

Bilingualism in South Asia: Friend or Foe?

(The persistence of English in Post-Colonial Societies:
Structural Reasons vs. Neocolonial 'Hegemony'
or Linguistic 'Imperialism')

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South Asia's great linguistic diversity has been seen as a source of conflict in the post-Independence era, as various states have attempted to throw off vestiges of colonialism and find a language policy that suits their own conditions—in particular, to find a way to reduce the dominance of English. The area's linguistic diversity can be viewed as not just a problem, but also as a resource: the linguistic diversity of South Asia is deeply rooted in its linguistic culture, and is in fact a product and an outcome of its cultural policy, rather than a vexatious hindrance. India's 'Three-Language Formula', under which everyone is supposed to learn English, the Mother Tongue, and Hindi, is supposed to be a middle way between unfettered diversity and monolingualism. It recognizes the value of local linguistic resources and the need for a language of wider (especially international) communication. Nevertheless, structures set up to foster multilingualism via schooling often fail to do the job, and end up perpetuating inequality, especially when it comes to a knowledge of English, a mastery of which is necessary to attain any useful kind of higher education, and thereby a higher standard of living.

This paper reviews some of the problems associated with school-fostered multilingualism in South Asia, as revealed by recent research. In my earlier work on India (Schiffman 1996) it seemed to me that India, at least,¹ had found a way to accommodate traditional and indigenous languages *and* languages of modernity (languages of wider communication) in the so-called 'Three-Language Formula' because India was tolerant of multilingualism and always had been, and because the three-language formula allowed people to have various linguistic tools at their disposal, i.e. it allowed them to have a diverse repertoire of linguistic resources. The earlier attempt to ban English had failed, and the attempt to substitute Hindi for English had backfired, so a new stage of equilibrium had to be reached.

1. Review of Literature

Much has been written about South Asian English, with the work of B. Kachru (1983, 1986) central to any discussion of the issue. More recently, the issue has become one not so much devoted to what *kinds of features* of Indian English we can describe, but what its status is at the end of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st. Annamalai's work (forthcoming a, b, c, d) focuses on this latter issue; Gupta (1995, 1996) deals with issues of English in Singapore, much of which is also germane to South Asia. Kandiah (1998) is concerned with the 'new Englishes' such as Sri Lankan English, Singapore English, etc. and how these varieties have taken on a life of their own, such that their speakers now feel that they 'own' them as much as BAMA₂ speakers feel they own English. Kubchandani (1981) has focused on language policy in independent India, and on the kinds of multilingual dynamics that pertain to the area; he also studies models of bilingual education, which for all intents and purposes means English and some other language. Pandaripande (2002) discusses what is meant by 'minority' language in the subcontinent. Tickoo (1996) addresses directly the 'love-hate' issue. Rahman's work (1999, 2002) is practically the only work of a serious nature dealing with language issues and language policy, especially the role of English, in Pakistan.

1.2 Three-Language Formula post-1968

The Three-Language Formula was devised in 1968 after much strife over the attempt to substitute Hindi for English, which ensued when the constitutional provision to do so became operative in 1965. Non-Hindi speaking groups such as the Tamils were adamantly, even violently opposed to the constitutional provision, and for much of 1965 there was unrest and upheaval over the language issue, with some universities shut down, trains and other ‘central’ government symbols attacked, and so on. Lal Bahadur Shastri, a shadowy and to some people, an unlikely candidate for the job, who became Prime Minister of India after Nehru’s death in 1964, worked out the formula and laid the groundwork for it, only to die prematurely of a heart-attack while negotiating details of a cease-fire with Pakistan in Tashkent in 1966. But before his death he had also attempted to defuse the language crisis and subsequently, the National Policy Resolution of 1968³ settled on the formula, and it was reiterated in the National Policy on Education in 1986.

