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# Sri Lankan English: a distinct South Asian variety

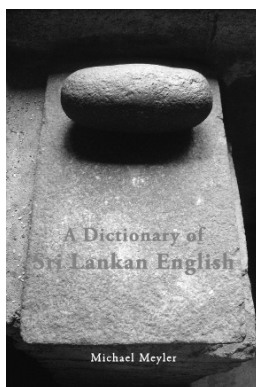
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Identifying and describing Sri Lankan English

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## Introduction

In November 2007, I published a book called *A Dictionary of Sri Lankan English*.<sup>1</sup> The dictionary contains approximately 2,500 examples of words and expressions which are characteristic of the English spoken in Sri Lanka. It is not intended to be a work of purely academic



interest, and, accordingly, it avoids as much linguistic jargon as possible. The dictionary is intended to be accessible to the general reader, and will hopefully be of interest to foreigners living in Sri Lanka, Sri Lankan students and teachers of English, and anyone with an interest in international varieties of English. Every entry is glossed with reference to so-called 'standard' British English, together with a pronunciation guide, examples of usage, quotes from published books, illustrations, and further notes. There is also an introduction outlining the main features of Sri Lankan English.

To coincide with the publication of the dictionary, I launched an associated website – [www.mirisgala.net](http://www.mirisgala.net) – which includes information about the book, photographs of many items in the book, and most importantly a page of updates, corrections and new entries, based partly on feedback from readers. I hope that the website will mean that an updated edition of the book itself will not be necessary, at least for a number of years.

The main aims of this paper are to present

the argument for the recognition of Sri Lankan English as a distinct variety of English, and to discuss some of the practical issues encountered in compiling a dictionary of this nature.<sup>2</sup>

## Sri Lankan English: Attitudes, awareness, research

It will not come as a surprise to readers of this journal that such a thing as Sri Lankan English (SLE) exists. What would perhaps be surprising is the controversy surrounding the issue in Sri Lanka itself, which involves the resistance in certain quarters to the idea that SLE deserves to be recognized as a separate variety, and the lack of awareness (even amongst its own users) of its distinctive features. This is due perhaps in part to the lack of any kind of codification of SLE up to now. Academics have been writing about SLE since around the time of independence in 1948, but few books have been published on the subject for the general reader, with the notable exception of Manique



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Gunesequera's book *The Post-Colonial Identity of Sri Lankan English* (Katha Publishers 2004), which, together with my dictionary, are the only books currently available on the subject in Sri Lanka. This is in striking contrast to India, where research on Indian English dates back to Hobson Jobson in the 19th century, and numerous books and dictionaries are available. My edition of the *Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary* (OUP 1996) even comes with a 42-page Indian English supplement.

My impression is that in recent years there has been increasing awareness of Sri Lankan English in academic circles. But there is still a lot of resistance to the concept elsewhere – both internal resistance among speakers of SLE themselves, and external resistance from the rest of the English-speaking world. In Sri Lanka the term 'Sri Lankan English' still carries connotations of 'broken English', something sub-standard and inferior. Many speakers of SLE do not like to be told that is what they speak, and most learners of the language aspire to speak 'British English' and nothing less! Unfortunately, this attitude is exacerbated by the fact that many teachers (both local and foreign) tend to share the same view.

Outside Sri Lanka, there is virtually nothing to show that SLE even exists. Many people are ignorant of the fact that there are a significant number of people in Sri Lanka who actually speak English as their first language, and where this is acknowledged, it is generally assumed to be some sort of sub-variety of Indian English. Part of the problem has always been the lack of documented evidence showing that SLE exists, and identifying the features that define it.

The question of attitudes and awareness is particularly relevant in the field of education. Dinali Fernando, one of the editors of my dictionary, is the author of an unpublished study titled 'Sri Lankan English in the Sri Lankan classroom: a study of teachers' awareness of their own variety', in which she shows that while Sri Lankan teachers of English are generally positive in their attitude towards SLE, they remain relatively unaware of what exactly it consists of, and how it differs from standard English.

