

# Sri Lankan Broadcasting Media Discourse: In Transition?

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**Abstract**---Code-switching and code-mixing between Sinhala and English are common linguistic behaviour in informal conversational settings in Sri Lanka. This type of linguistic variation, however, began to be used in public discourse in the popular Sinhala-medium mass communication media in the mid-1990s with the inception of private radio stations in the country. The practice which began as a form of code-mixing is now evolving into code-switching in some of the programmes on privately-owned popular television channels. The study in connection with the present paper examines the social-psychological impact of this media linguistic strategy on the audiences.

**Keywords**--- attitudes, broadcasting media, code-switching

## I. INTRODUCTION

**S**USTAINED contact between English and Sinhala/Tamil languages from the times of British colonial expansion into Sri Lanka until the present times has given rise to varying degrees of societal bilingualism in the country. However, in the present Sri Lanka, there is relatively a lesser number of English-language-dominant bilinguals who originate from the previously English-educated upper middle classes of the native Sri Lankan society. The majority of the current Sri Lankan bilinguals are native speakers of Sinhala/Tamil, displaying varying degrees of proficiency in English, down to minimal bilingualism. Besides, bilingualism could also be associated with acquaintance with any two languages used in the country other than English. The majority of the entire population in Sri Lanka, however, is still monolingual, in either Sinhala or Tamil, with a few speaking Malay, etc., though the overall numbers speaking Tamil are comparatively much less than those who speak Sinhala.<sup>1</sup>

The use of lexical borrowings and mixing and switching of codes<sup>2</sup> between the native languages and English is a very common occurrence in Sri Lanka which, as discussed above,

<sup>1</sup> (Most updated data from the Department of Census & Statistics)

<sup>2</sup> Code-switching “refers to instances when speakers switch between codes (languages or language varieties) in the course of a conversation. . . . A formal distinction is sometimes made between intra-sentential code-switching where switches occur within a sentence; and inter-sentential code-switching where a switch occurs at the end of a sentence” (Swann et.al 2004: 40-41). The term code-mixing is used “particularly for intra-sentential switching” (Swann et al. 2004: 41).

being a former British colony, has had a long-term relationship with English. In fact, certain anglicisms have become an almost inextricable part of the main languages of the country. However, the fact that a segment of the mass communication media has opted for the practice of the switching of codes seems as an implicit move towards legitimizing this type of linguistic variation on sites of public discourse.

## II. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

An earlier study by the author on the deliberate insertion of English lexical items and phrases in the popular Sinhala-medium FM radio programmes (Mawelle, 2012) discussed how intentional and excessive mixing of codes on popular commercial radio differ both linguistically and attitudinally from conventional bilingual code-mixing. It now seems necessary to examine the gradual move of popular television towards code-switching which is another form of linguistic variation and used by stable bilinguals. The present research study aims to investigate into this phenomenon by focusing on the related social-psychological perspectives of a cross-section of the audiences of some of the privately-owned popular television channels of Sri Lanka.

## III. RESEARCH QUESTION

Has the code-switched speech used on popular television begun to have a noteworthy effect on the language and perceptions of their audiences in spite of the recent origin of the linguistic practice and, if so, in which aspects?

## IV. METHODOLOGY

Since the present study involved a linguistic analysis of the code-switched speech on popular television as well as a social-psychological probing into this linguistic behavior, its complete methodological approach consisted of a combination of both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection and analysis.

### A. Selection of the Sample

The samples for the study were selected from the following categories:

i) A cross section of popular television audiences which included both young and adult groups was selected from Colombo, Kandy and Galle to represent the areas of the largest television viewing groups out of the nine provinces of

Sri Lanka. This sample consisted of forty (40) respondents from each area, making up an overall sample of 120 respondents.

ii) Twenty (20) audio-visual samples of different programmes were used from five television channels (04 programmes from each channel) for purposes of comparison and linguistic analysis.

#### B. Methods of Data Collection

**Audio-Visual Samples** Twenty (20) recordings of different types of programmes telecast on five (05) Sinhala-medium television channels were made to determine their features related with linguistic variation. The recordings were compared with one another to determine the degree and other aspects of code-switching done on each channel as well as in each programme.

**Questionnaire** A questionnaire was administered to the sample group, in order to elicit information on their basic demographic details and to find out their perspectives on linguistic variation on the medium of television in particular and on popular mass media in general.

**Matched-Guise Attitude Test**<sup>3</sup> This technique which is used in sociolinguistics and social-psychology of language to study listeners' evaluation of different speakers was employed to find the respondents' attitudes towards the varieties of language concerned with the study including code-switched speech and their speakers. The respondent sample was required to listen to three guises of speech (Sinhala only, English only, code-switched speech between Sinhala and English with naturally-made code-mixes), each lasting one minute of duration, and fill in a questionnaire which was specially prepared for the matched-guise test.

