

LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY AS REGIONAL CAPITAL: AI-DRIVEN MULTILINGUAL POLICY IN ASEAN

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Abstract. The language policy in ASEAN is a significant concern, primarily because of the dependence on English as the sole working language as stipulated in Article 34 of the ASEAN Charter. This classification enhances administrative clarity but has also exacerbated disparities in regional involvement, raising concerns over equitable participation and linguistic rights. Variations in English proficiency among member states illustrate wider sociolinguistic hierarchies that influence access to institutional processes and regional governance. In contrast, the EU has institutionalized a comprehensive regime that demonstrates the structural advantages of coordinated language governance, ASEAN scholarship has not yet systematically integrated sociolinguistic theory, legal analysis, and AI-driven technologies into a comparable institutional framework suited to ASEAN's consensus-based model. This paper rooted in sociolinguistic theories that view linguistic diversity as a form of regional capital, proposes an AI-driven multilingual governance framework for ASEAN through AI-based multilingual tools for translation and interpretation. This study utilizes qualitative legal research and document-based comparative analysis to investigate ASEAN's and EU's language governance framework. A range of scholarly works and policy documents are reviewed to evaluate institutional flexibility and operational limitations. The result shows that ASEAN cannot immediately replicate the EU's fully institutionalized multilingual framework politically or economically. AI-driven translation and interpretation systems can address ASEAN's institutional gap in multilingual coordination. These technologies can enable multilingual access, scalability, and potential cost savings while keeping English as the core language. The study shows that ASEAN's present structure and a right-based, digitally aided multilingual framework can promote more inclusive regional integration.

Keywords: *ASEAN, language policy, multilingualism, sociolinguistics, AI translation*

Introduction

ASEAN, as a regional organization in Southeast Asia, is built upon three main pillars: the Political-Security Pillar, the Economic Pillar, and the Socio-Cultural Pillar (ASEAN Secretariat, ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint of 2025). The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Pillar plays a vital role in strengthening regional social cohesion through cooperation in the fields of education, culture, science, and people-to-people interactions. This pillar positions cultural and linguistic diversity as a shared asset that forms the foundation of the region's identity. In practice, ASEAN is one of the regions with the highest levels of linguistic diversity in the world. Indonesia alone has more than 700 regional languages according to Ethnologue data (Ethnologue, 2024), while other member states also have distinct national languages such as Malay in Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam, Thai in Thailand, Vietnamese in Vietnam, Tagalog in the Philippines, and Khmer in Cambodia. This linguistic diversity reflects the region's

sociocultural richness while also presenting a unique challenge in the increasingly intensive process of regional integration.

Nevertheless, current institutional communication practices in the region remain heavily centered on a single working language. Article 34 of the 2008 ASEAN Charter explicitly states that the working language of ASEAN is English (ASEAN, 2008). The use of a single working language does indeed facilitate administrative coordination among member states, but at the same time it has significant sociolinguistic consequences. Reliance on English creates a participation gap between countries with high levels of English proficiency and those with relatively low proficiency. Data from the EF English Proficiency Index 2025 reveals a disparity in English proficiency across the ASEAN region. Countries such as Malaysia and the Philippines are classified in the high proficiency category, while Vietnam falls into the moderate category. In contrast, Indonesia is categorized as low, and Myanmar, Thailand, and Cambodia are classified as very low proficiency. Singapore is not included in the EF EPI dataset, as it is an English-speaking country, making it methodologically incomparable with other ASEAN countries where English is primarily learned as a foreign language (EF Education First, 2025). This situation has the potential to create inequalities in access to information, participation in regional discourse, and public engagement in the ASEAN integration process.

Table 1. *English First English Proficiency Index (EF EPI) Scores of ASEAN Countries.*

Country	EF EPI Score	Proficiency Level
Malaysia	581	High
Philippines	569	High
Vietnam	500	Moderate
Indonesia	471	Low
Myanmar	444	Very Low
Cambodia	402	Very Low
Thailand	390	Very Low

Source: EF Education First (2025).

The table above shows a disparity in English proficiency among ASEAN member states (EF Education First, 2025). Countries with lower proficiency levels are likely to face communication barriers in regional forums as well as in accessing policy documents and strategic information. Yet, in various official documents, ASEAN has reaffirmed its commitment to inclusivity and respect for cultural and linguistic diversity as part of building an inclusive and people-centered ASEAN (people centered ASEAN) (ASEAN, 2015). This imbalance highlights a paradox between the principle of diversity upheld by ASEAN and the language policy practices that tend toward monolingualism within the region's institutional governance.

