

F-07: Archaic English in daily life

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Sri Lankans have been using English for administrative and other official purposes since 1796; but over two hundred years later, we are still reluctant to admit that we speak anything other than British English. In this year of celebrating 50 years of independence from Britain, a socio-linguistic analysis of the English we use would be appropriate, at least to establish our identity or self respect.

The objective of this study is to analyse the English of the newspapers and official documents of 1998. An attempt is made to identify the linguistic features of the different genres found in newspapers. An analysis of officialese as reflected in documents and letters is also included.

The methodology used draws on the ethnographic methods adopted in discourse analysis and genre analysis. Empirical data from the English media, especially the print media and authentic documentation from official domains and contexts are included.

The results of the study highlight the reluctance of Sri Lankans to tamper with the Queen's English to the point of clinging onto archaisms and anachronisms such as "a member of the fairer sex", "a damsel in distress", "I appeal to your goodself", "herewith", "alas", "thus" etc. Another finding is the gender bias in terms of language found in the different genres of newspapers such as advertisements. The results of the study also show the gradual bilingualism of the English speaking population of Sri Lanka. For example, mixing languages was frowned on 40 or 50 years ago, but today, the fluent speaker of English borrows lavishly from Sinhala and Tamil. e.g "He maybe a podiyan or chokka, but he knows what he's about." The findings also show that the selection of particular turns of phrase and morphology represents the socio-cultural background of the speaker or writer.

The conclusions of this research have an impact on the status of English in Sri Lanka, is it a foreign language, a second language or an indigenous language? On the other hand, the definition of bilingualism and biculturalism can be queried in the Sri Lankan context. Most importantly, in this year of educational reforms, which variety of English will be re-introduced to the school system? It cannot be the old standard of British English, it should not be the trendy, new standard of American English, it should be our own. But do we acknowledge it as a standard form?