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The psychological need for an accent: spoken English in Sri Lanka

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English has been used in Sri Lanka from 1796, and has evolved as a language of Sri Lanka, with contributions from Sinhalese, Tamil and Malay. In 2010, mainly due to globalization, a liberalized economy, and relatively easy overseas travel, Sri Lankans are using a plethora of foreign accents with varying degrees of acceptability. The objective of this paper is to present an analysis of why Sri Lankan urbanites, in particular, feel the necessity for resorting to an accent in a professional context.

This is a retrospective, analytical study based on interview data from Sri Lankan professionals, and questionnaire responses from undergraduates at Sri Lankan universities.

The findings of the study show the phenomenon of accent usage to be fraught with sociolinguistic complexities. For example, many academics of Departments of English in our universities use and promote Standard Sri Lankan English (SSLE) pronunciation. In fact, in the 1970s, there was open scorn of 'elocuted accents' in the Departments of English whereby Received Pronunciation (RP), the accent required to pass elocution examinations was vilified. Today, the vilification is more muted, but the comparison and contrast of SSLE and RP continue. An added dimension is the growth and popularity of Standard American English (SAE) as exemplified by Cable News Network (CNN). Sri Lankan technocrats, including academics from the Science faculties claim to speak SAE. Another finding of the study is that the elocution teaching industry too, has changed to being called schools of speech and drama, and are continuing to teach English with an accent, which is slightly different from RP. The use of mid, centralized vowels such as the schwa /ə/ instead of the more open wedge /ʌ/ for 'but' and 'company' is an example of this modified RP.

The conclusions of the study show three main trends: a) the use of aspects of British/American accents to mask insecurity, b) to demonstrate the user's perceived sense of superiority through access to westernized accents, and c) scorn of other Asian varieties of English, mainly Tamil Nadu or Chennai English. A related finding is the ability of some Sri Lankan professionals to be able to switch accents on and off, depending on the context. The overarching finding is that SSLE is the norm, although ironically not claimed as such by the majority of its users.