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Language Policy Issues in Developing Countries

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Florian Coulmas

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By "speech community" we mean a group of people who show the following three characteristics: (1) members of the group are linked by some defined functioning of social organization; (2) they are able to communicate with each other, and (3) they share at least one language or linguistic variety as well as the norms for its use.

2 As the 1971 Census figures reveal, (divided) Maharashtra, Gujarat, (divided) Punjab, and Haryana States now have Marathi (76.61), Gujarati (89.39), Punjabi (79.49) and Hindi (89.42) speech communities, respectively, in dominant position. (The figures represent the percentage of speakers in their respective States.)

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Literacy and minorities: Divergent perceptions

J. V. NEUSTUPNÝ, *MONASH UNIVERSITY*

Contemporary social science has placed emphasis on variation both in social realities and in their perception by members of the society. The same emphasis is necessary in our approaches to literacy and minorities. The character of literacy and the ways we perceive it differ fundamentally in dependence on particular socioeconomic settings. So does the character of ethnic minorities.

Unless sociologists, sociolinguists and educators are prepared to fully accept this fact, it will be difficult not only to understand the relevant problems in societies other than our own, but also to communicate about literacy and minority issues across cultural boundaries. The questions of literacy and minorities are necessarily considered in different ways in a developing country of the Third World, such as Indonesia, and in a developed industrial nation of the type of the USA. Rapprochement is possible, but not before we acknowledge and interpret the existing differences.

A developmental typology working with socioeconomic types such as Traditional, Early Modern, Modern, and Contemporary will be basic to this paper (cf. Neustupný 1978, p. 27, 147-182, 255). I shall argue that the way societies at large and their representatives view literacy and minorities closely relates to the characteristics of their socioeconomic types. It should be understood that the typology I have in mind is a mere explanatory device and does not imply evaluations: a Contemporary society is not necessarily "better" than a Traditional one. Nor is a Traditional view of literacy or minorities necessarily "worse" than the assumptions and attitudes of people educated in a Contemporary Western environment.

*I would like to thank Michael Clyne and John Platt for a number of penetrating comments on this paper.

Literacy

1. Traditional Literacy

The designation "traditional society" is a rather rough tool with which to approach the large variety of social structures preceding the phenomenon of modernization. Among literate traditional societies, some limit the use of writing to ritual purposes and to basic practical tasks. In other societies, such as those of Ancient Greece, Medieval India, or China, written language further develops and appears widely as the vehicle of philosophy, literature, historiography, and the beginnings of science (Goody 1968). In the former type only a very small number of people possess literacy. In the latter the persons involved include a large number of specialists – for an average speaker, however, the skill of literacy is of no consequence. With Srivastava (cf. his contributions in this volume) we can speak of "nonliteracy" rather than "illiteracy".

The perception of the problem of literacy in traditional societies follows the pattern of the problem itself. Illiteracy is only noticed where literacy was expected. It is "natural" if someone who does not specialize in thought or administration, is unable to read and write. Khubchandani has aptly characterized this situation in noting that in traditional societies "literacy, no doubt, forms an important asset and accomplishment of an individual, but *not a necessary* condition of his survival and dignity (1981: 73-74). In Traditional societies nonliteracy is not treated as a major communication problem.

Although as a rule this way of perception changes in the Early Modern period, I wonder whether it disappears in full or perhaps survives in some strata of the society across the boundaries of socioeconomic change. Experience with gypsies in Czechoslovakia in the 1950s seems to support the possibility of survival. Illiteracy was viewed by them not as a fatal disease (as in other groups of the society) but as a natural state of affairs which did not warrant a special explanation or concern.

It may be appropriate to note here that while speaking of "perceptions" one must distinguish at least two different levels. Firstly, each potential communication problem can be perceived at the unconscious level: users of language may perceive their ignorance of spelling rules, experience uneasiness or frustration with regard to spelling problems, or even avoid certain words in order not to have to spell them. However, this does not imply that they would have to be aware of their problem.

