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Postcolonial analysis of educational language policies of Ireland, Singapore, and Malaysia

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Abstract
The aim of this paper is to compare the educational language policing in Ireland, Singapore, and Malaysia. While distant geographically, the three countries experience similar linguistic processes when it comes to anglicisation, and propose different solutions to the issue of balancing linguistic rights, and promotion of English as the language of globalisation.

This comparison aimed to find out what influences language policing in postcolonial countries, and in what ways language shift can be prevented. The aspects of language policing strategies are presented as a way of protecting linguistic human rights, but also as a way of dealing with the aftermaths of the policies implemented by the British Empire.

Similarities and distinctions in the language policies of Ireland, Singapore, and Malaysia prove that the weak position of native languages originates not in the "natural" decline of a language, but rather in the policy of promoting English by the colonial forces. Ethnic and linguistic discrimination favouring English speakers in Ireland, Singapore, and Malaysia, originates in similar, imperial linguistic ideologies, which are still reflected in the current language policies of countries of colonial past. While the countries approach their bilingual educational policing in different ways, ultimately the outcomes seem similar when it comes to linguistic attitudes and prestige.

Keywords: language management, educational language policing, Ireland, Singapore, Malaysia

1. Introduction

The original aim of this paper was to analyse the attempts at the protection of the Irish language in the context of British influence and oppression. I believed that it could be beneficial to consider Irish language policing in a postcolonial context.

I was especially interested in comparing the linguistic issues of Ireland to other countries of colonial past. I chose Malaysia and Singapore as I hoped to identify elements of language policing that lead to different outcomes despite the countries' common past. My hope was to find out which aspects cause a country to become more anglicised and influence the prestige of other languages in the region.

The aim of this paper is to show that the ethnic and linguistic discrimination favouring English speakers in Ireland, Singapore, and Malaysia, originates in the imperial linguistic ideologies, which are still reflected in current educational language policies. While the countries approach bilingual educational policing in different ways, ultimately the attitudes towards commonly spoken languages show some similarities, especially when it comes to the role of English. The increased use of English, at the cost of other languages, is therefore not necessarily a "natural" occurrence, but a consequence of a continuing spread of imperial linguistic ideologies.

2. Background

Phillipson's theory of linguistic imperialism describes the power relations between English and other languages in postcolonial contexts, especially "the dominance of English […] asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages" (Phillipson 1992: 47).

During the colonial period, the usual sociolinguistic situation of the colonised region was a binary opposition of the European language of the coloniser, used in formal contexts and specialized domains, and the local languages, used in local contexts only (Ricento 2009). In the Eurocentric, imperial worldview, English came to represent progress and prosperity (Phillipson 1992). It was also presented as a vehicle of "European" qualities, such as spirit and rationality, which in turn led to the establishment of a literary corpus, high culture institutions, history, and art (Wiley 2005). As a result of colonial influence, parts of the linguistic propaganda became assimilated into the cultures of (post-) colonial countries (Rassool 2013).

I find it beneficial to consider the outcomes of colonial language policing in the context of linguistic human rights, understood as a subfield of sociolinguistics that deals with the ways in which "social inequalities are legitimated and realised on the basis of language inequalities" (Schneider 2006: 17). Linguistic human rights operate on the basic assumptions that all human beings are equal, all languages are of equal value, and identification with and development of a person's mother tongue is a basic human right (Schneider 2006).

While the spread and popularity of English are often seen as a positive unifying element, Phillipson argues that, as an element and tool of imperialism, the English language spread contributes to the language shift processes ending in the death of other, indigenous, languages (Phillipson 1992). Educational policing is especially important in this context, as it plays a vital role in spreading the "ideology transmitted within and through the English language" (Phillipson 1992: 1). Despite the absence of a continued, direct colonial influence, linguistic imperialism contributes to linguistic attitudes and influences language policing of (post-) colonial countries.

3. Historical circumstances

The use of the Irish language has been restricted in various ways since the fourteenth century. The elimination of the Irish language and culture was one of the most vital aspects of the early colonisation or subjugation attempts of the English, and the ideologies of British and English superiority were already present in Ireland long before the administrative incorporation in 1800 (Crowley 2017). In the difficult times of the 19th century, English was seen as a way of escaping poverty and hunger, while Irish became associated with trauma and death (Crowley 2017). Despite that, the language continued to be seen as an important marker of national identity. Its role in the nationalist movement during the process of state formation resulted in a strong movement towards the preservation and protection of the language (Ó Croidheáin 2006). Since the beginning of the twentieth century, and as a consequence of the social and political circumstances, Irish language policing took a turn towards a less nationalist, bilingual approach, with English and Irish as official languages (Ó Croidheáin 2006).

