

Death by other means: Neo-vernacularization of South Asian languages

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Endangerment of a language is assessed by the shrinking number of its speakers and the failure to pass it on to the next generation. This approach views multilingualism in statistical terms. When multilingualism is defined by the functional relationship between languages the meaning of endangerment expands to include functional reduction in languages. This takes place when the economic, political and cultural value of a language comes to near zero. The language may still be spoken inter-generationally, but only for limited in-group communication. Such a language survives, but does not live. This situation can be found even in a language with a large population and official status.

This paper illustrates such a situation with Tamil, a South Asian language. Tamil has a long literary history, is the official language of an Indian state and has political and cultural value. But its lack of economic value makes its speakers consider it a liability in education and for material progress and this restricts it from functioning substantively. Such a language will not die but will become a vernacular. Most Indian regional languages, which were vernaculars in the first millenium when Sanskrit was the dominant language, may become vernaculars again in the third millenium when English is the dominant language.

மெல்லத் தமிழ் இனிச் சாகும் 'Tamil will die slowly'

Subramanya Bharathi (1882-1921), harbinger of modern Tamil poetry, challenged the above fear about Tamil on failing to acquire new knowledge

1. A FRAMEWORK. Multilingualism is less about the multiplicity of languages and more about the functional relationship between multiple languages. The function of a language is its use in the political, economic and cultural domains at the level of an individual, a community or a country. The functional status of a language accrues from the value attributed differentially to its use in these domains and levels. The resulting index of value is crucial to understand the retention or loss of a language in a multilingual environment.¹ The value index defines the nature of a linguistic ecology which is defined by the functional relationship between languages. The linguistic ecology changes over time because of extralinguistic changes at the macro level, including new contacts with speakers of other languages. These macro level changes may reset the value index, which will define the new ecology.

Let us explore the possible outcomes of functional realignment of languages already in contact, or of realignment due to languages that come newly into contact. With regard to the outcomes of the languages themselves as objects, it is well-attested that the speaker or the community of language X may turn to be X+Y, where Y is either an existing language in the region whose function has changed, or a new language that has come into contact from the in-migration of Y speakers, or the language encountered in the out-migration of X speakers. With regard to the functions of the languages, the functional value F of language X may change, in principle, to F- (indicating reduction in value) or to F+ (indicating elevation in value). The change is relative to X's pre-contact functional value F1. The outcome of both languages retaining their pre-change / pre-contact functional value is of marginal occurrence statistically. So are the outcomes of both languages elevating their functional value to F+ or reducing to F-. The functional value after change / contact (i.e. F2) is determined downward or upward relative to the political, economic and cultural value of the new language in the ecology. When the functional value of a new language is F+, other languages in the ecology may reconfigure their earlier value of F1 to F-. Such functional value reduction with regard to tribal languages is exemplified by

¹ Smolicz (1981) uses the concept of core value restrictively to refer to the valence of cultural value the linguistic community assigns to its language in relation to other markers of its cultural identity. But culture is only one of the domains that assign value to a language in my formulation.

the introduction of Tamil (Y i.e. L2) as a contact language with F+ status in the habitat of tribal communities in the Nilgiris (Tamil Nadu) with their own languages (Gnanasundaram et al. 2012). Functional reduction of the major regional languages of India is illustrated by the growing dominance of English (Y i.e. L2) in India from the time it became the language of the colonial administration, which elevated its political and economic value. One could argue that a prerequisite for multilingual existential stability is to have a balance in the reconfiguration of the functional relationship between the languages in contact whenever the status quo is altered.

