



Then and Now: English in Sri Lanka's Public Sector*

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Abstract

English was the official language of Sri Lanka during British colonization but it was replaced by Sinhala and Tamil as independence neared. The public sector was directly affected by this change although English held sway here for some years. Yet, English was made the link language for the Sinhalese and Tamils in 1987 and the state has since taken many steps to promote and improve its use in the public sector. Such change in language policy did not happen in void. It resulted from different perceptions nationalism and nationism had about English. This paper tries to understand the changing fate of English in Sri Lanka's public sector by placing it in the context of nationalism and nationism. It aims to do two things, namely to explain nationalism and nationism in relation to Sri Lanka and to explore the presence of English in the public sector from independence until today, affected by nationalism and nationism. This investigative approach shows the influence of local ideology on language policy. It is ultimately seen that language policy concerning English in the public sector is responsive to the volatile political and social contexts of Sri Lanka.

Keywords: language policy; nationalism; nationism; public sector

* A shorter version of this paper was presented at English and Asia: First International Conference on Language and Linguistics, 24-27 November 2008.

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Introduction

British colonization introduced English to Sri Lanka and the language remained an official language until 1944. This year saw the native languages of Sinhala and Tamil become the official languages. The public sector that once functioned in English had to use Sinhala and Tamil although this did not always happen. Nationalism became dominant after independence and Sinhala became the official language. The public sector was directly affected as it had to convert to Sinhala. Ironically, English was made the link language for Sri Lankans in 1987 as nationism was espoused to end the civil war. In response, the state is introducing English to public servants.

This paper explores the changing fate of English in Sri Lanka's public sector as independence neared until the present. It does so through the lenses of nationalism and nationism, as defined by Fishman (1968). This paper's focus is the Sinhalese as they are the majority ethnicity in Sri Lanka. Change in language policy about English is investigated in the public sector as it is a major employer in Sri Lanka and it is one of the sectors directly influenced by change in language policy. Besides, the language promoted and used by the public sector tends to reflect prevalent ideological sentiments. This paper begins by considering the position of English in pre-independent Sri Lanka as an important but elitist and exclusivist language. This helps explain its rejection in the nationalist period that did not last as English had to be reintroduced in the nationalist period to improve interethnic relations. The public sector has been responsive to both these periods, as will be seen.

English before 1944

Sri Lanka (Ceylon before 1972) was administrated in English during British colonization although the language was not widely used, taught and learnt. It was a privilege of the British and the Sinhalese and Tamil elites. These native elites tended to be from the higher castes who had English education and lived in urban areas. They used English to communicate as it was a common language shared by the Sinhalese and Tamils that also symbolized their belonging to a higher economic and social status. English was a vehicle for interethnic communication (Hettige, 1999, p. 308) but the lack of education in English

limited English to and for the elites. Education in English was geared towards providing employees for the Ceylon Civil Service that functioned in English. Employment here ensured the Sinhalese and Tamils economic and social mobility, breaking out of centuries-old caste and regional barriers (Saunders, 2007) but not many Sri Lankans could aspire to work in the Ceylon Civil Service as they did not know English.

There were slightly more Tamils than Sinhalese in the Ceylon Civil Service (Thangarajah & Hettige, 2007, p. 158). The Tamil elites preferred to work in the Ceylon Civil Service as it was hard to farm the Northern Province from where most of them hailed. This motivated them to concentrate on work in the public sector and professions (Wilson, 1988, p. 42). They did not lack proficiency in English as the Northern Province had about 20% of English educational institutions in Sri Lanka, be they missionary-run or state-run and such institutions were more common in Tamil areas than Sinhalese areas (Manogaran, 1987, Saunders, 2007).

The Donoughmore Constitution in 1931 conferred among other benefits, internal rule to Sri Lanka and universal adult suffrage (Saunders, 2007). The Legislative Council now comprised of Sri Lankans but they were from the elites mentioned before. They espoused British values (Dharmadasa, 1992) but the Legislative Council passed language enactments that opened the administrative and legislative domains to Sinhala and Tamil that were once held only by English (Saunders, 2007). These language enactments made the state accessible to ordinary Sri Lankans as they could now interact with the state in their native languages of Sinhala or Tamil. Such moves included requiring newly recruited public servants to be proficient in Sinhala or Tamil in 1932. However, the English educated elites continued to hold sway in the public sector and so did English.

