

# Colonialism and Problems of Language Policy: Formulation of a Colonial Language Policy in Sri Lanka<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The problems of language policy in modern Sri Lanka have their roots in the nineteenth century. The question of language came to the fore during the early nineteenth century when British administrators and missionaries debated what kind of language education policy should be introduced. The first official pronouncement relating to language policy in colonial Sri Lanka is to be found in the Colebrooke report on the *Administration of the Government of Ceylon* (1832), which made explicit the privileged position of English in the country. Linguistic imperialism was another consequence of colonial policy, and colonial ideologies were reflected in language education policies. However, there was no total agreement among the missionaries and colonial officials on policies relating to language-in-education and they continued to hold conflicting views. It is clear that the dual discourses of Orientalism (policies in favour of education in local languages) and Anglicism (policies in favour of education in English) continued to coexist alongside, and served the interests of the British colonial agenda. The introduction of English education in the nineteenth century had a profound long-term impact on the country's language policies and practices. This discussion of colonial language policies and practices reveals the historical origins of the language

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question in Sri Lanka and points to the general embeddedness of linguistic developments in colonial history.

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## **Introduction**

The beginning of the sixteenth century saw the first impact of European colonial power on Sri Lankan society and culture. More than four centuries (1505-1948)<sup>2</sup> of colonialism changed the linguistic situation in the island, and constituted a decisive phase in the evolution of the country's language policy and formal educational system. While much has been written on the political and social aspects of colonialism in Sri Lanka, little is known about the language policies that came to be associated with colonial rule (De Silva, 1973). This paper is thus concerned with explaining the complexities of colonial language policies and practices in relation to the different contexts of British colonial power. The language policies pursued by the British colonial government in the nineteenth century Sri Lanka deserve detailed consideration because; it was during that time the question of language elevated to a public question. Language became an important aspect of government and missionary activity of the colonial state. As we will see, difficulties of communication posed a serious problem to all colonial rulers. The question of language came to the fore during the early nineteenth century when British administrators and missionaries debated what kind of language education policy should be introduced. The dominance of English as the language of governance was a common feature of the period, but at the same time there were continuing efforts to study and promote vernaculars. A close look at the colonial context is necessary in order to understand the policies on such issues as language in education, missionary activity and administration, which evolved at this time and set the scene for subsequent developments. This discussion of colonial language policies and practices reveals

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2. The maritime regions of the island were under the Portuguese and the Dutch and the whole island was under the British during the period 1815-1948.

the historical origins of the language question in Sri Lanka and points to the general embeddedness of linguistic developments in colonial history.

To explore the social and political dimensions of the colonial language situation, this paper is divided into two parts. In the first part, my discussion will focus on the establishment of British rule and the formulation of a language policy for education and administration. I will examine, in particular, the influence of the 1832-33 Colebrooke-Cameron reforms on the implementation of colonial language policy in the nineteenth century, the efforts of the colonial government to regulate language, and problems associated with the use of local languages in administration. The second part shows how colonial policies related to language-in-education are interwoven with broader colonial discourses which were informed by conflicting notions of Orientalism and Anglicism. This paper focuses heavily on the disputes and deliberations over language policy which arose in different colonial, missionary, educational and administrative contexts.

## **Socio - Historical Background**

At the beginning of the European period in Sri Lanka, in the early sixteenth century, there were three native centres of political power: the two Sinhalese kingdoms of Kotte and Kandy and the Tamil kingdom in northern Jaffna. From the point of view of political power and size, the important one was the kingdom of Kotte (1412-1580), about six miles from the port of Colombo. In 1505, the Portuguese first arrived on the island and their original aim was merely to establish a trading post under the protection of the Sinhalese king. However, they were brought into local politics as a result of developments in Kotte, which led to the partition of that kingdom in 1521. The kingdom of Kotte was weakened due to the increasing decline in central authority and the rising power of the Portuguese (Abeyasinghe, 1966). In 1557, the king of Kotte was baptised as Don Juan Dharmapala (1551-1597), and he handed over his kingdom to the Portuguese in 1581. The island's coastal region fell under Portuguese influence from 1505 to 1658, and they were subsequently displaced by the Dutch, who emerged in the

early seventeenth century as a major naval power in the Indian Ocean. During the period of Portuguese rule, the local languages – Sinhala and Tamil – came into close contact with Portuguese language. Portuguese was the language of administration. The officials had to employ interpreters for communication with the local inhabitants. The Dutch dealt with the problem of language in a different way from the Portuguese. They did not succeed in establishing their language as the official language, and their policy to use Dutch along with other local languages (Sannasgala, 1976). Both Portuguese and Dutch rule did not extend beyond the coastal areas.

