Colloquial Sinhala language as a mixed discourse variety; a study on the syntactic and semantic impact of English language on present day colloquial Sinhala language

S.A.R.R.P.Dissanayake

Abstract

This study focuses on the mixing context involving in two languages, Sinhala and English. The mixing context between these two languages in Sri Lanka has brought about considerable changes in present day colloquial Sinhala language, which has resulted in creating a mixed discourse variety. The mixed code has effectively equipped the Sinhala speaker to meet the challenges of the present.

The aim of this study is to identify some structural properties of Sinhala and English languages that characterize this mixed variety. The study analyzes the structural properties focusing on the syntactic and semantic aspects of present day colloquial Sinhala language. The study is explanatory. It is based on a range of data collected in ordinary conversations among a group of TV announcers.

Many English loan words are used in colloquial Sinhala language. However, these loan words have been modified; mostly they have been given new semantic values. Further, they have been changed to accommodate syntactic properties of Sinhala language. As a result, the original words have lost their original syntactic and semantic

properties.The study opens up new dimensions for linguistic analysis of emerging discourse variety within Sinhala language.

Key Words; mixed discourse variety, syntactic properties, semantic modification, colloquial Sinhala language, borrowing

Introduction

Language change is a common phenomenon among communities. All languages are bound to change, and such change may be attributed to factors such as economy, contact and cultural environment. According to Sapir (1949: 171), "Nothing is perfectly static. Every word, every grammatical element, every locution, every sound and accent is a slowly changing configuration, molded by the invisible and impersonal drift that is the life of language." Large-scale shifts often occur in response to social, economic and political pressures. History records many examples of language change fueled by invasions, colonization and migration. Even without these kinds of influences, a language can change dramatically if enough users alter the way they speak it.Frequently, the needs of speakers drive language change.

In Sri Lanka, Sinhala is spoken alongside Tamil, English and Malay. Sinhala iswidely used in both formal and informal contexts. Apart from being widely used athome, a visit to the supermarket or a government office most certainly means using Sinhalafor many speakers. Though not used in some specific formal domains, Sinhala isused in most domains with many interlocutors by most Sri Lankan bilinguals. In fact, Sinhala is one of thelegislated official national languages and is spoken by over 75% of the populationin Sri Lanka. Sinhala is legislated as a medium of instruction in education while English is legislated as a link language. English holds the key to upward social mobility and is a symbol of power and prestige.

When two languages are in close contact with each other, words are easily borrowed, mostly from the language that has better social prestige. Borrowing is a very common process which is attested for all periods of the history of Sinhala. The reasons for borrowing are basically twofold. On the one hand there may be a necessity for a foreign word to fill a gap. The second reason for borrowing is because of the relative prestige of the speakers of English. The mixing context between these two languages in Sri Lanka has brought about drastic changes in Sinhala language. In fact, it has resulted in creating a mixed discourse variety.

The spoken variety of Sinhala used for purposes of general conversation is termed as 'colloquial Sinhala' in this study; it is used by all Sri Lankans, at all sociallevels. In essence, colloquial Sinhala cuts across class, education and socialboundaries. This colloquialvariety has been receptive over the years to a host of borrowings from English language.
An important agent in language change is the media. The media in Sri Lanka is dominated by Sinhala. Among the TV channels that function in Sinhala are Sri Lanka Rupavani Corporation, Independent Television Network, Sirasa TV, Swarnavahini, and TNL. Colloquial Sinhala is used by many of the programmes of these television channels. The colloquial Sinhala language used by announcers of these programmes reflects how Sinhala language has accommodated many elements of English language; their language can be better viewed as a mixed discourse variety.

Objective
The aim of this study was to identify some structural properties of Sinhala and English languages that characterize this mixed variety.The study analyzed the structural properties focusing on the syntactic and semantic aspects of present day colloquial Sinhala language.

Methodology

The study was confined to investigate the patterns of language use in authentic interaction of TV announcers; data were collected from samples of spoken language recorded from TV announcers authentic language use. Five TV programmes were recorded, each one exceeding 25 minutes; these included 73 minutes of news telecast and 120 minutes of entertainment programmes. The details of TV programmes are given in Table 1; interestingly, the titles of these programmes are English though they are Sinhala programmes. Since the goal of the research was to explore the characteristics of authentic language use among bilingual speakers as a whole, rather than any theoretically isolable aspect of language construction, the most appropriate method of data collection was a video-recorded study.While there are clearly difficulties and limitations in such an approach, it provided unique advantages for tracking the spontaneous production of utterances, which reflected common language use. This research design was useful for several reasons; since the purpose of the study was not theory building but exploring the peculiar patterns of language use, this approach was useful to identify the patterns of language use. It also provided one of the best opportunities to collect data naturalistically and to observe 'naturalistic language use' in context. However, the defect in this study design is that firm generalizations are not possible to account for changing nature of Sinhala language; most importantly, the selected announcers do not form a representative sample of the users of colloquial Sinhala.

