

# Language education policies, ideologies and identity politics: from post-colonial to post-war Sri Lanka

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# Language education policies, ideologies and identity politics: from post-colonial to post-war Sri Lanka

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## Abstract

Language ideologies and policies are intertwined concepts that shape language practices and social identities. By examining the evolution of language policies responding to global and local demands and the historicity of language ideologies in Sri Lanka, this paper aims to understand language ideological shifts and their impact on national, group, and individual identities. As a multicultural nation with a history of colonialism and a 26-year civil war, Sri Lanka's language ideologies have been deeply influenced by these experiences. Post-colonial language policies claim to promote nationalism while consequent post-war language policy changes are said to be the attempts to solve the linguistic disparity of the country. This paper sheds light on the contemporary linguistic landscape through a review of literature on the historicity of language ideologies. Understanding the intricacies of language ideologies is crucial for addressing linguistic and identity-related challenges associated with Sri Lanka's efforts at post-war reconciliation. Doing so this paper provides valuable insights into contemporary language policies and their potential implications for the future.

**Keywords:** language policy, Sri Lanka, language ideology, language order

## Introduction

Language policies and language education have been crucial in Sri Lanka's post-colonial nation-building and post-war reconciliation. Despite language diversity being a common feature of many South Asian nations, Sri Lanka's case is unique due to the 26-year armed conflict between the majoritarian Sinhalese government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which sought to establish an independent state for the Tamil minority. Issues related to language rights were a key factor contributing to this civil war. Therefore, language policies and the historicity of language ideologies could provide insights into the broader socio-political landscape of the country and allow us to analyze current language ideologies and future tendencies.

Zhou (2016) defines language ideology as a system of beliefs, assumptions, presuppositions, ideas, values, and attitudes about whether multilingualism or monolingualism should be practised, which

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language is valued and which is not, which language is “our” language, and which belongs to others, etc. (p.4). Language ideologies frame and influence most aspects of language use, but their influence is not always directly observable (McGroarty, 2010, p. 3), which means they are mainly unconscious and often become naturalized, so that they become the ingrained and taken-for-granted assumptions about languages, including prestige (which languages are valuable) and hierarchies (the relative value of a language vis-à-vis other languages) (Başok & Sayer, 2020). Since language policies impact many stakeholders and are the byproducts of language ideologies of the power mechanisms, language policy is “an inherently political matter” (Grin, 2006 as cited in Başok & Sayer, 2020, p. 55). Shohamy (2006) defines language policy as a mechanism used by authorities overtly and covertly to exercise control over language space. She further elaborates on how the concept of language policy falls between language ideology and practice in the midst of the manipulations of political, social, economic and personal ideologies such as language to create group membership, to demonstrate inclusion or exclusion, to determine loyalty or patriotism, to show economic status, to classify people and to showcase people’s identity. Therefore, the identities of people are attached to language ideologies or simply languages they use and the different relative status of those languages.

Language ideologies are not simply about language but also involve social and cultural conceptions of personhood, citizenship, morality, quality and value, etc., therefore, they have material effects on the world and thus are particularly important to understand (Farr & Song, 2011, p. 651). As such, studying the historicity of language ideologies is recognized as an important research agenda (Madhukar et al., 2023) as it enables us to understand how current language ideologies and policies are shaped by historical events such as colonialism, globalization and neoliberalism. Research can utilize micro-level (classroom activity), meso-level (institutional policies), and macro-level (sociopolitical) dynamics to understand underlying language ideologies (Madhukar et al., 2023).

Research about Sri Lankan language policies and language planning has been conducted by a few scholars (Canagarajah, 2005; Coperahewa, 2009, 2011; Liyanage, 2019, 2021; Walisundara & Hettiarachchi 2016; Wyss, 2020). However, the concept of language ideologies in the Sri Lankan context has not been given adequate scholarly attention. Accordingly, through a review of literature, this paper looks at the evaluation of the macro-level language policies in Sri Lanka. To do so, the paper particularly refers to language education of the post-colonial period (1948 onwards), civil war period (1983-2009) up until the post-war period (2009 onwards). Accordingly, the paper investigates and interprets popular language ideological shifts and how those changes at the macro level affected identity politics. This analysis of the historicity of ideologies and their evaluation aims to answer two questions: 1. what is the connection between language ideologies and broader political and ideological developments in Sri Lankan society? 2. How did we arrive at our contemporary views and perspectives on language and our assessments of current linguistic situations? I start by giving a brief overview of the Sri Lankan historical linguistic landscape.

Thereafter, I briefly introduce a theoretical account of language policies and ideologies before moving to the analysis of two different periods separately: the post-colonial era and the civil war and post-war era. I then discuss ideological shifts relating to language and language-in-education, their relationship with identity politics, and implications for future language policies.

