

Language Policy as a Tool of Reconciliation

Dushyanthi Mendis

Department of English, University of Colombo

Language policy can be defined as a law, rules or precepts designed to bring about language change, encoded in mechanisms of language planning undertaken by governments, schools or other institutional bodies (Smitherman 2000). In countries with a history of ethnic conflict in which language rights or language use has been a contributing factor, language policies can serve to divide or unite a nation. Sri Lanka is no exception, having been subjected to a succession of short-sighted, self-serving language policy decisions over the last 50 years. The country's current (pre-war) Constitution outlines Sri Lanka's language policy in Chapter IV, affording Sinhala and Tamil the status of both Official and National Languages, while English is termed the link language. In addition to this, the post-war Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission's (LLRC) Report contains recommendations on the directions and goals of future language policies and also - perhaps for the first time - an acknowledgment and recognition of the existence of problems related to language use/non-use. The objective of this paper is to analyse the recommendations pertaining to language use as set out in the LLRC's Report (2011) from the perspective of language as a tool of reconciliation. These recommendations encompass four major areas - education, administration, identity/culture and interpersonal communication. Of these, the last two represent a new departure into volatile yet crucially important areas of the Sri Lankan psyche that have not been previously addressed by language planners or policy makers. For instance, the Report proposes that Sinhala and Tamil speakers be brought closer through linguistic and cultural affinities in each other's language and literatures, rather than through English as a "link language" as given in the Constitution. The paper concludes by discussing the challenges of using language as a tool of reconciliation, such as ideological shifts, changes in beliefs and identities and consciousness raising, drawing from the experiences of diverse countries such as South Africa, Taiwan and Australia, which have adopted similar methods of conflict resolution.

Keywords: Language planning, Language policy, LLRC