

## **Patterns of phonological errors of phonemic clusters in Sri Lankan English**

Anjaneesewvandika Wijewardana

Pronunciation problems related to consonant clusters of the language learners have been overlooked over the years as random errors only occurring due to lack of exposure to the target language, especially in the case of learning English as a second language. Some language teachers in secondary school system in Sri Lanka tend to undermine the importance of the knowledge of the discipline of linguistics and the role of the first language of the learner in the process of teaching a second language effectively. Furthermore, in secondary education, teaching pronunciation and giving efficient feedback have been ignored altogether. Nonetheless, gatekeepers of Sri Lankan English identify patterns in pronunciation errors merely to label those learners as speakers of 'not pot English' and create social barriers. Nevertheless, the features of the cluster deviation can also be found among pronunciation problems of other varieties of 'New Englishes' which suggests it is justifiable to view it as a learner problem in a global level common to many second language speakers. This study investigates whether problems in pronunciation related to consonant clusters in Sri Lankan English are results of the interference of the learners' first language, Sinhala. Furthermore, it intends to identify patterns of the errors and compare them with similar errors among other speakers from different language backgrounds who also learn English as a second language. The research is primarily based on phonological data gathered from the interviews of fifty (50) adult participants in 2013 and 2014.

Secondary sources such as books, journals, magazine articles, and electronic media are also been used.

Key words: Sri Lankan English, Phonemics, Error Analysis, Pronunciation Problems, Second Language, New Englishes

## ABSTRACT

*Sri Lankan English, the variety of English spoken by Sri Lankans including many bilinguals, deviates from Standard British English. 'Gatekeepers' of Sri Lankan English, a fraction of the Sri Lankan academic populace, recognize a variety of Sri Lankan English as the 'standard dialect' and disdain other variations as inferior 'non-standard dialects'. Absurdly, they argue about the number of dialects in Sri Lankan English regardless of the fact that SLE as it is a non-native variety of English language and therefore could not possess dialects. The criteria they follow in setting the 'standards' are vague and unjust. In fact, they tend to overlook the most common practices as deviations, label them as 'not-pot English' and ironically ignore the deviations in SSLE from SBE so that their social prestige may be prolonged and make a dramatic plea for international recognition for the variety of English they promote. This paper argues that the variety of English they promote does not represent the language of the average Sri Lankan speaker. The language, even the local usages that have been labeled as 'not-pot English', deserve respectful scholarly attention. If these are simple anomalies and parts of learner language resulting due to the lack of exposure of the target language, it is constructive to remedy them with due measures. Nonetheless, the local flair and the language items marked with the identity of Sri Lankan usage should be valued and their terms of acceptance into the standard variety should be reconsidered if we intend to set a true standard instead of a synthetic one for Sri Lankan English.*



*This paper is primarily based on secondary sources including works of Manique Gunesequera, Siromi Fernando, Doric de Souza and Arjuna Parakrama.*

## **Introduction: English in Sri Lanka**

The notion of a Ceylon English or Lankan English goes back to 1940s, even before the time of our independence, when Prof. H.A. Passe first established it as the “Ceylonese variety of ‘Modified Standard’ English.” (Passe, 1943) Although some academics including Prof Siromi Fernando<sup>1</sup> have been recognizing only the native speakers of English as Sri Lankan English speakers whose first language is English, in present paper the term Sri Lankan English includes all Sri Lankans who speak English regardless whether it’s their first language or not. As Meyler defines it, “Sri Lankan English (SLE) is the language spoken and understood by those ‘Sri Lankans who speak English as their first language, and /or who are bilingual in English and Sinhala or Tamil.” (Meyler, 2007) Those who have acquired the language as their mother tongue are very few.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, many claim that their co-first language is English. De Souza states, “In India and Sri Lanka, English never became the language of all people, but serves only a small minority.” (Souza, 1979, p. 31) Accordingly, majority of the populace however, learns it as their second language or so.

