

THE SINHALA KADUWA: LANGUAGE AS A DOUBLE EDGED SWORD AND ETHNIC CONFLICT

Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake

A great many people think that they are thinking when they are merely rearranging their prejudices - William James

In many parts of the postcolonial world the languages of yesterday's oppressed are dominant national languages today. The shifting fortunes of once marginalized languages like Sinhala in Sri Lanka, Urdu in Pakistan, or Malay Bahasan in Malaysia have often been hidden by the importance of the *kaduwa* languages, or the languages of European colonialism like English, French, Spanish or Russian in transnational communication. The expanded national influence of languages like Sinhala has also been obscured by ethno-nationalists fixated on real and imagined pasts who continue to attack the *kaduwa* languages in the name of neocolonialism and *jathika chinthanaya* only to promote their own brand of linguistic and cultural chauvinism. What has been forgotten, with near fatal consequence as our present ethnic misery demonstrates, is that once marginalized languages now serve to exclude other minority languages, as much as they serve to create a new identity in South Asia's besieged post-colonial nation-states. As Claude Levi-Strauss, the father of structuralism would say "plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose" - the more they change the more things remain the same.

But language is not just about power and prejudice. It also functions to mask identity, to cross borders, to signal hybridity, to celebrate mixedness, bastardization, impurity and bi or multi-culturalism, as many of us from mixed and multiple ethnicities who constantly negotiate cultural and linguistic borders know well. In other words language, whether creole or standard, can function to disrupt the established order of things as well as to maintain it. Nor yet is this all that language can do or seem.

The campaign to do away with English (the language of the colonizer) in Sri Lanka, and the subsequent *Kaduwa* debate throughout the sixties and seventies among Sinhala educated youth, hinged on the importance of language not just as a mark of identity but also as a means of education and upward mobility. Language then had come to be perceived as a precondition for the material well-being of non-elite Sinhala communities. The issue was that of class exclusion.

At other conjunctures, language has served as the arbiter of life and death, as was the case during the ethnic riots of 1983 when Tamil

speakers who might have passed as Sinhala were asked to pronounce the Sinhala word *baldiya* (bucket) to determine their ethnicity. For Tamils who failed to pronounce the first syllable of *baldiya* with the appropriate Sinhala accent the gods had probably thrown dice the wrong way. Since the Tamil language lacks a "ba" sound, the performance of a single Sinhala syllable became the final mark of identity and exclusion - death in the presence of the mob. Rather than appearance, phenotype or dress, the usual markers of identity, at those moments language and its performance were the great betrayers of those versed in hybridity (also the fine art of transgressing cultural boundaries). The Sinhala language was momentarily literally the *Kaduwa* (sword).

There are then obvious connections between the question of the place of English in Sri Lanka and the position of Sinhala vis-a-vis Tamil in Sri Lanka. These connections cluster largely around issues of culture and identity, and the entrenched sense of exclusion and underprivileged that speakers of non-dominant, non-hegemonic languages have acquired, be they Sinhala or Tamil, in an increasingly post-colonial transnational world more or less dominated by English, as much as a Sri Lankan national context more or less dominated by Sinhala. Of course, English and Tamil are (numerically) minority languages in Sri Lanka for very different reasons: the former is a hegemonic international *lingua franca* while the latter is mostly a regionally limited and by now denigrated language in many parts of Sri Lanka. On the other hand, Sinhala has achieved a hegemony and indeed monopoly in several spheres of national life in post-colonial Sri Lanka. In the State and administrative bureaucracies, in local government (except for the North and East which is dominated by Tamil language speakers), and in the law courts. Likewise, in the middle and lower levels of business and among provincial elites and middle classes, Sinhala is the dominant language.

Yet, analysis of language and its practice continues to happen as if English still functions as it did in the heyday of British imperial dominance of Sri Lanka. It is almost as if 1956 (Sinhala Only Act) and 1958 (Tamil Language Special Provisions Act) never happened; English was never replaced by Sinhala only and subsequently modified, that the rise of Sinhala-Buddhist and Tamil linguistic nationalisms never occurred in post-colonial Sri Lanka. Rather, a historian looking back on this period may say the English-Sinhala debate and the Sinhala-Tamil debate happened in different space-times.