But this new, more tolerant situation was unable to maintain a balance among the three languages, since no one was prepared for the fact that with the rise of ‘modernity’, urbanization, industrialization and especially technologization (i.e. computerization) the demand for a more dominant role for English was rising dramatically. Parents demanded English in schools earlier and earlier, and some children even received no mother tongue instruction at all, attaining all literacy via English, with sometimes no literacy *whatsoever* in their mother-tongues. For some this made English the ‘enemy’ (Tickoo 1996) that was ‘killing’ other languages including mother-tongues, so while populist demand for mother-tongue resources was on the rise, underground or what I call (Schiffman 2002) the linguistic ‘black market demand’ was also increasing. (Cf. also Schiffman 1996:168.)

South Asia has always had a strong tradition of producing people skilled in mathematics and other technical subjects, and with the advent of the computerization of the world and the workplace, Indian citizens often found that these skills (as with medicine and engineering before them) were not only portable (opening up new job markets both at home and abroad) but had *export value*—both the people and the skills, (via internet etc.)

It had already been the case that India exported high-tech graduates, but now even if the person possessing the skills never left the country, the skills could be marketed in international/global industries via the internet etc. These skills naturally required a concomitant knowledge of English.

2. Jobs in Cyberspace

But the internet has opened up other possibilities, jobs that allow Indians’ knowledge of English to be used in cyberspace. What I am referring to is jobs involving such skills as medical transcription, where digitized transcriptions of doctors’ diaries, recorded in medical settings in the US or elsewhere are digitized, sent via internet to India, downloaded, made available as sound files, transcribed by the Indian employees, and the transcriptions then sent back via internet to the US setting. This is done during what is nighttime in the US, but is daytime in India; the transcriptions arrive back in the US before the next working day. Other jobs involve acting as ‘help’ desk personnel, answering questions that people in the US or elsewhere have about their computers or their software—the famous **800** help numbers. Indians and others are even taught to speak with American accents, so that when the customer thinks she is talking to Sheila in Chicago, she’s really talking to Susheela in Bangalore.⁴

Medical transcription is a costly business in the US, or at least used to be. Now these industries save vast amounts of money, paying their Indian employees the equivalent of \$4 per hour (or less) when back in the US the rate is four times that.⁵

3. English in Colonial India: some Historical Background

When colonialism, especially British colonialism came to India, the British at first tried to employ indigenous languages to govern the country, but this policy eventually came into question and was

challenged.⁶ Indian elites were also realizing that English was the key to power and participation, and demanded that classical languages be abandoned. Many reformers (such as Ram Mohan Roy etc.), cried out for access to English, pleading with rulers to give them English.

The debate became known as the ‘Orientalists’ versus the ‘Anglicists’, and the Anglicists eventually won. Macaulay’s hard-line was that Indian languages were not ‘fit to convey the ideas’ that the British wanted them to, so he concluded that:

“ [W]e must form an intermediate class of people with English tastes and intellect, but Indian in blood and colour”.⁷

His Minute of 1835 carried the day, and the colonial government made it official: spend all government money on English education, and establish English-medium universities. Hardinge’s proclamation (1844) made recruitment for public offices in India available only through English schools--this was of course focused on elites only. Later the British recognized that they had to think about the masses, too, and recommended the use of vernaculars.

In actuality, the British recognized three types of education:

- (1) **English medium**, in urban areas, for elites, from 1835 onward.
- (2) **Two-tier**: vernacular for primary, English for advanced, in smaller towns;
- (3) **Vernacular medium**, in rural areas for primary education.

Vernacular education was therefore viewed as inferior, and English medium as better, since it was reserved for elites. (Khubchandani 1981)

Annamalai has written that after 1835,

“English expanded its use in public domains and in a short time edged out the other languages in use in those domains (Annamalai 1994). Consolidation of English in the domains of power made a significant difference to the multilingual network (Dua 1994). This dominant language was *not under the control of any native elite guarding access to it* (like Sanskrit was under the control of Brahmins and Persian under the Muslim elite). This gave the dominant language English the image of *having open access* through education and standing apart from other native dominant languages. [Emphasis mine, hfs] (Annamalai Forthcoming, d.)