The Nationalist Period

This period begins with Sinhala and Tamil becoming the official languages in 1944 until English became the link language in 1987. It is distinguished by the gradual decrease of English and the gradual increase of Sinhala in the public sector. It is divided into two phases of 1944-1956 and 1956-1987 because Sinhalese nationalism was consolidated before and during the first phase while Sinhalese nationalism was validated in the second

phase. As such, nationalism is tied to the Sinhalese and activities at the ethnic level to integrate them, language being a crucial element to this end (Fishman, 1968). However, the Tamils also developed their own nationalism, as noted by Manogaran (1987), Bose (1994) and Wilson (2000).

1944-1956

The Legislative Council made Sinhala and Tamil the official languages of Sri Lanka in 1944 although the initial proposal was for Sinhala only (Wilson, 2000). The nation achieved independence in 1948 with two official languages and D.S Senanayake as Prime Minister. The absence of Britain saw the primordial concepts of 'race', language and religion raise their heads (Wilson, 1988, p. 22) and Senanayake was extremely concerned about ethnic and religious harmony (Vittachi, 1995, p. 5). Senanayake envisioned a multicultural democracy and a multiracial state that did not favor any ethnicity or any section of any ethnicity that was also secular (de Silva, 1984, p. 449). This vision was not shared by the Sinhalese nationalists and even by some in Senanayake's United National Party (UNP) (de Silva, 1984, p. 496). Coupled with this was the continuing emphasis on English as the language of administration although Sinhala and Tamil were the official languages (Manogaran, 1987, p. 41). Language practice did not match language policy although an Official Language Commission was created in 1951 to report on the implementation of Sinhala and Tamil as official languages (Saunders, 2007).

If English remained an important language in the public sector, many Sinhalese were barred from participating in the new state because a condition to access it was English. This was notably true for the Sinhalese scholars who were educated in Sinhala. They led the Sinhalese masses and fanned the embers for Sinhalese nationalism and the man who harnessed it best was S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike. His political base was the *pancha maha balavegaya* or five great forces, namely the ayurveda doctors, farmers, teachers, workers and Buddhist clergy (Vittachi, 1995, Mahindapala, 1999). They were the elites for rural Sinhalese society but they felt excluded from political and economic participation as they were educated in Sinhala, not English (Obeysekarana, 1979 cited in Manogaran, 1987, p. 33) and they were more rural than urban. These groups shared a common belief that Sri Lanka was inherently Buddhist and Sinhalese. This belief stems from the Mahavamsa, a

historical poem about the early Sinhalese kings. In it, Lord Buddha said to the King of Gods, Sakka, that Buddhism would be spread in [Sri] Lanka and Sakka was to protect both Buddhism and the Sinhalese there (Cited in de Silva, 1984, p. 4). The Sinhalese had a claim to the island that the other ethnicities lacked. This claim would form the basis for their nationalism and justify nationalistic policies, including those for language.

The Sinhalese had a great history but they were the most neglected segment in society around independence (Vittachi, 1995, p. 7). They were mostly poor and lived in rural areas. Their perceived lower economic and social positions compared to the Tamils fueled insecurity about their political position in an independent state that then fueled fears about the survival of Buddhism and Sinhala in Sri Lanka (Kearney, 1985). One of the hindrances to economic and social improvement was English as not many Sinhalese save the Sinhalese elites knew English. This disabled the bulk of the Sinhalese from employment in the public sector that continued to function in English, even with independence (Fernando, 1996) because the public sector was a major source of employment then. To this, the Sinhalese nationalists responded by taking an anti-English stance that soon became an anti-Tamil stance (Bose, 1994, p. 58) as their knowledge of English had long given them an advantage over the Sinhalese in employment and education. The Tamils became guilty by association with English that could have been avoided had the state adopted education policies that stressed the importance of English. Besides, the non-elite Tamils were in the same boat as most of the Sinhalese. Both groups lost out to the Sinhalese and Tamil elites educated in English (Thangarajah & Hettige, 2007, p. 156).

