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MUSLIMS IN SRI LANKAN LANGUAGE POLITICS

Tamil- and English-medium education

Christina P. Davis

Sri Lanka is a postcolonial nation, which, from 1983 to 2009 was ravaged by a civil war between the Sinhala-majority government and a northern Tamil insurgency group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Largely excluded from mainstream representations of the ethnic conflict, Muslims or Moors constitute the country's second largest minority group.[1] In contrast to Sinhalas and Tamils, they define their ethnic identities in terms of religion rather than language. The politics of Sri Lankan Muslim identity has significance for studies of language and education in South Asia and beyond. This chapter incorporates research conducted at a trilingual government school called Girls' College in Kandy, Sri Lanka during the last phase of the war. I investigate how Muslim teachers and students made sense of Tamil- and English-medium education in relation to their separate ethno-religious identity and class differences. Analyzing Sri Lankan Muslims' sociolinguistic practices and ideas about language, we can understand how postcolonial groups relate their identities to medium of instruction or medium, as well as how global English informs local ethnopolitics.

Sinhalas (Buddhist or Christian) make up the majority of Sri Lanka's population (74.9 per cent). They speak Sinhala, an Indo-Aryan language related to the languages of North India. There are several Tamil-speaking minority groups. North and East Tamils (11.2 per cent), alternately referred to as Sri Lankan Tamils, have lived on the island for centuries, primarily in the north and east, but also in urban areas in the Sinhala-majority south like Kandy and Colombo. Up-country Tamils (4.2 per cent), referred to as *malaiyaha* "hill region/area" or *malainaaTTu* "hill country" Tamils, are descendants of migrants who arrived from South India during the British period (1815–1948) to work as plantation laborers in the central highlands (Daniel 1996). Members of both Tamil groups are predominantly Hindu, with a significant Christian minority. Muslims make up 9.2 per cent of the population. They

can be traced back to pre-Islamic seafaring trade between South and Southeast Asia and the Middle East (both Arab and Persian), as well as Arab Muslim mercantile trade in the first part of the seventh century (McGilvray and Raheem 2007). The majority of Sri Lankan Muslims speak Tamil as a first language, but the government classifies them as an ethnic minority group on the basis of their religion (Imtiyaz and Hoole 2011; McGilvray and Raheem 2007; Thiranagama 2011). This contrasts with Muslims in Tamil Nadu, India, who accept both linguistic (Tamil) and religious (Muslim) identities (see McGilvray 2008; Ramaswamy 1997).

Categories of identity related to religion, caste, region, and language were fluid in precolonial Sri Lanka (Rogers 1994; Wickramasinghe 2006). In the mid-twentieth century language-based ethnicity emerged as a primary mode of sociocultural and political identification for Sinhalas and Tamils (Daniel 1996; Spencer 1990). In the late nineteenth century, Muslim leaders situated themselves as a separate racial group from Tamils in order to obtain separate political representation in the colonial government. Southern urban-based Muslim leaders gradually constructed a pan-Islamic identity in the mid-twentieth century, which allowed them to distance themselves from the Sinhala – Tamil conflict (McGilvray and Raheem 2007).

In Sri Lanka, post-independence policy makers switched the medium in government schools from English to Sinhala and Tamil. Medium divisions are not just a matter of state policy. They constitute an important ideological framework for the production and reproduction of social differences (LaDousa 2014). And, as Chaise LaDousa (2014) has argued, discourses of medium often do not fully reflect how individuals conceive of language in relation to their social lives.

Sri Lankan schools are organized according to their medium and religious affiliation (Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, and Muslim). In policy and practice, medium divisions are intertwined with the concept of "mother tongue." The English term mother tongue is used in Sri Lanka to describe a person's first or predominant language.[2] As consistent with the Herderian notion of one language/one people, it also takes on a moral significance "as the one first and therefore real language of a speaker, transparent to the true self" (Woolard 1998, 18). I do not treat mother tongue as an objective feature of the world, but as an ideologically mediated concept, which, as such, is politically and morally driven (LaDousa 2010; also see Hastings 2008; Mitchell 2009).

In the 1940s and 1950s public education was treated as a "right of an individual within a community or ethnic group rather than an individual right" (de Silva 1998, 59). Sinhalas and Tamils were required to study in their respective mother tongues.[3] Muslims, who had conflicted views about what constituted their mother tongue, were given special provisions as a predominantly Tamil-speaking group with a distinct ethnic identity from Tamils. They were allowed to study in the Tamil or Sinhala medium. Recent

changes to language policies in government schools gave Sri Lankan students additional options. Acknowledging the importance of English in the global economy, the Ministry of Education introduced English bilingual programs in some large government schools in 2001. This has allowed some students to take courses in English at the secondary level (Davis 2015, 2020a).

Kandy is a large city located in a mountainous region of the Central Province, which is one of nine provinces in Sri Lanka. A symbolic center for Buddhism and the Buddhist state, it is also a multilingual and multiethnic urban center (Tambiah 1986). Girls' College is a former Christian missionary school founded in the late nineteenth century. Currently a Sinhala Buddhist national school managed by the Ministry of Education, it is one of the leading girls' educational institutions on the island. Its students come from lower-middle to middle-class backgrounds.[4] It is one of the few schools in Kandy to offer subjects in both the Sinhala and Tamil mediums, as well as an English bilingual program. Some Muslims study in the Sinhala or bilingual mediums; most study in Tamil.

I examine how Tamil-medium Muslim teachers, in their interactions with non-Muslim teachers and with me, asserted how their heterogeneous linguistic practices were inextricably linked to their distinct ethno-religious identities. Then, I look at how Muslim students' lack of fit with the ethno-linguistic models presupposed by the school helped them embrace English-medium education. However, drawing on LaDousa's (2014) discussion of the limits of medium divisions as orienting frameworks, I show how the introduction of a bilingual program at Girls' College complicated Muslim teachers' and their students' discourses of language and identity by underscoring the relevance of English to class divisions and access to global networks.

