

THE SOCIOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF STANDARD AND NON-STANDARD ENGLISH IN SRI LANKA

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Abstract

The concept of Standard English and its relationship to non-standard varieties is a complex and debatable topic in Sociolinguistics. The research objective is to identify the differences between Standard Sri- Lankan English and Non-Standard Sri Lankan English and find their relationship to the sociolinguistic aspects. There are three research questions: (1) How can Standard Sri Lankan English be defined? (2) What are the differences between Standard Sri Lankan English and Non-standard Sri Lankan English? and (3) Do these differences between Standard Sri Lankan English and Non-Standard Sri Lankan English matter in society? The desk research approach was applied to the book ‘*The Postcolonial Identity of Sri Lankan English*’ written by Professor Manique Gunsekera in 2005. It provides comprehensive knowledge to the reader on Standard Sri Lankan English and Non-standard Sri Lankan English. Analyzing this book and finding answers to the research questions were done. The results showed that Standard Sri Lankan English has not been documented yet but, has gradually arrived at a standard. Furthermore, the results showed phonological, syntactic and morphological differences between Standard Sri Lankan English and Non-Standard Sri Lankan English. In addition, this research shows that these differences matter in certain situations, but they do not matter in some other situations. The research also showed that Non-Standard Sri Lankan English speakers suffer from sociolinguistic issues. The conclusion shows the features of Standard Sri Lankan English by explaining the features of Non-standard Sri Lankan English. Therefore, it is clear that Standard Sri Lankan English cannot have the features of Non –Standard Sri Lankan English. According to the findings of this research, the differences between Standard Sri Lankan English and Non-Standard Sri Lankan English matter in the job market and communication with Standard Sri Lankan English speakers and the whole society.

Keywords: Non-Standard Sri Lankan English, Sociological issues, Standard Sri Lankan English

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Introduction

Learning other languages in addition to one's mother tongue is a crucial way to gain knowledge and expand experience. In that sense, the concept of Standard English and its relationship to non-standard varieties is a complex and debatable topic in sociolinguistics. Standard English is generally recognized as the dialect used in written and formal contexts, which is brought closer to the reader by various texts and dictionaries. However, taking its exact definition is controversial and contemporary (Magdadi et al., 2020). People of different countries show differences in language pronunciation. It is influenced by cultural, geographical, and environmental conditions. In the pronunciation of the English language, differences between different races can be seen. For example, the pronunciation differences between the Chinese and Indians, Africans and the French and other Europeans and vice versa. Differences can also be detected when speaking to citizens living in the United Kingdom. People who speak English can be by birth, migrations, and differences in geographical class disparities (Trudgill, 1979). Non-standard English is spoken English with the addition of informal and gang slang and subcultural words. It has little vocabulary or grammatical usage. It deviates slightly from the use of proper spelling, grammar and punctuation. This has been nurtured by immigrants who speak English by birth and speak the English they know in everyday life. The standard-non-standard measurement closely relates to the difference between written and spoken language (Kerswill, 2007). The grammatical differences, as well as the pronunciation differences, can be seen.

School is an institution of particular importance in language development. Educational methods must acknowledge that all dialects are potentially and equally adequate, speaking unfavourable attitudes towards low-status varieties (Trudgill, 1979). School diversification can be seen in a country like Sri Lanka. It can be identified as rural and urban schools, national and provincially controlled schools, and Catholic and Buddhist schools.

Therefore, the spread of English language usage can be seen, as well as its differences. Hence, scholars have done much research on the use of the English language. They explore the disparities between the English used by the authors and the English used in everyday life. The study of rules and standards in English incorporates various research fields, including the development of dialects and varieties, correction processes, and issues of politeness and impoliteness (Locher & Strässler, 2008). These investigations contribute to a broader understanding of the complex relationships between language users and Standard English.

There are many variations of the English language within the Indian region whereas Indian English usage has significant differences, especially in terms of pronunciation. Sri Lankan English (SLE) is emerging as a distinctly South Asian change, distribution comparisons with Indian English due to their shared colonial backgrounds (Meyler, 2009). English pronunciation in Sri Lanka differs from that in India. There are people in Sri Lanka who speak English fluently like native English speakers.

The fact that Sri Lanka was ruled by the English people for more than a hundred years is also a strong factor. They also created an English-speaking social group at the same time. While British English remains highly treasured in Sri Lanka, attitudes towards SLE are progressively optimistic, suggesting its growing acceptance as a legitimate variety (Bernaisch, 2012).

