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## Impact of English loan words on modern Sinhala

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# Impact of English loan words on modern Sinhala

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## Abstract

One of the main causes of language change is linguistic borrowing. The influence of loan words could have an impact on the phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics of a language. .

At different periods in the history of Sinhala, mainly Sanskrit, Pali, Tamil, Dutch, Portuguese and English have contributed as donor languages. When considering modern Sinhala, English can be identified as the major donor language. Linguists define Literary Sinhala (LS) and Spoken Sinhala (SS) as two different varieties of the language. The diglossia situation opens up two major areas of research on modern Sinhala.

This paper attempts to discuss structural changes occurred in modern Sinhala by English loan words analysing data from both Literary and Spoken Sinhala. It is a hitherto less researched area and needs extensive studying since English continues to be the main donor language in linguistic borrowing not only in Sinhala, but also in many major languages of the world. Based on available data it is evident that Literary Sinhala has been somewhat slow in adopting English loan words. Spoken Sinhala has made less or no restrictions in this regard. Further, Literary Sinhala tends to avoid using direct loan words by finding substitutes for them from another donor language, for instance Sanskrit: <computer> '*pariganakaya*' (LS), '*kompiyutar eka*' (SL). The phonetic, phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic implications of the English loan words will be addressed in this study, and also how monolingual and bilingual native speakers of Sinhala adopt these loan words differently.

## 1. Introduction

All living languages are subject to constant change. Language change may influence phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics of a given language. These changes generally occur over the course of centuries, which can be detected by analysing literary records of a language<sup>1</sup>. One major cause of language change is linguistic borrowing. When two languages begin to coexist due to social, cultural, political or geographical reasons, it is inevitable that they have an influence on each other. "When cultures come into contact with one other, borrowing takes place primarily in the realm of lexical items" (Anderson, 1973:95).

Borrowing can be carried out in different ways, i.e. direct borrowing with very little or no change to the particular word (loan word), translating the loan word into words already available in the language (loan translation), combining a loan word and an already existing word in the language (loan blend), or an extension or a change of the

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<sup>1</sup> Language corpora of both spoken and written varieties of languages provide ample material for analysis of language change today; eg. ICE - International Corpus of English

meaning of hitherto existing words in the language (loan shift)<sup>2</sup>. This paper will address only the first category of borrowing - English loan words in modern Sinhala - words, which have been borrowed from English with little or no change, i.e. phonetic, phonological, morphological, syntactic or semantic, to the original, eg. <radio> /rēḍiyō/, <car> /kā/, /kār/.

Borrowing is somewhat a misleading word since it implies that the element in question is taken from the donor language for a limited number of time and then returned, which is by no means the case. The item is actually copied rather than borrowed in the strict sense of the word (Aitchison, 1998:113-14)

The main reason for linguistic borrowing is to fill a void in the borrowing language to describe new concepts and elements, which may not have been in existence earlier and suddenly enters a language, which then demands a term to identify it. For instance, many a term in the field of Information Technology, Computer Science, Medicine and Sports in the world today is borrowed from the English by a large number of languages. Further, names of countries, months of the year, currencies of the world etc. in many languages of the world originate from English<sup>3</sup>.

Some speakers may adopt loan words to show their superior learning over other members of their culture, or the lexical item in question may fill a definite need in that it is imported along with a new idea or object. (Anderson, 1973:95)

## 2. loan words in Sinhala

Over the centuries, many languages have acted as donor languages for Sinhala, i.e.. Pali, Sanskrit, Tamil from the South Asian region and Portuguese, Dutch and English from Europe<sup>4</sup>. During the presence of the Portuguese and the Dutch from 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries many words found their way into Sinhala from these two languages. These have been only in the form of lexical borrowing, causing hardly any structural changes in Sinhala. However, the major donor language since the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century up to date has been English (Ch. Premawardhena, 2003:168). Further, due to globalisation and rapid development of technology, the role of English in the world today has become even more significant than a few decades ago.

Although language change usually occurs over long periods of time, the structural changes that have occurred in Sinhala due to English loan words do not go beyond a few decades. English remained the language of the elite until after the gain of independence in 1948. Bilingualism was not common among the Sinhala native speakers. Furthermore, due to strong resistance by the language purists, there was no room for English loan words to enter the Sinhala linguistic structure. It was preferred to find substitutes from Sanskrit for English loan words, thus borrowing from one language to substitute borrowings from another language (Ch. Premawardhena, 2003:178)<sup>5</sup>. Wherever possible the loan words were adapted by way of loan translation <post card> [təpəlpətə], <radio> [guvanviduliyə]. In Literary Sinhala, even today, many a technical term is represented by a loan word from Sanskrit

<sup>2</sup> see Karunatilake (1986:65-73)

<sup>3</sup> see Braun et al (1990)

<sup>4</sup> see Disanayaka, (1994:28); Jayasekara (1986:1); Karunatilake (1984:70-71), Ch. Premawardhena (2002:20)

<sup>5</sup> see also Disanayaka, (1973:59-63)

although the original concept comes from the English, eg. <software> [murdukāngə], <internet> [antəʁjālə].

