The Politics of Language Learning: Sinhala Speakers of Tamil and Identity Formation at the University of Jaffna

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Introduction

While many Tamil students studying in predominantly Sinhala-speaking areas tend to learn Sinhala quite quickly, anecdotal evidence seems to point to a different trend in Sinhala students studying in Tamil areas; relatively fewer seem to learn Tamil. Being a Sinhala[1] person working in a predominantly Tamil-speaking area, who also struggles to learn the language, I was interested in exploring the excuse structures I and others give for only knowing a few phrases of Tamil, but also in the social and political structures that condition these excuses, or allow for the parading of ignorance without or with minimal shame. That being the dominant position, there are also students who do learn Tamil, or who speak Tamil from before entering university, while still identifying as Sinhala. While demographics in places like Negombo or Badulla may play a part in this, this paper explores their reasons for and ways of speaking and learning the language. While ethnicity is often a socially negotiated identity, the impact of the war has also resulted in the Othering of other ethnicities within a given language, leading to an enforcing of ethnic boundaries that may be very deeply ingrained in a person's worldview. Complicating this is the often enforced notion among student populations of Sri Lankan universities of strict ethnic boundaries that sometimes tip into open conflict among groups defined by ethnicity.

Due to the formation of such ethnicity-based, sometimes hostile groups, students who speak both Tamil and Sinhala are often thrust into positions of negotiating with the 'other side'; thus despite and because of their crossing of the borders of ethnicity via language, they are made spokespeople for one particular group (and possibly against other groups). Although many students at the University of Jaffna speak both Sinhala and Tamil (especially, but not all, or limited to, Muslim students and Malaiyaha Tamil students), this study focuses on the relatively rarer phenomena of Sinhala students who speak both languages, seeking to understand their positioning within the broader

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1 Although ethnicity is complex and relative, the question is generally posed in terms of a binary – 'Are you Sinhala or Tamil?' In the context of that erasure of mixed ancestry and need to 'pick a side', one becomes Sinhala.

student politics of the university as well as the processes of identity formation that result from speaking both languages in the charged space of the university.

While speaking is not the only index of knowledge of a language, this study focuses on speech as a way of performing a particular (ethnic) identity, and as a necessary factor in negotiating, mediating in, and perhaps creating or perpetuating conflicts. It also seeks to explore to what extent being multilingual is a privilege within the Sri Lankan system, and which languages get privileged in the positioning of students as negotiators and representatives.

Literature Review

The question I begin with has been approached from various angles – (1) the formal linguistic approach, which acknowledges the presence of bilingual speakers and studies the language variation that occurs within these communities as a result, (2) the applied linguistic approach, which studies the learning and teaching of/in different languages, (3) the linguistic anthropology/sociology of language approach, which examines the role played by language in the formation of ethnic identities, and (4) the conflict analysis approach, which studies the effects and portrayals of ethnic conflict on/in Sinhala and Tamil.

To begin with, there is a body of scholarship that looks at bilingual speakers of Sinhala and Tamil through a linguistic lens, tracking influences of Sinhala on Tamil (Bonta 2003) and of Tamil on Sinhala (Wickramasinghe 2014), and mapping language contact in terms of linguistic areas (Coperahewa 2007).

Moving into the field of applied linguistics, while several studies have framed the issue of less Sinhala students learning Tamil in terms of phonology or syntactical differences (Kalainathan, Ashraff 2016), others have studied the situation in terms of the ethnic conflict, by studying the motivations and progress of learners through the lens of reconciliation (Perera and Khodos 2024). Others have examined identity formation of students in bilingual (English and Sinhala/Tamil) classes and found that this leads to an increased interest in knowing the language of the other (Wijesekara 2018).

Multiple studies explore ethnic identity formation, looking at it historically (Gunawardana 2002, Ismail et al. 2009, Indrapala 2015, Wettimuny 2022), as delimited by particular locations (Dissanayake and Tahmaseb 2011, Anderson 2021), and as formed through political involvement and activity (Told 2014).

Finally, the impact of the conflict has been seen in the hierarchizing of different languages within the Sri Lankan state (Rajasingham-Senanayake 1996), in the differing

attitudes towards central stories and events of history among Sinhala and Tamil speakers (Gamage and Jayathilake 2023), and in the relations of students within state universities (Selvaratnam et al. 2024).

This study hopes to add to this body of research by delving further into the issue of identity formation in and in relation to language in the context of student politics at the University of Jaffna, seeking to draw connections between the identities encouraged or allowed by the milieu and the decision to learn or not learn Tamil.

Methodology

The paper is based mainly on a discourse analysis of interviews with students, recent graduates and lecturers from four faculties of the University of Jaffna who identify as Sinhala speakers of Tamil, along with interviews with peers of the main respondents which enable deeper understanding of the context. The faculties and/or departments within those faculties are selected for the presence of a significant number of Sinhala students, and for their location within the main campus premises in Thirunelveli. The respondents were chosen by snowball sampling, with the first few respondents being known either to me or to friends of mine.

Results

The study revealed several interesting findings about the motivations to learn Tamil among Sinhala students, as well as about the way the ethnicity of these students are perceived. While several of the participants cited Tamil films as an influencing their wish to learn the language, many of those interviewed were not merely bilingual but trilingual, with a significant number knowing English before they learnt Tamil. This enabled them to make friends with first language speakers of Tamil, which then motivated them to learn Tamil in order to participate better in conversations, understand jokes, and so forth. This, coupled with the finding that many Sinhala students who learn Tamil are from urban areas points to a class dimension in those who have access and motivation to learn Tamil.

Further, it was found that in some places it was assumed by other Sinhala students that all students who spoke Tamil were either Tamil or Muslim.

Conclusions

While this study is a preliminary one and a study of a wider group is necessary to draw firm conclusions, it seems apparent that there is a class element to Sinhala students learning Tamil - generally through access to schools with three mediums, or with prior access to English. Given the tendency for their ethnic identity to be mistaken because of their languages, it may be that it is students who are either more comfortable in

a class identification than an ethnic one or who are used, by virtue of already being bilingual (Sinhala and English), to being seen as having a hybrid culture, who tend to learn Tamil faster for communicative and cultural purposes beyond mere survival.

It also appears that while such students were positioned as translators for their friends not merely within the batch (in official matters it would appear that Muslim students also played a large role in communicating between Tamil and Sinhala student groups) but between non-Tamil-speaking Sinhala friends and people in the surrounding areas, their ethnic identity was also seen differently by virtue of their use of multiple languages.

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