Sri Lankans have long been motivated to learn English because of its association with elite social status. Globalization has even increased youths' desire to be proficient in the language (Canagarajah 2005). Rather than addressing the role of English in assumed cultural homogenization, recent ethnographic studies have examined how people around the world position it in relation to other languages (Annamalai 2004; Canagarajah 2013; Higgins 2009; Pennycook 2007; Ramanathan 2005). Alastair Pennycook (2013), for one, calls for an investigation into how English is used and appropriated by users and how global cultural flows are taken up in local ways. Drawing on this literature, this chapter demonstrates how orientations to global English mediate ethnopolitical identities and everyday social relations.

Methods

I conducted research at Girls' College from February to August 2008. My time there coincided with a tense period in the Sri Lankan civil war, which

abruptly ended in May 2009. Between 2007 and 2009, the Sri Lankan military made a massive push to gain control of the last LTTE-held territories in the northern Vanni region; military and civilian casualities numbered in the tens of thousands (Thiranagama 2011). Though Sri Lankans living in Kandy and elsewhere in the south were at a safe distance from the battle zones in the north and east, they lived in fear of civilian-targeted violence. Tamil-speaking minorities (Muslims and Tamils) experienced discrimination from the Sinhala Buddhist majority (Davis 2014).

My investigation was part of a broader study of multilingual practices and ideologies of linguistic and social difference among Kandy Muslim and Tamil youth inside and outside schools. The research for this chapter consisted of observing and recording interactions among Tamil-medium teachers and students in staff rooms, classrooms, and other spaces around the school. I also attended English- and Sinhala-medium classes and taught English to students in the grades 8 and 9 English bilingual program. I supplemented my research by visiting teachers and students in their homes.

My experience was mediated by my identity as a white American female and my language proficiency. The high level of proficiency in Tamil I acquired from over a decade of Tamil language study in India and the United States enabled me to interact easily with the Girls' College Tamil-medium teachers and students. Before turning to Girls' College, in the following sections I discuss the structure of the national education system and southern Muslims' ethnopolitical relationship with the Tamil language.

Regimenting medium and ethnicity

During the British period, a bifurcated system of education developed in Sri Lanka: local elites were educated in fee-levying English-medium schools, while the masses were educated in free Sinhala- and Tamil-medium schools (Little 2003). In the postcolonial period, policy makers advocated moving away from English to address the gap between the Anglophone elites and the majority of the population, who controlled the vote (Canagarajah 2005). From the mid-1940s to the 1950s, as part of the *swabasha* "own language" movement popular among both Sinhalas and Tamils, the government replaced English with Sinhala and Tamil instruction in government schools (see Chapter 9). In the mid-1950s, Sinhala Buddhist nationalists who were angered over the overrepresentation of English-educated Jaffna (northern) Tamils in the civil service, transformed the *swabasha* movement into a "Sinhala only" movement (Devotta 2004; Tambiah 1986).

In 1956, the newly elected Sinhala nationalist government passed the Sinhala-Only Act. This policy was modified in 1987 when Tamil was declared a co-official language, and English a link language (this phrase was ill defined). The Sinhala-Only Act was particularly significant in that it made Sinhala fluency a requirement for all government jobs. Though it

negatively affected all Tamil-speaking groups, including Muslims, it was particularly detrimental to English-educated Jaffna Tamils, who had relied on government and professional employment in the south (Tambiah 1986). In the early 1970s, the government passed a new policy regulating university admissions on the basis of language. It benefited the other Tamil-speaking groups, but this policy hurt Jaffna Tamils as it meant that they had to acquire higher marks on the qualifying exams than their Sinhala counterparts did. A year later, a district quota system was adopted to compensate for children in rural areas who did not have access to high quality schools (Sørensen 2008). While the causes of the ethnic conflict are highly complex (see Spencer 1990; Tambiah 1986), post-independence language and education policies are widely thought to have increased ethnic tensions (Davis 2020a, 2020b; Thiranagama 2011).

The gradual takeover of schools by the state and the change in medium combined to create a centralized system in which all school-aged children were guaranteed a free education in their first language (Little 2003). Though it increased access to education, the new system did not alter the social landscape as much as was anticipated. Sinhala became the language of the central administration, but English remained the unofficial code of "higher education, commerce, communication, technology and travel" (Canagarajah 2005, 423). Some Sri Lankans educated in Sinhala and Tamil obtained mid-level government jobs, but the English-educated middle classes retained preferential access to professional employment at home and abroad (2005). Sri Lankan social groups who have been traditionally deprived of English often feel alienated from it, seeing it as a symbol of discrimination. Speaking to its divisive role in Sri Lankan society, English is widely referred to as *kaduva* "sword" in spoken Sinhala (Gunesekera 2005; Kandiah 2010).

Post-independence education policies also had unexpected consequences for interethnic relations. The organization of schools on the basis of medium systematized and exacerbated the geographic segregation of Sinhalas and Tamils (Perera, Wijetunga, and Balasooriya 2004; Wijesekera, Alford, and Mu 2019; see Chapter 9). In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the National Education Commission introduced education reforms designed to promote interethnic integration. It required students to study their additional co-official language and emphasized English (National Education Commission 2003). While the reforms may have positive consequences, they do not represent a substantial change in the overall structure of education (Davis 2020a).

Though decentralized in 1987, the Sri Lankan education system remains somewhat centralized by virtue of the standardized Sinhala- and Tamil-medium curriculum. The education system is organized into five levels: primary (grades 1–5), junior secondary (grades 6–9), senior secondary (grades 10–11), collegiate (grades 12–13), and tertiary (university). Students take three national exams: the grade 5 scholarship exam, the General Certificate

Table 6.1 Ethnicity, Mother Tongue, and Medium in Sri Lankan Schools

Ethnicity	*Mother tongue*	*Medium*	*Religion*
Sinhala	Sinhala	Sinhala or English bilingual	Buddhism or Christianity
Tamil (Up-country and North and East)	Tamil	Tamil or English bilingual	Hinduism or Christianity
Muslim (southern)	?	Tamil, Sinhala, or English bilingual	Islam

of Education (G. C. E.) Ordinary-level (O Level) exam, which determines their entrance to the collegiate level, and the G. C. E. Advanced-level (A Level) exam, which is a university entrance exam. While schools are officially organized on the basis of medium and religion, teachers and students widely refer to them by their ethnic affiliations. The education system thus naturalizes the ideological conflation of language (mother tongue), medium, and ethnicity. However, the presence of Muslims, a social group that defines itself on the basis of religion, seemingly interrupts this conflation (see Table 6.1).