SLE is characterized by unique phonological, syntactic, grammatical, and verbal features, distinguishing it from other English diversities (Mendis & Rambukwella, 2020). It was also due to the rich pronunciation of the Sinhala language. The Sinhala language is a developed language in terms of sound and meaning. However, the lack of systematization and the constant discussion about standards

and norms present challenges for its gratitude (Mukherjee, 2012). The official languages of Sri Lanka are Sinhala and Tamil. Although English is the international language in Sri Lanka, it is commonly used in universities, schools, institutions and the business sector. English in Sri Lanka assists numerous purposes, including managerial, justice, and educational roles, despite its constitutional status as a "link language" (Mendis & Rambukwella, 2020).

In Sri Lanka, there is a particular focus on learning and writing the English language. Creative expressions such as poetry and fiction, learning the correct pronunciation, and high recognition are outstanding factors. (Mendis & Rambukwella, 2020).

The research problem of this study is the unavailability of a clear-cut definition for the differences between Standard Sri Lankan English and Non-Standard Sri Lankan English. Therefore, this study focused on the research objective mentioned below.

- To identify the differences between Standard Sri Lankan English and Non-Standard Sri Lankan English.

The study focused on three research questions.

- (1) How can Standard Sri Lankan English be defined?
- (2) What are the differences between Standard Sri Lankan English and Non-Standard Sri Lankan English?
- (3) Do these differences between Standard Sri Lankan English and Non-Standard Sri Lanka matter in society?

Research Design

This paper focused on the desk research approach, and the study is based entirely on secondary data. The book '*The Postcolonial Identity of Sri Lankan English*' written by Professor Manique Gunesequera in 2005, was selected as the analytical tool for this systematic review. This book is one of the most prominent pieces of Postcolonial Sri Lankan English. In this excellent book, Professor M. Gunesequera provides comprehensive knowledge of Standard Sri Lankan English and Non-Standard Sri Lankan English. It covers Sri Lankan English, Elitist English, Mixing Languages, Language of Governance and Phonology, Syntax and Morphology of Sri Lankan English. The fantastic and fascinating colour photos in this book add glamour and grace to the text, making the reader more interested and enthusiastic. In this research study, the research objective mentioned above is focused, and the answers to the three questions mentioned above are provided. Moreover, some other relevant secondary resources of Professor Manique Gunesequera and distinguished scholars' relevant studies have been used to enhance the validity of this research technique.

Results and Discussion

This Desk-Research Paper focuses on three main research questions as follows. (1) How can Standard Sri Lankan English be defined? (2) What are the differences between Standard Sri- Lankan English and Non-standard Sri Lankan English? (3) Do these differences between Standard Sri Lankan English and Non-Standard Sri Lankan English matter in society?

Defining Standard Sri Lankan English

According to Gunasekara (2005), the English language is ever-changing and today's non-standard would become tomorrow's standard. So, it is not easy to define a standard for Sri Lankan English and keep them in water-tight compartments. Being post-colonials, most elderly people obtained their

schooling while English was the main medium of education, considering that it was a disgrace to make changes to the Queen’s English (Gunasekara, 2005). However, being a multicultural and multi-lingual country, Sri Lanka has become a rich sociolinguistic laboratory (Raheem & Gunesakera, 1994) where our primary languages Sinhala and Tamil directly influence the English language.

According to Gunasekera (2005), the usage of English has gradually reached a standard for Sri Lankan English but has still not been documented. Some colonial countries like India and Australia have even published dictionaries outlining Indian English and Australian English respectively. According to Gunasekera (2005), Sri Lankans get caught in the trap of Standard English, as they have not prescribed the grammar of Standard Sri Lankan English. In Raheem & Gunasekera (1994), it is mentioned that even professionals are uncertain about the standard of Sri Lankan English. This is why they end their research paper posing another question- “Quo Vadis” –meaning, “Where we can go from here to approach a standard?”

