

# Language Education Policy Planning in Sri Lanka: Concern for unity, reality and rationality

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**Abstract:** As a major part of sociolinguistics, language planning has become a major research topic for many scholars. As a branch of Applied Linguistics, language planning is not a theoretical field of academic research, but mainly based on solving language problems in society. This paper explains the language diversity in Sri Lanka and the issues related with implementing the proper language planning policy in a socio-linguistic perspective. It further elaborates the planning language in educational settings .i.e. language-in-education planning or acquisition planning. While language in education planning is associated most closely with goals for language and literacy learning in educational and school setting, the paper finally concludes with a note on the importance of medium of instruction and its implementation in the Sri Lankan scenario. This paper will review and analyze the general situation of language planning research in the past 20 years at home and look forward to the future trend of language planning research.

**Index Terms**—language planning, language policy, linguistics

## 1 Introduction

Planning is a human activity that arises from the need to find out a solution to a problem. There are various types of planning such as educational, economic, agricultural, industrial, etc., used for solving a nation's problems. Language, which is considered as part and parcel of the society/ nation also, needs effective planning for achieving efficiency in language use. If there is language problems or a linguistic situation that is felt to be unsatisfactory then the language used by the concerned society/ nation should be planned in a systematic way for better use. Language planning can be preceded by identifying the concrete areas of the society, which demand planned action regarding the language resources. Various terms have been used for explaining the concept of language planning, such as glotto- politics, Language engineering, language development, language treatment, etc.

Haugen (1959, p 8) defines it as “the activity of providing a normative grammar, orthography and dictionary for the guidance of writers and speakers on a non-homogeneous speech community”. He also defines language planning as “the normative work of language academics and committees all form of what is commonly known as language cultivation and all proposals for language reform or standardization” (1967, p 2)

Tauli (1968) defines language planning as the methodological activity of regulating and improving the existing language or creating new, common, regional or international languages.

"Language planning is deliberate language change; that is, changes in the system of language code or speaking or both that are planned by organizations that are established for such purposes or given a mandate to fulfill such purposes.....for solving language problems to find the best (or optimal, most efficient) decision" (Rubin and Jernuad, 1971, p 29)

Fishman (1971) describes language planning as an organized pursuit of solutions to language problems usually at the national level.

Weinstein (1980, p 55) defines language planning as a government authorized, long term oriented sustained, conscious effort to alter a language itself or to change a language's function to a society for the purpose of solving communication problem

## **2. Language diversity in Sri Lanka**

Sri Lanka contains diverse ethnic, religious, regional, cultural and linguistic groups (Genesee, 2002). The total population of Sri Lanka exceeds 20 million. The Sinhalese, Muslims, Tamils, Burgers, Malays and others form the population of the country. The maximum population of the country that is up to 74 percent of the total population is of the Sinhalese community, 18 percent of the population is the Tamils and 7 percent forms the Muslims and the rest 1 percent of the population are people of other communities. The national identity of any nation is represented by its language. The language Sinhala is used by the Sinhalese people while the Tamil and Muslim people use the language Tamil. The English language has also been adopted by a small percentage of people of the Muslim and Tamil communities. The fact that Sri Lanka is a country with multiple ethnic groups is evident from the report of The Central Bank of Sri Lanka (2005) where it is stated that more than 23 groups entirely differing in ethnicity assembled for the Deyata Kirula exhibition held nationally in the year 2009 which had 'Children Of One Mother' as the theme. Each of these groups are said to have their own dialect or language. The second major ethnic group in Sri Lanka is the Tamil. According to Spolsky (2004), the language diversity of the country is one of its resources. On the other hand, it is also true that, accepting all the languages of diverse ethnicity as the official or the national language of a country is difficult. Therefore, the language policies and planning are required by every country. Sri Lanka is one such society that has produced serious, obstinate conflicts among the ethnic groups which states that there exists no proper scheme in the country's minority and majority relations. (Kaplan, Robert and Richard, 1997)