1.1. EXPLAINING EXCEPTIONALISM. Defining the stability of a language in terms of its relative functional value makes it possible to envisage a situation in which the contact language (Y i.e. L2) does not have an F+ value high enough (F++) to threaten the very existence of X (i.e. L1) by reducing its value to F0. In such a situation, the chance of maintaining X (i.e. L1), though with F-, is high. This may partially explain the phenomenon of language maintenance in the Indian context. Pandit (1979) observed that the question to be asked about Indian multilingualism is why the languages are maintained, and not why they are lost. In India, historically, migration of people with a different language (L1) into another linguistic area (L2) does not cause L1 to disappear. An example of this is the continued maintenance of Telugu (L1) at home in the state of Tamil Nadu by migrants from another region, Andhra, centuries ago. Telugu is maintained at the functional level of F-, as Tamil was not a language of F++ for the reasons described below. Though this is generally true of the language demography of India with regard to communities and families, there are historical exceptions, especially in indigenous communities and families (Ishtiaq, 1999, Sengupta 2009). Reduction in the number of speakers is generally reported, which lead to ultimate death of these languages in some cases. There is variation in the rate of demographic decline in different parts of the country, which is attributable to many variables (Gnanasundram & Rangan 2006).

Historically, Indian economy remained local and symbiotic, where economic mobility is restricted by the traditional caste and occupation and whose polity was built on the local power structure, which had a distant, tenuous and need-based relationship with the central power structure. The language of the centralized power was distant for the local population and

had to be acquired through formal means. Persian, during the Moghul rule, is an example of this. This arrangement allowed the possibility of all the local languages to share F- value. Such a political situation changed with social reorganization, the spread of education, added transport facilities, increased direct exercise of centralized political power and the emergence of a common market with cash economy. These, separately or in combination, reduced the possibility of maintaining different F- values for the languages of local linguistic communities and increased the possibility of one of them to elevate to the value F++, letting other languages survive with a value of F- . Its consequence could be either to accept further reduction in the F- value of all other languages, or the ultimate reduction of the functional value to F0, which is the total loss of the L1.

The possibility of language loss (i.e. the reduction of its value to F0) increases when the F- language is numerically small and/or is politically and economically weak. This result, however, may be checked by another factor, which is the cultural value of the language tied to the need of ethnic identity and ethnic perpetuation. The language with the largest number of speakers may additionally have a political value in a democratic polity. Such a language, though it is of F- value economically, is capable of organizing politically for resources.

I will argue in this paper that value reduction, not value elimination, is the risk faced in recent years by most of the major languages of India. These are called regional languages, as they are the majority language in a particular region in which they have a history of being the higher order language. They each dominate a region politically, with a state of their own within the Indian Union, and are politically sensitive to their cultural heritage and to their usefulness for political mobilization. I will illustrate this process, which is called in this paper 'vernacularization', with one language, viz. Tamil, which has a recorded history of two millennia and plays a crucial role in the identity politics of modern India.

2. THE PAST OF TAMIL. In the India of the first millennium CE, Sanskrit was the language of non-folk literature, philosophical and other epistemological discourse and royal culture and edicts. Prakrits, which are derivatives of Sanskrit and which played roles similar to those of Sanskrit for non-Vedic religions, succumbed to the dominance of Sanskrit as the

cosmopolitan language, but they remained as vernaculars and assumed new identities as languages of a particular region. In south India, the Dravidian languages Telugu and Kannada continued to be vernaculars whether Sanskrit or a Prakrit was the language of literature, religion, knowledge and power. They had their place grounded locally in the communities as languages of agriculture, commerce and crafts. Tamil was an exception, being the language of literature throughout the first millennium and the language of administration of the kings. It was more than a vernacular, which is defined here as a language divorced from material, intellectual and literary power. Tamil was, however, interacting with Sanskrit, which had increasing dominance in these domains, and being influenced by it.

In the second millennium, the vernaculars asserted their power throughout India, for reasons of political dynastic rivalry and popular religious movements positioned against Vedic Hinduism. They began to emerge as autonomous languages, as opposed to derivatives of a dominant language. They created their own literary traditions, grammatical treatises and records (inscriptions) of royal victories, land management, and disputes (Pollock 1998). Their evolutionary path, of course, was not on a straight line. It had upsets whenever political formations changed, but they did finally develop into socially full-fledged languages. However, they did not function in isolation, as they shared linguistic functions with other languages (especially Sanskrit). Each new autonomous language belonged to a contiguous region, though politically divided, and had a shared legacy of written literature, although the majority of the people were non-literate; they constituted a large linguistic community bound by common cultural beliefs, even if divided by castes. Literary works in these languages fostered a linguistic consciousness among their speakers about their literary cultural tradition.