### **An overview of Sri Lanka and its linguistic background**

In multi-cultural and multi-ethnic Sri Lanka, a majority of the population is Sinhalese (74.9%), while the remainder consists of 11.2% Sri Lankan Tamils, 4.1% Indian Tamils and 9.3% Sri Lankan Moors/Muslims (Department of Census and Statistics, 2012). There are two official national languages: Sinhala and Tamil. Sinhala is spoken only in Sri Lanka mainly by Sinhalese as their native language and by some Muslims. Tamil is spoken by Tamils and the majority of Muslims, and it is spoken by approximately 80 million people worldwide (Wyss, 2020). English is the language of colonial inheritance which is officially designated as the “link language”. Despite its label as the link language, English is a valuable commodity in Sri Lanka’s linguistic marketplace like many places in the world. English functions as *de facto* official language in many domains including the commercial and NGO sectors (Canagarajah, 2005). Issues related to language differences between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamils were one of the root causes of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka (Coperehewa, 2009; Canagarajah, 2005), and are widely seen as having been more important in this respect than religion or ethnicity (Tambiah, 1986). The following section of the paper will discuss the reason why language is central to the conflicts and underlying and contributing language policies and ideologies.

Language issues have contributed to conflict, as such language education and language -in -education policies and practices are central to the political and social cohesion of Sri Lanka to bring about post-war reconciliation and to make sure that such unfortunate violent conflicts would not be repeated. In a context of constant contestation amongst different linguistic communities, language policy planning is largely driven by political aspirations and nationalist motivations (Coperahewa, 2009). These policies were seen as Sinhalese nationalistic propaganda at the post-independence general election (Coperahewa, 2009), attempts to solve ethnic and political unrest (Liyanage, 2019; Walisundara & Hettiarachchi, 2016), failed attempts those created post-colonial social divide (Medawattegedara, 2015; Wijesekera et al., 2018) and contributing to further social, ethnic and political problems (Coperahewa, 2009; Wyss, 2020). Therefore, understanding the historicity of language ideologies and identity issues is crucial to making recommendations about potential future language policies of the country.

## **Theoretical background**

Language ideologies serve to differentiate individuals and groups, shape speakers' understanding of the nature of knowledge and are major determinants of social and cultural identities (McGroarty, 2010). Therefore, language is a marker of group identity. For example, many post-colonial nations have utilized language for nation-building agendas. Accordingly, language has always been manipulated and controlled by people who want to promote political, social, economic and personal ideologies (Shohamy, 2006).

Nevertheless, actual language behaviour at different levels may not always be consistent with explicitly proclaimed language ideologies, for many reasons (McGroarty, 2010). Zhou (2016) derives the concept of "language order" from Fishman's concepts of linguistic order (1998/1999) to further theorize the concept of language ideology in comparison with language order. She uses Fishman's categorization of languages within an order which was based on four main criteria; 1) the number of speakers, including both first language speakers and second language speakers, 2) the domains of language use, such as education, banking and international trade 3) the status of languages, whether a language is designed as a national language or an official language of international organizations, 4) a language's access to resources, such as internet, cultural (re)production, and official empowerment (p. 3). As per this categorization, Fishman outlined three levels of languages within the hierarchy including super languages, like English, regional languages, like Arabic and Chinese, and numerous local languages (Zhou, 2016, p. 6). In light of these perspectives, Zhou theorized language ideology as a superstructure, and language order as a reality of institutionalized hierarchical relationships. To do so, she analyzes the evolution of language ideologies and orders in the contexts of colonization and decolonization in Asia. Among the conclusions she draws she states that (1) language ideology and language order became predominant in colonization and anti-colonial national movements and processes of postcolonial state formation only since the nineteenth century when territorial claims were made; (2) language ideology generally precedes the creation of a language order; (3) existing language order may generate supporting language ideology; and (4) the language order may be local, national, regional, and global, but language ideology is always localized (p. 17). Informed by these perspectives, this paper evaluates language policies in Sri Lanka particularly referring to language education analyzing language ideological shifts starting from colonial Sri Lanka up until today's language planning situation.

## **Colonial era and language education**

The British (1796-1948) were the only colonizers who significantly influenced language ideologies and language policies in Sri Lanka despite previous periods of colonization by the Portuguese (1505-1658), and Dutch (1658-1796). Both Portuguese and Dutch ruled only the coastal areas of Sri Lanka and they

were unable to extend further inland. During the colonial period, the British divided the country into nine provinces. Officially, the North and East provinces were considered Tamil-speaking areas while the Southern part was Sinhala-speaking (Coperehewa, 2011). When the British conquered the whole island in 1815, English was eventually made the official language, and it retained that status until 1956 (Coperehewa, 2009). However, this cannot be considered a completely assimilationist approach as the British were not interested in educating the general public in English. Instead, they introduced a system of English schools in order to produce loyal and Westernized natives who could serve the colonial government (Coperehewa, 2009). In other words, this was a mission to produce bilingual ‘brown Sahibs’ (Goonetilleke, 2013); English- Sinhala and English- Tamil speakers with Western mindsets. The English education introduced by the British was fee-based while vernacular education was free. Thus, English education was limited to social castes which were already considered as elite (Canagarajah, 2005). This pattern of language education was not limited to Sri Lanka but was also common in India during the colonial period (see Kumar, 2005). However, studying the Sri Lankan situation is less complex as it provides a more manageable national case study due to its smaller size (Brutt-griffler, 2002). Therefore, this historical account of changes in language ideologies and their impact on different aspects of society can provide insight into similar contexts.

