A Friendly Knife? English in the Context of Sri Lankan Language Planning

Joseph Lo Bianco

Abstract

In this chapter I trace the role of English in the context of the wider Sri Lankan language planning. Prior to de-colonisation, English was excoriated by nationalists as kaduwa, a knife that sliced through the natural conversations of local people, whether in Sinhala or Tamil. The post-colonial period saw English marginalised and first language rights enshrined in education. Over time, however, especially due to communal conflict and war, but also global economic effects, Sri Lanka has restored a prominent role to English. Today, Sri Lanka enjoys literacy rates, both male and female, much higher than its South Asian neighbours, a result of both its traditional respect for learning and its vernacular language policies. In the late 1990s, a system of English medium schools, including “Amity” programmes, were created as an experiment to re-introduce non-segregated education via English. The chapter provides a historical survey and a policy-political analysis of English within the wider context of Sri Lankan state making and interethnic relations. It concludes with some evidence from research I conducted on schoolchildren's language attitudes, revealing how past disputes and debates about language have echoes in the children's comments but also prefiguring some future accommodations.

Introduction: Unfriendly knife

Sri Lanka is remarkable for both the intensity of its language planning efforts and for the severity of their consequences. In this chapter, the ‘fate’ and role of English are discussed within the wider context of Sri Lankan politics and language policy (LP).

Prior to de-colonisation and during the early years of independence, English was excoriated by nationalists as kaduwa, a knife or sword. The metaphor suggests a sharp instrument slicing through swabhasha (local language) conversations (Rajasingham-Senanayake, 1998), or a sword or knife conferring power or subjugation depending on whose hands wield it (Raheem and Devendra, 2007: 190). As late as 2003, one language activist told me that drawing the 'language knife', as he described it, could silence talk 'because it told of your connections'. The image is of symbolic displays of 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1991) alongside divisive social effects - a knife which speaks as well as silences. Even after it was officially ejected from state functions, English remained tied to the economy, aid and internationalisation. Its introduction had aggravated existing stratifications of class, caste, religion, and ethnicity, and was seen to damage national esteem, ethnic relations, and opportunities for the excluded masses (Peiris, 1999).

During the preparations for independence, there were energetic attempts to recover an ancient linguistic compact based on swabhasha bilingualism. The failure to compromise facilitated revolutionary populism, fuelled by the economic and social exclusion of vernacular speaking masses from the opportunities afforded by English. Post-Independence politics tried to restore Sinhala¹ (and Buddhism) by dislodging English from official domains, but succeeded in removing Tamil as well, alienating many Tamils and fomenting mistrust and eventually communal enmity (Little, 1994).

¹ Sinhala refers to the language, Sinhalese to its speakers.
Political analysts and historians offer several reasons for the erosion of ethnic relations and the descent into civil war. DeVotta (2003) argues that language was the central cause; Little (1994) sees the 'descent into enmity' as arising from a fusion of language, religion, and ethnicity; Fishman and Solana (1989) claim that the limited access of Tamils to land made them more dependent on civil service employment, hence administrative LP became acutely sensitive. Others refer to conventional politics, such as British colonial policy discarding the reformist demands of the Ceylon National Congress for power-sharing in a non-ethnic territorial franchise, preferring political representation via communal electorates. Devastating long-term effects resulted from sharpened sub-national identities and ethnicity-based political entitlement (Hussainmiya, 1987).

However, Tambiah (1986) also sees ancient foundations for contemporary conflict. Few commentators dispute that LP has played a role in the deterioration of ethnic relations in Sri Lanka, though there is little consensus about its precise function, its connection with other issues, or the balance between its symbolic and pragmatic components.

As late as 1999, prominent journalistic commentary was able to treat the decisive 1956 language law as though it were still in force. "A very negative feature ... ([of] the "Sinhala Only" Act of 1956) was to perpetuate a monolingual Sri Lankan populace, within a heterogeneous society. Sinhalese and Tamils grew up living side by side but unable to communicate and the majority community attempting to force the minority to assimilate" (Peiris, 1999: 6). The kaduwa had acquired vernacular blades.

Sri Lanka's overall post-colonial language project was to end the domination of colonial-serving Anglophone elites over tradition-observing vernacular masses, and its key move was the 1956 law.

Today, however, in all these settings, English is totally transformed. No longer excoriated, its reserve strength in the private sector of the economy (especially the labour market) reinforced by market internationalisation and the modern culture of consumerism, has overwhelmed state, nationalist, and populist campaigns calling for its rejection. English has been transformed into an object of desire and admiration. One aim of the present chapter is to show how the Sri Lankan vernacular rights struggle also offers salutary lessons of international importance. Swabhasha rights have made possible impressive achievements in universal literacy, gender parity, and mass participation in schooling.

Historical associations of English with colonial subjugation and cultural humiliation, and contemporary associations with economic opportunity and interethnic harmony, echo in community attitudes, even among schoolchildren, as the final part of the chapter reports.

Politics, discourse and language planning

LP is an ensemble of activities; some are textual (laws, reports, authorisations); some discursive (speeches, radio debates), while others involve performance of behaviours modelled by influential individuals or powerful institutions. In the analysis which follows text, discourse and policy performance are discussed in connection to three dimensions of language policies: the intended, the implemented, and the experienced (Lo Bianco, 2008).

Much analysis of LP focuses on the management of linguistic diversity in given polities. But LP is also an exercise in power shaped by the symbolic and practical effects of different communicative arrangements. It makes little sense to reduce language planning to a technical exercise, or a series of administrative formulas for allocating functions to different languages. Instead, both the politics of language and the policies that result from language politics are competing 'discourses' aiming to advance some interests and retard rival ones. These discourses always accompany the formal texts which announce funding or administrative decisions.

LP at the national level depends on political sovereignty and is delegated institutionally to various jurisdictions,
eg, education, health, policing, or justice. In these domains, ordinary citizens and various categories of professionals influence LP through what they say and do. Characteristically, therefore, LP is an extended conversation between citizens, professional elites and political leaders, aiming to achieve diverse ends (Lo Bianco, 2005; Lo Bianco, 2008).

