Puswedilla’s Arsetolk: A study of the extra-linguistic values of the Hierarchized Sri Lankan English

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A close textual reading of Feroze Kamardeen’s political comedy, which rapturously catered to an audience of bourgeois taste, sheds light on a pertinent issue related to Sri Lankan English; namely, the disenfranchisement of the English spoken by a socio-economically and politically disadvantaged group of people as “not pot” or “non-standard”. In these plays, the President of Arsikland, Chaminda Puswedilla claims that the government has invented a language called Arsetolk—a “new, hybrid language created using the local native language and the English alphabet […] which the government realized it was a people’s language” for the purpose of communication. Arsetolk deliberately employs mispronunciation, misspelling and ungrammatical structures in speech and sometimes in writing, which resonate the structural “deviations” of “non-standard” Sri Lankan English, in order to evoke humor in the plays. It is my conviction that through the use of Arsetolk, Chaminda Puswedilla attempts to establish it as the language of the “common”—the disenfranchised majority, thereby disempowering the so-called non-standard variety from that of the anglicized, urban upper class. This paper emphasizes that the use of arsetolk reflects the “extra-linguistic values conferred on hierarchies of English” (24, Parakrama), especially in the context of post-colonial Sri Lanka. Using Prof. Arjuna Parakrama’s article “Extra-Linguistic Value (of English in Sri Lanka) = Zugzwang (for Non-Elite Users)” as the theoretical basis, this paper attempts to study the socio-political, economic and cultural implications of “standard” and “non-standard” forms of Sri Lankan English, through a qualitative textual analysis of Feroze Kamardeen’s plays available on Youtube and Facebook.

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