Historically, the relationship of Tamil with Sanskrit was different from that of other regional languages. It was not a relationship of uncontested dominance by Sanskrit but was one of negotiation with it. Tamil became a literate and a literary language two millennia ago. It has had a rich literary, grammatical and religious-philosophical tradition. It was also the language of political governance throughout this period, whether on its own or in partnership with another language such as Prakrit, Marathi or Telugu until the colonial period, when English replaced Tamil in government.

Tamil, however, remained the language of political communication and mobilization of the populace in addition to English which was used by the elite during the period of struggle for independence from the British. Tamil was also the language of education for that segment of the population that had access to general education but not to English education, which was designed to produce the elite required to assist in running the colonial government (Nurullah & Naik 1951).

2.1. POLITICAL ECONOMY. The British, who came in the seventeenth century – towards the end of the second millennium CE –, called the regional languages (including Tamil) ‘vernaculars’ in contrast with the classical languages Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian. They were called vernaculars in the sense that they are languages of the home and the street and used for temporal purposes. The classical languages played a major role in colonial jurisprudence; the vernaculars found a place in the training of the colonial administrative officers working in the field and in the education of masses. Education meant to create a class of elites was in English (Zastoupil & Moir 1999). Though this language hierarchy between English and the vernaculars had negative repercussions for the latter, their educational content was on par with English to include new science and ideas of European Enlightenment and thus went beyond teaching traditional knowledge, skills and values. The colonial linguistic survey of India by Grierson took upon itself the drawing of linguistic boundaries between languages. This helped to extend the linguistic consciousness of the speakers of the vernaculars beyond the cultural arena into the political. National Congress, the political party that was leading the movement for freedom from colonial rule, allowed in 1917 caucuses in the party based on language (Thirumalai 2005). Congress committed itself to redrawing the administrative boundaries of the colonial provinces in independent India, forming states based on language.

The new Constitution of India took cognizance of the political and cultural importance of these vernaculars in a democratic polity and multicultural nation, and designated them for support by the federal government relating to maintaining national unity (Patra 1998). They were called ‘regional languages’, each of which represented a cultural, literary and linguistic region. The first linguistic state was created in 1956 and brought under a single state the speakers of one language living in a

contiguous area but previously under different administrative units. This elevated the language of the majority in the state into the political status of official language of that state. The old vernaculars came to have a larger region, and they stood to gain the patronage and resources of the state for their empowerment and development. These regional languages became the language of legislation and also the language of education by new laws. They thus ceased to be vernaculars and became the dominant language of the state. Unlike English in the colonial period and Sanskrit in the first millennium, the language of power was now a local language spoken by the majority. The combination of demographic strength and political power has potential consequences for the maintenance of the minority languages in a state. A minority language community in the midst of a majority language community will require the majority language for its livelihood needs, be it doing business with the majority community, enjoying its cultural products or making beneficial friendship networks. When the majority language also has political power, competence in the majority language is a prerequisite for accessing public domains that include the government, the school and the court and getting the benefits they offer. The combination of the need for livelihood and of the advantage of increased opportunities for moving up socially and economically makes the majority language a desired asset, and, consequently, strengthens the belief that the minority language is a dispensable liability.

2.2. MARKET ECONOMY. This situation started to change within a generation after India became a Republic in 1950. The policy of economic development anchored on science and technology through higher education was implicitly not confident about the capability of the regional languages to deliver this. This rationalized the policy position to hold on to English until capability was built in the regional languages. Additionally, the planned economy commanded by the State required a bureaucracy for implementing and monitoring economic projects, which inherited English from the structures of the colonial times, as it was the familiar bureaucratic language and it provided internal solidarity to the cadre and cross-regional reach to bureaucrats nationwide. The hold of English over the regional languages in an exponentially growing field of technology and in a globalizing commerce increased enormously during this period. The dominance of

English challenged the newly gained position of the regional languages. I will examine the challenge of English with the example of the Tamil language, which was in a stronger political position after independence, having been the cornerstone of cultural politics in the state of Tamil Nadu.

