



EXAMINING DISCOURSE FEATURES AND SOCIOLINGUISTIC VARIATIONS IN A SRI LANKAN ENGLISH CONVERSATION

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English has become the predominant global language leading to the emergence of diverse varieties known as World Englishes (WE). Sri Lankan English (SLE) is one such variety evolving from the need to express unique cultural concepts and linguistic identities. Despite its distinctiveness, SLE has undergone changes over time, prompting scholars to explore its distinctive features and deviations from Standard English varieties. This paper was designed as part of a larger study on “Examining Sociolinguistic Variations in Sri Lankan English” to explore the variety of distinctions in English. This study employed qualitative research methods to examine sociolinguistic variations in SLE. Conversational data were collected from twenty Grade 11 students who were selected through the convenient sampling method in an international school setting in Sri Lanka. Participants engaged in natural conversations, which were recorded, transcribed and analysed using the method discourse analysis. The study focused on identifying distinctive features of SLE, including cultural, pragmatic, and contextual elements, and examining how SLE deviates from other Standard English varieties. Analysis of the conversation revealed several distinctive features of SLE. Pragmatic and contextual elements, such as the usage of culturally specific terms like "poruwa ceremony" and "kevum" highlighted the unique cultural identity embedded within SLE. Vocabulary and syntax features showcased the incorporation of new terms and expressions influenced by global trends, reflecting the dynamic nature of language evolution. Pronunciation features demonstrated participants' attempts to emulate British accents, indicating a convergence towards global linguistic norms. Discourse features, including hesitation, repetition, and self-repair, contributed to the natural flow of conversation in SLE, albeit with occasional deviations from Standard English norms. The study underscored the dynamic interplay between language, culture, and individual linguistic agency in shaping communication within the context of SLE. Despite its distinctiveness, SLE exhibits a propensity towards linguistic convergence with global English standards, as evidenced by pronunciation adjustments and vocabulary assimilation. However, participants' retention of unique cultural references and linguistic features highlights the resilience of SLE as a distinct variety within the broader spectrum of World Englishes. Overall, the study offers valuable insights into the sociolinguistic dynamics of SLE and its implications for language acquisition and identity formation in multicultural settings.

Keywords: English as a lingua franca, World Englishes, Sri Lankan English, sociolinguistic varieties

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INTRODUCTION

English has become the most essential language in the world today. The rate of the usage of English has enormously increased. According to Eberhard et. Al (2024) English is the most-spoken language in the world including native and non-native speakers. Due to this reason, a variety of the English Language can be seen throughout the world. The concept of World Englishes (WE), its genesis and its theoretical, contextual, and pedagogical implications and appropriateness has been discussed during the past two decades in several programmatic studies and conference presentations (Kachru, 1997). The idea, though it didn't include the term "WE", it faced a series of significant evolvement during the post-colonial period after the 1960s. It has appeared with the increase of the number of English speakers in the period between the reign of Queen Elizabeth I in 1603 and the later years of the reign of Queen Elizabeth II at the start of the twenty first century (Jenkins, 2003). The study of the World Englishes involves identifying the different forms of English utilized in varied sociolinguistic settings around the world and examining how sociolinguistic histories, multicultural backgrounds, and functional contexts shape the usage of English across various regions of the world. Along with that, English became the mediator of the world and it was started to consider as the link- language as well. Later on the linguists started using the terminology "English as a Lingua Franca" (ELF). ELF involves both common ground and local variation. Meanwhile, English itself has served as a lingua franca ever since the countries of the outer circle (Kachru 1985) were first colonized from the late sixteenth century. Turning to the term lingua franca itself, the first language to be labelled explicitly as such was a variety spoken along the south-eastern coast of the Mediterranean from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries (Knapp & Meierkord 2002: 9). On one hand, there is shared linguistic common ground among ELF speakers just as many varieties of English that are collectively referred to as 'English as a native language (Jenkins, 2009). As Haberland (2011) cites according to UNESCO (1953), it is "A language which is used habitually by people whose mother tongues are different in order to facilitate communication between them". According to Back (2014) this can be considered as the most widely accepted definition for lingua franca with the deep analysis done by him with the definitions given by some dictionaries.

