

Shame: A Major Cause of ‘Language Desertion’

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Abstract

Siraiki, the language of millions of people is slowly losing ground to officially recognized and promoted languages, Urdu and English in home domain. A large number of parents living in urban Multan are deserting Siraiki and are not transmitting it to their children. This paper aims to elaborate shame as an important factor in ‘Language Desertion’. Drawing from the theories of shame presented by Brown & Levinson (1978), Cooley (1922), Goffman (1967), Elias (1982), Lewis (1971) and Scheff (1994) I have analysed the dynamics of shame giving a fuller account of how the different structures of a society combine to demean Siraiki speakers even in their own estimation. This paper explicitly links the theories of shame and face with the discourses of the Siraikis by citing examples from their home conversations and quoting from their interviews. The phenomenon of code switching is also shown to be a cause or result of shame and/or pride.

The paper will argue that the element of shame in relation to the Siraiki language is not only one of the major causes of language shift/desertion but also the result of other factors which are causing shift. Very few Siraikis overtly acknowledge shame that they hold in relation to the Siraiki language but different examples will suggest the presence of this emotion in the minds and behaviour of the Siraikis.

Introduction

This paper is based on the study carried out in rural and urban Multan about the Siraiki language usage and its transmission practices. First, I will discuss the attitudes¹ of the Siraiki parents towards the Siraiki language and the key role of schools and the general status of Siraiki in Pakistan in influencing these attitudes. Then I will discuss shame as a very important factor in language maintenance/shift. Finally, I will briefly discuss the inadequacy of the terms used in this context.

1 Attitudes have been defined as a disposition to respond favourably or unfavourably to an object, person, institution or event (Ajzen, 1988). Gardner (1985) considers attitudes as components of motivation. The preference for the speaker’s choice of a language, dialect or accent is influenced by attitudes and motivation. In studying language shift, contraction or loss, the study of language attitudes is important because attitudes represent an index of intergroup relations and also play an important role in mediating and determining them (Chana & Romaine, 1984).

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Siraiki², the language of approximately 25—40 million people, is spoken in central Pakistan, encompassing the south-western districts of the Punjab province and the adjacent districts of the Sindh, Baluchistan, and North-West Frontier Province (Shackle, 2001). The principal city where it is spoken is Multan.

In Pakistan, after English, Urdu (the national language) occupies the place of the second most prestigious language. The medium of teaching and learning at the school level is either English or Urdu and for higher education it is English. Due to the government's language policies it is an unquestioned assumption that education takes place in Urdu and/or English. Fluency in these languages is taken to be synonymous with being educated. To a varying degree, both these languages are associated with class, sophistication and 'good' breeding. Fluency in both, especially English, is considered a pre requisite for good jobs. In this scenario Urdu seems to be replacing Siraiki in the home domain where it has enjoyed an unchallenged position of the only home language for centuries.

In Multan, language transmission practices seem to be determined by identity, attitudes, motivation, and social needs (Asif, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c). It is believed that attitudinal factors disavouring language maintenance may lead to language endangerment (Bradley, 2002). Siraiki is being transmitted to children in rural Multan across all income groups (Asif, 2003, 2004, 2005c). The major reasons for the maintenance of Siraiki are:

- Low literacy rate (which is much lower than 43.9%, the general literacy ratio among Pakistanis aged ten and over (Population census organization³).
- Siraiki being the dominant language or even the only language in all spheres and among all networks
- Rural schools unlike urban schools not making any demands on the parents as to which language they should teach their children
- The parents who themselves are not fluent in Siraiki
- The parents do not see any utilitarian value of teaching any other language to their children a vast majority of whom start work in the fields even before reaching their teens
- Inaccessibility to electricity and media, as the dominant language of media is Urdu

The parents here only wish for their children to learn Urdu so that they should 'look' educated and sophisticated and can survive in the cities if they were to make a living there. However, the desire for their children to be fluent in Urdu but not at the cost of Siraiki exists among the rural parents.

Conversely, not all urban parents are transmitting Siraiki to their children (Asif, 2004). The non-transmission of the Siraiki language by the educated urban middle-

2 Siraiki is also written as Seraiki and Siraeki.

3 www.statpak.gov.pk/depts/pco/index.html 24.09.2004.

class Multani parents to their children started in the 1960s. Now there is a generation of Multani adults who can understand Siraiki which they learnt when they were growing up through socialization with older relatives, family friends who spoke Siraiki and domestic help. However, when they have to use it they do it with dense code switching from Urdu and English.