These thoughts came to me recently as I listened to Professor Tudor Silva of the Sociology Department of the University of Peradeniya delivering the Newton Gunesinghe Memorial Lecture titled "The *Kaduwa*: Two Discourses on the English Language", and again when Mr. Regi Siriwardene spoke on the problem of Sri Lankan creative writing in English at the International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo. Mr. Siriwardene's lecture, though not explicitly on the *Kaduwa* debate, explored the challenges that Sri Lankan writers writing in English who try to experiment with bi-lingualism or bi-culturalism faced, given that Sri Lankan English, or non-standard English which fuses Sinhala or Tamil idiom with standard English, might leave one open to ridicule by those who believe that there is only one kind of English, which is to say the Queen's English, pronounced with the appropriately plummy accents which even the best brown (mem)sahibs rarely approximate.

In the rest of this article, I will try to locate the *Kaduwa* debate or the question of the role of English in Sri Lanka in the wider field of post/colonial ethno-nationalist arguments about the role of Sinhala and Tamil languages in Sri Lanka and show how the Sinhala-Tamil debate: 1) displaces anti-English anti-colonial sentiment onto Tamil-speaking minorities, partly due to the former dominance of Tamil and English-speaking Burgher minorities in the colonial State bureaucracy ; 2) distinguish between the discourse about the use of language and its actual practice, in order to show how the issues around identity, exclusion and power pertaining to Tamil, Sinhala and English languages and their performance are profoundly related: non-elite, or first language Tamil speakers relate to the dominance of the Sinhala language in similar ways as do non-elite Sinhala speakers to the English-speaking "talking classes", or intelligentsia.

The sense of marginalization among impoverished Sinhala and Tamil communities has been used by Sinhala and Tamil politicians alike to mobilize people along ethno-linguistic lines in unseemly ways in order to enlarge their political constituencies, while ignoring the enormous linguistic and cultural cross-fertilization between the Sinhala and Tamil languages and cultures which has occurred in Sri Lanka. But to proceed we must backtrack a little.

The *Kaduwa*: Lineages of a Debate

In the Newton Gunesinghe Memorial Lecture, Tudor Silva, quoting extensively from Thiru Kandiah's work on the *Kaduwa* identified two discourses concerning English in Sri Lanka: 1) the hegemonic or elitist view of English, and 2) the under-class view of English. According to Tudor Silva, the former or hegemonic colonialist conception was and is that English is the purveyor of truth, beauty and goodness - a view held largely by English-speaking elites who seek to maintain their privileged position by speaking English. The second or under-class discourse of English is the critique of English which views it as a language of colonialism and neocolonialism and class exclusion - *Kaduwa*.

It is the latter view, the view that English is a language of oppression - a *kaduwa* or sword, wielded by the elites to shore up their dominance which has held sway in post/colonial Sri Lanka. The

metaphor of the *Kaduwa* or sword to describe the English language and its function in Sri Lanka draws from the Sinhala language idiom of cutting (*kapeema*). The term was first coined in the universities as a powerful metaphor of the political and cultural divide between Sinhala-speaking university students and their English-speaking counterparts.

For a long time Sinhala *swabasha* speaking students had felt that English, the language of the colonizer and post/colonial elite is used to cut (*kapanna*), exclude, and humiliate the non-English and by implication non-urbane, non-cosmopolitan *swabasha* speaker. The action of cutting, *kapeema*, is a highly developed discourse on social exclusion in the Sinhala language and is not restricted to the (ab)use of English. Any refusal of reciprocity, be it a gift or a glance can also be interpreted as *kapeema* - the refusal to acknowledge and the severing of ties or social obligations. The metaphor of *Kaduwa* which plays on this idiom is then doubly powerful and resonates with a history of experienced exclusion for upwardly mobile first-language Sinhala speakers. The use of the term *Kaduwa* to describe the English language also encapsulates the violence of incision and the pain of exclusion felt by those denied the rewards of English language education and skills and thus the benefits that a university degree should bring. Since then a generation of Sinhala-speaking youth have come of age associating the English language with *Kaduwa* or the sword in Sri Lanka.