Language in general and multilingualism in particular are problematic objects of policy-making. Language is both the medium for debates about policy, and in language planning it is the object of those debates. Language is often invested with emotional and ideological power, with cultural values and historic associations, and with group and individual identity. More than most others, the Sri Lankan experience highlights the textual, discursive, and performative links between LP and political processes, links often obscured in language planning theory which has for too long aspired to become a 'science'. The link to politics is inevitable when the distribution of resources is one of the main outcomes of policy making processes.

**People, religion and identity**

At the 2001 census, Sri Lanka's population was 18,797,257 (Sri Lanka DCS, 2001a) who speak Sinhala, Tamil and English and practise four religions: Buddhism (76.7%), which is associated with Sinhalese; Hinduism (7.8%), which is associated with the majority of Tamils; Islam (8.5%), practised largely by Tamils, Malays and Moors; and Christianity (Roman Catholics 6.1% and other Christians 0.9%), which is represented within all the groups (Sri Lanka DCS, 2001b). Sri Lanka has a dual Islamic tradition: an Indonesian-Malay component drawn initially from the Dutch colonies of Southeast Asia, and later replenished from the British Straits Settlements of Southeast Asia; and a more numerous pre-existing Arab and Indian, mostly Tamil speaking, component expressing a 'Moorish Islamic consciousness' (Hussainmiya, 1987: 19). This Malay-Moor distinction in Sri Lanka's Islamic tradition was sharpened by ethnicity-based political representation in the 1920s, culminating in the minority provisions of the 1948 constitution (abolished by the Republican constitution of 1972).

As surveyed in the 2001 Census (Sri Lanka DCS, 2001c), 82% of the population is classified as Sinhalese, 4.3% as Sri Lankan Tamil, 5.1% as Indian Tamil, 7.9% as Sri Lankan Moor, 0.2% as Burgher and 0.3% as Malay with a final classification of other 0.2%. Among the others are tiny population groups including the Veddas, a community of aboriginal people. The numbers of English-speaking Burghers declined sharply after independence due to emigration, the figures for Tamils are disputed by some and the two classifications, Sri Lankan Tamils and Indian Tamils, refer both to recency of arrival on the island (see below) and historic political status.

The language competencies of the population were last comprehensively surveyed in the 2001 census. These are reported according to the four main identified community groups in relation to competence in English, Sinhala and Tamil in the following table, drawn by the present author from the data supplied by the Department of Census and Statistics (Sri Lanka, DCS, 2001d).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sinhalese</th>
<th>Sri Lankan Tamils</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- able to speak English 13.2%</td>
<td>- able to speak Sinhala 64.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- able to speak Tamil 4.0%</td>
<td>- able to speak English 24.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sri Lankan Moors</th>
<th>Indian Tamils</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-able to speak Sinhala 60.9%</td>
<td>-able to speak Sinhala 50.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-able to speak English 20.6%</td>
<td>-able to speak English 8.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Communities are distributed according to historical settlement patterns, voluntary mobility, displacement due to war, and various resettlement schemes. Indian Tamils are concentrated in the central highlands, comprising nearly half the population there and working mainly as tea pluckers. They were recruited as part of British colonial efforts to establish a tea economy. Most Sri Lankan Tamils live in the Jaffna Peninsula around its main city of Jaffna. These territories are the traditional zone of various pre-colonial Tamil kingdoms. Sri Lankan Tamils are more concentrated in this region and several east coast districts. Apart from these two areas and the central highlands, Sinhalese predominate elsewhere, especially around Colombo, the densely populated capital. This area has the most diversified demography: a Sinhalese majority, large Tamil and Muslim minorities and significant concentrations of Burghers, Malays and Moors.

Sinhalese

Theravada Buddhism has been the main definer of Sinhalese identity for centuries and perhaps its strongest unifier. Passages from the Mahavamsa, an epic work of history and mythology composed by Buddhist monks in the fifth century AD, nourish identity for devout Sinhalese. According to the Mahavamsa, Sinhalese originate in antiquity among the Aryan inhabitants of North and East India. Bases for this claim include the linguistic cognates of Sinhala among Indo-Aryan languages (Wickremasinghe and Tisara, 1975; Dissanayake, 1993) including affiliations with Sanskrit, and a phenotype claim about the lighter complexion of Sinhalese compared to south Indians. The Mahavamsa depicts parts of ancient Sinhalese history as a struggle against repeated Dravidian incursions.

Sinhalese migration commenced around 500 BC; Buddhist conversion occurred two centuries later. This ancient encounter with Buddhism is a powerful component in the historical narrative, sometimes represented as the transfer of protective custody over the purity of the canon (Theravada = of the Elders). This custodial relation takes a political dimension in some nationalist discourse as a sacred mission entrusted by history through Prince Mahinda, son of Ashoka, India's only Buddhist ruler. Mahinda's mission personalises this transfer to Sinhalese of Theravada. The subsequent obliteration of Buddhism from Indian political life reinforced the idea of a transferred 'duty of care' for a pure Buddhist world-view. Anuradhapura, the ancient capital, conserves a Bo tree grown from shoots of the tree under which Buddha attained enlightenment; the most sacred transferred relic is the Buddha's tooth, held in Kandy's Temple of the Tooth (Rahula, 1966). Mahinda was received by King Devanampiya Tissa of Anuradhapura who reigned from 250-210 BC, and a subsequent visit by Mahinda's sister, Sangamitha, continued the transfer of holy objects to Sinhalese royals in acts of protection.

The most evident manifestation of Buddhism is the bhikkhu (monk). While they renounce worldliness, bhikkus remain in close contact with the world, performing duties for their congregations but remaining dependent on local people for their material needs. The relation between Buddhism and Sinhalese identity is profound and mutually reinforcing; popular involvement is channelled through support organisations, e.g., All-Ceylon Buddhist Congress, All-Ceylon Buddhist Women's Association and the Young Men's Buddhist Association. The state maintains close ties with the sangha (community of bhikkus), and as formal protector of Theravada it builds and maintains dagoba (temples) and fosters education in Pali and Buddhist thought.