The Sinhalese nationalists did not resent English as it is but against what it did to them, that is to bar employment in the public sector that consecutively barred economic and social mobility. It also made the state alien to them as long as it functioned in English. Citizens had to depend on people who knew English even to decipher information about income tax and inheritance (Manogaran, 1987, p. 46). Although the focus for Sinhalese nationalism was language, religion and ethnic survival, language came to dominate it as Sinhala was the vehicle for Sinhalese culture and religion and without it, both would suffer. Sinhala also enabled vertical integration (Fishman, 1968) as it would unite the Sinhalese across caste, class, regional and religious barriers. This concern for language would be used by S.W.R.D Bandaranaike to win the elections in 1956.

1956-1987

The new coalition government led by Bandaranaike in 1956 won on the ticket of 'Sinhala Only' that promised to proclaim Sinhala as the sole official language of Sri Lanka. It was more a political ploy to fish Sinhalese votes (de Silva, 1984, p. 501), catering to the large rural Sinhalese electorate. However, Bandaranaike's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and its rival the UNP earlier promised to maintain the status quo of Sinhala and Tamil as official languages. With the state now intending to deal with Sri Lankans in Sinhala, the Sinhalese scholars could enter political and economic domains, unthinkable before 'Sinhala Only' (Manogaran, 1987, p. 43). The Sinhala Only Act was passed in 1956 and among others required public servants to know Sinhala but provided a 4 year grace period if implementation could not be done immediately (Saunders, 2007). This permitted corpus planning as Sinhala was a language of culture, literature and religion but it was not yet fit for modern demands. For some of the Sinhalese, 'Sinhala Only' was seen as rectifying past injustices as English would no longer hamper their economic and social development. It proclaimed to the other ethnicities the dominant position of the Sinhalese in Sri Lanka because the majority native language used by the majority ethnicity was now promoted (Perera, 1984). Yet, this language policy alienated the minority ethnicities in Sri Lanka like the Tamils as not many knew Sinhala and their chances for employment in the public sector now diminished.

The activities during the second phase were geared towards maintaining, reinforcing and enriching Sinhala, common for the nationalist period (Fishman, 1968). The Constitutions of 1972 and 1978 reiterated Sinhalese nationalism by proclaiming Sinhala as the only official language and gave Buddhism a preferred position. Exception was only made for the Northern and Eastern Provinces where Tamil was permitted to be used as they had a Tamil majority populace. The Tamils were directly affected by 'Sinhala Only' as their numbers dwindled in the public sector. Sambandan (2006) reports that Tamils occupied 30% of the senior bureaucracy, 50% of the clerical field and 60% of the technical and professional fields in 1956 but their numbers declined in these fields as the years passed due to the requirement to know Sinhala.

'Sinhala Only' would also make its mark on the economy as the state pursued nationalization from 1956 to result in 65% of the economy directly in state hands by 1975 that made the state the largest employer in Sri Lanka (Fernando, 1999, p. 81). The Sinhala Only Act did not regulate the private sector but the nationalization of banks, insurance companies and oil companies made them state concerns (de Silva, 1984, p. 535) that had to function in Sinhala as dictated by the Sinhala Only Act. The public sector converted to Sinhala during this phase but Fernando (1996, p. 494) claims that English held sway in the public sector for nearly twenty years after 1956 as public servants were not proficient enough in Sinhala and the corpus planning for Sinhala did not match the status planning done for it. However, the decrease in teaching and learning English after independence implies that new public servants were not proficient (enough) in English. This, with the emphasis on Sinhala as official language contributed to Sinhala slowly dominating the public sector and replacing English. It was more pronounced after Sirimavo Bandaranaike became prime minister in 1960 as she promoted the use of Sinhala.

Ironically, English continued to be a valuable language because it was the language of commerce, science, technology and a host of other functions in Sri Lanka and beyond (Crystal, 2005, Saunders, 2007). The state could regulate language practice for the public sector but not for the private sector. When the state decided to liberalize the economy in 1977, the public sector shrunk as many state-owned companies were privatized (Hettige, 1999, p. 303). Sri Lankans had to compete for jobs in the private sector and knowing English would have set them apart from other candidates. Such was not the case because those receiving public education did not know English or did not know enough English. Sinhalese and Tamil students learnt in their native languages and both competed for jobs in the public sector that became limited after 1977. However, children from the elite or rich and urban Sinhalese or Tamil families who received private education learnt English and this gave them an advantage in employment in the private sector. Thus, English remained important but not as dominant as before 1956 in the public sector. Nationalism had simply reinforced elitism and exclusivism for English in Sri Lanka.