The second type of "perception" is a conscious process, accompanied by articulated attitudes, theories, discussions, or policies. It is useful to realize

that this type does not fully derive from the unconscious attitudes. Discussions of literacy or minorities are frequently influenced by established idioms and problem formulations, or by theoretical constructs originating in other cultures. For instance, most academics and top administrators in the present-day developing nations have studied or lived in the West. Although their unconscious perception of problems of their countries may remain unchanged, they are likely to employ legitimations and idioms which belong to a Western system. This fact may complicate the access of others to an exact picture of the relevant situation.

2. Early Modern literacy

With the beginning of industrialization traditional societies evolve into what I call Early Modern society. This socioeconomic type is characterized by a large number of social problems connected with the formation of modern nations, new social classes, and new social relationships between individuals.

Illiteracy now becomes a major problem. One reason why mastery of the written language matters is, as is often suggested, the need for literate manpower in industry and commerce. However, additional factors must be identified. It seems, for instance, that the process of individualization, which promotes each speaker to his own ideology-builder and manager, calls for radically increased competence in the written language and contributes in this way to the spread of literacy (cf. Slaughter 1982).

Final conclusions can only be drawn after a systematic analysis of the functions of the written language is available for all types of social structures. These functions are not universal, as anthropologists sometimes tacitly assume, but change with the socioeconomic type. For instance the extensive use of written language for making promises (commissive function), for establishing new situations (performative function), for instruction (instructional function) and for some other uses, sharply rise in the Early Modern period. On the other hand, keeping diaries and taking notes (self-regulative function) or writing letters to simply maintain contact (contact function) seem to weaken after the Early Modern period, at least in some societies (cf. Neustupný 1977).

In multiethnic states, it is principally in this period that the problem of literacy combines with the need to attain reading/writing competence in a linguistic variety different from the speaker's native variety. The issue, introduced in this volume by Coulmas, is connected with the problem of minorities which I shall discuss below.

The problem of literacy is, of course, actively perceived at this stage. General compulsory education is the universal policy designed as the corrective device. At the personal level of perception, illiteracy means lack of education and is evaluated negatively. Literacy is still far from being general or even universal. A large number of categories of language users who have not had access to good education remain illiterate. The term "restricted literacy" could be applied here, even if in a somewhat different sense from Goody's usage.

According to statistics quoted by Cipolla (1969: 127), in 1900, 23 % of the population of the Austrian Empire, 19 % of the population of Belgium, and 17 % in France could neither read nor write. Since these figures rely on self-assessment and exclude many of those who could do little else than sign their own name, the actual figures for functional illiteracy can be assumed to be much higher. In the USA, for the same period, the average rate of illiteracy has been reported as 10.7 %, but a considerable gap existed between the white and nonwhite population (6.2 % as opposed 44.5 %, cf. Wick 1980, p. 109).

Two excellent surveys of literacy conducted in Japan in 1948 and 1955-56 are of particular interest. At the time of these surveys Japan reached, in my interpretation, the very end of the Early Modern period. The results of the surveys well illustrate the phenomenon of "restricted literacy." Between 20 % and 50 % of Japanese language users were described as experiencing intense or noticeable problems in the use of the written language (cf. Monbusho 1961, Nomoto 1977).

TABLE 1: Rate of Illiteracy in Japan, 1955-56

	Tokyo area (rural)	North-Eastern Japan (rural)
No competence in reading characters	0.1	0.8
No reading/writing competence	9.5	15.7
Problems (sometimes serious) in the use of written language	48.3	61.5

Source: Monbusho 1961

Table 1 shows the percentage of people who experienced literacy problems in the 1955-56 survey. The survey covered subjects aged 14 to 26 in two selected areas, Tokyo and Northern Japan. The percentage of total illiterates in the survey was less than 1 % in each of the two areas. On the other hand those who were considered to "possess no competence in the use of the written language" and were expected to experience serious problems, made up approximately 10 % of the Tokyo sample and 15 % of the North-East Japan sample. However, another 50% or 60%, respectively, were also judged to lack sufficient competence, and some of these subjects definitely could be classified as functional illiterates.

