Sri Lankan Englishes

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Introduction

English in Sri Lanka dates back to British colonization at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In 1802, Sri Lanka, then known as Ceylon, was declared a Crown Colony with English as its official language. Although Sri Lanka gained independence from the British in 1948, English continued to function as the country’s de facto official language until 1956, when Sinhala became the sole official language under the terms of the Official Language Act No. 33. Official recognition was not accorded to English again until 1987, when it was included in the chapter on language in the Constitution of Sri Lanka.

Attempting a description of English as it is used and spoken in Sri Lanka today is challenging because of the many complexities involved in terms of speakers, status and functions, dialectal variation and recognition and acceptance. As observed by Meyler (2007: x–xi):

Even within a small country like Sri Lanka, and even within the relatively tiny English-speaking community, there are several sub-varieties of Sri Lankan English. Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims and Burghers speak different varieties; Christians, Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims have their own vocabularies; the older generation speak a different language from the younger generation; and the wealthy Colombo elite (who tend to speak English as their first language) speak a different variety from the wider community (who are more likely to learn it as a second language).

In terms of speakers/users, Meyler makes an important observation here which has been consistently emphasized in the literature on Sri Lankan English (SLE) by reputed Sri Lankan scholars and academics, but which is often ignored or not clearly understood in descriptions that label SLE as a second-language variety – i.e. that English is used and spoken both as a first language and as a second/third language in Sri Lanka. In order to be both accurate and valid, any description of SLE as a regional variety must acknowledge and address the complexities arising from this contextual situation.
Second, there appears to be considerable confusion about the position of the English language in Sri Lanka in terms of status and policy. Several recent publications have reported that English is an official language in Sri Lanka, perhaps because of its strong presence, particularly in the nation’s capital, in matters of official and state administration, in education and in the media. However, English is not an official language in Sri Lanka. The country’s Constitution accords that status to only Sinhala and Tamil. Article 18 (3) in Chapter IV of the Constitution states that ‘English shall be the link language’. While no elaboration follows as to what English is supposed to link, one can assume that, given the history of a 30-year conflict between the predominantly Sinhala-speaking majority and sections of the Tamil-speaking minority, English was chosen as a neutral medium of communication between the two communities.

In terms of use and functions, however, English in Sri Lanka is far more than a mere ‘link’. It is still pervasive in many areas of officialdom, it is the language used in Sri Lanka’s Supreme Court, it has a strong presence in the media and in advertising, it is making a comeback in the country’s education system, and it is the undisputed language of choice in the private business and commercial sectors. In other words, its hegemonic grip on the country is still very evident.

Given the often contradictory tensions between description and use, and status and function, it is not surprising that definitions of SLE and its speakers have tended to be vague or simplistic, and often skirt a discussion of the complexities that have influenced and shaped the language into what it is today. Adding to the difficulties encountered in attempting a linguistic and functional description are the widely disparate attitudes prevalent about and towards SLE, ranging from outright rejection of its existence, through ambivalence, to the active encouragement of its use and institutionalization in education.

As in many other postcolonial nations, Sri Lanka too has a well-developed literary tradition in English. Tracing the trajectory of its development from the early twentieth century to the present reveals some of the attitudes of rejection, ambivalence and acceptance mentioned above expressed through choices of language, context and character. This demonstrates that to many of its speakers/users, SLE is not by any means a neutral code, but one that is vested with a meaning and symbolism that operates at many different conscious and subconscious levels.

In this chapter, we will attempt to deal with each of these complexities as comprehensively as possible. We will problematize hitherto unchallenged assumptions about SLE, discuss the findings and implications of recent empirical linguistic studies, and point to the difficulty of pigeon-holing an emergent and still-evolving code in order to make it fit into externally imposed models or typologies. Most multilingual South Asian societies were linguistically diverse and complex entities before the introduction of English and its imposition as the language of power and governance; today, in each of these entities, unique ethnic and cultural factors, both in conjunction and in opposition, have contributed to postcolonial frameworks that may have several commonalities but are also sufficiently diverse to resist easy categorization.

**Speakers of Sri Lankan English**

By 1940, as noted by C. Fernando (1996), English-speaking Sri Lankans, many of whom had completed their tertiary education in England, occupied leading positions in the government, in education and in the judiciary. In one of the earliest discussions on the
English language in Sri Lanka (1943), Passé observes, ‘The small percentage of educated Ceylonese are “English educated”; they know English and for the most part they know it well’ (Passé 1979: 16). By the middle of the twentieth century, therefore, a small but nevertheless significant minority of Sri Lankans for whom English was the first or at least the more dominant language was established in Sri Lanka.