In parallel to British influence, in the 1820s, American missionaries also promoted the learning of English language to spread Christianity through education. In this way, English proficiency further stratified society providing status, wealth and power to the rich, upper caste, urban Christians (Canagarajah, 2005). American missionaries later increasingly used local languages, with the purpose of spreading Christianity to the large majority of people who had not learned English but the British government’s influence turned it back to English medium education (Coperehewa, 2011). This was a strategy used by the British colonial authorities to keep English and Christianity out of reach of the vast majority of the population, thus reinforcing the privileges of loyalist native Sri Lankan elites who assisted them in maintaining control.

The first-ever proclamation related to language policy in colonial Sri Lanka can be found in the Colebrook Report on the Administration of the Government Ceylon issued in 1832 which influenced the government to regulate language, and discussed problems related to the use of local languages in administration. Though the commission recommended promoting English monolingualism and abolishing vernacular, the commission was unable to ignore local languages and eventually promoted them alongside English schools (Coperehewa, 2011).

As a result of these language policies and practices, English was taught mainly in “English schools” which were attended by a tiny and privileged minority (Goonetilleke, 2013), with vernacular schools functioning separately. Anglo-Vernacular schools used vernacular languages as the media of instruction in primary years and switched over to English and these were also fee-charged schools. These schools were

not successful and were gradually converted to English schools (Kularatne, 2016). Government schools were maintained by public funds while aided schools were a result of grant-in-aid missionary enterprise, also called missionary schools (Wickrama, 2011). Table 1 gives a summary of the different types of schools that functioned from 1871-1900 which gives insights about English education being limited to a minority group of students. Data in the table also shows that during the period 1870-1900, English education was almost left to the Christian missions (Coperehewa, 2011). Nevertheless, the Christian mission was not limited to English schools but was also widespread in Vernacular schools.

**Table 1: Government and Aided Schools, 1871-1900 (Coperehewa, 2011, p. 47).**

Type of school	1871	1881	1891	1900
Government English	17	26	3	4
Government Anglo Vernacular	34	25	13	12
Government Vernacular	129	347	422	484
Aided English	37	77	51	144
Aided Anglo Vernacular	40	82	66	16
Aided Vernacular	237	680	854	1,168
Total	494	1,237	1,409	1,828

According to Goonetilleke (2013), in 1914, only 37,500 pupils attended English schools, while 347,500 were registered in “vernacular schools” and before independence, there were around 180,000 pupils in English schools, while 720,000 attended vernacular schools. By 1901, only 3% of the native male population was literate in English (Census of Ceylon, 1901 as cited in Coperehewa, 2011) which further proves the restricted access to English education. Accordingly, given the prestigious status of English language in the country, English-educated natives had access to financially and socially rewarding employment while students who were educated in vernacular schools got only low-level jobs and had no opportunities for higher education. As a result of the geographical distribution of different ethnicities and the distribution of ‘English schools’ during the colonial period, Tamils had more access to English education compared to Sinhalese. Northern province is a Tamil-dominant area and more than 20% of English educational institutes were located there increasing access to learning English for the Tamil community. This was especially because there were a large number of missionary schools in the northern part of Sri Lanka (Lim, 2013). With this advantage (over the Sinhalese) in English literacy, the Tamils could secure more opportunities in select professions such as law, medicine and engineering (Lim, 2013). Sinhalese considered this as a part of British government’s ‘divide and rule’ policy which benefited minority Tamils over the majority Sinhalese (Canagarajah, 2005). This gradually created a new form of language inequality in Sri Lankan society; those who knew English and those who did not know it (Coperehewa, 2011), further compounding ethnic, religious and caste differences. Similar to other colonial contexts, the English language was associated with power and higher status while the use of the vernacular was regarded as an “admission of

inferiority” (Wyndham, 1933 as cited in Coperehewa, 2011, p. 43). Hence, English emerged as a marker of class identity. Most importantly, English education was successful and popular among elites while students in rural areas received poor English education even though English was made a compulsory subject from grade 3 onwards in 1940 (Nawastheen, 2019).

### **Post-colonial linguistic nationalism and ethnic conflicts**

In response to the dominance of the English language, many Sri Lankan activists sought to promote local languages. The *Swabasha* movement (own languages movement) started prior to independence was supported by native elites seeking political power. This advocated replacing English with Sinhala and Tamil. Accordingly, language status planning began in Sri Lanka in 1944, when it was decided that Sinhala and Tamil should become the official languages of the country (Coperahewa, 2009). The reforms proposed in 1946 envisaged a ten-year plan to transform the linguistic orientation of the public sector and to replace English with vernaculars (Bawa, 2013; Liyanage, 2021). In 1944, a State Council resolution required Sinhala alone to replace English as the official language in Sri Lanka, a move which the Tamil community found discriminatory (Brutt-griffler, 2002). This kind of resolution to establish Sinhalese as the dominant vernacular making it the official language resonates with some other post-colonial nations as countries with colonial history are keen to establish a national language as a symbol of independent nationhood (Kirkpatrick, 2017, p. 9). Accordingly, after independence in 1948, the debates over languages were intensified.