If my interpretation of these data is correct, they mean among other things that the countries of the Third World which are in the Early Modern stage at present should not place much hope in general literacy. At the level of perception, total literacy may be the goal. However, we should realize that a high degree of industrialization can be reached on the level of "restricted literacy". This is not to say that restricted literacy was beneficial to 19th century Europe or to 20th century Japan, or that it would be the preferable pattern in present-day Asia or Africa. But it may be a historical necessity.

3. Modern literacy

The process of modernization was finalized in most Western industrial nations at the beginning of the 20th century. The basic structure of the industrial society was now completed and the feeling that fundamental conflict issues were solved pervaded the leading strata of the society. As shown in World War I, the economic crisis of the late 1920s, the history of European fascism and World War II, this was a daring assumption. Yet, at the level of perception and ideology, a conflict-less mood prevailed.

In this period the character of literacy undoubtedly changed. Since the whole of the community, including rural areas, became incorporated into industrial society, no easily predictable sectors marked by limited or zero literacy remained. Instead, disadvantaged individuals or groups were affected – immigrants, the blacks, the gypsies, school dropouts. Of course, differential competence in the use of written language depending on social class remained an undisputable fact. On the other hand, complete illiteracy, represented by the inability to sign one's name, seems to have been radically reduced. On the basis of our present experience we can guess that in Western developed nations functional illiteracy existed throughout the Modern period at the level of not less than 10-20 % of the adult population. In today's Japan, some of the speakers who were counted as encountering problems in the 1955-56

survey continued their education and can be expected to have attained literacy (Nomoto 1977). Others may have improved through active participation in roles which require the use of written language. Yet a considerable number must still possess a very limited functional competence in reading and particularly in writing. The figure cannot be lower than 20 %.

However, as far as perception is concerned, the Modern period creates the myth of 99 % literacy for the industrialized societies of the world. Illiteracy is considered to be a very rare illness. The stigma of illiteracy is enormous. "Illiterate" now becomes synonymous not only with "uneducated" but also with "Ignorant" or "backward". Yet the fiction of the conflict-free society makes it unusual to raise the problem as an academic or political issue. Goody (1968: 1) reports on his colleagues of this period as follows:

> It is especially surprising that so little interest in literacy – and the means of communication in general – has been shown by social scientists. Those working in "advanced" societies have taken the existence of writing for granted . . . .

Let me note in addition that Cipolla's useful Pelican on illiteracy, published in 1969, reflects not only the changing mood by raising the issue, but also reflects the older (Modern) pattern by presenting literacy as a problem of the past, not of the present.

For an average Japanese intellectual any suggestion of widespread illiteracy appears dubious even today. He would be prepared to deduct a few per cent of the official 99 % figure, but not as much as appears to be necessary. Only those who have had the experience of working among the disadvantaged can break through the general mode of perception. However, the representative section of society, including the Education Ministry and the teachers unions, take general literacy for granted and show no interest in the problem. No new survey of literacy has been conducted since 1956.

4. Contemporary literacy

The perception of human society began changing again in the developed industrial nations as they were moving from the Modern to the Contemporary type of social structure. I believe that this process commenced in the 1960s and that it remains characteristic of the present period. After being denied existence throughout the Modern period, latent social problems reappear on the scene: problems of ethnic minorities, social class, poverty, sexual, and other discrimination, the problem of the human environment, and many others. Literacy is joining these issues, even if not in a spectacular way.

