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Sri Lankan English: an appropriate model for the teaching of English in Sri Lanka?

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1. Abstract

Since the launch in 2009 of a “Presidential Initiative” to promote “English as a life skill” in schools – popularly known as “Speak English our way” – the subject of Sri Lankan English (SLE) has become a controversial topic. Some welcomed the initiative as a way of taking ownership of the English language, stripping it of its colonial baggage, and making it more relevant to the practical needs of Sri Lankan learners; others saw it as a sign of falling standards, creating and validating a devalued variety of English which would disadvantage Sri Lankans on the world stage.

This paper will look at the background to the “English as a life skill” initiative and examine the arguments for and against promoting the local variety of English as a model for learners. It will also discuss the background to the Sri Lankan English debate, and the extent to which SLE is understood and accepted by Sri Lankan teachers, learners and speakers of English.

(Additional comments in brackets refer to comments made during the presentation, and at other sessions during the conference.)

2. English as a Life Skill

During 2009 the government launched a Presidential Initiative to promote “English as a Life Skill” in schools. This was an ambitious programme which aimed, within an 18-month period from June 2009, to achieve the following:

- training of 21,984 teachers in spoken/communicative English
- training of teachers as Master Trainers at EFLU Hyderabad
- introducing spoken English into the school syllabus and examination system
- preparation of new teaching materials in spoken/communicative English
- introduction of public examinations for learners and teachers of English
- production of a TV programme for distance teaching of spoken English
- training of public servants in English as a Life Skill
- introducing spoken/communicative English to private tutorials

(from Road Map to promote spoken/communicative English skills in Sri Lanka, 2009)

Some of the rhetoric surrounding the initiative was interesting. In the same document, Presidential Advisor Sunimal Fernando wrote about a “paradigm shift” in English

teaching, from “the old, conservative, outdated, elitist Sri Lankan ideology of English that still enjoys an unwarranted amount of social legitimacy and power, which sees English as an instrument of social oppression, the prized possession of a privileged class and an exclusive emblem of upper class status, to be therefore spoken as an English person would speak - with unblemished diction, perfect grammar and technically perfect pronunciation. This anti-national ideology of English was crafted by our Anglo-centric urban elites as one that provided the gateway to the West and a repudiation of our own values and heritage.”

... to “a new Sri Lankan ideology of English that ... sees English for its utility value and not for its social worth, English as a skill for employment and a vehicle for reaching out to the external world of knowledge and learning, English as a straight and simple tool of communication stripped of its historical baggage, English as a common property resource to be owned by all – “English as a Life Skill” similar to other natural life skills such as the skills to ride a motor-cycle or drive a car or use a computer.”

(quoted in Sunday Observer, 21 June 2009)

And in an interview published in Business Today in March 2009, Sunimal Fernando spoke of building on the achievements of 1956:

“What we disempowered, or shall we say destroyed in 1956 was the ideology of English as an instrument of social oppression, English as the repudiation of our own cultural values, English as the prized possession of a privileged class. What we are bringing in now through the Presidential Initiative is “English as a life skill”. ... We disempowered one kind of English, one ideology of English, and we are bringing in another kind of English which has another kind of ideology.”

(Business Today, March 2009)

(In his keynote speech at the conference, Sunimal Fernando reiterated this theme, drawing comments from the audience expressing the widely held view that 1956 represented a severe setback in English language education in Sri Lanka.)

As part of the Presidential Initiative a publicity campaign was launched in which celebrities such as Sanath Jayasuriya and Susanthika Jayasinghe spoke of the importance of English, and emphasised that they were happy to speak English “their way”. The motto “Speak English our way” was adopted by the programme, together with the symbol of the *manna* knife (symbolically replacing the earlier image of English as a *kaduwa*, or sword).