Contrary to ASEAN, which has established a single working language, the European Union (EU) has developed a language governance model that explicitly recognizes linguistic diversity as a cornerstone of regional integration. The EU currently has 24 official languages recognized within its institutional framework, meaning that all legal documents, policies, and institutional deliberations should be available in all of these languages. To operate this system, the EU has built a massive language infrastructure. EU institutions employ approximately 4,300 full-time translators and 800 full-time interpreters to ensure the translation of documents and the provision of simultaneous interpretation services during official meetings (EC, 2022). Consequently, managing this multilingual system entails significant costs, with estimated annual expenditures reaching approximately US\$1.4 billion. On the other hand, this investment is viewed as

part of the EU's institutional commitment to ensuring equal access for all member state citizens to use their native languages when interacting with regional institutions.

Along with the development of digital technology, the European Union has also begun integrating artificial intelligence as part of its multilingual management strategy. The European Commission has developed a neural machine translation system called eTranslation, an AI-based platform capable of automatically translating text into various official EU languages. This system is designed to support public administration, government institutions, and organizations operating in multilingual environments (EC, 2022). The use of this technology demonstrates that language management no longer relies solely on human resources but can also be strengthened through digital innovations capable of enhancing the efficiency and scalability of translation services. Thus, the EU's experience demonstrates that regional integration need not sacrifice linguistic diversity but can be managed through a combination of robust multilingual policies and AI-based technological support. This approach offers an important comparative perspective for ASEAN in considering the potential for developing more inclusive language policies within the regional integration process.

In recent years, language policy issues in the ASEAN region have begun to receive attention in academic studies, particularly regarding efforts to strengthen regional identity and improve the effectiveness of communication among member states. A number of studies have discussed the possibility of developing a regional language that is more representative of Southeast Asian societies. One relevant study was conducted, which examined the feasibility of Indonesian as one of ASEAN's official languages by highlighting historical factors, linguistic proximity, and the cultural influence the language holds in the region. The study indicates that Indonesian has the potential to serve as a regional lingua franca due to its linguistic roots shared with Malay and the widespread distribution of its speakers across Southeast Asia. However, most existing studies still focus on historical, cultural-political, and linguistic diplomacy approaches, resulting in discussions regarding ASEAN language policy tending to be limited to debates over the selection of a specific language as the regional language. This approach has not fully accounted for the complexity of linguistic diversity in ASEAN, which encompasses hundreds of local languages as well as various national languages that serve as symbols of member states' identities.

In the perspective of sociolinguistics, monolingual language policies have the potential to create symbolic inequalities in cross-national communication. Pierre Bourdieu explains that language is not merely a tool of communication, but also a form of linguistic capital that reflects the social position and symbolic power of its speakers within a social field (Bourdieu, 1991). With English designated as the sole working language of ASEAN, as stipulated in Article 34 of the ASEAN Charter, the national and regional languages of the region have indirectly lost their space for representation within the regional institutional framework. This situation highlights a gap between ASEAN's principle of respecting cultural diversity and its institutional communication practices, which tend to be monolingual. Building on this context, this study offers a different approach by combining traditional language policy analysis with the development of digital technology. In contrast to previous studies that focused on selecting a single regional language, this research explores the possibility of developing a multilingual system in ASEAN inspired by the European Union model, while leveraging artificial intelligence technology to reduce translation costs and cross-linguistic communication barriers. This approach is expected to provide a new

perspective on how linguistic diversity in ASEAN can be managed more inclusively in the era of digital transformation.

This study aims to formulate a more inclusive language policy framework for ASEAN in the context of global digital transformation. Specifically, this study explores the possibility of developing a multilingual system within ASEAN's institutional governance by considering the addition of several regional working languages alongside English, which is currently designated as the official working language under Article 34 of the ASEAN Charter. In addition, this study also assesses the potential for utilizing artificial intelligence technology, particularly machine translation systems, as supporting tools to address cost and complexity challenges in the implementation of multilingual policies.