1956 - the year of Sinhala Only- recognized the sense of exclusion and frustration felt by non-elite, non-English speaking Sinhala youth, and marked a watershed in Sri Lanka. Sinhala Only was made the official language overnight as it was said. It is important to note that this was the first flush of post/colonial (linguistic) Sinhala nationalism which, though directed against the hegemony of English, effectively marginalized Tamil-speakers. The marginalization of the Tamil language at this time was from the perspective of the non-elite Sinhala speakers, a more or less unintended consequence of the struggle to decolonize, to regain a sense of collective and national cultural integrity. Yet clearly, at the higher levels among Sinhala politicians and policy makers intent on shoring up their vote banks, the Sinhala Only Act was a part of a wider ethnicization of politics in Sri Lanka and marked a high watermark in the rise of Sinhala nationalism.

If the first flush of post/colonial nationalism was Sinhala only, the second flush was encapsulated in the *Kaduwa* debate. This debate recognized that simply doing away with English had not and could not solve very many problems. In fact, Sinhala Only had created more problems for the people it aimed to benefit. For ironically, as Professor Silva also highlighted, the switch to Sinhala meant that Sinhala educated youth were in fact even larger losers since they were more than ever ghettoized within the prison house of Sinhala linguistic nationalism and excluded from access to the transnational sphere whether in education, law, or business where English remains dominant internationally.

Sri Lanka's Sinhala educated youth and intelligentsia have for a long time been aware of the implications of speaking or not speaking the English language with the proper accent, and thus the *Kaduwa*

debate encapsulated the frustration and resentments of Sinhala speaking youth who felt that they were still excluded from the economic and social benefits which decolonization should have brought them. Yet as Silva mentioned in passing, Tamil-speaking university students did not always share their Sinhala counterparts' confrontational attitude towards the position of English in Sri Lanka, perhaps because as a minority community they were aware of the importance of being bi-lingual and having access to the dominant community.

The argument underlying the second flush of critique of English was that those who maintain the *status quo* do so also by reproducing the language and thus the culture of the colonizer. While the *Kaduwa* debate continues in Sri Lanka, the battle over colonialism and its after life has moved on to less material things than the language one actually speaks in other parts of the post/colonial world. The Indian scholar Ashis Nandy writes about the need to decolonise the mind of colonial ways of ordering the world and positioning man (sic) against nature in his book *The Intimate Enemy: The Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism*, while the Palestinian-American Edward Said writes of the false constructions of non-European peoples in *Orientalism*. Both of them, of course, recognise the importance of language in the European colonial project to civilize the non-white world, which is to say most of the world, but also write powerfully and critically in English.

Sinhala *Kaduwa*: Multiple Discourses

To balance the scales a bit, I am tempted to perform here a similar analysis to that which Professor Silva did with English. That is, to identify several layers of discourse on the role of Sinhala in post/colonial Sri Lanka. Yet, we will have to identify more than two discourses concerning the Sinhala language, for as with any language there are many discourses. Here we will examine three:

- 1) The Sinhala nationalist discourse which claims both the pre colonial dominance and greatness of the Sinhala-speaking peoples in Sri Lanka and the subsequent colonization and devaluation of the Sinhala language by various foreigners, primarily the Tamil and English speakers. This position is the Sinhala Only position.
- 2) The critical nationalist discourse on Sinhala, also shared by many English-speaking elites which argues that there is a need to preserve the Sinhala language and culture, but also importantly recognizes the existence and legitimacy of other languages, including English and Tamil.
- 3) The Tamil-speaking people's perspective that Sinhala has been the instrument of Tamil marginalization in the post/colonial period. This is a version of the *Kaduwa* debate. Similarly, Tamil speakers have articulated their grievances over the marginalization of Tamil on numerous occasions, and the marginalization of Tamil has been one of the reasons of the ethnic conflict.