Differences in Standard Sri Lankan English and Non-Standard Sri Lankan English

The differences between Standard British English (SBE) and Standard Sri Lankan English (SSLE) can be identified in the following discussion. In pronunciation, there are some differences between SBE and SSLE, which can be distinguished and justified only by a native speaker. When pronouncing the words “bake”, “cake”, and “stake”, the standard British pronunciation is /beIk/, /keIk/ and /steIk/, but in Standard Sri Lankan English, people pronounce them as /be<k/, /ke<k/ and /ste<k/. Here, instead of the diphthong /eI/, many Sri Lankans use the sound /e</. Diphthongs (e.g./ eI/ sound in /beIk/) in Standard British English do not exist in Sinhala; therefore, Sri Lankans find it difficult to pronounce them. Another striking difference is shown in the pronunciation of words such as “pocket”, “market”, and “painted”. In British English, they are pronounced as /pθkɪt /, /mɜ:kɪt/ and /peɪntɪd/. In Standard Sri Lankan English, Sri Lankans pronounce them as /pθkɛt/, /mɜ:kɛt/ and /pentɛd/ Here, the change of /I/ into /ɛ/ sound in SSLE can be noticed.

According to ‘Received Pronunciation’ (R.P.), or in other words Standard British English, the articulation of /ʃ /and /Δ / is made by moving the tip of the tongue between the teeth and making the mouth passage so narrow as to produce friction, while the air passes through (Gunasekara, 2005). However, in SSLE, this friction is very limited; therefore, Sri Lankans make these sounds differently. When they make the sound /w /, e.g. in “cow” and “window”, they should round their lips, according to R. P. However, according to SSLE, people do not round the lips and the sound is produced differently. As a result, many Sinhala people produce ‘what’ as /wɔ:t/which is produced in R. P. as /wθt/. The /v/ sound, e.g. in “visual”, should be made by binding the two lips in R.P., but many Sri Lankans do not bind the lips. For /w/ and /v/, they use the same pattern and the sounds of both are almost equal. Words which start with the letters p, k, and t, should aspirate the initial sound, according to R.P., e.g. The initial sound /p/ in the word “pen” should be pronounced as / P^h /. However, in SSLE, these sounds are not aspirated. In addition, the mispronunciations of some words like ‘is’, “new”, “stupid”, as /Is /, /stYpɪd/ and /nɪw / respectively, are accepted in SSLE. As the /ʒ / sound is not found in Sinhala, people normally represent it with the /s / sound. In R.P., these words are pronounced as /Iz/, /nɒu:/ and /stɒu:pɪd/ respectively. In addition to those pronunciation differences, there are many borrowings from Sinhala and Tamil languages in Standard Sri Lankan English, e.g. “*Bana Preaching*” “*Osariya*” and “*Reddai hatte*”. In the typical younger generation’s discourse, words like “*Mara*”, “*Aiyyo-Aiyyo!*” and “*Machang*” can be noticed very often. Parakrama (1995 as cited in Gunasekara, 2005) stated that in Ceylonese English, people use the verb “put” in a sentence such as “*He put a shout at me*’. Here, the construction has originated in Tamil as “*Athu, saththam pottathu*”. There are many words borrowed

from Tamil in Standard British English, but there is not much evidence of particular Tamil words, which are only restricted to Sri Lankan English. In SSLE, terms like “no” and “men” can be found as in “*She is going there no?*” and “*They are not pretty men*”. Here Sri Lankans use “no” and “men” to emphasize the action instead of using “Isn’t she?” or “Are they?”

In Sri Lankan English, it can be found expressions such as “*Run and fetch the ball*”, “*Go and Come*”, and “*Going to go*” whereas the standard British would say, “*Fetch the ball quickly*”, “*Come back*” and “*planning to go*”, respectively. Redundancy also can be found in “*We returned back the same day*” and “*It is quite all right*”, where the words “back” and “all” are omitted in SBE. In addition, even among very fluent speakers whose first language is English, “Code Switching” is often used. Words like “*funeral house*”, “*wedding house*”, “*front house neighbour*”, and “*cousin brother*” can also be noticed in Sri Lankan discourses. This is due to the difficulty of finding the equivalent terminology in English. Gunesequera (2000) clarifies how morphosyntactic errors of fluent speakers of English in Sri Lanka negatively affect the correct use of SSLE. Personally, the writer feels that Sri Lankans’ intelligence can be well noticed by their reconstruction of these words, e.g. “*Front house neighbour*,” which clearly points out which neighbour is to be considered in the context.