Materials and Methods

This study employed a qualitative approach using document analysis and comparative policy analysis. Document analysis referred to a systematic procedure for reviewing and evaluating documents as sources of research data (Bowen, 2009). The research data consisted of primary and secondary data. Primary data consisted of official documents, such as the ASEAN Charter and European Union language policies, which served as the main focus of the analysis. Secondary data, on the other hand, were drawn from scholarly literature used to support the analytical framework and data interpretation. The data were analyzed through qualitative content analysis and comparative analysis of the collected documents. Relevant documents were selected and grouped into several key themes, such as language policies, institutional frameworks, and multilingualism practices. Next, the data were analyzed comparatively to identify the differences, strengths, and limitations of language policy models in ASEAN and the European Union. The results of this analysis were then used to explore opportunities for developing more inclusive language policies, particularly through the use of artificial intelligence to support multilingual governance in ASEAN.

Results and Discussion

Comparative analysis of the ASEAN and European Union Language Models

The European Union Model: Institutionalized multilingualism

The European Union serves as a comprehensive example of a language governance model that enshrines linguistic diversity as a constitutional principle within regional integration. This commitment is not merely declarative but is firmly embedded in a binding legal framework and operationalized through a massive institutional infrastructure. The legal foundation of multilingualism in the European Union rests on three main instruments. First, Council Regulation No. 1/1958, the earliest and most fundamental regulation, establishes that each official language of a member state may serve as an official and working language of the European Union institutions. This regulation ensures that all member states have equal linguistic standing before regional institutions. Second, Article 342 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) states that the rules regarding the languages used by the institutions of the European Union are determined by the Council through regulations adopted unanimously. This article grants the Council of the European Union the constitutional

authority to establish the institutional language regime. Third, Article 3 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) explicitly affirms that the European Union respects the cultural and linguistic diversity of its member states, thereby establishing linguistic protection as a core value of European integration. The European Union currently recognizes 24 official languages, all of which should be used in the legislative process, legal documents, and institutional communications. This means that every European Union regulation, directive, and decision must be available in all 24 official languages, making translation and interpretation systems the operational foundation of the framework.

In order to support this system, the European Union has built a massive language infrastructure. EU institutions employ approximately 4,300 full-time translators and 800 full-time interpreters, making it one of the largest language service operations in the world (EC, 2022). The financial implications of this commitment are significant, with estimated annual expenditures reaching approximately US\$1.4 billion. The European Union has strategically integrated artificial intelligence technology as part of its multilingual management system. A key milestone in this effort was the launch of eTranslation in 2017, an AI-based neural machine translation service capable of translating text into all 24 official languages of the European Union, as well as several non-official languages such as Arabic, Mandarin, Japanese, Russian, Turkish, and Ukrainian (Skorupa-Wulczyńska and Zannina, 2026). In addition to eTranslation, the European Union has developed a suite of eLangTech tools (speech-to-text, eSummary, eBriefing, and Website Translation Tool) accessible to public institutions, academics, and NGOs. The implementation of the AI Legislative Assistant in the European Parliament has even been shown to reduce the time required for cross-lingual review of legislative texts by more than 60% (EC, 2022).

Multilingualism in the European Union is more than just an institutional mandate; it reflects the democratic aspirations of its citizens. Approximately 86% of Europeans support the mastery of more than one language, and 84% believe that regional and minority languages need to be protected (Skorupa-Wulczyńska and Zannina, 2026). The strengths of this model lie in two main aspects: inclusivity, whereby every citizen of a member state has equal access to institutional processes in their native language; and democratic legitimacy, whereby recognition of each official language reflects recognition of the national identity of each member state.

The ASEAN Model: Monolingual pragmatism and its consequences

Fundamentally different from the European Union's approach, ASEAN's language policy reflects what might be termed monolingual pragmatism: a policy choice that prioritizes administrative efficiency over linguistic inclusivity. Article 34 of the 2008 ASEAN Charter explicitly designates English as the sole working language of the organization, applicable to all official communications, policy documents, negotiation processes, and institutional forums under the auspices of ASEAN (ASEAN, 2008). Administratively, this choice can be understood as a pragmatic response to the region's linguistic complexity. However, this choice carries far deeper sociolinguistic implications that cannot be ignored.

Disparities in participation.