My hope is that my dictionary of Sri Lankan English may help to raise awareness of the features of SLE among teachers, learners and users of English in Sri Lanka. Probably the next significant step will be the completion of the written component of ICE-SL – previously and

more memorably known as 'SLICE' – the Sri Lankan component of the International Corpus of English. Work has been ongoing for a number of years, and is currently being undertaken at the University of Giessen in Germany. The 400,000-word written component of the corpus is expected to be completed this year. This will be a valuable source of empirical data for researchers. Unfortunately, though, the spoken component of a further 600,000 words is likely to take much longer to complete.

### **Sri Lankan English: the regional context**

Sri Lankan English belongs to the family of South Asian Englishes, of which Indian English is the best known and most established example – although Indian English itself is of course hugely diverse. Indian English and Sri Lankan English have much in common, as both varieties evolved from the English of the British colonials of the nineteenth century, and much common vocabulary developed to describe the common flora and fauna of the two countries, as well as their shared religious and cultural aspects. Both varieties include a number of words of Tamil origin, and many others derived from Sanskrit roots.

One might expect Indian and Sri Lankan English to be almost identical. And indeed that is the assumption of much that has been written on the subject of World Englishes. There is a tendency to think of Sri Lankan English as being just a sub-variety of Indian English, an impression encouraged by the relative lack of documentary evidence of SLE as an independent variety. Anyone who is familiar with both varieties will be aware that this is not the case. In fact it seems to me that in the years since independence there has been remarkably little cross-fertilization between the two, and Sri Lankan English has forged its own quite independent identity. However, this may change with the increasing economic power of India, as the popularity of Indian satellite TV channels is starting to expose Sri Lankans to more Indian English.

Another difference that is worth mentioning is the linguistic context in which English exists in India and Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka is essentially a trilingual country. Apart from a very small minority (e.g. speakers of Sri Lankan Malay) most people speak one, two or three languages, and that is all they are ever likely to

need. In India, there are hundreds or even thousands of different languages and dialects, and many people encounter several of them on a regular basis in different situations. In this respect Sri Lanka may be closer to places like Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia, each of which has three or four major languages. In the case of Singapore and Malaysia, three of the four major languages (English, Malay and Tamil) are also found in Sri Lanka. Something else that Sri Lanka shares with Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia is the relative lack of recognition and acceptance of the local variety of English – unlike India, where Indian English has long been recognized as an established variety of English, and has been well documented ever since Hobson Jobson. There is a widely held perception in all these countries that British and American English are the only valid varieties, and all three communities – like Sri Lanka – face major issues surrounding the official status of English and the use of English as a medium of instruction in schools.

### Features of Sri Lankan English

Three major examples of the specific features that distinguish Sri Lankan English from Indian English are (i) the high frequency of Sinhala loanwords, (ii) differences in the usage of shared vocabulary, and (iii) the pronunciation of ‘r’ in SLE.

The most obvious unique characteristic of SLE is the sheer number of Sinhala loanwords that it includes. This is not surprising: Sinhala is after all the majority language of Sri Lanka, and since it is not spoken anywhere else, these words are likely to be unique to the island. These words refer especially to the flora and fauna of the country, to different types of food and drink, and to Buddhism, the majority religion of the country. SLE also includes loanwords from Tamil, Hindi, Malay, Arabic, Dutch, Portuguese and other languages, but most of these are likely to be common to other varieties of South Asian and/or South-East Asian English.

A more specific distinction is seen in the way certain words shared by Indian and Sri Lankan English are used. Take the word *lakh* for instance. This Hindi word means one hundred thousand, and even the way it is written numerically (1,00,000), is different from the standard British (and international) convention for writing this number (100,000). The

word is very common in everyday written and spoken SLE. But interestingly the Hindi word *crore* (meaning 100 lakhs, or 10 million) – which is equally common in Indian English – is hardly used in Sri Lanka. There is also a difference in the way the word *lakh* is used. In Indian English it is used in the same way as equivalent words such as thousand and million: ‘six lakh rupees’. But in SLE this would normally be expressed as ‘six lakhs of rupees’. These examples from a quick Google search illustrate the difference:

