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From the British Isles to Ceylon, or English in Sri Lanka*

Abstract

Although Sri Lanka was a site of colonization of the Portuguese, Dutch and (under the treaty of Amiens in 1802) British, it was the English language that had the strongest influence on the indigenous population of the island as the earlier colonizers were less interested in disseminating their culture. Taking into consideration the fact that English was established in Sri Lanka by missionaries and British officers, it can be assumed that the language brought to the island of Ceylon was the Standard English of the turn of the 19th century. Exploiting data from *International Corpus of English – Sri Lanka* and articles on Sri Lankan English, the present study contains a comparison of contemporary Sri Lankan English and the English of the period when the language was brought to the Island (early 19th century). Thus, an effort is made to show the conservative features of the language of the first British settlers, which survive in English spoken in contemporary Sri Lanka.

1. British colonization of the island of Ceylon: a historical overview

Ceylon, or Sri Lanka, was a site of European colonization from the early 16th century, when it got under the rule of the Portuguese. Later on, the Dutch took over in the mid-17th century and under the treaty of Amiens in 1802, the island got under the British rule. The first two European colonizers failed to exert stronger cultural influences on the indigenous population as they were less interested in disseminating their culture.

The British, on the other hand, have established English as a high status language and a way to enter the lower and middle levels of administration on the island. The first British schools were established by missionaries who believed that Western-style schooling and instruction in English would "civilize" the population of Sri Lanka since they saw English as a language of "enlightenment ideals" and an important means to educate people for administrative purposes (Dharmasada

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1992, 28). In his 1803 *Account of the Island of Ceylon*, British missionary Robert Percival wrote that a "zealous effort on the part of our government to introduce our learning and religion among the natives is the surest means of improving and consolidating our empire in the island" (quoted in Dharmasada 1992, 28). High-caste Sri Lankans were favoured and encouraged to work for the British. Natives who knew good English were considered elite. Schools were established by the British and taught in English, so obviously this language was given preference by the socially aspiring Lankans.

Considering the fact that the English language was established in Sri Lanka by missionaries and British officers, it can be assumed that the language brought to the island of Ceylon was Standard English from the turn of the 19th century. This was the language that was elevated to the language of high prestige and importance among the native population, which allowed for it to become rooted in the indigenous society and remain an important means of communication today. The schools once opened by British missionaries are still those of the highest prestige in the country.

2. Reasons for English being used in Sri Lanka

When Sri Lanka gained independence in 1948, a major issue became how to govern an originally bilingual country, favouring neither of the two languages. The island is mostly inhabited by two ethnic groups: Sinhalese (around 74% of the population) and Tamils (around 12%). The Sinhalese speak an Indo-European language (Sinhala), while the Tamil language is of Dravidian origin. Because those languages are not only different but also belong to two separate language families, communication issues arose. The attempt at introducing Sinhala favoured policy ended up in triggering a civil war which continued for a few decades (Canagarajah 2005, 423–425). Consequently, an aid from the outside, i.e. another language which would allow mutual communication between Tamil and Sinhalese, became a necessity, and because of the colonial past English was an obvious choice. English evokes "cultural pluralism and internationalism that assumes anti-totalitarian and anti-chauvinistic ideological interests against dominant separatism. English thus helps keep alive multicultural discourses in the periphery and helps resist the monocultural/monolinguistic tendencies of local regimes" (Canagarajah 2000, 128). Nowadays English has an officially recognized status next to the two languages spoken by the two largest ethnic groups in the country and is an obligatory language for all Sri Lankans who handle any official positions.

3. Purpose and data

The original purpose of the present study was to establish whether English in Sri Lanka today retained the features of Standard English from the turn of the 19th century, but the data on that subject were found insufficient. Therefore, the modified aim is to show that English in Sri Lanka was influenced both by the way in which it was acquired on the Island (missionary schools) and by the language of the colonizers. It is also suggested that since 19th century English has influenced the formation of Standard British English spoken today, therefore similarities between the modern BrE standard and SLE (Sri Lankan English) have also been taken into consideration.