The urban parents are not transmitting Siraiki to their children mainly due to the following three reasons:

- To identify with a prosperous social group
- Due to the demand of school authorities
- Seeing no utilitarian value of Siraiki in the cities

So far I have not encountered any parent who genuinely regrets the lack of fluency of their child in Siraiki. In fact it is presented as a matter of pride that their child does not know much Siraiki. Conversations with parents revealed how their everyday experiences, and personal and collective histories combined to define their perspectives, decisions and practices of language transmission to their children.

In the following section I will discuss the role of shame in language shift.

Shame

Although the attitudes of a speech community towards its language (Bradley, 2002) and self-perceived social status are considered crucial factors in language maintenance or language shift, the role of shame as one of the major factors resulting in giving up one's language has not been discussed at length in any studies of language shift.

Shaming is defined as, 'all social processes of expressing disapproval which have the intention or effect of invoking remorse in the person being shamed and/or condemnation by others who become aware of the shaming' (Braithwaite, 1989: 100).

Shame is considered a bodily or mental response to outer social bonds and to actions in the inner self in which we see ourselves from the point of view of others (Cooley, 1922; Lewis, 1971; Mead, 1934); in other words, 'the self a social construction, a process constructed from both external and internal social interaction, in role-playing and role-taking' (Scheff⁴). Cooley (1922) in his analysis of the nature of self, proposed that human consciousness is social in that we spend much of our lives living in the minds of others without realizing it. In his discussion of the "looking-glass self" Cooley states, 'The thing that moves us to *pride* or *shame* is not the mere mechanical reflection of ourselves, but an imputed sentiment, the imagined effect of this reflection upon another's mind... we always imagine and in imagining share, the judgments of the other mind.' (ibid: 184). Cooley mentions three stages in the process of self-monitoring. Firstly, the imagination of our appearance to the other person; secondly, the imagination

4 'Shame and the social bond: a sociological theory' www.soc.ucsb.edu/faculty/scheff/2.html 29.08.2004.

of his judgment of that appearance; and subsequently, some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or shame. Scheff (1994: 45) summarizes Cooley's approach in these words, 'Self-monitoring from the view point of others gives rise to self-regarding sentiments...we are virtually always in a state of either pride or shame'.

In the context of shame the concept of 'face' is of great importance. Face has been defined as, 'an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes' (Goffman, 1967: 5). Brown and Levinson (1978) distinguish between positive face and negative face. Positive face refers to the basic claim over the projected self-image to be approved by others, whereas negative face refers to the basic claim to territories, personal reserves, and rights to non-distraction. Although the construct of face pervades in all societies, it is claimed that in collectivist cultures e.g. Asian countries where one tries to gain the approval of others, positive-face needs are greater than the negative-face needs (Ting-Toomey, 1988).

It is believed that in most cases when an individual feels a sense of shame, it is not overtly verbalized and the existence of shame is hardly recognized in everyday life (Sueda, 2002). Elias (1982: 292) states, 'the anxiety that we call "shame" is heavily veiled to the sight of others; however strong it may be, it is never directly expressed in noisy gestures'. The participants of my doctoral research (Asif, 2005d) overtly and covertly referred to shame as a result of which they either do not use Siraiki themselves or are not transmitting it to their children. There were many instances, some of which I will mention in the following subsections, where I strongly felt the presence of shame in relation to Siraiki language use and a sense of pride with reference to the command and use of Urdu. During my research, schools came out to be the biggest source of creating or perpetuating shame in the minds of parents and children about the Siraiki language. As a result, Siraiki children grow up carrying the burden of feelings of rejection and inadequacy with reference to their language, which at times is carried over to other aspects of their Siraiki identity.

I believe that shame is simultaneously a part of the process causing language shift as well as the result of the other factors which then lead to a decrease in Siraiki usage. Though not always admitted explicitly by the participants of my research (Asif, 2005d), my data is full of such instances where a sense of 'shame' or 'shaming' is present. Shame is transmitted not only in schools but also at homes. First I will talk about the schools in influencing the attitudes of the parents towards Siraiki language.