A direct consequence of this monolingual policy is the emergence of disparities in participation among ASEAN member states. Data from the EF English Proficiency

Index 2025 indicates uneven levels of English proficiency across the region, with only a few countries, such as Malaysia and the Philippines, reaching high proficiency, while others, including Indonesia, Myanmar, Thailand, and Cambodia, remain at low to very low levels. Delegates from countries with lower proficiency may face obstacles in effectively advocating for their national interests during policy negotiations, drafting and responding to official documents, and accessing strategic information distributed through official ASEAN channels.

Access to information and justice

All ASEAN policy documents, regional legal frameworks, and public information are available in English. For communities in countries with low proficiency levels, access to this information is structurally limited. Ishak (2023) notes that the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration (AHRD), while formally prohibiting discrimination based on language (Article 2), does not explicitly recognize the linguistic rights of minorities nor provide binding protection mechanisms.

Erosion of local linguistic capital

From Pierre Bourdieu's (1991) perspective, language is a form of symbolic capital that reflects the social position and power of its speakers. When English is established as the sole official language in ASEAN's regional governance, the national and local languages of the region indirectly undergo symbolic devaluation within the institutional context. This situation presents a striking paradox: on the one hand, the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 affirms a commitment to inclusivity and a people-centered community vision (ASEAN, 2015); on the other hand, its institutional communication practices consistently privilege a single language that is not the mother tongue of the majority of the region's residents.

Table 2. Comparative overview of ASEAN and European Union Language policy models.

Dimensions	European Union	ASEAN
Policy model	Institutionalized multilingualism, with all official languages of member states recognized as equal	Monolingual pragmatism, with English as the sole working language
Legal basis	Council Regulation No. 1/1958, Article 342 TFEU, and Article 3 TEU	Article 34 of the ASEAN Charter (2008)
Number of official languages	24 official languages	one working language (English) across ten member states with numerous national languages
Human Resources	~4,300 translators + 800 full-time interpreters (European Commission, 2022)	No systematic centralized institutional translation unit
Infrastructure	~US\$1.4 billion per year for language services	Significantly lower
Operating costs	eTranslation (neural MT, 2017), AI Legislative Assistant (EU Commission, 2024)	No formally integrated AI-based translation system currently exists at the ASEAN institutional level.
AI technology integration		
Linguistic inclusivity	Equal access for all member state citizens in their respective native languages	Access disparities based on English proficiency
Protection of local linguistic capital	National and regional languages are recognized; 84% of Europeans support the protection of minority languages (Eurobarometer, 2024)	National and local languages lack representation in regional institutional governance
Democratic legitimacy	High; multilingualism is seen as a reflection of national identity and citizens' rights	Limited; the principle of non-intervention restricts the drive for language policy reform at the regional level
Architectural Model	Supranational; language policies are legally binding for all member states	Intergovernmental, consensus-based; no legally binding linguistic obligations at the regional level

Synthesis: Why replicating the European Union Model is not feasible for ASEAN

The European Union's experience in managing linguistic diversity offers valuable lessons, but a more in-depth comparative analysis reveals that directly transplanting that model into the ASEAN context faces fundamental structural obstacles. There are at least three dimensions of constraints that make the replication of the EU's multilingual model impossible for ASEAN to implement immediately.

Political constraints: The principles of non-intervention and consensus in ASEAN

The European Union's model of multilingualism operates within a supranational framework that allows for legally binding linguistic obligations. In contrast, ASEAN operates based on the principles of consensus and non-intervention enshrined in Article 2 of the ASEAN Charter, which guarantees respect for the sovereignty and independence of each member state (ASEAN, 2008). This institutional architecture is inherently incompatible with the implementation of a top-down, binding multilingual regime. Ishak (2023) notes that ASEAN's principle of non-interference has effectively limited the recognition and realization of minority rights in practice, including linguistic rights. Given the differences in national interests and linguistic political sensitivities among member states, achieving full consensus for such reforms poses a significant political challenge. This complexity is compounded by ASEAN's dual nature as an organization in transition between the "ASEAN Way", an informal approach based on consensus and flexibility and its commitment to becoming a rule-based organization following the 2008 Charter. On the one hand, the ASEAN Charter binds member states to a formal legal framework; on the other hand, decision-making practices remain heavily influenced by the principles of non-intervention and consensus, which avoid supranational obligations (Acharya, 2014). In this context, top-down and legally binding language policy reforms would be difficult to accept as they are seen as conflicting with the principle of sovereignty, which is highly valued by member states.