As a publicity campaign it seems to have been remarkably successful. Suddenly everyone was talking about “English our way”. The comments at the time seemed to divide roughly evenly between those that welcomed the initiative as a way of taking ownership of the English language, stripping it of its colonial baggage, and making it relevant to the practical needs of ordinary Sri Lankans, and those who feared that it was a sign of falling standards, creating and validating a devalued variety of English which would

disadvantage Sri Lankans on the world stage.

The existence of Sri Lankan English as an area of academic research, and the idea that a local variety of English exists and has been validated by ELT professionals, fitted very conveniently into the agenda of the Presidential Initiative. It seemed that scarcely a day went by that there was not an article about Sri Lankan English or “English our way”, and the two terms started to be used interchangeably. The confusion was understandable, but I feel it is important to differentiate between the two terms because of their different origins and connotations.

“Sri Lankan English” is an inclusive term – or it certainly should be, incorporating all the various ways in which English is used in Sri Lanka, by people from different regions, different ethnic and linguistic groups, different religions, different generations, different social classes, etc. This point is emphasised by the fact that the chapter on SLE by Dushyanthi Mendis and Harshana Rambukwella in the latest edition of the *Routledge Handbook of World Englishes* (2010) is titled “Sri Lankan Englishes”, acknowledging the increasing recognition not only of SLE itself, but also of its various sub-varieties.

But in the political context in which it was introduced, the term “English our way” aroused suspicions that the “our” was not an inclusive term, but one which defined English the Colombo way, or the Sinhala way, or some other way which was not necessarily what everyone could call “ours”. I personally followed the debate closely, partly because it related to my own area of interest, Sri Lankan English, but also because from the perspective of “World Englishes”, I saw it as an interesting development – the first time to my knowledge that a national government had so enthusiastically embraced its own local variety of English.

Among the criticisms of the programme mentioned at the time was a deep mistrust of the Indian involvement in the training process. People seemed to think that we would suddenly be teaching our children “Indian English” instead of “Sri Lankan English” or any other English, and that this idea was an anathema. The criticism implied the inferiority and unsuitability of the Indian model, and provided a cue for several disparaging remarks about Indian English in the press. But the involvement of EFLU Hyderabad was merely in a trainer-training capacity, so there was no reason why the process should have any effect on the English of the teachers themselves, or on the language they would be teaching.

Another widely held fear was that “English our way” meant abandoning standards altogether, a free-for-all where anything goes and no one cares. A more insidious variation on the same argument was the fear that somehow the programme was deliberately designed to lead to the creation of a two-tier system, where the Colombo elite would continue to speak a standard SLE almost identical to the international standard, while promoting a low-grade, “not-pot” variety for the masses.

My own concern at the time was that perhaps too much faith was being placed in Sri Lankan English, elevating it to the status of a magic wand which would transform

attitudes to English, allowing everything else to fall into place. But in reality it was just one element in a hugely ambitious project. The danger was that placing too much emphasis on SLE would detract from the much greater challenges facing English language educators in Sri Lanka – teacher training, methodology, syllabus design, materials development, etc. – all of which elements of the Presidential Initiative needed to be given equal or greater weight. Another danger was that over-emphasising SLE provided ammunition to the detractors who wished to undermine the effectiveness of the whole project by focusing on this one rather controversial aspect of it.

One task which was undertaken as part of the programme was an attempt to codify standard Sri Lankan English. A committee was set up in May 2010 under the auspices of the Presidential Initiative and the Ministry of Education, tasked with defining what is meant by “standard Sri Lankan English” and drawing up a guide for teachers. This was the only part of the Presidential Initiative in which I myself was involved, as a member of this committee alongside Sri Lankan ELT professionals from the universities and the NIE.

It was my personal hope that the committee could succeed in defining standard Sri Lankan English in terms which were compatible with current thinking in the ELT field, so that “English our way” would not mean abandoning standards as some feared, but redefining standards in a way which would be more relevant in the contemporary Sri Lankan context. But the work of the committee was never completed, and appears to have been abandoned, which I feel was a missed opportunity.

(Speaking from the audience during the presentation, Sunimal Fernando confirmed that the codification of SLE was indeed dropped from the agenda of the English as a Life Skill programme, for reasons outlined later in this paper.)