The argument that English is still spoken as a first language in Sri Lanka today is based on several factors – method of acquisition, environment of acquisition and domains of use (most importantly, the home), level of proficiency, and the primary language of choice in interpersonal communication. Kandiah (1979: 86–7), referring to speakers of English who use it on a daily basis, notes that:

The English that these habitual users of Lankan English ‘pick up’ in this very natural way as the first language of their thought, action and experience in these spheres would, in its spoken form be Lankan, not ‘Standard English’.

Perhaps the most compelling argument for the existence of English as a first language in Sri Lanka comes from the country’s Burgher community. The Burghers, who are of Eurasian descent, represent about 0.2 per cent of Sri Lanka’s population. According to Roberts et al. (1989), English had become the mother tongue of many Burgher families as early as in the 1840s. C. Fernando (1996) reports that in the 1940s and 1950s the Burghers still regarded English as their mother tongue. More recently, Rajapakse (2008) cites interview data in which each of her Burgher informants (of three different age groups, representing three generations) unequivocally identified English as their mother tongue.

For a majority of speakers in Sri Lanka, however, English is a second or third language, used primarily for functional purposes. Also, all speakers of SLE today are bilingual, and some are trilingual (Kandiah 1981a; Gunasekera 2005; Meyler 2007). This widespread multilingualism should be placed in context beside the fact that, in Sri Lanka, the English language has been in close contact with Sinhala and Tamil for over two hundred years. This in turn has resulted in the evolution of linguistic features that make SLE distinct from its original input variety – i.e. British English – and continues to exert an influence in areas such as phonology, syntax, grammar and the lexicon.

The status and functions of English in Sri Lanka

Administration

The confusion that exists in relation to the constitutional status of English in Sri Lanka warrants some discussion. Article 22 of the Constitution, titled ‘Languages of Administration’ states:

(2) In any area where Sinhala is used as the language of administration, a person other than an official acting in his official capacity shall be entitled:

a. to receive communications from, and to communicate and transact business with, any official in his official capacity, in either Tamil or English;

b. if the law recognizes his right to inspect or to obtain copies of or extracts from any official register, record, publication or other document, to obtain a
copy of, or an extract from such register, record, publication or other document, or a translation thereof, as the case may be, in either Tamil or English;
c where a document is executed by any official for the purpose of being issued to him, to obtain such document or a translation thereof, in either Tamil or English;

(3) In any area where Tamil is used as the language of administration, a person other than an official acting in his official capacity shall be entitled to exercise the rights, and to obtain the services, referred to in sub paragraphs (a), (b) and (c) of paragraph (2) of this Article, in Sinhala or English.

In many respects, Article 22 stands in contrast to Article 18, which merely states that Sinhala and Tamil are the official languages and that English is the link language in Sri Lanka. First, Article 22 elaborates and spells out the functions of English as Article 18 (3) does not. Second, and perhaps more importantly, Article 22 accords English parity of status with Tamil and Sinhala as a language of administration under certain circumstances. It allows for the right of official communication and the obtaining of official documents in English in an area of the country where a language other than a speaker’s mother tongue is the language of administration. Whether this actually happens in practice or not, it can certainly be read as the granting of some degree of official status or recognition to English.

The judiciary

A similar situation is found in Article 23 which specifies the languages of legislation in Sri Lanka: ‘All laws and subordinate legislation shall be enacted or made and published in Sinhala and Tamil, together with a translation thereof in English.’ Arguably, this may not accord parity of status to English with Sinhala and Tamil, but it does make an English translation a requirement. Sri Lanka’s Constitution also spells out the languages that may be used in the country’s courts in Article 24, and this is where the most obvious disparity can be seen between status and function. Article 24 (1) states,

Sinhala and Tamil shall be the languages of the Courts throughout Sri Lanka and Sinhala shall be used as the language of the courts situated in all areas of Sri Lanka except those in any area where Tamil is the language of administration.

However, the language used in Sri Lanka’s highest court – i.e. the Supreme Court – as well as quite frequently in the Court of Appeals, is English.

What these examples of the de facto status of English in administration and the judiciary clearly demonstrate is the strong presence the language has in important areas of governance in Sri Lanka, more than sixty years after independence from the British. This probably explains the fairly common perception that English is an official language in Sri Lanka, in spite of what the Constitution states in Article 18 (3). In a study conducted among 63 university students in Colombo, 9.3 per cent of the Sinhala students and 35.5 per cent of the Tamil students surveyed believed that English, along with Sinhala and Tamil, is an official language in Sri Lanka (Mendis 2002). A study by Raheem (2006), who surveyed a group of 20 academics who occupied decision-making positions in Sri Lanka’s Open University, produced similar findings: 53 per cent of the Sinhala speakers and 40 per cent of the Tamil speakers believe that Sinhala, Tamil and English are all official languages in Sri Lanka. It remains to be seen if larger surveys and surveys of populations in sectors other than education will corroborate these results.