Also, as he points out,

“English came to be viewed as the language of rational and scientific (as opposed to religious) thought and material (as opposed to spiritual) progress. It came to be viewed as fulfilling a need for the elite to work together on their political and economic agendas.” (Annamalai, op. cit.)

Even though English is a powerful tool in the hands of South Asian elites, minority communities⁸ also see access to English as a way to circumvent the power of state elites, where their languages are circumscribed, and indeed, in some smaller states, English has been made the ‘official’ language as a way to undercut the power of, say, Hindi. (This is again, as Annamalai points out, because English is **not under the control of any native elite guarding access to it**, i.e. nobody owns it.

“English is thus believed to be a powerful tool available to the speakers of the powerless languages to constrain the power given by their language to the speakers of the majority language. That the power the minorities try to gain through English is **at the cost** of their languages is of secondary importance to them.” (Annamalai op. cit.)

That is, since in some small linguistic states such as those that were granted statehood in recent years (such as Nagaland in the northeast), speakers perceive that their own language may appear to have no value, and no **‘power’** (i.e. no way to confer advancement of any sort) some have therefore adopted English as official (and not without legal objections from Central, i.e. federal, authorities.) This may indeed undercut the ‘power’ of their indigenous language(s), but in Nagaland there is no single ‘native’ language that can even be used in education other than a pidgin⁹ language, Nagamese, born of contact between Assamese and the various Naga languages spoken in the area. English is therefore used as the ‘official’ medium of instruction, but teachers *de facto* teach through Nagamese.¹⁰

But as Annamalai so aptly puts it, “The question to be raised is the effect of this change on the position of English” (that is, its co-option by linguistic minorities, who want to have the same advantages that they see national elites having) “is whether this actually benefits them.”

“To use an **ecological metaphor**, the question is whether a new organism introduced and integrated into an ecological system has strengthened the system or weakened it. More specifically, whether it endangers other organisms in the system.” (Annamalai, *op. cit.*)

4. Ecological Metaphors and Other Metaphors

Searching for a way to represent visually the various kinds of repertoires of linguistic registers and other kinds of linguistic knowledge that we find in multilingual societies, I became dissatisfied with the sorts of tables and charts that had been proposed (e.g. by Mackey 1970)¹¹, and decided instead on a model that sees linguistic repertoire development as a function of age. I proposed a model that involved concentric circles, with all speakers sharing the same repertoire during the years of early childhood (the center or nucleus of the circle) but as education proceeds, repertoires become diversified. The result is the figure shown below:

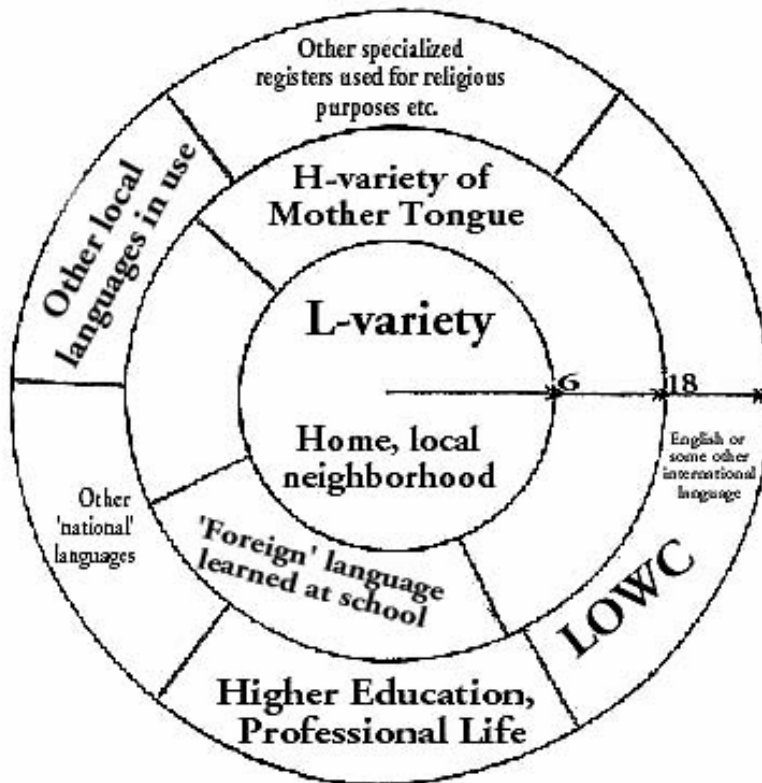


Fig. 1: Language repertoires as a function of age, education, and life experience.