Despite opposition from the Tamil community, the “Sinhala Only Act/Official language Act” was introduced in 1956 making Sinhala the only official language but ruling and social elites were formed by the “brown sahib” class (Goonetilleke, 2013). Among these social elites were also English-educated Tamil middle class. This suggests even though the ruling elites promoted the Sinhala language for political purposes, they themselves were predominantly English-educated and English-speaking. This Act marginalized monolingual Tamils in the government administration (Liyanage, 2019), as the Sinhalese majority demanded what many saw as their “rightful” portion of state employment (Spencer, 2012). Some blamed the resulting tensions on the legacy of a colonial “divide and rule” approach by the British that had favoured Sri Lankan Tamils in education and employment (Burger, 1987). The protests were led against Sinhala dominance, but Tamil elite linguistic nationalism merely aimed at winning electoral support from Tamil monolinguals to enable the sharing of power with Sinhala elites which means middle-class Tamils benefited from this social stratification (Canagarajah, 2005).

The sequence of incidents leading to this decision mirrors the conflicts over Urdu and Hindi languages in independent India where slogans such as “Hindi, Hindu, Hindustani” and “Urdu, Muslim, Pakistan” exhibited the role of language and religion in early nation-building (Immidisetti, 2021). Also

similar was the failure of Sri Lankan nationalists, like their Indian counterparts, to dislodge the status of English by introducing national languages of their own. However, Sri Lanka's move to a 'Sinhala only' policy from 1956 was significantly more radical than attempts in post-independence India to promote the use of Hindi, and hence more consequential in its effects on Sinhala-Tamil relations, and on the alienation of the Tamil community. This post-war linguistic nationalist move demonstrates that language ideology is closely associated with nationalism (Zhou, 2016).

The Sinhala Only Act forced Tamil government officials to acquire Sinhala language proficiency during a probationary period of 3 years by passing a proficiency test and as per the act most of the government publications were issued only in Sinhala (Coperahewa, 2009). Hence, Tamils were forced to resign from their public service positions if they could not meet the required Sinhala language proficiency (Mehta, 2011). Despite these changes introduced with the Act a notable exception was education in Tamil-medium schools were allowed to operate in Tamil medium across the country and students retained the right to sit public examinations in Tamil throughout the island (Abayasekara, 2010).

In response to the introduction of the Sinhala Only Act, the Tamil Federal Party stressed the importance of Tamil language and called on the Tamil population of the country to refuse any business with the Sinhalese government, to refuse teaching and learning Sinhala and to communicate with the government only in Tamil and English (Coperahewa, 2009). The Sinhalese government attempted to negotiate with the Tamil political leaders with a wide range of initiatives. Such initiatives included the Bandaranayake-Chelvanayakam pact in 1957 which proposed legislations to recognize Tamil as the language of national minority of Ceylon and language of government administration in Northern and Eastern provinces; the Senanayake-Chelvanayakam pact in 1965 which proposed Tamil as the language of administration and of records in Northern and Eastern provinces; and the 1966 Tamil Language Regulations which proposed use of Tamil for business in Northern and Eastern areas for public records (Bawa, 2013). Though most of the initiatives were stalled due to resistance from the majority Sinhala population, they influenced the Tamil Language Act in 1958 (Prasangani, 2014) through which Tamil was accepted for certain administrative activities and as a medium of instruction in secondary and tertiary education.

The argument of Sinhala nationalists focused on language survival, as they claimed that Sinhala was more endangered than Tamil in a global sense given the fact that Sinhala is used only in Sri Lanka and spoken by around 3 million people whereas Tamil is used by more than 40 million people in India and worldwide (Coperahewa, 2009). The Sinhalese nationalists feared that if Tamil was given the demanded status, it would gradually become the dominant language in Sri Lanka and might eventually eliminate Sinhala. A Sri Lankan Tamil anthropologist, Thambiah (1986), therefore characterized the Sinhalese as a 'majority with a minority complex'. According to Perera et al (2004), the Official Language Act triggered a series of events that culminated in the communal riots of 1958, and they also argue that the ethnic riots and war between Tamil militants and government armed forces which started in 1983 were ultimately

extensions of these riots. According to Canagarajah (2005) nationalistic struggles and debates over language arose ultimately from party political competition amongst elites. He further explained that Sinhalese government nationalism was a strategy to gain votes from monolinguals and on the other hand, Tamil politicians' linguistic nationalism was aimed at sharing power with the Sinhala elite by winning electoral support from Tamil monolinguals.