#### C. Findings and Analysis

The audio-visual samples from different television channels indicate a significant difference among one another in their choice of code-switching as a media strategy. Where frequency of occurrence of code-switching is concerned, programmes on privately-owned television channels could be observed as containing large amounts of code-switched speech on some of their programmes, especially those which cater to youth audiences (see Samples I and II below). Even programme titles of these channels show this variation, in emblematic form. In comparison with this code-switching behavior on privately-owned popular TV, the state-owned (national) television channels do not seem to promote linguistic variation in their programmes.

#### Sample I (From a fashion programme on private 'Sinhala-medium' commercial television)

*Mee dress eke centre eke seam ekak tiyenevaa. Ee seam eke tamai frill ekak tiyennee.* This fashion is very much in

vogue these days. You have to have the frill in a different colour, though.

So, flower-girls-*la-ge* head-dress *ekat mee* design *eken* create *keruvanam hari*. Then the outfit is complete, you see.

#### Sample II (From a youth programme on private 'Sinhala-medium' commercial television)

P1: Presenter 1 (S)

P2: Presenter 2 (A)

P1: Hi, welcome to (name of the programme – in English), all of you! Great having to see you again! *Okkomallaa* in their best mood-*ne?* *Hari, ehenam adath A saha man oyala venuvwn*, will be singing and dancing for you. Of course, A will be playing the violin as well.

P2: Hey, just stop kidding. I don't know how to play the violin. *Man danne nae.*

P1: *Ehenam manda danne?*

The above samples show a significant use of code-switching and code-mixing. As is readily visible, there are more mixes from and switches into English than Sinhala utterances in both these samples though they from the Sinhala-medium television.

The audience responses to the questionnaire reveal paradoxical preferences in terms of language in that the Sinhala-dominant youth audiences (as opposed to adult audiences) favour code-switched and code-mixed speech over Sinhala monolingualism in the mass communication media. This preference seems to have been influenced by the fact that English is associated with respectability and higher social status. The responses of all informants to the matched-guise attitude tests, too, indicate that English is associated with a positive social identity. Even after sixty five years of independence, English is still perceived as the language of power and social recognition. Furthermore, the use of English in the Sinhala media is seen by the youth audiences who are minimally proficient in English, as an opportunity to familiarize themselves with English on a daily basis. These youth audiences have developed a habit of picking out and re-producing whole chunks of English phrases and/or short sentences as used on private commercial TV in their conversations carried out in Sinhala. In a situation where they manifest a strong desire to be identified as competent speakers of English this type of linguistic behaviour appears to exercise a self-empowering effect on them.

Another noteworthy finding was that, with the on-going transition from code-mixing to code-switching on some programmes, the audiences of the popular television channels concerned seem to be adding on. As apparent in the phone-in programmes, in addition to the youth audiences who speak Sinhala as their first language, another group of viewers who show higher levels of bilingualism appear to be drawing towards the youth programmes which use code-switching more than code-mixing.

#### D. Interpretation of Findings

Bandura, in the discussion of his Social Cognitive Theory on Mass Communication (2001) which focuses on the impact of modeled behavior in mass media on the audiences, points

<sup>3</sup> Lambert and his colleagues' (1960) use of the matched guise technique in Canada can be cited as one of the earliest instances of its use in social-psychological research (Mesthrie *et al.* 2000).

out that popular media can also promote misconceptions through modelled behavior (Bandura, 2001: 282). By making quite fashionable-looking TV presenters to switch codes between Sinhala and English, popular broadcasting media sites of Sri Lanka seem to be subscribing to and promoting the prevailing attitude among the masses that English definitely helps enhance one's image as a respectable member of the community.

## V. CONCLUSION

While further validating the prevailing notion of English in Sri Lanka as an emblem of symbolic power, the findings of the present research also see code-switching on popular television as an opportunity seized by their youth audiences to get more acquainted with the English language on a daily basis, a chance they have expressed as one they would not find otherwise. This informal recognition of the learning factor associated by the youth audiences who are either minimally or in some cases passively or even zero proficient in English, also appear to have had a significant impact on increasing the popularity of private commercial television among the masses.

## APPENDIX

### *Translation of the Audio Samples*

#### **Sample I**

There is a seam on the centre of this dress. A frill is attached to the seam. This fashion is very much in vogue these days. You have to have the frill in a different colour, though. So, it's good if the head-dress of the flower girls could be created in the same design. Then the outfit is complete, you see.

#### **Sample II**

P1: Hi, welcome to (name of the programme – in English), all of you! Great having to see you again! Is everybody in their best mood? Okay then, *today also* A and I (for you), will be singing and dancing for you. Of course, A will be playing the violin as well.

P2: Hey, just stop kidding. I don't know how to play the violin. I don't know.

P1: Then you expect me to know?

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