## **3. Issues in language planning policy implementation**

The dominant language in the country being Sinhala, the Tamil people are found to experiences difficulties as stated by (Shaklee, 1980). Key language problems in the country are as follows, inability of the Tamil people to receive the documents and public service in Tamil, the implementation of training program in second language by the government is ineffective, the proficiency of the government servants in the Tamil language is bad, lack of awareness on the language policies for the public servants and the public, solicitudes and attitudes of the public servants regarding the training program is less, Tamil people need support to write letters and fill in the documents, lack of attitudinal change program for the government staffs. There thus exists a serious language issues among the people of different ethnic backgrounds.

### **3.1 Language planning implementation policy**

After the civil war of the country came to an end, the government of Sri Lanka introduced certain language policies. It is stated by Warnapala (2011), that, the impact of the policies on the country's national integration, being practiced in the public administrative institutions is important to be examined. One such policy of the government of Sri Lanka which empowers the citizens of Sri Lanka is the trilingual policy in the education system of the country, which gives importance to three major languages of the citizens of Sri Lanka, the Sinhala, the Tamil and the English. According to Dikshit, Garg, Panda and Vijayshri (n.d), the education system of the

country comprises of the major part in achieving the goal of the trilingual policy of the country, which is to empower its citizens and make them effectively communicate and proficient in all the three major languages being used in the country. The system of education is well designed to make students proficient in all the three languages.

### 3.2 Language planning in the socio- linguistics perspective

The definition of language planning according to Mathews and Bruce (1995) is the planning of purposeful changes in the use of or form of language or its variety and examined as a sub- discipline of socio- linguistics. The behavior of others is influenced by the purposeful changes in the language planning with respect to functional, acquisition or structural allocation of the language. In general, language planning involves the development of objectives, strategies and goals in order to change the manner the language are being used. Nahir (2003) recognizes a total of eleven goals of language planning. They are **Language Purification**, where the usage of a language is prescribed to preserve its linguistic purity, guard from the deviations of language and protect from the influences of foreign languages; **Language Revival**, which attempts to turn back a language having very less, or no users or native speakers into a normal mode of communication; **Language Reform**, where the changes are made deliberately in certain aspects specific to the language in order to facilitate its usage, like the grammar, spelling or orthography; **Language Standardization**, which attempts to gather reputation for the local dialect or language transforming it to a language acceptable by a majority and to standardize it in the region; **Language Spread**, which refers to the effort put to increase the users or speakers of a specific language at the cost of another; **Terminology Unification**, where the unified terminologies are developed basically in the technical domains; **The Lexical Modernization**, which means adapting or creating words; **Stylistic Simplification**, where the usage of language in style, grammar and lexicon are simplified and modifying the language usage in formal and social contexts; **Language Maintenance**, which focuses on maintaining or preserving the native language used by a group as the first language or the second language where the status of the language is declined by the threats or pressure; **Inter- lingual Communication**, which refers to facilitating communication between the people of different communities who use diverse languages to communicate and the last goal mentioned is the **Auxiliary- Code Standardization**, where the auxiliary and marginal aspects of a language are standardized, these aspects refer to the rules of transcription and transliteration or the names of the places or the signs of the deaf people.

In the multi-lingual and multi-ethnic pluralistic nations, the language planning is of great importance as it comprises to the procedure of nation building besides meeting the specific objectives of each and every segment of the country and to satisfying various linguistic and ethnic communities (Haarmann, 2001). Language planning in the post- colonial communities like Sri Lanka clears the incapacitating conflicts in planning the status of the mother tongue or the vernacular language and English in the education and society (Cooper, 1989). In the countries where the mother tongue has been given primary importance in both the social and educational life happened to suffer during colonization because of delicate opposition from the local population in the favor of English (Wardhaugh and Ronald, 2008). In the places where the role of English is encouraged with respect to the educational and economic opportunities of globalization, a related chauvinistic resurrection of localism is created that creates unsolved tensions in the practice and policies of the communities. Sri Lanka is one such nation where the argument falls between the English language and the Mother Tongue. According to Bradley, (2004), engineering a shift in language on behalf of the mother tongue being motivated by the interests, sentimental associations and collective rights of the ethnic groups and preservationists is pointless as the requirements of the social and economic mobility of the people are coordinated to work in opposition to this enterprise. The Sri Lankan Tamil people, using the Minority Language Rights (MLR) are trying to authorize their mother tongue in the country Wells (1981) which has become the source of ethnic conflicts in the country (Molina and Serafin, 1996). According to Cummins (1991), in the process of language