The role of schools in influencing the attitudes and behaviour of parents

Unlike the rural schools, the urban State schools do not encourage or allow Siraiki in the classrooms despite the fact that there is no explicit directive from the Federal and Provincial Ministries regarding the use of only Urdu and/or English as a means of communication in these schools (Asif, 2005e).

Private English medium schools in Pakistan, which are thriving on their promise

of making their students fluent in English, force the parents to use English or, if they (the parents) are not fluent in it, then Urdu with dense code switching from English with their children. The parents in order to enable their children to access social goods and seize some share from the precious but scarce commodity of 'cultural capital', (Bourdieu, 1986), speak Urdu and English with them as the primary language of socialization.

The sense of shame in Siraiki and sense of pride in Urdu was expressed in the interviews which I conducted during my fieldwork. What led the father in an urban family not to transmit Siraiki to his sons sprang from, in his own words, 'the inferiority complex and the inadequacy that I felt in knowing only Siraiki language when I joined school where everybody else seemed to know Urdu'. His wife also explicitly expressed pride in her good command of Urdu language and said, 'When I started school I was among the elites due to my good command of Urdu'. The mother in another urban family also had to struggle with, 'the embarrassment of not knowing any Urdu for one full year in school'. This has resulted in her speaking only Urdu with her children at home. The reason that the wife of one famous Siraiki researcher gave me for speaking Urdu and not Siraiki with her children was that she still remembers with clarity the laughter that erupted in her class when on her first day in school, in answer to her teacher's question in Urdu she responded in Siraiki. The shame that she felt that day is still with her and she does not want to subject her children to that humiliation.

In many schools in Multan, speaking Siraiki is constructed as something sinful, uncivilised and shameful. UT⁵ in her interview stated that she sometimes allows the children to use some Urdu in the class but always stops them from speaking Siraiki because, 'it doesn't look nice when children speak in Siraiki in the class. Their peers laugh at them if any child mixes Siraiki words in Urdu speech. The teachers also talk among themselves about such children and make fun of them'. This teacher was of the opinion that, 'those children who learn Siraiki as a first language, they speak English too, all their life with, Siraiki accent. Their accent never changes; they drag words, which is unacceptable'. 'For such cases', she said, 'the teachers seek the help of their parents to make an effort to change the accent of their children'. The sense of shame is therefore, not just overtly brought by the peers, but also by teachers.

Another teacher said that the children are levied a fine of five rupees if they speak any language other than English in the playgrounds; she however, admitted that when she is on discipline duty in the playground she is, 'stricter towards those children who speak abusive or Siraiki language'. Her positioning of the Siraiki language with abusive language is reminiscent of the regulations on the walls of Norwegian boarding schools guiding the children about what was forbidden; the two regulations read, 'Do not speak Sami or Finnish in your free time; 'Do not urinate on the stairs' (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000: 345).

5 Teacher from urban private English medium school.

Shame Transmitted within Families

The sense of shame in relation to the Siraiki language is driving parents not to transmit Siraiki to their children. They, instead, are unwittingly transmitting shame about this language which has repercussions in that it is creating a shame about the Siraiki culture also. Some parents overtly express shame in the Siraiki language like the father in one urban family who said, ‘I have not taught the Siraiki language to my sons because of my inferiority complex as I think that Siraiki is an inferior language’. But sometimes this shame is expressed in indirect expressions like, ‘it seems awkward’ or ‘not appropriate’ or does not look nice’. The mother in an urban family said, ‘it does not look nice if children speak Siraiki in school’.

The mother in another urban family was observed making fun of the speech of her children when, in trying to speak Urdu, they code switched from Siraiki. The lack of proficiency of her children in the Urdu language is a matter of shame to this mother and she is transmitting this sense of shame to her children as well.

[1] Daughter 2: Itni **nikki jai**⁶ hai
(She’s so small)

[2] Mother: Haan je
(Yes)

[3] Son 2: **Sukki, sukki** ho gai hai is ko bukhar tha
(She has grown weak. she had fever)

[4] Son 1: Kurwi **duva naal**
(Due to bitter medicine)

[5] Mother: **Aye wi ghulaabi Urdu, oo wi ghulaabi Urdu, duhein hiko jai Urdu bulaeinain. Itna tumasha leinain**
(Both of them speak ‘pink Urdu’ [they are not fluent in Urdu]. They both speak similar type of Urdu and cause hilarity)

[6] Son: 1 **Treivain, treivain. Ghulaabi Urdu kiya hei?**
(All three. What is pink Urdu?)