A good example of the hegemony of Sinhala and, indeed, the marginalization of Tamil is evident in the practice of the Open University of Sri Lanka which offers distance education to students in all parts of Sri Lanka. Though the university has staff and students from all the various ethnic communities, many of the myriad forms which lecturers need to fill, whether to obtain parking permits in university premises or to apply for leave, are usually only available in Sinhala. The stationery of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences is in Sinhala as well as English. In this instance, for many Tamil students English serves to bridge the language and identity gap.

Yet clearly in post/colonial Sri Lanka the hegemony of English has been replaced by the hegemony of Sinhalese the official language, a matter which Sinhala ethnic nationalists justify by a rather simpleminded argument that the Sinhalese are the numerical majority in the country (whoever said that might was right?). Just as access to education is determined by language so too is access to the (welfare)State, arguably the most powerful institution aside from the family and kinship network in Sri Lankan society. Yet birth registration forms, passport application forms, immigration and visa forms at airports are often only available in Sinhala. Likewise the rising fortunes of the Sinhala language is evident in most of Sri Lanka except for the Tamil dominated north and east, particularly in the rural areas and the major towns other than Colombo where Sinhala is today the language of provincial elites. Today even in parts of Sri Lanka where Tamil-speakers predominate, Sinhala is *de facto* the official language of transaction. This is the case in the Jaffna peninsula which is currently occupied and administered by a largely Sinhala-speaking Army.

English as a Link Language

In the language debate regarding the place of Sinhala vis-a-vis Tamil, the role of English in Sri Lanka has been a hidden signifier - a position demonstrated by its ambiguous position over the course of successive Official Language Acts. This is perhaps partly because English, for better or worse, was the language under which modern Sri Lanka came into existence - a fact that nationalists prefer to forget. For the nation-State now called Sri Lanka is indeed a recent invention - a British colonial invention in which English was the official language of administration after the low country and upcountry were united in 1815. It is partly because of this history of modern nation-building that English has functioned as an official link language between the ethnic communities. This is also why Sinhala Only meant the marginalization of non-Sinhala speakers within the nation.

The importance of English as a link-language of administration has however been alternatively ignored or dismissed. For instance, Arjuna Parakrama in a recent book that makes all sorts of extralinguistic claims about Sri Lankan society on the basis of a rather uncritical reading of post/modernist discourse theory, banishes the idea that English can be and indeed has been a link language between the two communities with scant attention to empirical evidence. Parakrama dismisses DCRA Gunetilleke's argument that English serves as a link language not just inaccurately, but with astonishing high mindedness when he states:

It has been argued that as “link language” English operates only among the urban educated middle/upper classes... the notion of English serving to “bridge the generation gap” is merely a measure of the parochiality of Goonetilleke and his ilk, who blindly equate their own generation of anglicized, educated, urban (upper)-middle-class peers, comprising far less than one percent of the population within that age group with the rest of the nation. Moreover by and large, within the same extended family units, where the older generation is English speaking, the “younger generation”, though more bilingual, speaks English fluently too”. (1995:177)

Contrary to what Parakrama thinks, in official matters English has and does function as a link language for Tamils - regardless of class. In urban and rural areas in the Tamil speaking north and east literacy in English rather than Sinhala is more common, even though in the border areas of the Vanni and in the East first language Tamil speakers are more likely to speak Sinhala than English. The fact remains that when it comes to State and the conduct of official matters, such as filling out forms to register for an exam, or to register a birth or death, or to read and respond to court summons, literacy in English is higher than in Sinhala among first language Tamil speakers. Parakrama seems to forget that there is a distinction to be made between orality and literacy (and never mind the deconstructionists).

The Poverty of Theory and the Task of the Social Scientist in the Context of (Ethnic) Conflict in Sri Lanka

English, French and other so-called imperialist languages have also been used by those at the forefront of the critique of colonialism and imperialism (Fanon, Nandy, Said) as well as by the articulators of post/colonial dependency and underdevelopment theses. Some of the best critics of British colonialism indeed thought and wrote in English. Some of the best critical literary theories (from Bakhtin/Volosinov to Bhabha), as well as some of the worst critics from colonialism’s truly crippled minds have been articulated in the language of the colonizer, be it Russian or English, while other writers of colonial language have profoundly subverted the structures of colonial thinking, also by using irony, satire, and scatological reference to critique the dominant or standard interpretation. There is then nothing intrinsic to a particular language, whether Sinhala, Tamil, English or Russian outside the context of its use and performance that makes for the oppression or exclusion of peoples. Likewise, the language of domination might also be a language of resistance, subversion and critique.

