Linguistic Cringe

Dr Saiqa Imtiaz Asif *

Abstract

The paper will examine the role of English medium schools in Multan which are serving as active agents in the promotion of the Siraikis "linguistic cringe". With the help of data collected in the form of interviews the paper will demonstrate that in these schools The Siraiki speaking students face constants dismissals, inequalities and put-downs. This attitude coupled with ignorance of teachers/ educationists about the positive results of additive bi-multilingualism proved through research is largely responsible for creating a sense of ambivalence and conflict promoting 'Language Desertion'.

In the end strategies will be proposed that can enable the school teachers and in turn parents/community members to 'read' the phenomenon of language shift and language loss and its full implications in order to bring about a change in the status of Siraiki language.

Introduction

The Siraiki[1] language situation is quite complex in Pakistan (Asif, 2005a). The principal city where Siraiki is spoken is Multan. Since Multan had always been under foreign rule (Raza, 1988) the administrative and cultural languages of the region have been Persian, and later Urdu and English (Shackle, 2001). Siraiki remained, however, the language of the locals who used it amongst themselves informally and as a home language. This status of Siraiki persisted even after the partition of India in 1947. The language situation was further complicated by the dominance of the English language in the official and judicial fields. In higher education, as well as in private schools catering for the children of the elite, English was the sole medium of instruction. In state schools English was taught as a compulsory subject from grade six (equivalent to year six in UK schools). The present situation in the Punjab province is more or less similar with minor changes, like the use of Urdu to some extent at the official level and the introduction of English as a compulsory subject from year one in state schools. The number of private English medium schools has grown very quickly in the last two decades. English still remains a dominant language and proficiency in English is a

* Associate Professor, Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan, Pakistan.

1. Siraiki also written as Seraiki and Siraeki is the language of approximately 25—40 million people. It is spoken in central Pakistan, encompassing the southwestern districts of the Punjab province and the adjacent districts of the provinces of Sindh, Baluchistan, and North-West Frontier Province (Shackle, 2001).

necessary 'password' to be able to advance socially. Without having a good command of written and especially spoken English one cannot enter good jobs. A conversational ease in English with a 'good' accent certifies you as an educated and competent person. After English, the second most important language is Urdu. Like English, a good command of Urdu is also considered a must for good jobs and social success. In this scenario Urdu is replacing Siraiki in the home domain where it has enjoyed an unchallenged position of the only home language for centuries (Asif, 2003; 2004; 2005a).

Thus, Siraiki, the language of a socially and economically disadvantaged group inhibiting some of the most backward districts of Pakistan 'enjoys' the status of 'a majority minority language' in the south of Punjab. A language of more than 40 million Pakistanis is still defined as a 'Variant of Punjabi' on the website of Government of Pakistan.

Due to the factors mentioned above, The Siraiki language, compared to Urdu or English, is considered inferior even by the Siraikis themselves (Asif, 2005b). In the Siraiki region fluency in English or Urdu is considered a yardstick for measuring one's ability or cleverness. Thus, for many, Siraiki is associated with being dull or not bright, hence a cause of shame (Asif, 2005c). The term *Linguistic Cringe* refers to this shame. I have adapted the term *Cultural Cringe* to describe the Siraiki language situation. Phillips (1958)[2] originally coined the term cultural cringe and used this phrase in the limited context of imaginative literature and exemplified it by three episodes involving non-typical subcultures of Australians. It has, however, since been generalised to whole Australian experience. It is believed that Australians have in general been passive and deferential towards all British things which is due to their (Australians') lingering embarrassment over their penal colony roots. Hume (1993), however, challenges this notion and states that this notion never existed, rather it was invented. In general terms, this phrase refers to the belief that one's own culture is unsophisticated and backwards compared to other cultures.

This study will focus on the language policies of the elite English medium schools. In the following sections this paper will examine how the language policies of these schools in the Siraiki region interact with history, culture, politics and economics. The paper will study the long-term impact of British colonialism on the mindset of the colonized influenced by the socio-political, cultural and economic factors.

In this context the concept of *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1991) is important. It refers to the dispositions developed through experiences in society, culture and family (Rassool, 2007). This study will examine the ways in which colonialism shaped the linguistic *habitus* of the educationists towards the Siraiki language. Using data obtained from the teachers working in Multan the paper will highlight the links between colonial and postcolonial policy language choices.

2. (www.wordspy.com/words/culturalcringe.asp 09.02.05).