planning; the decision making is motivated by the 4 extraordinary language ideologies. First ideology being the linguistic assimilation which means the faith that, every citizen of the country, irrespective of his or her ethnic background, should use and learn the language that dominates the society where he or she lives, as how all the people of Sri Lanka are supposed to be aware of Sinhala language. The second ideology is the linguistic pluralism which is directly opposite to the linguistic assimilation, which means that the support and recognition of multiple languages in one society, as how Tamil, Sinhala and English are recognized in Sri Lanka. The third ideology is the vernacularization, which means the development and restoration of an indigenous language in addition to the adopting the language as the official language of the country as how Sinhala is restored and developed in Sri Lanka. The fourth ideology is the internationalization which means, adopting a non- indigenous language of broader communication as an official language of the country, as how English language is being made an official language in Sri Lanka.

#### **4. Language policies in the socio- linguistics perspective**

Human rights are being ensured in every democratic country. The rights of the minority and the human rights are being protected by a lot of legal policies. According to the International Human Right Act (2003), the various acts in Sri Lanka are, The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Fundamental Rights and Racial Discrimination, The United Nations Minorities Declaration (1992), Universal Declaration of Human rights, International Human Rights Act (2003), The Durban Declaration (2001). Basically, every democratic state is supposed to protect the rights and identities of the multicultural and multiracial groups in their state. With respect to the multiracialism, every political organization of a country like federal and unitary has imposed policies. The minorities and their existence based on the ethnic or national, linguistic, religious and cultural identity and states are to be protected (Mickan, 2006). Of the various functions of a country, the critical ones which are regarded generally to justify the policy decisions are education, justice and administration. It is stated by Creed and Koul(1993), that, one of the highly vexing issues that exist in the world's minority or ethnic conflicts is the problem of language used in a country and by its citizens. Cases of persecution, widespread and systematic atrocities, violence, and genocide perpetrated acts and sexual violence are seen against the minorities. Thus the government of a nation plans the policies for language and the language planning in the government level is called as the language policy. The Constitution of Sri Lanka has laid down the basic foundation for the language policy in the country (Haarmann, 2002). But, it is stated by Nahir (2003), that there is a lack of successful exploitation of the language policies in spite of the government having implied a lot of language policy programs and curricular to ensure the national integrity and language rights. Equity for all groups of people using different languages should be aimed and ensured by the language policy of a country.

Since the period of British colonization, the government of Sri Lanka follows many language policies. And according to Collier (1989) it is also true that, the language policies framed during colonization failed to solve the ethnic conflicts as it did not build the social integrity and to fulfill the equality nationally. Both the Tamil and Sinhala have been the official languages of the country before the introduction of the Act 33 of Official Languages in the year 1956 by the Prime Minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranayake who declared that, the official language of the country to be 'Sinhala'. And for the Eastern and North provinces, Tamil was prescribed to be the administrative language according to the Act 28 of 1958 Wiley and Terrance (2003). Thus, the Act of 1956 emphasize the Sinhala Only' policy with Tamil playing a subordinate role. The Constitution, in the year 1972 stated the language of legislation to be the Sinhala with a Tamil translation. In the year 1978, the second republic constitution in the country again reiterated that the Sinhala is the official language according to the chapter IV, Article 18 and the Article 19 of the chapter declared Tamil to be the national language. Various ethnic conflicts and continuous internal conflicts burst out for the problem of languages after the year 1985, which the government failed to settle and fix in spite of trying. It is stated by Chandrasegaram(2006) that, in the year 1988, the 16<sup>th</sup>