In this representation, the L-variety in the center is the language of early childhood—of home, local neighborhood, and family. Around the age of 6, the child leaves this environment and enters the environment of school and wider communication, and in South Asia, at least, the variety taught in school is probably not exactly the same as that spoken at home. Diglossia, a common feature in the area, means that the language of school may either be an H-variety of the home language, or a totally different language.¹² Again in South Asia, another language, often English, may be introduced even as early as first grade (sic!) in this day and age, but certainly by the time the student reaches college, English is the dominant, indeed usually the *only* language used in higher education.¹³ This is also the language of wider communication (LOWC) for all of South Asia, and of course the language of specialized registers such as medicine, technology, etc.

As I contemplated this model, it occurred to me that resistance (in areas such as Tamil Nadu) to the language policy that favors Hindi (or Urdu in Pakistan) as the ‘official’ language of the post-Independence era has been mainly focused on the perceived threat that Hindi (in particular, but also Sinhala in Sri Lanka) would penetrate the registers and domains in the **outer** circle of this model. No examples of Hindi ever replacing registers or domains of the second circle, or indeed the central circle, have ever come to my attention in such areas as Tamilnadu, where the resistance to Hindi was and has been the most vehement, virulent, and outspoken. English, of course, has come to dominate these outer domains, and in some cases now, the second circle, so that many South Asian elites are more comfortable with (South Asian varieties of) English than they are with their own ‘mother’ tongues;

indeed some Indians (at least) grow to maturity with little or no literacy in their ‘mother tongue’, a situation that I never encountered when I first visited India 38 years ago.

But as I contemplated this model further, the image that came to mind was that of a *virus penetrating a healthy cell*, invading it, and replicating itself as we know this to be the case with HIV. As I thought about the fear that Tamil speakers have of the ‘threat’ of Hindi, I saw this as similar to the ‘threat’ of a hostile virus, and I still find this image a useful one. How else to explain the *virulent* (no pun intended) reaction that Tamil speakers exhibit than as the perception that Hindi will not only invade one or more domains of the outer circle, but that it will continue on to *invade all domains*, and like a virus, enter the nucleus, replicate itself, and totally replace Tamil with Hindi, in the way we understand bio-viruses to operate? The result, of course, would be the death of Tamil, and all Tamil culture with it.

We know, of course, from the virological model, that viruses do in fact find a way to enter the cell, finding the ‘key’ that unlocks some ‘portal’ or attaching itself to a ‘receptor’ that allows it to enter. To defeat the virus and its spread, a way must be found to prevent this, of course, and the way that Tamilians see as their best defense is to forbid Hindi to enter *any* domain of their repertoire.¹⁴ Otherwise, of course, the language will completely ‘take over’. One need not look far in the world for other parallels to this kind of fear—the fear of globalization, the fear of the spread of English, of the spread of ‘western values’ or of ‘atheism’ or of ‘secularism.’ Resistance to this invasion must be total and absolute, and this absolutism is what we now see in many of the current world conflicts, whether linguistic or not.

I do not want to belabor this point, or overuse the metaphor. The virus metaphor, of course, has also been applied to disorders that infect *computers*, as we well know, and in a web-search search for an illustrative ‘picture’ of a virus I found many representations of computer viruses; the analogy is the same: something invades, destroys the indigenous nucleus, replicates itself, and causes total malfunction of the system. Attempts to control the entry of computer viruses into ones computer are about as successful as attempts to try to prevent the spread of the AIDS virus, or most recently, the SARS virus. This is because, as we now know, viruses, including computer viruses, are constantly changing, i.e. they are adaptable, and can thwart or foil the virus protection system.¹⁵

But as Annamalai says, in an ecological approach to language, the danger in allowing a ‘foreign’ species to enter a part of the natural environment where it is not native is that certain species have been known to ‘take over’ and totally wipe out native species. How different might this be if the ‘foreign species’ is a language?