Siraiki in Schools

Due to the government's language policies it is an unquestioned assumption that education takes place in Urdu and/or English. Both Urdu and English symbolise sophistication, and fluency in these languages is taken to be synonymous with being educated. The urban state schools as well as the elite English medium schools, as a result, do not encourage or allow Siraiki in the classrooms despite the fact that there is no explicit directive from the education department regarding the use of only Urdu or English as a means of communication in these schools. These schools prohibit the use of Siraiki overtly and covertly (2005d) and both these prohibitions in Skutnabb-Kangas' words inculcate, 'embarrassment, shame, a feeling of doing something 'wrong', or at least doing something that is not 'good for one'' among the students (2000: 344).

Colonial Discourse

Burr (1995: 184) states that the term discourse is essentially used in two senses,' (i) to refer to systematic, coherent set of images, metaphors and so on to construct an object in a particular way, and (ii) to refer to the actual spoken interchanges between people'. Referring to the dual meanings of discourse Kemshall (2002: 13) states that it, 'not only facilitates our understanding of the world, it also limits our perception and understanding of the phenomenon around us, including social processes, social institutions and cultural forms'. Thus discourse besides providing a particular way of looking at the world also influences what can and should be said and also who should be allowed to say something (Pecheux, 1967). The objective of colonial discourse, according to Bhaba (cited in Childs and Williams, 1997: 227), is 'to construct the colonised as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction.' In this regard Rassool (2007: 17) comments, 'colonial discourse operated at societal and global level articulated in key defining sites, and was mediated within and through cultural practices such as the mass media, education and other 'discursive processes'.' She further adds that this type of discourse, 'represented a powerful means through which cultural and racial 'truths' about colonized people, their languages and cultures were legitimised (ibid).

It is argued that the colonized take on the view of themselves that the colonizers promote and this total physical and mental submission results in the colonizers establishing themselves firmly on alien lands and minds (Said, 1993; 1995). The negative influence of colonialism on the self-concept of colonized societies is one of its most enduring legacies (Rassool, 2007). Imperialism colonizes only those who get too close without opposing it vigorously on its own ground (Clegg, Linstead & Sewell, 2000). 'The basis of imperial authority was the mental attitude of the colonist. His acceptance of subordination…made empire durable' (Fieldhouse cited in Said, 1993:11) and in the words of Tagore, it was not the Western culture that was to blame, but 'the judicious niggardliness of the Nation that has taken upon itself the White Man's burden of criticizing the East.' (cited in Said, 1993: 259).

The Enduring Legacy of Colonialism

The colonial legacy is legitimised even today in Pakistan through the language and education policies implemented in the public and the private sector. It is through these that indigenous ways of speaking, knowing and doing are being eroded. Fanon (1967: 18 cited in Rassool, 2007) underlines the significant role played by the language in maintaining colonial cultural hegemony, and the way this penetrated the consciousness of the colonized, 'Every colonised people—every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality, finds itself face to face with the language of the civilised nation, that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards'. In Pakistan the colonial mother tongue i.e. English has become the benchmark for measuring social and academic success.

Colonial discourses of different documents written during the colonial regime in India emphasising the superiority of the English language and English people over the natives of India and their languages reverberate even today in the discourses of the teachers and heads of elite English medium schools in Pakistan. It is in such discourses that we can see the relationship between self and other as constructed by colonialism and which continues to date: 'We live with the results of what colonial regimes have made of others;' (Fulton, 1994: 19).

Both the view that English is the storehouse of knowledge, rationality and morality and the condescending, disdainful attitudes of the English towards Indians and their languages (Rassool, 2007; Pennycook, 1998; Suleri, 1992) are reflected in various forms in the discourses not only of the school heads and school teachers but also in those of the 'colonized' i.e. the Siraikis themselves.

For the Siraiki parents, compared to the Siraiki language, both Urdu and English appear to be superior languages (Asif, 2005a). The Urdu language is associated with 'good people', 'educated people', and 'city dwellers' (Ibid). The firm belief of the educationists in the superiority of English and Urdu language over the Siraiki language is reflected in the following examples.