As a result of these political manipulations, Sinhala and Tamil laypeople became victims of the politicians' greed for power and wealth, as they exploited and popularized nationalistic language ideologies, polarizing ethnic groups based on language. However, the Sinhala Only Act was in effect only for a relatively short time as the Tamil language Act was introduced in 1958. Despite this recognition, the delay in addressing the grievances of Tamil community damaged the Sinhalese-Tamil relations (Abayasekara, 2010). In 1972, the first republican constitution was introduced, designating Sinhala as the language of legislation with provision for Tamil translation in response to political and social pressure from minority groups and people from North and East provinces which were considered as 'Tamil-speaking areas' (Coperehewa, 2011). In 1978, as an amendment to the existing language policy, Tamil was designated as a national language while Sinhala remained the official language (Liyanage, 2019; Prasangani, 2014). 1983 marked the beginning of the Civil war between the LTTE and Sri Lankan government. The language policy and political demands of the LTTE were not only oppositional against the Sinhalese, but also against the politics of the elite bilingual Tamils. As explained by Canagarajah, (2005), the LTTE insisted on Tamil only and Pure Tamil (without borrowed or adopted words, especially from English) in certain extreme terms when they established their de facto state in 1990 which favoured monolingual folk. Canagarajah points out that, the majority of high officials of the regime were Tamil monolinguals coming from non-dominant castes/groups. However, because of international connections, the LTTE regime could not completely refuse English though it was their policy. Nevertheless, their Tamil-only language policy was not a complete failure as the Tamil language was being used increasingly for institutional and official purposes in northern Sri Lanka giving an instrumental value for the language Tamil and that was a relief for Tamil monolinguals as that situation opened up educational, social, economic and professional opportunities to monolinguals. According to Canagarajah, the LTTE showcased that languages do not come to power by themselves unless aided by guns and swords (p. 434).

Meanwhile, pressure from the LTTE and other Tamil political and community activists influenced further adjustment in the government's language policies. In 1987, the 13th amendment to the 1978 Constitution was introduced as an outcome of the Indo-Lanka Accord, which aimed to resolve Sri Lanka's full-fledged civil war. The amendment not only led to the creation of Provincial Councils and a power-sharing arrangement between the central government and the nine provinces of the country but also raised Tamil to the status of official language, by amending Article 18 of the Constitution. In 1987, both Sinhala and Tamil were proclaimed official and national languages, with English as the 'link language'

(Walisubdara and Hettiarachchi, 2015).

However, these repeated declarations of Tamil's status as a national and official language suggest that, in practice, they were being largely ignored across much of the country. Bawa (2013) states that the language rights of Tamil-speaking minorities are recognized on paper but not enforced. In 1991, under President Premadasa, the government took a notable policy decision to address linguistic human rights by establishing an Official Language Commission (OLC) with legislative powers to supervise the implementation of official language policy under Act No 18 of 1991 (Coperahewa, 2009). The OLC was mandated to supervise compliance with provisions contained in Chapter IV of the Constitution (which lays down the Official Languages Policy of the state). The OLC still functions, but issues related to negligence and ignorance of official language policy and its implementations are widespread, disadvantaging the Tamil language and Tamil community in Sinhala dominant areas and Sinhala language in Tamil dominant areas. For example, Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) in 2011 identified that the majority of the Tamil people are marginalized due to deficiencies in the implementation of language policies by successive governments.

## **Language policy reforms during and after war**

### ***Bilingual policy***

Due to the war, social cohesion became a key concern for both the government and non-government organizations. One of the initiatives taken by the government to enhance positive interactions between Sinhala and Tamil students was the proposal to establish 'Amity Schools' in 2001. The aim was to produce high-achieving students representing different ethnic groups studying and working together while using English as a common link language (De Mel, 2022). Though the Amity School project was limited to a pilot run, studying a few subjects in English became popular and was introduced to secondary students (Grade 6 to 11) in 2002 to continue studying one to five subjects in English while other subjects are taught either in Sinhala or Tamil only in schools with human and physical resources already available (Jayasooriya and Vickers, in press). In 2007, this programme was renamed as bilingual education. Table 2 shows the distribution of schools as per their medium of instruction and the number of students studying under each medium. This can be interpreted as a reproduction of the language education situation in the colonial era and the numbers resonates with Table 1.

