

Sri Lankan English: mapping speech variation in a “Linguistic Area”

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Sri Lankan English (SLE) defined in general as “the language used by Sri Lankans who chose to use English for whatever purpose in Sri Lanka” (Gunasekara 2005: 11), is supposedly spoken by a numerically small social elite, who are geographically confined to the capital, Colombo, its’ suburbs and comprising of the majority ethnic Sinhalese of the Indian Ocean island. Seldom would a definition surface that is explicitly indicative of the existence of English speakers whose first language is *not* Sinhalese – or of other ethnic L1 speakers.

In effect, linguistic mapping of SLE had been hereto largely mono ethnocentric passing over essential insights to understand the linguistic developments resulting in language change in an L2 variety of English - precisely in a *sub* South Asian linguistic area. This renders imperative a closer examination of the socio-interactional contexts in which the mingling of input superstrate varieties of English with that of minority substrates had caused contact-induced variation.

Consequently, my findings explore the linguistic features of Sri Lankan English as the essential expression of the multiethnic and hence multilingual composition of a country situated off-shore mainland India; contagious for centuries of migration and sea trade patterns.

With attention to historically evolving social relations, I establish the key sociolinguistic variables (such as L1 substrate, age, geographical location and social class) that have fashioned SLE – both in its development and change – by examining the varied phonological properties of this South Asian variety of English in its everyday usage as well as in comparison to selected features of Indian English (Broad) rendering a regional perspective.

The conclusions I derive rest on a corpus consisting of recordings with associated metadata that was collected during three field trips to Sri Lanka from August 2008 to August 2010, each trip lasting for a period of four weeks. The oral data, comprising elicitations, direct translations and free speech, was gathered within the environs of Colombo and is representative of SLE speakers, who are members of a social class that subsist on a steady monthly income. These speakers were then clustered into four age groups; representatives, in terms of their L1, of the two most widely spoken native substrates – Sinhalese and Tamil.

My results in return, display a variety of phonological processes applied in 2nd language acquisition such as sound substitution, under- and over- differentiation; indicative of common and differing strategies used by the Tamil (Dravidian) and Sinhala (Indo-Iranian: Indic) L1 speakers.

In comprehending the resultant composite of phonological features, the complex sociolinguistic processes that have generated SLE are necessarily understood as much as a legacy of the colonial past as of the communal status and acquisition planning strategies, characteristic of post-independent Sri Lanka, i.e. of former Ceylon.

Reference:

Gunasekara, Manique. (2005). *The Postcolonial Identity of Sri Lankan English*. Colombo: Katha Publishers.