

ENGLISH IN MODERN SRI LANKAN TAMIL SOCIETY: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC APPRAISAL

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An attempt is made in this paper to present briefly the status and functions of English in modern Sri Lankan Tamil society, and to discuss the attitudes of different categories of people in the society towards English. As a preamble, a brief historical view of the position occupied by English during the past, especially before the independence of Sri Lanka, is presented. Generally the status and functions of English in the Sri Lankan Tamil society have been and are governed by the language policy of the government. The societal attitudes too have been responsible for the position of English to date.

Over the years, particularly after independence the status and functions of English and the societal attitudes towards English have differed in some marked ways in the two major societies in Sri Lanka, namely Sinhala society and Tamil society. Generally English bilingualism has differed in the political, social, cultural, linguistic and attitudinal network of these societies in which it developed and flourished as a dynamic communicative tool. According to social psychology and anthropology, language, primarily the first language, has great influence on perception and thought process. In learning English a Tamil student usually perceives a Tamil model of English. Similarly a Sinhala student perceives a Sinhala model. So it is pertinent that separate studies are made on the position of English in these two societies.

II

Bilingualism in English was introduced into the island with the advent of the British in 1796. In the course of time, the English language was firmly implanted in Sri Lanka in a systematic manner. The use of English became supreme and pervasive in several domains of language use. Under British rule English was the language of administration. It was the language of higher education and the most popular language of school education. Generally people equated "education with ability to write and speak English. English was also the language of urban trade, business and island-wide advertising.

The government promoted the learning of English, and the Christian missionaries who came here for proselytizing purposes concentrated on English education, for this was considered the key to conversion.

In fact, the missionaries were the first to start teaching English in Sri