The Nationist Period

This period begins with English being made the link language in 1987 until today, as Sri Lanka attempts to reintroduce English to the public sector and the nation at large. The impetus for nationalism was the civil war led by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) from 1983 that lasts until today. Among the initiatives to bring peace to Sri Lanka was the Indo-Lanka Accord signed between Sri Lanka and India in 1987. Among its resolutions was to have Tamil and English as national languages, besides Sinhala. As such, nationalism focuses on governmental activities to integrate the Sinhalese and Tamils (Fishman, 1968) and English plays a crucial role to this end. In this vein, the 13th Amendment to the Constitution of 1978 made Tamil an official language with Sinhala while English became the link language. The 13th Amendment made explicit the implicit role English played in and for Sri Lanka. English had been used for interethnic communication, albeit among the elites since colonial times. However, the 13th Amendment did not explain the importance and consequence of English as the link language and Dharmadasa (1992, p. 318) mentions that it was open to personal interpretation that became clearer in the 16th Amendment to the Constitution of 1978 because English was permitted to be used in administration and legislation if citizens wish to be served in English (Constitution of Sri Lanka, 2003).

The state is more concerned with efficiency and horizontal integration among different ethnicities in the nationist period (Fishman, 1968). English is suitable as the link language as it is the one language that is neutral, not favoring either Sinhalese or Tamil, as it belongs to neither ethnicity, due to its colonial origin. Yet, the change in language policy for English was not drastic because English was not given as many domains as Sinhala and Tamil. The opaque definition of the link language also did not result in immediate changes for English and in President Kumaratunga's 1997 letter, 'Implementation of the Official Language Policy' the provisions for English were made explicit as it was now compulsory to have boards, forms, instructions and regulations for the public in Sinhala, Tamil *and* English (OLC, 2005, p. 10).

By then, the conversion of the public sector to Sinhala was almost complete and by 2000 about 91.69% of public servants were Sinhalese (Cited in Sambandan, 2006). The decrease

of English in public education translates to public servants and Sri Lankans in general having little proficiency in the language. Educational policies that promote native languages are not unproductive but at the same time they need not marginalize English as it can help traverse the (real or imagined) ethnic boundary between the Sinhalese and Tamils. Yet, the implementation of English as the link language in the public sector has been slow because the public sector has a need to function in Tamil (besides Sinhala) more than English. Such practical concern enables the Tamils to use their language to interact with the state as about 18% of Sri Lankans are Tamil (Government of Sri Lanka, 2008) but only 8.40% and 19.81% of public servants know Tamil at the state and provincial levels respectively (Cited in Sambandan, 2006). Increasing public servants' competence in Tamil helps convince the Tamils the state is accessible to them and wins them over to its side in the civil war. Hence, the priority now is to introduce Tamil to the public sector instead of English.

To this end, the state charges the Department of Official Languages (DOL) and Official Languages Commission (OLC) to expand knowledge of Sinhala, Tamil and English among public servants. For English, the DOL provides courses for public servants and there are two levels- Basic and Higher although the OLC proposes increasing them to three levels (OLC, 2005, DOL, 2006, Sambandan, 2006). Participants are tested at the end of each level to gauge their level of understanding. Participation in these English courses is voluntary but there are incentives to encourage public servants to attend and pass them. Presently, public servants are given a monthly stipend of Rs. 150 or a once lump sum stipend ranging from Rs. 500 to Rs. 5000 based on their English qualifications (OLC, 2005, p. 19). However, the OLC recommends this be raised to Rs. 500, Rs. 1000 and Rs. 1500 monthly once public servants qualify level I, II and III respectively of the new English courses (OLC, 2005, p. 27). Those who know English are also given preference in promotion (OLC, 2005, p. 27). There are incentives provided for knowing Sinhala or Tamil also.

