

Bilingual pronunciation and first language dominance

Rohini Chandrica Widyalkara

English Language Teaching Unit University of Kelaniya Sri Lanka

Abstract: Literature on Sri Lankan English, through reasonable deduction, states that deviations from Standard Sri Lankan English (SSLE) pronunciation is a feature of Sinhala dominance in Sinhala/Other Variety Sri Lankan English (S/OVSLE) bilinguals or Tamil dominance in Tamil/Other Variety Sri Lankan English (T/OVSLE) bilinguals. This study using standard statistical procedures collates the difference in the mean values of self-declared competence in First Language (L1) and Second Language (L2) across the four skills: Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Listening with the difference in rate of usage of L1 and L2 in selected social and personal domains to calculate L1 dominance in each bilingual participant (n= 185). Then the rate of occurrence of selected deviations from SSLE pronunciation in each participant is estimated. The correlation between the independent variable L1 dominance and the dependent variable rate of occurrence of selected deviations from SSLE pronunciation in the populations is illustrated through scatter diagrams, calculation of the Pearson Correlation and the Coefficient of Determination. Statistical analysis shows that there is a medium 9% and a moderate 11% correlation between L1 dominance and rate of occurrence of deviations from SSLE pronunciation in S/OVSLE and T/OVSLE bilinguals respectively.

Keywords: Sri Lankan English pronunciation, bilingualism, L1 dominance, self-declared competence, language selection in functional domains, Willingness to Communicate

I. Heuristics In Bilingual Taxonomy And Language Dominance

Defining bilingualism this study identifies a plethora of definitions ranging from the restrictive to the very flexible. A multitude of interdisciplinary theory and experimental research bear evidence for the complex nature and the increasing ambit of bilingualism on socio- psycho - neuro linguistics. Bilingualism has been branded as a 'ubiquitous yet an abstruse word, and perhaps used rather esoterically in different fields of linguistics' (Sia&Dawaele, 2006). The general state of flux within the domain of bilingualism is reflected through the polemics in literature where the traditional definitions seem incongruous in the sphere of modern linguistics. Literature reveals that early definitions on bilingualism were narrow and prescriptive and focused on 'native like control on two languages' (Bloomfield, 1935: 56) where equal fluency in both languages was a marker of bilingualism. Opposition comes from Grosjean (1997) who refutes the misconception that bilinguals are 'equally fluent in their languages' and further states that 'a bilingual is not simply the sum of two monolinguals'. Hakuta (1986) too identifies the difficulty in defining 'native like control'.

Haugen (1953: 7) provided a minimalist definition based on the onset of bilingualism. According to Haugen bilingualism begins at a point where the speaker of one language can produce 'complete meaningful utterances in the other language'. But evidence of minimal function in a language reflected through 'complete meaningful utterances' such as reeling off the words of a popular English song, according to Beardsmore (1982), does not provide sufficient proof for beginnings of bilingualism. An example to supplement the argument comes from the Sri Lankan English (SLE) usages 'see you later', 'no problem' which might be habitually used by interlocutors during Sinhala discourse who would find the construction of a standard 'complete meaningful utterance' in English beyond their linguistic capabilities.

Other definitions are deliberately made vague. 'It seems obvious that if we are to study the phenomenon of bilingualism we are forced to consider it as something entirely relative' (Mackey, 1957: 51). An equally vague definition for bilingualism comes from another proponent of relativism in bilingualism. According to Arsenian(1937: 19) 'One of the most important factors to be borne in mind when discussing bilingualism of any type is that a notion of relativism must be introduced where by the degree of bilingualism under analysis has to be ascertained'. But according to Beardsmore (1982: 7) 'the degree of bilingualism is not an easy thing to measure'. Crystal (2003: 51) too identifies 'many kinds and degrees of bilingualism'.

In essence, distancing from narrow, prescriptive, historical definitions this study bears acquiescence to the following: 'bilingualism must be able to account for the presence of two languages within one and the same speaker, remembering that ability in these two languages may or may not be equal' (Beardsmore 1982: 3) and recognize that 'bilinguals have conceptual representations linked to two different lexical representations; (Abutalebi& Green, 2007; de Groot, 2010; Finkbeiner et al., 2006; Francis, 1999; Kroll & Stewart, 1994). Thus the ontology within the domain of bilingualism identifies the elements equilingual/balanced bilingual, and