

# Language and social cohesion: An introduction and lessons learnt

*Hywel Coleman*

## Opening

The Ninth International Language and Development Conference, held in Colombo, Sri Lanka, between 17th and 19th October 2011, took as its main theme 'Language and Social Cohesion'.

The internal concept note prepared by the conference's joint organisers<sup>1</sup> stated that 'The aim of the conference is to bring together professionals working in development where language plays a key role for social cohesion.' It was hoped that the conference would give opportunities for Sri Lankan government and civil society partners 'to share experience in the use of Sinhala and Tamil, and English as a link language, in good governance, socio-economic development and peace building.' But it was also planned that the conference would attract 'project and programme implementers, influencers, researchers and educationists' from a broad geographical spread across Asia and Africa and that these people would 'bring with them a wider perspective to the discussion' about language and social cohesion.

Why was this theme selected? As several of the contributors to this volume remind us, it is only relatively recently that Sri Lanka has emerged from thirty years of military conflict. Many observers identify the passing of the Official Languages Act of 1956 – often referred to as the 'Sinhala Only Bill' – as the trigger for the hostilities which ensued. The issue of language and social cohesion is therefore very apposite for the Sri Lankan context. But – as other contributors also remind us – Sri Lanka is by no means the only state to have experienced severe social disruption associated with language policy. On a more positive note, Sri Lanka has engaged in an array of activities aimed at healing the wounds of conflict; the Language and Development Conference provided an opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of these efforts.

This introductory chapter discusses briefly how the concept of social cohesion has been understood by scholars and practitioners in various fields and how our own contributors conceptualise it. It then describes each of the fifteen chapters and shows how they fall into four broad strands. The

introduction concludes with a summary of the lessons that can be learnt from the fifteen contributions, in this way fulfilling one of the principles of the Language and Development Conferences, that each conference ‘should build towards a collective outcome.’

## Understanding social cohesion

There is little agreement among scholars as to the meaning of social cohesion. Speaking from the perspective of sociology, Friedkin complains that ‘the literature on social cohesion has become increasingly confused as the number of investigators who research it has increased’ (2004, 409). He attempts to clear up this ‘theoretical confusion’ by suggesting that social cohesion is essentially a matter of how individuals relate to the groups in which they find themselves. What needs to be investigated, Friedkin suggests, are ‘individuals’ membership *attitudes*’ (what they feel about the group) and ‘individuals’ membership *behaviours*’ (e.g. what they do to maintain or sever their group membership). This is an interesting distinction, but the framework seems rather limited if we wish to look not only at individuals but also at language groups within national entities. Although this is not stated explicitly it seems that Friedkin is primarily interested in social cohesion in the context of industrial and post-industrial economies in North America and Europe. He makes no mention of language, incidentally.

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) – perhaps not surprisingly – adopts a largely economic view of social cohesion. It suggests that fiscal policy is the most powerful tool that can be employed for improving social cohesion:

Greater fiscal space opens a window of opportunity for development and stronger social cohesion in developing countries. (OECD 2011, 20)<sup>2</sup>

Other areas where steps can be taken, according to OECD, include employment and social protection, education, gender, migration and civic participation. Again, language is not mentioned at all, although it is of course implied in several of its recommendations (especially education).

Many people working to ease the plight of migrants and refugees do, though, recognise the importance of language skills in social cohesion. The following examples come from Catalonia and Wales respectively:

The Department of Education has drawn up a broadly based plan as part of the approach to immigration so that we may promote and consolidate the Catalan language as the mainstay of a multilingual and intercultural education policy in order to achieve greater social cohesion. (Comenius Network, no date)<sup>3</sup>

The Refugee Inclusion Strategy sets out the Welsh Assembly Government’s vision of refugee inclusion in Wales ... The Welsh Assembly Government is committed to realising the following objectives:

- Language: refugees and asylum seekers have the opportunity to develop their English and Welsh language skills.

- Communication: good communication exists between refugee/asylum seeking communities and their receiving communities, service providers and government.
- Information: refugees/asylum seekers are able to access relevant information easily.

Refugees and asylum seekers bring a rich diversity of languages to Wales. To participate fully in Welsh society, however, refugees and asylum seekers also need English or Welsh language skills. (Welsh Assembly Government 2008)

But even in this field there is still a tendency to ignore the importance of language. A briefing note on immigration, diversity and social cohesion, produced by the University of Oxford's Migrant Observatory (Demireva 2011), for instance, also completely ignores language issues.

