



Language policy for multilingualism

E. Annamalai

The countries in the world are necessarily multilingual demographically given the universal historical facts that people migrate to new lands and the states annex new lands. Both migration, voluntary and forced, and annexation, by war and other means, give rise to a population in a country that speak more than one language. The difference between countries lies in the nature of multilingualism whether it is subtractive or additive neither of which is indicative of a static linguistic situation. In subtractive multilingualism, the new languages entering the population of a country may lose out to its dominant language, but new languages will keep coming or the lost languages may resurrect. At any given point in time, there will be more than one language in the country. In additive multilingualism, the new languages add new nodes to the multilingual network. It is not the case that no language will be lost in additive multilingualism. But the loss of languages will not be in linear progression keeping constant the dominance of one language, as in subtractive multilingualism where the loss replaced by new additions that are to be progressively lost. The loss of languages will change the pattern of the multilingual networking, as does their addition. The constant in additive multilingualism is the language net work itself, though the functional relation between the languages in the net work may change. In other words, the over all system remains, but the relational pattern of the units within it changes. The difference then between the additive and subtractive multilingualism is in the nature of the dynamics of change of relation between the languages and in the direction of change, whether it is unilateral or multilateral.

When a country is viewed as a geographical area, it is possible to think of the many languages in that area as a cluster with no functional relation between them other than sharing a country. But this is hardly possible because a country is also a political unit and sharing a country is sharing a political boundary. This is also inadequate for a geographical area to be called a country. A country is more than a politically bound territory and it has a lot more to share than a boundary. The most important of the sharing is the idea of a nation defined by a set of values, institutions and symbols. Language plays a role in defining a nation. The country is also a social entity structured on some principles and the language plays a role in the structuring. The languages in a country therefore must have relationship with each other on political and social grounds. The difference in multilingualism between countries is in the kind of social and political relationship between languages in the country. The functional relationship between languages reflects their social and political relationship.

The universality of many languages in countries means that the language policy in any country must relate to multilingualism, more specifically to multilingual networking. The network is built on the functional relation between languages. Language policy, then, is not about a language but is necessarily about languages, about the functional (or ecological) relationship between languages. The policy may range from attaining and maintaining dominance for one language (or a few languages) against others to balancing the power of languages by containing the



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dominance of one language (or a few languages) exercised at the cost of others. The balancing of power may be restricted to granting the right for survival alone or be extended to sharing the power. This paper tries to suggest the principles of a policy for multilingualism without linguistic dominance in the specific sense of granting equity in opportunities to the speakers of all languages, which ensures that there is no discrimination by language in any aspect of life.

The unit for the networking of languages is not the country alone. The community and the individual are other units of operation of the network. The pattern of networking may not be identical in the three units, and often it is not. An obvious example is when all the languages of a country are not used by all its communities, and all the languages of a community are not used by all its members. The language needs of the individual, the community and the country may be different and so the multilingual networking based on this need is bound to be different for the three. To make the networking between the three non-exclusive and cohesive is an issue to be addressed by language policy. The pattern of networking of languages in different communities may be different, as in individuals. The difference in the multilingualism- in the language repertoire- of the majority linguistic community and the minority community is well attested. To make this difference non-universal is another issue to be addressed by language policy.

Language policy is basically about deciding on the networking of languages. It involves choice of functions and the choice of language to perform each of them. The choice is made for a purpose to serve the perceived need of the maker of the choice. The common assumption is that it is the government, or a central body authorized by it, makes the policy. This policy is naturally for the country and its purpose is to meet the needs of the country. It is assumed that the community and individuals will not have a different choice or will subordinate their choice to the government's choice. It does not mean government's policy cannot be changed by the people. It is often changed in a democratic polity. It means that the perceived needs of communities and individuals and their choices based on those needs are considered secondary to the government policy. At best, those needs are taken to naturally flow from the government policy. Communities and individuals may be allowed to have their own choices additionally, but not replacing the government's choice. Some governments may not allow them any choice of their own, additionally or otherwise.

The preeminent or exclusive right of the government to make language policy is a result of the view of the government, whether it is representative or totalitarian, that it makes policies and implements them in the interest of all the people. That this view is not necessarily true has been shown historically and theoretically. A government represents the interests of groups and those are the interests of the groups who gain power or have access to power. The interests of the groups who neither hold nor access power are not represented in the policy. When the centrality of the government is not accepted as the given in language policy formulation, then it becomes imperative how the communities and individuals are interfaced with language policy. Before going into the question of interface, an over view of government language policies will be helpful.