The data for the present study come from both literature on the subject and the personal research of the Sri Lankan component of the *International Corpus of English* (*ICE-SL*) provided by the universities of Colombo and Giessen. The corpus consists of 200 texts (400,000 words) out of which 50 are students' essays, social/business letters, etc., while 150 documents are printed texts (academic and popular writing, reportages, instructional, persuasive or creative writing; cf. Körtvelyessy et al. 2012, 4).

4. Phonology

As mentioned earlier, English was regarded as a superior "enlightened" language, hence until very recently it was taught rather in the written, not spoken form. The result is that orthography or spelling pronunciation played an important part in the acquisition of the language as is often testified by English in Sri Lanka as well as by the representatives of other South Asian varieties (especially the language spoken by the older generation of speakers). As an example of this trait, initial voiceless plosives are not aspirated in SLE as opposed to Sinhala, where aspiration is distinct and represented by different graphemes in its alphabet, while initial stops in Tamil are always unaspirated (Table 1).

Table 1. Graphemes representing voiceless stops in Sinhala and Tamil

Sinhalese voiceless stops	Sinhalese voiceless aspirated stops	Value represented by BrE graphemes	Tamil voiceless stops
ක	බ	k	க்
ට	ඨ retroflex	t	ட் retroflex
ත	ථ dental	t	த் dental
ප	ඵ	p	ப்

The non-segmental features of Sri Lankan English are discussed in Passe (in Fernando 1985). The main points there are that stress is comparatively weak in both Sinhalese and Tamil, which is also reflected in Sri Lankan English; there is no vowel reduction and no distinction is maintained between strong and weak forms. Gopalakrishnan's (1960, 49) observations on Tamil English in South India also apply to the Tamilians of Sri Lanka: he claims that there is an unawareness of the patterns of both primary and secondary stress (Kachru 1995, 517). English in Sri Lanka demonstrates specific phonological features, e.g. the lack of plosion in geminates consisting of two stops in the speech of older generations (Kachru 1995, 513).

The phonology of Sri Lankan English undoubtedly retains its British roots. The pronunciation of consonants, except for a few differences described below, mirrors RP, a variety formed in the 19th century. The variety is non-rhotic, with /r/ in all other contexts pronounced as a flap. The major differences between Standard English and the Sri Lankan consonant system are:

Table 2. Differences between consonants in RP and Sri Lankan English

RP consonant	SLE consonant
/t/	/ʈ/ retroflex
/d/	/ɖ/ retroflex
/θ/	/t/
/ð/	/d/
/w/, /v/	/ʋ/ labial approximant

As can be seen, RP's dental fricatives are pronounced in Sri Lankan as dental plosives, while RP's dental stops /t, d/ are pronounced as retroflex. Also, due to a transfer from both Sinhala and Tamil, /w/ and /v/ are confused or are pronounced as the labial approximant /ʋ/ (Fernando 1985, 47). The difference is reflected, for example, in how two original Sri Lankan place name endings are transcribed in Sri Lankan English (Table 3).

Table 3. The *-uva/-uwa* and *-eva/-ewa* place name endings spelling variation in *ICE-SL*

-uwa (92)	-uva (23)
-eva (10)	-eva (32)

As presented above, graphemes <w> and <v> can both be used to represent the /ʋ/ sound. Therefore, the name of the town *Sabaragamuwa* can be spelt either *Sabaragamuva* (4 occurrences) or *Sabaragamuwa* (5 occurrences in the corpus)

and very often words like *vow*/*wow* and *vest*/*west* can be homophones in SLE.

To conclude, apart from the situations when the native tongue of Sri Lankans interferes, SLE follows the Standard British English pattern.