Economic and capacity constraints

The implementation of the European Union's multilingual system requires an investment of approximately US\$1.4 billion per year for translation and interpretation services alone, supported by more than 5,000 language professionals. This scale reflects the economic capacity of the European Union as an economic bloc with a combined GDP of over US\$18 trillion (EC, 2022). The ASEAN context is vastly different. ASEAN is characterized by significant economic heterogeneity, with substantial disparities in GDP per capita among its member states. Most developing countries in ASEAN lack the fiscal capacity to bear the costs of multilingual operations on a comparable scale, even within a framework of shared funding.

Linguistic landscape differences

Southeast Asia is one of the world's hotspots for linguistic diversity, with more than 800 indigenous languages spread across the region (Zhu and Shen, 2025). Most of these languages are under-resourced: they lack adequate written corpora and have almost no sufficient data to train modern machine learning-based AI systems. Skorupa-Wulczyńska and Zannina (2025) note that even within the far more established context of the European Union, under-resourced languages still face systematic challenges in the development of language AI technologies. These challenges will be compounded in the ASEAN context. However, amidst the complex linguistic landscape of Southeast

Asia, there exists a cluster of closely related languages with high mutual intelligibility: Indonesian, Malay, and Brunei Darussalam. These three countries have regularly held meetings through the Brunei Darussalam-Indonesia-Malaysia Language Council (MABBIM) since 1985 to standardize Malay/Indonesian vocabulary, particularly in academic, technical, and administrative domains. This forum has produced a consensus on new terms that are understandable to speakers of all three languages, creating a shared linguistic foundation that encompasses more than 300 million speakers in the ASEAN region.

The Malay language has the advantage of a consistent orthographic system; what is written is what is spoken (a phonetic writing system); which significantly facilitates learning, teaching, and the development of Natural Language Processing (NLP) technologies such as speech-to-text and text-to-speech (Sneddon, 2003). This linguistic similarity has proven to have tangible practical implications: many Indonesian workers feel more comfortable working in Malaysia compared to other ASEAN countries because the shared language reduces communication barriers in both daily life and professional settings. This fact demonstrates that while the ASEAN region exhibits extremely high linguistic diversity, there is also potential for regional languages to serve as a lingua franca for the majority of the region's population. Hence, the complexity of the ASEAN linguistic landscape does not mean that a multilingual approach is impossible; rather, it requires a selective and phased strategy, starting with languages that have a broad speaker base and relatively adequate digital infrastructure. This reality opens opportunities for the development of alternative models that leverage artificial intelligence technology as a solution to bridge the gap between multilingual idealism and the fiscal and political constraints in the ASEAN region.

An AI-Based Multilingual Governance Model for ASEAN

ASEAN's reliance on English as the working language, as stipulated in the ASEAN Charter, has long been viewed as a tool for administrative efficiency. However, in practice, this policy has also resulted in structural exclusion based on unequal linguistic proficiency among member states. This situation reinforces a sociolinguistic hierarchy that limits participation in regional decision-making processes. Unlike the European Union, where multilingualism has been comprehensively institutionalized, ASEAN faces structural limitations stemming from the principles of consensus and non-intervention. Therefore, an approach to transforming language policy in ASEAN cannot be achieved through the transplantation of existing models but requires contextual and adaptive innovation. In this context, this study proposes an AI-based multilingual governance model as an alternative solution that bridges the need for efficiency and inclusivity without disrupting institutional stability. This model is built upon normative principles and three main pillars: technological infrastructure, legal-institutional integration, and capacity building.

Guiding principles

The following principles were derived through a comparison of various approaches, such as legal frameworks, sociolinguistics, and AI technology.

Principle of complementarity

The principle of complementarity stems from the normative reality that English has been established as the official working language in the ASEAN Charter (ASEAN, 2008). This provision provides a strong legal basis for the use of English in official ASEAN communications, so any effort at language policy reform must take into account the stability of this norm. Nonetheless, a number of studies indicate that a monolingual model based on a dominant language tends to result in structural exclusion. According to Grin (2003), language policies that rely solely on a single working language have the potential to create inequalities in access to political and economic participation. In a global context, a complementary, rather than a substitute; multilingual approach is more widely used, particularly in organizations lacking the capacity to manage full multilingualism, such as the European Union (De Swaan, 2001). Empirical data from the European Union indicates that the costs of multilingual translation and interpretation can reach approximately €1 billion per year (European Commission). This reflects the significant financial burden of a fully multilingual system. Therefore, for ASEAN, a more realistic approach is to use AI as a complementary tool that expands language access without replacing English (Dunlevy et al., 2006). Consequently, the principle of complementarity is based on a combination of: normative commitment to the ASEAN Charter, empirical findings regarding the costs of full multilingualism, and global practices in language policy.