Southern Muslims, mother tongue, and medium

Southern Muslim leaders first promoted their separate racial identity as "Ceylon Moors" in the late nineteenth century to establish a claim to separate political representation (McGilvray and Raheem 2007). The Legislative Council was a governing body comprised of non-official members who represented distinct racial groups. Ponnambalam Ramanathan (1851–1930), a Tamil Hindu politician, was the "Tamil" representative (he was also thought to represent Tamil-speaking Moors) (Thiranagama 2011). In 1885, he made a speech to the other members that used physical, social, and cultural evidence to argue that the Moors of Ceylon were ethnologically Tamils. His speech angered southern Muslim leaders because it denied their right to separate political representation. I. L. M. Abdul Azeez (1867–1950), a prominent Colombo-based lawyer and Muslim leader, explained in response that Sri Lankan Muslims only spoke Tamil as a first language because their Arab ancestors had adopted the local language for convenience. He denied the physical resemblance of Muslims to Tamils, but accepted the mixture of Muslim and Tamil blood, explaining that some Arab traders had intermarried with local Tamil women (Nuhman 2007; Samaraweera 1997).

I. L. M. Abdul Azeez's arguments reconciled Muslims' widespread use of Tamil with their non-Tamil identity. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, some Muslim leaders emphasized Sri Lankan Muslims' lack of attachment to any particular language. Others, influenced by language-based

models of ethnicity, debated whether Arabic, Tamil, or Sinhala should be their mother tongue (McGilvray and Raheem 2007). In 1884, M. C. Siddi Lebbe (1838–1898), a prominent Colombo-based Muslim leader, cited historical reasons to make the case that Arabic is the mother tongue of Muslims. Two years later, he suggested that Muslims study Arabic, Tamil, English, and Sinhala. He added that Arabic was of particular importance because it is the language of the religion of Muslims. In the mid-twentieth century, Deshamanya Badiuddin Mahmud (1904–1997), a Colombo-based politician, argued that Muslims should adopt Sinhala as their mother tongue. A. M. A. Azeez (1911–1973), an intellectual who grew up in Jaffna, stated that Tamil is the mother tongue of Muslims because it is their home language (Imtiyaz and Hoole 2011; McGilvray and Raheem 2007; Nuhman 2007).

Sri Lankan Muslims' differing views regarding the issue of mother tongue reflect their diversity as a community. Historically, linguistically, socioculturally, economically, and politically distinct from their counterparts in the war-ravaged north and east, southern Muslims live in scattered pockets among Sinhalas and/or Tamils (O'Sullivan 1999).[5] Their vulnerability vis-à-vis Sinhalas and Tamils shaped their participation in Sri Lankan politics in the twentieth century. The Sinhala-Muslim riots of 1915, which started in Kandy and spread to Colombo, caused Muslims to seek the protection of the British government. Political issues related to the riots turned Muslims against Tamil leaders and the possibility of "Tamil-speaking" ethnic solidarity (Thiranagama 2011). After Muslim candidates were defeated in the independent nation's first elections in 1948, they switched to a policy of accommodation with the Sinhala-majority government, a strategy that brought them valuable concessions. For example, during his tenure as Minister of Education in the early 1970s, Deshamanya Badiuddin Mahmud convinced the government to open Muslim training colleges, a new category of Muslim government schools, and fund the development of a curriculum for teaching Islam in schools (McGilvray and Raheem 2007).

Eastern Muslims' ethnic and political interests merged with the formation of the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress in 1981, but southern Muslims have continued to support mainstream political parties (McGilvray 2008). Changes in economic policies in the 1970s, combined with their growing interest in pursuing formal education, contributed to the growth of a sizable southern Muslim middle class. Labor migration to the Gulf States and the influence of transnational Islamic organizations strengthened their pan-Islamic identity (McGilvray and Raheem 2007; O'Sullivan 1999).

Many urban southern Muslims identify themselves as bilinguals in Tamil and Sinhala. Some middle-class southern Muslims primarily speak English or Sinhala, though they use Tamil for in-group communication. Many Muslims in Kandy and elsewhere in the south speak a distinct variety of colloquial Tamil, widely referred to as Muslim Tamil. This variety, which varies regionally, is distinguished by its large number of Perso-Arabic loan

words and unique grammatical patterns (Hussein 2007; Nuhman 2007; Suseendirarajah 1999). The term Arabic Tamil is sometimes used to refer to Sri Lankan Muslim Tamil, but it more accurately describes a genre of Tamil literature written in Arabic script by Muslims in South India and Sri Lanka that dates back to the eighth century (Nuhman 2007).

Southern Muslims still debate over the issue of mother tongue. Some Kandy Muslims told me that they did not have a mother tongue at all; others stated that Arabic was their mother tongue. A small number of Sri Lankan Muslims learn Arabic in the Gulf States or study it at madrasahs (schools for Islamic learning), but most do not have Arabic proficiency beyond reciting the Quran. As I discuss subsequently, when Kandy Muslim teachers and parents asserted that their mother tongue was Arabic, they did not mean it was their predominant language. Rather, they meant to stress its importance to their religion and their ethno-religious identity (Nuhman 2007).

