Impacts of Language Policy on Conflict: Comparing India and Sri Lanka

Ostensibly, language policy is about accommodation and effective governance. However, as this essay will explore, language policy is a vehicle for political power. The cases of India (specifically Tamil Nadu) and Sri Lanka are relevant to put into conversation because though they share a common language, their language policies differ and that has impacted the respective conflicts within the regions. By applying Johnathan Galtung's *triangle of violence* to the cases of Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka, I have concluded that language policy's impacts on conflict are twofold: 1. It provides a catalyst for direct violence and 2. It is the scaffolding for various forms of structural violence. I will first ground my analysis by justifying my choice of case studies. Then I will unpack Galtung's *triangle of violence* (cultural, direct, and structural), analyze where his conceptualization falls short, and offer additional critical support. In the subsequent sections, I will apply the critical framework to determine how language policy has impacted conflict. Finally, I will summarize the themes covered in the analysis of language policy in India and Sri Lanka and propose my critical recommendations for any future discussions on language policy and conflict.

Nearly 30 years after Johan Galtung wrote "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research*"*, wherein he developed the concept of *dimensions of violence*, he published his article, "Cultural Violence". According to Galtung, if direct and structural violence stand as the base of a *triangle of violence*, then *cultural violence* stands at the top as the justification and/or legitimization for both (Galtung 1990, 291). Galtung's distinction between the three umbrella terms of violence is as follows: "Direct violence is an *event*; structural violence is a *process* with ups and downs; cultural violence is an *invariant*" (Galtung 1990, 294). Within the concept of *cultural violence*, Galtung outlines six cultural domains, including language, where this violence can be seen. I will use Galtung's qualification of language as a cultural domain for my analytical departure point in using the concept of a *triangle of violence* to analyze the impacts of language policy on conflict. The cultural violence of language as Galtung frames it, is limited to a departure point; however, because his example of linguistic cultural violence lacks critical muster (Galtung 1990, 299). This critical "muster" can be found by framing language as a human right. While the UN Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 did not specifically outline language as a human right, the 1999 Universal Declaration on Linguistic Rights did include "the right to receive attention in their own language from government bodies and in socio-economic relations" in its delineation of "inalienable personal rights" (Dubinsky and Davies 2018*,* 168). Understanding language as a human right refocuses language policy as it was very first introduced in this essay, *a vehicle of political power*. The subsequent analysis of direct violence and structural violence will use case examples from Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka as mirrors to each other in order to reveal this image of language policy as a vehicle of political power.

Direct violence

Direct violence is easy to identify because it is, as Galtung stated, an *event*. It also has a "clear subject-object relation" which is revealed through the act of violence (Galtung, 1969, 171). The *event* of direct violence, I argue, can be understood as a direct or delayed response to language policy. In the first case, language policy will be viewed as the direct catalyst for conflict and in the second, as a delayed catalyst.

To the first point, the introduction of the Three-Language Formula (TLF) in the Madras Legislative Assembly of Tamil Nadu in 1965 was the instigation of a series of anti-Hindi protests which included riots and self-immolation (Nathan 2019). The proposed TLF was perceived in Tamil Nadu as a threat to the Amendment Bill of 1963 and which was the safeguard against the national imposition of Hindi. The TLF carried the political agenda of the ruling party and as such, can be framed as a vehicle *of political power*. The response of the opposition to the proposed language policy, however, can also be understood as using direct violence to challenge "the structural iron cage" of political language policy (Weber 1971).

The second consideration of direct violence is how language policy was a *delayed catalyst*. While India may not have had a protracted conflict between Tamil Nadu and the Centre like Sri Lanka, I argue that the delayed implementation of the Official Languages Act created the conditions for the direct conflict during the 1960s language riots. The riots may have been prevented had Article 343 of the Constitution, which was intended as a temporary solution while a permanent answer to the question of an Indian national language could be found, been properly employed (Nathan 2019). However, the Centre allowed the language question to be postponed and then failed to consider the particular political context when they tried to implement the Three Language Policy (TLP) fifteen years on (Dua 1993, 296). Similarly, conflict in Sri Lanka between 2002-2009 paralleled that of India in that it was the "non-implementation of the language policy [of 1967]" which seeded frustrations before the uprising (LLRC 2011, 12). The examples from Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka support the reading of direct violence as a response to the introduction of repressive language policies but also a response to the failure to implement policies. This contradiction highlights the need to understand how language policy creates structures of violence and so I will now address the concept of *structural violence*.

Structural violence

If structural violence is "a process with ups and downs", then it presents an analytical quandary that it must be more visible at certain junctures (Galtung 1990, 294). In both Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka, Tamil has been co-opted into a linguistic binary which at various points in history, has assumed colonial, religious, and/or ideological characteristics. Though the current linguistic issues may no longer underpin those original sentiments, it is important to consider the historical connotations which have subsequently been codified into the "self-perpetuating language policy inheritance" that continues to scaffold structural violence (Wyss 2020, 18). Understanding how language policy supports these structures requires a dissection of the dynamics of conflict in addition to the structures of violence. I would therefore like to bolster Galtung's *structural violence* framework with two of Edward Azar's dynamics of protracted social conflict: communal content and human needs.