Education

The curriculum pertaining to the teaching of English in Sri Lanka’s schools and several language policy decisions taken by universities in the country reveal a reintroduction of the language as a medium of instruction after about forty years of mother tongue education resulting from the Official Language Act No. 33 of 1956. Raheem and Devendra (2007) report that, by the early 1960s, the only university in the country at that time, the University of Ceylon, had begun changing the medium of instruction in its Faculty of Arts from English to Sinhala; C. Fernando (1996) states that by the end of the decade, English had been phased out of Sri Lanka’s education system. However, the 1980s saw a new phenomenon – the appearance of privately managed ‘International Schools’ which were established as business enterprises, and which therefore did not come under the purview and dictates of the Ministry of Education, which would have meant adhering to the stipulation of mother tongue education as specified in the country’s Constitution. The medium of instruction in these ‘International Schools’ is English, and this option has proved to be so popular that there are now English-medium pre-schools for children as young as three years.

The 1990s saw the introduction of government-sponsored interventions designed to strengthen the teaching of English in all state and private schools in which the medium of instruction was either Sinhala or Tamil. These interventions applied at all levels of the curriculum, from Grade 1 to Grade 13. Children were thus supposed to be exposed to English at a very early age. A policy of bilingual education came into practice in 2000, when English-medium instruction in science and mathematics subjects was introduced to selected schools at the secondary level (Grades 11 and 12). Around the same time, several of the faculties of arts and humanities in Sri Lanka’s universities which had either Sinhala or Tamil as a medium of instruction started considering the possibility of moving towards English-medium instruction.

How successful the attempt at reintroducing English as a medium of instruction into the school system will be, and what effect it will have on the use and spread of English in Sri Lanka, is yet to be seen. Raheem and Devendra (2007) report on an initial dearth of teachers competent to teach in English, a lack of training provided for the new ESL initiatives introduced at the primary level in schools, and urban–rural disparities in terms of facilities and support for the new English language programmes. However, there does appear to be an increase in the use of English in interpersonal communication and in the domain of the home among young people in Sri Lanka, and this could very well be the result of a revitalization of English teaching in schools.

Interpersonal communication

Raheem’s (2006) study of a group of university academics indicates an increase in the use of English among the informants’ peers and children. More than half the group also reported that their language of choice would be English when talking to a superior. Although the study does not explain reasons for these choices, it is possible that an instrumental motivation underlies the use of English with children, while the use of English with a superior could be an acknowledgement of the prestige associated with knowing and using English in Sri Lanka. A more recent study by Künstler et al. (2009) of 122 participants also drawn mostly from Sri Lanka’s education sectors reveals a correlation between age and the use of English in interpersonal communication. The
younger the respondents, the more likely they were to use English in general topics with friends. A possible reason for this is the use of English in email and text messaging, the latter having become an extremely popular and widespread method of communication in Sri Lanka. In fact, text messaging appears to have created a linguistic space in which even those who are not very proficient in English are not afraid to communicate, as the usual prescriptive rules pertaining to correctness of spelling and grammar rarely apply to this type of discourse (Mendis 2006).

Sri Lankan English (SLE): stability and evolution

SLE has been referred to as a language (Gunesekera 2005; Meyler 2007), a dialect (Parakrama 1995; Gunesekera 2005; D. Fernando 2007), both a language and a dialect (S. Fernando 1985: 2008) and ‘an independent, distinctive and fully formulated linguistic organism’ (Kandiah 1981a: 102). From a sociolinguistic point of view, SLE is all of these. It is a language in the sense of a superordinate term that can be used without reference to a dialect, whereas the term ‘dialect’ is meaningless unless it is implied that there is more than one dialect, or a language to which a dialect can be said to ‘belong’, as explained by Haugen (1966); however, as Haugen himself points out, in reality languages and dialects represent a dichotomy in a situation that is infinitely complex, and are thus best represented as a continuum rather than in contrast with or in opposition to each other. This is certainly the case with SLE, which is by no means a ‘fixed’ or static code with no dialectal variation. The term ‘variety’ is also applied to SLE, as is to be expected, from a New Englishes, World Englishes or Postcolonial Englishes perspective. This multiplicity of terminology, while sometimes confusing, is often necessary to convey all the connotations of a code that displays simultaneously the features of the input variety from which it derives its name as well as features which place it very firmly and without doubt in the sociolinguistic contexts from which it draws its current sustenance, and on which it depends for survival.

Much of the literature available up to now on the features of SLE has been largely impressionistic accounts not supported by representative samples of speakers or (in the case of phonology) instrumental acoustic analyses, or by corpus data that reflect syntactic and grammatical language in use across a range of genres. As Parakrama (1995: 34) observes:

all the writing to date has been based on random examples and personal experience. Nothing like a large-scale sociolinguistic survey or a systematic study has been undertaken. As a result, the findings of linguists remain more impressionistic than necessary, and even the acceptability of the few cited examples are contested.