However, Sri Lanka is also known for a politically engaged Buddhism, emerging in modern form in the early twentieth century when the sangha, deploring the social effects of alcoholism, organised temperance campaigns. Elements of the sangha criticised the colonial administration for permitting taverns and deriving
tax income from issuing licences. Remarkably, in recent interviews with schoolchildren some speak of this as though it were current. Foreign colonial control over this intertwined religion-nation nexus gave the temperance movement implicitly anti-Western and anti-Christian dimensions. After independence, Buddhist political activism was directed at restoring historic political-religious arrangements and advocating the rights of Sinhala speakers and Buddhists. The state-sangha connection and the status of Sinhala were key issues around which a political restoration occurred after 1956 and in which, because of their influence among villagers and the urban poor, bhikkus were prominent.

More recently, with civil conflict and war, joint delegations of bhikkus, bishops, imams and priests have agitated for peace, advancing humanitarian considerations. Though often on the forefront of peace initiatives (Ariyaratne, 1999), some elements the sangha have campaigned against a concession of rights to minorities. One such occasion was in 1986 when some bhikkus helped establish the Movement for Defence of the Nation to deter President J. R. Jayawardene from making significant concessions, and later in 2000, some monks opposed national devolution.

Studies conducted in the 1980s on the role of bhikkus in politics (Katz and Stiglicz, 1986; Katz, 1987, 1988) have revealed that about three quarters did not recognise minority political grievances, some arguing that minorities were privileged by comparison to the legitimate political grievances of the majority community.

_Tamils_

The two distinct population groups among Tamils, Sri Lankan Tamils and 'Indian' Tamils are both predominantly Hindu and Tamil-speaking but otherwise differ. For many Sri Lankan Tamils, Jaffna has abiding homeland associations based on the independent Tamil kingdoms that flourished there between the 13th and 16th centuries. Many regard the mythological and religious Tamil heritage with great reverence and some see Hindu purity residing in its continuation. Some extremists (a small minority of dominant-caste Vellalas) see this ancient heritage as a mark of superiority.

For long periods of time, elite caste members dominated over commerce, education and culture and imposed their views and values on the wider community of Tamils, especially in the rigorous application of Hindu devotional practices and caste distinctions and notions of female chastity.

Sinhalese and Tamil ethnic awareness, and consciousness of difference, emerged during the classical age (200 BC to 1200 AD). Tamil self-consciousness has a more ancient history in India but its specifically Lankan manifestation emerges with the northern kingdoms. Prior to European colonisation, Sinhalese kingdoms located in the north declined, their vulnerability to attack stimulating southward migration. From 1500 AD, European encroachment commenced, reaching its maximum territorial range under the British around 1820. Management of the colony and its ethnicities indelibly shaped communal relations after this first establishment of an island-wide unitary state. The alienation of many Tamils and militant secessionism have been progressive since that time.

Potential political compromise occurred in 1957 with the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam Pact and the 1965 Senanayake-Chelvanayakam Pact (de Silva, 1992), which aimed to grant autonomy to Tamil majority regions and accept Tamil as a language of administration. Both were abrogated under pressure from the majority community. Ethnic riots, anti-Tamil civil uprisings, and other inter-communal conflicts which occurred in 1956, 1958, 1961, 1974, 1977, 1979, 1981 and 1983 (the worst and bloodiest of them), have scarred memories (Somusundaram, 1998) and left many Tamils sympathetic with the secessionist cause, if not the violent means of some of its militants. The emergence of an alienated Tamil diaspora in the wake of the 1983 riots has produced an international support network both willingly offered and sometimes forcibly extracted.

Since independence, the poorer, less educated Indian Tamils have had an ambiguous and precarious status. Despite initial moves to repatriate them to India, most were eventually granted citizenship, though many
remained stateless until the mid-1980s. Represented by the Ceylon Workers’ Congress, Indian Tamils have generally not participated in the secessionist struggle, but have instead engaged in class politics aimed at ameliorating the abject poverty of plantation workers. The range of Tamil political advocacy is therefore very broad. Moderates seek inclusion in a non-ethnic unitary and civic state, while secessionists use ethnic nationalism to push for a separate national state.

Three colonialisms

The compounding effects of three European colonialisms (Portuguese 1505-1568, Dutch 1568-1796 and British 1796-1948) imposed on these indigenous histories, combined with the politics of post-colonial state-making, have produced a unique intensity for LP in Sri Lanka (de Silva, 1977, 1981; De Silva, 1992; De Silva 1998).

From the 16th century, foreign imposed languages proselytising Western religion and foreign education systems tied to public administration permanently changed relations between Sri Lanka's ethnic groups. Colonialism grafted new dimensions of social stratification onto existing divides of caste and religion, with the colonisers' languages adding new barriers but also facilitating new, forms of class mobility and employment.

For much of the post-independence period, incompatible, ethnicity-based rival nationalisms have overwhelmed the construction of a modern civic state. The resulting catastrophic damage to civil order and recurring violence have drawn on both class-inspired revolution and secessionist ethnic nationalism. Moves towards civic rather than ethnic nationalism and for national bilingualism and administrative devolution have failed repeatedly to gain sufficient consensus in the face of terrorism and war.

Education, elites and masses

Traditional

Traditional learning among Sinhalese was principally confined to bhikkus. Most villages contained a pansal (temple school) in which literate monks instructed privileged pupils. Typically, the curriculum involved memorisation of items of Buddhist literature the Nam potha (Book of Names) of Buddhist shrines, the Magul lakuna (Book of Auspicious Symbols on the Buddha's body) and classic stories of the Buddha's life. Brâhmâ script was taught for recognition and basic mastery. Higher education took place at pirivena (religious colleges), reserved for men intending to become bhikkus, whose curriculum focused on memorisation and approved commentary on Pali scripture. For Tamils, village schools were located near temples, run by literate Brahmins or educated Vellas and consisted of religious inculcation in the Hindu canon, studies of Hindu puranas (oral stories) and script literacy.

