

Bilingualism in the Media - Language use or abuse?

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of bilingualism in the media in Sri Lanka, is on the increase and is influenced by the expansion of the consumer market and product competition that is characteristic of a country practicing open-economy. The 'creativity' portrayed in the language used to get 'the message across' in the vast number of hoardings, banners, placards, trailers, displaying advertisements in the print and electronic media, have succeeded in stirring both wonder and criticism. This paper presents the results of interviews of three CEO's of leading advertising agencies in Sri Lanka, presently involved in creative advertising. It also includes the results of a questionnaire, which was circulated among academics, managers, journalists, students and parents. The purpose was to find out the context in which, those who create it, accept the language used for advertising, promotional activities and campaigns. It also examines the influence of the language used in the media, on a section of society who are recipients of it. The interviews and questionnaires query the context in which the language of the media is used in general discourse, the assumed aspirations of the target audience, the objectives of the agencies when creating, promoting and using language and the attitudes of the public towards using language which is neither standard Sinhala nor standard Sri Lankan English. The problematic areas included defining 'a standard language' as a medium of communication in the media with special emphasis on the spoken variety, the use of the spoken 'slang' in written sales and advertising literature, the possibility that the phenomenon of bilingualism is actually promoting and expanding the social gap which already exists between the fluent and non-fluent speakers of Standard Sri Lankan English or whether, as some believe, the media is killing languages. Positive attributes included the awareness of language use and abuse in the media, new linguistic input, awareness of the workings of morphological processes such as coining, compounding, back-forming, repetitions in creating entirely new vocabulary items to the word-stock of both Sinhalese and Sri Lankan English, objectivity of outsider perspectives, an emergence of new syntactic structures and the belief and aspiration that to an extent, languages are being protected and promoted by the media.