5. Morphology

Another piece of evidence comes from spelling, which mostly follows the British English pattern. Table 4 presents data comparing the number of words which represent spelling variation in SLE suffixes and other word-final sequences:

Table 4. Spelling variants in SLE suffixes and other word-final sequences

Occurrences of spelling: variant 1	Occurrences of spelling: variant 2
-our (331)	-or (53)
-ogue (23)	-og (3)
-ce (177)	-se (10)
-re (150)	-er (69)
-ise (279)	-ize (401)

As can be seen, there is some consistency in following the British English orthographic pattern. The spelling variation might have been caused by the influence of American media but may also be a reflection of the not fully standardised spelling in the 19th century, when English was introduced in Sri Lanka (Mugglestone 2012, 279). This assumption is supported by the fact that 19th century literature provides a considerable amount of data proving inconsistencies in the pattern. Thus, George Eliot or Walter Scott would use *surprize* rather than *surprise* and Charles Dickens preferred *harbor* to *harbour* (Mugglestone 2012, 300).

As seen in Table 4, the spelling variant *-our* predominates. Words with the largest number of tokens in the two spelling versions are:

Table 5. Lexemes with the highest number of *-or/-our* variation

honor (3)	color (6)	behavior (17)	labor (10)	tumor (5)	favor (0)
honour (8)	colour (49)	behaviour (58)	labour (98)	tumour (17)	favour (25)

As the examples show, in all the cases the British English variant is more frequent. In many items, e.g. *favour*, *neighbour*, *vigour* or *saviour*, the alternative *-or* had zero occurrences. It is also noteworthy that no departure has been found in the corpus from the British English spelling *-or* in those words in which it is

fixed (such as *donor*, *governor* or *emperor*, which until the 17th century could appear with the suffix *-our*). This may lead to a conclusion that variants in Tables 4 and 5 are not spelling mistakes, but are a part of a consistent pattern. Worth mentioning is that the contribution of the "student writing" and "letters" component of the corpus to the number of words with the spelling *-or* is insignificant. Actually, only two examples appear in this section of the corpus:

(1a)   Almost all participants said that they prefer western medical care for major sicknesses like heart attack, cancer, AIDS, appendix, brain **tumor**, etc.
(1b)   We have been noticing this **behavior** during the past few months.

Example (1a) is extracted from a student's essay while (1b) comes from a business letter. The lack of *-or* variants in the non-printed part of the corpus (i.e. students' essays, personal and business letters, etc.) may suggest that, first of all, British English remains a standard variety for schools in Sri Lanka (the usage of the non-British variant of spelling might be frowned upon), and second, that on the basic levels of communication it is more prestigious, as the largest number of departures from the British norm have been observed in "Academic Writing", which suggests that English speakers with a wider knowledge and a higher status per-se, pay less attention to keep British English as a stiff standard.

Another example from Table 4 is *-ogue* vs. *-og*, of which the former is the standard British English form. As can be seen, 23 occurrences of *-ogue* correspond to only 3 forms of *-og*. A vast majority of tokens has been provided by the word *dialogue*, which appears in the corpus 20 times, all instances of the *-og* ending being the examples of its variant *dialog* (found 7 times, but 4 of the tokens are those of the name of a Sri Lankan mobile network operator).

In the case of *-ce* vs. *-se* spelling in nouns one can clearly see the British spelling variant prevalence (177 vs. 10). The largest number of forms come from the items presented in the table below.

Table 6. Lexemes with the highest number of *-ce* : *-se* variation

defence (22)	advice (32)	practice (115)
defense (7)	advise (1)	practise (0)

In each of the examples, the prevalence of *-ce* is unquestionable. Like the previously discussed suffixes, a single instance of the alternative spelling has been found in students' papers ("...to recognize children who are often 'not heard' and to speak out in **defense** of them, so as to make sure that these"), though repeated 10 times in different places of the text. It is characteristic that forms with *-se* do not appear with the alternative *-ce* spellings.