[7] Mother: **Ghulut mulut**
(The wrong type)

[8] Son 1: **Accha udhii Urdu tay udhii Multani**
(Right, half Urdu and half Multani [Siraiki])

[9] Son 1: **Ye kiivein** hota hai?
(How is it done?)

In this extract the mother and children are talking in Urdu in the presence of neighbour girls. The children in [1], [3] and [4] insert Siraiki lexical items in their Urdu speech because they do not possess a full command of Urdu. The mother makes fun of the Urdu proficiency of her children in [5]. The mother chooses to speak in Siraiki to point out this ‘deficiency’ of the children by using an Urdu phrase ‘Gulaabi Urdu’ literally meaning ‘pink Urdu’, the phrase meaning lack of proficiency in Urdu. The

6 In this extract the Siraiki language is represented in bold type.

mother points to both the sons saying that both of them speak '**Ghulaabi** Urdu' (the Urdu word 'gulaabi' is pronounced as '**ghulaabi**' in Siraiki) and thus cause hilarity. Because of the embarrassment that Son 1 is feeling at his mother's criticism, he at once says that not just the two boys but Daughter 2 also speaks this kind of language but in the next instance asks the meaning of this term used by the mother. The mother explains that it means 'the one that is not correct'; at this he shows his understanding of the term saying that it means 'half Urdu, half Siraiki' and the mother nods her head. It is interesting to note that a similar term does not exist for any other language of Pakistan spoken with code switching from some other language. So here the social unacceptability of Urdu with code switching from Siraiki language is transmitted to the children, along with the notion that this type of language is the incorrect language and the one who speaks it causes amusement and laughter.

The parents of this family have not taught Siraiki to their youngest daughter because their eldest daughter, who was only eight years old at the birth of her sister, stopped everyone from speaking Siraiki with the youngest child due to her own negative experience at school regarding her lack of fluency of the Urdu language. Her efforts to 'save' her youngest sibling from the Siraiki language and the active support of her family in accomplishing this task bear witness to the shame that is held in relation to the Siraiki language in Multan.

Speaking Siraiki with their children at home is face-threatening and speaking Urdu or English with them and not letting them speak any Siraiki at home is a face-honouring experience for the parents. This sense of shame, to some extent, is also present among the rural Siraikis as a mother in a rural family said that even though she does not know any Urdu, she believes that by learning Urdu her children would become 'clever and smart'.

Strangely enough, almost all of the parents that I interviewed were of the opinion that they will not mind if their children were to grow up without knowing any Siraiki but almost all of these parents said that they would not like it if Siraiki were to die. There seems to be a love-hate relationship here. On the one hand they do not see any utilitarian value of this language and want their children to learn Urdu even at the cost of Siraiki but on the other hand they would like to see this language around them.

Not only the Siraiki language but also the Siraiki accent is a stigmatised⁷ commodity even by the Siraikis. The reason a mother gave for not teaching Siraiki to her daughter was the 'fear' that her daughter's Urdu or English speech would be 'polluted' with the Siraiki accent.

7 The term, stigma, means a spoilt social identity (Goffman, 1963; Harvey, 2001). This term originated in Greece and it means, '...bodily signs designated to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the signifier. The signs were cut or burnt into the body and advertised that the bearer was a slave, a criminal or a traitor—a blemished person, ritually polluted, to be avoided, especially in public places' (Goffman, 1963b: 11).

What I have discussed so far about the relationship of shame with Siraiki and its results can be depicted in the following figure.