Most Sri Lankans demonstrate a tendency to transfer language, which seems common in every language. For example, the usage of words such as “*handlings*”, “*advice*”, and a sentence such as “*Many poetries describe beautiful sceneries*” are incorrect. At the same time, the tendency to assign numbers to all noun phrases may be due to the influence of Sinhala and Tamil languages. e.g. “*a gratitude*” and “*a land*” are incorrect. According to Gunesequera (2005) under the “Use and Abuse in Sri Lankan English”, she states that abusing the number, in sentences is on the way to acceptance. Therefore, the two examples shown above will be accepted in the future.

Mixing up the active voice and passive voice is also noticeable in Sri Lankan English, e.g. “*This war will not be ended this year*, instead, “*will not end*”, “*I know what to say*”, instead of “*What is to be said*” The writer personally believes that, when active voice is replaced by the passive voice, it would not give the exact sense what it should be.

The overuse of prepositions is also becoming a characteristic of Sri Lankan English and incorrect verbal phrases are becoming more common than single verbs. e.g. *He fell down on the ground*, where “down” should be omitted according to “Standard British English”. However, these features are also accepted now according to Gunesequera (2005). The overuse of comparative forms, e.g. “*Munchee Lemon Puff.....It’s more creamier*” could be noticed in a previous T.V. advertisement. According to Gunesequera (2005), this is also accepted in standard Sri Lankan English. Another common feature is using participles in adjectives, e.g. *matured*. However, this latter format is also accepted, but only with similar adjectives. Problems of discourse also exist that denote sociological errors. e.g. “*Former Cambodian strongman Pol Pot kicks the bucket.*” This was stated at the beginning of a formal Rupavahini news telecast, even though it is unacceptable in a formal discourse. According to Sri Lankan culture, people speak respectfully of the death, even of an enemy. It is difficult to rationalize these things, as the journalists seem to have obtained special licenses to handle the language independently. Another error is the morpho-semantic mix-up, e.g., using “founder” for “finder” due to misunderstanding the meaning. These formats also seem to be on the way to being accepted for some words, according to Gunesequera (2005). Focusing back to Non-standard Sri Lankan English, it can be noticed that many pronunciation “mistakes” compared with Standard Sri Lankan pronunciation. The /p/ sound as /f/ and /f/ as /p/, e.g. “pan” as /f{n/ and “fish” as /pIsh/ can be noticed. When considering the

words “stop” and “school” are pronounced as /Istop/ and /Iskul/ in non-standard Sri Lankan English. The reason here is that in the Sinhala language, one cannot find two consonant clusters together. To be comfortable with the pronunciation, the “not-pot” speakers add an /’I’/ sound and make them /Istop/ and /Iskul/ forming a class-bias system in the society (Gunesekera, 2005). When considering the words “hall” and “hole”, they are mispronounced as /hΘ:λ /and /hO:λ /, which should be /hO:l / and /hΘ:l/, respectively. They often “interchange” the pronunciation of these two sounds, /Θ/ and /O/. All these examples show “not pot” speakers' inability to use the correct pronunciation. The “not pot” speakers are cornered in society due to their class-biased system, which is sociologically affected. In addition, there is the use of some words, such as “coacher,” which may follow the pattern of the teacher and speaker. Syntactical incorrectness is also found in Non-standard Sri Lankan English, e.g. *Do you know what is her name ?* instead of *Do you know what her name is?* Another factor is the abuse of the article, e.g. A student may say *“I am going to the school”*. Here, the article “the” should be omitted in Standard Sri Lankan English. Errors in comparison forms also can be noticed as, *“My brother is elder to me”* where it should be *“older than I”* (Gunesekera, 2005). Likewise, there are many differences between Non-standard and Standard Sri Lankan English concerning phonology, syntax, and semantics. The people who use Non-standard English are the “not pot” speakers, who are being challenged by society, and become helpless. This is a socio-linguistic issue prevailing in Sri Lanka.

Do these Differences between Standard Sri Lankan English and Non- Standard English Matter?

This section will elaborate on whether these mistakes matter in our day-to-day usage. When considering the pronunciation mistakes that are made by “not-pot” speakers, the elite speakers who prefer R. P. will frown at the “not-pot” speakers for the mispronunciation of words. However, the writer believes that some places would not make much difference or bring adverse effects if they do their profession or job successfully. For example, bankers, sales representatives, and even some academics, excluding English teachers. Recently, the researcher met an agent of Ceylinco Insurance co-operation. Even with his misuse of /p/ and /f/, /Iz/ and /s/, and /O:/ and /Θ:/, he was perfect with his explanation of the relevant insurance policy.

