

# CROSS LINGUISTIC INFLUENCE OF SINHALA ON THREE SELECTED DEVIATIONS FROM STANDARD SRI LANKAN ENGLISH IN LEARNER PHONOLOGICAL PRACTICES

**Rohini Chandrica Widyalkara**

English Language Teaching Unit, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka.

*rdhrcw@yao.com*

**Key words:** phonological practices, Sinhala, Sri Lankan English, Sinhala, transfer

## **Introduction**

Classifying dialectal variations Fernando (2006) identifies four dialects of Sri Lankan English (SLE) based on the pronunciation of the back rounded vowel sounds /ɔ/, /o/, /ɔ:/, /o:/. Dialects 1 and 2 together represent Standard Sri Lankan English (SSLE) pronunciation which 'is acceptable and unquestioned' (p. 72). Dialect 4 according to the classification is a learner dialect where the users 'are open to learning the *correct* rules' of pronunciation. Thus this study, for the purpose of discussion, will classify Dialect 4 as a learner variety of SLE and investigates the influence of Sinhala on three selected pronunciation areas other than the back rounded vowels discussed by Fernando (2006).

## **Objective**

Selecting the following three pronunciation deviations from SSLE identified in literature on Sri Lankan English this paper aims to trace the influence of Sinhala as a causal factor for the deviations in the user of Dialect 4: the user of a learner variety of SLE.

The transference of existing, familiar phonological practices of Sinhala, which is a diglossic language, been realized as the following features of pronunciation in the user of Dialect 4.

- a) Insertion of lax front close vowel /ɪ/ before consonant clusters with /s/ at word onset position
- b) Indiscriminate use of /ʃ/ for /s/
- c) Substitution of /p/ for /f/

## **Methodology and material**

The methodological procedure accumulated a corpus of English loanwords relevant to the areas under investigation from a daily Sinhala paper in Sri Lanka: Divayina. The compiling extended from 2009 to 2013 and spanned 50 articles roughly of the same word count randomly selected and the data was examined for etymological identity as borrowed English lexicon.

## **Findings**

**1 Insertion of the lax front close vowel /ɪ/ before initial consonant**

### clusters with /s/ at word onset position

In their study on a rule based syllabification algorithm for Sinhala, Weerasinghe et al (2005) state that syllabification of words borrowed from Sanskrit play a major role in the loanword adaptation genre in Sinhala. The syllabification of many of the Sanskrit borrowings has a CCCVCCC structure. According to Weerasinghe et al (2005: 476) such Sanskrit loanwords do not 'completely adhere to syllabification rules imposed in the language from which the word originated. Syllabification of such words will naturally be altered according to the ease of pronunciation and the existing syllable structure of Sinhala'. They further state that Sinhala has 'four legal structures as V, VC, CV, CVC' (ibid). Thus insertion of /ɪ/ during the repairs done to borrowings from Sanskrit proves that it is driven by the prohibition on such alien clusters in the recipient language Sinhala.

Similar to the phonotactic repairs done to the Sanskrit loanwords borrowed to Sinhala, loanwords from English to Sinhala too under went the repair, inserting the lax front close vowel /ɪ/, to words commencing with /s/ at word onset position which is an illegal structure in Sinhala.

#### 1.1 Loanword adaptation from English to Sinhala

The practice of inserting the lax front close vowel /ɪ/ before the initial consonantal clusters commencing with /s/ was transferred to the large corpus of loanwords borrowed into Written Sinhala (WS) and Spoken Sinhala (SS) from English which contained the

initial consonant clusters /sk/, /skr/, /sp/, /spr/ and /st/. When the user of Sinhala encountered these borrowed lexical items from English, the familiar assimilation process in Sanskrit was yet again used to translate the initial bi/tri consonantal clusters into medial positions as evidenced.

#### 1.2 English loanword assimilation paradigms from Sinhala print media

English loanword Sinhala assimilation in WS and transliteration

Scan /skæ:n/ iskaan /iskæ:n/  
(Divayina, 18.06.2009: IV)

CCVC VC-CVC

Spare (wheel) /speə/ ispeaa /ispea:/  
(Divayina, 06.03.2012: 17)

CCVV VC-CVV

(Z) score /skɔ:/ iskoor /isko:r/  
(Divayina, 12.08.2012: 6)

CCV VC-CVC

Thus during the process of assimilation of English loanwords to WS the resultant change introduces an initial vowel /ɪ/ which bestows the loanwords an initial VC structure which is familiar to the user of Sinhala.