2.3. THE STRENGTH OF TAMIL. The position of Tamil changed legally and politically in 1956, when the Madras state was formed (renamed as Tamil Nadu in 1968), where Tamil speakers became the absolute majority (90% of the population of the state) and the Tamil language became its official language. Tamil was expected to gradually replace English as the official language of the state. The official language policy was to expedite the switch-over from English to Tamil in public administration and to make Tamil the sole language of instruction in schools, and gradually move it up to higher education. Such policies are enablers of language development, which means that the language will propel itself by its legally and politically sanctioned power and will rise up high above the level of survival. But other factors play a role in this planned outcome in spite of its strengths described below.

Tamil is the first language of about 70 million people around the world. Of these, 61 million live in India, 56 million of which in Tamil Nadu. It is a language with minority status and varying degrees of official recognition and use in Sri Lanka, Singapore and Malaysia. Nevertheless, its demographic strength of about a quarter of Sri Lanka's population was reduced to about 14 per cent as a result of deaths and out-migration caused by the civil war there (De Silva 1998). In Singapore, its survival is threatened in the coming generations (Saravanan 1998). Malaysia is not very different. Tamil survives largely in memory as the ancestral language for ethnic identity in countries such as Mauritius, Fiji, Trinidad, Reunion and South Africa, where Tamil speakers were mostly taken as indentured laborers by the colonial companies. By the demographic strength of the first language speakers of Tamil in India (in Tamil Nadu, the former French enclave of Pondicherry and in other states as settlers), it is the fifth largest language, and constituted six percent of the country's population in 2001 (Bhattacharya 2002). It is the second language of about 6.5 percent of the population in south India outside Tamil Nadu (Mallikarjun 2012). The oral language is transmitted across generations as the home language in Tamil Nadu, except in a small

minority of urban families resulting from inter-lingual marriage. It is learned as a language in the majority of schools in Tamil Nadu. It has a vibrant literary production and use in the media, including cinema. Tamil is thus not endangered in any sense in which this linguistic process toward extinction is described (Fishman 2001).

However, the question of the value of Tamil as a living language remains. The value of a language could be symbolic or substantive. It is symbolic when Tamil serves the emotive and existential needs of its speakers, involving cultural identity and security, family and communal solidarity, and celebration of the language as heritage. The symbolic value of Tamil has received the attention of scholars (Ramaswamy 1997, Schiffman 1999) and others.² It is substantive when Tamil serves the instrumental and material needs of the speakers. Tamil has had the symbolic status from the beginning of its history, helping to assert its separateness from Sanskrit, a language in early contact with Tamil which was ritually and epistemologically dominant. This contact influenced in complex ways the development of Tamil and the attitude of its speakers about their language, but it did not lead to the loss of its distinctiveness and use. Acquisition of the knowledge of Sanskrit remained the prerogative of only a few in the foreground of political, religious-philosophical and literary discourse. Tamil remained the language of natural use in economic activities such as agriculture, small industries and trade in agricultural and manufactured goods that included spices, pearls and precious stones. Its material advantage, in other words, was not compromised by the dominance of Sanskrit until the period of British rule.

In the modern period, Tamil nationalism was built politically around the Tamil language and the culture portrayed to be represented by it. One of its manifestations has been the purification of the language by eliminating the presence of Sanskrit at the lexical level (Annamalai 2011). It is an integral part of the construction of a discourse of protection of Tamil from the Other, which could be Sanskrit or its political heir, Hindi. Ordinary people could be passionate about their language to the point of being ready to give their life for its protection (Ramaswamy 1997). The successful political demand

² It is not restricted to Tamil. The role of passion for the mother tongue in the political agitation and formation of the first linguistic state in India is illustrated with another south Indian language, Telugu by Mitchell (1999).

to obtain federal government sanction for the status of Tamil as a classical language on par with Sanskrit in 2004 is an expression of the protection of Tamil's historical status. This can be said to be only a symbolic recognition, when formal learning of Tamil in schools and colleges by the younger generation of Tamil speakers occurs either by a policy mandate or as the last choice of academic subjects to learn.