- Private security industry generating 10 lakh jobs every year (*Economic Times*, India)
- More than two lakhs of patients attend this hospital for treatment in a year. (jaffnan-gos.org, Sri Lanka)

In the area of phonology, SLE differs from Indian English in the pronunciation of ‘r’ sounds. In SLE, as in standard British English pronunciation and in Welsh, Australian and South African English, the letter ‘r’ is not pronounced in words like *mother*, *card* and *earth*, as is common in Scottish, Irish, American and many varieties of Indian English. In addition, SLE does not normally include a ‘linking r’ in phrases such as these: *mother and father*, *here and there*, *four or five*, *you better ask*, etc. In standard British English pronunciation, the final ‘r’ is pronounced in these cases where it is followed by an initial vowel in the next word, while in SLE the ‘r’ is not pronounced.

I have mentioned three specific examples where SLE differs in some way from Indian and other varieties of English. But it would be wrong to say that any variety of English consists only of those features which are unique to that variety. What distinguishes any variety of English is the particular combination of lexical, grammatical and phonological features that it comprises – including those features which are shared with other varieties. In the case of SLE, this includes many features of standard contemporary British English; others which date back to the English of the British colonial period, including Anglo-Indian and other items which are also found in contemporary Indian English; words of Sinhala origin which are unique to Sri Lanka, as well as words of Tamil and Hindi origin which are also used in India, words of Malay, Dutch and Portuguese origin which are also used in South-East Asia, and words of Arabic origin which are part of international Muslim English. Finally, it includes

many collocations which, while not necessarily unique to SLE, lend Sri Lankan discourse a distinctively 'local' flavour simply because of the frequency with which they are used. In the course of compiling my dictionary, I found that collocations such as these were a particularly rich source, collectively bestowing on SLE its own unique identity.

For example, collocations of the words *coconut*, *rice* and *tea* tell an interesting story. If you look up *coconut* in a standard British dictionary, what do you find? *Coconut matting*, *coconut milk*, and *coconut shy!* 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'. And *coconut milk* is often wrongly defined in British dictionaries as 'the liquid inside a coconut', which is referred to as *coconut water* in Sri Lanka. *Coconut milk*, on the other hand, is the liquid made by squeezing grated coconut with water, a basic ingredient of many Sri Lankan curries. Apart from *coconut tree* and *coconut milk*, the word *coconut* is also found in a wide variety of other collocations in SLE: *coconut arrack*, *coconut estate*, *coconut husk*, *coconut oil*, *coconut sambol*, *coconut scraper*, *coconut shell*, *coconut toddy*, and many others.

We find a similar multiplicity when it comes to *rice* and *tea*. In British English, we have a relatively small set of collocations for *rice*, including *rice field*, *rice paper*, and *rice pudding* (none of which are used in SLE). Whereas in Sri Lankan English, one has *rice belly*, *rice cooker*, *rice flour*, *rice mill*, *rice packet*, *rice puller*, etc. In the case of *tea*, British English gives us *teabag*, *tea break*, *tea cloth*, *tea cosy*, *teacup*, *tea party*, *teapot*, *teashop*, *teaspoon*, *tea table*, *teatime*, *tea towel*, and *tea trolley* (all of which relate to the national habit of drinking a cuppa). Sri Lankan English, by contrast, has *tea country*, *tea dust*, *tea estate*, *tea factory*, *tea leaves*, and *tea plucker* (all of which refer to the production process).

## Setting standards for Sri Lankan English

In compiling the *Dictionary of Sri Lankan English*, it was necessary for me to make decisions about how words should be spelt, as well as matters of grammatical usage.

### Spelling

More than any other, spelling is one area where dictionaries are expected to be prescriptive,

and we are used to looking up words in the dictionary to check their correct spelling. The problem for the dictionary maker, however, is how to spell a word of non-English origin like *aachchi* (grandmother) or *thaaththa* (father) which does not yet appear in any dictionary, and which is normally used only in spoken contexts. There is clearly a dilemma in attempting to strike a balance between being consistent in spelling conventions, and reflecting actual usage, which is far from consistent. In the end, it often comes down to the lexicographer's own subjective decision.