To frame the question of language in Sri Lanka merely in terms of English “the language of the colonizer” verses Sinhala as Silva does, or to argue that extending the standard to include non-standard English as Parakrama does, is to simplify an argument recognized as more complex by most people who recognize the fact that for better or worse we live in a transnational world where the terrain of the power/knowledge questions are constantly shifting. Further, many of us who use the English language fluently do not subscribe

to the view that English is and ever was the purveyor of truth, beauty and goodness as Tudor Silva suggested. Indeed we even recognize that English can function as a *kaduwa*. So too can Sinhala function as a *kaduwa*. So too can Tamil. The present ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka demonstrates that the issue of language is more complex than the west verses the rest, English verses Sinhala or any other oppressed language of the world.

From a sociological perspective, then, with few notable exceptions, discussion about language, its role, uses and abuse in post/colonial conflict-ridden Sri Lanka seems to have been a dialogue among the deaf for the benefit of the dumb, ironically among some of the more progressive specialists of socio-linguistics and related subjects. Of course, there have been some fine analyses of the corrosive effects of the hegemony of English on the subjectivities of Sinhala speakers who have been subject to ridicule for non-standard English pronunciation (Kandiah, Perera). These critics have also identified the double complex of fear and desire for the English language (and the worlds it opens) that marks much of the *kaduwa* debate. The effects of British colonialism have been the entrenchment of a deep inferiority complex which plays itself out in the rise of ethno-nationalism, be it Sinhala or Tamil, in the post/colonial context. It is hence that many heated words and things have been exchanged over the hegemony of English as well as Sinhala vis-a-vis Tamil since 1956.

It is then symptomatic of the failure of those of us who work in the humanities and the social sciences that a Sri Lankan historian can make the astonishing claim that:

The wide gap between the rhetoric of “Sinhala Only” and the actual on the ground situation explains to a large extent, why the 16th amendment to the constitution of 1987 which reestablished the parity of status of the two languages proved to be so uncontroversial. **Indeed language issues had lost most of the capacity to generate or aggravate ethnic tensions** (De Silva 1996:7).

I wish Kingsley De Silva were correct that the language issue had lost most of its capacity to generate ethnic tensions today, for then the war might be half over. De Silva seems to forget that it is precisely because language is and was such an important issue that the sixteenth amendment to the constitution signed in 1987 during the Indo-Sri Lanka accord explicitly incorporated recognition of Tamil as an official language. Clearly language remains a “root” cause of the current ethnic conflict and will be an issue in any peace settlement which recognizes the autonomy of the provinces. De Silva’s above interpretation which implicitly justifies the language *status quo* does not follow largely because it has no empirical basis as is evident from the following statement:

use of the Tamil language in administration, in the national legislature and local government institutions, in the law courts ... have proceeded on an uninterrupted continuity from the pre-1956 situations.

This is patently incorrect: it was only very recently that a Senior Lecturer in the Sociology Department at Colombo University said to me that not so long ago, he was asked by several Tamil-speakers to help them fill out the Identity card application forms when he was in the Identity card office. The forms were only available in Sinhala at the time. In the context of the fact that Tamil speakers are summarily arrested and held if they do not carry identity cards these days, one need not labour the point that this is the sort of thing that continues to fuel Tamil s' sense of grievance and the LTTE's brand of ethnic chauvinism.

Yet though De Silva is quite simply wrong that the Sinhala Only act of 1956 did not in practice alter the use of Tamil in official circles, it is important to note the distinction he makes between the "rhetoric" and "reality" of the language issue. The fact is that the issue of language has been politicized by Sri Lankan politicians who have become ethnic entrepreneurs to create their power bases by appealing to the deep sense of grievance of peoples who have been marginalized in the processes of post/colonial state building for many different reasons, including the lack of access to the English language or the increasingly hegemonic Sinhala language. The Sinhala and Tamil ethnic entrepreneur politicians, themselves usually bi-lingual, have used an anti-other discourse on language to tap into the experience of marginalization of the impoverished Sinhala and Tamil-speaking peoples via the issue of language.