Finally, British rule in Sri Lanka began with their acquisition of the Dutch territories in 1796. After a brief period of administration by the East India Company the British possessions in Ceylon (which it was then called) were placed under the Colonial Office in 1802. Fredrick North assumed office as the first Governor of Ceylon in 1802, and the power of the coastal provinces was concentrated in the hands of the Governor. In 1815, with the fall of the kingdom of Kandy in the central highlands – the last Sinhalese kingdom – which had maintained their independence under the kings of Kandy, the British managed to bring the whole island of what they called Ceylon under their political control. They soon embarked on a policy based on introducing the English language, and this eventually brought significant sociolinguistic changes.

## **Introduction of English in the Nineteenth Century**

The history of the introduction of English dates back to the earlier decades of the nineteenth century, and it is closely tied to the presence of the British colonial administration and missionary educators. From the start of British rule, the colonial administrators stressed the value of English and Christianity. Fredrick North, the first British Governor on the island (1798-1805) saw that there was some immediate gain in propagating the language and religion of the rulers, and therefore laid the foundation for a language policy which linked the English language with an elite class (Ludowyk, 1966). Later on, Governor Edward Barnes (1820-1822) also stressed

the indelible link between the 'civilizing' mission and the promotion of English:

Instruction in the English language should be promoted and encouraged as much as possible, when the people would be enabled to come more directly to the evidence of Christianity than they are through the tardy and scanty medium of translations (Quoted in Gooneratne, 1968: 5-6).

The colonial administrators realized the functional value of English in the creation of a class of English-educated officials who would serve as an essential link between the British rulers and the masses. They seem to have expected English to spread gradually and ultimately to become the language of the country. As one Civil Servant later in 1849 pointed out, "it was formerly the policy of the Government to make the natives learn English, rather than to make the public servants learn Cingalese [Sinhala]" (Evidence of Major T. Skinner, Select Committee, 1850: 294).

### **Colebrooke - Cameron Reforms, 1832-33 and English Diffusion Policy**

In 1829, the British Colonial Office sent a Royal Commission of Eastern Inquiry led by W.M.G. Colebrooke and C.H. Cameron to assess the administration of the island. In 1832, this Commission made some far reaching recommendations in relation to the administrative, economic, educational and social organization of Sri Lanka (Mendis, 1956). Although the Commission's purpose was mainly focussed on administrative and judicial reforms, its recommendations extended to language policy planning as well. The first official pronouncement relating to language policy in colonial Sri Lanka is to be found in the Colebrooke Report on the *Administration of the Government of Ceylon* (dated 24 December 1831). Seeing the need for a common language for administrative purposes, it made explicit the position of English as the language of government. As a result, during the years 1832-33, the British decided to encourage the use of English as the language of administration, education and of the courts of law. A former judge of the Ceylon Supreme Court observed: "It is significant that in Ceylon

the native languages are far less used than in India for the transaction of public business, and in the law courts the proceedings are conducted in English” (Clarence 1899: 439).

Colebrooke also believed that knowledge of English would lead to the enhancement of the people of the island, and consequently showed little interest in the local languages of the people. He stressed the absolute value of the English language, and further noticed the importance of ‘diffusing’ knowledge through the English medium schools (Mendis, 1956: 215). As pointed out by historian G.C. Mendis, in his proposals for the establishment of English schools Colebrooke was “influenced by the view, held by Englishmen at the time, that oriental learning was of little value and that knowledge of English would lead to the moral and intellectual improvement of the Eastern peoples” (Mendis, 1956: lxiii). In general these policies and attitudes were not unique to Sri Lanka. In some respects there were close parallels between colonial language policies and practices in India, Sri Lanka and Hong Kong (see Rahman, 1996; Pennycook, 1998; Evans, 2002; 2008; Mir, 2006). Two years after the Colebrooke Commission, Lord Thomas Macaulay’s famous ‘Minute on Education’ (1835) in India also echoed this policy of imparting Western knowledge through a Western language (English), and then only to a minority of the population (See Phillipson, 1992; Evans, 2002). Macaulay had been sent to India in an official capacity, knowing nothing about on the South Asian languages and thus, one wonders whether Macaulay may have been influenced by the Colebrooke Commission Report, which seems very likely. In fact Colebrooke anticipated Macaulay’s idea for India by seeking to create a group of natives who were competent in English language.