### Grammar

Another issue is where one draws the line between what is an acceptable example of Sri Lankan English on the one hand, and what is better described as an 'error' on the other. I was particularly aware of this issue because of what I mentioned earlier: the reluctance among Sri Lankans to accept SLE as a distinct variety, and the belief that 'Sri Lankan English' equates with 'learner English' or 'broken English'. As a British English speaker myself, and teaching English at the British Council, there was a danger that many readers would interpret my dictionary in terms of right and wrong, which was not the idea. For myself, my intention was simply to describe the way the English language is used in Sri Lanka, without making any judgements about what might be regarded as 'correct' or 'incorrect'.

However, merely by deciding to include a particular word or expression, the compiler is inevitably bestowing upon it with the seal of acceptability. My dictionary includes many features of colloquial SLE which would be recognized as mistakes by teachers (and examiners) of standard English, and indeed by many speakers of standard SLE. For example:

- I'm having a fever.
- I wish I don't have to go.
- He told he'll definitely come.
- Lot of problems are there.
- She is three years elder to me.
- You must be knowing him.
- You better ask from your father.
- You'll come, no? tomorrow.
- Can't with these children!
- Raining so no tennis.
- Haven't any rice.

These features are marked '(coll.)' in the dictionary, showing that while they may be common features of the colloquial language, they



## M

**-ma**

/-mə/ (Sinhala emphatic ending, also added to English words for emphasis and/or humorous effect) ° *sitting in the front-ma front seat* ° *You must-ma come!*

**maaduru**

/məduru/ sweet cumin (Sinhala) (> *suduru*)

**maama**

/məmə/ uncle (mother's brother or father's sister's husband) (Sinhala/Tamil) ° *Mahinda maama*

- "Gnanamma, I whispered, mischievously, contracting Gnanam and *mama* (uncle) into a girl's name, as I used to when I was a boy. (WMD 208)
- "No, maama," ... (CG 122)
- How could a little girl play so much magic in the heart of her Maama, ... (KCS 42)

**maami**

/məmi/ (= *nenda*) aunt (father's sister or mother's brother's wife) (Tamil)

- "Yes, maamee." (CG 125)
- "Bala Maama, I came to see Sonia Maamee," ... (CG 333)
- ... and Niloufer Maami always asks

**machang**

/mətʃəŋ/ (coll.) a fight between close male friends (from *machaan*) ° *I got into a machang with him* ° *on machang terms.*

- You tell them you must win
- "Anil, machang" (FB 71)
- "Machang" looking nice "brother-in-law" as a form of acknowledgment of brothers (TT 195)
- "Why so young difference"
- Why him five years (OD)
- "Yes" (RU)
- "I" dr b
- "
- "
- "
- "

**mad: are you mad?**

(coll.) nonsense! rubbish! → Like 'lies', the word 'mad' is used in a more light-hearted way in SLE than in BSE.

**madam**

(term of respect, dated in BSE); also used (sometimes ironically) to refer to President Chandrika Kumaratunga (> *sir*) ° *Madam still hasn't turned up!* ° *Madam was very happy with the news.*

**maddo**

/məðo/ (coll.) a crazy person (usually female) ° *She's a real maddo.*

- "That old maddo will live more than all of us." (YY 19)

**made-up saree**

a Kandyan saree which is cut and tailored to make it easier to wear

**madithi**

/məditi/ a tree with small bright red seeds similar to *olinda* seeds (Sinhala)

- Claudia gathered up the crimson seedpods that had fallen from the *madhitchi* tree on the edge of the lawn and I threaded them onto cotton. (HC 83)

**maduruwas**

/məduruwas/ (coll.) mosquitoes (Sinhala)



MAGUL BERA

**maha**

/məhə/ one of the two annual paddy harvests (Sinhala) (> *yala*)

**maha gedera**

/məhə gedərə/ (= *ancestral home*) (Sinhala) (> *walauwa*) ° *All the family had gathered at the maha gedera for the event.*