3. Standard Sri Lankan English

The term “standard Sri Lankan English” is used by Manique Gunsekera in her book, *The Post-Colonial Identity of Sri Lankan English* (2004), to describe the variety of English used by Sri Lankans who speak English as their first language, or who are bilingual in English and Sinhala or Tamil. Although “standard Sri Lankan English” itself has not yet been adequately codified, it is a more precise term than “Sri Lankan English”, which as mentioned earlier is an umbrella term covering all the different ways in which the language is used in Sri Lanka.

(In my presentation, I outlined some of the features of standard Sri Lankan English in the areas of lexis, grammar and phonology. These have been documented in my book, *A Dictionary of Sri Lankan English* (2007), and in other publications listed in the references at the end of this paper. For more information, see the website www.mirisgala.net.)

4. Relevance to English teaching in Sri Lanka

So what is the relevance of all this to the teaching of English in Sri Lanka? On one level, it is stating the obvious. It is creating materials relevant to the local environment in which, to take a simple example, students talk about mangoes and rambutans rather than blackberries and gooseberries. It is also perfectly natural, because since teachers themselves are Sri Lankan, speak Sri Lankan English, and share the Sri Lankan culture and environment of their students, they will inevitably, and subconsciously, model the language in a way which is locally appropriate, whatever materials they are using.

But it also needs to go further. Because as long as the official standard is one which is outdated, or alien, or unrealistic, there will always be uncertainty about what exactly should be taught, and what should be achieved at the end of the process.

Syllabus designers and materials writers should ensure that the content of the courses they design should be relevant to the local context, and that the language introduced should be consistent with the local standard. However, this is not to say that other varieties of English have no place. Especially at higher levels, students should be exposed to as many different varieties as possible; and the vast resource of authentic material provided by the internet should be exploited, not only as a source of language but also as a window on the world and a prompt for further discussion and research.

Testing is one area that cannot possibly be undertaken without agreement on accepted standards. It is unrealistic and unfair to test students' English ability according to an alien and outdated standard. This will apply particularly with the proposed introduction of a speaking test as part of the O-level exam which is one of the objectives of the Presidential Initiative, planned to be introduced in 2012.

Sri Lankan English is also relevant in the area of teaching and learning resources – for example dictionaries, which are seen as valuable resources for language teachers and learners. And yet the most widely available and authoritative dictionaries are of limited relevance to the local context. Take the Oxford Intermediate Learners' Dictionary of English for example. Looking through the C words, most of the words are core words which are likely to be relevant to any learner of English anywhere in the world: cabbage, cable, cage, cake, call, camel, camera, candle, car, cat, catch, caterpillar, cattle, ...

But there are also a number of marginal words: cagoule, Calor gas, car boot sale, cardigan, carnation, cashmere, caviar, Channel Tunnel, chestnut, chicory, chilblain, chimney sweep, chip shop, chrysanthemum, ciabatta, clementine, clotted cream, conker, cress... These are standard English words, which students might come across at some stage, but very UK/US specific, and therefore not priority language for an intermediate Sri Lankan learner.

On the other hand, another set of words is missing altogether: cadjan, carrom, chena, chilli powder, coir, copra, cowpea, curd pot, curry leaves, custard apple... These are all English words (not Sinhala/Tamil loanwords) which are necessary for Sri Lankan learners to describe the world around them. And they are not necessarily specific to Sri

Lanka – many of them would also be used in India, and elsewhere in South and South-East Asia.

Also under the letter C, collocations of the word *coconut* tell an interesting story. If you look up *coconut* in a standard British dictionary, you find *coconut matting*, *coconut milk*, and *coconut shy*. Of these only *coconut milk* is used in SLE, and this is often wrongly defined in standard dictionaries as the liquid inside a coconut, which is referred to as *coconut water* in Sri Lanka, while *coconut milk* is the liquid made by squeezing grated coconut with water, a basic ingredient of many Sri Lankan curries. You don't even find *coconut tree*, which is surely common to many varieties of English, but which in standard British English is referred to as a *palm tree*.