When the school heads and school teachers were interviewed regarding their views about multilingualism of their students I came up with startling results. The administrator of the school where 70% of the students come from Siraiki families said that in school they tell children, ***'If they are Siraikis then they should be proud of the Siraiki language'***. At face value such sentiments are a boon for the Siraiki language. Such 'conscientiousness' is echoed in, **'We are deeply sensible of the importance of encouraging the cultivation of the vernacular languages.'** (Bureau of Education, 1922, pp. 71-2 cited in Pennycook, 1998) but the 'sincerity' of this school head's remark was exposed during my interviews with the teachers of the same school. Not only are the students fined for speaking Siraiki in school but they also have to face the wrath of the

teacher for this 'unforgivable' act. One of the teachers of this school commented, ***'I'm lenient towards those who speak in Urdu but I cannot tolerate Siraiki. It's a home language so it should remain at home'***. This kind of behaviour may lead to the elimination of the Siraiki language, as it is believed that, 'The punishment of a child for speaking their language is the beginning of the destruction of that language' (Representative from Berlin to the World Conference on Linguistic Rights, Barcelona, June 1996 cited in Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000: 294). Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) believes that forbidding children from using their own language in schools must be seen as an instance of linguistic genocide according to the UN 1948 definition.

The nursery teacher at another Elite English Medium school reported that almost all of her students, with a few exceptions, come with a full knowledge of Urdu because, ***'Parents are becoming well aware, they don't teach them (their children) Siraiki…they know it can become very difficult, a problem for our school system'.*** In other words, the Siraiki children who by any chance do not leave Siraiki outside their school gates are perceived as 'a problem'. The appreciation of the parents who do not transmit Siraiki to their children and calling this act of theirs an act of awareness is the reason why I call formal education in Pakistan 'linguicidal'. Another noteworthy point in this teacher's discourse was that the schools encourage bilingualism as long as one of the languages is not Siraiki. The school authorities can encourage the parents to transmit Siraiki, Urdu and English simultaneously but what they are encouraging is subtractive bilingualism. The same teacher later commented on Siraiki children who do not speak any Siraiki in school nor give their Siraiki identity away in any way through their language, ***'sometimes after two or three months I know from their files that they are Siraiki, I ask them they are Siraiki but they don't speak Siraiki, it's very good…their parents say we don't let them speak Siraiki and we keep them away from servants' children from whom they learn Siraiki'.*** This appreciation of children in the class for not speaking in Siraiki and thus not giving their Siraiki ethnicity away does not bode well for the survival of the Siraiki language. This comment also demonstrates the defensive attitude of the parents who seek the appreciation of school authorities not only by not letting their children speak Siraiki at home but also by identifying Siraiki as the language of the servants and distancing themselves from this language. This takes us back to Tagore's comment, of taking the White Man's burden of criticizing the East. Such Siraiki parents team up with the school authorities in presenting Siraiki as an inferior language to their own children and to the society. This type of attitude on the part of parents also reflects the linguistic cringe that they feel with reference to the Siraiki language and the shame they feel in transmitting it to their children (Asif, 2005c). This teacher later labelled those parents as 'uneducated' who 'despite' the advice of the school authorities encourage their children to speak in Siraiki at home. ***Some uneducated, some uneducated ones…again and again, again and again we tell them not to speak Siraiki to their children…I am not Siraiki and can't understand it so I feel stressed if a child speaks some Siraiki word.***

The 'ignorance' of the Indians was not only an important point in Macaulay's

notorious 'minutes' but was expressed in texts such as these also, **I shall merely observe that the greatest difficulty this government suffers, in its endeavours to govern well, springs from the immorality and ignorance of the mass of the people (Fraser cited in Pennycook, 1998).** The exasperation spilling out of the tone of this teacher at the 'ignorance' and 'rigidity' of the parents matches with the one expressed in Robert Knox's (1850) text about the races of India, **Neither Northern India nor Indostan proper have altered since the time of Alexander the Great…they have not progressed nor changed…their possible improvement is questionable (cited in Suleri, 1992).** Apart from the annoyance in the teacher's tone and the labelling of Siraiki parents who speak Siraiki with their children at home as 'uneducated', one other aspect that stands out in this comment is the teacher's unashamed admission of not knowing any Siraiki and feeling stressed on hearing it. She is neither apologetic for not knowing the majority language of the region since it is the language of the other, nor has her school apparently made any effort to appoint a Siraiki bilingual teacher in early classes, especially when according to their own figures 70% of their students come from Siraiki families.