Mother tongue as Medium of Instruction was introduced, phasing out English medium education in the government sector by 1983 (NEC, 2016), ostensibly as an effort to recover Sri Lanka's lost identity (Punchi, 2001). Despite that policy, there has been a gradual shift back to English. In schools where the Bilingual education policy has been implemented since 2001, depending on the availability of classroom space and teachers, a group of students are given a choice to switch to bilingual education (Sinhala -English

**Table 2: Distribution of students and teachers based on medium**

Medium	Number of Schools	Number of students	Number of teachers (as per language medium of appointment)
Sinhala	6,348 (62.4%)	2,981,235	170,320 (69.1%)
Tamil	3,030 (29.8%)	988,773	65,018 (26.4%)
Bilingual	S/T 45 (0.4%)	91,645	E 11,254 (4.6%)
	S/E 541 (5.3%)		
	S/T/E 33 (0.3%)		

Source: Ministry of Education, 2019

or Tamil-English). According to Brutt-Griffer (2002), simply giving a choice of language in education is unfair when one language has a much higher status than all others. More importantly, a sector of fee-paying “international schools” offer education solely in English medium, preparing the children of elite families for UK-based IGCSE and A Level examination or Edexcel-IAL. Accordingly, the introduction of bilingual education to very few schools that possess the resources to afford it can be seen as an attempt to replicate or widen access to English-medium education for relatively privileged groups in competition with international schools, reproducing the colonial linguistic hierarchy.

### *Trilingual policy initiatives*

Trilingual policy attempts started during the war and continued up to the post-war period driven by the will to promote social cohesion and reconciliation. There is no explicit policy titled trilingual policy but alongside English Medium Instruction, there have been efforts to advance reconciliation through the ideology of pluralism. One such initiative was teaching of Second National Language (2NL) (Sinhala for Tamil students and Tamil for Sinhala students). Compulsory instruction in 2NL from Grades 6 to 9 was initiated in 1999, and it was made an elective subject for Grades 10 and 11 from 2001. In 2003, 2NL learning was extended to Grades 3, 4, and 5, and in 2007 oral instruction in 2NL was mandated at Grades 1 and 2 (NEC, 2016). According to Liyanage (2019), this initiative was not a success primarily due to a lack of qualified teachers. He further states that 23,000 2NL teachers were required to implement the policy while by 2011 there were only fewer than 4000 teachers.

In addition, in 2007, the government introduced a new regulation to ensure the second language proficiency of public servants making it compulsory for them to be proficient in the second national language (Tamil for Sinhalese and Sinhala for Tamils) within five years of the recruitment to be eligible for annual salary increments (Wyss, 2020). In order to make this endeavour a success, the National Institute of Language Education Training (NILET) was established, and they handled the training courses and the government conducted prescribed exams to determine language proficiency. However, from 2020 onwards completion of a government prescribed 2NL language course with a duration ranging from

100-200 hours depending on service level is taken as proof of acquisition of required competency (Ministry of Public Services, 2020). Therefore, the success of this policy remains questionable.

Also, in 2011 a trilingual initiative was formally launched with, a Ten-Year National Plan for a Trilingual Sri Lanka (2012-2022). Accordingly, people were encouraged to be proficient in all three languages: Sinhala, Tamil and English. The objective of the trilingual initiative was stated as to create social integration through the spread of languages. According to Malalasekara (2019), trilingual policy is more likely to be unsuccessful due to linguisticism (i.e: - the unfair treatment of an individual or community based on their use of language). This resentment of having to learn the other group's language is caused by the mistrust and prejudice between communities due to long-lasting ethnic conflicts which were aggravated by civil war and the interest and desire they have for English as a key to social mobility and economic prosperity. This is an interesting social phenomenon in trying to understand the consequences of trilingual policy. More importantly, the implementation of this policy was not closely monitored or largely supported by the government due to changes in political regimes.

### *The 'Speak English Our Way' movement*

Soon after the end of the war one of the significant language initiatives by the government was 18-month Road map to promote spoken/communicative English skills in Sri Lanka which was started on 22nd June 2009 and followed by a cabinet decision taken in January 2009 (Ministry of Education, 2010). This can be recognized as the first policy concerning the prestigious status of English and a turning point for Sri Lankans starting to accept Sri Lankan English in replacement of British Standard English. Accordingly, this presidential initiative was posited with the motto "English as a Life Skill-Speak English our Way" has created a Sri Lankan identity for the English language. This attempt to embed Sri Lankan identity in the use of English was intended to make Lankans feel less alienated from their roots, heritage, villages, and family and to be culturally and emotionally on par with social norms (Ministry of Education, 2010). Moreover, the Ministry of Education (2012) believes that this initiative has been capable of eradicating pronunciation prejudices existing in Sri Lankan society by identifying the Sri Lankan version of English as legitimate similar to that of a variety of "Englishes" worldwide. This campaign of "Speak English our Way" expected to give confidence to even the students in rural areas to get rid of their fears and use their own patterns of accentuation, pronunciation and diction (Ministry of Education, 2012). This initiative was appreciated and given a lot of attention due to the existing linguistic disparity in Sri Lanka based on language which is faced by both majority (Sinhala) and minority (Tamil) people of the country.

The very idea of "Speak English our way" was an attempt to challenge standard British English, proficiency which was limited to a minority, and which was widely seen as an instrument of social oppression and social discrimination. Accordingly, challenging this status quo, the establishment of a legitimate version of Sri Lankan English has further watershed the most important concept regarding the use of

English for its utility value and not for social worth (Ministry of Education, 2010). The use of pictures of “*Manne*” (machete) in textbooks and telecasting and broadcasting advertisements highlighting the replacement of *Kaduwa* (sword) from *Manne* (machete) can be identified as very crucial involvement in changing the symbolic meanings people assigned to those tools: *Kaduwa* (sword=weapon) for British Standard English and *Manne* (machete=tool) for Sri Lankan English (Madawattegedara, 2015). However, as with other initiatives, this initiative also did not last long due to the lack of governmental-level support.

