

# The Impact of the Socio-Political Tenacity on Language Usage in Sri Lankan English Journalistic Writings

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**Abstract**— Recently, Sri Lanka underwent major political upheavals, structural and constitutional amendments that attracted the attention of the international community. Formulation of dilemmatic interim government of fifty-two days, the legal debates about alleged political misdemeanours, presidential and general elections were the main discourses of the Sri Lankan society during the last couple of years. Thus, the substantive researchers voyage on a genre analysis in order to analytically explore the intricacies of English journalistic writings as to how they have been impacted by the socio-political tenacity prevalent in the nation. These socio-political milieus were reflected in the English Language in myriad forums and most importantly were visible in the mainstream media in the country, particularly in English newspapers and led to the creation of timely vocabulary of a brief duration. As an instance, coinage of novel terms with a vernacular tinge can be depicted. This new vocabulary that was developed owing to the political and social pressures were replete with political implications, sarcasm and highly pragmatic meaning. Thus, contentious political debates and occurrences seem to have impacted on the structural and semantic English Language used in newspapers in the period concerned. Content analysis method was used to interpret the textual data and the 'latent analysis' method was exploited to analyse the pragmatic meaning of the language used. Thematic analysis was utilized to itemize the findings in the discussion heeding semantic denotations. It was evinced that local English journalistic writings do amply make use of SLE and intertwined use of vernacular language components to relay their socio-politically driven messages to the readership judiciously exploiting code-switching and code-mixing strategies. Thus, artistic journalistic writings have come into being having been profusely fed by socio-political transformations over the years. It has been primarily researched how formulation of 'localized' English terms, affixation of English

terms with local flavour, and integration of vernacular expressions along with English wordings, have voiced out the intended messages from English journalistic writings vociferously.

**Keywords**— *structural language, genre analysis, semantic language, coinage, vernacular tinge*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Language is the lifeblood of any society. Sri Lanka has two official languages as per the provisions of the constitution. Sinhala and Tamil are the two official languages whereas English serves as the link Language. English is being widely used across all social administrative, educational, media and commercial spectra. The English in Sri Lanka has been influenced by various factors particularly by the native vernacular languages which are Sinhala and Tamil and they have led to the creation of native variety of English, called Sri Lankan English [SLE] (Gunasekara, 2005). These influences are visible in terms of phonological, morphological, and syntactic features and many studies have been carried by the scholars in this regard. This paper is thus concerned with examining the impact of the socio-political nuances on English Language in recent times in Sri Lanka and the resultant impact on the English Language used in Sri Lankan English newspapers.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Fernando (2012) states that 'when a language is carried from its country of origin, the language adopts into a new variety in order to express the new geo-socio-cultural phenomena and concepts it encounters in its new environment' (p.160). Thereby, she states that a new set of vocabulary and new variety of English have been developed in Sri Lanka, in concurrence with the above view. She states that the creation of this new vocabulary passes through certain morphological processes which are namely affixation, compounds, new words, acronyms, abbreviations, borrowings and states that linguistic and social pressures and

counter pressures contributed to the development of SLE vocabulary. Fernando (2012) further testifies this argument in her study on SLE vocabulary where she states that

‘The mood in Sri Lanka had become more complex, as it passed through times of racial and class tensions, conflict, war, economic and social disparities, corruption, natural disasters, rehabilitation, peace and reconciliation etc. Words representing these changes in mood have been reflected in SLE vocabulary’ (Fernando,2012, p.165).

Canagarajah (1995) exemplifies the influence of Tamil on English Language through his study on the political economy of code switching in English Language used in Jaffna and he highlights how the necessity for code switching has been stimulated by the necessity to find a living and fulfil economic needs. Canagarajah further states that this kind of activity helps English to be ‘used in a more persuasive form than ever before’. This study sets out to examine the impact of socio-political dynamics on English vocabulary in the past year and the evolution of the English Language morphology and syntactic features based on the political implications.

### III. METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted using a meticulous observation of randomly selected newspaper articles published in English newspapers in Sri Lanka over a period of two years from October 2018 to June 2021. Content analysis method was used to interpret the textual data and the ‘latent analysis’ method was exploited to analyse the pragmatic meaning of the language used. Articles were randomly selected from three newspapers for the study, namely ‘The Island’, ‘Daily Mirror’ and ‘Daily News’. Given the larger number of newspapers that are being published daily, a sample of 30 articles were reviewed.