At the substantive level, Tamil has legal status. It is the language of public administration and its use is stronger at the lower levels of administration, though not at the higher levels. This is true of the judiciary as well as law enforcement. Tamil is the language of legislative deliberations used predominantly on the floor of the house; laws are written in it, though their original version is often written in English and then translated into Tamil. It is the language every student must learn in school, whether public or private, with a few exceptions, though this language is of the high variety far removed from the variety used in daily life and is alienating its learners. It continues to be the language of the agricultural market in which farmers participate, though the outreach programmes of agricultural colleges are embedded in a conceptual framework derived from modern science and in a vocabulary translated from English.

At the cultural level, Tamil is the language of religion used in reciting hymns, in offering prayers, in discoursing religion and in reading religious writings, whether the religion is Hinduism, Christianity or Islam. Tamil is strong in the entertainment industry, whether it is music in audio format, or music and action in video or television programmes and movies. Hindi (not English) comes behind, but way behind; choice of English is restricted to action films, which are also increasingly dubbed into Tamil. The language of sports is a mixture of Tamil and English.

2.4. DEVALUATION OF TAMIL. Tamil is passed on from one generation to another at home and on the street. Even in homes where English is used with children so as to aid in their learning it, the kind of Tamil restricted for in-group communication and media entertainment is still transmitted. The indicators of language endangerment as classically defined (Fishman 2001) are thus absent in the case of Tamil. Yet, it is necessary to bring the situation of languages like Tamil into the discourse of language endangerment for a better understanding of its effect on the nature of multilingualism. It is

generally understood that language endangerment is not just a numerical matter, but an ethical and political matter also pertaining to human choice and dignity. It is also a matter of survival of the earth, whose endangerment may be curbed by the multiple knowledge systems and value systems (values with regard to ecology being just a part of them) codified in the multiplicity of languages (Maffi 2001), most of which are small and bypassed by technological revolutions. This multiplicity of ways of living on this earth and managing it has a better chance to save it than any unifying and unilateral technological solution. Unless manipulated by external socio-political forces, languages develop by responding to the ecological demands placed on them (Mühlhäusler 1996). It follows that their survival is enhanced by their successful ecological adaptation. This philosophy of language and life, however, is not the basis of the symbolic value attached to their language by the Tamil speakers. It is more political and emotive.

Of the three dimensions of language ecology, viz. cultural, political and economic, the last one is increasingly homogenized through the use of globally converging market and technology. The language with which the information communication technology grew has the power of replacing other languages. With this fast changing and quickly spreading technology, other languages do not get adaptation time and their survival comes under threat. Moreover, this is the second time in history a technology has come to be closely knitted with a language; as the invention of writing technology was knitted with languages in one way (unlike wheel technology or combustion engine, for example), information communication technology is knitted with English in another way. This hinders, if not prevents, ecological adaptation to this technology by minor languages.

Language endangerment is not merely about individual languages, but about the relationship between languages. It is not just the relationship between the dying languages and the others, but between the languages that are living. When the functional relationship is heavily loaded in favour of one language over another or of some languages over many, the structure of multilingualism becomes less sustainable, not only on ethical and political grounds but also on the grounds of economy. Language endangerment includes endangerment to multilingualism in this non-statistical sense. It is true that all languages are not equal functionally, just like all guns are not equal in their lethal power. But the languages are equal in their right to

live and flourish so that their speakers enjoy the equal rights of all human beings. The right to one's cultural life is as significant (and inalienable) as the right to one's physical life (Skutnabb-Kangas 2012).