### **Colonial Administration and Knowledge of Language**

The language of government became crucial to the development and maintenance of British colonial power. As pointed by many historians ‘knowing the language’ was important for ‘social communication’ and ‘colonial knowledge’ (See Cohn, 1985: Bayly 1996). In the early period of British rule, however, colonial officers had very little knowledge of the island’s languages, customs, and

people. They believed that the English language was adequate for their purposes and neglected the study of local languages. For example, in 1804, according to Rev. Cordiner, only one British official had mastered Sinhala, the language of the majority of the islanders (Cordiner 1807: 119-120). In fact, during the early period of British rule, one of the English Civil Servants, John D'Oyly (1774-1824), who had a mastery of spoken and written Sinhala and who became Chief Translator (1805-1816) to the government, carried out an extensive system of intelligence work in Kandy in order to gain information about the Kandyan kingdom (D'Oyly, 1917). Because of his knowledge of the Sinhala language, D'Oyly was able to communicate with every leading Kandyan chief hostile to the king, and this was crucial to the development of colonial power in the island (Perera, 1946: 56).

Since the majority of the civil officials generally knew neither the language nor the customs of the native people, they depended heavily on "native chieftains", or *mudaliyârs* (who had been employed by the Dutch), for administrative matters in rural areas (Schrikker 2007). In fact, the missionaries were actually much closer to the people than were the civil officials. But it is important to mention that there were a few exceptions. As early as 1805 Samuel Tolfrey of the Civil Service, who came to the island in 1801 with D'Oyly, was interested in Sinhala and designed a plan for a dictionary to render assistance to Europeans in the learning of Sinhala for the transaction of business in the different colonial offices. Another Civil Servant, William Tolfrey assisted the work of Bible translators. In 1802, regulations were drafted which made competency in local languages mandatory for promotions within the Civil Service. Sinhala and Portuguese were the languages in which proficiency was required. Tamil was not considered necessary until 1813, and Portuguese was given up in 1824 (Toussaint 1935). At this time, very little positive action was taken to encourage the knowledge of local languages.

In the instructions issued on 18<sup>th</sup> January 1830 to the Colebrooke Commission by the Earl of Bathurst, the Secretary State for Colonial and War Department pointed out that "the introduction of the English language in the Courts of Law, and in all public proceedings, connects itself with this branch of your investigations"

(Mendis, 1956: 2). This term of reference appears to be an important point in the formation of a language policy for colonial administration. In 1833 the Colebrooke Report laid the foundation for an unified administration in the country and envisaged a language policy for colonial governance. Since the majority of the population was not proficient in English, local languages were also used in a limited way at the lower levels of administration. In *Gamsabhâvas* or Village Committees, the local languages were used for proceedings, but records were kept either in English or in the local language in use in that division. The government ordinances were published in English and Sinhala as well, and sent to the different agents to distribute among the headmen. For administrative convenience the country was divided up into nine provinces, each under the authority of a Government Agent. In official discourse, the North and East provinces were considered as 'Tamil-speaking areas' and the provinces in the southern part as Sinhala-speaking areas.

In the early years of the British occupation the bulk of the posts in the clerical service were filled by Burghers, who were proficient in English language. Commenting on the 'employment of natives', Colebrooke pointed out the lack of proficiency in English of native officials within the administration:

The headmen at the seats of magistracy are generally acquainted with the English language, but the Modeliars and the headmen of Korales are often ignorant of it. In 1828 a regulation was made that no native headman should in future be appointed who could not read and write the English language (Mendis, 1956: 48).

Therefore, Colebrooke recommended that "a competent knowledge of the English language should be required in the principal native functionaries throughout the country" (Mendis, 1956: 70).

The linguistic proficiency of Sinhala and Tamil also became a necessary condition for promotions in the Civil Service. Colebrooke too stressed this point in his recommendations:



All Europeans who are selected to fill the Civil appointments in the Provinces should be required to obtain a competent knowledge of the Native language (Cingalese or Malabar[Tamil] as the case may be) and when Natives are appointed to such situations they should be equally conversant with the English language (Mendis, 1956: 214-215).

However, in practice these language requirements were largely ignored by the British Civil Servants, and a high percentage of officials were ignorant of the local languages. Various explanations were offered for this failure, ranging from the difficulty of learning the languages to the burden of regular duties which permitted little time for study (Mills, 1933: 88). Between 1833 and 1848 only two Civil Servants had passed the local language requirement for the profession. Civil Servants were allowed to choose which language (Sinhala or Tamil) they wished to study, and were required to pass an examination in reading, writing and conversation. But it is reported that very few Civil Servants took up Tamil, because the majority of the more important posts were in the Sinhalese areas (Toussaint, 1935: 6). Thus a very few Civil Servants were proficient in Tamil. However, as a result of the growth of Tea plantation areas in the up-country provinces, the knowledge of colloquial Tamil also became useful for commercial interests. As stated by J. C. Willis, a British Civil Servant : “ the most usual native language for the European to learn is Tamil, but not what is often called ‘book Tamil’, the language of the higher class Tamils of the north and of Madras, and the language used in an extensive literature” ( 1907: 107).