The principle of gradualism

The principle of gradualism is rooted in the institutional character of ASEAN, known as the “ASEAN Way,” which emphasizes consensus, non-intervention, and an evolutionary approach to decision-making (Acharya, 1997). On the contrary, ASEAN has evolved through an incremental process, not through drastic structural reforms (Acharya, 2014). This approach aligns with the public policy theory proposed by Charles E. Lindblom, who argued that policy changes in complex systems tend to occur through “muddling through” or gradual adjustment. In the ASEAN context, this gradual approach becomes increasingly relevant given the differences in political interests and economic capacities among member states. Empirically, various ASEAN integration initiatives, such as the ASEAN Economic Community, also demonstrate a pattern of gradual implementation that requires a long time to achieve full consensus (ASEAN, 2015). This suggests that language policy reforms, particularly those involving new technologies such as AI, should follow the same pattern.

The principle of inclusivity

The principle of inclusivity stems from empirical findings regarding disparities in English proficiency across the ASEAN region. Data from the EF English Proficiency Index 2025 reveals uneven levels of English proficiency among ASEAN countries, with Malaysia and the Philippines classified in the high proficiency category, while Indonesia is categorized as low, and Myanmar, Thailand, and Cambodia fall into the very low proficiency category. In this context, Singapore holds a distinct position due to its use of English as an official language, and therefore cannot be directly compared with other countries in the region where English is primarily learned as a foreign language. This disparity creates what sociolinguistic studies refer to as a linguistic hierarchy; a social structure in which proficiency in a particular language determines access to power and resources. Pierre Bourdieu, in his work “Language and Symbolic

Power,” asserts that language is not merely a tool of communication but a form of symbolic capital that influences the social position of individuals and groups. In the ASEAN context, the dominance of English has the potential to limit the participation of communities lacking proficiency in the language, thereby reinforcing exclusion in regional governance processes. UNESCO (2016) study also indicates that the use of mother tongues in accessing public information can enhance participation and policy effectiveness.

The principle of flexibility

The principle of flexibility is based on the reality that ASEAN countries have vastly different levels of technological readiness. Data from the International Telecommunication Union (2022) reveals significant gaps in the digital readiness index between developed countries such as Singapore and developing countries in the region. Within the framework of regional governance, this situation calls for an approach that is not one-size-fits-all, but rather adaptive to each country’s capacity. This aligns with the principle of flexible integration, which is widely used in regional organizations to accommodate differences in development levels (Schimmelfenning et al. 2015). Theoretically, this flexible approach is also supported by the concept of network governance, which emphasizes horizontal coordination and local adaptation, as explained by Dunleavy et al. (2006) within the framework of digital-era governance.

The principle of linguistic legitimacy

The principle of linguistic legitimacy stems from the understanding that language functions not only as a tool of communication but also as an instrument of legitimacy within power structures and governance. In regional contexts such as ASEAN, the use of a particular language in decision-making processes is not neutral; rather, it reflects the distribution of symbolic power among member states. Theoretically, this concept is rooted in the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1991), who argued that language constitutes a form of symbolic capital that determines who possesses the authority to speak and be heard in the public sphere. In recent developments, current research indicates that linguistic inequality occurs not only in social spaces but is also reproduced within digital technology systems and Artificial Intelligence. A study by Sumiluh et al. (2024) demonstrates that the dominance of certain languages in AI systems reinforces global inequality and creates new forms of linguistic hierarchy within the digital realm. Furthermore, linguistic legitimacy is also linked to the principles of fairness and inclusivity in global AI governance. In its Global Roadmap for Multilingualism in the Digital Era, UNESCO emphasizes that equitable language representation in digital technologies is a prerequisite for inclusive participation and policy legitimacy in the digital age (UNESCO, 2025).