Sri Lankan English (SLE) evolves in response to the necessity of expressing distinctive cultural concepts and linguistic identities that are absent in Standard English. Sri Lankans began to speak British English as used by the British Monarch and the British Broadcasting Cooperation (BBC) (Gunsekera 2003). Speakers of SLE often engage in a process of borrowing from and modifying elements of local languages such as Sinhala and Tamil. Consequently, SLE incorporates vocabulary, expressions, and syntactic structures originating from these languages. As Gunsekera (2003) says it is basically the British English that BBC uses, but shows the influence of the Sinhala and Tamil languages too. Promoting the standard variety of SLE is a positive step towards fostering integration among diverse communities within the nation (Ramesh & Wong, 2020). Sri Lanka's English education dates back to the invasion of the British in 1796. It is closely connected to the British colonial administration and evangelical missions (Sittarage, 2018). "SLE is not simply 'English in Sri Lanka', but a variety with a certain regional and social identity" (Meshtrie and Bhatt, 2008: pp .200). However as time passes, SLE has undergone some changes thus most Sri Lankan scholars agree on distinctive characteristics of the variety called SLE: its oral character, pronunciation, lexicogrammar, and syntax (Burnish, 2009). Also the artificiality or imitation of other accents is nowadays very common in the Sri Lankan context. Crucial aspects of authentic speech such as backchannelling, pauses, hesitations, repetitions, discourse markers, fillers, revisions, false starts and deixis often get left out in spoken examples. Yet, these elements are consistently found in one's native language



communication and should be prioritized in teaching second language speaking skills (Indrarathne, 2020). According to Chandranath (2021) Standard SLE is a unique form of English that shows characteristics distinct from other varieties, notably differing from standard British English and American English. In this study, the selected conversation aimed to lead a discourse analysis with reference to culture, pragmatics and specific contextual features of a natural conversation in the concept of ELF and to show how it deviates from the other Standard English spoken contexts.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This paper was designed as a part of a larger study on “Examining Sociolinguistic Variations in Sri Lankan English” to explore the variety of distinctions in English. This research was conducted as a qualitative research as it enables to dig deep in to the context and aimed to explore the deeper insights and meanings. Unlike quantitative research, which emphasizes numerical measurement and statistical analysis, qualitative research aims to uncover deeper insights, patterns, and meanings through inductive reasoning and thematic analysis (Merriam, 2009).

Research Questions

The following research questions were designed to guide this paper.

1. What are the significant distinctive features in SLE?
2. How does SLE deviate from the other Standard English spoken contexts?

Data Generation and Data Analysis

To further this study, twenty students in Grade 11 of an International school in the Kegalle District were selected through convenient sampling and arranged them in pairs. They were given 15 minutes to talk about their day-to-day stuff in a natural atmosphere. All the students were given an alphabetical figure (letters A to T) to anonymously identify them. Each conversation was recorded simultaneously to minimize the effect of the time and background on the natural aspect of the conversation and then transcribed all the conversations verbatim. For this article, one conversation of two students (conversation between K and L) was selected and the content was analysed using the method ‘discourse analysis’ and distinctive sub-themes like pronunciation features, vocabulary, syntax and discourse features under sub categories like hesitation, repetition, false start, self-repair, adjacency pairs... etc. were determined being based on the cultural, pragmatic and context specific features underlying the concept of variety of the contexts as suggested by Meshtrie and Bhatt (2008) and Bernaisch (2009).

DISCUSSION

Here in this conversation selected for this paper, two participants have made a very casual conversation basically about their day-to-day things and some previous memories that cherish their lives also had been taken in to account. With regard to the means of ELF and SLE, some important features could be analysed using the aforesaid methods by basically identifying the features, categorizing them and making decisions based on the so-called features to see whether they have any light account with the standards of the considerations of this paper. They were tabulated in order to identify them distinctively and the tabulation given in Table 1 enabled the researchers to dig deep in to the concept and discuss the findings in detail. The findings were presented with real utterances produced by the participants and certain interpretations were made.