The next example from Table 4 does not suggest a clear prevalence of the Standard British English variant *-re* over non-British *-er* (150 : 69 ratio). The most frequent words with the suffix in the corpus are:

Table 7. Lexemes with the highest number of *-re*/*-er* variation

calibre (2)	-litre (4)	fibre (1)	metre (9)	theatre (7)	centre (78)
caliber (1)	-liter (3)	fiber (2)	meter (41)	theater (1)	center (41)

As can be seen, some pairs, namely *fibre/fibers*, *litre/liter* and *calibre/caliber*, have a very close count, but in the pair *metre/meter* the latter spelling is represented by a larger number of tokens. Even in *centre/center* the ratio is close to 2 : 1. It is interesting that the distribution of different spellings is observed in the same texts, cf. (ab) and (cd):

(2a) [text W2B09] This standard carries at the ***centre*** a heraldic Lion standing smartly holding a sword upright by its right paw which stands for Justice and Righteousness.
(2b) [text W2B09] Farmers who cultivated big onion were concentrated around Dambulla trade ***center*** and therefore they did not face severe marketing problems other than price fluctuations.
(2c) [text W2B33] (...) "sports" mode almost helped me to win a race with an SLK500 that sneakily pipped me at the post in a 400-***metre*** dash.
(2d) [text W2B33] Brave New Nanoworld Aircraft wings made of light-weight, high-strength carbon nanotubes only a few billionths of a ***meter*** in diameter.

The above demonstrates that particular authors can employ different spellings of the same word.

It might be tentatively suggested that the issue has a twofold nature. On the one hand, the standard spelling taught at school requires the use of British *-re* (again, the lowest number of the occurrences of *-er* spelling was found in the students' essays), but on the other hand, the spread of American pop-culture, as well as the easiness of the form *-er* (/ˈsɛntə/ or /ˈmiːtə/ rather suggest final *-r* pronunciation) are responsible for the popularity of the latter.

The last of the spelling variants presented in Table 4 are *-ise/-ize* (*-yse/-yze*), which show a much higher frequency of *-ize* (*-yze*) ending (401 : 279 ratio). Words which provided the highest number of examples are:

Table 8. *Lexemes with the highest number of -ise/-ize variation*

recognise (26)	realise (40)	analyse (18)	organise (41)	utilitise (6)
recognize (57)	realize (57)	analyze (46)	organize (22)	utilitize (9)

As can be seen, the distribution of the two forms of the suffix is very uneven, and in most cases the *-ze* variant is more common. This may be attributed to the fact that at the point when colonial British culture and education was spreading in Ceylon, the difference was not yet highly systemised. In the 18th century dictionaries, such as Samuel Johnson's *A Dictionary of the English Language*, *analyze* is preferred over *analyse* and alternative forms are also submitted by the compilers of the Oxford English Dictionary (*OED*), cf.:

(3a)   Johnson's dictionary (1755: 151): to ANALYZE – to resolve a compound into its first principles.

(3b)   [1885 J. C. Jefferson *Real Shelley* II. 192] The troop of nakedized children rushed downstairs.

(3c)   [1898 L. A. Tollemache Talks with Gladstone 114 (*note*)] It (the passage) is, as it were, Canning Gladstonized.

(3d)   [1979 F. Kermode Genesis of Secrecy ii. 39] One does not try.. to state what the narrative meant in its original.. one does not try to 're-cognize' it.

Thus, during the colonial period, not only the use of the suffix was not standardized, but also sometimes the *-yze* variant was promoted as the "proper" one. Moreover, *OED* provides examples of its usage amongst British authors up to the late 20th century.

The provided morphological facts lead to a conclusion that, sociolinguistically, British English remains a standard of high prestige and is still followed by the local users of English in Sri Lanka. Still, the original language implemented on the island (19th century British English) has left its trace because the inconsistencies which existed in the discussed period are still found in SLE today.

6. Syntax

Some evidence from syntax shows that the features of the 19th century English are retained in Sri Lankan English. It becomes evident when one compares the development of count/non-count words in English or the number of nouns. In the table below, the count occurrences of non-count words have been presented.

Table 9. The number of the occurrences of non-count nouns in countable forms.