Firstly, the myth of the 99 % literacy seems to be gone, at least among experts. Specialized reliable surveys are still rare. However, in the case of the USA, Northcutt (1975) could conclude that in 1975 20 % of adult Americans were then "functionally incompetent" (could not perform basic operations such as reading/writing or simple calculations (see Copperman 1980). This figure included 8 % of higher income earners (over $18,000) and 40 % of those with incomes under $4,000. Copperman argues that in the mid-1960s, reading ability of American children actually began declining, compared with improvements in the immediately preceding period (Copperman 1980: 115). Our feeling is that the figures given by Copperman indicate a trend. If that is so, no single popular argument such as the spread of TV can account for the change of course. In order to understand this process, it will be necessary to survey the varying practical role of written language in work situations, as well as to consider the obvious change in the symbolic function of literacy: to be able to use the written language is no longer a symbol of belonging to a particular social class, while to be illiterate becomes more a practical problem than grounds for social stigma.

Still, the objective of universal literacy is retained. The current paradigm does not simply accept that a certain percentage of the population could remain without a sufficient command of the written language. This continues to be regarded as an undesirable situation that must be corrected.

Another novel feature of the contemporary approach is to look at literacy in terms of "functional literacy", "reading competence", or competence in the written language (cf. Coulmas' paper in this volume, also Slaughter 1982), rather than as the acquisition of a script, notably the alphabet. Concern with competence for interaction, rather than with the acquisition of inventories, is of course a general feature of Contemporary attitudes towards social facts.

In connection with a new attitude towards linguistic variation, emphasis is now shifting from acquiring literacy in the national language to acquiring literacy through the medium of one's native variety of language. This trend is conspicuous in the perception of literacy in the most highly developed countries. However, perception clearly precedes reality here, at least in the case of Australia. No more than a few lines are needed to enumerate Australian schools which have adopted this approach (Clyne 1982: 129).

For my argument, it is important to realize that the contemporary perception of literacy cannot be easily applied to the countries of the Third World which belong to the Early Modern type. It would be foolish to expect that these countries would finance programmes aimed at achieving 100 % literacy prior to establishing a socioeconomic structure that would require such objectives. The problem of "functional literacy" may be very different from the same problem in a developed country, and the immediate objectives may

come close to the traditional aim of learning the script. Caution is also called for with regard to literacy programmes in minority languages. As Coulmas has already pointed out, such programmes may run, in Third World nations, against the need for national unity, and each case must be carefully considered on its own merits.

To carry out a literacy project in a developing country in accordance with the Contemporary perception of the problem might agree with our general sociopolitical persuasion. Still, I wonder whether even an ideal socialist society, in which all elites had been abolished and which was totally committed to equality and social justice, could succeed in this task.

For one thing, let us realize that the contemporary society is by no means an ideal structure in which all problems would be solved in accordance with the perceptions of its most advanced strata.

Minorities

1. Traditional variation

The term *minority* will be employed to refer to all ethnic communities which speak a variety of language other than a variety of the "national language" of the country. The usage is etymologically incorrect because a "minority" defined in this way can actually be a "majority", but it has been too well established to be changed. Strictly speaking, a minority is a category which only develops in an Early Modern nation. The number of varieties and their functional distribution in traditional societies presented a much more complex picture. The language of religion and ideology was not necessarily also the written language of administration. The language of literature was frequently different from both of these varieties. The spoken language of administration might be still another variety. Khubchandani (1981: 19-20) gives examples of Indian rural communities in which at least eight very different groups of varieties are in daily use.

With regard to attitudes towards language and perception of linguistic variation in Traditional societies my understanding owes much to Khubchandani. Although we did know that ethnic groups of pre-Modern Europe often lived side by side in the same communities without much friction, Khubchandani's picture of a "grass-root linguistic pluralism" has most eloquently illustrated the situation which differs so much from the experience of most Western linguists. His linguistic portrait of India shows a situation in which a large number of varieties, used by different people, or by the same people for different purposes, happily coexist and where "switching of linguistic codes from native speech to Hindi/Urdu is similar to switching of styles (such as informal/formal) in monolingual situations" (Khubchandani 1981: 18). In his view, there is a strong trend in India to retain this pluralism and to reject attempts by the élites to elevate some of the varieties into the position of power – an act which automatically means that other varieties are relegated to the position of minority languages.