Colonial

The first colonial schools were designed to foster Catholic culture; some 100 schools were set up by Portuguese missionaries in the 1500s in low country areas to serve a growing number of converts. In the 1650s, when the Dutch ousted the Portuguese, they established an elaborate system of elementary schooling to sustain the missionary activity of the Dutch Reformed Church. By 1760, the number of schools established by the Dutch had grown to 130, with approximately 65,000 students. However, only Britain established full control over Ceylon after the fall of the last indigenous stronghold, the kingdom of Kandy in 1815. English became the language of instruction in government-funded schools whose graduates filled the lower and middle rungs of administration.

Alongside colonial schooling, traditional education continued in religious contexts and vernacular languages.
Government-funded and Christian schools, however, had enrolments of about one-third less than those of a century earlier. In 1870, the colonial administration extended its control to private education through grants in exchange for regulatory control, expanded directly-run state schools, and commenced specialist medical and law training. These measures revolutionised education (by 1900, students totalled over 200,000), but also instigated patterns of privilege that were to have devastating consequences. English-medium private Christian schools furnished English-knowing young men, whose disproportionate numbers in the bureaucracy provoked discontent after independence. Schools over-represented Christians, Tamils and south-western geography, and English became tied to occupational mobility and higher education. While pансal and kovil education continued at elementary level, the European school curricula contained all the elements for training the junior administrative class and disrupted the connection between traditional public life and its skill requirements. Female education was neglected, so that by the 1920s differential literacy rates were stark: 50% of Christian girls, 17% of Buddhist, 10% of Hindu and 6% of Muslim girls were literate.

Aiming for universal literacy, extensive education reform in the 1930s made government schooling free, extended education across rural areas, established teacher training colleges and moved to recognise swabhasha as a medium of education, so that by the time of Independence in 1948, the government ran 60% of schools. The University of Ceylon was established in 1942, producing an articulated free education from preschool to tertiary. Although by independence Sri Lanka’s education infrastructure was extensive, it was characterised by gross inequalities in ethnic participation rates (Jayasuriya, 1969).

**Modern**

Since Independence, education has been a high priority with some impressive outcomes: the number of schools increased dramatically; all parts of the country gained access to full education locally; tertiary studies became available in all regions and enrolments increased (Diyasena, 1981; De Silva and De Silva, 1990; Raheem and Devendra, 2007). Literacy rates reflect these institutional expansions. By late 1970, more than 90% of Sri Lankans were considered functionally literate, although urban-rural disparities remained (NEC, 1992, 1997; NIE, 1996). Basic literacy became a less reliable predictor of advantage than English, especially of standard British varieties compared to stigmatised Sri Lankan forms (Parakrama, 1995). By the mid-1980s, almost 80% of Burghers were English-fluent, while the corresponding rate among Sinhalese was 12%.

The removal of public subsidies from private institutions led to the charging of fees and the transfer of most students to state schools. By 1980, 95% of students were enrolled in government-run primary schools (Jayasuriya, 1981). Though fewer, religion-oriented schools were diverse, including Buddhist pансal and pirivena, Hindu kovil schools, Christian (mainly Catholic) schools and Muslim schools. In 1982, the Buddhist and Pali University of Sri Lanka was established in Colombo. Raheem and Devendra (2007) attribute high literacy standards (they report 92% for males and 88% for females) to free schooling, to all 15 universities being under the University Grants Commission and 9,790 of the 10,475 schools under the state administration.

While male and female enrolments have broadly equalled, other differences beyond those of income and wealth persist, with the overwhelming majority of Sinhalese educated within the state system while Tamils are spread widely across all providers (World Bank, 1998; Peiris, 1983).

Modern education, however, has exacerbated ethnic tensions, perhaps unintentionally, but nevertheless as a direct consequence of measures to overcome majority disadvantage, measures were tied closely to LP. For some 15 years after independence, many students sought university degrees (mainly the Bachelor of Arts) to qualify for government services, the major employer of administrative skills. Because university exams were in English, the potential pool of university applicants was small, with only about 30% of applicants being admitted. By the mid-1960s, examinations were instituted in Sinhala and Tamil, widening university access to a larger body of applicants, many from swabhasha state-run secondary schools. However, university expansion slowed due to funding limitations, and by 1965 only 20% of applicants were admitted, further
declining to 11% by 1969. A looming crisis was compounded by a glut of graduates with BA degrees, unable to be absorbed in government services or private enterprises. Perversely, educational expansion produced two major problems: the growing difficulty of university admissions and the growing irrelevance of a liberal arts education to employment. Sinhalese were especially disadvantaged - although they were finally able to obtain educational qualifications, they found employment opportunities blocked. Frustrated aspirations helped fuel violent class rebellion, especially the 1971 uprising of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna.

During the colonial period and for two decades after independence, Sri Lankan Tamils - Hindu and Christian - had outstripped Sinhalese in secondary school and university representation. In 1969, 50% of medical students and 48% of engineering students were Tamil. As the Government became dominated by Sinhalese interests, representation in government services declined for Tamils. Tamil education had stressed on science as preparatory for university science and medicine programmes, so that during the 1960s these disciplines were dominated by Tamils. As Sinhalese BA candidates found their career prospects diminished by dropping market demand for their qualifications science and medicine opened up lucrative professions for their Tamil peers. The result was political agitation aimed at limiting Tamil numbers in science and medicine.

Despite political favouritism against them, the dominance of Tamils in education did not decline until 1974 when quotas were instituted for university access, in a preferential admissions system known as 'standardisation', which aimed to align university enrolments with national population percentages. The scheme established quotas of 70% of places allocated to predominantly Sinhalese revenue districts (including a special 15% reserved for disadvantaged areas), and 30% of admissions allotted nationwide on merit. By the 1980s, 40% of admissions were allocated on individual merit; and 60% according to district quotas. Standardisation benefited Sinhalese because of their numerical dominance in most districts, and Tamil admissions declined sharply, though they remained above their overall population percentage.