With their ignorance of the local languages, the British officials relied on a few trusted individuals to act as intermediaries between themselves and the local population. All areas of governance, including the judicial administration, became heavily dependant upon “a new class of local functionaries” – the interpreters in the day-to-day operation of the colonial administration (Samaraweera 1985: 98). In the Maritime Provinces they were drawn from among Burghers and in the Kandyan provinces from among the Sinhalese who came to be associated with British rule through their early acquisition of the knowledge of English. They were formally known as ‘Interpreter Mudaliyars’ and they emerged as an elite group in the

colonial society (See Peebles, 1995). These early interpreters faced problems with regard to the local languages, while on the other hand later translators and interpreters found difficulties with English. Indeed, Colebrooke remarked on this situation in his report: "The native inhabitants are required to send with their petitions to the Governor an English translation, and from the ignorance of the translation they generally convey very imperfectly the sense of the original" (Mendis, 1956: 106).

The lack of a working knowledge of local languages was one serious deficiency in the administration at local government level. In 1848, a 'rebellion' broke out against the British administration in the Kandyan provinces and in Colombo, and it was alleged that the mishandling of the rebellion was to a considerable extent due to the communication gap which existed between the native population – especially the peasants – and the British civil officials (Toussaint, 1935: 11). It was cited in evidence that most of the civil officials were not proficient in the local languages. Giving evidence before a Select Committee, one official said: "As I cannot speak the language of the country, I could not have any extensive communication with natives" (Evidence of Muddock, Select Committee Report, 1850: 58). At this time many of the public servants sought the assistance of headmen or interpreters to communicate with the people. The colonial officials themselves often remarked upon this division between the rulers and the natives, and upon the consequence of not knowing the people's language. Phillip Anstruther, the Colonial Secretary of the island (1830-1840), commenting on the lack of communication between officials and locals stated that "there is a complete curtain drawn in Ceylon between the government and the governed; no person concerned with government understands the language [of the people]" (Select Committee Report, 1850: 344).

It was in reference to this state of affairs, in 1852, that James De Alwis, a bilingual Sinhalese scholar mentioned that the study of the Sinhala language was much neglected by Europeans (Dharmadasa, 1992). In the dedication of his work – the *Sidat Saògarâva* translation – to the Governor, he pointed out the value of competency in local languages – mainly Sinhala – as requisite

qualification for those who entered the public service. De Alwis believed that,

The constitution of the native society in this Island, the habits and feelings of the Singhalese, their wants and grievances, their domestic and social relations, their traditions and customs, and their all-concentrating religion, are very imperfectly known; and these, which constitute their national character, can be understood but little, without a competent knowledge of the medium through which they are perpetuated – *the Singhalese* or *Elu* language (De Alwis, 1852: v).

Accordingly, he emphasized the value of learning local languages in order to govern the native people through their own language and requested the Governor's assistance and support to encourage the study of Sinhala for Europeans. De Alwis, too, referring to the proceedings of the state prosecutions in the 1848 rebellion, pointed out the lack of linguistic skills in local languages. As early as 1852, he considered Sinhala as the 'national language' of the Singhalese. He questioned: "Is it then right or just that the national language of the Singhalese should be neglected and discouraged?" (De Alwis, 1852: xviii).

Although from the earliest period of British rule, a knowledge of the local languages was considered as an essential requirement of a Civil Servant, until 1850s there were no fixed rules on these examinations. In 1852, a Minute by the Governor, George Anderson, noted the knowledge of local languages as a condition for promotions in the Civil Service. At this time the Colonial Office made some effort to facilitate the study of local languages. In 1863, Governor McCarthy reduced the work of the Writers or Cadets so that they might have more time to become proficient in the language of the people. In order to obtain the necessary competency in local languages, the Civil Servants were also given a 'pundit allowance' of £3 per month to enable them to pay a teacher of Sinhala or Tamil. In 1870, with the introduction of the Civil Service Examination, proficiency in the local languages became an important matter, which attracted the attention of the Civil Service Commission (Dickman, 1872: 42). In 1872, it was decided that no Civil Servant would be promoted to

any higher situation without a knowledge of Sinhala or Tamil (Warnapala, 1974: 42).

Moreover, for the benefit of British officials learning Sinhala, a few Sinhalese scholars and missionaries made an attempt to publish Sinhala grammars in English. In 1886, C. Chounavel, a Catholic missionary, compiled *A Grammar of the Sinhalese Language* for the use of European students. Commenting on this, the Director of Public Instruction, stated that “your Grammar ought to be most useful to civil servants for passing their examinations in Sinhalese, and to all Europeans who desire to learn Sinhalese” (Chounavel, 1886: iii). And in 1891, a Sinhalese scholar and government official, Abraham Mendis Gunasekara, (1860-1931) also published *A Comprehensive Grammar of the Sinhalese Language* and pointed out “the absence of a comprehensive Grammar of the Sinhalese Language suited to the requirements of English readers” (Gunasekera, 1891: iii). Most of these Sinhala grammars were organized in terms of English grammar books, the various chapters dealing with grammatical categories. At the turn of the century, most of the British Civil Servants who served in the island had a necessary command of local languages in order to carry out their official duties. For example, Leonard Woolf, who served in the Jaffna, Kandy and Hambantota districts as a Civil Servant in the first decade of the twentieth century (1904 -1911), took both Sinhala and Tamil examinations and conversed with villagers in their own language (Woolf: 1961).