The language policies of governments may broadly be classified into three categories in terms of the goals of the policy, implicit or explicit: policy of elimination of multilingualism, of tolerance of multilingualism, and of promotion of multilingualism. These policy categories have correlation with the political form of the country and the strength -demographic, economic and cultural- of the linguistic communities. Language policies are not independent of these factors. This paper, however, does not bring up the interplay between these factors and language policy when discussing language policy for multilingual countries. It requires a separate paper.



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The three categories of policy may be understood with the notion of domains of language function. The domains broadly divide into public domain and private domain. The public domain is that where linguistic communities converge and compete regarding language use. Some examples of locales of the public domain are the government, court and school at different levels. The private domain is that where individuals contract with others with regard to language use. Some examples of locales of the private domain are home, local market, place of entertainment. It may be seen that language use in the public domain may need legislation as for resolving competition between languages and so the government will come into play in this domain. It is also the domain of power because the language legislated for use in the public domain gives material and social rewards to its adopters. Language use in the private domain, on the other hand, is by the preference of users. It is a domain of solidarity, which expresses cultural and social identification with the preferred language and with the users having the same preference. In either domain, the choice may be more than one language indicating legislation or preference of the use of multiple languages.

The most negative policy to achieve the goal of elimination of multilingualism is the legal ban on the use of the language of speaker's choice even in the private domain with punitive action for any violation. This is, however, uncommon. Closure of the public domain to languages, generally the minority languages, is a common policy with this goal. This closure devalues the languages politically and economically and makes their speakers perceive their language as a natural liability. This is likely to lead to language shift unless the cultural value of the language is strong. When there is no language shift, multilingualism will be functionally unequal and existentially precarious.

The policy of tolerance of multilingualism may be continuance of historically distributed functions of languages, however imperfect they are. This policy of status quo is not a durable one because of political and demographic dynamics, which will bring in changes in the relationship between languages and in turn will bring policy into play. When the policy aims at changes in the nature of the existing multilingualism, it keeps itself out of the private domain. While it does not permit the use of minority languages in the public domain, it is willing to grant some measures of amelioration to their speakers and to provide support to the cultural activities carried out in their languages. The policy itself recognizes the functional dichotomy between the use of language for cultural expression and identity and the use of language for material progress and political power. Such division of languages on symbolic and substantive use inherently has the potential for making multilingualism unstable.

The policy of promotion of multilingualism aims at measures that eliminate, or at least reduce, the factors that lead to language loss. It encourages the use of many languages in the private domain. It ensures that the use of languages in the public domain is non-discriminatory. Non-discriminatory use is not necessarily equal use but is enabling use of languages. Using mother tongue in initial education, requiring the knowledge of the official language as a post-selection condition (as opposed to pre-selection condition), providing interpretation service in courts are some examples of a policy that are enabling to speakers of minority languages. The policy of promotion is basically concerned with functional distribution of languages in the public domain and with provision of linkage between languages in the hierarchies of the public domain.

The important areas in the public domain where the functional distribution of languages is of critical importance are public administration, law enforcement and education. Each of these areas is a government enterprise and so the policy of the government is crucial for its effect on multilingualism. Though education may also be a private enterprise, the government has a responsibility to make it universally available at affordable cost up to certain level. Language has a significant bearing in making education universally available and hence the language policy of the government in education becomes important. It becomes central because it



enables implementation of the language policy in administration and law enforcement by producing people with necessary language competence and attitude. A multilingual policy in other areas, for example, will not work with a monolingual policy in education.

The distributed functions of languages may work in two ways. There could be more than one language in each of these areas of the public domain, as a policy. As in the case of India, for example, there could be two official languages of the country. This depends on the historical and demographic circumstances of the country. What is more common is the functional distribution of languages across regions and across levels. The states in India have official languages different from the official languages of the Union; they have different media of education. This distribution derives from the political power of the states with different languages in a federal political structure of the country. It follows that the use of more languages for one function goes with the political strength of the languages, which is allowed by the political structure of the country to express itself.