Kandy Muslims may select Sinhala or Tamil mediums for varied reasons. Some Muslim students told me that they chose Sinhala to better their chance of obtaining a government job. Others mentioned that they would have less competition for admissions to public universities if they chose Tamil. In Kandy, the majority of Muslims study in Tamil in government schools and compete with Tamils for entrance to Tamil-medium streams at public universities and Tamil-medium government jobs.[6] Although Muslims are among Kandy's poor and uneducated populations, there is also a significant Kandy Muslim middle-class employed in business, government, and professions such as law and medicine. This population has also financially benefited from remittances from the Gulf States. Kandy Tamil educators often described Muslims as a politically well-connected and wealthy group that they fear will encroach upon their Tamil-medium state educational resources (Davis 2020a). Although this topic is outside the scope of this chapter, Muslims have faced severe challenges in the postwar period. They have been targeted by right-wing Sinhala Buddhist nationalists, resulting in mob attacks on Muslim businesses, vehicles, and mosques (see Aliff 2015). In addition, anti-Muslim sentiments increased following the April 2019 Easter bombings (see Amarasingam 2019).

I spoke with Tamil educators who had trouble reconciling Muslims' social detachment from Tamil with their educational achievement in the language. Dr. Srivasan, an Up-country Tamil Hindu lecturer at the University of Colombo argued that the Muslims' disavowal of Tamil as a mother tongue was misleading because it suggested that they were studying it as their second language. He added that his Muslim students actually write better Tamil than his Tamil students, and that the winners of the national Tamil literary awards are usually Muslims from the east, where Tamil is the main language. A Muslim Professor at the University of Peradeniya, Dr. Amen, also distinguished Muslims' ideological views about language from their sociolinguistic practices. He said that despite Muslims' conflicted

views on the matter, "I accept that our language is basically Tamil." In the following section, I investigate how Girls' College Tamil-medium Muslim teachers made sense of ideologies of linguistic, ethnic, and religious difference in practice. I focus on how they responded to Tamils' critiques of their speech by relating their sociolinguistic practices to their separate ethno-religious identities.

The Girls' College Tamil-medium stream

Sociolinguistic hierarchies

At Girls' College in 2008, there were 2,990 (67 per cent) students in the Sinhala-medium stream and 971 (33 per cent) students in the Tamil-medium stream. Though Tamils could study in the Sinhala medium at some of Kandy's private and semi-private schools, they were not permitted at Girls' College. Some Muslims were admitted into the Sinhala medium, though the majority studied in Tamil. Muslim parents told me that only families with wealth or political connections could get their children admitted to the Sinhala medium. The Sinhala-medium stream was about 90 per cent Sinhala and 10 per cent Muslim, and the Tamil-medium stream was about 50 per cent Tamil and 50 per cent Muslim. Sinhala- and Tamil-medium students could qualify to enter the English bilingual stream in grade 5.

At Girls' College, the Tamil-medium students were separated from the Sinhala-medium students in academic and extracurricular contexts. Most Tamil-medium classrooms were located in a separate building, which also housed the Tamil-medium staff room. The Tamil-medium teachers differed from one another in relation to ethnicity, religion, caste (for Hindus), class, region of origin, and level of English proficiency. Yet they frequently grouped themselves into the following categories: Jaffna Tamils (Tamils from the Jaffna peninsula); Batticaloa Tamils (Tamils from Sri Lanka's eastern coastal region) (McGilvray 2008); Up-country Tamils (Tamil descendants of plantation laborers) (Bass 2013); and Muslims who came from all over Sri Lanka.

Tamil (like Sinhala) has been widely described as a diglossic language because of the differences between literary and colloquial forms of the language (Schiffman 1999). Diglossia refers to opposed yet related varieties that may be ranked as high or low, formal or informal, or literary or vernacular (Ferguson 1991; Fishman 1965). However, as Woolard and Schieffelin (1994) observe, diglossia is not so much a description of sociolinguistic situations than an ideological rationalization of those situations. Girls' College Tamil-medium teachers often said that classroom interactions were supposed to be in literary Tamil; in practice teachers and students mixed both literary and colloquial varieties (see Davis 2012, 2020a). Teachers described literary Tamil as being fairly uniform, but they socially differentiated the spoken language into Jaffna Tamil, Batticaloa Tamil, Up-country Tamil, and

Muslim Tamil. These varieties differ from one another in terms of lexicon and grammar (Suseendirarajah 1999).

In the colonial period, Jaffna Tamils – and Batticaloa Tamils, to a lesser extent – had privileged access to English-medium missionary education. As they were rendered stateless following the 1948 Ceylon Citizenship Act, Up-country Tamils had little choice but to attend poor-quality plantation schools (Little 2003). Although there was a small urban-based Anglophone Muslim elite in the colonial period, Muslims were generally late to come to Western education because of the association of missionary schools with Christian proselytization (Nuhman 2007). While the majority of schoolteachers used to be Jaffna and Batticaloa Tamils, significant demographic and institutional shifts in education occurred after the outbreak of the civil war in 1983. Large numbers of Jaffna and Batticaloa Tamils fled Sri Lanka, seeking asylum abroad (Daniel 1996). During this period, Up-country Tamils and Muslims made significant strides in education. Up-country Tamils' educational progress was related to the nationalization of state schools, and the fact that most gained citizenship by 1988 (Bass 2013; Little 2003). Muslims first enrolled in free state schools in the 1940s and 1950s but made further progress in the 1970s and 1980s (Nuhman 2013; O'Sullivan 1999).

At Girls' College, there was an equal proportion of North and East Tamil, Up-country Tamil, and Muslim teachers. Though North and East Tamils frequently claimed that their Tamil was the "best," most teachers and students produced what I refer to as "normalized" Up-country Tamil. While it is influenced by Jaffna Tamil, it is closer to South India Tamil varieties (Davis 2020a). Inspired by my research project on Tamil language practices, teachers would highlight differences in the Tamil spoken in the Tamil-medium staff room. Once, for example, they named the words for beautiful in different varieties of spoken Tamil: *vaDivu* in Jaffna Tamil, *pasundu* in Muslim Tamil, and *azhahu* in "normalized" Up-country Tamil. While these encounters felt like a celebration of Tamil linguistic difference, non-Muslim teachers often described Muslim teachers' speech as peculiar. They singled out the speech of Muslim teachers who were from the lower income areas outside Kandy.