Although these incentives can promote English among public servants, the immediate need now is to promote Tamil so public servants can communicate better with *all* Sri Lankans. This implies the program for English has a long-term goal. The OLC targets a bilingual if not trilingual public sector in 15 years (OLC, 2005, Sambandan, 2006). There is no

pressing need for English in the public sector as most public servants do not need it in the daily discharge of their duties. However, public servants in Customs, Emigration and Immigration, Foreign Affairs, Health Services, Industry and Technology and Trade and Commerce are encouraged to learn English (OLC, 2005, p. 17) as the nature of their job puts them in contact with (spoken or written) English often and English is imperative to access job-related knowledge not available in Sinhala or Tamil. Future measures to promote English include creating the National Language Training Institute to teach Sinhala, Tamil and English to public servants (Official Government News Portal, 25/11/07).

The very idea of English or any language besides Sinhala in the public sector was anathema during the nationalist period but the nationist period reverses this idea, as pragmatism, at least in language, is crucial to improve interethnic relations. Fernando (1996, p. 508) recommends that it is better for the Sinhalese and Tamils to learn each other's languages for a stronger sociocultural identity instead of learning English that is related to colonialism and elitism. This conception of English as colonial and elite misses the point that language is amenable to local wants and needs. Sri Lankans cannot afford to ignore English as it is an international language that can be used for their benefit. This means using English for national development. Besides, English has been and is being nativized in Sri Lanka. Perception, not language, has to change and the state should play a role in this change. There might also be resistance to learn Sinhala and Tamil from the Tamils and Sinhalese respectively, after nearly three decades of civil war although the state encourages and sponsors programs to learn Sinhala and Tamil among public servants.

As such, the functional differentiation of languages, as forwarded by Safran (2005, p. 12), is useful here as Sinhala and Tamil are used for intraethnic communication but English is used for interethnic communication. English is also useful for international communication. This view should be adopted as it gives the native languages and English their respective spaces in Sri Lanka's linguistic repertoire that is most importantly exclusive and non-competitive. As such, the Sinhalese need not fear the deterioration of Sinhala as it would be used for domains that are closely related to them like culture, literature and religion. This confirms Fishman's (1968, p. 47) prediction that most 'new nations' would adopt nationism and diglossia involving a language of wider

communication (English and Sinhala/Tamil for Sri Lanka). However, such functional differentiation must not be so extreme until it disrupts Sinhala's modernization. Tamil is better placed because it is widely promoted and used in neighboring Tamil Nadu, India.

Sri Lanka's Parliament gazetted the National Cultural Policy in November 2007 that encourages using English, including for literary purposes (National Cultural Policy, 2007). The National Cultural Policy supports multilingualism and the future holds much hope for English in Sri Lanka. English might stage a comeback in the public sector in the long run and this must come as part of a larger scheme to promote and improve English in Sri Lanka. The direct way to do so is via the education system as students have about 13 years of free public education. This removes English from its elitist environs and also makes it inclusivist as everyone has a chance to learn English. Yet, before implementing such programs in the education sector, teachers have to be trained and a recent survey by the Presidential Secretariat found that there are nearly 21,000 untrained English teachers at the primary and secondary levels (Official Government News Portal, 20/04/08). The lack of (trained) teachers and resources has to be solved before mass programs for English are introduced. Recent steps taken by the state are promising and can be evaluated in due time.

Conclusion

The fate of English in Sri Lanka's public sector has been impacted by nationalism and nationism. Language policy is not made in vacuum and is informed by local ideology. Political or social position(s) or situation(s) do and can influence language policy and the Sri Lankan case confirms this. Ideologies are often biased but are powerful, enough to fire people's imagination. When language enters the ideological realm, it becomes a symbol (Fishman, 1968, p. 43) and not only influences its role(s) in relation to the state but also the role(s) of other languages. In Sri Lanka, nationalism promoted Sinhala at the expense of Tamil and English because Sinhalese nationalism was at its peak around independence, common for many newly independent states (Gill, 2002). The civil war encouraged nationalism that supports reintroducing English to the public sector and also to other domains like education. However, some domains like the media have had some presence of English that might increase with the present backing for English. The key word now is democratization or the teaching and learning of English to citizens, rural or urban, poor or

rich, especially students, so everyone benefits from English. Knowing English should not be the privilege of any group, ethnic or elite, an idea echoed by President Rajapaksa (Rajapaksa, 2005). In this vein, 2009 is to be the Year of Information Technology and English Language in Sri Lanka (Official Government News Portal, 22/06/08).

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