

Language dilemma of post-independence Ceylon: a socio-linguistic perspective

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The post-independence Ceylon was born almost seven decades ago inhering some of the most enduring conflicts, paradoxes and dilemmas of governance at the time. The local élite of the new post-colonial administration took over a top-down, centralized and long-established policy and governance structure from the British, but immediately faced the twin challenges of addressing the growing demands of the Ceylonese citizens and establishing their own legitimacy among them. By the mid-1950s revitalizing Sinhala basa or the Sinhala language had become inter alia a symbolic priority of a vocal group of agitators from the majority ethnic group, Sinhalese, who were in a quest to re-establish local identity, tradition and authenticity. This bottom-up demand also received the tacit support of local political élite, who saw the cultural capital of these demands as a way of politically legitimizing themselves in the eyes of the Sinhalese. The language policy adopted by the second government of the independent Ceylon in 1956 was a result of this localization-inclined political thinking which also brought about abiding and long-drawn-out consequences. Primarily based on the literature survey of historical documents, this paper analyses the key language-related developments during the first two decades of the independence of Ceylon by applying the ideologies of Einar Haugen (language planning) and Pierre Bourdieu (cultural capital, language & symbolic power). This paper limits itself to inferring and discussing the linguistic projects launched immediately before the Independence as a bottom-up language revitalization effort and how it turned out to be a larger political project, afterwards. While contextualizing the social and political developments of the era, this paper underlines that the formation of post-independence Ceylon's language policy was born out of confrontations and dilemmas of the political elite and the local populace, intermingled with contemporary language and political thinking.

Key Words: Language policy, Language planning, Cultural capital, Indigenization, Language politics