Non-count noun	Number of count occurrences
damage	4
content	3
exuipment	2
legislation	2
acquaintance	2
government	2
advice	1
fish	1
cotton	1
agitation	1
aircraft	1
in detail	1

As the *ICE-SL* corpus is relatively small (400,000 words), the number of nouns found is not large, but it still shows the use of non-count nouns as count ones. The irregularity in the employment of the noun number in SLE reflects the fact that in 19th century British English the concept was not fully systematised (Denison 2007, 96). Thus, non-count *acquaintance*, nowadays considered obsolete in count form in British English, which still existed in the 19th century, as in, e.g., *She dreaded addressing any of her female **acquaintance*** (1848 Gaskell, *Mary Barton* xiv.164, cf. Denison 2007, 97), survives in this form in Sri Lankan English

(4a)   The **acquaintance** I have made with people from all over the world there, proved to be very beneficial.
(4b)   It was nice to make so many new **acquaintance**.

although the count form also exists (as it did in 19th century English)

(4c)   His female **acquaintances** spent a weekend in Galle.

Acquaintance appears 9 times in the corpus, while *acquaintances* only once. This noun was not only "problematic" when it comes to the terms of the count/non-count context but also when it comes to the grammatical number (Denison 2007, 98). In the 19th century British English it was much more frequently treated as a plural noun, e.g. *The **acquaintance** she had already formed **were** unworthy of her* (Jane Austen's *Emma*, quoted in Denison 2007, 99). The singular form *acquaintance*, claims Dekeyser (1975, 42–66), appeared at the end of the

19th century. In the examined corpus *acquaintance* occurs as a plural, which suggests that Sri Lankan English is similar to 19th century British English in this respect.

Similarly, the word *government*, which was singular in the 19th century, occurs in Modern English both in the singular and the plural. The analysis of the Sri Lankan English corpus has shown that all 239 instantiations of *government* are singular. Therefore, it may be assumed that British English of the 19th century still leaves some traces in SLE.

7. Vocabulary

The lexicon of SLE shows great similarity with the British one, as can be seen in Table 10, where lexemes which have their counterparts in American English. These two varieties have been compared as the latter is the only one which might have influenced SLE because of the impact of American culture and media around the world, including Asia (*Hunt 2016, 96–108*).

Table 10. The numbers of the occurrences of British and American counterpart lexemes compared.

British English (occurrences)	American English (occurrences)
football (11)	soccer (11)
railway (16)	railroad (0)
maize (7)	corn (3)
pavement (10)	sidewalk (0)
mobile phone (6)	cell phone (0)
sweet(s) (2)	candy (2)
underground (2)	subway (2)
queue (3)	line (0)
cornflour (2)	cornstarch (0)
flat (1)	apartment (1)
lorry (0)	truck (2)
zip (2)	zipper (0)
biscuit (1)	cookie (0)
nappy (1)	diaper (0)
jumper (0)	sweater (0)
Total: 72	**Total: 21**

As has been shown, the number of typically British forms definitely exceeds that of their American counterparts (71 : 21 ratio). This, again, proves that although more exposed to American mass media, Sri Lankans still prefer to use Standard British English, as it carries the high status brought to the island with the colonisers.

Another kind of conclusion reflects the fact that in SLE, some words, which nowadays tend to be formal, archaic or obsolete in Standard British English, are employed in everyday conversations in Sri Lanka, and show no less vitality than they did decades ago in the British Isles. This can be exemplified by words cited below, supplemented with *OED* definitions and examples of usage from *ICE-SL*.

(5a)   spectacles
       OED: now obsolete A device for assisting defective eyesight, or for protecting the eyes from dust, light, etc., consisting of two glass lenses set in a frame which is supported on the nose, and kept in place by side-pieces passing over the ears. Usually in *pl.*
       ICE-SL: I see that his (...) **spectacles** have misted up.
(5b)   *needful*
       OED: That which is necessary or requisite.
       ICE-SL: It's a virtual bank which keeps & stores customers money & detail & **do the needful** service.
(5c)   redressal
       OED: Now Chiefly Indian English, orig. *Sc.* Reparation or compensation for a wrong or consequent loss.
       ICE-SL: Every consumer has a right to the **redressal** of complaints related to unfair trade practices.
(5d)   august
       OED: Inspiring or worthy of respect (originally on account of birth or position in society); impressively eminent or respected; imposing, reverend, worshipful.
       ICE-SL: I am feeling ill after standing to attention in the sun, listening to the **august** seniors lecture us on how we are to conduct ourselves during the rag.
(5e)   expire
       OED: To breathe one's last breath, die.
       ICE-SL: My friend's dad **expired** two days ago.
(5f)   demise
       OED: Transferred to the death or decease which occasions the demise of an estate, etc.; hence = Decease, death.
       ICE-SL: (…) to succeed their father Philip Wijewardene on his **demise** at the age of 38.