Since the administration of the country was conducted in English, the local entrants to the Ceylon Civil Service and government service needed an education in English. The premium position of English as the language of government in the island necessitated the establishment of English schools to ensure the diffusion of this language. Colebrooke was aware that, for the better administration of the country, the wide gulf that existed between the rulers and the natives had to be narrowed. He felt the need to devise a government educational policy which could smoothly absorb certain elements of the native population into the machinery of civil administration. In this way, education was one aspect of colonial

policy and language policy was accordingly geared to the production of a limited group of people proficient in the English language.

## **Language Policy for Education**

When the British captured the colony in 1796, they neglected the propagation of education for many years, but about forty years later the question was taken up by the British government; and in the meantime, a considerable amount of work was done by various missionary bodies. Colonial language education policy evolved in the nineteenth century through the officials of the Colonial Office in London and of the colonial government, and this was deeply influenced by language ideologies and attitudes (See Ruberu, 1962a; Jayaweera, 1969; 1971; Jayasuriya, 1976).

As a part of the plan for educational reform, the first British Governor, North, recognized the importance of providing English education. He stated that the objective was to create a people “connected with England by education and by office and connected by the ties of blood with the principal native families in the country” (Quoted in Jayaweera, 1971: 153). In 1799, three years after British occupation began, James Cordiner, the first Colonial Chaplain and Principal of Schools, proposed the establishment of a “training school for the sons of *Mudaliyars* and other chiefs who would supply English-speaking officers to various Government Departments” (Gratiaen 1929: 26). The first English school – the Academy at Wolvendhal – was established by North in early 1800 as a step to produce a set of well qualified candidates for all the offices. Later on Governor Brownrigg also considered English not simply as the language of the ruler but also as an effective ideological tool to “increase the attachment of the natives to the British government” (Ruberu, 1962a: 135). At this time, the teaching of English was also used as a method to diminish the use of Portuguese, which was prevalent in some areas.

In the early period of British rule, educational activity was left largely to the initiative of the missionaries. The American Ceylon Mission pioneered English education in the 1820s by founding a seminary at Vaddukkodai (Batticotta Seminary) in the northern district

of Jaffna. The main purpose in founding that institution was to give a “thorough knowledge of the English language to native youth” (Quoted Chelliah 1922[1984]: 6). English language, it was argued, is indispensable, since “the treasure of the English” can only “to a small extent” be “transferred to the native languages” (Chelliah, 1922: 6). In addition to the American Ceylon Mission, several other missionary organizations commenced their activities on the island during the early nineteenth century (De Silva, 1965). However, most of the missionaries saw education as the best method of spreading Christianity, and the teaching of Christianity in local languages as the most efficient means of “enlightening the masses of the people” (Ruberu, 1962a: 167). As the missionaries had to counter the influence of the Buddhist and Hindu priesthood and to reach the masses, they favoured the use of vernaculars – Sinhala and Tamil – in their schools (De Silva, 1965: 142). They also wanted workers who could communicate the Christian faith in the local language and convert locals. Later on, as a result of government policies, missionaries were compelled to modify their vernacular language policy and to give much attention to the diffusion of English.

Colebrooke’s recommendations in 1833 set the direction for educational policy – in essence a language policy. Until 1831 the government provided very little education in English, but as a result of the Colebrooke report the government’s attention was shifted to English schools. Colebrooke recommended that government vernacular schools should be abolished, and that attention should be given to the teaching of English. The establishment of English as the language of administration and the medium of instruction signalled the triumph of the ‘Anglicist’ policy. Endorsing the Colebrooke’s proposals, the Secretary of State for the Colonies wrote in 1833 to the Governor in Colombo: “The dissemination of the English language is an object, which I cannot but esteem of the greatest importance, as a medium of instruction, and as a bond of union with this country” (Mendis, 1956: 277). The only consistent theme in Colebrooke’s recommendations on education was his insistence on English as the medium of instruction. Commenting on the English missionary schools at that time, Colebrooke complained that the “English missionaries have not very generally appreciated the importance of diffusing a knowledge of the English language

through the medium of their schools”, and viewed the activities of the American missionaries in the North of the island with admiration (Mendis, 1956: 73-74). As a result of Colebrooke’s recommendations, by the 1840s the missionaries were in favour of the diffusion of the English language through education.