5. Status Management in India

As we have noted, language status management in post-colonial India has involved a policy, since 1950,¹⁶ of attempting to restrict the domains of English in India as a whole, whereas in some linguistic states (such as Tamilnadu) the effort has been one of limiting the domains of *Hindi* and *Sanskrit* so that Tamil can recapture the domains of elementary and secondary education, the media, and so forth. This regional policy has operated at cross-purposes with the national policy, because English is perceived in some ways as a ‘buffer’ against Hindi, which is perceived as a greater ‘threat’ to linguistic survival for the Tamils. In other words, **English is virus-protection**. English will not, it is believed, invade the cell in the same way that Hindi might; English is ‘safe’ and prophylactic, and will protect the inner domains from invasion, remaining safely in the outer ones. Earlier I might have agreed with this; today, with global job markets and other ways that English can be not only a useful part of a South Asian person’s linguistic repertoire, but indeed a *vital* part, I am not so sure.

6. Models of Language Policy

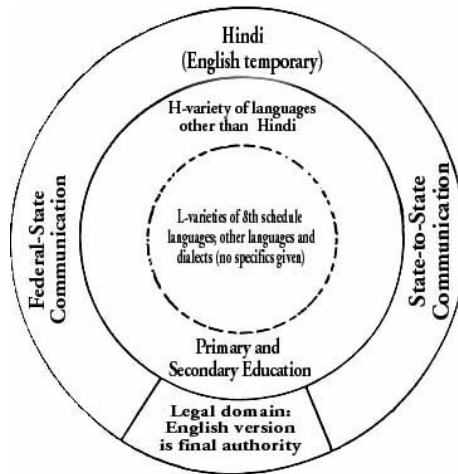


Figure 2: Pre-1968 Model of Indian Language Policy

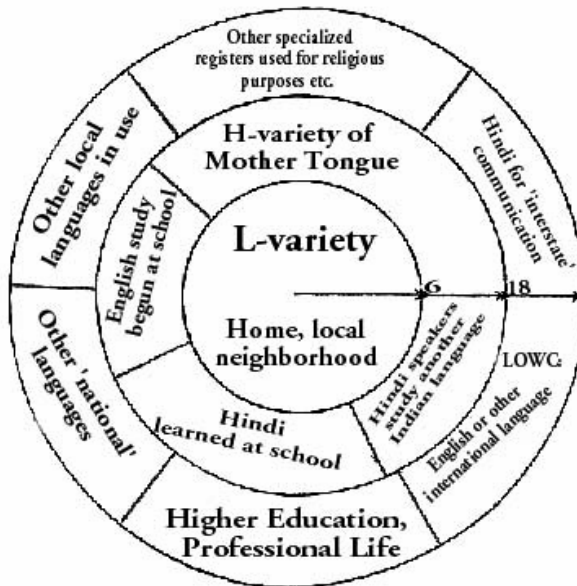


Fig. 3: Domains under India's Three-Language Formula.

The concentric circle model can be used not only to represent a community's linguistic repertoire, but to represent a language policy. Figure 2 represents the pre-1968 model of Indian

language policy. This policy makes no statements about domains of L-variety language; for the space occupied by an H-variety language (such as Tamil) in Figure 1 this policy model allows any language mentioned in Schedule ('article') 8 of the Indian Constitution. In the outer ring the policy reserves most segments for Hindi, but allows temporary (i.e. until 1965) domains for English; in one case it specifically reserves a domain for English (i.e. the ultimate authority of English versions of laws). It takes no cognizance of the already *de facto* control that English exercises over higher education, business, or medical, technical, or scientific domains. This policy also makes no mention of all the other linguistic varieties (languages, dialects, etc.) spoken natively by millions of Indian citizens that are not recognized by Schedule 8.¹⁷ Figure 3, by contrast, represents the so-called 'Three-language Formula', where English retains some domains, and Hindi speakers are expected to learn another Indian language. The role of Hindi in the outer circle is restricted to interstate communication; whether it is allowed to penetrate inner circles depends on local circumstances.

