Does Proficiency in the Second Language Influence Bilingual Word Retrieval and Pronunciation?

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Abstract- During empirical sociolinguistic research this correlational study statistically compares quantitative scores of an independent variable Proficiency in English against the quantified dependent variable Rate of occurrence of deviations from Standard Sri Lankan English (SSLE) pronunciation across the 185 users of Other Varieties of Sri Lankan Englishes. The participants diversified in their first language. 100 participants had Sinhala while the first language of 85 participants was Sri Lankan Tamil. a questionnaire cum word elicitation process compiled data. The instrument consisted of 25 lexical items which gave rise to pronunciation deviations compiled from literature on Sri Lankan English. Descriptive statistics posit that there is a negative correlation between the two variables while the percentage variance explained for the correlation between the variables was a medium 9% for the Sinhala and 24% for the Tamil bilingual participants. This study concludes that other exogenous factors too would have influenced the rate of occurrence of deviations from SSLE. Most importantly it informs pedagogy that devoid of the diversity of the first languages Sinhala and Tamil, Proficiency in English influences deviations from SSLE pronunciation which is the target of Teaching English as a Second Language in Sri Lanka.

Index Terms- Sri Lankan English, Sinhala. Tamil, pronunciation, Proficiency, Rate of occurrence of pronunciation deviations

I. INTRODUCTION

Tracing the contact dynamics of Sri Lankan English (SLE) the first exposure of the monolingual Sinhala/Tamil speech communities of Sri Lanka to English would have occurred as far back as in 1796 when the British East India Company annexed the maritime provinces of Ceylon. Thus the timeline for the evolution of SLE commenced with the linguistic interactions between the colonial rulers and Sinhala and Tamil monolinguals of the country. Then SLE progressed through exonormative stabilization, nativization and endonormative stabilization stages. It could be stated that at present SLE has passed the endonormative stage and has codified phonological norms, identified morphological, syntactic behaviour; defined standard usage and dialectal variation within the variety. This evolution of English within the linguistic ecology of Sri Lanka has taken place over a period of more than 200 years. This signifies the intense cross linguistic interference between English and the vernaculars as they began to coexist within the linguistic ecology of the country and contributed to variety formation and dialectal variation within the variety. The nativization of SBE pronunciation was a heterogeneous process which was influenced by the language specific markedness constraint rankings of the vernaculars Sinhala and Tamil. This resulted in the creation of a prestigious, norm forming variety SSLE and Other Varieties of Sri Lankan Englishes (OVSLEes). The adherence to SSLE phonological norms due to the influence of the parity in language specific markedness constraints of Sinhala/Tamil identifies Sinhala/Sri Lankan English (S/SSLE) and Tamil/Sri Lankan English (T/SSLE) bilingual speech communities respectively. Deviation from SSLE pronunciation identifies the users of OVSLEes. The participants of this investigation are bilinguals with Sinhala/OVSLE and T/OVSLE in their code repertoire. This study selects two variables Proficiency in SLE and Rate of occurrence of selected deviations from SSLE pronunciation and aims to investigate the correlation between them as well as ascertain whether the diversity in the first languages influence the correlation. This investigation is informed by theory on dual language lexical processing in bilinguals, their word retrieval mechanisms and how proficiency in the second language (L2) affects their pronunciation.

II. THE LITERATURE

2.1 Word retrieval and bilingual mental lexicon

Theorists (Abutalebi and Green, 2007[1]; Costa and Santesteban, 2004[2]; Fabbro, 2001[3]; Illes et al., 1999[4]; Sia & Dewaele, 2006[5]) state that the first stage of word retrieval in bilinguals is the accessing of mental lexicon. According to Costa et al (2000)[6] in bilinguals the conceptual information both in L1 and L2 is stored in one common conceptual store, regardless of the language of input. This common conceptual store is connected to the L1 and L2 lexical stores, which are also connected with each other (Centowska, 2006)[7]. Concurring Kroll (2008)[8] states that mental juggling which is necessary to negotiate the use of two languages is a natural outcome of bilingualism. If both languages are active and compete for selection, the bilingual then needs to acquire a mechanism that provides a means to control this activity and the corresponding decision process. Thus lexical production in a bilingual involves, when compared with a monolingual, a more complex dual language processing architecture.

2.2 Dual language lexical processing: The case of bilinguals

Discussing cross language lexical processes Linck et al (2008: 349)[9] states 'both languages are active when balanced bilinguals and second language learners are reading, listening, or speaking one language only'. They further state that 'The intention to use one language only does not suffice to restrict activation to one language and does not appear to be restricted to