## **Sri Lankan English vs. Standard British English**

It is a fact that Sri Lankan English is dissimilar to Standard British English. I would like to draw your attention to a few factors *why* it happens. First of all, Sri Lankans on the island are NOT exposed to

---

<sup>1</sup> (Changes in Sri Lankan English as reflected in Phonology, 1985)

English as they would in Britain etc, obviously. The amount of exposure has a direct impact on the speakers' fluency of the language. Poor exposure results in poor language acquisition. Nevertheless, we won't give up that easily. When all else fail, Sri Lankans tend to learn it with effort, even after their puberty. As discussed in greater detail in Critical Period Hypothesis, they come across various challenges. Penfield and Lenneberg give reasons why language acquisition is difficult after puberty. They exposed that the plasticity of the brain is lost "at puberty, after which complete or native-like mastery of languages, first or second, is difficult and unlikely." (Genesee, 1988) As a result, the native-like pronunciation is not likely to be practiced in Sri Lanka. Then, the language acquisition patterns get in the way. The average Sri Lankan is more likely to learn to write in English before he speaks the tongue. In addition to that, they learn the words from the written variety so they tend to do a number of errors including 'Spelling Pronunciations' (Fernando, 1985) which are not to be seen in Britain or in America. Talking about learning English in Sri Lanka, one has to mention about the mother tongue influence of Sinhala and Tamil. It results in a number of complications in the language learning process for the learner since the different language systems have so little in common. Therefore, interference takes place. In addition to that, it is worth mentioning that Sri Lankan English has the local style and the language items marked with the distinctiveness of Sri Lankan usage.

### **Sri Lankan English: a dialect or a variety?**

Is Sri Lankan English a different dialect? I would like to discuss a few ideas of a few authors in this regard. Prof. Manique Gunasekera, accurately refers to it as a separate variety of English. She views it as a 'linguistic servitude' of the post colonial society



not “to acknowledge that we have a language’ which can be known as Sri Lankan English and it is a delusion to see it as “a slight variation of British English.” (Gunasekara, 2005, p. 12) Prof. Siromi Fernando, also refers to it as a separate variety and also she subdivides it into several dialects based on the language standards. She states, “Dialects can be distinguished at the levels of vocabulary, morphology, grammar, phonology etc.” Although I agree with her reasons for identifying Sri Lankan English as a dialect, there is a reasonable reservation that ‘dialects’ may not be the term we should use to name these varieties. Let me clarify my argument. What makes a dialect? Yes, it involves vocabulary, morphology, grammar, and phonology.

A dialect is either a regional variety of language: a variety of a language, with regional differences in vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation or a Social dialect: a language spoken by class or profession. David Crystal describes that, “Accent refers only to distinctive pronunciation, whereas dialect refers to grammar & vocabulary as well.” (Crystal, 1985, p. 24) Normally “dialects of the same language are considered to be mutually intelligible,” while regional, or geographic dialect means, “the speech of one locality differs at least slightly from that of any other place.” (Encyclopedia Britannica: Dialect, 2014). Having said that, I’d like to point out one of the dialect myths and realities related to the topic in question. It is false to say “dialects result from unsuccessful attempts to speak the “correct” form of a language.” In reality, “dialect speakers acquire their language by adopting the speech features of those around them, not by failing in their attempts to adopt standard language features.” (Young) In this respect although we have a unique vocabulary etc, Sri Lankan English, doesn’t validate itself as a dialect. As I already mentioned,

Sri Lankan identity is only one of the reasons why we speak this way. Most of the time native-like speech or language mastery is simply not achievable. For instance, we do not pronounce diphthongs in Received Pronunciation, simply because we cannot. Same goes with many other phonological features in British English.

### **Standard dialect vs. Non-standard dialect**

Previous reasoning leads me to the issue whether or not Sri Lankan English has dialects in it.<sup>3</sup> According to Fernando, Sri Lankan English has 4 dialects. Dialect 1 and 2 are the standard Sri Lankan English dialects while number 3 and 4 are non-standard varieties all based on their phonological features. (Fernando S. , 2010, p. 310) Prof. Gunesequera also admits that, “there are only a few phonological features which demonstrates the difference between SSLE and ‘Not<sub>2</sub>pot English’.” (Gunasekara, 2005, p. 126) As I already indicated, phonology alone cannot form a dialect.