amendment provided equal position for both the Tamil and Sinhala languages for administration of Sri Lanka which in turn proved to be a new step forward in the national integration. Later in the year 1991, the Trilingualization of forms circular, numbered 22/91 was issued by the Home Affairs, Ministry of Public Administration and Provisional councils, according to which, the 3 languages English, Tamil and Sinhala were forced to be printed in every documents, forms and papers, at all the government institutions of Sri Lanka. The national integration and ethnic equality are tried to be built up by the Government of Sri Lanka, since the military actions and ethnic conflicts have come to an end which is stated by Gramley and Pätzold (2004) as a step to new language policy. Rectifying the previous lapses, the government declared equal positions for both the languages, establishing them to be the official and national languages. The circular of Public Administration was passed in the year 2007, according to which, the public servants were ordered to carry out their duties and functions in both the Tamil and Sinhala languages. Cobarrubius, Juan and Fishman (1993) and they were also given a time period of 5 years to make themselves proficient in both the languages. Thus the Act enables the public officials at the institutions of the government, receptionists and all other officials who interact with the public to be bilingual. According to Cobarrubias and Juan (1999), it is believed by the government of Sri Lanka that, the communication and knowledge in all the 3 languages English, Tamil and Sinhala will help the process of reconciliation between the communities easier. After the civil war has come to an end in Sri Lanka, the government has vital responsibility on rebuilding the social integration, fraternity and equality in the country through successful programs and comprehensive policies. Boada and Albert (2000) state that, in case of the government failing to maintain the equality among the diverse ethnic groups, it might lead to re- raising the internal conflicts again in the country. Thus, it is important to examine the language practices and policy and its impacts to the integration of the nation.

## **5. Types of language planning**

The language planning is of 3 different types according to Rubin et al (2001). They are Status Planning which refers to the status of the language; Corpus planning, which in turn constitutes of 3 other types called the Graphization, Standardization and Modernization and the third type is the Acquisition Planning.

### **5.1 Status Planning**

Allocating and reallocating a language or its variety to the domains functioning within a society, thereby affecting the standing or status of a language is called as the status planning.

**5.1.2 Language Status:** the concept of language status is different from the language function and language prestige even though they are all intertwined with each other. The standing or position of a specific language in comparison with other languages is referred to as the language status. According to Vidanapathirana and Wickramasinghe (2005), the status is gathered by a language based on fulfilling 4 diverse attributes. Thus the 4 qualities or attributes that determine the status of the language are

Origin of the language: determining whether the specific language is being imported or is indigenous to the speech community.

Standardization degree: in order to define the correct usage of the language, determining the extent of developing a proper set of standards which define the usage policies.

Status of the judiciary: According to Swamy(2002), the judicial status provided to a language are determined by 6 other status of the specific language, they are the Sole official language, which means the only official language in the judiciary; Joint official language, which means more than one official language; Regional official language, which means the diverse set of languages used in various

regions of the country; Promoted language, which specifies that the language is not declared to be official to the country but it is promoted and at times also used for specific functions by the public authorities; Tolerated language, which denotes that the language is neither proscribed nor acknowledged or promoted but only ignored in the country and the last status is the Proscribed language, which means that the language is discouraged by official restriction or sanction.

Vitality: the percent or ratio of people using the language to another variable is the vitality and the other variable can be the total population of the country.

Thus, as a whole, the status of a language is determined by the 4 attributes degree of standardization, Origin, Vitality and Judicial status.

## 6. Corpus Planning

The perspective intrusions in the form of language refer to the corpus planning, where the decisions of planning are done to engineer the modifications in the language structure (Raheem, and Gunsekara, 1994). The reasons which give rise to the activities of corpus planning are the outcomes of the beliefs regarding the sufficiency of the language to serve various desired functions. Chapelle (1997) claims that, the planners who have higher linguistic expertise involve in the corpus planning, unlike the status planning which involves the politicians and administrators. The corpus planning are of 3 types namely modernization, standardization and graphization.