At this point, it is worth examining the British colonial attitude towards the native educational system and languages. During this time, in most of the villages the *pansala* or temple was a school where a resident monk taught the basics of Sinhala writing to native children. However, in the face of colonialism, the language practices of temple education counted little. For example, Colebrooke unhesitatingly dismissed the education provided by “the native priesthood in their temples and colleges” as one that “scarcely merits any notice” (Mendis: 1956: 74). It is possible that Colebrooke, since he did not know the local languages, was not in a position to appreciate the indigenous system of learning. He further stated: “In the interior, the Bhoodhist [Buddhist] priests have evinced some jealousy of the Christian missionaries; but the people in general are desirous of instruction, in whatever way afforded to them, and are especially anxious to acquire the English language” (Mendis, 1956: 75).

Colebrooke also observed that the schools maintained by the government were “extremely defective and inefficient” (Mendis, 1956: 72). Commenting on the education in Government schools in that period, Colebrooke remarked: “The schoolmasters are not required to understand the English language, of which many are wholly ignorant, and they are often extremely unfit for their situations” (Mendis, 1956: 72). Accordingly, he recommended that in all instances the schoolmasters should possess “a competent knowledge of English to enable them to give instruction in that language” (Mendis, 1956: 73). The implementation of the recommendations of the Colebrooke report on educational reforms commenced only after the arrival of Governor Sir Robert Wilmot Horton. The first step was the appointment of a School Commission in 1834, in order ‘to facilitate the reform of the government schools’ on the lines suggested by Colebrooke (Ruberu, 1962b). In 1841 this was remodelled and became the ‘Central School Commission for the

Instruction of the Population of Ceylon'. The special duty of promoting education in English was imposed on it. Yet at the same time, the Commission decided to introduce vernacular education as a preliminary to English education. It resolved that the "means of giving instruction in the Native languages so as to afford the necessary preparation for English education" should be provided in every elementary school, in the hope that many natives who could not be made to see the advantage of learning English would thus be induced to send their children to the government schools (Wyndham, 1933: p. 43).

After Colebrooke's reforms the government embarked on a policy of using English as the principal medium of instruction and maintained the vernacular schools as "subsidiary" to the English schools. Colebrooke also recommended the value of establishing an institution in Colombo for the purpose of educating native youths for different branches of the public service (Mendis, 1956: 215). A model institution for English education – the Colombo Academy – was established in 1836. From about 1870 more English education was demanded, and the missions, assisted by the government, established English secondary schools in the major towns. These schools provided a curriculum that led to rewarding employment opportunities and higher education, while the vernacular schools led to low levels of employment and to no opportunities for higher education.

Colebrooke's promotion of English never led to a widespread literacy in that language. Official records suggest that the proportion of the people literate in English has always been small. By 1901, only 3 per cent of the male population was literate in English (Census of Ceylon, 1901). A major reason for this situation was the uneven quality of the English education provided. During the last two decades of the nineteenth century, the colonial officials paid some attention to the standard of teaching English in schools – more particularly, on the 'bad English teaching' of incompetent native schoolmasters. The following extract from the report of the Director of Public Instruction for 1879 shows the status of the teaching of English in schools.



In several Anglo-vernacular schools which I have visited, the teacher supposed to teach English has been quite unable to converse with me in English, and it has been necessary for the inspector who accompanied me to act as interpreter (Administration Report, 1879)

A few years later, in 1883, the Director of Public Instruction, strongly stated in his report: “We are doing positive harm to the country by the number of weak schools in the outlying stations and villages where English is badly taught” (*Administration Report, 1883*). Nevertheless there were leading English schools – such as the Royal College on the government side, and St. Thomas’ College, Colombo on the grant-in-aid side – which provided a good standard of English education.

During the British colonial rule, the Burghers always had the advantage of English education and literacy. By 1901, two-thirds of them were literate in English, and in 1911 the figure had risen to seventy eight per cent (*Census of Ceylon, 1911*). A report in the Blue Book for 1907 also noted the fact that “English is a foreign language to all but a small fraction of the population; the Europeans, Burghers, and Eurasians together form a little less than 1 per cent” (*Ceylon Blue Book, 1907*). Since all government employment depended on the proficiency of English there was a predominance of Burghers in government employment. At the same time, because of their English knowledge, the Tamils also enjoyed more posts in proportion to population than did the majority ethnic group, the Sinhalese (Tissa Fernando, 1976). Although English education established a link among the elite of different ethnic communities (Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims and Burghers) it did not penetrate far below the surface. The majority of the Sinhalese and Tamil peasants and workers remained in a position incapable of communicating with each other. In this way the colonial educational system added a new form of language inequality to the island’s linguistic culture – those who knew English and those who did not (Chitra Fernando, 1989). The English language was at the apex of the linguistic hierarchy and the use of vernacular was regarded as an “admission of inferiority” (Wyndham, 1933: 49).