The Malaysian Peninsula has been subject to European colonisation since the 16th century. The Straits Settlements became a British crown colony in 1889 (Schneider 2009). By that time, settler colonies were replaced by economic exploitation, which aimed to gain maximal profits by exploiting natural resources of the Peninsula and using Singapore a centre for trade between the Middle East, India, and China. This resulted in increased migration into the region, which in turn created a culturally and linguistically diverse population, where, by 1931, the Malay people were no longer a majority (Church 1997). The socioeconomic situation differed between and within groups, with the common element of the upper-class groups receiving English-medium education, which was to offer them more social and economic opportunities, and rural and poorer groups still using their original languages (Campbell 2018).

Even after the independence was gained in 1957, linguistic and ethnic issues did not disappear and eventually resulted in the separation of Singapore in 1965, and the policy of positive discrimination against the indigenous people (Albury and Aye 2016). A part of this policy was reducing the "emphasis on English education, which would favour the urban non-Malays" (Puteh 2010: 194). Singapore took another direction, promoting English medium education in an effort to "give a newly independent country a sense of belonging to a new nation and to differentiate it from the colonizer" (Suárez 2005: 462).

4. Current circumstances

In 2016, only 1.7% of the population of the Republic of Ireland spoke Irish every day outside the school system (Census 2016). Even in the protected Gaeltacht areas, Irish was used daily by only 32% of the population. The official language policy of the Republic of Ireland is focused on reviving the language as a vernacular and protecting the existing Irish-speaking communities. Unfortunately, despite various language revival policies, the numbers of Irish speakers are lower with every census. Currently, there are virtually no monolingual communities, even in the traditionally Irish regions in the west of Ireland. In most of the language policies, which take a careful bilingual approach, Irish is now presented as a

language of culture and identity, but not necessarily of economics or politics, which is a common outcome in colonised regions (Ricento 2009).

At the time of independence, Singapore struggled with a lack of a distinct national identity, separate from Malaysian or Chinese (Suárez 2005). As a result, English was chosen as the working language of the country, with Malay remaining a national language (Wee 2013). The national language was meant to connect Singapore to its Asian heritage, while English allowed it to compete globally and benefit economically (Suárez 2005). Currently, English, Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil are the four official languages of Singapore. Similarly to Ireland, Singapore adopts a policy of bilingualism, with students learning English and one of the other official languages at school (Wee 2011). In the context of the need to create a national identity separate from British or Chinese, the English variety Singlish, or Singaporean English, emerged as an identity marker for many Singaporeans. While fulfilling one of the aims of Singaporean language policing, the use of this variety is heavily criticised by the state, especially in official settings, as it is seen as a threat to the proficiency of English and its (perceived) many benefits (Murata and Jenkins 2009).

In Malaysia, as there are 14 big language groups and more than 80 smaller language communities, the aim of current language policing is to create linguistic unity through Bahasa Malaysia, which is the national language for all Malaysian people regardless of their ethnicity. The linguistic rights of other ethnic groups are restricted, in what Albury and Aye (2016: 71) call "limited acceptance of linguistic diversity". The policy of positive discrimination against ethnically Malaysian people can be quite harmful to other groups, beyond the issue of linguistic rights. The policy does not, however, pose a threat to the role of English. English is taught in schools as a foreign language, but it is important as a language of business, trade, and industry. This aspect made the effort to eliminate English from the public sphere in order to separate Malaysia from its colonial past more difficult, as English "continued to possess linguistic power and capital" (Gill 2005: 255).

5. Examples of educational language policing

5.1. Ireland and education as a tool for revitalisation

The hope for reviving the Irish language through teaching has been in place since the beginnings of the revitalisation efforts (Ó Croidheáin 2006). The educational goal after the Republic of Ireland gained independence was to prove that there are no significant disadvantages to bilingualism, and that Irish is not only suitable for the past (Ní Dhrisceoil 2013). Therefore, revitalisation of the language was understood as teaching the language to new generations, and not making sure that the language is continually used.