Apart from *coconut milk* and *coconut tree*, the word *coconut* is also found in a wide variety of other collocations in SLE: coconut arrack, coconut estate, coconut flower, coconut husk, coconut oil, coconut plucker, coconut sambol, coconut scraper, coconut shell, coconut toddy, etc.

An Intermediate Learners' Dictionary for Sri Lankan learners, taking account of these factors, would be a valuable resource. It could be a simpler and more affordable publication than the Oxford edition. And it could include notations identifying those words which are unique to Sri Lanka, or to South Asia, etc. Such a dictionary would serve not only as a reference book for learners, but also as a resource for teachers and materials writers, for example when choosing target language to be introduced, or checking how words are used, or spelt, in SLE.

This is just one example of an area where acknowledging the relevance of SLE to English teaching in Sri Lanka, could lead to the development of resources which could be of genuine practical value to learners and teachers of English.

5. Conclusion

So what became of "Speak English our way"? After a flurry of publicity last year, it seemed to fade away. I cannot comment on the overall effectiveness of the Presidential Initiative, because I do not have any direct experience of the programme myself. But as far as the question of Sri Lankan English was concerned, it seems that there were three issues which led to it being quietly dropped from the agenda. Firstly, resistance from the general public in the form of a number of articles and pronouncements, in the press and elsewhere. Secondly, resistance from teachers and other ELT professionals who remained unsure about what was really meant by Sri Lankan English, and therefore felt uncomfortable about being told to teach it – including perhaps, within the Education Ministry itself. And finally, resistance from academics and ELT professionals in Jaffna, who felt that "Sri Lankan English" was a Colombo-centric concept which did not take adequate account of the way English is used by all language communities, and especially by Tamil speakers.

(Sunimal Fernando confirmed during the presentation that this was a significant factor in the decision to drop SLE from the agenda. In another presentation, Sriranjini Anandakumarasamy from the University of Jaffna showed that recent English language textbooks for use in schools all over the country include a large number of Sinhala words presented as “Sri Lankan English”, but which are not familiar to Tamil speakers in the North, and many of which have English and/or Tamil equivalents. And the same criticism can be made of materials in the Teacher Guide produced by the English as a Life Skill programme and distributed during the conference.)

“Sri Lankan English” should be an inclusive term, incorporating elements of the way the language is used in all parts of the island, and by all communities. But it is true that the majority of the people who have written about the subject have been Colombo-based, and/or Sinhala-speaking. The danger then is that fears about the true meaning of the “our” in “English our way” can seem justified, and the inclusion of a few Tamil words like *kovil* and *thosai* in SLE wordlists can seem tokenistic. For this reason it is vital to involve Tamil-speaking ELT professionals in the process of defining standard SLE, so that it is genuinely inclusive, and seen to be so.

(In his comments, Sunimal Fernando suggested that in the absence of standard Sri Lankan English as a model, “English our way” means encouraging learners to speak English their own way, giving them the confidence to express themselves in English, even if they make mistakes. This is accepted communicative methodology, but it is only one part of the picture, because it assumes that learners are exposed to a standard model of the target language, so that they can learn from their mistakes and improve. But in a classroom environment, this may not be the case. This is why an agreed standard is so important. And I believe that “standard Sri Lankan English” can provide a relevant, realistic and definable standard.)

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Further reading:

The Post-Colonial Identity of Sri Lankan English, by Manique Gunsekera (Katha Publishers, 2004)
A Dictionary of Sri Lankan English, by Michael Meyler (author publication, 2007)
Sri Lankan English: a distinct South Asian variety, by Michael Meyler (English Today 100, 2009)
Sri Lankan Englishes, by Dushyanthi Mendis and Harshana Rambukwella: chapter in the Routledge Handbook of World Englishes (Routledge, 2010)
www.mirisgala.net