On the other hand, Gunesequera explains that these varieties on Sri Lankan English are social varieties, similar to social dialects where the speakers of standard variety are the ‘elite’.<sup>4</sup> (Gunasekara, 2005, p. 24) She states that, “Members of this group use Sri Lankan English in their educational, social, and professional activities, and share togetherness in their use of the language..” and “The other variety, which used to be called non-standard Sri Lankan English

---

<sup>3</sup> Current research is not answering the question whether there is a separate English dialect in Jaffna, due to the fact that further research has to be done on this basis.

<sup>4</sup>“The English used by the Sri Lankan elite is Standard Sri Lankan English, which is part and parcel of belonging to the „English speaking“ class..... ” (Gunasekara, 2005, p. 24)



is now called “Not pot English,” spoken by those who are not very familiar with English.” (Gunasekara, 2005, pp. 34-35) Although the social attitude she speaks of is true, the over generalization of the two varieties are evident. Prof. Siromi Fernando responds to this as, “Std SLE is often used by people who are outside today’s Sri Lankan elite, eg. poorer or no longer influential members of the Sinhala, Tamil, Moor, Malay Burgher etc. communities; while others who at present are part of the Sri Lankan elite, do not always use Std SLE, eg. some prominent professionals, businessmen, media personalities, politicians etc., who use Dialect 3.” So Gunasekara’s definition of Std SLE is neither ‘accurate’ nor ‘adequate’. (Fernando S. , 2010, p. 311)<sup>5</sup>

Strictly speaking, Sri Lankan English has uniqueness beyond many other English dialects such as American English or British English. Ours is influenced by the mother tongue of the native Sinhalese and Tamils. Language interference is evident. Also the language has been widely taught than been acquired. Because of the lack of exposure of the target language, Sri Lankan English speaker, most of the time, fails to achieve the native-like competency. This leads to series of learner errors and the pronunciation of the speaker is greatly affected. Those who are exposed to English at a younger age tend to be more fluent in English than those who are exposed to it much later. In terms of pronunciation, we can observe that some of these speakers have accents which are more influenced by Sinhala or Tamil than others. As a result, Sri Lankan English speakers achieve different degrees of competencies unlike the speakers of England. This is a new paradigm. In conclusion, these are not different dialects, but different levels of fluency in English among Sri Lankans.

---

<sup>5</sup>(Fernando S. , 2010, p. 311)

### **Criteria of standardization**

I receive Braj Kachru's (1985) Three Circles Model ideas as a model sets out to illustrate the typology of varieties that have arisen with the spread of English. His idea of the language model is not mutual. In other words, I do not believe in Kachru's ideas on the native speakers' privilege to control its standardization"

Can I tell you a story? I am human. Humans walk while fish swim in water. And some humans, unlike me, have learned to swim. But when you have Olympic games, we do not compete with fish in swimming. Does it make us, humans any inferior? The answer is no, it's not. As a matter of fact, it helps in case of an emergency if you know how to swim. On the other hand, fish haven't learn to walk yet... So, it should make us more proud in fact. Of course we have lungs, not gills, so we need to find a way to breathe air now and then. If you can hold your breath longer so much the better. The point is, we should have our own standards.

If Sri Lankan English is not a similar to British English dialect, does it make our language variety any less respectful? In a linguistic perspective the answer is NO. Every language has its own identity. As long as they fulfill their function, which is communication, every language arises or emerges and become apparent in the same level. In a linguistic point of view, there are neither prime languages nor inferior ones. If Sri Lankan English standard differs from it, does it make us inferior? I do not encourage '*everything goes*'. But the standard of Sri Lankan English has to be so, that the communication function of the



language can be fulfilled from it. Also, it should be a realistic one. Prof. Gunasekara most elegantly puts,

“the majority of English speakers of Sri Lanka would be shocked that in today’s linguistic sense, ‘correctness’ is decided by usage rather than by textbooks..... what is acceptable by users of it should be considered acceptable rather than harking back to an old standard.” (Gunasekera, 2000, pp. 114-116)