Since the introduction of policies of open economy in the late seventies the influence of English loan words on Sinhala has been on the increase. With the influx of electronic items and openings for new fields in the media and IT, there seem to be less resistance even by the purists to prevent the flow of loan words with little or no change to the original English terms.

### **2.1. role of English in Sri Lanka**

English is one of the three official languages in Sri Lanka. In today's education policy much importance is given to improving the knowledge of English and IT skills in the Sri Lankan public. Bilingualism is not as rare a phenomenon as it used to be five or six decades ago. The electronic media has taken the hitherto 'foreign' language of English to the doorsteps of the rural communities. Especially in the field of advertising the use of English loan words along with Sinhala texts is very common today. For instance, it would be hard to find a Sinhala native speaker who would not know what a 'radio' or a 'tv' is or wonder what a 'bicycle' is. Even if the native speaker is not bilingual, the English loan words do function as a major entity in his vocabulary.

### **2.2. monolingual and bilingual native speakers**

Sinhala native speakers can be monolingual or bilingual. As a national language and taught as in schools right up to the G.C.E. Advanced Level examination from Year 1 or Year 3 onwards, English is no 'foreign' language to the Sinhala native speaker. Although only a small percentage of the population can be categorised as bilingual in the strictest sense with both Sinhala and English as first language, there is a fair number of Sinhala native speakers having a good or very good command of English as a second language. Thus the term bilingual is used here in a broader sense including all Sinhala native speakers with competency in English. The distinction between the monolingual and bilingual speakers should be made here since the way monolingual speakers use a loan word from English differs from the way the bilinguals use the same.

### **2.3. Literary and Spoken Sinhala**

There exists a vast between the spoken and the written variety in modern Sinhala. Termed by linguists as Literary Sinhala and Spoken Sinhala, the differences between the two forms of the language is not restricted to the lexicon but extends further to its phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics and sociolinguistic variables. Spoken Sinhala can be further divided into Formal and Colloquial Sinhala<sup>6</sup>. Formal Sinhala is used in public speeches, discussions etc, and also in the electronic media, especially in news reading<sup>7</sup>.

As mentioned in 1.2. modern Literary Sinhala is yet to keep pace with Spoken Sinhala in borrowing loan words from English. When analysing literary work or articles in the

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<sup>6</sup> see Karunatilake, 1992; Disanayaka, 1998; Gair, 1998; Ch. Premawardhena 2002, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> The electronic media too shows a tendency is to adopt more informal Spoken Sinhala even during news reading -especially in the private radio and television channels, which has been the subject of heavy criticism from some of the Sinhala scholars and has been a subject of open debate.

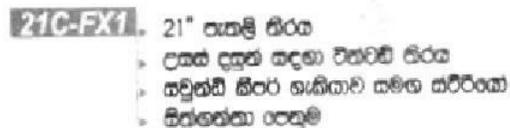
newspapers, it is evident that loan words from Sanskrit take the place of loan words from English. Even in formal Spoken Sinhala it is the practice to avoid English loan words. However, as discussed in 2.3.1., the field of advertising seems to take a bolder path by freely using English loan words.

**2.3.1. electronic and print media in the field of advertising and their role in linguistic borrowing**

When analysing the current advertisements in the print and electronic media, it is evident that Spoken Sinhala is more freely used than it used to be a few years ago. The most recent trend is to include a handful of loan words from English. Thus the field of advertising seems to break away from the traditional way of adopting Sanskrit loan words in place of English loan words in written Sinhala (see eg. 1, 2.).

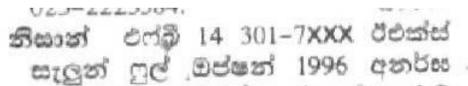


eg. (1)  
*Silumina*, 14/09/2003

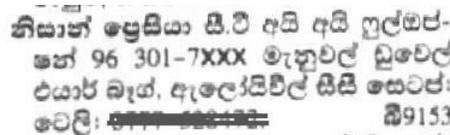


eg. (2)  
*Lankadeepa*, 07/09/2003

As seen in the examples 3 and 4 even in the classifieds of the Sinhala news papers English loan words are freely used.



eg. (3)  
*Silumina*, 14/09/2003



eg. (4)  
*Silumina*, 14/09/2003

Further, it has been observed that in many advertisements for products there is a tendency to use English words in English and Sinhala words in Sinhala, thus using both English and Sinhala scripts in one advertisement, although these appear in Sinhala news papers.

**3. structural changes in modern Sinhala caused by English loan words**

The impact of English loan words on the structure of modern Sinhala is more on Spoken Sinhala (SS) than on Literary Sinhala (LS).

### 3.1. impact on Spoken Sinhala

As mentioned above, SS has a large number of English words in comparison to LS. Thus it is inevitable that these cause phonetic, phonological, syntactic and semantic changes in the existing structure of the language.