In 2007, however, a dictionary of Sri Lankan English was published, the compilation of which shows an attempt at using a corpus-based approach. Second, a corpus of Sri Lankan English (ICE-SL) is currently being compiled, as part of the larger International Corpus of English (ICE) project; about two-thirds of the written component of ICE-SL (130 text files) is now complete, and these data are beginning to provide insights into features of SLE in a number of written genres. The discussion that follows on the syntax, grammar and morphology of SLE will draw on these two databases.
Phonology

The phonology of SLE is an area in which a fair amount of work has been published, and there appears to be broad agreement on phonological features that mark SLE (Parakrama 1995; D. Fernando 2007). However, most of these studies have focused on features of a high prestige variety of SLE – i.e. the dialect used by speakers for whom SLE is the first language. S. Fernando (2008), whose recent study suggests that at least four different dialects of SLE can be distinguished on the basis of fairly systematic features of pronunciation, is a notable exception. However, empirical evidence is needed from speakers before these conclusions can be accepted.

The following list of phonological features is drawn from the early work of S. Fernando (1985) and the more recent observations of Meyler (2007), on the basis that the same or similar features being attested to after twenty years is a reasonable argument for relative stability. Before proceeding, however, a few points must be made. Fernando’s 1985 list is much more comprehensive than Meyler’s, and includes features that Fernando herself refers to as ‘learner interlanguages’ (1985: 53). Her differentiation between such features and those of a more ‘standard’ dialect of SLE is further support for the argument that SLE has more than one dialect. All of Meyler’s observations, however, pertain to the high prestige variety of SLE, which he refers to as ‘standard SLE’. The list that follows, therefore, is representative of features discernible in the high prestige variety of SLE.

1. Replacing of [ɛɪ] and [əu] in British English with the long vowels [eː] and [oː].
2. Replacing the voiced fricative [ð] with a voiced dental plosive [d̪] and the voiceless fricative [θ] with a voiceless dental plosive [t̪]. Fernando (1985) adds that alveolar plosives in British English take on a slightly retroflex articulation in SLE.
3. The use of a labiodental frictionless continuant [ʋ] for both [v] and [w] in word-initial position.
4. Devoicing of [z] in word initial, word final and intervocalic positions.
5. In the case of the inflectional suffix -ed, SLE uses [əd] instead of the British English [ɪd]. Fernando (1985) describes this as the feature of placing a neutral vowel [ə] in all unstressed vowels in final syllables of words.
6. Primary stress tends to be placed on the first syllable of a word, which Meyler (2007) contrasts with British English, in which he says the stress would typically be placed on the second syllable.

In addition to these features, Meyler (2007) lists many examples of variable (i.e. not systematic) pronunciation, pointing to the unstable nature of SLE phonology. One such example cited is the pronunciation of the syllable containing the letter ‘i’ in the words ‘granite’, ‘marine’ and ‘binoculars’. Meyler reports the use of a diphthong [ai] in SLE in contrast to [i] or [ɪ] in British English; however, some speakers of SLE use the high front vowel [i] in marine. Similar variation is also found in the pronunciation of words such as ‘direct’ and ‘finance’.

Syntax

A feature of SLE which it possibly shares with other South Asian varieties, but, according to Meyler (2007), not with British English, is a marked difference between speech and
writing. Several reasons can be posited for this, including an adherence to archaic written norms even to the extent of seeming ‘dated and overly formal’ (Meyler 2007: xiv) or a natural tendency on the part of speakers to maintain a distance between spoken and written codes as in the case of Sinhala and Tamil, both of which are languages with diglossic features. Unfortunately, this is another characteristic of SLE that has to remain unsubstantiated by data at present because of the lack of representative corpora for the purpose of comparison. However, some preliminary findings on syntactic patterns in speech have begun to appear. For instance, Rajapakse (2008), using a small corpus of speech data recorded in the homes of informants from Sri Lanka’s Burgher community has been able to provide support for Kandiah’s (1981b) observations of three syntactic structures he claims are characteristic of Sri Lankan English – ellipsis, focalization and topicalization. Rajapakse (2008: 52) cites the following examples of ellipsis from the speech of her informants. The words omitted are given in brackets.