7. The Output Effect, the Input Effect, the Back-up Effect, or the Presumption Effect

In some of my work (e.g. Schiffman 1992) I have variously referred to some factors that affect language policy implementation (usually to thwart or resist it) as the 'output effect, the input effect, the back-up effect, or the presumption effect'¹⁸. That is, if there are 'reserved domains' such as that of the English version of Indian laws being the 'definitive' version in any legal challenge at the central (federal) level, this means that judges in Indian high courts must know English, and know it well. The back-up (presumption, push-down) effect is that law colleges at Indian universities must then operate in English; this requires that students applying to law schools must know English well, and so-on down the chain, all the way to pre-school, presumably. Thus the simple reservation of English to this domain, seemingly minor in the grander scheme of things, means that there are implications all the way down the educational chain.¹⁹

8. The 'New Englishes'

But beyond this, there is another factor that must be taken into account. That is that in various parts of the post-colonial world, there are varieties of English that have been in existence since before the end of colonialism, but have taken on new roles since these nations became independent—they have become nativized (Annamalai forthcoming D; Kandiah 1998) or indigenized, and fill a niche that no one had predicted for them. South Asian English, Singapore English, and other 'new Englishes' have even become the subject of scholarly study, and though they are often perceived, especially by 'native' speakers of 'old' English (such as Americans, British and Australians, the so-called BAMA people) as lacking in prestige, even of being defective in some way, their users themselves see a role for them, and do not wish to see them replaced by exonormic varieties. In Singapore in particular, Singapore English ('Singlish') is even seen as a marker of Singapore identity, since it is the only language shared by Singaporeans of Chinese, Malay, and Indian origin (Gupta 1995)²⁰.

9. Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that notions of (post-)colonial 'hegemony' or linguistic 'imperialism' are not part of the status-management strategies for certain linguistic minorities in post-colonial societies at least, and for various reasons. Aside from the perception of 'threat', there are also, I argue, 'structural' reasons for the retention of colonial languages; one such would be provisions in Constitutions, such as that of India, reserving a legal domain for English. This engenders what I call the 'Back-up' Effect',

such that if the Supreme Court is to consider the English version definitive, lawyers and judges must be trained in English; this has consequences all the way down to the lowest levels of schooling. Add to this the fact that business in India has always operated in English; that scientists, engineers and doctors wish to be part of a larger global discourse, and the larger global employment market, so the chances that the domains of English will be diminished by official language policy alone are seriously undercut. *Economic determinism*, rather than any ‘post-modern’ explanation, seems to be the definitive issue here. I have also used the semi-serious *virus metaphor* to illustrate how, rationally or irrationally, one language may be perceived as a hostile invading enemy. In some post-colonial polities, English or other LOWC’s are cast in this role, but in some parts of India, Hindi is seen as the invader and English as the protector, or ‘*virus protection system*.’

The end result of all of this is that English is still the main language of higher education in most of India, and other LOWC’s function in this role in other post-colonial societies.. In India, of course, the central government has no control over local educational policies, so no attempt to impose Hindi as a medium of instruction in local schools, universities, or colleges has ever been (or will ever be) attempted. But this does not keep the fear at bay.

Notes

¹ Other South Asian countries have had other experiences—Sri Lanka tried to ban English, or severely restrict it, in its ‘Sinhala-Only’ policy beginning in 1958, with ongoing disastrous results; Pakistan (Rahman 2002) has not tried to, or has done so only as window-dressing, reserving English for elites.

² **BAMA** is an acronym for ‘**British, American, and Australian**’ i.e. the main exonomic varieties of English that Singaporeans and South Asians are most likely to encounter, and which they are expected to emulate.