However, when professionals are highly involved in using the English language, such as English teachers, students, medical doctors, engineers, and other professionals, they will encounter many issues if they use non-standard English. According to Gunesekera (2013), the results of her study showed that employers' needs keep changing to keep abreast of the needs of a 21st-century office, and the outcome is that students need to be fluent in English, be aware of the rules of written genres such as official letters, emails, press releases and taking minutes, and be familiar with etiquette, cross-cultural communication and fine dining. This clearly shows the negative social impact in the workplace due to the usage of “not pot English”. When considering literal writing, some Sri Lankan poets have exceeded the expected limit by using Sinhala words directly and following direct translations, forming many syntactic mistakes, e.g. In the Sri Lankan poem “Cobra” by Lakdas Wickramasinghe, the poet has used the word “*Dunkririniya*” which he means “*because the mother has fed her baby*”. This word makes it difficult for the readers to understand the exact meaning in Sinhala properly. This kind of non-standard writing negatively affects the value of poetry and thereby English literature in Sri Lankan context. Therefore, deciding whether these mistakes in Non-standard Sri Lankan English matter depends on the speaker's or the writer's profession or job and the relevant context.

However, English has reached the ‘Language of Power’, and it is considered as the ‘window to the world’. In addition, Sri Lanka has become globalized, and the citizens need to communicate with the world. If one turns back to Sri Lankan history, Sri Lankans have obtained independence without any drop of bloodshed, but only with paper and pen, with the British people, using Standard British English

or, in other words, R. P. Even if one cannot approach that much fluency in Standard British English, as Honorable S.W.R.D, Bandaranayake, who headed this writing process to make Sri Lanka an independent country from Britain, Sri Lankans should at least improve their knowledge in Standard Sri Lankan English. The English language has become a prerequisite in the competitive job market where executives expect their employees to use their English knowledge at their workplaces. Therefore, an applicant who cannot fluently produce the SSLE at an interview will be disadvantaged. Even though these “not-spot” speakers were selected, the executives could not help laughing at them or pointing out their mistakes. For example, employers would take decisive action when a typist uses non-standard English continuously and shows many pronunciation, syntax, and morphology errors. This is another sociological impact where the “not-pot” speakers suffer.

Moreover, as a nation in a globalized world, it is not feasible to remain isolated, like "toads hiding in a well." People should always communicate with the world. Therefore, there is a need for the tool of Standard Sri Lankan English to approach the world. Finally, the researcher would like to mention that everyone has a responsibility to maintain standard Sri Lankan English to reach upward mobility and become successful and fruitful Sri Lankans.

Conclusion and Recommendation

By reverting to the 03 research questions of this study, the following findings can be concluded as follows. (1) Gunsekera (2005) has mentioned the Standard Sri Lankan English has not been documented in our country. However, Gunsekera has well stated what the features of Standard Sri Lankan English and the features of non-standard Sri Lankan English (“not-pot” speakers) are. Therefore, it is obvious that Standard Sri Lankan English cannot have the features of Non –Standard Sri Lankan English. If any speech or text shows non-standard Sri Lankan English (“not-pot English”), we can confirm that the particular text or speech is not in Standard Sri Lankan English. (2) The results show many differences between Standard Sri Lankan English and Non-Standard English in phonology, morphology and syntax. (3) According to the findings of this research, the differences between Standard Sri Lankan English and Non-Standard Sri Lankan English matter in the job market, communication with Standard Sri Lankan English speakers and in society. This brings a sociological issue. This research concludes that sociological aspects exist in Standard and Non-standard English in Sri Lanka.

This research study recommends the of Non- Standard Sri Lankan English speakers face the challenge of speaking, writing, reading and listening skills in Standard Sri Lankan English without any hesitation. They should sharpen their knowledge of Standard Sri Lankan English phonology, syntax and morphology enthusiastically. These Non-Standard English speakers should listen to Standard Sri Lankan documentaries, movies, T.V. news, etc., quite frequently. They also should read English novels and maintain a diary to write down daily activities in Standard Sri Lankan English using a well-recognized Sinhala-English Dictionary and an English-English dictionary with the “Phonetic Alphabet”. Furthermore, they should try to speak in Standard Sri Lankan English continuously with others, no matter if they are weak initially.

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