1 They hardly know that there’s a community called Eurasians. Most of them have migrated. [There is] Just a handful here. (Male speaker, aged 65–90)
2 Where dressing is concerned also [there is] no place at all now. (Female speaker, aged 40–60)

Kandiah (1981b: 64) gives the following sentence as an example of what he means by focalization:

3 Before five o’clock, Nimal woke up.

Rajapakse’s (2008: 53) speech data yields the following:

4 Now a Burgher is not heard of. (Female speaker, 65–90)
5 Today you can’t say no who’s a burgher and who’s a Sinhalese. (Male speaker, 65–90)

Topicalization, interpreted by Rajapakse as the fronting of the topic of an utterance from Kandiah’s sentence ‘Kasy, I expect him to make an exciting contribution to Tamil studies’ (1981b: 64) is evident in the following speech excerpts:

6 Today’s Burghers I don’t think that fun loving. (Female speaker, 18–35)
7 The British they treat us very shabbily. (Male speaker, 18–35)

(Rajapakse 2008: 53)

Since Rajapakse’s data is admittedly limited in terms of a relatively small number of speakers from a single Sri Lankan speech community, these findings can only be considered as preliminary; they are, however, the first steps towards substantiating observations made about SLE before the advent of corpus-based techniques in analysing and describing language use.

**Grammar**

In his dictionary, Meyler (2007) lists several grammatical features of SLE which he claims are in contrast with British English in terms of either use, frequency or both. As
not all of these features can be addressed in a work of a general nature, we have chosen to discuss phrasal verbs, an area of grammar that has recently come to the attention of both researchers and language teachers in Sri Lanka (D. Fernando 2007). Meyler highlights two differences between SLE and what he refers to as British Standard English (BSE) in terms of the verb particle – in some cases, a phrasal verb in BSE such as ‘throw away’ is used without a particle in SLE, as in ‘Please don’t throw my letter’ (2007: xvii); in other cases, a particle is added in SLE which would not be found in BSE, as in ‘She couldn’t bear up the pain’ (2007: xvii). A third feature of SLE is the existence of phrasal verbs with meanings not found in BSE, such as ‘put on’ meaning to gain weight, ‘pass out’ meaning to graduate (from a university or technical college) and ‘come down’ meaning to fail (an examination or test).

Not surprisingly, with such variety, phrasal verbs in SLE have become a heated topic of debate and not inconsiderable confusion in relation to their syntactic and semantic ‘correctness’. For instance, while the use of ‘put on’ and ‘pass out’ are accepted in speech and in some informal written registers in the contexts of gaining weight and graduating from an institution, ‘cope up’ tends to be seen as an error. In one of the few studies conducted on perceptions of correctness of SLE lexico-grammar, D. Fernando (2007) surveyed 242 teachers of English from secondary schools in Sri Lanka and asked them to rate as correct or incorrect the use of a selection of phrasal verbs in sample sentences. Table 10.1 gives eight of these phrasal verbs, the contextual meaning of each as made clear in sample sentences, and the informants’ responses in relation to correctness of use.

First, the percentages above illustrate a clear difference in the correctness ratings given to the first five phrasal verbs and the last three, which indicates that there is a collective sense of what is acceptable and not acceptable. Second, if the five phrasal verbs that received the highest percentages in terms of correctness are different in form and/or meaning from BSE, we can conclude that some parts of the grammar of SLE are evolving in directions that increase its distinctiveness from its input variety. As an example of such an evolving grammatical category, it will be interesting to see where ‘cope up’ will lie on a cline of acceptability in the future. A search of the 130-text ICE-SL sub-corpus produced two tokens of ‘cope up’, in the categories of Informational (popular) texts (W2B) and press editorials (W2E). The concordances are given below.

8 water is required. To **cope up** with the demand of the increasing population (W2B)
9 find it difficult to **cope up** with the hardships they have to endure (W2E)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phrasal verb</th>
<th>Meaning in SLE</th>
<th>Rated correct</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>bear up</td>
<td>to endure</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>come down</td>
<td>to fail (an examination)</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>passed out</td>
<td>to graduate</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>took it up</td>
<td>to accept</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>go as</td>
<td>to be known as, to be called</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>falls into</td>
<td>to meet, to intersect</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>blew off</td>
<td>to explode</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>got up</td>
<td>to wake up</td>
<td>36%</td>
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</table>
Clearly, ‘cope up’, whether considered correct or incorrect by language teachers and other prescriptivists, appears to be making inroads into certain written genres of SLE and could possibly be a phrasal verb that contributes to the distinctiveness of SLE at some future date.

**Morphology and the lexicon**

The lexicon of SLE is another area that has been subject to a fair amount of discussion, especially in relation to Sri Lankan creative writing in English (see, for instance, Canagarajah 1994; S. Fernando 1989). These studies have tended to focus on Sinhala, Tamil or Malay words which have been either borrowed or assimilated into SLE and which writers have used to convey a particular contextual ethos or Sri Lankan ‘flavour’ through their work. However, an examination of the vocabulary of colloquial SLE reveals processes more complex than straightforward borrowing in the coining or creating of ‘new’ lexical items.