However, two questions of principle bear upon Khubchandani's picture of the Indian situation. Firstly, we must ask to what extent his pluralism is still typical for the India of today. Khubchandani's own discussions seem to indicate that this traditional arrangement has been significantly weakened and is being replaced by a hierarchical system, for which a negative evaluation of variation is characteristic.

Second, Khubchandani attempts to relate the Indian situation to some contemporary perceptions of Western societies. Undoubtedly, similarities such as the positive evaluation of linguistic variation are apparent. However, it can be questioned whether the surface similarity should be interpreted in the same way. The entire historical context is different. I would be delighted if the developing nations of today could avoid the traumatic experience of the European modernization process, but I am less confident than Khubchandani that this can be done.

The traditional nonevaluative perception may, however, survive in individual cases in the Early Modern (developing) stage. I wonder whether this does not contribute to an occasional lack of interest among ethnic minorities in the question of the national language in which literacy is offered. In such cases the new national language is perhaps perceived as *just another* functional variety within the pluralistic system, not as *the dominant* variety of the forthcoming period. When the mistake is discovered, it may be too late to take counteraction.

2. Early Modern variation

The Early Modern period is the era of industrialization and the establishment of a sociopolitical structure which is to support the industrial economic base. As far as linguistic variation is concerned, some of the varieties of the pre-Modern systems are reduced. For instance the H-standards, which characterize what C. A. Ferguson has called *diglossia,* receive their final blow. On the other hand, one variety is now elevated to the position of the "national language", and within this language a considerable number of sub-varieties (the language of modern administration, law, science, technology, etc) develop. This new "national language" becomes the sole vehicle of the unifi-

cation of the national networks and of social development. It also serves as the sole vehicle of education and literacy.

There are, of course, examples of developing societies with two or more "national languages", both in 19th century Europe and among the present-day developing nations. The Austrian Empire, prior to 1918, and contemporary Singapore, with English, Chinese, Malay, and Tamil as its "national languages", belong to this category. However, even in these societies the hierarchical arrangement among the "national languages" exists, *de facto* if not *de jure* (see Platt and Weber 1980: 39 on the position of English and other languages of education in Singapore); a large number of other varieties which have not made it to the "national language" are simply excluded.

In the case of Early Modern Japan (mid-19th century till after WWII) the assimilation policies of the mainstream of society were in no way less drastic than those we know from Early Modern Europe. Minorities such as the Ainu or, after 1911, the Koreans were emphatically suppressed, with the Ainu being almost totally assimilated and the Koreans, too strong for assimilation, reestablishing their national independence after 1945.

It is fair to admit that national unity in this period is a fragile flower which needs gentle care. It is equally necessary to realize that the leaders of the more powerful ethnic groups do attempt to secure as strong a territorial and population basis as possible; and while pursuing their policies, do not stop at any form of oppression.

The public perception of variation is twofold. Representatives of the national establishment evaluate negatively any competing variety; members of minority groups, to the extent that they are capable of resistance, fight back. What happened in Europe towards the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of the present century is now happening in the Third World. History repeats itself, not exactly, but to a recognizable degree. There are special cases and new features due to differences in the international environment. However, the overall trend is necessarily the same.

3. Modern variation

In a Modern Society the mainstream ethnic group has established itself, at the level of economic and political interaction, beyond any doubt. Some of the deviant minority groups have been almost totally destroyed, at least as linguistic entities (the Ainu in Japan), some fatally weakened and silenced (the Sorbs in Germany), others have formed separate national states. Variation and conflict still exist, even if to the mainstream group it appears to be of little significance. The ideology of nationalism is not needed any more and

recedes to the background. The Western world of the first half of this century up to the 1960s and contemporary Japan (since the 1960s) are typical examples of Modern nations.