Thematic analysis was utilized to itemize the findings in the discussion heeding semantic denotations.

### IV. EMPIRICAL OBSERVATIONS, RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Baugh (1935) states that the simplest way of the formulation of new words stems from adding of morphemes to the morphemes already existing in

the language. This appending familiar prefixes and affixes to formulate new words of SLE could be seen in recent times in newspapers owing to the political heat existed in the country. One such word is ‘pohottuwa’, it is the name for the symbol of a mega political party that was recently established in the country and its English equivalent is the lotus bud. The original Sinhala term ‘pohottuwa’ was added by the suffixes ‘ees’ and the term ‘pohottuwitees’ was mostly used by the English newspaper editorials to refer to the clan of people representing the respective political party. The most glaring feature of creating the vocabulary was, it is not even an English term, but an original Sinhala term written in English using English suffixation. It was used in plural contexts as follows by adding the plural inflection ‘-s’.

Example: ‘the crowds that press round Gotabhaya – pohottus, a shame to the real lotus bud!’ (22nd August, The Island)

‘Pohottu supporter’, ‘Pohottuwa candidate’ are some of other word compounds that were formulated by the journalists with the Sinhala term ‘pohottuwa’.

Furthermore, English words were suffixed to formulate verbs. These words have greater connotative meanings in the Sri Lankan political discourse; thus, given the excessive political implications of these words entail, they were affixed in order to make new words. One such term is the contentious word that appeared in the political debate ‘white van’. This is an English compound consisting of an adjective and a noun. This term is associated with alleged forcible abductions that were believed to have been carried out locally some time ago. The “white van abduction” referred to instigate fear psychosis associated with some political affiliation. This word has been later suffixed by the ‘ed’ to formulate the verb ‘white vanned’, being “white-vanned” had become a verb synonymous with being abducted — a tactic allegedly used by some unidentified local elements to deal with troublesome opponents.

Ex: He is believed to be white-vanned and murdered.

They will definitely van you! (Taken from a social media post).

The term ‘white van drivers’ emerged as a major propaganda used to vilify one of the main

candidates in the last held presidential elections. Thus, it became a frequent term in the political debates in the run up to the presidential election.

In addition, Sri Lanka witnessed a large number of anti-government protests over the years which were usually dispersed by the police squads using tear gas; majority of the victims of these protests were the university students of the country. The term 'tear-gas' which was initially a noun was later suffixed with 'ed' to formulate the word 'tear-gassed' simply as the verb 'googled' to be synonymous with the word a protest being dispersed using tear gas.

Example: 'These are the same boys and girls who march to Lipton Circus in Colombo and get baton-charged and tear-gassed trying to close down the universities' (08th August 2019).

A trend has also emerged where the writers of the English newspapers directly incorporate the Sinhala idioms as direct translations into English Language to describe certain political scenarios. Rather than using the refined English syntax, the usage of direct translations which are culture specific can only be understood by those who are familiar with the Sinhala language.

E.g: 'Let those cardboard heroes who are falling over themselves to please government politicians, whose boots and sandals they lick, be urged to refrain from barking at the protesting disabled veterans who deserve respect and a much better deal' (The Island, 15th September)

The phrase 'licking boots and sandals' is an original Sinhala idiom which is pronounced as 'සැප්පෑනා ලිච්චා' [ɛvəkʰɨɲɔ]. It denotes the idea of being subservient to someone being deprived of oneself, dancing according to the whims and fancies of the persons concerned. Thus, here the direct translation of this idiom of the Sinhala Language has been used by the writer to be critical of those who are in the garb of the government politicians and ingratiate them. The sensitivity of the issue concerned has enjoined the writer to use the idioms from the source language to express his displeasure for the issue at hand.

Such usage of a direct translation is further visible in the daily mirror political gossip section where a title reads as 'Cut-throat rivalry compels them to look for another pasture' (15th October, Daily Mirror). The political gossip here refers to a dispute

among the members of a political party to obtain an electorate to compete at the election for their advantage. The idiom cut throat here refers to the original Sinhala idiom pronounced as 'βəllə KhəPəɫə' which metaphorically means to gain advantage even at the expense of the other's life.