For instance, SLE has many noun compounds which are unique to the Sri Lankan context, and which can be found in *A Dictionary of Sri Lankan English* (Meyler 2007) along with their meanings. Some of these are ‘agency post office’ (a private post office), ‘border villages’ (Sinhala villages bordering traditional Tamil areas in the Northern, Eastern and North Central Provinces), ‘floor patient’ (a patient in a hospital without a bed, who has to lie on the floor), ‘jump seat’ (a folding seat in the aisle of a bus) and ‘line rooms’ (estate labourers’ accommodation). These compounds are the result of combining two English words, but others which are combinations of Sinhala and English words, such as ‘boru part’ (putting on airs) and ‘peduru party’ (an informal party usually with live traditional eastern music) also exist in SLE. As observed by Meyler, however, while such compounds are common features of colloquial SLE, they would not necessarily be considered acceptable in more formal written contexts.

A more creative morphological process is the application of English affixes to Sinhala words to form unusual and unique lexical items. Meyler refers to this process as one where non-English words are ‘Anglicized’ (2007: xv). For instance, the affix -fy is added to a Sinhala word/term to create a colloquial verb in SLE, such as ‘rasthiyadufy’ (to go to a lot of trouble and achieve nothing) or ‘gnurugnurufy’ (to moan or whinge). The same process is sometimes applied to an English word in a manner not permitted in British or American English, resulting in a colloquial SLE verb as in ‘stignify’. The affix -ish is also sometimes employed to create ‘new’ words, as in the case of ‘vomitch’.

If it can be shown that lexical items such as these are only found in speech data, the argument that there is a marked distinction between speech and writing in SLE would be strengthened considerably. A different and more difficult question to answer is whether lexical items which are a combination of an English and Sinhala/Tamil word or which have only an English suffix should be considered as part of the vocabulary of SLE. This can only be determined through wide-scale studies of acceptability and use which have unfortunately not yet been undertaken.

**Sri Lankan English: myth or reality?**

That English occupies a niche in Sri Lanka from which it cannot easily be dislodged is beyond dispute. However, there is far less agreement on what variety of English this is,
or should be. There is still a belief among many speakers that the English spoken in Sri Lanka is British English. In a recent survey, Gunesekera (2005) found that a former president of Sri Lanka, the then leader of the opposition and several prominent ministers in the government believe that they speak British English. Furthermore, ironically, the English Language Teaching Unit of a university in Sri Lanka’s Southern Province (known for its strong nationalistic ideologies) claims to teach RP (Received Pronunciation) in its ESL programme.

It should be noted that a lack of awareness of the distinctiveness of the language one speaks is not wholly unusual if the language has been acquired as a first language in the domain of the home, and if one does not have a point of comparison with a different variety. This is the case with grammar and syntax as comprehensive descriptions of British English are not easily available in Sri Lanka. The case of accent or pronunciation is different, as these features are discernible through the media, films and popular music. In fact, such an awareness is reflected in the responses to D. Fernando’s (2007) study, in which 81 per cent of the respondents agreed that SLE refers to the accent of Sri Lankan speakers. One can argue therefore that an awareness of SLE as a variety distinct from British or American English is not entirely lacking.

When SLE is posited as a target or production norm, however, a more complex attitudinal picture emerges. In Künstler et al.’s study, when asked what kind of English is spoken in Sri Lanka, 62 per cent of the respondents selected the option ‘Other variety of English’ over RP or American English, with 30 per cent specifying this variety as ‘Standard Sri Lankan English’; but when asked what kind of English they would like to speak, 50 per cent of the respondents selected RP, while only 40 per cent chose ‘Other’. Similarly, in response to the question ‘What kind of English do you think should be taught in schools?’ 49 per cent said ‘RP’, 38 per cent said ‘Other’ and 6 per cent said ‘RP and Other’, pointing to a mismatch between the actual production form and the target norm the informants aim for (Künstler et al. 2009). Clearly, a situation of ‘linguistic schizophrenia’ (Kachru 1992: 60), not unusual with postcolonial Englishes, exists to some extent in Sri Lanka.

What does the future hold for English in Sri Lanka? Recent research indicates that the nationalistic ideologies of the 1960s and 1970s which rejected English (especially in education) have weakened (Mendis 2002; Raheem 2006). When asked about interpersonal communication, 97.5 per cent of the respondents of Künstler et al.’s study stated that they would like to speak English, and 75.4 per cent said they would be embarrassed if they had no English language skills. Based on these preliminary findings, Künstler et al. conclude that, overall, it seems fair to assume that in the future English will become even more firmly rooted in Sri Lankan society.

The final section of this chapter will discuss the use of English as a medium of creative expression in Sri Lanka. The discussion will show that some of the attitudes towards SLE described above, can be found, whether stated overtly or merely implicitly, in the history of Sri Lankan literature in English.