Although standardisation brought about a more equitable overall distribution of education access it thwarted the prospects of talented individual Tamils whose community judged the policy as blatant discrimination. Limiting educational opportunities for Tamils was reflected in their declining representation in skilled and professional areas of government. State-employed Tamil doctors and engineers decreased from the mid-1960s to late-1970s; by 1980, their proportion in the public sector was roughly equivalent to their percentage of the overall population. Direct political patronage also played a role. An infamous 'chit' system operated during the 1970s in which a parliamentarian's memorandum to recruiting agencies informed them of which candidate was to be preferred. The 'chit system' extended the influence of members of parliament into public sector job allocation. Patronage became blatant when 'job banks' of lower level positions were allocated to parliamentarians for distribution to supporters, diminishing merit as a basis for public employment; and because Tamil politicians had fewer patronage opportunities, Tamil representation correspondingly declined further.

Standardisation in higher education and patronage in the public service were a statistical success but a political catastrophe, radicalising many young Tamils.

**Language status politics**

Through such regulations and laws (policy texts), debates, broadcasts and publicity (policy discourses) and modelled behaviour (policy as performance), LP was made both symbolically and pragmatically. It can be demarcated into four overlapping but recognisable phases.

**Official English**

After subjugating the kingdom of Kandy in 1815, British colonial policy established a plantation economy whose management functioned in English, so that clerical work, policing, law, and later, education established
an official realm for English, while in the religious sphere, Pali, Sanskrit and Tamil continued.

The first LP text emerged from a 1923 Judicial Enquiry, the Colebrook-Cameron Report. Essentially an examination of the entire administration of civil and criminal justice, including the police and admiralty, Colebrook-Cameron issued instructions requiring 'English only' across all public administration. Conceding that English was not widely known, minor notices and advertisements were exempted, permitting limited use of Sinhala and Tamil (then called Cingalese and Malabar).

Significantly for later ethnic relations, Colebrook-Cameron imposed 'competent knowledge' of English as the condition for hiring 'native functionaries', noting that advancement for locals into positions 'exclusively held by Europeans' would represent 'a most powerful inducement' to 'high caste natives' (Dharmadasa, 1996; Commissioner, 1989, 1990; Department of Official Language, 1992; De Silva, 1998).

In 1931, however, Britain granted Ceylon limited self-rule (State Council) and introduced universal franchise. State Council documents reveal the central importance of language choices in public sector employment policies. On 5 July 1932, the Council considered proposals from G. K. W. Perera to replace the Colebrook-Cameron rules with swabhasha requirements for base grade clerical appointments and promotions, policing and criminal and civil trials. Counter proposals from J. R. Jayawardene on 22 June 1943 called for Sinhala to replace English as the medium of instruction in all schools, compulsory subject in all public examinations, and State Council language of business (de Silva, 1981; Canagaretta, 1987; Jupp, 1978). Although at Independence in 1948 the State Council's debates between English-only, Sinhala-only and swabhasha bilingualism were unresolved, parallel reforms (such as the Kannagara Free Education Scheme of 1945) facilitating vernacular literacy were adopted.

**Official Sinhala**

The language status question was dramatically revisited in the Official Language Act, No. 33 of 7 June 1956, which declared: "The Sinhala language shall be the one official language of Ceylon..." (Dharmadasa, 1996; Theva-Rajan, 1998), resolving the pre-independence alternatives but signalling the failure of the bilingual compromise. The chief sponsor was Prime Minister and leader of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, S. W.R. D. Bandaranaike.

In parliament, a prophetic warning on the Bill by Dr Colvin R. De Silva, leader of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party: "One language means two countries, two languages mean one country", did not deter Bandaranaike who promised "Sinhala-only in 24 hours" (De Silva, 1998; Somasundaram, 1999).

Under the Kannagara arrangements, Tamil continued as a language of education but the practical effects of the Sinhala-only law kicked off a tortuous and still unfinished process of alleviating Tamil grievances and symbolised civic exclusion that reverberates to this day.

**Restoration of Tamil**

The Official Language Act provoked immediate conflict (De Silva, 1998) which led to the promulgation of a Tamil Language (Special Provisions) Act on 4 September 1958. It provided that Tamil-educated citizens would be examined in Tamil for public service admission, conditional on them gaining what was called 'a sufficient knowledge of the Official language of Ceylon' or specifying that such knowledge would be gained within a period of time after admission to the Public Service.

The ameliorative intent was matched in practice and subsequent restrictions in higher education access for Tamil and English-educated candidates compounded matters, ultimately producing a bitter legacy of antagonism and alienation. Commenting on contradictions between intended and experienced policy, the historian De Silva argues that: "The rhetoric not the actual policy had become ... the political reality ... and that
... although the rhetoric of language policy did not conform to the living reality, that rhetoric had a life of its own" (1998: 61-62).

The next legislative attention on language status was the 1977 Republican Constitution which formalised Sinhala as 'official' but declared it and Tamil 'national languages'. Any difference in meaning was not clarified in the text although a provision for the discharge of administrative duties was permitted in either language (Commissioner, 1989, 1990; Dharmadasa, 1996).

**Restoration of English**

Just like the pragmatic reasoning underlying amelioration measures for Tamil, pragmatism also led to partial re-admission of English. For example, on 7 September 1978, Chief Legal Officer, K. W. Devananagam regulated to permit the use of English in court records and proceedings; and on 7 May 1979 he modified the legal code permitting use of Tamil (Department, 1989, 1990, 1992; Olcott-Gunasekera, 1996).

Internal crisis and external intervention, but also the continuing presence of English in private sector employment, produced the next phase of LP.