Distinctive Features in SLE

Pragmatic / Context Specific and Cultural References

In this conversation, it’s very rare to find Sri Lankan cultural elements with regard to their speaking context. “Just you and your little brother?” (Participant K). She uses the word “little” with “brother” rather using the word “younger” as in the Sri Lankan context the younger brother is called with the meaning “small”. Also they use the word “alone” in one place “It’s really amazing to be alone” (Participant L) that exactly doesn’t mean she is totally alone, but to say “just with her friends”. In one



context, a participant says “Just because you called it noodles, Ken called it noodles, too” (Participant K); the word “noodles” doesn’t mean the food item here. It means the curls of her hair. “She came with a bowl of rice” (participant L). The word “rice” here suggests the cooked rice, not the raw rice. It can only be understood with the context. The meaning of that word appears differently in various situations. So, these words are just understood as they meaningfully appear only in that particular context. Therefore, this feature can be categorized under diexis in line with the pragmatic features and also in the context specific features. As Cairns (1991) has also stated, it is clear that diexis play a major role in the field studied in pragmatics, semantics and linguistics.

Table 1 :- Special Features Found in the Conversation of the Participants

Concept / Feature	Found Examples (specific words)
Pragmatic Features	“Noodles”, “rice”,
Context Specific Features	“Younger”, “alone”, “milk”
Cultural References	“Dating”, “poruwa ceremony”, “kevum”
Pronunciation Features	/i: wəs/, /ə'meɪzɪŋ/, /gu:sgʌms/*, /sə:ra:/, “Just you and your little brother? (Rising Intonation)
Vocabulary and Syntax Features	“Tattoos”, “Instagram”, “Pizza”,
Discourse Features	Hesitation - “I”, “Ehhhh”, “Huh”
	Repetition - “He was such a stupid guy”, “He was...” “Delete it...”
	False start - “It was such... It was a 4k...”, “I... I... She was...”, “He have... he has...”
	Self-Repair- “Goosebumps” and “Traumatizing”
	Adjacency Pairs - “Is this Lisa? Yuh, who is this... etc.

Vocabulary/Syntax Features

In this conversation, the utterances “You like tattoos, right? He has tattoos” (Participant K), “I saw you on Instagram too” (Participant L) suggest how the vocabulary features have made an influence on the language. The words, “tattoos” and “Instagram” uttered by the participants were introduced later with the attainment of the new trends in the society. With the new social experiments and trends, there is a tendency to introduce new vocabulary items to the vocabulary of any language. A language may be considered transplanted if it is used by a significant number of speakers in social, cultural and geographical contexts different from the context in which it was originally used (Kachru, 1986). Haugen (1950) discusses the nature of pressure exerted on such groups to develop vocabularies. In Sri Lanka, in both the post-independence and contemporary periods, the alteration and extensions to the vocabulary were not always necessarily generated in new fields, but often through new methods of word formation (Fernando, 2012). Even Guneseckera (2003) states that the vocabulary of the Standard Sri Lankan English signifies the multicultural society we live in as it borrows terms from different coexisting languages.

Pronunciation Features

Accordingly, the pronunciation has been unique for the Sri Lankan speakers of English for different kind of purposes. However in this study, as one of the participants is trying to imitate the British accent and she is so fluent in that accent, she assimilates the words without any effort (ex: “it was” is normally pronounced as /ɪt wəs/ but she pronounces it as /i: wəs/; the word “amazing” is in the Sri Lankan context pronounced as /ə'meɪzɪŋ/ but she pronounces it as /ə'meɪzɪŋ/. Other Sri Lankan speakers of English pronounce “Sara” as /sa:ra: / but she pronounces it as /sə:ra:/) There are some