The Modern period sees the zenith of the flourishing of the "national languages" which are actively "cultivated" but not radically reformed. Emphasis is not on change (as in the preceding period), but on mere elaboration and maintenance of the status quo.

In 1980 Japan had well over half a million Koreans, over 50 thousand people of Chinese parentage, and it is estimated that approximately 30 thousand people considered themselves Ainu. Yet, the myth of the total ethnic homogeneity of the country maintained an absolute dominance in the public image. Discrimination against the Koreans has not been based on any explicitly formulated ideologies, but has remained widespread. There has been no official support for activities of any of the mentioned groups, nor for any facilities for education in their ethnic language.

This situation reminds us, among other things, of the case of Australia in the 1950s and 1960s. Although no reliable data are available for this period regarding the size of minority communities, on the basis of later figures (Clyne 1976) it can be inferred that approximately one-third of Australia's population were immigrants or children of immigrants, or Australian Aborigines, close to half of them from non-English-speaking backgrounds. Still, the official story, believed by almost everyone, was that of a basically homogeneous country, in which no minority problems existed.

Although there were few active discrimination policies (apart from cases such as excluding citizens with non-English backgrounds from recruitment into the Australian diplomatic service), the immigrant minorities were *de facto* the subject of discrimination in many forms (cf. Clyne 1982, p. 117). The attitude of the mainstream public was inimical to "foreign" languages. Speaking a language other than English in a public place could evoke angry comments. Immigrant children tried to hide at school the fact that they spoke a "foreign" language at home. Some limited facilities for learning English were available, but the teaching of the languages of immigrants was almost nonexistent.

In other words, at the level of discussions, theories, and organized policies, the Modern period shows a passive attitude to language variation. The hierarchical order in the society has already been established and needs no reinforcement of this kind. On the other hand, in actual social interaction, variation receives strong negative marking. It is interesting to note that this marking is mutual and universal: immigrants are held in contempt by the mainstream population, while they themselves despise the mainstream groups as well as other immigrants.

4. Contemporary variation

The situation started changing in the USA and other countries of the developed world in the 1960s. This is when the power of various sidestream groups in the society grew to such an extent that they could not be overlooked any more. The pendulum swung. To be different became the "in" thing. The picture that society held of itself could not but follow these new developments.

One warning is appropriate here. When social scientists spoke of modernization in the 1950s and early 1960s they often assumed that "modern" stood for "correct" or "perfect". For them the world was moving towards the aim of a "modern" society, beyond which no further improvements could be envisaged. Today we can look at modernization and Modern societies through more critical eyes, with an emphasis on their limitations and failures. The mistaken self-perception should not be repeated in the case of the Contemporary society. It must not be looked upon as an example of a perfect rational structure in which all problems have been solved and which represents the ultimate word in the organization of human society.

In the Australia of the 1970s, ethnic minorities were rediscovered. The fact that Australia is a multicultural and multilingual society is today a fact beyond any doubt for anyone. Yet the relationship between the mainstream and the sidestreams is not one of equality. The policy of assimilation has formally been abandoned, but in practice may of the assimilation processes continue to be in force. Budgets have been made available for the teaching of English to newcomers and for the teaching of ethnic languages. A large number of minority languages have been accepted as examination subjects for entry into universities. The symbolic value of these measures is considerable, but the teaching itself remains underdeveloped. Children who speak an ethnic language have come to be proud of being multilingual, even if there are differences between those whose ethnic language is Japanese (a high prestige language in present-day Australia) and those who speak an Italian dialect at home. Attitudes of the mainstream part of the community in daily interaction have improved to a considerable extent, but the fear of a possible future backlash exists.

The USA was admittedly first in developing the Contemporary system. The changes in Europe seem to be much slower, and the system is still very weak in Japan. Since its growth is dependent upon the absence of the danger of separatism and the availability of a part of the national income for redistribution to the minority groups, I do not expect that similar developments could be wholeheartedly pursued by those governments of the Third World which are not in a position to take the risk and to accept the expenditures.