Following violent communal conflict from the mid-1980s, an Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) intervened in Sri Lankan political life, departing in May 1990 after the signing of the 1987 Accord, whose provisions found their way into a new constitution. The explosive importance of languages is found in the terms of the entry and departure of the IPKF. The Accord specifically addresses language issues, determining that the official languages of Sri Lanka would be designated as Sinhala, Tamil and English (Section 2.18, Indo-Sri Lankan Accord), and the 13th Amendment - certified on 14 November 1987 - introduced into the National Constitution an obligation imposed under the Accord. The precise terms of the Accord stipulate that Sinhala, Tamil and English will be designated official languages, but in section 2:18 of the Constitution, Tamil was made co-official but English was allocated the undefined new status of 'link language' (Department, 1992; Theva-Rajan, 1998; Samarasinghe, 1996).

Article 22 (1), as amended by the 16th Amendment (Section 3), names only Sinhala and Tamil as 'the languages of administration throughout Sri Lanka'. The 13th and 16th Amendments to the Constitution make an unclarified distinction between 'official' and 'national' for the swabhasha, and reserve the new, also undefined status of 'link language' for English.

**Language education policy**

**Languages of teaching**

Prior to national independence, 'fee levying' schools taught in English while 'vernacular' medium schools were free of charge. Universal free education and swabhasha medium were implemented in the Kannagara Free Education Scheme of 1945. About 12% of students at the time were educated in English, but the steady implementation of the Kannagara Scheme meant that by the mid-1960s, education from preschool to university was essentially in Sinhala and Tamil.

On these reforms, the distinguished education historian J. E. Jayasuriya has written: "Even after nearly a century and a half of British rule, only about 6 per cent of the population was literate in English but they constituted an elite." English had been 'socially disruptive' but 'partly integrative'. The asymmetrical acquisition of English divided Ceylon into a privileged English speaking minority incomunicado with a second-class, non-English speaking majority. As English facilitated communication between Sinhalese and Tamil elites, it impeded majority to majority communication (Jayasuriya, 1981: 81), making the island's long history of LP a 'struggle against privilege' (Jayasuriya, 1969).
The International Centre for Ethnic Studies and Commissioner of Official Languages, in a joint study, document how language education contributed to “division between ethnic and class groups (rather than a contribution to) national unity” (ICES, 1990:1).

Today, education and training are structured around giving effect to mother tongue (MT) education rights. MT or swabhasha medium produces language-specific schools, colleges and universities; examinations and certification procedures and other operations defined by language of instruction.

A small number of bilingual institutions enrol from both language communities but mostly teach via separate language streams; for example, Royal College and Muslim Ladies College in Colombo enrol Sinhalese and Tamil children and offer language-specific streams In rural areas, Sri Pada and Vavuniya among the National Colleges of Education (NCOE) are also bilingual medium. English is the teaching medium in some private schools, but until recently, Pasdunrata was the only college among the 14 NCOEs to teach in English. Increasing sensitivity to the employability of graduates and the dominance of English in employment, aid and trade, further bolstered by expectations of and pressure from donor agencies such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the World Bank (WB), has helped English to overturn LP restrictions and rapidly expand in mass public education, most recently as a language of instruction (Raheem and Devendra, 2007).

Teaching swabhasha

If the efforts to make general teaching in the MT were successful, concurrent efforts to teach Sinhala and Tamil as second languages have mostly failed, dogged by half-heartedness.

Three key periods can be identified when moves were made to teach the two main ethnic groups the other's language - 1953, 1987 and 1997 - each coinciding with moments of severe inter-ethnic crisis. The attempt in 1953 corresponds with the immediate post-independence era, when forging national institutions was uppermost and prior to the Sinhala only law; the move in 1987 followed the perceived loss of sovereignty that accompanied the entry of the IPKF to curtail secessionist fighting; and the third occasion, post 1997, was under the Reforms to General Education (RGE), a period marked by external economic pressure on Sri Lanka to solve its ethnic crisis and invite direct foreign investment into its economy.

However, even from the outset, supporters of compulsory teaching of the nation's two languages to all its citizens were noting practical constraints a most identical to the ones that beset the project today. A UNESCO conference in 1953 was told: "[We] are faced with a three-fold problem... how far is it wise to get a child to learn a third language? At what stage should the third language be started? How far should we go with the teaching of the third language?" (D. A Wijayasingha, Assistant Director of Education, Nuwara Eliya; NIER, 1994). The 1953 initiative petered out due to the diversion of energies towards consolidating MT-medium general schooling.

The 1987 move aimed to ease ethnic conflict with conciliatory and peace-making sentiments about respecting diversity and multiculturalism within a framework of national unity. This kind of rhetoric has recurred in all subsequent policy for national bilingualism, which is almost never spoken of as a cognitive activity or culturally enriching endeavour, but always loaded with objectives of promoting peaceful co-existence and inter-communal understanding. This is a heavy burden to place on a minor and under-resourced education measure. Most of the small number of schools that responded to the 1987 initiative discontinued their programmes after about one year (ICES, 1990), effectively ending all school-level training in national bilingualism.

The third attempt followed aid donor concern about the devastating human and economic cost of the ongoing war. The initiative was announced in the WB financed Education Reform Project with the aim of: "Establishing strong human relationships in the Sri Lankan society through the media of Sinhala and Tamil towards the goal of peaceful co-existence" (Lo Bianco, 1999). The RGE of 1997 were in response to International bank loans
and declared that from 1999 all children would be required to study the second national language. The implementing documentation shows scant seriousness for the initiative, especially by comparison with provisions for English, with few explicit references, opt-out provisions, little teacher training and scarcely any curriculum support (NEC, 1997: 11). The only other direct reference is in Section 2.4 of the Senior Secondary Stage of Education, which refers to the two-year period (Grades 10 and 11) that comprises the General Certificate of Education (O-Level) and a minor addition of Sinhala/Tamil as second languages among seven 'optional subjects' from which students select up to three (Lo Bianco, Sivakumaran and Sivagurunathan, 1999).

