

Socio-Cultural Aspects Reflected in a Language: An Analysis of Degrees of Respect in Spoken Sinhala

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Analysis of any living language provides an insight into the socio-cultural aspects of the relevant speech community since cultural values; norms, traditions and beliefs are reflected in the language. Albeit a native speaker acquires competency in the mother tongue effortlessly, a foreign or second language learner will be confronted with the daunting task of grasping the finer points of unwritten rules of a given speech community. Thus, despite mastering phonological, morphological or syntactic rules, a non-native speaker will fail to communicate successfully and integrate himself with the native speakers. Apart from scholars engaged in research on Sinhala, learners of Sinhala as a foreign language, visitors to Sri Lanka and expatriates have long felt the need of a comprehensive study of socio-cultural aspects of the speech community, as relevant research hitherto conducted is limited. In an attempt to contribute to filling this void, this paper will discuss degrees of respect depicted in Spoken Sinhala by analysing the existing corpora and secondary data.

The study focuses on both monolingual and bilingual native speakers of Sinhala with an attempt to discuss how both groups communicate and express their levels of respect towards the addressee or the third person. The reference indices, forms of greeting, expression of gratitude are some of the aspects considered in this analysis. The results of the study indicate that non-verbal communication plays a significant role in expression of respect especially among the monolingual speakers. Furthermore, the differences between social groups, age, social status, level of education, urban, rural, monolingual, bilingual, laymen and monks and the religion play a significant role in determining the expression of degree of respect in Spoken Sinhala. Despite the advancement of technology, modernisation and influence from other cultures due to globalisation, cultural values and traditions inherent to Sinhala native speakers are still strongly reflected in the language. Hence it is expected that this paper will provide an insight into the aspects of degrees of respect expressed in modern Spoken Sinhala.

Key words: sociolinguistics, Spoken Sinhala, degrees of respect, monolingual and bilingual speakers