**6.1 Graphization:** the modification, selection and development of the orthographic conventions and scripts of a language are referred to as the graphization (Mansor and Sabiha, 2005). In a speech community, the usage of writing has an everlasting social and cultural effect like easy transmission of stuff through generations and communicating with many people, the comparison to which is done by the various spoken languages. The written language is viewed by Ferguson and Gibson (2006) as a secondary method to the spoken language. Still, the phonological structures, grammatical structures and vocabulary of the language adopted in the written form vary from the spoken form. Sometimes the written language is considered to be the perfect language as the speech is considered to be corrupted which is said to be a folk belief. The spoken language is viewed to be susceptible and the written as the conservative. The corpus planners have 2 options in establishing a language for writing which are either inventing a new language or using the one already in existence.

**6.2 Standardization:** the standardization process involves the precedence of one variety of the language over other regional and social vernaculars of the language. Brown, (1996) states another approach where a poly- phonemic form in written is introduced which intends to present all the vernaculars of the language sufficiently with no forms of spoken standards where the vernaculars are mutually comprehensible as a whole. The one variety of language which is chosen is considered as the best form or the supra-dialectal form of the language. The language selected for the precedence poses social consequences as it presents the privilege of the written and the spoken dialects confirming closeness to the standard chosen. The standard that is mostly spoken by the powerful or dominating social group in a society is generally chosen and imposed on those groups who are less powerful in the society. It is stated by Jayatilleke, (2002) that it creates dominance in the society.

**6.3 Modernization:** when a language requires expanding its resources in order to meet its functions, the modernization method is used. When the status of a language experiences a shift, modernization occurs like when independence is gained by a country or when the education policy of a country is changed (Goel, 2002). The lexicon being expanded is the most important strength of



modernization. Creating new glossaries and lists are generally focused by the language planners in order to define the new technical terms. Importance is given while selecting the new terms to ensure the consistent usage of the new terms by the people in the society.

## **7. Acquisition Planning**

The third type of language planning is the acquisition planning where the aspects of the language like the literacy through educating people and the distribution and status of the language are influenced by the local, the state or the national government (Yang and Meyen, 2003). While mostly this type of planning is done by the government, the non- governmental organizations also sometimes do the acquisition planning. Larger processes of language planning mostly integrate the acquisition planning where the corpuses are revised and statuses are evaluated after which the final changes are introduced to the country or the state or the local region.

While status planning posits the evaluation of a language, the distribution of the language is carried out by acquisition planning. The colonial rulers were well aware of the fact that these two types of planning are complimentary. In course of time English education had been considered the key to economic influence and social status. So learning English became a craze in Sri Lanka. But everybody couldn't gain access to this language. Vernacular education was free but English education had been levied heavily. Already caste hierarchy was prevailing in the society and English proficiency too was distributed accordingly. Resources and English teachers were limited. This resulted in setting up the schools in towns. The rural folk were left monolingual and vernacular-educated. Preference was given to Christians; others who had had a chance to get English education came out as Christians. So English became an important criterion to stratify the society, contributing wealth, status and power to the prosperous, upper caste and urban Christians.