This idea is on a par with Prof. Arjuna Parakrama’s ideas about non-standards as a form of resistance against ‘native speaker authority’. (Parakrama, 1995, pp. xii-xiii) Gunasekara quotes his ideas in her book and states that some Sri Lankan English speakers refuse to advocate the features of so called ‘standard variety’ as a refusal to give up their identity. (Gunasekara, 2005, p. 37) For many years when scholars in the country claimed that they spoke British English. However, now the situation has changed. Thanks to the efforts of these courageous Sri Lankan academics, now Sri Lankan English is an internationally recognized variety of English. They see these varieties as a way of de-hegemonizing the language not only as a way of opposing imperial, neo imperial and neocolonial hegemony of English, but also as a step against Sri Lankan elitism. So the question remains. Why shouldn’t the standards of it should be any different? In the end, the matter is who decides if we are speaking acceptable English or not?

### **Sri Lankan English: a quest of identity finding**

This research has in fact has arisen more questions than answers. One thing I've learned by doing it is there is lot more that I do not know. However, the following resolutions are worth mentioning.

Sri Lankan English is a matter of identity finding, as Dr. Thiru Kandiah pointed out in a lecture last week. (Kandiah, 2014) The attitude towards Sri Lankan identity should be a positive one. Language belongs to its speakers. So is Sri Lankan English. So if a person decides to retain his strong Sinhala accent, it should not be a matter of embarrassment, at least not among the linguists. Logically, if we degrade our identity, what is the point in expecting any difference from the international community?

Secondly, Sri Lankan English is a unique variety undoubtedly. Whether or not it is a dialect is questionable due to some of its characteristics. However, rather than sub-dividing it into dialects, it is highly productive if error analysis is done in Sri Lankan English in such a way that it can actually help the language learner. Constructive criticism is required.

Lastly, standardization should be done in such a way that it becomes a standard of the speakers of it other than an idealized non-realistic version. In setting up these standards, some common usages should be re-considered in terms of acceptability.



## Bibliography

Crystal, D. (1985). *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*. London: Blackwell.

*Encyclopedia Britannica: Dialect*. (2014). Retrieved October 30, 2014, from Encyclopedia Britannica: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/161156/dialect>

Fernando, S. (1985). Changes in Sri Lankan English as reflected in Phonology. *University of Colombo Review*.

Fernando, S. (2010). Does Sri Lankan English (SLE) have dialects, and can one dialect be identified as Standard SLE? *English in Sri Lanka: Ceylon English, Lankan English, Sri Lankan English*, 304-313.

Genesee, F. (1988). "Neuropsychology and Second Language Acquisition." In *Issues in Second Language Acquisition: Multiple Perspectives*. New York: Newbury House.

Gunasekara, M. (2005). *The Postcolonial Identity of Sri Lankan English*. Colombo: Vijitha Yapa Publications.

Gunasekera, M. (2000). Morphosyntactic Errors of Fluent Speakers of English in Sri Lanka. *Vagvidya* 7, 112-133.

Kandiah, T. (Performer). (2014, October 27). *Some issues in the study of English at Sri Lanka's current postcolonial movement*. Colombo.

Meyler, M. (2007). *A Dictionary of Sri Lankan English*. Colombo: Samayawardhana Printers.

Parakrama, A. (1995). *De-Hegemonizing Language Standards*. London: Macmillan Press Ltd.

Passe, H. A. (1943). The English Language in Ceylon. *University of Ceylon Review I*, 50-55.

Souza, D. d. (1979). Targets and Standards. *Socio-Economic and Other Factors affecting the Teaching of English in Sri Lanka*. (reprinted in English in Sri Lanka: Ceylon English, Lankan English, Sri Lankan English by SLETA in 2010), 36-43.

Young, R. F. (n.d.). *Dialects: Regional Varieties of English*. Retrieved October 18, 2014, from University of Wisconsin: English: <http://www.english.wisc.edu/rfyoung/336/dialects.pdf>