'a spot of dung fell into the pot of milk a few days ago when security personnel of Member of Parliament S.B. Dissanyake opened fire at a crowd blocking his motorcade causing some non-grievous injuries' (November 9, 2019. Island)

'Unfortunately, some states continue to be havens for terrorists. The UK is one of them. This is what Sri Lankans call harbouring venomous snakes under one's sarong'. (December 2, 2019)

Sarong is a traditional cloth in Sri Lanka and to put a snake under one's sarong here refers to the fact to invite troubles willingly. It is a Sinhala idiom to indicate to give way in to troubles through one's own volition.

'The only thing the presidential candidates did not promise us, during the last few weeks, was rice from the moon or handen haal' (November 15, 2019. The Island)

Furthermore, new words have been generated through compounds as a result of the socio-political discourse. Some of these words are 'wartime general', 'perahera jumbos', 'vote-catching', 'jumbo-cabinet'.

#### *A. Quintessential Semiotic Devices with Local Flavour*

In addition, the political heat in the country gave rise to creation of a number of hybrid compounds; these compounds constantly appear in newspapers and the readers obviously know their political implications. Most of these hybrid compounds stem from the two Sinhala root words. One is 'yahapalanaya', this refers to the famous political concept 'good governance' pledging which a new government came into power in 2015. Thereby, many hybrid compounds have been created in this regard, some of them are 'yahapalana government', 'yahapalana camp', 'yahapalana coup', 'yahapalana leaders', 'yahapalana cronies', and 'yahapalana dummies.' It is worthwhile to note that the adjective of the Sinhala noun, 'yahapalanaya – good governance' which is read as 'yahapalana – good governing', has been used in conjunction with

an English noun as its pre-modifier. Thus, English adjectives have been replaced by corresponding Sinhala adjectives in English lettering with a view to make the text more reader-friendly to the local predominantly Sinhala readership. This could be perceived as a strategy employed by English newspaper journalists and editors to better market their journalistic feature and news articles. This can be further substantiated from the following extract:

‘Sirisena and his erstwhile *yahapalana chums* owe an explanation.’ (The Island, 7 Apr 2021).

In the above extract, the phrase ‘yahapalana chums’ comprises the head noun ‘chums’ of which the pre-modifier is ‘yahapalana’ denoting the Sinhala equivalent for English adjective ‘good- governing’. This could be used as an inter-language code mixing technique.

Similarly, hybrid compounds have been created using the name of the other political counterpart term ‘Rajapaksa’, a heraldic nominal for a popular political legacy or familial generation. Some of these terms are ‘Rajapaksa cronies’, ‘Rajapaksa heavyweights’, and ‘Rajapaksa clan’. These terms appeared in meaningful sentences and referred to the respective political clans.

E.g.: The yahapalana government is desperate for funds, as was said previously, and also ready to do anything to be in the good books of the US and its allies (The Island, September 1).

‘Shangri-La and the government feel a special affinity for each other; it was the former that hosted the *Viyathmaga events* while the SLPP was struggling to topple the *yahapalana government*’ (The Island, 03 June 2021)

‘Viyathmaga’ is a cosmopolitan professional body whose English institutional title reads as ‘The Professionals’ Collective’. They pioneered the election victory of new government in 2019. Notwithstanding the fact that an English title is in existence for the respective organization, the editor has used the local vernacular dialect thinking that the readers would easily make note of it.

#### B. Coinage of Terms in consonance with Code-mixing

Coinage of words also could be seen in the longer run of the political discourse by the leading news agencies in the country.

E.g. - Gotanomics from the new President (Daily News, 18th Nov 2019).

The coined word where the two roots are combined from the words ‘gota’ and economics refer to the new economic policy measures adopted by the incumbent president H.E. Gotabaya Rajapaksha. According to Daily News definitions, “Gota-nomics”/ “Gota-ism” denote the characteristic way of thinking and way of performing things, mapping out principles and policies through which the new president is following to administrate the country as a whole. These new things which are related to economy, administration and management have been defined as “gota-nomics” whereas the changes that are related to political system and administration are called as “gota-ism”.

‘He has also impressed upon the other members of his government that he does not tolerate boru shows and expects them to do likewise’ (The Island, 30th November).

In the above example, we could see the characteristic of Sri Lankan English morphology where Sinhala root word ‘boru’ and English word ‘show’ have been combined and the hybrid compound ‘boru-show’ has been created to connote the idea of fake kind of pomp and glory that the current president of Sri Lanka detests of.

#### C. Vernacular Connotations

The researchers came across the following title in ‘The Island’ editorial dated 04.04.2021.