The Head of another school belonging to the similar category commented that for teaching the 'right' language to the children, the teachers of pre-nursery and nursery have to 'train' both the parents and the children. ***I tell the parents that if they really realize the importance of English then they must speak this language with them and if they can't then they must code switch to English often.*** Her words imply what Grant (1797, cited in Pennycook, 1998) wrote: **Thus superior, in point of ultimate advantage does the employment of the English language appear…this is a key which will open to them a world of new ideas.** Her answer to my question about whether children should be taught to read Siraiki in schools was, ***Why? I don't think there's any reason to do that. If it's their mother tongue and they can speak it, it's more than enough.*** This School Head who has condescended to accept the status of Siraiki as a domestic vernacular is not willing to raise its status in any way because in her mind, **In a word, knowledge must be drawn from…the English language, (Captain Candy, 1840 cited in Pennycook, 1998).** When I told her that many people have said that they do not read Siraiki with ease because they were never taught to do so, her comment was, ***Where do they get that thing, where, where are they supposed to read it by the way? Is there anything which er is you know, any book?'*** On being told that there exists rich written literature in Siraiki, her reply was,***'is there any special thing [in Siraiki books] they cannot find in any other language—like English?*** This dismissal of Siraiki language, culture and thought and the argument in favour of English is the mimicry of the following colonial discourse, **It stands pre-eminent even among the languages of the west….Whoever knows that language has already access to all the vast intellectual wealth which all the wisest nations of the earth have created and hoarded in the course of ninety generations (Bureau of Education, 1920).** The school head's view also mimics Macaulay's evaluation of Indian literature, **a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia** (1835: 241)**.**

The data obtained from elite English medium schools for this research suggests

that colonialism is still alive. Pennycook (1998) argues that colonialism is not so much a status as it is a state of mind. This colonial past echoes in the speech of parents and teachers/school heads. For some, the superior language is Urdu while for others who can afford it, it is English. The English medium schools in Pakistan are places where images of the self and other are constructed and where constructions of superiority and inferiority are produced. At these schools in Multan the Siraiki speaking students face constant dismissals, inequalities and put-downs. Children speaking Siraiki are seen as the 'native other' who can only be civilized if they give up Siraiki.

Just as the 'imperial stereotyping of the nineteenth century is consistently interested in maintaining a belief in the cultural stasis of the subcontinent' (Suleri, 1992: 105) in the same manner these school authorities construct a picture of Siraiki language and culture as that of acute sterility thus, creating a *cultural* as well as *linguistic cringe* in the hearts and minds of the Siraikis.

Conclusion

English is the most precious 'cultural capital'[3] in Pakistani society. Cultural capital derives its value from its scarcity, and from its potential convertibility into economic power. The pursuit of cultural capital symbolized by competence in the English language forces the parents to accept the viewpoint of the school authorities because the parents are well aware that this linguistic capital will acquire a value of its own, and become a source of power and prestige in its own right (Heller, 1989; 1994). The chances of the students possessing this cultural capital eventually rising to key positions in the public and private sector are very strong. The quest for this cultural capital makes the parents accept or even appreciate the Western celebrations of Guy Fawkes Day or Halloween night in these schools but neither these schools nor the parents feel any need of celebrating something like the Farid festival in the name of one of the greatest Siraiki Sufi poets of all time.

The question that arises here is that should we create a hurdle in the societal development and progress of a country by adopting indigenous languages as official/ national language and as the language of education instead of English? Another question which is often put in this context is that are we justified in asking the parents to risk the economic future of their children by denying them the opportunity of studying English which would ensure their better futures? To answer the first question we will have to see as to what is meant by the term societal development. Societal development is a controversial concept. This notion is essentially grounded in the Eurocentric view which considers development as strengthening of the material base largely through industrialization (Rasool, 2007). This notion has been influential in shaping policy discourse both in south Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. What is not taken into account is that 'these forms of development might conflict with, and undermine indigenous

3. Bourdieu (1986) defines cultural capital as a form of historically accumulated social advantage which is reflected in several objectified social facts such as prestige accents, educational abilities, and qualifications.

forms of development. In the long-term, this could contribute to un- or underdevelopment by eroding existing infrastructures as well as indigenous ways of life' (ibid: 6). We need to create an awareness about these views. As for the other question, we need to promote the concept of additive bilingualism (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000) and respect for linguistic and cultural diversity.

To achieve these goals we need to follow a two pronged approach. Firstly, raising the awareness of the Siraiki community about the rich linguistic heritage they are letting slip from their hands and secondly, including the component about the benefits of multilingualism in the teacher education courses. The parents and teachers need to be made aware of , 'the importance of using languages that people know, and can relate to in the learning process *is* significant, not only in relation to skills and knowledge acquisition, but also with regard to language maintenance and cultural reproduction (Rasool, 2007: 15).

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