Within the field of language planning, the relationship between language and social cohesion (or its absence) is also well recognised. Lo Bianco observes:

[There is a] close but complex relationship between language and literacy diversity and education with the opportunities for social, citizenship and economic advancement that societies make available. As a result language questions are often implicated in conflict, tension and struggle within societies ... [A] cause of intra-national tension is often related to ethnicity differences when these are represented by language differences, exacerbated when such differences are not negotiated, discussed and planned in a systematic and skilled way. (Lo Bianco 2013, 6)

Three contributors to this collection propose their own understandings or definitions of social cohesion:

- Social cohesion has 'the sense of reducing inequalities and exclusion while at the same time strengthening social relations.' (de Varennes, Chapter 2)
- Social cohesion 'is seen here as the glue that holds all members of a society together. It is derived at least in part from a society which is working towards reducing disparities and inequalities.' (Hernandez and Malderez, Chapter 4)
- 'Social cohesion ... is understood, firstly, as positive interaction (exchanges and networks between individuals and communities) and, secondly, as social inclusion (integration of people into civil society).' (Legère and Rosendal, Chapter 6)

Meanwhile, many contributors provide formulations of the relationships that they perceive between language and social cohesion:

- 'Human interaction requires communication and language provides the means of communication. Hence the link between identity, language and social cohesion becomes evident.' (Chandrasahana, Chapter 1)
- 'Education is important for social cohesion and language is essential for education: both education and language can be used to divide or unite societies.' (Pinnock, Chapter 3)

- Sri Lanka has experienced ‘an immensely destructive military conflict that had much to do with a crisis of identity linked ... to language.’ (Sasanka Perera, Chapter 5)
- ‘Language has been used for social cohesion as well as confrontation.’ (Rahman, Chapter 7)
- Timor-Leste intends ‘to set an example of good educational practice [i.e. mother-tongue-based multilingual education] in the service of equitable development, social cohesion and national pride.’ (Sword Gusmao, Chapter 8)
- ‘Respect and promotion of minority languages will promote tolerance in a society where extremism and intolerance are spreading.’ (Rehman and Sagar, Chapter 9)
- ‘Multilingual education ... policy is transformative and has the potential to contribute to social development: it bridges the gap between community and school and recognises the identity, epistemology and voices of local communities.’ (Phyak, Chapter 10)
- ‘Literacy in the mother tongue ... is sustainable as learners and communities see and experience the benefit it brings to their lives.’ (Laviña-Gumba, Chapter 11)
- ‘The teaching and learning of 2NL [the Second National Language] are ... crucial to Sri Lanka’s national integration and cohesion.’ (Marie Perera, Chapter 12)
- A language policy ‘ought to be able to promote ethnic harmony, social cohesion and overall socio-economic development.’ (Balakrishnar and Thanaraj, Chapter 13)
- ‘... languages do not exist as mere languages. Instead, they reveal affiliations to certain class and socio-ethnic groups that choose to include and exclude elements.’ (Ibrahim, Chapter 15)

The contributors to this volume, then, recognise the importance of language in social cohesion, whether as a factor that strengthens social harmony or as an element in marginalisation, discrimination and social tension.

#### Four strands and fifteen chapters

The fifteen conference presentations which are included in this volume fall into four strands:

- Social cohesion, language and human rights
- Languages as connectors or dividers
- Education and social cohesion in multilingual contexts
- Languages, education and social cohesion in Sri Lanka.

The first strand, Social Cohesion, Language and Human Rights, consists of four wide ranging chapters. They set the scene for the context-specific case studies which appear in later strands.

In the first chapter, ‘Monolingualism, bilingualism and multilingualism: The human rights perspective’, Dr Nirmala Chandrahasan opens the discussion by tracing the development of international law on human rights from the beginnings in the eighteenth century, through various treaties which followed the First and Second World Wars, to the regional and international conventions of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. By considering the cases of the UK, Spain, Canada, Finland, Sri Lanka, Switzerland and India, she demonstrates that international human rights law has been instrumental in establishing standards for linguistic rights. Chandrahasan, who teaches in the Faculty of Law in the University of Colombo, concludes that countries with discriminatory language policies tend to experience severe civil unrest; in contrast, countries which recognise human rights and adhere to internationally agreed language policies achieve greater social cohesion.