‘*Down the pallang* with no end in sight’

The uniqueness of the title is that it comprises two set phrases, one from Sinhala written in ‘Singlish’ and the other, an original English phrase, and both have been combined giving a code-mixing effect. The Sinhala phrase ‘Down the pallang’ means decadence in any process. The editor of the article has skilfully intertwined two notions from two distinct languages to make the message more appealing and eye-catching to the readership. He has used this strategy dramatically to make the text simpler and relay the message with economy of words, letting no any room for verbosity.

'There have been instances where heroin sent to the Government Analyst's Department for testing was turned into *kurakkan* flour!' (The Island, 06 Apr 2021)

'*Kurakkan* flour' is the flour made from finger millet and 'kurakkan' is the Sinhala term for the said grain. The word 'finger millet' could be alien to some Second Language (L2) Sri Lankan English users as well and the writer does not want to strive reader to push him/her to look up dictionary denotations of unfamiliar miscellaneous terms as his journalistic priority is to sarcastically criticize unscrupulous actions of some state entities. Thus, this is a way of safeguarding attention priorities of readership.

#### D. Formation of Localized Abbreviations/Acronyms

In addition, new words have been developed as acronyms in SLE as a result of the prevailing situation of the country; some of these key acronyms which have come into the fore are, 'JO' (Joint Opposition), 'FCID' (Financial Crimes Investigation Division), 'CIABOC' (Commission to Investigate Allegations of Bribery and Corruption), 'SG' (Secretary General Parliament), '19A' (Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution), '20A' (Twentieth Amendment to the Constitution) and 'PSC' (Public Service Commission).

'Why wasn't Thursday's Cabinet meeting summoned to discuss 20A cancelled after the ministers, save a few, had vehemently opposed it, at Temple Trees?' (22nd September, The Island).

'PSC accused of letting down courageous public servants opposed to corruption' (20nd Nov, The Island).

MCC - The Cabinet has, after months of dillydallying, decided to sign the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) grant agreement.

In addition, abbreviations such as (ETCA) Economic and Technological Cooperation Agreement, SOFA (Status of Forces Agreement) were created based on the political controversy that sprang around these terms.

Sri Lankan English language journalists are adept in creation of localized English abbreviations. In a way, this has cropped up to familiarise the readers to a longer term making it judiciously short, realizing economy of space.

E.g.: Interestingly, not even the *Presidential Commission of Inquiry (PCoI)*, which probed the Easter Sunday carnage, for months on end, was able to find the mastermind behind the savage terror attacks! (The Island, 08 Apr 2021).

'Presidential Commissions of Inquiry' are a commonality which is seen in Sri Lanka just after a new regime comes into power. Such are established to investigate into alleged misdemeanours or corruptive dealings alleged to have taken place in the preceding rule. Due to frequent occurrence of this term, English language journalists tend to replace the overarching term as PCoI.

It was a tragedy for this country that Venerable Madulwawe Sobitha Thera, who founded and led the *National Movement for Social Justice (NMSJ)*, died prematurely (The Island, 04 Apr 2021).

NMSJ is a localized abbreviation which refers to 'National Movement for Social Justice', a politically driven civil movement which was instrumental in toppling the 2005 - 2015 Sri Lankan ruling government. Since this movement was discussed in journalistic articles frequently, English newspaper writers and editors created an abbreviation citing its flexibility in use.

#### V. CONCLUSION

It is undebatable that journalistic writing is a greatly creative form of writing. The journalists deliberately try to convince their stance to the readership through persuasive writing style whilst criticizing some notions exploiting argumentative writing. Some resort to exposition writings when

it comes to mild topics like nature. Yet, in analysing socio-cultural and political developments, the local English newspaper editors and other journalists use a myriad of strategies to voice out their message powerfully; thus, employment of SLE and intertwined use of vernacular language components are conspicuously seen in such instances as they profusely aid journalists to realise their expectations; primarily, relaying the message with economy of words, letting no any room for verbosity. The socio-political developments unravelled in local contexts in recent times have been greatly influential and these occurrences have given rise to some novel strategies in English journalistic writings lately. In this milieu, this study is an attempt to explore the

socio-political tenacity under which the use of English in Sri Lankan English newspapers was influenced during the recent times.

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### ABBREVIATIONS AND SPECIFIC SYMBOLS

SLE – Sri Lankan English

L2 – Second Language

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