By contrast, the RGE deals seriously with English, aiming to offer "up-graded opportunities for pupils island-wide for equal access to English for comprehension and communication" (NEC, 1997, 14) while the national languages are treated as first languages, i.e. MTs, rather than potential sources of bilingualism. Most schools introduced the second language in 1999 with largely untrained low-proficient teachers. A grammatically simplified version of an MT text was the prescribed curriculum and many teachers concentrated on teaching the relevant script. By 2000, most schools had followed the availability of official texts and introduced the second national language at grades 6 and 9 simultaneously, expecting that these cohorts would be offered a new textbook each subsequent year. The full secondary cycle was involved by 2002, bringing some improvements in teacher support, materials and in-service training. Some schools introduced the second national language throughout the secondary cycle and a small number at the primary level. A typical allocation has been two weekly, 40-minute periods, compared to the five for English. In the Initial Training Curriculum, the second language is compulsory for only 2 hours weekly in the second semester of the first year - a total of 32 hours.

Because Sinhala and Tamil use versions of Brâhmī script (Chatterji, 1960; Pope, 1993), the alpha-syllabic nature of their orthographies are part of the intercultural encounter most schools undertake, exposing similarity and difference. Students learn something of the second national language, a large part of which lies in pointing out script similarities and differences.

Teaching the fink language

Raheem and Devendra (2007) note that, as in India, both western education and English were instituted to supply the colony with native peoples to mediate between the British and local masses.

After its turbulent rejection, the English comeback is remarkable. The language that once provoked fragmentation is now a key to reconciliation. This transformation has occurred through some unlikely steps, including disastrous LP which has trapped the two national languages in associations of ethnic pride and conflict. During its banishment in the 1960s and 1970s, English survived state-sanctioned marginalisation through association with the labour market and the depth of its penetration of legal training and justice administration, existing therefore in both the private sector and parts of the public sector. Its academic strongholds had been legal and medical training and non-agriculture based scientific research. The most unlikely source for the revitalisation of English was India via its military intercession in Sri Lankan domestic affairs, deploying English as a code of extra-national diplomacy, and devising a cognate designation for English, link-language, which then passed into the new constitution. This re-authorised English as a language, not of local identity nor of colonisation, but of presumed ethnic 'neutrality'. This new kind of instrumentality assured its official re-entry, but was also massively bolstered by global markets, conditional multilateral agencies, and demand for British study credentials which delivered portability and emigration prospects for middle-class islanders to North America, the UK or Australia.

The year of Ceylon's strongest repudiation of English, 1956, was also a year of Malaysia and Singapore's repudiation of the language (Lo Bianco, 2007). Its recuperation in all three countries required disengaging its associations with colonial subjugation and western religion. Its recent transformation from a reviled obstacle to post-colonial national unity and state making, into a key instrument of globalisation and a tool of national reconciliation is dramatic, if not complete. It is, moreover, also infused with a new kind of local identity - that of
consumerism, modernity, international participation and mobility. With hindsight, we can identify two kinds of LP in this tumultuous and intense period of language politics: first, a public, state-centred, ethnic, nation-creating LP; and second, a rival, covert, private economy, anti-state and pro-English LP. Ultimately overwhelming the formal LP texts and the LP discourses of nationalists was the anti-state global market for commodified English. In planning documents and public debate today, few issues in Sri Lankan education command the consensus and attraction that surrounds English, and yet it is vernacular education which has delivered the country's most admirable educational achievements.

**Making the nation literate**

Few accounts of education and language in Sri Lanka report its successes, which are as much a part of its reality as the better known problems. The Sri Lankan literacy achievement is particularly impressive. This is clearly evident in documentation prepared for the UN Millennium Declaration (MD), adopted at the 55th Session of the General Assembly on 18 September 2000. The MD aims to accelerate international cooperation for overcoming gender disparities in education, improving health provision in poor countries and stimulating general economic development and gainful employment.

Supporting these goals is a database located at the UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS) from which comparative statistics can be assembled. A comparison of Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka in 2001 (the most complete and recent in-year comparison) underscores Sri Lanka's literacy accomplishments, which against the backdrop of immense social upheaval and ongoing civil war are remarkable. The percentages of male and female youth literacy and the gender parity index (ratio of male to female youth literacy), assembled from the UIS by the present author, are given below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Male Literacy%</th>
<th>Female Literacy%</th>
<th>Gender Parity Index</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>67.2</td>
<td>60.3</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>84.2</td>
<td>67.7</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nepal</td>
<td>80.6</td>
<td>60.1</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
<td>95.1</td>
<td>96.1</td>
<td>1.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

National Literacy Rates for Youths aged 15-24, M, F and GPI (2001)

For all of these countries there were improvements between the reported year in the table, 2001, and the next complete set (2007 for Bangladesh, India and Nepal, and 2006 for Sri Lanka) but the pattern of disparity remained constant so that at 2007 the GPI for Bangladesh was 0.9, for India 0.8 and for Nepal 0.75, while for Sri Lanka the GPI remained at 1.01 at 2006.

According to the UIS, looking at the years 1991, 2001 and 2007, the overall youth literacy rate in Bangladesh improved from 44.7% to 63.6% to 72.1%; in India, from 61.9% to 76.4% to 82.1% and in Nepal, from 49.6% to 70.1% to 79.3%. For Pakistan the overall youth literacy rates are available for 1998 and 2005 (55.3% and 65.1% respectively; with a Gender Parity Index of 0.69 in 2005) while for Sri Lanka the overall youth rate of literacy in 2001 was 95.6% and 97.5% in 2006.

The MD Goals are a series of direct, simply-stated objectives intended to mobilise political action. Goal 2 addresses a longstanding, continually postponed objective which in development circles is abbreviated as 'UPE' (Universalisation of Primary Education). UPE comprises subsidiary targets, the third being that by 2015 there will be universal completion of the full cycle of primary education by all learners, boys and girls equally. This target relies heavily on two literacy measures, a rate for youth (15-24 year olds) and an 'adult' rate. The youth rate measures the percentage of the population 'who can both read and write with understanding a
short simple statement on everyday life', a skill which the UN claims reflects the outcome of primary education over 'the previous ten years' and serves as a "... proxy measure of social progress and economic achievement" (UIS updated 27 July 2007; UIS MD Goals). This use of literacy as a proxy for social progress and economic achievement is encountered frequently in development literature (e.g. World Bank, 2004) and constitutes a kind of development ideology where youth literacy rates and gender parity ratios stand as indicators of social and economic advancement.