The communal content of both Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka was co-opted under British colonialism in their "divide and rule" strategy. The violence of this colonial legacy is reflected in the data that the former British colonies had higher levels of ethnic violence between 1960 and 1990 (Dawson and Lange, 2009). However, structural violence under colonial rule also came in the form of access to social institutions. Educational inequalities were institutionalized which resulted in better access to British civil service jobs for Tamils who had access to missionary schooling (Lange 2009). Post-independence, there was a push for *swabasha* (self-language) which referred to the switch from English to Sinhala or Tamil. The aim of *swabasha* was the

pursuit of greater economic mobility for lower castes who had been denied government jobs due to not speaking English. However, the Sinhalese mobilized to demand a preferential language policy which would address the under-representation of Sinhalese in education and government (OBriain 2012, 4). The Sinhala Only Act of 1956 was thus introduced in conjunction with "affirmative action" quotas on the number of Tamils admitted to higher education and civil service as reparation for the injustice of colonial administration preference (Azar 1990, 68). The communal content of Sri Lanka and the subsequent cycle of preferential policies reflects Galtung's assertion that, "structural violence is a *process* with ups and downs" (Galtung 1990, 294).

The case of Tamil Nadu, however, presents a different understanding of colonial legacy. Christian missionaries in the nineteenth century propagated an Aryan invasion theory which associated Hindi with the Aryan invaders and Tamil with the subjugated indigenous (Sharma 2022, 213). Colonial legacy of cultural violence of one identity/language against another is transformed into structures of violence which are then codified by language policy. This is seen in the linguistic binaries of Aryan v. Dravidian, Brahmin vs. Non-Brahmin, and Hindi v. Tamil which are interwoven into the political structure of Tamil Nadu through the ruling party, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam party (DMK). The other colonial legacy in Tamil Nadu is the use of English. As previously discussed, Article 343 outlined that English would continue to be used for fifteen years from the Constitution's commencement. However, due to the inaction of the government to pass an Official Languages Act during that time, the 1963 Amendment Bill of the Official Languages Act established the "continuance of English language for official purposes of the Union and for use in Parliament" (India Code, 1963). The bill set the precedent that changes to the status of English could not be made without the consent of non-Hindi speakers (Dua 1993, 296). This precedent and the current sentiment in Tamil Nadu that English is a far more useful language in the current global landscape than Hindi, further scaffolds the tensions surrounding language policy.

My final point on structural violence in regards to language policy, is that language is a human need. Both Azar and Galtung outline humans' basic and physical needs and agree that restricting access to those needs, either implicitly or explicitly, is a condition of violence. In the *Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (*LLRC*)* report from 2011, one participant from Puttalam complained that administrative correspondences, State and private buses, hospital forms and death certificates were all in Sinhala (LRRC 2011, 296). The grievances of the participant reflects an inability for Tamil speakers to "access the superstructure of society i.e. social institutions" despite supposed language policy (Azar 1990, 9). In the case of Sri Lanka, this need was denied first under British colonial rule for the Sinhalese then for the Tamils under the Sinhala Only Act. The "up" of structural violence is easy to see in the colonial legacy of language policy in Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka. However, by assessing language policy through the dynamic of basic human need, the opaquer "down" of access to social institutions is revealed.

Conclusion
Two themes emerge in the analysis of direct and structural violence in Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka. The first is that conflict surrounding language policy emerges from an actual or perceived deprivation of language. The structural violence of language deprivation is seen through colonial legacy and institutionalized in official doctrine such as the Sinhala Only Act of

1956 and Article 343 of the Indian Constitution. The consequences include limited access to social institutions of justice, education, employment, and political power because potential participants do not speak the language which is used in these institutions. Perceived deprivation (threat to linguistic identity) and actual deprivation (limited access to social institutions) have been catalysts for direct violence. Secondly, conflict is a result of delayed or non-implementation of language policy coincides with an implicit or explicit misunderstanding of context. This emphasizes how language policy was used as a vehicle of power rather than a tool of governance.

In conclusion, there is great potential for language policy to be used to address structural conditions of conflict such as access to social institutions. Tamil Nadu, more so than Sri Lanka, has achieved a level of parity with the central government over language policy. This has in turn provided a bulwark against the "one nation, one language" policy espoused by Hindi-centric national policy and solidified India as a multilingual state. There is potential for a similarly positive result for Sri Lanka should their own language policy be properly implemented. However, a particularist approach must be undertaken to ensure that language policy is relevant to the current political climate and communal content. Based on this, my recommendations for future analysis of language policy and conflict are as follows: scholars must frame language as a human right and any analysis of language policy must be grounded in its particular context. Language policy can only earn distinction as more than a tool of conflict management or a symbolic gesture if language itself is understood as a basic need to be protected by governments through inclusive doctrine. Finally, a particularist approach is needed for the implementation of language policy which addresses direct and structural violence. A particularist approach should consider factors such a colonial legacy, historical connotations of ideology and supremacy, and the current communal content. It is my hope that these additions to the critical framework should provide a starting point for language policy to contribute to positive peace.

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