## **English - Vernacular Debate in Education, 1840-1900**

It should be noted that not all those who were in charge of education and administration in the British period were supporters of education in English. As we will see, there were a number of important shifts in colonial policy, and different officials often had different opinions regarding education in the English medium. Controversy over the medium of instruction reveals that colonial administrators and missionaries took different approaches from time to time, confirming the absence of a single ideology and policy. As early as 1817, the Wesleyans began teaching in Sinhala, according to Tennent, with the precise objective “of superseding the Buddhist priesthood in this department” (Tennent, 1850: 295). Before the year 1832, schools supported by the government taught almost entirely in the vernacular, but immediately after the Colebrooke Report government policy opposed the further development of vernacular schools. In the late 1830s, the first movement against English began with the controversy between the Orientalists and the Anglicists on the issue of the use of English in education.

It was realized within a few years that English was an unsatisfactory medium of instruction at first for Sinhalese and Tamil children. For example, in 1838, the Governor James Stewart-Mackenzie (1837-1841), a firm believer in the social benefits of education, called for a fundamental change in the language education policy of the government. He believed that an exclusive dependence on the English language was an obstruction to progress in education, and publicly stated that the “state must educate the masses and not merely an elite” (Corea, 1969). Governor Mackenzie proposed that children were to be taught to read their own language before they were taught English. Mackenzie’s adviser on educational reform, Orientalist Rev. D.J. Gogerly from the Wesleyan mission supported the establishment of a Translation Committee and emphasized “the absolute destitution of books” in Sinhala (Quoted in Jayasuriya 1976: 171). Mackenzie appointed a Translation Committee with Gogerly as Secretary, without the prior approval of the Colonial Office, in order to translate useful works into Sinhala and Tamil, to print these books at the expense of the government, and to distribute them among the schoolmasters. In 1840, he sent home a set of educational reforms that gave considerable

prominence to education in the vernacular. However, the Colonial Office was not interested in vernacular education, and the Secretary of State's reply to Mackenzie's proposals restated the "English-only" language policy of the government:

It would be unnecessary for the government to direct its attention to devote the funds available for education to instruction in the native languages, and the preferable plan would be to encourage the acquisition of the English language by conveying instruction in that language to the scholars, both male and female, in all the schools conducted by the government (Quoted in Jayaweera, 1971: 157).

Furthermore, the Colonial Secretary, Phillip Anstruther, came out strongly against education in the vernacular and his Memorandum of 1840 further stressed the English language diffusion policy: "I do not think that sufficient efforts are made to diffuse the English language, and I am confident that, if English schools were established to a sufficient extent the English language would soon be generally spoken in the country" (Quoted in De Silva, 1963: 185). In 1847 the above policy was changed, and attempts were made to establish vernacular schools by the government. It was found that many of the students, especially in the village schools, could not benefit by the instruction they received unless it was combined with their own language. By establishing vernacular schools, the government diverted a section of the population to those schools and thus limited English education to a minority, in particular to children of rich and elite parents. It should be noted that those who advocated education in the vernaculars never turned their attention to the country's ancient literature, or to the *pansala* school system because of their Buddhist flavour. In fact they stressed the cultivation of vernacular languages in order to promote Western knowledge, as a "prelude to education in the English language" (De Silva, 1963: 146).

During the 1850s, the influence of a policy decision (Educational Dispatch of 1854) in favour of mass education formulated for British India by Sir Charles Wood came to have its impact on Sri Lanka as well. This suggested the use of vernacular languages to teach the far larger class who are ignorant of, or

imperfectly acquainted with, English (Khubchandani 1997). At this time, the issue of a language education policy received the attention of the Legislative Council of Ceylon. As a result of a motion carried before the Council in 1865, a Sub-Committee was appointed to inquire into the state and prospects of education in the island, and its report – known as the ‘Morgan Committee Report’ (named after its president, Sir Richard Morgan) – also pointed out that due attention had not been paid to elementary vernacular education as a means of enlightening the “mass of the people in their own tongue” (*Report on Education, 1867: 9*). The report explicitly stated that vernacular schools should be widely extended, by establishing government schools and encouraging grant-in-aid schools. This recommendation was put into operation, and the government showed a commitment to promote vernacular mass education. However, there were objections to this initiative. Some argued that vernaculars were unsuitable for pedagogical purposes. While commenting on vernacular education, Walter J. Sendall, the Government Inspector of Schools, made the following observation on the Sinhala language:

I am of the opinion that Vernacular Sinhalese is a language on the wane, gradually decaying, and destined to die out [...] If it be a decaying dialect, any attempt to revive it will only impart to it the vitality of a galvanized corpse (*Report on Education, 1867: Appendix: 56*).