³ This agreement was essentially worked out by inter-state negotiation, i.e. between the chief ministers of states, rather than by the Central government.

⁴ <http://www.wired.com/news/business/0,1367,55799,00.html>

⁵ This website (http://www.lairdsschool.com/why_med_tran.htm) declares that medical transcriptionists can earn \$20 to \$40 per year working at home, and that those ‘working in medical and office settings can earn up to \$40,000 a year.’

⁶ Ironically, during the first 250 years of British colonialism in India, the East India Company ran things, and their language policy was to get by with whatever languages had been in use before, such as Persian, although English also gained some ground. This did not work everywhere, and some local elites resisted it; after the so-called ‘Mutiny’ or ‘Uprising’ in the late 1850’s, the rule of the Company came to an end, and a colonial office was established in London that undertook to train people professionally to govern India. But even before this, English-educated elites challenged the ‘Orientalist’ position, and wished to use more English, and after 1830, this became the policy.

⁷ Quoted in Schiffman 1996.

⁸ These are groups whose languages are spoken by less than 10 million people, and are thus not recognized by the Indian Constitution as having the same rights as majority languages, which are listed as such in the so-called ‘Eighth Schedule’ of the Constitution; this provision has changed over time to include some ‘state’ languages with fewer speakers than the 10 million minimum, and some others.

⁹ Nagamese may now be creolized to some extent for some urban speakers, but for most it remains a pidgin.

¹⁰ Here again, what is ‘official’ and what is actually the language policy are at odds. But if Nagamese were not used, students would not understand what was going on. Nagamese is therefore the language of ‘explanation’ without which education could not proceed.

¹¹ I realize that Mackey’s typology is not a typology of bilingualism, but of bilingual education types, but there is a tendency in the literature to conflate the two.

¹² In the Indian State of Jammu and Kashmir, for example, though Kashmiri is spoken by more than 3 million mother-tongue speakers, Urdu is used as the language of education, though this may soon change.

¹³ The only domains in which a language other than English is used is in the study of the language and literature of the States in question, e.g. Bengali in West Bengal, or in the study of indigenous music, e.g. Carnatic music in S. India.

¹⁴ In fact, what we see most often is that Tamilians tend to deny that they know any Hindi, when they may in fact have secret knowledge of Hindi, perhaps only *passively*, e.g. for the consumption and enjoyment of Hindi movies, which certainly play to large audiences even in Tamilnadu.

¹⁵ Or, their designers construct them in such a way that they can function without the user's knowledge, hiding themselves in dark places, replicating themselves, sending out bogus messages and/or replicas of themselves to other computers, and so on.

¹⁶ That is the date of the first Constitution of independent India, which specified that within fifteen years, the Hindi language would become the 'national language' and would replace English in almost all domains at the 'Central' (federal) level.

¹⁷ For a summary of India's language policy as expressed in the 1950 Constitution, see Watts 1971:152-4.

¹⁸ Schiffman 1992: `` `Resisting Arrest' in Status Planning: Structural and Covert Impediments to Status Change." *Language and Communication* 12(1), 1-15.

¹⁹ The same is true by the way in other polities, such as in Malaysia—the Federation of Malaysia has worked hard to eliminate English from various educational, legal, and other domains, but again in one situation there is a loophole. Malaysia has no 'supreme court' but relies instead on the Privy Council (in London, "which, through its Judicial Committee, is the provision of a final Court of Appeal for a number of Commonwealth countries who have chosen to retain it" in the case of disputes. This means, again, that judges and lawyers must know English well enough to argue cases before the Privy Council; the back-up effect of this is palpable even for Malaysia. In Schiffman 1992 I have shown how this 'loophole' has affected Malaysia's ability successfully to ban English from the legal domain, and now the technical domain.

²⁰ As Gupta points out, most Singaporean young people want to sound Singaporean, and are hostile to accents they see as foreign. Some also want to emphasize their ethnic identity, which means that their kind of Singlish may sound more 'Chinese' (Malay, Indian, ...) than others.

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