In the field of phonetics of SS the number of allophones was increased by the addition of the open back vowel [ɔ] as in <orange>, <toffee>, <office> and the addition of the long central vowel /ɛ:/ as in <shirt>, <nurse>, <skirt>. However, the monolingual speakers substitute the open back vowel with closed back vowel /o/ and central vowel with /ē/ /æ:/ or /ō/ (Ch. Premawardhena, 2003:176).

eg.: (5) <nurse>        /nēs nōna /  
         <purse>        /pōs ekə/  
         <sir>            /sæ:r/

A lot of words with stops at word final position [b, t, d, g, c, j] were introduced to SS.

eg.: (6) <bulb>, <bat>, <card>, <bag>, <torch>, <badge>

The monolingual speakers substitute the voiced stops at word final in these words with voiceless stops, and sometimes a vowel is added to create an open syllable for the convenience of pronunciation.

eg.: (7) <bulb>        /balup/  
         <bag>            /bæ:k/

The existing syllabic structure too, has changed as a result of consonant clusters that occur in English loan words with the addition of closed syllables at word initial, central and final positions.

eg.: (8) <strike>        CCCVC  
         <bacteria>        CVCCVCVC  
         <bulb>            CVCC

The monolingual speakers adapt these loan words to the existing VCVC or VCCV combinations as follows:

eg.: (9) <strike>        /iʃtæk/  
         <bacteria>        /bāṭṭīriyā/

Furthermore, the phonological structure changed with the addition of two new phonemes /ɛ:/ and /f/ due to English loan words where a contrast occurs with the available minimal pairs in SS.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> see Karunatilake (1984), Rajapakse (1994a, 1994b), Ch.Premawardhena (1997), (2003) for further details on impact of English loan words on the structure of LS and SS

eg.: (10) <fan> /fan/ # <pan> /pæ:n/

The phoneme /f/ is generally substituted with the closed voiceless stop /p/ by monolingual speakers. However, this may lead to differences in meaning as seen in the following example (Ch. Premawardhena, 2003:176)

eg.: (11) <chief> /chīp/  
<cheap> /chīp/

thus resulting in misinterpretations as in the case of <chief clerk> being referred to as /cīp klāk/ (<cheap clerk>).

The hitherto existing morphological structure too underwent changes due to English loan words. The addition of /ekə/ 'one' as a singular marking for the nouns borrowed from English thus caused an extension to the existing singular and plural markings in SS. The loan word, which is usually in the singular in English, as in <car> is taken as the plural form in Spoken Sinhala and the addition of the allomorph /-ekə/ denotes the singular<sup>9</sup>.

	singular	plural
eg.:(11) <car>	/kār ekə/	/kār/, /kār/
<bat>	/bæt ekə/	/bæt/

### 3.2. impact on Literary Sinhala

In respect of LS a few changes have occurred in the Sinhala script and formal writing system. The introduction of a new symbol in the Sinhala alphabet to represent the unvoiced labiodental fricative /f/ in English and the representation of long central vowel /ɛ:/ in written Sinhala as in the case of <Germany> /jɛ:məniyɛ/, <super> (engine oil etc.) /supɛ:/. Further, the addition of the allomorph /-a:nu/ to denote a nationality has been introduced due to English loan words in LS<sup>10</sup>.

eg.: (12) <German> /jɛ:mānu/  
<American> /amerikānu/

Although there has not been a significant change in the structure of LS due to the impact of English loan words when compared with SS, the electronic and print media has adopted many a loan word as discussed in 2.3.1. and new trends, thus breaking away from the traditional approach to advertising, presentation and marketing strategies.

### 4. conclusion

This paper attempted to discuss the impact of English loan words on modern Sinhala with examples from both LS and SS and how linguistic borrowing acts as a major cause for language change. Only the loan words were considered here, which are borrowed directly with not much change to the original form in the donor language. As discussed in 3.1 and 3.2 major structural changes have occurred in modern Sinhala

<sup>9</sup> see also Karunatilake (1984:70-71)

<sup>10</sup> see Ch. Premawardhena (2003, 171-178) for lexical differences in English loan words in SS and LS.

due to English loan words. Further, the different ways of adopting these words by monolingual and bilingual speakers was also discussed. Other than the print and electronic media, Literary Sinhala is cautious in using loan words from English, preferring loan translations, loan blends and loan words from Sanskrit. English loan words in Sinhala appear to be 'spoken and heard' than 'written and read'. However, as in the field of advertising, the time may not be too far in seeing more and more loan words coming into use in Literary Sinhala, too.

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## Symbols

- (ā), : (æ:)	long vowel
ɘ	central unrounded vowel
ɔ	open back vowel
æ	higher-low front unrounded vowel

t̥	voiceless dental stop
d̥	voiced dental stop
c	voiceless palatal stop
j	voiced palatal stop
C	consonant
V	vowel