In the Republic of Ireland, education is the first out of 9 "areas for action" of the 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language, a policy that aims to revitalise Irish as a community language (“20-Year Strategy” 2010). So far, this policy has been implemented relatively well. Therefore, it would be false to assume that the language has not been revived due to the lack of proper implementation of the educational language policy. Instead, it seems that, while the policies

have been implemented, they are not resulting in the desired outcome. Modern Irish language campaigns, such as the Bród Club, try to distance themselves from Irish school education, which is often associated negatively with the language (Kelly-Holmes and Atkinson 2017).

When it comes to the revitalisation efforts, one of the biggest problems is that, while in general there is an interest in promoting, learning, and speaking the Irish language, some people affected by the policy do not have any interest in it. Within the educational system, Irish is often deemed less relevant than other subjects. In their assessment of compulsory Irish examinations, surveyed students expressed the view that Irish is stopping them from learning what is more interesting, practical, or needed at university (Banks et al. 2018). Irish can also be seen as difficult, boring, or not useful (Duffy 2016). Such views, even if presented subjectively or anecdotally, reflect the attitude toward the Irish language and its pragmatic value outside the school system.

Another issue is that the policy is based on a false, or simplified, assumption, that language proficiency among children will result in proficiency among adults. The lack of daily language use creates a disconnect between Irish teaching and its revitalisation as a vehicular language. While the educational system succeeds in teaching children Irish and the percentage of Irish speakers is very high within the group of 5- to 16-year-olds, it drastically drops for people outside the school age (Census 2016). With only 2.6% of daily Irish input, a student who uses Irish only during Irish classes is unlikely to reach proficiency and confidence similar to that in English (De Barra 2019). As a result, Irish never becomes "natural" or "comfortable enough" to use when it is no longer mandated by the school. In a way, the Irish language policy lacks continuity, and there is no adequate support for Irish speakers of working age.

It seems that, in the case of a minoritized language, education policy is simply not enough to reverse the decline of daily language use. In general, while the Irish language policy provides support for already existing Irish-speaking communities in the Gaeltacht areas, and promotes the language to young people, there is no precise plan that would ensure continual use of the language. Even a relatively good educational language policy isn't enough to reverse the language shift. While language protection policies are in place, Irish-speaking communities are declining due to a lack of economic prospects, an aspect of language policing which is neglected in favour of a higher emphasis on education policing (Crowley 2017). Regardless of their preference, the economic, and social situation forces the speakers of a minority language to choose to function mainly in English, which they need in order to be employed in a particular sector, obtain higher education, or live in a city (May 2005). The Gaeltacht communities are getting older, and relying on Irish surviving in traditional Gaeltacht without providing support is simply unrealistic.

A more holistic approach could be beneficial when it comes to language revitalisation. Except for existing funding for language schools, and small businesses, the Irish-speaking areas, both traditional and those that emerged more recently, require better infrastructure, employment opportunities, and long-term planning when it comes to the development of the rural areas. This support, combined with a renewed interest in a rural way of life after the COVID-19 pandemic, creates an opportunity to close the gap between teaching Irish and its vernacular use.

5.2. Singapore and a pragmatic approach to linguistic education

In Singapore, the lack of intergenerational use of language is not of national concern. The education system is not aiming to revitalise minority languages or promote a specific regional language, and instead takes a more pragmatic approach, which would most likely be appealing to those with negative attitudes towards the teaching of Irish in Ireland. Singapore, which is only 687 sq km and does not have natural resources, relies on international trade and a global economy (Suárez 460). Therefore, the education policy includes English from a very early stage, and fluency is encouraged if not mandatory in hopes of facilitating the use of English towards "progress" and economic achievement (Schneider 2006).

At the turn of the century, Singapore was promoted as a country where one can benefit from the prestige and privileges that come with knowing English, and the language has kept a vital role in Singaporean society to this day. The linguistic policy of Singapore is based on an instrumentalist view of language planning, in which language is a tool, used to serve the economy or common values (Dixon 2009). The promotion of English as a language of business and economy, connected to both the imperial ideas of superiority of global English and the economic aspects of globalisation, contributed to the pragmatic decision to use it as a first language. As a result, the status of English is now stronger than those of the other three official languages of Singapore, and growing numbers of people speak it outside the business domain, as reflected in the latest census (Census 2020).