It is in this sense of an imbalance in which all the functional load is staked on one or a few languages (Annamalai 2003) that multilingualism is endangered. Let us see the situation of Tamil and similar non-minor languages with regard to functional deprivation without loss of their demographic, even political, strength. The modern borderless economy driven by virtual digital technology and fed by monetization of knowledge is not conducive to a multiplicity of knowledge systems, and so to a multiplicity of languages. Education is the means to produce workers for this economy, and the most advantageous language at the work place becomes the language of education. English scores high as the advantageous language in the contemporary economy. The reward system for skills and knowledge in this economy is linguistically skewed in favour of getting them through English. People attribute the rewards to this particular language through which the skills and knowledge are imparted rather than to the skills and knowledge *per se*. Language and content become isomorphic; English comes to be equated with knowledge. People want to acquire this language at the cost of everything else, including their inherited language. Any non-participating language in this homogenizing economy is considered a liability, and this downsizes its non-economic – cultural and political – value also.

Tamil is considered a liability by its speakers in the contemporary world, particularly by those in the middle class and those aspiring to be there. The population of the middle class is on the increase in the new economy, which is freed not only from its commanding control by the state but also from cultural variation in economic activity. The sense of liability of Tamil is strongest when it comes to choosing a medium of instruction, in favour of English. When the medium of instruction from grade one in school is not the language of mediation with the world from infancy, learning becomes less creative and productive, and less beneficial in learning the second language used as the medium (Cummins 2009). The child makes a dichotomy of languages used as learning tools, one for school subjects and another for ordinary life (Krishna Kumar 1996). The language for the former is for cognitive tasks and the latter for emotional needs. This dichotomy creates a barrier for the mother tongue to develop for academic-cognitive purposes.

This not only reinforces the sense of liability, but discourages the mother tongue from performing its intellectual function. Lack of intellectual value is a step towards vernacularizing a language. Tamil is moving in this direction: the use of Tamil in academic-intellectual debates and output of such debates is minimal.

Learning of Tamil as a language in schools and colleges is perfunctory for the children of middle class parents. They learn it because it is mandatory and necessary for passing the examination. A consequence of this is that reading of Tamil outside the class for cultural understanding and enrichment is minimal. Reading is limited to passing time and getting mundane information. These people, who will be culturally semi-literate as to the world view articulated by their mother tongue, are not numerically large, but they will constitute the elite of the Tamil society by their economic power through higher education. They will be responsible for conferring on Tamil the status of a vernacular in contrast with cosmopolitan English. This will be a situation similar to the one that obtained in colonial times.

There are other consequences of vernacularization that have a bearing on the form of Tamil. The registers of the Tamil language are getting reduced to those relating to in-group communication, entertainment and day to day politics. The development of registers for speaking of hard and soft sciences, issues that shape the perceptions of modern life, more generally the deliberations of intellectual pursuits, is stunted. Any attempt to use Tamil for these purposes is in a register which is extensively mixed with English, in which the ability of Tamil to code new ideas is compromised. This prevents the emergence of a linguistic conceptual apparatus in Tamil to make it a language with added functional value. There are, of course, translations of new knowledge from English into Tamil. But they remain outside active and natural use in Tamil, since learning of new knowledge through formal education is done through English. Tamil remains thus sterile to conceptual and discourse elaboration. The elite perceive no need to energize Tamil in this regard, and accept an F- value for it.

This is by no means a threat to the survival of the Tamil language, but it is a threat to its functioning as a language capable of serving the needs of their speakers to live in the modern world. It will shrink to become a vernacular fit only to link their speakers to their heritage and to their kinship network. It will encourage the speakers to be linguistically literate in Tamil,

but culturally semi-literate. This state of the language will make it morbid, living on the life-support mechanisms of allocating state resources to maintain its symbolic status, and of providing statutory status for mandatory, but perfunctory, use in some public domains. Tamil, in its journey from a classical language to a modern language, seems to be choosing the path of becoming a vernacular again in the new linguistic ecology of Tamil Nadu.

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