Sri Lankan writing in English

Creative writing in English has been a part of Sri Lankan literary culture since the late eighteenth century. In its early phases this writing was largely limited to the British expatriate community although a few Sri Lankan writers such as James de Alwis wrote
and published in the early nineteenth century. A more substantial body of English writing is evident in the first half of the twentieth century, with British writers such as Leonard Woolf and Sri Lankan writers such as R.L. Spittel and Lucian de Zilwa producing novels which received some critical acclaim. However, it is with the increasing output of writing in the post-independence period that Sri Lankan writing in English (SLWE) becomes identifiable as a distinctive postcolonial category.

There has been a steady increase in SLWE from the 1970s onwards with both resident and non-resident writers contributing to its regional and international profile. The Gratiaen Prize, which is awarded annually for the best creative work in English in Sri Lanka, and the State Literary Awards sponsored by the Sri Lankan government, which reserves a specific award for writing in English, give creative writing in English institutional recognition. The critical reception of SLWE, however, has been mixed. The conceptual and ideological debates attending to the choice of English as a medium of representation in non-Anglophone cultural contexts such as Africa and India have been largely absent in Sri Lanka. Sri Lankan writers, with the notable exception of Lakdasa Wikkramasinha (1941–78), have generally not engaged extensively with either the poetics or politics of writing in English. This in turn has led prominent Sri Lankan critics to view most SLWE as lacking a substantial connection to the larger political or cultural ethos it emerges from (Kandiah 1971, 1997; Canagarajah 1994). Both Kandiah and Canagarajah have argued that stylistic, and at times thematic, innovation when it appears has largely failed to capture what are understood to be ‘local’ realities.

Stylistic analyses have looked at how language use – whether it is the use of metaphor, words borrowed from Sinhala, Tamil or Malay, or experimentation with grammar – ‘fits’ the local reality it attempts to convey. Such analyses also often make a positive or negative evaluation of the writing based on its ability to be faithful to a local reality, i.e. how effective the writing has been in using English to convey a non-Anglophone ethos. However, such an approach can be highly subjective and at times tends to ignore how the paradigm of authenticity itself needs to be historicized. The localizing tendency in SLWE, and critical responses to it, cannot be understood in isolation from the strong cultural nationalist context that influenced it. Writers like Yasmine Gooneratne, James Goonewardene and Jean Arasanayagam who experimented with thematic and formal aspects of English writing in the 1970s and 1980s did so within a decolonizing framework where there was resentment towards English – precipitating a sense of beleaguerment among English writers.

Prior to the 1990s, when it was used in poetry or prose, SLE was a marker of a lack of education and a source of humour, with a variety of English close to the colonial standard used for the authorial/narrative voice in the text. While it is difficult to sustain a blanket claim that the Sri Lankan sociolinguistic landscape has altered radically, a greater fluidity in the use of SLE in general as a creative medium is evident in a number of recent publications. Also, we see that the inclusion of SLE does not necessarily serve the satirical purposes of earlier writers. Several recent novels suggest that thematically and linguistically Sri Lankan writers are relatively more attuned to the sociopolitical complexities of English in the country and at the same time use the language – i.e. SLE – unapologetically and with far less self-consciousness.

For instance, Manuka Wijesinghe’s *Monsoons and Potholes* (2006) is a satirical text that interweaves a personal and familial coming-of-age narrative with sociopolitical commentary. Most of the dialogue in the novel occurs in SLE, which complements its urban middle-class social setting. But *Monsoons and Potholes* also confronts the
hierarchies associated with different varieties of SLE. For instance the idea of ‘goday’ or rustic or unfashionable pronunciation associated with speakers of English as a second or third language is treated comically, but at the same time such attitudes are also critiqued overtly.

*Monsoons and Potholes* has two subaltern characters who are accorded a limited register of SLE. One of them is Dasa, a Sinhala boy from a village who works as a domestic for the narrator’s family. Predictably, Dasa’s attempts at speaking English evoke humour among the narrator’s family. However, where an earlier novel would not have gone beyond the humour, Wijesinghe uses a dialogue between herself (as the narrator) and Dasa to critique this attitude.

[Dasa] ‘Your friends told me I should come as a DJ to their parties.’
[Manuka] ‘Don’t talk nonsense, as if they would ask you to come to their parties? You can’t even talk English.’
‘My name is Dasa. I go to village school. I live in village big house where Mr Tissa’s mother living [Manuka’s paternal grandmother], I am … ’
‘Not like that. You don’t speak English like a person from a Colombo school.’
Dasa looked hurt.
‘Okay, your English is good, but it is different to ours,’ I tried to pacify him. I realized that what I had said wasn’t very nice. We English speaking people had a sense of linguistic superiority. It was an idiotic sense of superiority but it was hard to eliminate.