As the school system in Singapore is strongly separated between the ethnic groups, English-knowing bilingualism is especially valuable, as it is seen to enhance national integration, without privileging any of the three national languages (Gopinathan 1979). The main aim of the bilingual education policy is to make sure that the pupils achieve proficiency in English, which is supposed to offer them opportunities they do not have with their mother tongues (May 2016).

Culturally, the type of education that one receives is seen as a sign of intelligence, prestige, and influence (Dixon 2009). English-medium education is introduced at the earliest stages in hopes of achieving early proficiency. The languages are taught separately, without interreference, because of the view that the mother language does not contribute to second language acquisition. Because of the belief that the quantity of time devoted to studying a language is more important than quality, the language education takes up most of the student's school day and is even more extensive to those who are considered "skilled". While these aspects create a view of the Singaporean education policy as one that is focused on academic achievement and practical use of language, mother tongues are supposed to promote "Asian values" and "provide Singaporeans with a sense of ethnic identity" (Abu Bakar 2015: 46). The mother tongue, in its oral form, is to provide students with cultural and literary background characteristic to their ethnicity, rather than a means of non-vernacular communication (McKay and Bokhorts-Heng 2017). In this way, the mother tongues fulfil a similar role to that of Irish in Ireland and are taught similarly, together with culture, literature, and folklore (Dixon 2009). This is perhaps the main reason why the bilingual policy is maintained, despite the overwhelming difference in the prestige of the mother tongues and English.

Despite this effort to promote mother tongues along with English, the use of English is steadily growing. In the last ten years, the percentage of people who use English as a home language grew from 32 to 48%, mainly at the cost of Mandarin and other Chinese Dialects (Census 2020). Singaporean language policies are being adapted to the new reality: the Speak Mandarin Campaign expanded its goal to promote Mandarin not just among dialect speakers, but also English-educated and English-speaking Chinese Singaporeans ("About the campaign" 2022). The use of the Singaporean variety, Singlish, is partially disturbing this opposition between the cultural use of the Asian languages and the pragmatic, instrumental use of English (McKay and Bokhorts-Heng 2017). There is a chance that with the acceptance of Singlish as a marker of distinctively Singaporean, Asian identity, the importance of the three mother tongues will diminish. For the Singaporean linguistic situation, it would be a shift from polyglossia and multilingualism, to a diglossia with a few minority languages present. While this is still a hypothetical situation, it should be considered as a possibility within long-term language management schemes.

5.3. Malaysia and the conflicting goals of educational policing

As a result of the strong promotion of Malay culture, values, and language, the status of Bahasa Malaysia as a national language is indisputable. However, despite a strong nationalist approach to language policy, the goals of Malaysian language management are still conflicted when it comes to the education system. Educational language policy is influenced by two main factors: promotion of a coherent national identity, and striving towards a strong position of the country in the globalised world (Albury and Aye 2016).

The current state of the language education policies is a result of colonial policies, the linguistic plurality of Malaysia, and the early policies of using Bahasa Malaysia as the sole medium of education ("National Education System" 2015). Since Malaysia's independence, the educational language policies are conflicted between "local cultures and their demands", and "globalisation and internationalising aspects" (Puteh 2010: 195).

The Barnes Report from 1951, proposed by the British government, promoted a bilingual education policy, in which Malay would be the main language at the primary level, and English at the secondary level (Gill 2005) This policy combined the idea of uniting students of all ethnicities under Bahasa Malaysia and providing them with the opportunities which were perceived to come with English language education.

The following Razak Report (Report of the Education Committee 1956), promised "a place in primary school for every child and a unified educational system which promotes national unity and consciousness by using the national curriculum, not the national language" (Puteh 2010: 194). Razak Report supported not only Malay schools, but also vernacular schools and mother tongue education, which in colonial times were considered an "unreasonable [...] expenditure" (Gill 2005: 245). The new, independent education policy was dedicated to supporting disadvantaged Malay speakers and providing them with the same opportunities that were associated with English-speaking, urban areas (Albury and Aye 2016). Unfortunately, the implementation of Bahasa Malaysia policing was rather slow and ineffective, contributing to the culmination of the racial riots of 1969 (Gill 2005).

In the next twenty years, following the 1967 National Language Act, national schools and universities which used English as a medium of instruction were converted into Malay-medium institutions, and English was taught simply as a school subject (Azmi 2013). Between 1972 and 1988, there has been an extensive effort to adapt Bahasa Malaysia to its new role, which included the modernisation of the language, as well as the development of terminology (Gill 2005).