Rasha was a Muslim home science teacher in her 50s from Balangoda, an ethnically mixed city in the Sabaragamuwa Province, south of Kandy. She wore a sari with a hijab: a style of dress preferred by most Muslim teachers. The Up-country Tamil history and Tamil literature teacher, Geetha, would frequently point out Rasha's speech to me. In some regions, it is common for Muslims to pronounce ச ([s]) as [ʃ]. In one instance, Geetha, in the presence of Rasha, sung the lyrics from a Tamil film song, *chinna aasai* "little desire," pronouncing *aasai* "desire" as *aashai*. Geetha and other teachers cited Rasha's speech as an example of Muslim Tamil, but Rasha was quick to stress that it was not "Muslim" but "Balangoda" Tamil. That is, she

emphasized her speech as a regional variety (of Muslim Tamil) rather than a uniform ethno-religious variety.

When Muslim teachers were absent from the staff room, non-Muslim teachers sometimes severely criticized their Tamil. Once, I asked the female Jaffna Tamil music teacher, Jayanthi, and the male Batticaloa Tamil math teacher, Ravi, to fill out a survey written in Tamil that I was distributing to teachers. It was designed to elicit their language ideologies. Jayanthi read question 21 aloud in Tamil: "Do you think the Tamil language is important for Islam?" Ravi immediately replied "*eppaDidaan sonnaalum, avangaLukku teevayille tamizh teevayille*" (However you may say it, for them Tamil is no use, no use). He then used an offensive metaphor to characterize Muslims' Tamil speech:[7]

Ravi: anda paNDiya koNDuvandu viiTTila nippaaTTi, nallaa kulippaTTi, soop pooTTu, sunsilk pooTTu, kazhuvi tuDacci viiTTa suhaadaaramaa, nalla niiT aakki koNDu vandu vakkiRataam.	If you take that pig to your home, it seems, bathe it well, put soap on it, put Sunsilk (a shampoo brand) on it, wash and dry it hygienically, make it "neat."
avittu viTToom enna naDandadaam?	We untied it and what happened, it seems?
oree oTTamaa oDi anda uuttakkuLLa pooy kiDakkumaam.	It will run in the same dirt, it seems.
ada pooy saappiDumaam.	It will go and eat [the dirt], it seems.
aadavee niingaL evvaLudaa(n) solli kuDuttaalum, iikkidu enDudaan sollum.	Like that, no matter how much you teach [them], it seems, [they] will always say "*iikkidu*" (the verb "to be").

Likely intentionally trying to be shocking, Ravi likened Muslims to pigs, a reviled animal in Islam. He cited the shortening of the Tamil verb "to be" *irukkudu* to "*iikkidu*" – common in southern Muslim varieties – as an emblematic representation of Muslim Tamil speech. He argued that no matter how much you teach Muslims to speak "normalized" Tamil, they will immediately return to their own language, which he likened to the filth in which a pig rolls. Ravi thus treated Muslim Tamil as an inalienable part of the Muslim self.

Muslims' sociolinguistic orientations

Girls' College Muslim teachers responded to critiques of their speech by explaining how their sociolinguistic tendencies differed from that of Tamils. They sometimes invoked diglossic models to describe their speech. Nabiha was a Tamil-medium Muslim geography teacher who lived in Kandy and held a bachelor of arts degree from the University of Peradeniya. She had middle-class status as a result of her husband's job in Saudi Arabia. Her

signature look was to wear a sari with one of the Calvin Klein hijabs her husband had given her. One day I went to the school canteen with Nabiha, Geetha, and Ravi. When Ravi started making fun of a new Muslim teacher's speech, Nabiha and Geetha responded that not all Muslims speak like that. Later, Nabiha observed that Muslims use different language at home and at school. She then added:

Nabiha: uNmaiyaana tamizh kadachchaa engaDa aakkal sirippaanga.	If we speak real Tamil our people will laugh.
veDDing hovus-ukku ella(m) pooy appaDi peesunaa sirippaanga.	If [you] go to a wedding house (a place where a wedding is held) and all and speak like that they will laugh.
avanga ninaikkiRadu naanga veeNunu peesuRoonu(m)	They will think that we are speaking that way purposefully like that.

In essence, Nabiha diglossically argued that *uNmaiyaana* "real" Tamil is appropriate in school, while Muslim Tamil varieties are suitable only at home. Implicit in this is the observation that Muslims have the ability to code-switch. Nabiha's comments also spoke to the solidarity value of Muslim Tamil in the home, as a counter legitimate language (Woolard 1985). A few days later, Nabiha invited me to join her for tea at her younger sister's home, where her mother also lived. When I brought up the previous interaction (the other family members were in back), she used the concept of mother tongue to describe her speech. Her Tamil is "broken," she admitted in a mix of Tamil and English, but that did not matter much to her since Arabic is her mother tongue. She added that she tried to speak "real" Tamil at school so the students would not laugh at her. By using the term "broken," she was likely referring to the lexical and grammatical features characteristic of Muslim Tamil. While Nabiha had made it clear on many occasions that Tamil was her home language, in this interaction she emphasized Arabic as her mother tongue as a way to justify her use of a Tamil that is not deemed correct or appropriate in Tamil-medium educational settings (Davis 2012, 2020a).