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, as we have seen, the colonial language policy was also affected by the conflicting positions held by colonial officials regarding the respective roles of the vernacular languages and English. Till 1870, there were two educational systems working side by side – the government schools and missionary schools. It should be noted that these two systems were not rivals, the missions having few English schools and many vernacular schools, and the government having more English schools and fewer vernacular (Gratiaen 1933). During the period 1870-1900, indeed, there was a partial reversal of the government’s educational policy, in the sense that English education was almost wholly left to the Christian missions, while education in the vernacular became much more direct the concern of the government.

(Jayasuriya 1976: 289). The following table shows the situation of the governmental English and vernacular schools at the end of the nineteenth century.

**Table 1: Government and Aided Schools, 1871-1900**

	<b>1871</b>	<b>1881</b>	<b>1891</b>	<b>1900</b>
Govt. English	17	26	3	4
Govt. Anglo Vernacular	34	25	13	12
Govt. Vernacular	129	347	422	484
Aided English	37	77	51	144
Aided Anglo Vernacular	40	82	66	16
Aided Vernacular	237	680	854	1,168
<b>Total</b>	<b>494</b>	<b>1,237</b>	<b>1,409</b>	<b>1,828</b>

Source: AR (Public Instruction)

As these figures indicate, vernacular schools were numerically the largest group of schools, and at the end of the nineteenth century, the majority of students received their school education in these vernacular schools in which local languages were taught exclusively.

The debates on education policies within the official circles also created a forum to discuss the matters related to language in vernacular education. As we have seen, after 1867, government policy favoured vernacular education and this paved the way for various language planning activities – particularly with regard to Sinhala. Over the years, language issues related to vernacular education received a considerable amount of attention from the colonial government and the literary elite. For example, as a Sinhala language loyalist, James De Alwis campaigned for the provision of better facilities for vernacular education and the preparation of a good set of school textbooks in Sinhala. In 1869, a Committee was appointed, including De Alwis, for the purpose of considering the quality of Sinhala books commonly used in the vernacular schools in the island (*Papers on the subject of Vernacular Education 1876*:

4). In 1871, the Director of Public Instruction recommended the “appointment of a Pundit of recognized learning and authority, to be permanently attached to the Department, for the purpose of assisting in the production of vernacular school textbooks” (*Administration Report, 1871*). To promote vernacular education in Sinhala, the Government Press started to print Sinhala textbooks and other works from 1879 onwards for the Department of Public Instruction. With regard to the compilation of Sinhala textbooks and grammars- mainly for teaching Sinhala -the government consulted the leading Sinhala scholars, school inspectors and translators of the day. It is clear from this discussion that from the late-nineteenth century onwards, colonial government became involved in the promotion of Sinhala for pedagogical purposes, and this laid the foundations for the development of the Sinhala language as an educational medium in the colonial context.

## **Conclusion**

As we have seen, the question of language became an important factor in many areas of colonial power – missionary, education and administration – when the need for specific language policies began to become apparent. The colonial policies of the British with regard to language and government were more organized and effective than those of the other colonial powers, which preceded them, and these evolved over time. The sociolinguistic significance of the Colebrooke report was that its recommendations paved the way for a definite colonial language policy. English rapidly became associated with colonial administration and served the function of an ‘official language’ as in their other colonies. The hegemony of the English language in government policy prevailed but no provision was made for giving the people at large an opportunity to acquire a knowledge of that language.

Linguistic imperialism was another consequence of colonial policy, and colonial ideologies were reflected in language education policies (Phillipson, 1992). However, there was no total agreement among the missionaries and colonial officials on policies relating to language and they continued to hold conflicting views. Our discussion also makes it clear that the dual discourses of Orientalism

(policies in favour of education in local languages) and Anglicism (policies in favour of education in English) operated not so much as competing policies, but rather as “complementary discourses within the larger discursive field of colonialism” (Pennycook 1994: 79; see also Pennycook 1998). It is clear from this analysis that the language policy issue emerged as a public concern during the British colonial rule, and was a key element of colonial policy for education, missionary work and administration. The introduction of English education in the nineteenth century had a profound long-term impact on the country’s language policies and practices. These colonial educational policies inevitably resulted in the creation of a social elite educated solely in the English language. Despite the increase in the number of schools those who had the benefits of an English education remained in a minority. As a result, the colonial educational system created a new language hierarchy. But we can at the same time also argue that due to the expansion of mass vernacular education, another large literate audience in vernaculars, mainly in Sinhala was produced by that same educational context.

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