Just ten years after this conversion process was completed, economic aspects of language policing became more pressing, leading to an adjustment in the form of the Education Act 1996, seen by Puteh as a response to globalisation (Puteh 2010). The Education Act allowed English-medium education in some cases, provided that the national language was taught as a compulsory subject (Puteh 2010). At the same time, English was yet again allowed as a medium of instruction at private universities, which eventually lead to higher employment rates for their graduates (Gill 2005).

The next step towards globalisation and a pragmatic approach to language policing seen in Singapore was the Teaching and Learning of Science and Mathematics in English (PPSMI) policy, which as the name suggests, promoted English as the language of STEM subjects (Schneider 2009). While most reasons for this change were given as having to do with a lack of specialist vocabulary or access to scientific texts, the view of English providing students with a greater understanding of science seems to be rooted in the high prestige and perceived attributes of English, rather than in actual results of the students. The PPSMI policy was not particularly popular, as it was seen as a poor alternative to mother tongue education, which threatened other languages spoken in Malaysia, especially minority languages. After a period of intense protests and extensive corpus planning, the PPSMI policy was reversed in 2012, replaced by Upholding the Malay Language and Strengthening Command of English (Radhi 2020).

Just 8 years later, the prime minister of Malaysia announced that the government is reconsidering the reintroduction of the PPSMI policy (Soong 2020). This reversal would be especially influential for the Indian and Chinese students, as in the PPSMI policy the only language taught in their mother tongue would be the mother tongue itself, essentially diminishing the difference between Tamil/Mandarin-medium school and Bahasa Malaysia-medium school (Soong 2020). The decision is welcomed by some and dreaded by others, but the inconsistency in the Malaysian policy is criticised by both groups. Not only are the changes harmful to the students and teachers, but they also show the inconsistency and lack of long-term planning when it comes to Malaysian language policy. Even now, there is still a strong conviction that the native languages may be applicable to culture and home life, but to prosper in the field of science or economics, English is necessary, even on a national level. The current state of language education policies is therefore still an extension of the original, separated colonial policy, in which Bahasa Malaysia is sufficient for home life, but English is necessary to achieve globalisation and technological advancement (Schneider 2009).

6. Conclusion

Language policies of Ireland, Singapore and Malaysia are the result of the countries being faced with the choice between promoting English or the other language(s) of the nation. The outcomes reflect the conflict between a pragmatic choice of using the colonial language, and a more cultural, national approach (Puteh 2010).

Even without direct British influence, the three countries choose to promote English as the language of business, trade, and economy. Regardless of the national sentiment, English is seen as the language which offers opportunities better than those that come with the original language. The promoted model of language use, English-speaking bilingualism, reflects a divide between English as vehicular and other languages as gregarious languages of social intimacy, home life, and shared identity. In general, while the colonial aspects of Southeast Asian and Irish history are different, the issues of globalisation, linguistic imperialism, linguistic human rights and multilingual policing affect both similarly. The one common aspect which connects Ireland, Singapore, and Malaysia, is that all three countries strive to compete in the globalised economy, by the means of English. This aspect of the language beliefs, regardless of toleration-oriented rights of various linguistic communities, promotes the use of English as a means of success and gain, contributing to the decline of other languages.

The imperial linguistic ideologies of the language policies impact the attitudes towards all languages and contribute to ethnic and linguistic discrimination. While Malaysia is typically shown as being very distinct from Singapore, the changes in the last 50 years show a tendency to take a similar, less national, and more globalised approach to language policing. One may expect Irish policing to be more traditional, or independent of English, but the Anglicization of Ireland can be seen as even more advanced than that of Singapore. The processes that we see in Singapore, such as the development of a strong and distinct English variety, seem to already be completed, or at least more advanced, in Ireland. I hoped to compare the policies of Singapore and Malaysia to draw conclusions on how to best approach the Irish question. Instead, by analysing the history and current state of the Irish language, one can predict the future linguistic landscape of other postcolonial countries that take the instrumental, bilingual approach to language policing. Hopefully, taking a more balanced approach, that recognises the outcomes of linguistic imperialism and its impact on postcolonial countries, but also does not isolate the issue of English proficiency from that of language shift, language death, or the rights of linguistic minorities, can offer an opportunity to prevent language shifts before there is a need for language revitalisation.

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