### **7.1 Language education and medium of instruction policies**

The chapter 4 of the constitution provides the policy framework and the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment of the constitution provides the relevant clauses according to which, the languages Tamil and Sinhala can also be selected as the first languages by the students who have them as their medium of education. According to the school curriculum, English is their second language. And Fearon, James, David and Laitin (2003) state that, in addition to this, Tamil students are being taught the Sinhala language and the Sinhala students are being taught the Tamil language by the schools. The language regulation bodies of many nations are specifically charged with implementing and formulating the language policies (Laitin and David, 2000). In the context of post- modern discourses and globalization, the status of dominant and local languages poses serious problems on the policies for the post- colonial communities like Sri Lanka. The changing philosophical and geopolitical contexts in the communities with dominant language and the mother tongue are evaluated to pose serious policy and practical problems (Stern and Druckman, n.d). The bilingual education programme is being implemented at the secondary level from grade six and a certain other subject are also taught using English in this programme while the other subjects are taught to the students in their first language. The Government of Sri Lanka when declared the trilingual policy in the country, the question regarding the significance of the Bilingual Education Programme in the trilingual Sri Lanka was posed by many. The trilingual programme declared by the government focuses on promoting the Tamil and Sinhala languages in the curriculum, as the first language as well as the second national language and also improves the students' proficiency in both these languages. In addition to this the policy is also expected to improve the adeptness of the language English as the students' second language (Christ and Diarmait, 2008). The trilingual policy of the government on the curriculum of the students ultimately results in making the citizens trilingual and competent enough to effectively communicate in all the 3 major languages of the country. According to Mickan (2006), global focus is towards plurilingualism, and the trilingual policy focused in Sri Lanka is a visionary decision, making an essential competency among the Sri Lankan citizens. The bilingual education programme which teaches Tamil and Sinhala as the first as well

as second languages and at the same time having the same as the medium of instruction is not seen as an issue in the educational system. But, on the other hand, Hornberger and Nancy (2006) state that, using English as the medium to teach a few subjects at the secondary level of education is seen to have opponent views as it is taught as a second language under the bilingual education programme. In the schools, the teaching hours or the number of periods in which the language Tamil is taught has been increased by the ministry of education in Sri Lanka. The importance and focus towards the Tamil language serves the people proficient in Tamil which in turn, open the opportunities for job in the public sectors. It is stated by Liddicoat and Anthony (2005) that, the public servants, serving in the administrative institutions are provided with workshops and language training programs in order to improve their proficiency in the language. The Department of Official Languages trains the teachers to teach Tamil and to promote unity, fraternity and equality among all the people of different ethnic backgrounds.

### **8. Importance of medium of instruction**

The medium of instruction provided to the learners impacts on their capacity of proficiency in the language, which in turn determines the performance of the learners. The language policies implemented in Sri Lanka proves advantageous to its people by making them proficient enough in all the 3 major languages of the country, the Sinhala, Tamil and English (Lu et al, 2005). A trilingual policy is declared by the government of Sri Lanka focusing the promotion of both the major languages of the country, the Tamil and the Sinhala in the curriculum of the students as the first and the second language. This has proved to improve the efficiency of the students in both the languages (Riazi and Abdolmehdi, 2005). People of the country are being made aware, fluent and proficient in the commonly used languages which help the interaction among people of diverse communities easier rather than not being aware of the language. In addition to this, the language English is also being used in the schools to teach a certain subjects making the students proficient in the English language as well. It is stated by Ramanathan and Vaidehi (2004) that, the policy is expected to improve the adeptness of the language English which is implemented as the students' second language. The medium of instruction being English offers a gate-way to the students to focus on great objectives in their life. It is stated by Kangas and Tove(2002) that, the children's attitude towards life has changed tremendously after the language English is being chosen as the medium of instruction in the classes. It is also stated that, this attitude of the students would integrate the diverse communities in the country and that English as the medium of education needs to be improved with the complete support of the stakeholders in extending the medium of instruction as English in every school in the country. The skills of the children are noticed to improve immensely after they have started acquiring the education through the English medium classes. They are found to write as well as speak well in English thereby Liddicoat and Anthony (2005) states them to become competent enough in the world.

### **9. Conclusion**

The trilingual policy of Sri Lanka enables the people comfortable with every language and as the government institutions and the employees of the government institutions are also supposed be knowing all the 3 languages, the educational system provided for the students in their secondary education level makes them qualified enough for the designations. One of the strongest claims that Jayatilleke (2002) makes is that, the language issues that prevail in the country between the people of different backgrounds will resolve and the student's minds will move towards integration of the country.

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