(Wijesinghe 2006: 297)

Elmo Jayawardena’s *Sam’s Story* (2001) is a text that is less overtly concerned about issues of language than *Monsoons and Potholes*. Its central character, Sammy, is an intellectually challenged Sinhala villager whose quirky first-person perspective on contemporary Sri Lankan life forms the main narrative element of the novel. Seen through Sam’s eyes the lifestyle of his upper-middle-class employers appears pampered and protected. For instance, the socioeconomic realities of war are made explicit in the following excerpt:

Our Boy [the master’s son] knew very little about the war and what was going on. He only came here for holidays. To jump in the river and send his sky rockets, or row the red boat to build his arm muscles. This war had nothing to do with him. He was out of it, protected by who he was.
The sad part is my two little brothers didn’t know about the war either. They certainly had nothing to do with it.
But then, they didn’t have anyone to protect them …
That’s why Jaya and Madiya went to this miserable war, one to die, the other to run and hide and be called a coward …

(Jayawardena 2001: 144)

As is evident, *Sam’s Story* does not make a sustained attempt to ‘localize’ Sam’s language but is arguably effective in conveying his perspective. What the text does, however, is to mark Sam’s non-English-speaking identity by introducing some common mispronunciations of English words into his dialogue. Sam consistently pronounces the name of one of the pet dogs in the house, Brutus, as ‘Bhurus’, his master’s favourite
drink Scotch becomes ‘is-scotch’ and aeroplanes are ‘aerobblanes’. All of these can be used to ridicule ‘uneducated’ speakers of English. But in the case of Sam’s Story, because the dominant perspective is Sam’s, the ‘proper’ pronunciation is rendered ironic instead:

‘No no Sam, it is not Bhurus, it is BRUTUS.’

She [the master’s daughter] would make her eyes big and give this funny growling sound; she called it rolling. She would start by tightening her mouth and extending her lips into a small round hole saying ‘brrrouuuuu’ and go ‘TUS’ like breaking a stick …

I never could get that funny sounding name. After a while she gave up. She stopped trying to correct me whenever I called my friend. I am not sure but I think she knew I was right. Once or twice I heard her ignoring her round mouth ‘ooos’ and stick breaking ‘tusses’ and calling my friend the way I did – Bhurus.

Bhurus of course didn’t mind. …

When I said ‘Bhurus, come, come,’ he came. I think he liked my name better, Bhurus.

(Jayawardena 2001: 8)

Sam’s story illustrates that a non-Anglophone perspective can be sympathetically and effectively represented in English without major linguistic innovation. The self-irony built into the narrative facilitates a critical view of the linguistic and social practices of the English-speaking and/or affluent classes in the country without explicit concern about using English as the medium for such representation. Thus, the choice of English as a medium of creative expression no longer appears to raise the same fraught ideological issues as it did a few decades ago. Syntactic and grammatical structures of SLE which were once stigmatized and used for comic effect are being appropriated by newer writers who use them with a remarkable lack of self-consciousness, and sometimes even with pride, giving them a legitimacy that they previously lacked. It remains to be seen whether these recent trends in literature will in any way be instrumental in creating more awareness and eventually, more acceptance and recognition of SLE as a distinctive South Asian variety among its speakers.

Suggestions for further reading

Salgado, M. (2007) Writing Sri Lanka: Literature, Resistance and the Politics of Place, London: Routledge. (Salgado’s text looks at a fairly representative selection of Sri Lankan writing in English (SLWE). Salgado critically interrogates how nationalist boundary-marking operates in SLWE and also provides readings of moments where Salgado believes texts/authors transcend such ethno-nationalist boundaries. It is an example of how SLWE now has a distinct profile within postcolonial writing – one large enough to warrant sustained study. It has a useful and extensive references list that can direct readers to more material on SLWE.)

Goonetilleke, D.C.R.A. (2005) Sri Lankan English Literature and the Sri Lankan People, 1917–2003, Colombo: Vijitha Yaapa Publications. (This is possibly the single most ‘representative’ work on Sri Lankan writing in English currently available. It contains chapters on a fairly extensive range of writers and traces the historical development of English writing in the country. Goonetilleke also attempts to position English writing in the context of writing in local languages, especially Sinhala.)
Coperahewa, S. (2009) ‘The language planning situation in Sri Lanka’, *Current Issues in Language Planning*, 10 (1): 69–150. (This monograph gives a fairly comprehensive historical introduction to the linguistic situation in Sri Lanka. It provides broad historical coverage on the development of local languages and the later introduction of English. Though the overall perspective is language policy planning there are substantial sections devoted to discussing the three main languages (Sinhala, Tamil and English) and their interrelationships. Data on literacy rates, distribution of linguistic groups within the country, etc., is also provided. It also has an extensive references section representing a large body of linguistic studies on Sri Lanka. It should serve as a good point of entry for those interested in the larger linguistic context of Sri Lanka.)

References