Between the reality of the experience of linguistic marginalization, and Sinhala and Tamil politicians involved in whipping up ethno-linguistic nationalisms, there is a space for creative rethinking of how language can be developed to empower both marginalized first-language Sinhala and Tamil speakers. Yet sympathy for an underdog or victim, be they Sinhala or Tamil speaking peoples, need not obscure the fact that victimhood is a relative thing. History has again and again shown that today's victims may be tomorrow's oppressors. Similarly, the dominant in one context might be subordinate in another.

Clearly, speaking or not speaking a language raises complex psychological issues pertaining to the experience of exclusion or humiliation. Yet, it is unfortunate that many social scientists who understand this fact and who normally eschew knee-jerk (linguistic) nationalism, still harp on the dominance of the English language while paying scant attention to the wider national and international context in which we are located as third world scholars or nationalists. As such, if only inadvertently, their arguments often dovetail with and fuel those of the linguistic nationalists who advocate (ethnic) cleansing of language, culture, or land in a nonsensical nostalgia for some sort of pure, pristine, authentic, traditional, indigenous culture, as if culture was not an always already hybrid thing, made of cross-cultural borrowing and mixings - in Sri Lanka Sinhala, Tamil and English. This is unfortunately the case with Tudor Silva's and to a lesser extent Parakrama's analyses which fail to contextualise the debate over the use of English in Sri Lanka in the wider context of Sinhala and Tamil language politics. For Silva constructs a strawman out of English-language speakers, and Parakrama a strawman out of Standard English in order to beat fairly dead horses to death.

There is a need for broader, comparative thinking and theorization of the language issue given the present crisis in Sri Lanka. But this might also be said of much of what passes for sociological analysis in Sri Lankan Universities today. Yet if linguistic and social analysis is to be anything more than the commonsense rearranging of prejudices, as the distinguished Indian Sociologist Andre Beteille notes, it must consist of:

empirical grounding in careful observation and description of facts,... rigorous search for interconnections among different domains of society, and the systematic use of comparisons" (Beteille: 1996, 2361).

It is in this context then that the approach of the Indian state to the question of language might be a propos. India has evolved a three language approach to the question of language. This consists of recognizing: 1) the dominance of the regionally or provincially dominant language as an official language, 2) Hindi in non-Hindi areas or any other national language in Hindi-dominant areas as a second official language, 3) English or any other European language as a third official language. That is, in addition to the most commonly spoken language of a state, Hindi or any other official non-European national language is also an official language, while English or any other European language preferred by that particular state is also recognized as an official language.

Applying the Indian approach in Sri Lanka would translate into *de jure* recognition of Sinhala, Tamil and English as official languages in the broad national context even as they perform differently important functions. In practice then, Sinhala will be dominant in Sinhala-speaking areas, and Tamil dominant in Tamil speaking areas, while the importance of Sinhala is recognized in Tamil dominated areas and vice versa for Tamil in Sinhala dominated areas. At the same time English will be recognized as a third official language since it serves as a bridge as well as an international language. Such a policy would of course entail recognition of the importance of bi- if not tri-lingualism, and a transformation of the insular linguistic nationalist thinking which has driven language policy making in Sri Lanka for too long.

References

- Beteille, A . 1996, " Sociology and Commonsense" in *Economic and Political Weekly*: Vol xxxi Nos 35,36 and 37 Special Number 1996
- De Silva, K.M, 1996, "Editor's Introduction: Language, Ethnicity and Politics in South Asia" in *Ethnic Studies Report* ,International Centre for Ethnic Studies Special Issue "Language Policy in South Asia".
- Parakrama, Arjuna, 1996, *De-Hegemonizing Language Standards: Learning from (Post) Colonial Englishes about English* ,London: Macmillan Press.
- Silva, Tudor nd. "Kaduwa: Two Discourses on English" The Newton Gunesinghe Memorial Lecture 1996.