words mispronounced by the speakers here (ex: goosebumps was miss-pronounced as /gu:sgΛms/ and the word traumatizing was difficult for her to pronounce, but she corrected it on the spot.) Not only that, the speakers here used the intonation patterns to infer some specific meaning. “Just you and your little brother? (rising intonation)”. This is not exactly a question from the outer appearance, but the way she pronounces it with a rising intonation alarms the recipient that it is a question. Therefore it shows that the features of pronunciation, though it emerges in the Sri Lankan context, with the intention to follow higher standards of the pronunciation, the speakers can gain those expected standards too. In the area of phonology, Sri Lankan English differs from the Indian English in the pronunciation of ‘r’ sounds. In Sri Lankan English as in standard British English pronunciation and in Welsh, Australian and South African English, the letter “r” is not pronounced. (Meyler, 2009).

Discourse Features-

In this conversation all these features were very common thus hesitation has grandly occurred throughout. Words like “I”, “Ehhhh”, “Huh”...etc. have been used and it is considered as a non-fluency feature as it interrupts the flow of speech. In this conversation, certain clauses like “He was such a stupid guy” (Participant A), “He was...” (Participant A), “Delete it...” (Participant B) have been unnecessarily repeated. It shows the amount of emphasis that they have put on those contents. False start is also considered as a non-fluency feature as it starts with a failed attempt so in this study there are so many false starts like “It was such... It was a 4k...” (Participant A), “I... I... She was...” (Participant B), “He have... he has...” (Participant B) etc. Both the participants of this conversation repair their utterances on their own (self-repair) as both of them correct the mispronunciation of “goose bumps” and “traumatizing” on the spot. To maintain the natural conversation interpersonally, both the participants used adjacency pairs like “Is this Lisa? (Participant A), “Yuh, who is this?” (Participant B) ... etc. As the essay on Discourse Features in Edubirdie (2022) indicates, hesitation, false start, repetition, self-repair, and phatic talk were taken into consideration in this study. Moreover, common discourse features like hesitation, repetition, and self-repair contribute to the natural ebb and flow of conversation. These features, though sometimes perceived as disruptions, serve to enhance communication by allowing speakers to clarify and refine their thoughts in real-time.

How SLE Deviates from the Other Standards of English

Apart from that, with reference to this conversation, it is clearly significant that, although there are accepted beliefs that the SLE has its own originality to distinctively differ from other standards of English, with the usage of the language and with the motivation to be fluent in the language, people can more likely obtain the standard pronunciation abilities up to the trusted standards in the society. So these two participants as the discussion above figures out, are leading a native like English conversation except the deviations that could be visible with some difficulties they encountered to pronounce some words. Some words in the conversation are particularly specific to the Sri Lankan context compared to the other English standards. “The most favourite occasion of that wedding was the “poruwa ceremony” (Participant K). According to Haugen (1950), new vocabulary items can be introduced according to the cultural context of the speakers.

In the observed conversation within an international school setting, participants noticeably adopt a British accent, diverging from traditional Sri Lankan linguistic norms. This choice reflects an assimilation of global linguistic trends rather than local cultural references. Furthermore, pronunciation adjustments are evident as participants strive for linguistic fluency. For instance, one speaker's emulation of British pronunciation patterns demonstrates a conscious effort to refine their speech. These adjustments not only reflect an aspiration towards a higher standard of language proficiency but also highlight the dynamic nature of language acquisition within multicultural educational environments. Overall, the conversation showcases a complex interplay between language, culture, and individual linguistic agency within the unique context of an international educational setting.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the conversation illustrates the dynamic nature of language within the context of an international school setting, where participants navigate between their Sri Lankan identity and global



linguistic trends. Despite occasional deviations from traditional Sri Lankan English norms, such as adopting a British accent and incorporating new vocabulary, participants demonstrate a commitment to linguistic fluency. This highlights the adaptability of language acquisition in multicultural environments and the ongoing evolution of English as a global language. Overall, the conversation underscores the complex interplay between language, culture, and individual linguistic agency in shaping communication within diverse communities.

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