

Sri Lankans' Views on English in the Colonial and Post-Colonial Eras

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By

Subathini Ramesh and Mitali P. Wong

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

In the South Asian context, the concept of postcolonialism has been defined and interpreted by various writers as controversial due to its semantic features. After Sri Lanka's (then Ceylon's) independence in 1948, the indigenous languages of Sinhala and Tamil were reintroduced as official languages, but English has often served as the *lingua franca* on the island and is typically the language of choice in contemporary governmental policies and practices. These policies altered further in postcolonial years, most notably with the 1956 Language Act that established Sinhala Only as the nation's official language.

The term 'post-colonial' is interesting and has a double-edged sharpness. It implies that the country and the people in question are no more under a colonial rule. This would mean that they are politically 'independent'. The term independent here only means independent of the colonial authority and are perhaps in a position to take their decisions. The other dimension of the word is more far-reaching. It argues that the colonial era is not completely over and there are very factors at work, which link these actions somehow or other to that colonial past. (Sivathamby 120)

The word 'postcolonial' may refer to the status of a land that is no longer colonized and has regained its political independence (e.g. postcolonial India). In this sense, 'postcolonialism' will pertain to the set of features (economic, political, social, etc.) which characterizes these countries and the way in which they negotiate their colonial heritage, it being understood that long periods of forced dependency necessarily had a profound impact on the social and cultural fabric of these societies (the postcolonial condition). It may also apply to the former colonizers inasmuch that both their extended contacts with the alien societies they conquered and the eventual loss of these profitable possessions deeply influenced the course of their economic and cultural evolution. This process raises several kinds

of conceptual and pragmatic problem. Crucial questions which are relevant in this respect are:

- a. What were the forms of resistance against colonial control?
- b. How did colonial education and language influence the culture and identity of the colonized?

Phillipson (2008) argues in his paper “English, panacea or pandemic?” for the maintenance of multilingualism, with English in balance with other languages. He explores these concepts by considering whether the continued use of English in postcolonial contexts and its current expansion in Europe is purely positive – the lure of the panacea – or life-threatening for other languages and cultures, symptom of a pandemic. Thiru Kandiah of Sri Lanka sees countries in the postcolonial world as trapped in a major contradiction—one which raises ethical issues for English-dominant countries. On the one hand, postcolonial countries need this “indispensable global medium” for pragmatic purposes, even for survival in the global economy: a panacea for the privileged. On the other hand there is the fact that the medium is not culturally or ideologically neutral, far from it, so that its users run the “apparently unavoidable risk of co-option, of acquiescing in the negation of their own understandings of reality and in the accompanying denial or even subversion of their own interests”: pandemic (Kandiah, 2001:112). What is therefore needed in relation to English is “interrogating its formulations of reality, intervening in its modes of understanding, holding off its normalising tendencies, challenging its hegemonic designs and divesting it of the co-optive power which could render it a reproducing discourse” (ibid.). Kandiah advocates authentic local projections of reality, and emancipatory action (Phillipson 9).

Before we take up the question of Sri Lanka, we shall speak of colonial rule in India. It is the British rule that counts. The British did not use the term ‘colony’; the British monarch called herself/himself ‘Empress/Emperor of India’. The British looked down upon many of the social traditions, even the educational traditions, prevalent in the country prior to subjugation as not befitting a modern civilized community. Lord Macaulay wanted to civilize India: thus, his ideas of education influenced colonial education in that country.

Colonial Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, British rule was more direct and, in a way, even unpretentious. Ceylon was a crown colony and after the Kandyan war of 1815 and the

settlement of 1817, the entire island of Ceylon came under one single rule. The relative freedom that was available within the British set-up of the historic communities was used to assert the sociocultural identity of the Sinhalese, the Tamils and the Muslims. Chronologically, the upper caste Hindus of Jaffna were the earliest to assert their identity as a distinct group during British rule. Not opposed to British rule, in fact even welcoming it, they did not want to be Christianized and to be brought onto a par with the socially oppressed and the downtrodden.

The assertion of Hindu identity also meant conserving social traditions and conventions. They took over from Protestant Christianity all the trends of modernization. They wanted English education without Christian influence. The Saiva English schools were the answer. Protestant Christian strategies were employed to take Hinduism to the newly literate. It has been argued that even the type of Saivism which Arumuga Navalar, the protagonist of this movement, explicated was puritanical in character. One of Navalar's last acts as leader of the Saiva Tamils was to promote Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan as the nominated representative of the Tamils. The Ramanathan legacy is a Hindu legacy (Sivathamby 2005:123).

The history of Buddhist revival is too well known to be repeated here. Significantly enough, Buddhist resurgence emanated more from the south than from the central highlands. The role of the Buddhist Theosophical Society and its efforts in introducing modern education brought a new awareness. Anagarika Dharmapala is a key figure in the Buddhist resurgence. The need for a Buddhism based on Sinhala culture was present very much because of the cultural changes brought about by the Portuguese and the Dutch rules, and even the early British impact was not only seen as Christianizing but also de-Sinhalising the Sinhalese. Thus, there was the necessity for underlining Sinhala identity as much as the Buddhist legacy.

The 1870s saw the assertion of Muslim consciousness in Sri Lanka. Inspired by the movement in Egypt, the Muslims of Ceylon, ably led by M.C. Siddi Lebbe, a Muslim from Kandy, set themselves on the path of forging an identity separate from the Tamils. Here again we could say that Muslims' consciousness had become a political reality by the first two decades of the 20th century.