Analyzing language policies introduced throughout history provided insights into the politics of those policies and also public and scholarly perceptions about those policies. Below is a discussion that attempts to provide an analytical overview of language ideological shifts down to the present day, while suggesting some implications for the future.

### Language Ideological Shifts and Identity Politics

The literature review enables us to understand macro-level language ideological shifts that occurred in parallel to milestone language policy initiatives. Wyss (2020) in her analysis of the socio-political situation identifies four critical junctures pertaining to Sri Lanka. They are: 1948- independence, 1956- Sinhala only Act, 1978- constitution and 1987- 13th amendment to the constitution. Building on Wyss’s frame of analysis, this review of literature identifies the Sinhala Only Act, 1987- 13<sup>th</sup> amendment, bilingual education policy and trilingual policy initiatives as milestones in language policy or language education initiatives. Historically, Sri Lankan society was multiethnic and plurilingual. With colonization, another language was introduced creating a language hierarchy in the society. This led to post-independence decolonization through monolingualism and linguistic nationalistic language ideologies in which ethnic groups competed for language rights and recognition. The analysis of this literature is synthesized in Table 3 to clearly understand the process of ideological shift in parallel with successive language policies.

**Table 3: ideological orientations of key language policies**

Phases of Linguistic Transformation	Macro-level language ideology	Interpretation
Colonization	English language is important and more valuable than other languages	English is the language of elites and the language that helps to acquire social and economic capital
Decolonization/emergence of linguistic nationalism	Ideology of one language/assimilationism	Majoritarian language as the official language to replace English
Wartime and post-war language policies	Pluralist language ideology	People should learn more than one language; Sri Lankans should be trilingual
Globalization/post-war re-colonizing of language education	English is a global language and more valuable than other languages	English remains powerful among bilingual and trilingual policy promotions.

Adopted from Başok & Sayer, 2020

Though the macro-level language ideologies are not always reflected in meso (institutional level) and micro (classroom level) levels, the former influences the latter. Similarly, macro-level language policy and language ideologies influence each other though there is no single theorization on which determines the other. The combination of language policy and ideology has created significant socio-political as well as economic changes in Sri Lankan society. According to Liyanage (2019), language education policy in Sri Lanka has been both a source and instrument of social and political division for over 200 years. The main reason for this was language and ethnicity assume a key role in the competition over constituencies and votes (Sorensen, 2011, p. 217).

In post-colonial Sri Lanka, as in many other former colonies, language has been utilized as a weapon in inter-ethnic power struggles (Coperahewa, 2009). Post-independence linguistic nationalism was mainly a mere symbolic gesture to gain votes from monolingual folk (Canagarajah, 2005). This short-sighted political greed opened up doors for a fierce war that lasted for 26 years. At the same time, as the linguistic rights of Tamils were one of the main concerns of LTTE, Canagarajah (2005) argues that Tamil militancy is the outcome of the forces at play in the history of language politics in this island (p.434). This shows that post-independence efforts to decolonise language education in Sri Lanka have failed due to the rivalry of linguistic groups and extreme linguistic nationalization which resulted in an armed conflict. The English language could benefit from this rupture establishing its position as a link language or common language which can bridge two hostile linguistic groups. Some scholars believe that English functioning as a neutral link language can boost cross-linguistic flexibility and increase acceptance of diversity and heterogeneity (Malalasekara, 2019; Wijesekera and Alford, 2019; Sittarage, 2018). On the other hand, some other scholars argue that achieving ethnic harmony through English is not practical or sustainable, as English exacerbates social divisions and power disparities (Punchi, 2001; Wijayatunga, 2018). For example, research provides evidence on furthering social divisions as a result of reintroduction of English Medium Education from 2001 onwards (Jayasooriya and Vickers, in press).

Previous literature shows that language ideology during and in post-war situations has started to drive away from linguistic nationalism towards pluralism. Embracing multilingualism or particularly trilingualism in post-war Sri Lanka is unarguably a positive sign for the post-war reconciliation effort. However, in the presence of linguistic hierarchy (or language order), all three languages do not carry equal power dynamics or linguistic capital. This is so because, the reality of institutionalized hierarchical relationships in Sri Lanka have been built in response to the global language order (Zhou, 2016). Though education has been free from grade 1 to university level in state schools and state universities in Sri Lanka since 1945 which is a policy introduced even before independence (Sorensen, 2011), this has only ensured free access to limited resources. This can be considered a significant feature of the education system in Sri Lanka compared to neighbouring countries and many other countries in the world where education is not free. However, this policy does not necessarily ensure equal access to quality language education or quality

education in general. More importantly, access to English education remains limited furthering elitism associated with the English language.