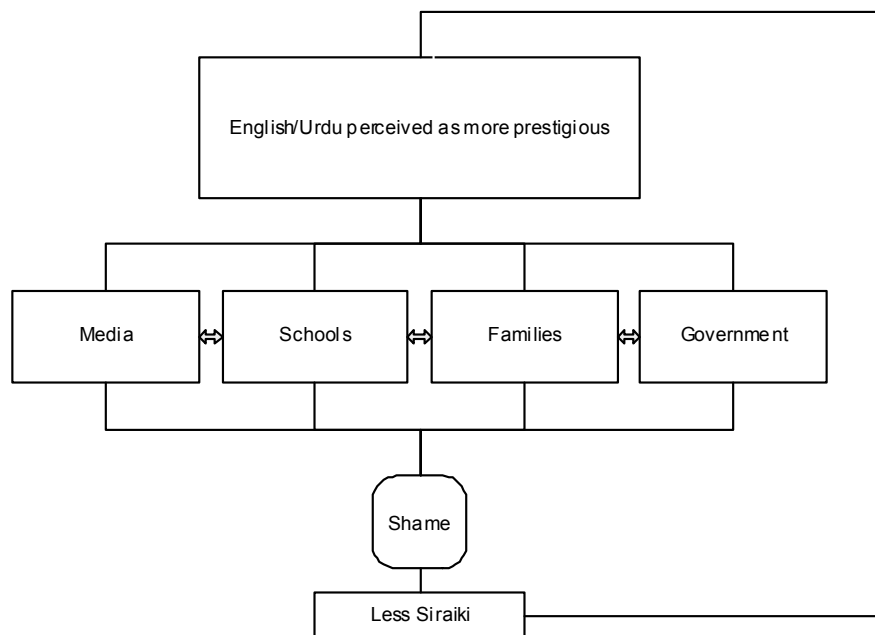


Figure 1: The relationship of shame with Siraiki and its results
(Asif, 2005d)

The centre of the diagram depicts four factors. On the one hand, these factors are influencing the status of Urdu and English in our society in constructing these as more prestigious than Siraiki and on the other, they are causing shame which is resulting in less Siraiki being spoken. The arrows between these factors illustrate that they influence each other. Two of these factors, families and schools are interpersonal whereas media and government factors are imposed from outside. Despite this broad classification they are interrelated. The link between ‘less Siraiki’ and ‘English/Urdu perceived as more prestigious’ indicates that less Siraiki is the result of the perceived prestige of Urdu and English in our society, and that shame about Siraiki is resulting in elevating the status of Urdu and English.

The above-mentioned factors have resulted in shame in relation to the Siraiki language which is simultaneously a result of these factors as well as a factor in itself in causing less Siraiki usage. Figure 2 is a graphic representation of this point.

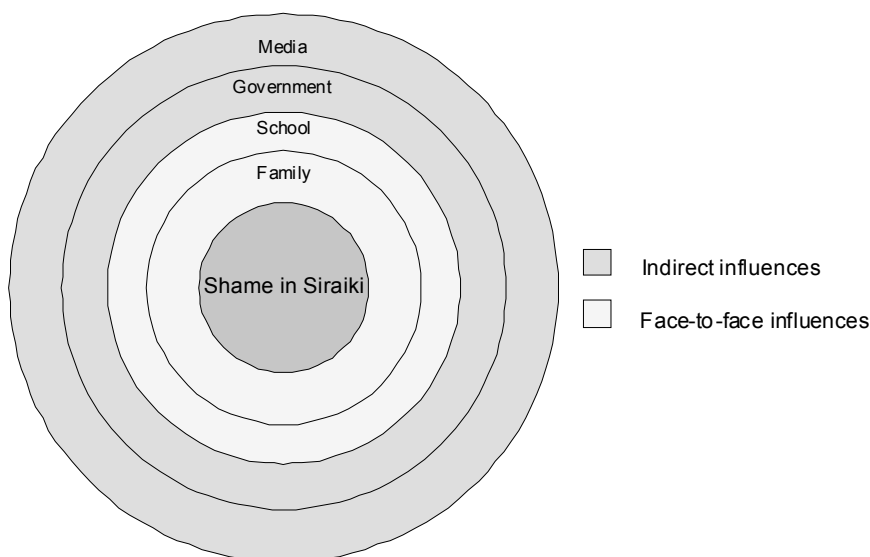


Figure 2: Shame, a cause as well as a result

(Asif, 2005d)

In Figure 2, shame in Siraiki is presented as both a cause and a result of indirect and face-to-face factors. The media and government are indirectly influencing the language usage practices of the Siraikis, whereas, schools and families of the individuals have a direct, face-to-face influence on individuals regarding their speech practices.