The political dimension must play a lesser role with regard to functional distribution across levels. Each of the three areas in the public domain mentioned above has hierarchically organized multiple levels. Administration is structured from village or town administration to national administration with many levels in between. So are the courts of law. Education starts with primary schools and ends with universities. A multilingual policy may allow the use of more languages at the bottom levels gradually reducing them at higher levels. This is done on the consideration of efficiency in terms of economy of resources and feasibility of management. This pyramidal structure of functional distribution viewed as combining multiplicity with practicality will be flawed if it does not relate to language use in other areas where the functional relationship is not strictly hierarchical. Artistically creative use of language, use in the media for information generation and dissemination, use of language for non-material pursuits etc. do not have any inherent hierarchy; they connect languages in many different ways. A multilingual policy will provide support, financial and infra structural, for such use of languages to help their enrichment and their mutual feeding and bonding. Such support will not be expected to come from the linguistic communities alone. This will help make language networking more linear and reciprocal than what the pyramidal structure allows. Such a linear network will be the super structure over the hierarchical structure in the public domain. A viable model of multilingual policy must balance the hierarchical and linear relation between languages.

It does not mean that the government alone has a role in policy making. Given the nature of the government that it serves specific interests, it is natural not to expect the government to have a balanced multilingual policy on its own, which has a place in it for the languages that are not privileged in the public domain. Language Rights come in here to correct the imbalance in the policy made unilaterally. The demands for the rights spring from the linguistic communities and they include the right to their language, however marginal they might be historically and demographically, in the public domain up to an appropriate level. The level will be appropriate when the speakers of marginal languages become confident of performing in the language(s) of the public domain chosen by the policy. The rights up to appropriate level are about the medium of transaction, be it in administration, in law enforcement or in education. The right to learn and transmit the marginal language or create new content in it has no such ceiling. This right does not cease when the marginal language speaker has acquired the dominant language. It is the unconditional right of the community to keep its language alive and make it grow. And to let its growth over a period challenge the dominance of the language chosen for that role by the policy. In other words, the multilingual policy does not pre-empt the emergence of languages given a marginal role in the public domain to challenge the policy at some point.

This takes us to the question of language development. Language development has two aspects: gaining power (what the language planners call getting status) and enrichment (what



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planners call improving code). Both aspects of development require use of language. The domains of use are not equal in power or in opportunities for enrichment. The languages favoured by the policy for use in the public domain, particularly in its higher levels, have a natural advantage for development. The other languages that are not used in that way are deprived of the opportunity for similar development, though they might have enriched themselves in creative use. This is a paradox in the functionally distributed multilingual policy which means to be open for new languages to challenge the functional arrangement sanctioned by it. The dichotomized functions does not give the idea that the policy intends to keep the multilingual network dynamic and open for changes to take place in it. Solution to this paradox lies outside language policy and it will be taken up later after dealing with another paradoxical resistance to the multilingual policy from the speakers of the marginal languages, even though it is favorable to them.

The preference for dominant languages is to be expected when the language policy promotes monolingualism. But it is reported even in countries where the policy is to promote multilingualism. It is widely known that the speakers of marginal languages in many places of the world do not favour the use of their languages in education, specifically as the medium. Their preference for the use of their languages in the public domain expressed in attitude surveys or even in political demands turns out to be symbolic, not substantive, in nature. They want their languages to appear to have power, but they in practice want to have their personal power enhanced through the dominant language(s).

This situation is widely reported in post-colonial countries where the policy of the government is to change the function of the former colonial language, notably English, in the public domain. An integral part of that policy is to change the medium of education to the native languages, which may even be major languages. But people subvert this policy by preferring the colonial language -English- medium for their children. Their preference leads to opening private schools on commercial basis. There are then parallel streams of education with native language medium in public (government) schools poorly funded and English medium in private schools richly endowed creating a divisive society. The preference for the dominant language to be the medium from the beginning of education is found with regard to native dominant languages also. So this phenomenon is not restricted to global languages alone. A related case of differing behaviour of people from multilingual policy is where the immigrant population does not opt for its language in school even when the policy offers it.