On the other hand, pluralistic language policy initiatives have always been transient except for the bilingual education policy initiative which is only symbolic in signalling the pursuit of social harmony (Jayasooriya and Vickers, in press). Jayasooriya and Vickers further highlight how bilingual education exacerbates class divisions in society contributing to expanding elite and middle classes while neglecting students who already have no or limited access to English language education. They argue that bilingual education has exacerbated class divisions inside schools as students are divided, forming their identities based on their medium of instruction. Language policy has social and political consequences such as constructing, reconstructing or reforming national identity (Farr & Song, 2011). Likewise, in the Sri Lankan linguistic marketplace, language policy also has individual-level consequences such as determining if a person is worthy enough for employment despite the technical or subject knowledge they have as communicative competence is also key to any employment. This even applies to higher education as language proficiency can be a gatekeeper for certain educational programmes. As higher education is mainly delivered in English, monolinguals can find it extremely challenging. For example, medical and engineering education is only delivered in English. Therefore, English proficiency is the vehicle for success in higher education and employment. As such, English has been objectified as something people can possess or lack which means it is an asset or a valuable commodity that can be acquired (McCarty 2004). This can potentially fuel class struggles in ethnically divided conflict-ridden Sri Lanka.

Class struggle, however, is not a new thing in Sri Lanka. The violent past of Sri Lanka is not only associated with ethnic issues but also economic and political issues. In 1971 and 1987-1989, Sri Lanka faced two historical armed insurgencies led by a Marxist Communist group named JVP (*Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna*) against the government mainly due to unemployment issues of the youth. Canagarajah (2005) explains in his discussion about Tamil military activities that, to win linguistic rights minority communities have a right to engage in political activism to advocate for their languages. In the context of recolonizing language education, minority English speakers have advantages in education and employment over the majority Sinhala and Tamil-speaking monolinguals. Therefore, in order to avoid any conflicts in the future it is important to democratize access to English language education and ensure the establishment of pluralistic language ideologies instead of language ideologies directed towards the global linguistic order which positions English at the top of the hierarchy as a/the super language (Fishman 1998/1999 as cited in Zhou, 2016).

## Conclusion

The colonial and post-colonial language ideologies in Sri Lanka share similarities but also exhibit

significant differences. Colonial language policies established a language hierarchy in the plurilingual Sri Lankan society. The post-independence or post-colonial ‘Sinhala only’ policy followed assimilationist language ideologies. However, post-war language policies, despite their largely symbolic nature, adopted more pluralistic stance as a part of declared reconciliation efforts. Despite this, the enduring influence of colonialism and globalization has made English a valuable commodity in both global and local linguistic marketplaces. Consequently, language policies after 2000, as evidenced by the reintroduction of English medium education in 2001, have largely been shaped by the global and local language order, which in turn affects local language ideologies. This shift has created a growing imbalance, placing the status of Sinhala and Tamil, the national and official languages, at risk. In the past, ethnic identities, closely tied to linguistic identities, were paramount and even contributed to the 26-year civil war. However, the gradual dominance of English in language education, driven by its colonial legacy and its global status, is now subtly reshaping social and group identities. English has reestablished its status as a marker of elitism and higher social status, gradually replacing the importance of ethnicity, religion, and other group identities with class distinctions. This evolving linguistic landscape reflects a form of social Darwinism of language; “survival of the fittest” (Farr & Song, 2011), where only those who can afford commodified English thrive, leaving rural and impoverished communities at a disadvantage. This reality calls for policymakers to rethink language policy. While Sinhala and Tamil are designated as official and national languages, and English as the link language, the increasing dominance of English and its linguistic capital suggests a return to English dominant assimilationist ideologies despite claims of pluralism at the macro level.

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言語教育政策、イデオロギー、アイデンティティ政治：  
ポスト植民地時代から戦後のスリランカを対象に

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言語イデオロギーと言語政策は、言語実践及び社会的なアイデンティティの形成に関わる相互に絡み合った概念である。本稿は、スリランカにおけるグローバル及びローカルな要求に応える言語政策の展開と言語イデオロギーの歴史性を検討する。そしてその検証によって、言語イデオロギーの変化とそれが国家、集団、個人のアイデンティティに与える影響を捉えることを目的とする。植民地支配と26年間の内戦の歴史を持つ多文化国家であるスリランカの言語イデオロギーは、これらの経験に深く影響されてきた。ポスト植民地時代の言語政策はナショナリズムを促進するものとして論じられる一方で、戦後の言語政策の変化は国の言語格差を解決する試みであると述べられている。そこで本稿では、言語イデオロギーの歴史性に関する文献のレビューを通して、現代における言語を巡る状況に光を当てる。言語イデオロギーの複雑さを理解することは、戦後和解に向けたスリランカの努力に関連している、言語およびアイデンティティに関する課題に対処するために不可欠である。そしてその作業によって、本稿は現代における言語政策とそれが将来的に及ぼす影響について重要な示唆を提供する。