Table 1; The details of TV programmes recorded

TV Channel	Title of the programme	Total duration of record
Live @ 55	Sirasa TV	48 minutes
Live at 8	Swarnawahini	25 minutes
Chat&	Independent Television	30 minutes

Music	Network	
Rhythm Chat	Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation	45 minutes
16+	Sirasa TV	50 minutes

Samples of utterances of the announcers were recorded; their speeches were taken down in broad phonetic script at first. Along with this data, it was attempted to record any surrounding linguistic context (what the announcer was doing, attending to etc.). 'Marginal notes' of researcher concerning interpretation, frequency, or uniqueness of such utterances or dialogues were also added; the study is one of explanatory.

Research Data

Data were collected and patterns emerging from data were analyzed. Examples for each of the identified processes were recorded in the study.Accordingly, several characteristics of this mixed discourse variety could be noted; types of syntactic changes and semantic modification are primarily discussed in this paper.

Syntactic changes incolloquial Sinhala

The striking characteristic of present day Sinhala is that it has borrowed a large number of elements from English language. The importance of the role of lexical and syntactic borrowing for language change has been studied by Thomason and Kaufman (1988). In most cases, in a situation of language contact between bilinguals, words are the first elements to enter a borrowing language. These borrowed words are usually modified to suit the morphological and syntactic patterns of the borrowing language. According to Thomason and Kaufman, if bilingualism is wide-spread and if there is strong long-term cultural pressure from source-language speakers on borrowing language speakers, "structural features - phonological, phonetic and syntactic

elements and even (though more rarely) features of the inflectional morphology may be borrowed" (Thomason and Kaufman, 1988: 37).

One way to estimate the relation of the Sinhala language to the borrowed element is to consider the two as being actually used in speech. An attempt was made to count every word used in each recording, including repetitions; the proportion of Sinhala to borrowed words was relatively high, higher than 16:1. On such a count, every recorded version used considerably more native words than borrowings. However, this was not statistically analyzed since the goal of the study was to identify the patterns of language change.

Apart from borrowing, other morphological processessuch as compounding and reduplication were also found in this study.The examples in Table 2, from freespoken data, illustrate the impact of English inclusions in present day colloquial Sinhala.

Table 2; impact of English inclusions in present day colloquial Sinhala

lunch time eke fun ekataekwennna apith ekka **phone eken**dan **kanektwenne**ragamin **friend kenek.**

At present, the inclusion of English lexical items is widespread inthe repertoire of the Sri Lankan bilingual. This is a result of the extensive use ofEnglish register-specific vocabulary in the spontaneous discourse of bilinguals.English words are generally included as direct lexical forms such as 'lunch time' and are nativized with the addition of a morpheme such as 'eke' (Table 1).

In Table 1, the English items such as 'lunch time', 'phone' and 'friend' patternsyntactically and phonologically with the borrower language. The Sinhala suffixes such as 'eke', ekata', 'eken' facilitate the process of integrating the alien items syntactically andmorphologically in all cases.

The process of compounding could be seen in a very peculiar way; the coined words contained one part of Sinhala word and the other of English;

webadaviya (web site)

noinduloveraya (maiden over)

vidulibalbaya (electric bulb)

chekpotha (cheque book)

gaslipa (gas stove)

The process of reduplication is a linguistic characteristic; in reduplication,lexical items belonging to various grammatical classes are reduplicated for emphasis. Reduplications are the result of the underlyinginfluence of one language on another. But in this study, it was noted that native English words are borrowed and their corresponding Sinhala meanings are repeated- a type of reduplication. These reduplications were important to this study as bilinguals constantly use them in mixed discourse;

> "catch allanawa"
>
> "pitipassata reverse karanawa"
>
> "nawatha nawatha repeat karanawa"
>
> "pitipassen follow karanawa"
>
> "bladethalaya"

This pattern of reduplication too suggests that Sinhala language has borrowed from English and this borrowing has worked in a variety of ways.

Further, English words are borrowed and their morphosyntactic properties are modified to suit Sinhala language. The following examples demonstrate how nouns are borrowed and the morpheme 'ya' or 'eka' is added;

> baisikalaya (bicycle + ya); a bicycle
>
> regimaya (regime + ya) ; a regime
>
> dongalaya (dongle + ya); a dongle
>
> careka ; car

telephoneeka; telephone

fileeka; file

Similarly, the morpheme 'karanawa' is added to verbs in the following examples;

istartkaranawa (start)

enjoykaranawa (enjoy)

trykaranawa; (try)

Rather unusual finding was noted in the following examples where preposition is used as a verb;

offkaranawa (switch off)

onkaranawa (switch on)

Thus we see extensive use of elements of English language. This can be explained as a result of code-switching between the two languages. According to Grosjean (1997: 228), 'bilinguals find themselves in a bilingual mode, in that they are communicating with bilinguals who share their two languages and with whom they normally mix languages'. As these bilinguals code switch – in the mixing context - in public media, the elements of English language become permanent features of colloquial Sinhala. This has resulted in creating a mixed discourse variety.