In these cases the policy of language choice by individuals or community does not match with the policy of the state. The individuals and the community are not always the object of state policy; they are also subjects having their own language policy applicable to their lives. The explanation for the divergence in the policies of the state and the community is not simple when the state desires to redistribute the power of the dominant language favouring the language of the community, but the community goes for the dominant language. It is not that people want to move towards monolingualism while the policy wants to promote multilingualism. It may be that the multilingual policy is defective making the people behave contrary to its policy goals, but it is not as simple as that. The difference in the perception of the language need by the community and the state stems from different factors. At the process level, the community may not appreciate the strategy followed in the policy to achieve the goal. To illustrate it with the desire of English medium education in India, there is no major difference in the goal of the state and the community to keep English as a part of multilingualism with a redefined relationship with Indian languages. There is, however, a difference in the strategy for achieving this goal. The strategy preferred for acquiring mastery of English or any other dominant language by the community is to use it as the medium of education, whereas the strategy followed by the state is to teach it as a language. At the policy level, the community believes that redefining the place English has a cost to personal progress whereas the state believes that not doing it has a cost



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to national progress. The community's beliefs are shaped also by the market, not by the government alone. The community does not share the government's belief that it could change the language needs of the market with its language policy.

More importantly, the community does not trust the government on its policy claim of being impartial and not catering to special interests. It suspects that the government's claim of national interest is really elite interest. Such mistrust and suspicion are fostered by what is not apparent in the policy. The policy of multiculturalism with regard to immigrant population, for example, may be viewed by the community as a potential means of discrimination in future. The policy of native language medium in education may be perceived as a means of keeping the privileges of the colonial language to themselves by the elite. Such fears are real for the unprivileged communities, though they may be unfounded in the views of the policy makers. They emanate from seeing the actual behaviour of the elite that is contrary to the expectations of the policy (like, for example, opting for English medium education for their own children) and from seeing grey areas in the policy that the elite use to circumvent the policy (like having expensive English medium schools outside the policy purview). This suggests that promotion of multilingualism may fail not because of what is in the policy but because of what is not in the policy, because of hidden elements in the policy. A multilingual policy therefore must be reviewed for any hidden agenda in it as well, like the hidden curriculum in education. There must be a campaign to expose it as there must be a campaign to educate the people how the policy will serve their interests in short and long terms. This is the kind of interaction between policy making and the civil society that will sustain a good multilingual policy.

The negation of a multilingual policy may not be hidden in it but may be transparent in other areas of policy like economic policy, science policy, culture policy etc. The economic and science policy may indirectly and discretely promote one language while education policy promotes many languages. When there is such a contradiction, people choose their own policy. Lack of coordination between different areas in the implementation of language policy also induces people to choose their own policy. When the implementation of a multilingual policy moves slowly, for example, in matters of law (and therefore of power), people make their own inference about the language policy in education. Language policy in education does not operate in isolation of other areas where the language policy is implementable; language policy in general does not work when framed in isolation of other areas which touch the lives of the people where language does not figure explicitly in policy formulation. Language policy is not made for the sake of language alone; it is made for a better life for the people. A policy for multilingualism is inadequate if it stops with keeping many languages as its goal and does not address itself to the concerns of the people in other aspects of their life.

Government is not the only actor in shaping the language behaviour of the people through its policy, as mentioned earlier. Another forceful actor is the market. The market does not make a language policy as the government does; nevertheless, it rewards certain language choice over others and this choice making has the properties of policy, though in disguise. The power of the market makes that choice a de facto language policy in contravention to government's de jure policy. This de facto policy is in the direction of reducing linguistic diversity following the market principle of efficiency of reduced variation. This alternative force to shape language behaviour is the major challenge to the multilingual policy a government may make.

One way of meeting this challenge and arresting the monolingual preference is to emphasize the necessity for the language(s) of solidarity against the inevitability of the language(s) of power. The economic forces working on language behaviour will be counter balanced by the cultural forces modifying that behaviour. The paradox of linguistic inequality in multilingualism by this dichotomy can be solved only by a fundamental change in the way economics and politics operate presently. It is to localize them both and make the decentralized locales of



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economic action and political action cooperative, not competitive. This is also to accept alternative models of development in which development is not predicated on elimination of diversity, biological, cultural and linguistic. I hope that this need for the fundamental change in the way the world is viewed and organized does not suggest that the language policy for multilingualism, in which even the smallest and the weakest language has a place and value, belongs to the realm of dream.