terms, such as the three components of individual language policy (agent, process, and level) repeated in appropriate places further enhance the readability of the work. Both academic and non-academic readers may find themselves engaged with the text all the way through. Second, the book maintains coherence and consistency in terms of structure and content. Specifically, it is well structured and easy to follow. We can see the logical progression of the different chapters, from the introduction of the research background to the articulation of its theoretical basis and contextualisation, the evidence-supported elaboration of research findings under the theoretical framework, to the final discussion. Third, the solid theoretical basis and evidence ensure the persuasiveness of the

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discussion. With respect to the theoretical basis, the whole discussion is centred on individual language policy and, at the same time, refers to other language policy theories, where relevant. With respect to evidence, the author collected data from various sources, mostly the individual youth's narrative discourses through interviews, while informal talks with their parents serve as supplementary sources. The informants' voice highly relevant to the themes being discussed are incorporated as evidence to support the author's arguments.

Nonetheless, some minor flaws can also be identified. For example, the book seems a bit crowded with concepts, which may cause occasional confusion. In addition, the microcontextual analysis of the participants, such as the socioeconomic status of their families, is absent. These factors may have an impact on individualised life trajectories and therefore on the construction of individual language policy. Further discussion that involves microcontextual factors would further help in sorting out the construction and transformation of the youth's individual language policy. Furthermore, the study is based mainly on subjective data gleaned from formal interviews or informal conversations: relatively more objective data from ethnographic observation would have added to the richness of the book, not only because it would add to the validity and reliability of the discussion but also because it might open up the possibility of studying the emerging issues that arose during the ethnographic research process. But these few points should not detract the reader from its high quality and value and the contribution it makes to research on individual language policy.

The discussion in this book is characterised by an informative tone and seeks to inform readers about the knowledge of individual language policy and the vivid stories of how bilingual youth construct their dynamic individual language policy that follows both maintenance and transformation orientations. The author presents persuasive and inspiring arguments to readers with reference to theories, literature, and data. By vividly documenting and telling the language experiences of the research participants, the book has the potential to engage its readers to learn more. As a researcher in language policy, I was engaged throughout my reading of this book. The data that reveal the informants' stories in multiple domains enable the author to paint a holistic picture about the bilingual youth's language life. This will probably resonate with bilingual readers who live in subtractive language environments, inspiring them to reflect on their own language life and experiences. These stories may also encourage policymakers to consider building and preserving an ecological environment where various languages can coexist and minorities' ethnic and cultural prosperity as well as their multiple orientation policies and identities are respected.

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To sum up, the book vividly depicts Vietnamese bilingual young people's language voyages across ethnic cultural spaces, using their multilingual repertoire as a 'linguistic passport to reach various minor or major destinations' (p. 5). Facing language tensions and the resulting identity tensions, the youths constructed their dual line individual language policy and hybrid bilingual identities based on their evaluation of the appropriateness of specific language to specific domain and the interlocutors' language preferences. By means of 'practicing, perceiving and negotiating' (p. 104) a dual-line individual language policy evolved that involved both maintenance and transformation orientations to fulfil their need to find their place in their ethnic community and, at the same time, integrate into mainstream society. By delving into the minority bilingual youth's language lives embedded in specific social realities in Vietnam, the author makes a strong case for the relevance of individual language policy to ethnic minority bilinguals' language life and the configuration of their individual language policy that follows both maintenance and transformation lines.

The book enriches the emerging discussion of language policy at the individual level by conceptualising the notion of individual language policy and establishing a theoretical model based on this concept. While the book clearly sets out to explore Vietnamese society, the research findings and the ideas discussed provide valuable insights for other scholars to investigate individual language policy and beyond in other multilingual and multicultural societies where one or a few languages are dominant while other minority languages are marginalised. This volume is very useful for understanding individual language policy from concept to reality. It is worth reading and is highly recommended for readers.

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