Semantic modification

Thomason and Kaufman (1988: 14)hold the view that "as far as the strictly linguistic possibilities go, any linguistic feature can be transferred from any language to any other language".This is true for meaning component of language too. We find instances of semantic modifications of original English words, when they are transferred in to colloquial Sinhala. Recent overviews on semantic modifications have been presented by Blank and Kock (1999), which provides us a useful guide for analysis of semantic modification in colloquial Sinhala.

The recorded speech in the study contained many words where the original meaning is modified. The word, 'Shape' is defined in Oxford

233

Dictionary as 'Form of the outer surfaces (noun) / make something into a particular way (verb)'. But in Sinhala speaker's use its original meaning is not retained; shape eke innawa/ shape wenawa/ shape karagannawa / shape nyaya,/ full shape. This has a close meaning to 'not interfering with one; negotiating with one'. The lexical meaning of the word 'game' is 'a sport with rules/ an occasion of playing a sport'. But the use of 'game karaya/gemadenawa/ gemaillanawa/ gemenmai' (playing tricks') suggests semantic modification of the original word. The use of the words in Table 3 too exemplifies semantic modification.

Table 3; Semantic modification of English words I

Word	Dictionary meaning	Use
Part	some but not all of a thing/ piece/ leave somebody/ move away	part ekadanawa /gon part (acting)
Hint	sign/suggestion/ do something to tell something in an indirect way	hint pass karanawa/ hint gahanawa (form of ridiculing)
Dim	not bright (light), cannot see well, vague	ful dim wela/ serama dim una (upset/frighten)
Scene	view/place something happens/ part of a film or play	ful scene/ mara scene eka /boru scene (incident; context dependent)
Dial	the face of a clock/ use telephone by pushing buttons	mara dial eka/ dial eka upset (attractive/mind; context dependent)

Boot	a strong shoe	boot ekadenawa / boot kanawa (refused by a lover)
Rim	the edge of something forming a circle/ forming an edge round	rim ekenyanawa (maintain with difficulty)

NB; The corresponding meanings are only close meanings, and are mostly context-dependent.

It would be useful for a future researcher to study how the colloquial meanings have been derived from the original English words.

However, in the examples quoted in Table 4, it is possible to associate the meanings of colloquial Sinhala words to their corresponding original English words, though they do not denote exact original meaning in the context.

Table 4; Semantic modification of English words II

Word	Dictionary meaning	Use
Top	highest position/highest rank/upper surface	top idea eka/ top ekatakara/ tope top (best/most)
Upset	to make somebody feel unhappy/sick/to make something fall over	ful upset/ mara upset eka/ upset una/ upset eke innawa/ upset yanawa/ upset karagaththa/ upset gannawa
Full	Complete	ful upset/ ful try

These words can be viewed as examples of semantic loan - a process of borrowing semantic meaning from another language. They may also

change further in future; though borrowed words undergo changes in the adopting language, they preserve some of their former peculiarities for a comparatively long period. However, it is equally important to note that the degree of assimilation of these borrowings depends on a number of factors. First, if the words are borrowed orally, they are assimilated quicker; in most of the instances quoted here, the words are borrowed orally – they are used in colloquial Sinhala only. Next, the greater the frequency of its usage, the quicker it is assimilated. Since, media propagates the use of these colloquial expressions the words enter Sinhala language easily.

Conclusion

The syntactic and semantic characteristics of Sinhala presentedin this paper emphasize the influence it has on mixed discourse.Furthermore, the historical and social development of Sinhala provides a widerunderstanding to the emergence of this mixed variety. As a result of Sinhala mixing with English,a mixed variety has emerged as the language of the masses. It is evident that themixed discourse displays more affiliations towards English than to any otherlanguage spoken in the country. The mixed code has effectively equipped the Sinhala speaker to meet the challenges of the present day.

References

Blank, Andreas; Koch, Peter (1999). "Introduction: Historical Semantics and Cognition".In Blank, Andreas; Koch, Peter, *Historical Semantics and Cognition,* Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter, pp. 1–16.

Gosjean, F. (1985). The bilingual as a competent but specific speaker–hearer. *Journal of Multicultural and Multilingual Development* 6: 467–477. Sapir, E. (1949). In Mandelbaum, D. *Selected writings in language, culture and personality.* Berkeley; University of California Press.Thomason, S.G. & T. Kaufman (1988). Language contact, creolization and genetic linguistics. University of California Press.