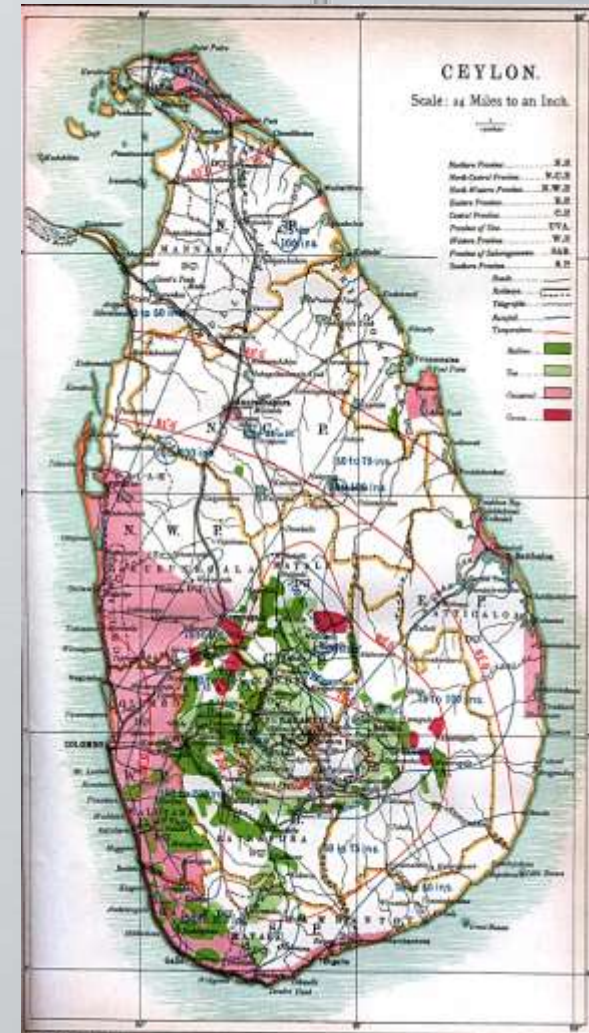# Sustainable preservation: Language choice in complex multilingual settings.

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Outline

- The setting: Sri Lanka

- The actors: Malay diaspora

- The issue: MDG and minority languages

- The solutions: 'standard' vs. vernacular

Millennium Development Goals

Target 2.A: Right to education

Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling

UNHR report

The findings of this survey are revealing. Ethnic or linguistic minorities are mentioned in only 19 of the 50 MDG country reports reviewed. The inequalities experienced by religious minorities are mentioned in only two of the reports. […]

Minorities were mentioned most frequently in connection with Goal 2 on universal primary education. Attention to indigenous peoples is in general significantly higher than attention to non-indigenous marginalized minorities across the reports. […]

Minorities are virtually absent from the MDG country reports from donor countries. None of the MDG country reports gives consideration to minorities under each of the eight Goals.

(Source: A/HRC/4/9/Add.1)

Background

- Language documentation and description

- Sri Lanka Malay

- Perceptions of endangerment

- A note on DoBeS – SLM 2004-09 project

  VW Stiftung's initiative for the Documentation of Endangered Languages

Linguistic ecology of Sri Lanka

- Sinhala: dominant language (74%), Indo-European

- Tamil: largest 'minority' (ca.15%), Dravidian
  - Sri Lankan Moors 7.2%
  - Indian Tamil 4.6%
  - Sri Lankan Tamil 3.9%

- English: spoken fluently by 10%, widely understood

- Various 'creole' varieties

- Vedda (extinct)

A few details

- English is used in education and the media and constitutes a 'link' language.

- Sinhalese regard themselves as original inhabitants

- Sinhalese are predominantly Buddhist

- Tamils have been present in SL since ancient times

- Tamils are predominantly Hindu

- Tamil group includes South Indian Tamils, Tamil Moors and migrant plantation workers.

Languages in conflict

- At independence more missionary-built schools in Tamil dominated North (Jaffna) than in the rest of the island > large number of Tamils in the civil service, medicine and law in post-independence Sri Lanka

- Sinhalese claim Tamil favoritism under colonial rule. Tamils claim this was a consequence of better performance on their part

- Sinhala Only Act of 1956 made Sinhala the sole official language, restricted many government jobs to Sinhala speakers and changed university admissions policies, which reduced the number of Tamils getting higher education

The Malays of Sri Lanka

COLOMBO MALAY CRICKET CLUB

JAVA LANE

Colombo and Upcountry

The deep South

The SLM vernacular

- A linguistic compromise between Malay, Sinhala and Tamil

- Heavily restructured grammar + mixed vocabulary

- Unintelligible with Bahasa Melayu

'Endangerment'

The Colombo urban 'elites'.
Shift: SLM > English/ Std Malay

- English-educated

- Recent decades

  with removal of English as medium of instruction:

  → SLM replaced by English in home domain

  "The key to a good job and a comfortable life"

  → SLM endangered

- In 21st C.

  local scholar's attempt 'revitalize' Malay:

  → Standard Malay (Bahasa Malaysia) introduced in urban communities

  - Support from Malaysian High Commission and Malaysia's Institute of Language & Culture

  - Access to higher learning and competitive financial markets

The Kirinda periphery

- **SLM always been vital; multilingual also in Sinhala and Tamil**

- **In 2006 (due to influence from urban centre): → Plan to teach and use StdMalay in schools**

JANGAN SUARA BERI HORMAT

Alternatives

Standard (StdMal)

- Modernity

- Development

- Agency

Vernacular (SLM)

- Tradition

- Identity

LHR concerns

- instrumental interest in language as means of communication, aiming to ensure that language is not an obstacle to the effective enjoyment of rights with a linguistic dimension, to the meaningful participation in public institutions and democratic process, and to the enjoyment of social and economic opportunities that require linguistic skills

- expressive interest in language as a marker of identity, aiming at ensuring a person's capacity to enjoy a secure linguistic environment in their mother tongue, and linguistic group's fair chance of cultural reproduction

Contrasting linguistic markets

Center (Colombo): nation, larger Malay world

- Higher education

- Global economy

- Islam

Periphery (South): village, region, nation

- Primary education (Tamil)

- Fishing industry (Tamil/ Sinhala)

Shifting identities

Center (Colombo):

- StdMal for identity with larger Malay world is legitimised and valued

- Urban youth: 'Speaking SLM is crucial to my identity as SLM' → 'strongly disagree'

Periphery (South):

- Perceived isolation from center

- SLM resource for local integration and Lankan identity

- Wish to join the 'Center'

Summary

- SLM Center shifting to Std. Malay

- Center also interested in preserving SLM vernacular

- SLM Periphery vital in vernacular

- Periphery interested in shift to Std. Malay → development

- Shift = loss of vernacular language

Paradox and challenge

- Centre already globalized; does it need the vernacular?

- SLM vernacular may serve periphery best:

  - Education: easier transition from home language to medium of instruction

  - Harmony: minimizes cultural gap between ethnicities

Reflections for theory and practice

- Is revitalization/ maintenance always compatible with MDG 2.A?

- If not:
    - A: language/ minority rights must be set aside in the interest of MDG
    - B: MDG can only be achieved later after language/ minority rights are safeguarded

Thank You