In international practice, organizations such as the European Union continue to uphold multilingualism policies as an effort to maintain institutional legitimacy through equal language access (EC, 2022). However, technological advancements suggest that AI-based approaches can serve as a more efficient alternative to achieve the same objectives. Through accurate, real-time AI-based translation systems, actors from diverse linguistic backgrounds can participate more equitably in regional forums. This not only expands access to communication but also strengthens procedural legitimacy and participatory justice in ASEAN governance.

AI technology infrastructure

The development of artificial intelligence (AI) is inextricably linked to the evolution of computing technology and the need to automate information processing. Historically, AI in the field of language evolved from rule-based systems in the 1950s–1980s, to statistical machine translation in the 1990s, and finally transformed into deep learning in the last decade (Hutchins, 2014). A significant breakthrough occurred with the introduction of the transformer architecture, which enabled natural language processing (NLP) to be performed in a more contextual and efficient manner. This model became the foundation for the development of Neural Machine Translation (NMT), which is now widely used across various global translation platforms. With increasing computational capacity and data availability, AI is no longer limited to a single language but has evolved into a system capable of processing multiple languages simultaneously (Kurniawan et al., 2026). This marks a transition from monolingual AI to multilingual AI, which is particularly relevant in the context of regional governance frameworks such as ASEAN. Multilingual AI is an artificial intelligence system designed to understand, translate, and generate more than one language within a single integrated model. This development is driven by the global need to overcome language barriers in international communication, trade, and governance. According to UNESCO (2025), language-based AI technology holds significant potential for improving access to public information and expanding social participation, particularly in regions with high linguistic diversity. In this context, multilingual AI serves not only as a technical tool but also as an instrument of social inclusion.

Furthermore, the development of models such as multilingual transformers enables cross-lingual knowledge transfer, allowing low-resource languages to benefit from larger language datasets. This is particularly relevant for ASEAN, which has hundreds of languages with uneven levels of digitization. In practice, multilingual AI can be classified into several main types that have distinct yet complementary functions: Neural Machine Translation (NMT), Real-Time Speech Translation, Multilingual Large Language Models, Multilingual Data Platforms.

Legal and institutional integration

The article 34 of the ASEAN (2008) states that “the working language of ASEAN shall be English.” This provision is often interpreted as the basis for the exclusive use of English in all ASEAN institutional activities. However, from an international law perspective, the approach to interpretation is not always literal, but also contextual and teleological. Based on the principles of interpretation in international treaty law as set forth in the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties (UN, 1969), a provision should be interpreted by taking into account the object and purpose of the treaty, the institutional context, and developments in implementation practices. In the context of ASEAN, the primary objective of the ASEAN Charter is to promote effective and inclusive regional integration. As such, the use of English as the working language should be understood as a tool for administrative efficiency, not as an absolute barrier to the use of other languages. Thus, it can be understood that the integration of AI enabling multilingual translation and interpretation can be positioned as a facilitative mechanism that does not alter the status of English but rather expands access to it.

According to Aust (2013), one approach that can be applied to interpret multilingual language governance using AI technology is through the approach of legal adaptability. Through this approach, it can be seen that amending the ASEAN Charter requires full consensus from all member states, which is politically difficult to achieve. In international law theory, there is also the concept of the living instrument doctrine, which allows a norm to be interpreted dynamically in accordance with the times and practical needs. This approach has been widely used in various international legal regimes to accommodate technological and social changes without having to formally amend the legal text (Letsas, 2007).

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the use of English as the sole working language of ASEAN, while providing administrative efficiency, has generated structural inequalities in participation among member states due to differences in English proficiency levels. In contrast to the European Union, which has institutionalized a comprehensive multilingual system, ASEAN faces political, economic, and linguistic constraints that prevent the direct adoption of such a model. From a sociolinguistic perspective, particularly the concept of language as symbolic capital proposed by Pierre Bourdieu, monolingual policies risk reproducing linguistic hierarchies and reinforcing exclusion in regional governance. To address these challenges, this study proposes an AI-driven multilingual governance framework that integrates technological infrastructure, legal flexibility, and gradual policy implementation. Rather than replacing English, this approach positions multilingualism as a complementary mechanism to enhance inclusivity, accessibility, and institutional legitimacy. Ultimately, the use of artificial intelligence offers a realistic and context-sensitive solution for ASEAN in managing linguistic diversity in the era of digital transformation.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

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