Some of the claims and assumptions merit deeper reflection but their relevance here is to underscore a point that reflects well on Sri Lanka. The high absolute numbers of claimed literacy, very high male and even higher female achievement, and the gender parity index which reverses the general tendency of male dominance are due to MT-delivered universal free public education. Recent research conducted for the UK Department for International Development comparing Zambia and Malawi on the use of children's first languages in early education concluded that "the moral of the Malawian achievement would appear to be that if resources are scarce, there is a greater likelihood of success in attempting to teach pupils a known local language, rather than an unknown one" (Williams, 1998).

Sinhala and Tamil are the means of initial literacy for the vast majority of Sri Lankan children and the main reason for its highly assessed levels of school completion and reading and writing skills. Since the 1997 RGE, English has expanded along all sectoral levels, including introduction of General English in Grades 11 and 12, use of English as a medium in experimental and then widespread 'Amity' programmes (de-segregated programmes), regional and district based teacher support and a June 2003 University Grants Commission requirement for compulsory first semester University English. All these moves extend the reach, range and roles of English, from primary, secondary though University levels, as a subject and increasingly as a partial medium of teaching. But the languages of initial literacy remain Sinhala and Tamil.

**Making the knife friendly**

Arising from this general restoration of English from 1997 has been the introduction of bilingual teaching in English and Sinhala or Tamil, including experiments with full English-medium teaching. Amity programmes are a particularly interesting initiative. Proposed by the National Institute of Education, Amity initiatives were debated at the Sri Lanka English Language Teachers' Association conference held at the Galadari Hotel on 30-31 August, 2002. Preliminary research was reported with the intention to create an Amity initiative in each province, with the requirement that they would use English for teaching and thereby de-segregate school participation, by teaching children from all backgrounds together.

Many middle-class parents, keen for English-medium teaching for their children, embraced the idea, sometimes even setting aside its essential justification of bringing various communities together. This corruption of the initial aim, however, suggests pressure for wider public school (therefore, free) use of English as the language of general instruction. Only time will tell what effect such moves would have were they to be permitted.

Symbolically, use of the term Amity appears to close one of the historical associations of English, its association not with amity, but with enmity, its symbolisation as kuduwa. The sword cutting off native communication appears by force of material interest, regional power, and social turmoil to have transformed itself into a more friendly knife, claiming today to cut through misunderstanding.

**Voices and views of children**

These dramatic transformations have occurred in an education system subjected to staggering amounts of duress and many phases of change.
In recent research with students on contemporary language attitudes, these phases and this upheaval still resonate in children's understanding of languages and their social functions historically. Below is reported a small sample of comments from students of Grade 6 and Grade 9 (11 and 14 year olds respectively) in Sinhala and Tamil medium schools across Sri Lanka gathered in 1999 and repeated in 2002 and 2003. The comments are all prominent responses (several children agreed to each) reported in random order, to questions asked of whole class and small groups in semi-structured 'focus discussions' about learning English, Sinhala and Tamil.

**Children studying in Sinhala medium**
- We have to learn English because computers
- Most countries speak English
- International language
- Sinhalese morals and culture were damaged by English people
- English built this fort and used Sri Lankan labour and oppressed us
- I need a high knowledge of English
- English opened up the taverns and brought liquor and beef-eating habits and other immoral acts
- Destroyed our temples and Vihara
- They took our resources
- Very capable people
- Many people speak English.

**Children studying in Tamil medium**
- International language
- Language in many countries
- To help me to talk to person from other country
- I feel happy when I speak in English, because I can
- When I go for an interview I will be helped with English
- It is a common language
- Only has 26 letters
- Easy to learn
- Easier to write
- Travel abroad
- English is everywhere.

The negative comments about English and British colonisation were exclusive to the groups of 14-year-old boys, and only in Sinhala medium schools, and only in the 1999 sample. In repeat investigations during 2002 and 2003, a much reduced frequency of negative remarks was encountered in these schools. Most comments were about the international standing of English, its difficulty of acquisition, and its benefits.

In the 1999 sample, 14-year-old Siva remarked: "Just as much as Tamil is my mother tongue I want Sinhala to be my father tongue. To be clever, I must know English too" (Lo Bianco, 1999). In an extended conversation, Siva re-worked perhaps the oldest metaphor of language and its connection to family roles and nurture to offer an original perspective on linguistic affiliations and solidarity. In his formulation, English is a techno-economical code, understood as utility, and associated with competence and functional skill but still invested with identity and belonging for Sri Lankans. He told us that English allowed all to talk to all, making it a kind of national meta-lect. The 'old' national languages, in Siva's model, function as demo-lects and can never be dislodged because they are culturally authentic. Both are invested with enduring associations of place, history, and authority and so Siva attaches them parent roles, fusing a biological with an imagined family, the national community.

---

2 Thanks to Sabapathy Sivagurunathan and Pushpa Sivakumaran for facilitating the interviews.
Conclusion

In fact, the Sri Lankan constitution has adopted a model similar to Siva's, and the country's education system is moving in the same direction. The national tri-lingualism that this implies, however, allocates particular statuses and identities to the component languages. The national family seems to have given English a permanent presence alongside Siva's family languages, as if to keep the parents on speaking terms.

References


NIE. 1996. Reports of a Workshop on Developing a New Curriculum for Pre-Service Education. Colombo: NIE.


Author/s: 
Lo Bianco, JL

Title: 
A Friendly Knife? English in the Context of Sri Lankan Language Planning

Date: 
2011

Citation: 

Persistent Link: 
http://hdl.handle.net/11343/112281

File Description: 
Accepted version