Chandrahasan’s observation concerning countries with discriminatory language policies is picked up and developed further in Chapter 2 (‘Language rights and social cohesion: A balance for inclusion and stability’) by Fernand de Varennes, one of the most eminent international legal experts on language rights. After examining the experiences of Pakistan-Bangladesh, Tibet and the German-speaking minority in Italy, de Varennes draws three conclusions about how social cohesion can be helped through strengthening language rights. Firstly, governments must provide for a language minority to use its language so that it can share proportionally in economic, social and employment opportunities. Secondly, it is not sufficient simply to draw up legislation that ensures language rights; these rights must be implemented in a practical day-to-day manner. Thirdly, matters should be arranged to ensure that the composition of the civil service reflects the main groups in society. In summary, experience shows that ‘proportionality for social inclusion’ is the key to ensuring social cohesion.

In Chapter 3, ‘Multilingual education: From “why” to “how”’, Helen Pinnock (a specialist in education and language who was previously senior education adviser for Save the Children in London) provides a very clear exposition of the arguments in favour of using children’s home language as the medium of instruction in the early years of education. One of these arguments is that, in cases where children speak a non-dominant language and are denied the opportunity to learn through the medium of that language, the injustices which are experienced give rise to conflict and social fragility. In other words, mother-tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) is not only beneficial for the individual but is also a fundamental element in the achievement of social cohesion.

Chapter 4, ‘One stone, two birds: Stories to enhance both social cohesion and transformative learning’ by Gary Hernandez and Angi Malderez (a son and mother team unique in the annals of the Language and Development Conferences), falls into two distinct sections. In the first section, the authors present us with an extremely useful overview of the concept of social cohesion. They argue that social cohesion is playing an increasingly important

role in thinking about development and also in its practice, for example in post-conflict and peacebuilding contexts. They also note that there are marked similarities between the literatures on social cohesion and group dynamics. In the second part of the chapter the authors posit that procedures that have been shown to be successful in the development of positive group dynamics may be of value in situations where it is important to improve social cohesion. In particular, Hernandez (an international development consultant) and Malderez (well known for her work in language teacher trainer development) suggest that shared metaphorical stories can be employed to enhance social cohesion and to support transformative learning.

The second strand examines the scope that language has for being both a connector and a divider. Three chapters explore this issue, taking Sri Lanka, East Africa and mainland South Asia as the contexts for their discussions. All three adopt an historical (or partly historical) approach.

In Chapter 5, 'Reflections on issues of language in Sri Lanka: Power, exclusion and inclusion', Sasanka Perera (Professor of Sociology at South Asian University in New Delhi) traces in great detail how official language policy in Sri Lanka has developed from the 1940s to the present day. One of his major findings is that the country now has an enlightened Official Language Policy granting equal status to Sinhala, Tamil and English, with a barrage of associated directives for implementation. However, in practice many provisions are 'consistently violated' because of a lack of political will. In consequence, people are being 'deprived of their fundamental rights.' If they are unable to use their own language when seeking treatment in their local hospital, making a report to the local police station or asking for information at the office of their local authority they experience 'frustration and lack of trust towards the state.' Perera concludes with the stark warning that if 'we do not learn from our history ... from our mistakes ... we will be the architects of our own future destruction.'

Karsten Legère (Emeritus Professor of African Languages at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden) and Tove Rosendal (a researcher on African languages at the same university) in Chapter 6, 'National languages, English and social cohesion in East Africa' find that in both Rwanda and Tanzania the national languages – Rwanda and Swahili respectively – are strong and make important contributions to social cohesion. But in both countries political leaders and others have tended to undervalue the national languages in favour of English. In consequence social divisions are being created and 'social cohesion is being weakened.'

In Chapter 7, Tariq Rahman, Distinguished National Professor and Professor Emeritus at the National Institute of Pakistan Studies, adopts an innovative approach in his discussion of 'Language, social cohesion and confrontation: The case of the historiography of Urdu.' Scholars have long debated where the Urdu language originated from and how it relates to Hindi. Rahman demonstrates that the arguments adopted by these scholars reflect and at the same time contribute to political and religious differences: the debate shifts 'from linguistic identity to nationalistic identity, from cohesion

to confrontation.’ He concludes with a plea, that scholars of language should ‘confront and reinterpret narratives of confrontation in a spirit of truthfulness and understanding.’

The third strand consists of four case studies of education and social cohesion in multilingual contexts. These are all set in Asia: Timor-Leste, Pakistan, Nepal and the Philippines.