Tamil-medium Muslim teachers at Girls' College described their sociolinguistic tendencies in different ways. In the late 1990s, the government started a new initiative that required all school students to study their "additional" official language in grade 6–10 (Tamil for Sinhala-medium students and Sinhala for Tamil-medium students). Throughout the south, it was common for Muslims to teach Tamil-as-a-second language (TSL) classes to Sinhala-medium students in government schools because they were widely identified as bilingual in Sinhala. Many Kandy Tamils also spoke Sinhala, but some Girls' College Tamil teachers noted that Muslims often spoke Sinhala more fluently than Tamils. Fatima, a recent hire, was a young and enthusiastic

woman from a Muslim-majority town outside Kandy. Though she had studied in the Tamil medium, some non-Muslim teachers questioned her ability to teach TSL. I accompanied Fatima to her grade 8 TSL class. She went over Tamil words for flora and fauna from the government TSL textbook. I spoke to her for a few minutes while the students completed an assignment. Seemingly referring to non-Muslim teachers' critiques of her speech, she explained that she actually did not know some of the *sutta* "pure" Tamil words for flora and fauna in the textbook. She explained that she spoke Tamil at home, but used Sinhala words for foods and spices, and Arabic words for prayer times. Her emphasis on sociolinguistic heterogeneity, especially her mixing of Sinhala and Perso-Arabic words, sharply contrasted with Tamils' claims of speaking a pure language (Davis 2020a).

Nabiha and Fatima responded to negative evaluations of Muslims' Tamil speech by pointing to the diversity and heterogeneity of their sociolinguistic practices. In addition to addressing critique of their speech, these teachers' defense of their spoken language also underscored their separate ethno-religious identity. While the presence of Muslims at Girls' College interrupted the ideological conflation of language (mother tongue), medium, and ethnicity, Muslim teachers used their sociolinguistic proclivities to distinguish themselves from Tamils.

Though there was some divisiveness between the Tamils and Muslims, Tamil-medium teachers also spoke of themselves as a unified group, particularly when comparing their students' academic performances to those in the Sinhala-medium stream, or when discussing the lack of resources for Tamil-medium education in Kandy. Teachers' relative class status, level of education, and proficiencies in Sinhala and English also inflected social relations. For example, though the teachers mainly spoke to one another in Tamil, they demonstrated an acute awareness of their relative skills in Sinhala and English. In the following section, I discuss how the introduction of the bilingual stream complicated Muslims' narratives of their sociolinguistic proclivities in relation to their ethno-religious identities. While I do not attempt to fully represent Sri Lankans' complex views toward English, I highlight the role of English in the negotiation of postcolonial identities in relation to local and global reference points.

The English bilingual stream

Studying in the English bilingual stream

In 2018, 7.3 per cent of government schools – most of them in urban areas – provided English bilingual programs (Department of Census and Statistics 2018). As a result of the dearth of qualified teachers (a consequence of the *swabasha* language policies), these programs only offered selected subjects in English. Bilingual programs are also available at many private and

semi-private schools.[8] By contrast, students with significant financial means can obtain a full English-medium education at a special category of private school called international schools. Originally started in 1977 to educate the children of expatriates, these schools, which have grown in popularity since the 1990s, prepare students for international exams that are equivalent to the UK General Certificate of Secondary Education (de Silva 1999). The best of these offer a higher standard of English education than is available elsewhere (Gunesekera 2005).

In 2008, the Girl's College English bilingual stream (grades 6–11) offered math, science, and English literature in English (most A Level subjects were available in English). Students were admitted to the bilingual program on the basis of their results on the English portion of the national grade 5 scholarship exam, their identified home language(s), and other factors. Girls who came to the program from the Sinhala-medium stream (Sinhalas and Muslims) studied in separate bilingual classrooms where they took their English- and Sinhala-medium subjects. Students who transferred from the Tamil-medium stream (Tamils and Muslims) came to the bilingual classrooms for their English-medium subjects but returned to their Tamil-medium home classrooms for their Tamil-medium subjects and for English-as-a-subject.

At Girls' College, there was a noticeably higher number of Muslim students than Tamils in the bilingual program.[9] In the grade 10 bilingual program, for example, there were eight Muslims and only one Tamil. Enrollment statistics are not available in bilingual programs with regard to ethnicity. But during my initial survey of Kandy and Colombo schools, I noticed a high proportion of Muslims in bilingual programs at government, private, and semi-private schools. International schools are also popular among Muslims; they have been mushrooming in areas with large Muslim populations (Nuhman 2013). I asked a grade 10 Up-country Tamil Hindu girl who was very strong in spoken English why she had decided not to enter the bilingual stream. Echoing a statement made by both Tamil-medium Tamil and Muslim girls, she said the bilingual program was not very reliable because it was new. She also noted that her mother, who had studied in Tamil medium, would not be able to help her with her English-medium subjects. Some students who had entered the bilingual program from the Tamil-medium stream told me that they found their English subjects difficult. As I directly observed, some of the Sinhala teachers who taught in the English medium used Sinhala in their lessons to provide additional explanations. Though most Tamil-medium girls could speak Sinhala, they were unfamiliar with the Sinhala academic register.

The Girls' College English-as-a-subject head, Mrs. Deen, explained why more Muslims join the bilingual program than Tamils. A Muslim woman of Malay heritage in her 50s, Mrs. Deen was one of the most senior teachers at the school. She stood out from other teachers because she studied in the English medium at a Kandy Catholic missionary school. She spoke Tamil

at home with her mother and was highly fluent in English and Sinhala. She wore an Indian-style sari without a hijab; a style of dress that she noted made her ethnic and religious identity ambiguous. However, she often referred to a callus on her forehead, the result of praying, as her Islamic bindi (a mark worn on the center of the forehead by Hindu and some Catholic women) (Davis 2020a). Mrs. Deen said that Tamils were skeptical about the bilingual stream because of their strong attachment to the Tamil language. In another conversation, she discussed the linguistic flexibility of Sri Lankan Muslims. She stated that "our mother tongue is Arabic, but when we are in areas with a lot of Tamil people we speak Tamil, and areas with a lot of Sinhala people we speak Sinhala, so our language is very mixed." Mrs. Deen implied that Muslims' lack of attachment to Tamil and Sinhala makes them open to studying in English. Her characterization of Arabic as the mother tongue of Muslims sociolinguistically distances them from both Tamils and Sinhalas. Thus, like Nabiha, Fatima, and other Girls' College Muslim teachers, Mrs. Deen used language to assert Muslims' separate ethno-religious identity.