**mahal; mahan**

/məhəl, məhən/ daughter; son (Tamil) (> *merlay; mernay*)

- "Meena, ... I am soaking wet, *mahal*." (WMD 386)

**mahanayake**

/məhənəyəkə/ a senior Buddhist priest (Sinhala) ° *Malwarte Mahanayake's funeral today* ° *TNA delegation to meet Mahanayakes on Monday*

**Mahapola**

Figures 1 and 2: Sri Lankan English – *ma* to *Mahapola*

would not necessarily be considered acceptable in a more formal written context. Others, such as these examples of the use of tenses, may also be found in written contexts:

- The robbers had escaped in a white van.
- An important letter can arrive this week.
- Application forms could be obtained from the secretary.
- This email address would not be valid from next week.
- I knew the car will be there, and sure enough it was.

I believe that including such features is the best way to reflect the way that English is actually used in the current Sri Lankan context. The excerpts from the dictionary shown above illustrate the way in which the volume is set out, and the way in which commentary on Sri Lankan vocabulary and grammar is incorporated into the text. As these excerpts show, all of the entries contain some or all of the following features: a pronunciation guide (written in the phonetic font which I developed myself for writing Sinhala and Tamil phonetically);

cross-references written in bold type; example phrases and sentences written in italics; notes comparing Sri Lankan and British usage; and quotes from a selection of 30 published works of fiction. The latter are all novels and collections of short stories published between 1982 and 2006; set mostly or entirely in a Sri Lankan context; and written by Sri Lankan authors, or authors of Sri Lankan origin living abroad.

### Sri Lankan English literature

The Singaporean poet Edwin Thumboo, speaking at the Hong Kong International Association for World Englishes (IAWE) conference in December 2008, commented that it is often literature that leads the way in establishing and standardizing a new variety of English. Many loanwords from indigenous languages, and many colloquial expressions and creative coinages, first find their way into print in fiction. In choosing to illustrate entries in my dictionary with quotes from English-language Sri Lankan fiction, I realise in retrospect that in a

small way I have documented a part of this process.

English literature in Sri Lanka still has a way to go when compared to India, with its extraordinary array of internationally recognized English-language writers: Amit Chaudhuri, Amitav Ghosh, Anita and Kiran Desai, Rohinton Mistry, R. K. Narayan, Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, and Vikram Seth, to name a few. One of the problems is the widely held feeling that Sri Lankan English is not appropriate in the context of creative writing. But there are a number of English-language writers who are starting to forge a Sri Lankan fictional identity in their work, and who have in the process helped to define the identity of SLE itself. Apart from diasporic writers like Michael Ondaatje, Romesh Gunsekera, Shyam Selvadurai and Michelle de Kretser, others writing locally, and employing a more authentically Sri Lankan idiom, include Yasmine Gooneratne, Ameena Hussein, Lal Medawattegedera, Carl Muller, and Manuka Wijesinghe.

## Conclusion

Codification of different varieties of English is clearly an important first step in getting them accepted. It seems extraordinary that – as far as I am aware – there is still no established dictionary of Hong Kong English or Singaporean English or Malaysian English, or indeed of any other so-called ‘outer circle’ variety of English – with the notable exception of Indian English, which is well documented and seems to be gaining recognition both within India and outside. I hope that my book might serve two purposes: first, to raise awareness of Sri Lankan English both within Sri Lanka and outside; and, second, to serve as a model for similar dictionaries of other South and South-East Asian varieties – a model which can no doubt be improved upon, not least by benefiting from newer developments such as corpus-based research. ■

## Notes

1. Meyler, Michael (2007) *A Dictionary of Sri Lankan English* (with Dinali Fernando and Vivimarie VanderPoorten). Colombo: Michael Meyler. The dictionary may be purchased directly from Michael Meyler at <michaelm@sltnet.lk>. Further details may also be found at: <www.mirisgala.net>.

2. This article is based partly on presentations

given at the conference of the International Association of World Englishes (Hong Kong, December 2008) and at the Galle Literary Festival (Galle, Sri Lanka, January 2009).

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