Kirsty Sword Gusmão, the wife of Timor-Leste’s Prime Minister, Xanana Gusmão, adopts an unusually informal and highly appealing approach in her contribution, ‘Timor-Leste: Language and identity in Southeast Asia’s newest nation’ (Chapter 8). As Founder and Chair of the Alola Foundation, which is dedicated to addressing the needs of the women and children of Timor-Leste, Sword Gusmão is well placed to present a language profile of her country. She describes how, since independence, Portuguese has been introduced as the medium of instruction, even though it is not the mother tongue of the vast majority of children. In consequence, children’s learning has been severely ‘compromised’. Meanwhile, attempts to raise awareness of the value of mother-tongue-based multilingual education have encountered hostility in some quarters (particularly in Parliament), where MTB-MLE is perceived to be ‘nonsense’ and a threat to social cohesion.

In Chapter 9, ‘The effectiveness of English language learning in multilingual schools in Pakistan’, Khawaja A. Rehman and Muhammad Zaman Sagar look at the impact of small scale efforts to use the mother tongue as the medium of education in four different language communities. These programmes meet resistance from policymakers and, at first, from parents. Nevertheless, the authors, both of whom work for the Forum for Language Initiatives in Islamabad, provide convincing evidence that a grounding in MTB-MLE gives children a head start in English, Urdu and mathematics, compared to those who are taught in a conventional way. Moreover, MTB-MLE strengthens social cohesion at two levels. Firstly, at the individual level, children who have experienced MTB MLE in their early years are more likely to stay in school and complete their education; this enables them to integrate into their own community and play active and useful roles. Secondly, Rehman and Sagar note that the MTB-MLE programmes help the development of social cohesion between different language communities as they organise joint events and learn from each others’ experience.

Similar conclusions are reached in Chapter 10 by Prem Phyak, who writes on ‘Multilingual education, social transformation and development in Nepal.’ Phyak, who teaches at Tribhuvan University in Kathmandu, focuses on an MTB-MLE programme provided for one very small marginalised community. Community members were involved in the design of the programme and the preparation of reading materials. As a result, parents have lost their shyness about coming to the school; people see that their language is being preserved and developed; children ‘learn happily’ and have warm relationships with their teachers. But the scheme faces challenges, particularly in the form of a growing demand from parents that their children should be taught English or even that they should be taught through the medium of English. Phyak interprets this

as evidence that neoliberal economic and political influences pose a threat to Nepal's efforts to create a multilingual, cohesive and just society.

Unlike Chapters 8, 9 and 10, which are concerned with school education, Chapter 11 focuses on adult literacy programmes. The author is Leslie Laviña-Gumba, an activist with the Translators' Association of the Philippines (TAP). Her chapter, 'Mother-tongue-based literacy, a tool for indigenous people's empowerment: The Western Subanon and Binukid/Higaonon experience', briefly describes the mother-tongue-based adult literacy work which TAP has been carrying out with two minority language groups on the island of Mindanao. An evaluation of these programmes identified numerous benefits for individual participants and for the language groups as a whole. Laviña-Gumba concludes, therefore, that literacy in the mother tongue is transformative, empowering and development-oriented. Not only that, but having themselves experienced the benefits of literacy in their first languages parents are now demanding MTB-MLE programmes for their children as well.

The final strand brings together four chapters that discuss issues concerning languages, education and social cohesion in Sri Lanka. Chapter 5 has already discussed the Sri Lankan context from the point of view of legislation on language, but in this final strand the focus is on the specific roles that Tamil, Sinhala and English are expected to play in the country.

In Chapter 12, Marie Perera, Professor in Humanities Education at the University of Colombo, discusses efforts to encourage the learning of the 'Second National Language' (2NL). There is a requirement that in schools all speakers of Sinhala should learn Tamil and that all speakers of Tamil should learn Sinhala, in the expectation that this will lead to easier communication between the two main ethnic groups and in turn that social cohesion will be strengthened. A similar regulation applies in teacher education colleges. In her chapter, 'Building bridges: National integration through the teaching of the Second National Language', Perera shows that, although these enlightened rules are in place, the reality is often very different. Some improvements have occurred in recent years, but there are still significant weaknesses in the system. Perera recommends that a comprehensive nation-wide review of the programme should be carried out, followed by fundamental revision of the 2NL curriculum. Unless these steps are taken, she fears that the 'building of bridges' required for the achievement of social cohesion will not be possible.