It is logical that postcolonial groups that do not ground their identities in national languages would embrace English given its association with upward mobility. Nuhman (2013) gives different reasons as for why Muslims pursue English-medium education. Citing the particularly high number of Muslims enrolling in international schools, he argues that Muslim parents' have a strong desire for their children to speak English, because they equate the language with "knowledge, prestige, and pride" (2013, 10). He further posits that the neglect of Muslims by the state education system in the south (on the part of the state and Muslims themselves) may lead parents to favor international schools (2013).

In our frequent conversations, Mrs. Deen advocated that all Sri Lankans learn English because it is an international language. She did not discuss English-medium education in relation to class inequalities. In Sri Lanka, there are clear socioeconomic disparities between families that send their children to the leading private and international schools and those that must settle for government schools (de Silva 1999). Though at Girls' College the division between Sinhala-, Tamil-, and English-medium education did not neatly map onto socioeconomic level, many of the students in the bilingual program were characterized by their teachers and classmates as wealthy. In the following section, I discuss Sinhala, Tamil, and Muslim students' complex orientations to English-medium education.

Orientations to English

Most of the girls in my grades 8 and 9 English classes (comprised of Sinhalas and Muslims) spoke English at home in addition to Sinhala and/or Tamil. While the Tamil-medium students went to Internet cafes, many of

the girls in my English class had home computers that they used to search Google or browse Facebook. Some of the Muslim girls referred to an English Islam program that they watched through satellite television. Though all students had to wear the government uniform, some of the Tamil-medium teachers said that you could tell the wealth of the girls in the bilingual program from their accessories, such as pink sapphire earrings or fancy pencil boxes. An Up-country Tamil student in the Tamil-medium stream noted that she had Sinhala-medium friends but found girls in the bilingual program too "posh," a characterization that crosscut ethnic and religious divisions.

I had a chance to elicit some students' views on medium when a group of Sinhala girls in my grade 8 class did a debate on the merits of English- vs. Sinhala-medium education. Those arguing for English commented that it was far less complex than Sinhala and therefore easier to learn. One girl said that a knowledge of it was necessary in order to communicate with the world. Those arguing for the Sinhala side stated that it was their mother tongue, which they treated as a true or authentic language. They mentioned that Sinhala was important to the preservation of Sinhala culture. They also associated Sinhala with purity. This debate emphasized the contrast between English's global utility, and the ostensible moral worth of Sinhala. While the Tamil-medium students also discussed the value of their mother tongue, they tended to underscore the more practical benefits of studying in the Tamil medium. In the following, I discuss the students' motivations for studying in the bilingual stream by briefly discussing my interactions with three Tamil-medium girls (a Tamil and two Muslims) who had joined the bilingual stream.

Maalini was an Up-country Tamil Hindu girl in grade 7. Unlike most Tamil-medium students, who spoke to me in a mix of Tamil and English, she only spoke to me in English. While many of her classmates exhibited Tamil or Sinhala phonological influence, her pronunciation was similar to elite varieties of English spoken in Sri Lanka. She chose to wear her hair short rather than in long braids in a style that her classmates referred to as modern. I visited Maalini's modest but well-kept home in a middle-class neighborhood southwest of Girls' College in 2008. Her father was involved in business and her mother stayed at home. Given Maalini's impressive spoken English skills, I was surprised to discover that Maalini and her family mainly spoke Tamil at home. During my visits, she spoke to her mother, father, and grandmother in Tamil mixed with English words and phrases, and to her older sister and me in English. Her sister told me that they had entered the United States Green Card lottery several times, but if they went abroad for higher education, it would likely just be to India because of financial constraints.[10] When I asked Maalini's English teacher why her English was so strong, she said that she had shown a keen interest in speaking English from a very early age.

Shameera was a grade 6 Muslim girl. She also only spoke to me in English. She lived in a large multi-generational family home southwest of Girls' College, which happened to be right next to the annex where I stayed. I would often chat with her through the chain link fence that divided the two properties. I sometimes heard Tamil spoken by adults sitting outside Shameera's house, but when I tried to address her in Tamil she always responded in English. I initially assumed she refused to speak Tamil with me because she considered it a Muslim in-group language. However, her classmate told me that she did not speak to me in Tamil because her parents would scold her if she did. I asked one of Shameera's teachers if this was true. She said that some middle-class Muslims do not allow their children to speak Tamil at home because they want English to become their primary language.

Unlike Maalini and Shameera, many students struggled with the bilingual program. Muna was one such Muslim student in grade 7. She was from a lower-middle-class background; her father was a driver and her mother did tailoring at home. They lived in a small rented apartment on a bustling commercial street not far from Shameera and me. Her parents were Tamil and Sinhala bilinguals with limited English. Her mother invited me home daily for tea. She encouraged me to speak in English, but Muna was much more comfortable speaking in a mix of Tamil and English. A Tamil-medium teacher said that she had repeatedly encouraged Muna to return to the Tamil-medium stream because she was failing her English-medium classes. But Muna had adamantly refused. I felt that Muna's decision was likely shaped by the pressure her parents felt to fit in with middle-class Muslims at Girl's College and in their neighborhood.

There were ethnic, religious, class, and sociolinguistic differences between Maalini, Shameera, and Muna. But they were all determined to learn English out of a desire – either their parents' or their own – for upward social mobility. Though there is widespread interest in English-medium education, many Sinhalas and Tamils viewed English as being in conflict with their mother tongues because of the importance of these languages to their cultural and ethnic identities. The fact that large numbers of Muslims are choosing to study in the English medium is consistent with the narrative that their religion-based ethnic identity affords them flexibility with regard to language. However, drawing on LaDousa (2014), I suggest that while this discourse serves to differentiate Muslims from other Sri Lankan ethnic groups, it does not adequately account for Muslims' complex relationships with the English language, particularly in relation to class inequalities and global networks.