#### 1.3 Transference of a familiar practice from Sinhala to the user of Dialect 4 of SLE pronunciation

The occurrence of the following practices within the discursal patterns of the Sinhala linguistic community validates them as norms.

- The diglossic practice of inserting the lax front close vowel /ɪ/, to loanwords from Sanskrit to Sinhala, in SS before the initial consonantal clusters beginning with /sk/, /skr/, /sp/, /spr/ and /st/ in WS.

- The interference of this practice during the integration of English loanwords with the same initial clusters into the recipient language Sinhala resulting in a deviant orthographic and phonemic shape which includes the insertion of an initial /ɪ/ changing the syllabic structure from a CCV/CCCV structure to a word onset VC- structure.
- The transference of the familiar practice of /ɪ/ insertion to English words with onset /s/ by the user of Dialect 4 of SLE when the target language is English. Thus one causal factor for the user of Dialect 4 of SLE inserting the lax front close vowel /ɪ/ before an initial consonantal cluster commencing with /s/ in English words is theorized as the interference of a familiar practice in Sinhala and its transference to the pronunciation of English words.

## 2 Indiscriminate use of /f/ for /s/ in the pronunciation of Dialect 4 of SLE

### 2.1 Coalescence of the two sibilants /ʃ/, /ʒ/ with the dental sibilant /s/

Karunatillake (2001) states that there was a coalescence of the three sibilants /ʃ/, /ʒ/, /s/ with the dental sibilant /s/ in all positions within a word in Old Sinhala (OS) phonology. 'The phonemic consequence of this change is the loss of the three-way contrast among dental ≠ retroflex ≠ palatal sibilants of Old Indo Aryan in OS' (ibid: 14).

Thus this study identifies the following linguistic features in the user of Sinhala.

(a) The lack of phonemic status for /ʃ/ and /ʒ/ in SS where the diglossic nature of the language authenticating the phonemes /ʃ/ and /ʒ/ in orthographic representations being pronounced as /s/.

(b) The indiscriminate practice of free variation between /s/, /ʃ/ and /ʒ/ in writing.

### 2.2 English loanword assimilation paradigms from Sinhala print media: /s/, /f/

Evidence for the indiscriminate use of /s/, /ʃ/ and /ʒ/ in modern orthographic usage comes from current print media: Divayina. An example where WS orthographically records a conversation in print media is given below. This bears evidence for an interlocutor functioning in Sinhala discourse embedding the English word *seat* /si:t/ in a predominantly Sinhala utterance and pronounces the word as /ʃi:t/ (sheet- a different lexical item).

*eya issaraha ʃi:t eke: giyaa*  
*mama passe ʃi:t eke: giyaa* <Divayina  
 23.09.2009, p. 13>

[she (in this context) went in the front seat and I went in the back seat]

In both instances the usage /ʃi:t/ was for a seat (si:t) in a bus.

It is argued that this practice of free variation between /s/, /ʃ/ and /ʒ/ in orthography, and the diglossic currency of substituting /s/ for /ʃ/ and /ʒ/ in orthography transfers into the pronunciation patterns of the user of Dialect 4 of SLE as free variation between /ʃ/ and /s/ while the SSLE user makes a clear differentiation between the two phonemes.

## 3 Substitution of /p/ for /f/ by the Dialect 4 of SLE speech community

### 3.1 The alien phoneme /f/ of Sinhala

The English /f/ is a relatively modern addition to the phonology of Sinhala. Hence the phoneme is matched to /p/, violating faithfulness of manner and places of articulation, by members of the Sinhala speech community specially those who belong to the user of Dialect 4 of SLE bilingual category.

### 3.2 English loanword assimilation paradigms from Sinhala print media: /p/, /f/

Obituaries from Sinhala papers, especially of the older generation provide examples for English names/designations containing the Sinhala letter for /f/ being substituted with the grapheme for /p/. 4

Table 1: English names/designations containing the letter <i>f</i> with the substitute <i>p</i> in Sinhala print media Lexical item	SSLE pronunciation with /f/	Sinhala orthographic representation and pronunciation with /p/
<i>Joseph</i>	/dʒo:səf/	/dʒo:fəp/ < <i>Divayina</i> .18.04.2008, p. iv>
<i>Wilfred</i>	/wilfrəd/	/wilprəd/ < <i>Divayina</i> .17.04.2008, p.2>
<i>Francis</i>	/frænsis/	/prænsis/ < <i>Divayina</i> .17.06.2009, p. iv>
<i>Fiscal</i>	/fiskə:l/	/piskəl/ < <i>Divayina</i> .18.04.2008, p. 2>