A very different aspect of language in education is discussed by Jayageetha Balakrishnar (senior teacher at Valvai Girls' College) and Thaiyamuthu Thanaraj (Professor of Education in the Open University of Sri Lanka) in their contribution 'Instruction in the English medium: A Sri Lankan case study' (Chapter 13). The authors show how attitudes to using English as the medium of instruction have fluctuated repeatedly between the 1940s and the present day. In each case, policy change has been 'based mostly on ethno-nationalism and political expediency' and each change in practice has been carried out 'without adequate planning and preparation.' They document the detrimental effects of these unprincipled and unplanned changes on children and on the development of education in Sri Lanka in general.

Staying with English, we move next to a discussion by Michael Meyler, who is a long term resident of Sri Lanka, a teacher of colloquial Sinhala and Tamil and a researcher of Sri Lankan English. In Chapter 14, Meyler asks whether ‘Sri Lankan English’ [is] ‘An appropriate model for the teaching of English in Sri Lanka?’ His question arises from a proposal, emanating from the Sri Lankan Government in 2009, that Sri Lankan English or ‘English Our Way’ should become the model for English language learning and teaching in the education system. The proposal attracted widespread attention but it soon encountered resistance from various groups in society and it now appears to have been shelved. Meyler’s argument is that the proposal still has some value but that there needs to be consensus on what exactly ‘Sri Lankan English’ is.

The final chapter in the collection, ‘The role of the standard variety in defining sub-varieties: A study based on teaching English and Tamil’ is by Rukshaan Ibrahim from the University of Peradeniya. Ibrahim also looks at the ‘English Our Way’ initiative and compares it with attempts to identify a ‘standard Sri Lankan Tamil’. These initiatives were intended to free Sri Lankans from the dominance of inappropriate external language varieties (British English and Indian Tamil respectively). However, both schemes are questionable because the state’s involvement in standardising languages – ostensibly to overcome the country’s linguistic problems – inevitably ‘re-creates hegemony’ and potentially gives rise to new problems.

## **Lessons learnt**

Eleven important lessons can be drawn from this volume. As the experience of Sri Lanka itself demonstrates, ignoring these lessons may have extremely serious consequences.

1. Multiple interpretations of the concept of ‘social cohesion’ exist. Social cohesion is a core element in approaches which, following Sen (1999), see development as ‘freedom.’ (Chapters 4, 10)
2. Social cohesion works at two levels. It concerns the relationship between the individual and his or her community. It also concerns relationships between groups in the wider society. (Chapters 6, 9, 11)
3. The freedom to use, become literate in and be educated in one’s own language is a core human right. (Chapters 1, 2, 5)
4. Discriminatory language policies give rise to civil unrest. Policies which recognise language rights contribute to social cohesion. (Chapters 1, 2, 3, 5)
5. Legislation that recognises language rights does not, by itself, guarantee that language rights will actually be enjoyed by minorities. Practice frequently differs from what the law requires, either because the legislation has been badly planned or because there is no political will to bring about change. New policies therefore require careful planning before being formalised. Legislation, once passed, must be followed up by concrete action. (Chapters 2, 5, 12, 13)

6. Public discussion and writing about language in society often reflects and contributes to political, religious and ideological differences. Those who speak and write about language should do so responsibly, making sure that everything they do and say contributes to social harmony. (Chapters 7, 14, 15)
7. Parents and politicians alike are often too easily convinced of the value of using former colonial languages as the medium of instruction, whereas in fact these policies can lead to social division and weakening of social cohesion. (Chapters 6, 8, 10, 13, 15)
8. Mother-tongue-based multilingual education, especially in the early years, provides the best foundation for children's cognitive, linguistic and social development. (Chapters 3, 6, 8, 9, 10)
9. Mother-tongue-based adult literacy programmes strengthen individuals' participation in society and social cohesion of the community as a whole. (Chapter 11)
10. Practitioners aiming to strengthen social cohesion can learn from the lessons offered by the field of group dynamics. (Chapter 4)
11. Overall, stakeholders – from politicians to parents – require information about language in society and language in education which is accurate and which is presented to them dispassionately. Educating stakeholders and changing their perceptions is a slow, frustrating and painstaking task.

## Notes

- 1 Sri Lankan Ministry of National Languages and Social Integration, Sri Lankan Ministry of Education, British Council and GIZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, German Body for International Collaboration).
- 2 OECD's approach is severely criticised by Oxfam (Green 2012).
- 3 But see Dooly and Unamuno (2009) for a discussion of how socially constructed notions of 'language', 'social cohesion' and 'diversity' in the migrant language programme in Catalonia create tensions.

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