Though English-as-a-subject classes have long been offered at Girls' College, the new bilingual program further emphasizes class inequalities that traverse ethnic and religious divisions. Maalini, Shameera, and Muna had different levels of access to English at home, as well as differing financial support for their English study. Maalini and Shameera's parents could

afford to send them to after-school English tutoring classes; Muna's parents could not. Given that she has little exposure to English at home, it is likely that she will complete her secondary education without full competency in spoken and written English, which could limit her employment potential. Likewise, although Maalini and Shameera were strong in English, they will have to compete for access to higher education and jobs with students who attended top private and international schools. As we have seen, southern Muslims emphasized their sociolinguistic diversity/heterogeneity to distinguish themselves from Tamils. However, in the global world Muslims' status as English-, Sinhala-, or Tamil-medium students is relevant beyond local ethnopolitics.

At Girls' College, students differentiated one another in relation to their relative English proficiency. All of the Girls' College students strived to improve their English skills, but girls like Maalini who excelled in English were considered to be "posh." In fact, is it common throughout South Asia for youth who speak English "too well" to be considered snobbish or arrogant (Nakassis 2016). Some girls will go abroad for education or jobs, but most will stay in Sri Lanka. In 2016, I learned that Maalini had completed her A Levels at Girls' College and was preparing to go to India for her higher education, just as her sister had predicted. I was unable to reach Shameera, but I had a chance to see Muna when I returned to Kandy in 2011. I also chatted with her on Facebook Messenger in 2016. While completing her A Levels at Girls' College she started an English-medium degree-equivalent IT course through a UK-based institute. She hopes to get an IT-related job in Kandy after graduation. I did not chat with her long enough to fully evaluate her language skills, but it was clear that her English had significantly improved. During a brief visit to Girls' College in 2011, I noticed progress in the spoken English abilities of many Girls' College students despite the fact that no additional English-medium subjects had been introduced. This preliminary finding speaks to the high motivation to study English among Kandy youth.

Conclusion

In the postcolonial period Sri Lankan Muslims have carved out their identities in a manner that distinguishes them from other ethnic groups (McGilvray and Raheem 2007; Thiranagama 2011). Muslims do not define their ethnic identities on the basis of language. Yet, they are part of a national education system that conflates language (mother tongue), medium, and ethnicity. In practice, Girls' College Tamil-medium Muslim teachers asserted their sociolinguistic proclivities to substantiate their separate ethno-religious identity. Muslim students' lack of fit with the ethnolinguistic models presupposed by the school and its medium choices allowed them to be open to English-medium education.

Sri Lankan Muslims' varying access to English as related to social class does not necessarily contradict their attempts to ground their ethno-religious identities in their sociolinguistic proclivities. Rather, it reveals that the relationships between language and social life are more intricate than can be encompassed by available narratives. Today, Sri Lankan Muslims increasingly situate themselves in relation to the pan-Islamic world (McGilvray and Raheem 2007; Nuhman 2007), as well as elite and professional networks where English proficiency is paramount. While English has long been offered as a subject, the recent introduction of English bilingual streams underscores how the English language continues to be an important mode of social distinction for Muslims as well as for all Sri Lankans. Arabic, like English, is also locally and globally relevant for the Girls' College Muslim youth, but the students did not differentiate themselves in relation to their relative knowledge of liturgical Arabic.

In postcolonial nation-states, English holds power in part because of its role as an international language. However, as Higgins (2009) also observes in reference to East Africa, in Sri Lanka it would be inaccurate to conceive of Sinhala and Tamil as local and English as global. Though some Girls' College students' English proficiencies are rooted in their access to global networks (e.g., for Muslim girls whose fathers are international gem traders), their English skills were locally highly relevant in their association with middle-class status and prestige.

Unless there is a radical change in the structure of the national education system, the majority of Sri Lankan students will continue to study in Sinhala or Tamil mediums as was prescribed in the mid-twentieth century. However, with the spread of globalization, relative English proficiencies are quickly becoming more crucial to the way individuals differentiate themselves in local and global spheres of practice. As more government schools offer bilingual streams and international schools increase in number, teachers and students will develop new and innovative ways to define themselves in relation to Sinhala, Tamil, and English. Relative English proficiency will continue to be an important aspect of social distinction both within and between ethnic groups. The case of Sri Lankan Muslims demonstrates the extreme complexity of carving out postcolonial identities in relation to multiple languages when the global is embedded in and informs the local.

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Notes

1 The term “Moor” was used by the Portuguese to describe Muslims throughout their colonial territories in Africa and Asia. Currently, Muslim and Moor are both used to describe Sri Lankan Sunni Muslims of the Shafiʿi legal school (McGilvray and Raheem 2007).

2 There are Tamil (*taay mozhi*) and Sinhala (*mawu bhashawa*) correlates for the English term “mother tongue.”

3 It is very rare for Sinhalas to study in the Tamil medium. However, Tamils may study in the Sinhala medium if they speak Sinhala at home or if there are no Tamil schools where they live.

4 National schools contrast with smaller provincial schools, which are managed by the provincial councils.

5 Northern and eastern Muslims have suffered greatly in the Sri Lankan civil war. Eastern Muslims have been victims of brutal violence on the part of the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government. In 1990, the LTTE, desiring a racially pure Tamil state (Eelam), expelled tens of thousands of Muslims from Jaffna (see McGilvray and Raheem 2007; Thiranagama 2011).

6 District statistics from 2006 show that only 15 per cent of Kandy Muslims studied in the Sinhala medium (Nuhman 2007).

7 The Madras University Tamil Lexicon has been widely used for representing literary Tamil in Roman script. Influenced by Annamalai (1980), I use a modified version of this lexicon. Retroflex consonants are represented with capital letters, and ழ் ([ɻ]) as *zh*.

8 Semi-private or government-assisted schools are free. They receive some government funding and follow the national curriculum (de Silva 1999).

9 The proportion of Muslims in relation to Sinhalas in the bilingual program was comparable.

10 The Diversity Visa Lottery, commonly known as the Green Card Lottery, provides an opportunity for individuals from certain countries to get a United States green card.

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