Social scientists of the Contemporary world are proud of their new perception which acknowledges the existence of variation and social conflict, and do not hesitate to recommend it to the attention of their colleagues in the Third World countries. As long as this marks the beginning of a discussion, no objection can be raised. However, care must be taken in the case of attempts which aim simply at a transplantation of the Contemporary perception. This is where doubts concerning the Contemporary system are felt most strongly.

Are we absolutely sure that the retention of all minority languages will better the world? Why should this be so? Are we sure that children are not disadvantaged when they have to start their education in one language and shift later into another one? Are we doing enough to ensure that multilingualism within our own communities is based on a consistent multicultural policy? Which of the negative features of the Modern paradigm have not yet been affected? Is this resistance the result of change factors or does it originate in some inadequacies of our own paradigm?

As in the case of literacy, there should be no question of promulgating our current perceptions as the universal truth. A dialogue is necessary. Its result should be not merely to institute policies in nations of the Third World, but also to make sure that the Western societies are doing their best under the most favourable conditions in which they themselves operate.

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Index

Index of Names

Alisjahbana, S.T. 98
Anderson, A.B. 99
Apronti, E.O. 26
Apte, M.L. 107
Bamgboṣe, A. 10
Baugh, A.C. 78, 98
Bhola, H.S. 8
Brandstetter, R. 98
Calvet, L.-J. 11, 13
Chang, B.S. 71
Chang, K. 63, 69, 71
Chao, Y. 69
Chen, T. 66
Cipolla, C.M. 118, 120
Clyne, M.G. 115, 121, 125
Copperman, D. 121
Coulmas, F. 3, 13, 39, 117, 121, 122
Das Gupta, J. 108
Dempwolff, O. 98
Denteh, A.C. 26
Desheriev, Y.S. 22, 26
De Silva, M.W.S. 32
Deutsch, K.W. 11
Downing, J.A. 98
Dreyer, J.T. 63, 67
Edmondson, J.A. 7
Elson, D.G. 29
Ferguson, C.A. 123
Fingar, T. 69
Finnegan, R. 30
Fishman, J.A. 110
Fraser, J.O. 72
Fu, M. 69, 70
Genghis Khan 72
Gleitman, L.R. 31, 35
Golebiowski, J. VIII
Goody, J. 6, 14, 29, 116, 118, 120
Graff, H.H. 6
Grimes, E.F. 8, 9
Gudschinsky, S.C. 13
Hagan, K.O. 26, 27
Hatta 82
Haugen, E. 100
He, Z. 72
Hummel, C. 27
Hyer, P. 72
Hymes, D.H. 102
Iskandar, T. 97
Iyengar, K.R.S. 111
Jagchid, S. 72
Jeng, H. 71
Jones, M.G. 30
Kabirdas 30
Khubchandani, L.M. 116, 122, 123
Lenneberg, E. 31
Leonard, S.A. 98
Lewis, E.G. 107
Li, F. 63, 69, 71
Li, P.J. 71
Lieberman, P. 31
Liu, H. 65
Ma, X. 69
Marshall, D. 30
McLuhan, M. 6, 14, 29, 32
Meggitt, M. 30
Misra, B.G. 108
Mushakoji, K. VIII
Neustupný, J.V. 16, 102, 115, 117
Nieuwenhuis 50
Nomoto, K. 118, 120
Northcutt, N. 121
Nyerere, J. 24
Omolewa, M. 27
Ophuysen, C.A.v. 80, 83, 85
Oxenham, J. 5
Pattanayak, D.P. 99
Pietersen, L. 100
Platt, J. 115, 124
Poerwadarminta, W.J.S. 85, 97
Ravidas 30
Rozin, P. 31, 35
Sah, P.F. 33
Singh, J. 43
Singh, P. 43
Slaughter, M.M. 117, 121
Smock, D.R. 26