Inadequacy of the Terminology

The last point that I want to make is about the terminology used in the situation of language maintenance and language shift. Strictly speaking, an 'Urdu speech community' does not exist in Multan but in the broader perspective the concepts of language maintenance/shift can be said to be applicable to the Siraiki language situation in Multan. The problem that arises now in determining whether Siraiki language shift is taking place in Multan is that the term *language shift* in itself is vague. Commenting on the ambiguity of this term, Clyne (1991: 54) notes that it can, 'designate a gradual development, a *shifting*...or the fact that a language previously employed is no longer used at all by a group or individual'. He further argues that *language shift* can also mean a change in the main language, the dominant language, the language of one or more domains, and exclusive language for between one and three of the four language skills. This term also does not illustrate the reasons of language shift, i.e. whether the speakers are shifting or have shifted from one language to another due to social and

psychological pressures or is it a voluntary shift or has the shift taken place due to some physical disaster. In the term *language shift* the onus of responsibility does not seem to be on the speakers but what comes to the foreground is the language. What I object to is the agentless nature of responsibility implied within the term.

This inadequacy of the general umbrella term *language shift* in describing different linguistic processes has led to the coining and adoption of a new set of orienting metaphors and terms like *language death*, *linguicide*, *linguicism* and *linguistic genocide* by researchers (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 1996: 667; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). However, these terms take the role of the speakers of a language experiencing linguicism as passive agents—individuals with no will, no power of assertion, or obligation towards their mother tongue. Here I want to introduce the term *Language Desertion*. *The Chambers Dictionary* (2003: 404) defines ‘desertion’ as ‘an act of deserting; the state of being deserted; wilful abandonment of a legal and moral obligation’; *Longman Dictionary of Language and Culture* (1994: 344) defines it as ‘(an example of) the act of leaving one’s duty, one’s family, or military service, esp. with the intention of never returning’. The term *language desertion* highlights the role of speakers as language deserters who despite having the ability to resist external pressures give in to them and desert their mother tongues. In many cases they desert their mother tongue for affective reasons like shame or desire to identify with the dominant group. It is also observed that some adults do not desert their mother tongues themselves but make sure that their children or grandchildren grow up without their heritage languages. This also comes in the act of language desertion because adults here serve the role of active agents in language decline.

Conclusion

Dorian (1982: 47) has pointed out that ‘language loyalty persists as long as the economic and social circumstances are conducive to it, but if some other language proves to have greater value, a shift to other language begins’. However, Ostler (cited in Crystal, 2000: 105) rightly comments, ‘The problem comes when that goal changes, or perhaps when the goal is achieved, and so no longer important. There is no path back: an option or an identity which was given by the old language is no longer there’.

The parents who are raising their children without transmitting Siraiki to them are doing so under the influence of ambition for a ‘bright’ future of their children as well as due to competition with other parents. Now the question is do these parents have a choice? And can they resist social pressure? I believe that despite the pressures of ambition and competition, yes, they have a choice. We must not lose sight of the fact that in my part of the world bi- or multilingualism is not an exception; it is rather a rule in urban areas. If some of these parents can raise their children bilingual in Urdu and English then why they cannot raise them trilinguals? With a little effort they can effect a change. Social changes do not happen overnight. A few ‘crazy’ and committed people begin a change because they believe that every single drop makes a difference. There are countless children in Multan who have been or are being taught Siraiki along with

other language(s). Such parents who have taught Siraiki to their children besides other languages, stand in sharp contrast to the language deserters who do not realize that Siraiki language is a part of their heritage which they are duty-bound to pass on to their children without any feeling of shame. If they fail to do so then the fate of their children will be no different from the one depicted in the following poem:

Sonnet For The Poor And The Young

Little child, what sort of future have you?
Living in clothes given from foreign lands
Dependent on food from a stranger's hands
Will all your life be spent in food queue?
The languages which you speak and learn
Are those of another people's country
You will never know your family
Why is our culture like so much wood burned?
The sins of those long dead and gone;
Why must you suffer because of them?
O colonial men who exploited them,
You help them as the dead are by Charon.
The rebels say rise up and take back your pride
How can you, when the disease is inside?
(Kenneth Wee, cited in Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000)

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