Words emphasised in the above quotations are either obsolete or have had their primary meaning changed in modern British English. *Spectacles* (5a) as

used in SLE is now an obsolete word for *glasses. To do the needful* (5b) in the context provided by SLE has a marginal meaning nowadays and is, as stated in the *OED*, mostly used in Indian English (apparently, also in SLE), similarly *redressal* (as an alternative of *redress*) is used only in Indian and Sri Lankan English. *August* as an adjective appears nowadays only "as a honorific epithet" (*OED*). It is interesting that there are two separate words, which denote 'death'; *expire* in the context of death is not used in British English, and *demise* only in formal usage, while in SLE it can be used in an everyday conversation. All of the words in the usage mentioned are rarely registered (according to *OED*) after the late 19th/early 20th century.

However, during colonial and post-colonial periods, SLE concentrated on developing vocabulary to reflect a limited Ceylonese context different from British. Therefore, a number of borrowings in the fields of flora, fauna, place names, festivals, food and beverages, clothes, etc., entered the English used on the Island (Fernando 2012, 165). Such loanwords are quoted in (6ab), both examples coming from *ICE-SL:*

(6a) Crisp golden-brown **kokis**, red-brown **sambol** and pale fawn milk toffees competed for space on the crowded table, with the fragrant butter cake, and the green and yellow-and-brown speckled bananas.
(6b) On the way back, they stop at the tea boutique to buy some white tissue paper for **Vesak** lanterns.
(6c) We came home from school one day to find **Amma** and Neliya Aunty sitting on the verandah, looking alarmed.
(6d) (…) lots of love and hugs to you and baby… whats his name?? **aney** aunty must be sooo happy.

Kokis are a deep-fried, crispy Sri Lankan food made from rice flour and coconut milk and sambol is a paste made from a mixture of a variety of chili peppers with secondary ingredients, such as shallots. Both are typically Sri Lankan dishes, which do not have their equivalents in Britain, and hence in British English. Also Vesak is a word referring strictly to Ceylonese culture – a traditional Buddhist holiday commemorating Buddha's birthday.

Apart from words borrowed into SLE to convey concepts absent in Standard British English, in modern SLE there is a number of words which introduce, rather than concepts, a sense of national identity (items 6c and 6d). The word amma 'mother' (34 tokens in *ICE-SL*) has its equivalent in English, but is nonetheless frequently substituted with the indigenous word. Aney (6 tokens) is frequently used as a discourse marker meaning 'but'.

To sum up, the provided data show that British English lexis remains in prevalent use in Sri Lankan English, with British vocabulary of the turn of the 19th century still occasionally retained. Moreover, SLE vocabulary conveys

the cultural identity of the Ceylonese, which is exemplified by indigenous loan-words present in the corpus.

8. Conclusions

Like languages in other post-colonial countries which adopted English as an official language, Sri Lankan English shares many features with the variety it originated from, i.e. British English. It is a non-rhotic variety and its consonant system, with few exceptions, mirrors RP. Also orthography follows the Standard English pattern although some variation can be found, which might be a result of the fact that spelling was not yet systematized in the 19th century.

There are some tendencies in the classification of count/non-count words, and adding plural endings to collective nouns shows more similarity to 19th century English than modern British English. Also patterns in vocabulary, especially the modern usage of some obsolete British words, points at conservative views on English.

The 19th century patterns and tendencies in British English of that period have still remained in Modern Sri Lankan English. This can possibly be attributed to the way in which the language was introduced onto the island and the way it was, and still is, taught, i.e. as a language of prestige. The social attitude surrounding British English was for a long time close to the one which may be attributed to a "classical" language (so that older generations sometimes use spelling pronunciations). Therefore, SLE seems to be more stagnated and less prone to change.

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