Unlike the case of India, assertions of identity did not play a major role in the pre-independence era. Whereas India could enfold its cultural diversities within a single polity, in Sri Lanka after 1948 those pluralities

that were taken as part of Sri Lankan life were not heeded to when the process of Sinhalisation of the administration began. There were a number of reasons for this, including a feeling among the Sinhalese that they were the minority in comparison to the Tamils, whom they identified as part of India. As the insistence on Sinhalaness increased, Tamil consciousness and Muslim consciousness started developing too (Sivathamby 2005:124).

To come to the main argument, postcolonial Sri Lanka wanted to bring into existence the ideological constructs it made for the Sinhalese and for Buddhism within a colonial set-up. What is interesting in the colonial period was the mutual appreciation of the identities of different groups. Ramanathan was keen on the question of Buddhists' rights. The state council pressed for Sinhala and Tamil to be the official languages. Postcolonial Sri Lanka, in trying to erect a colonial construct, has come to the verge of destroying the entire country. The searching question is how much of the colonialist ideology has determined postcolonial politics in Sri Lanka.

Western influence

Due to the length of British rule, the English language influenced the society and the languages as well. Consequently, certain linguistic features appear in the society when they use English and they have to be brought out properly. Further, the influence of English on the Tamil and Sinhala languages is also an important feature; apart from the linguistic power, it could be discerned through the socio-cultural, political and economic power of a particular language. The Portuguese language was introduced during the Portuguese period in Sri Lanka. A large number of words entered into the Sinhala and Tamil languages. The main contribution of the Portuguese to Sri Lanka was to introduce the Christian faith to the society; therefore, the primary task of their education was to satisfy the religious needs of the converted people.

During the Dutch period, the status of Sinhala/Tamil was not affected. There is evidence that the Dutch priests also learnt Tamil/Sinhala in Sri Lanka to develop public relations. Therefore, we can conclude that the hegemony of Tamil/Sinhala was challenged only by the introduction of British language policy and planning in Sri Lanka. The policy was initiated during the British period. Thereafter, English gradually gained prestige in this country.

The Colebrook commission also did not consider the mother language of this country. It emphasized that English education should be seriously taken into consideration. This policy directly enhanced the status of English and lowered the status of Tamil and Sinhala in this country. The Colebrook policy also led to the closure of the many government vernacular schools in Sri Lanka. A few years later, a committee led by Richard Morgan in 1865 recommended the extension of vernacular schools in every village to provide primary Sinhala education in Sinhala regions and Tamil in Tamil regions (Godge 421). From this time, the government concentrated on vernacular schools and the development of the status of the native languages Sinhala and Tamil, and gave away the English schools to private agencies. On the other hand, the government encouraged the start of private English schools and indirectly supported the maintenance of the status of English.

The Sri Lankan government also decided to elevate the status of the two national languages by parliamentary act; the government declared the vernacular languages as the official languages (Sinhala: the Official Language Act no 33, 1956; and Tamil Act no 28, 1958). Due to these fresh measures, the status and position of the English language gradually declined. But after the declaration of the national languages as official languages, all activities should be officially carried out entirely through the medium of the national languages, initially Sinhala and then gradually Tamil as well. Due to this, English began to play a dwindling role in the educational system.

The activities of the colonial rulers brought about a great deal of other changes, not only in the status of the native languages but also in the entire linguistic behavior of the masses. Where the local culture and languages came into contact with Portuguese, Dutch and English, western influence on lifestyle and culture resulted. These invaders brought their culture, traditions and religions, in addition to their languages.

The postcolonial history of Sri Lanka in the late fifties and sixties was beset with trouble between inter-ethnic groups and political instability and uncertainty. The first event in this instability was the 1958 communal riots, followed by a series of such riots in 1977, and finally again in 1983, an event which is now referred to by political scientist and politicians as a 'pogrom' (Thiruchandran 2006, Somasundram 1998, Santhan 2010). Although there are some ethnic differences between Tamils and Sinhalese, there is some commonness, especially in social customs, manners, practices, beliefs and linguistic behaviors. Sinhalese and Tamils have co-

existed and reciprocally interacted in Sri Lanka for several centuries. Consequently, Sinhala has incorporated many linguistic traits of Tamil and vice-versa. This helps to strengthen the fact that a bilingual group must have existed in the early society of Sri Lanka.

Hindu tradition in Sri Lanka

In the British period, there was close parallelism between education in India and Ceylon. The resilience, dynamism and absorbent qualities of Hindu traditions in education were well illustrated in the way in which it withstood the storm and stress of religious and cultural onslaughts by the missionaries backed, both directly and indirectly, by the Government of the time. With the first gleams of independence, it emerged triumphant, waiting to effloresce with fresh vigour during the present century. Of neo-educational traditions in India, it may be necessary to mention the Brahma Samaj and Arya Samaj movements, the educational visions of Ramakrishna which have also spread into Sri Lanka, the experimental work of the great sage Rabindranath Tagore at Shanti Niketan, the Yogoda System of Swami Yogananda Paramahansa of Bihar, the Theosophical movement of Dr. Annie Besant and the basic system of education of Mahatma Gandhi (Somasegaram 1131).

There is ample incontrovertible evidence to indicate that there was close contact between Sri Lanka and India through the ages. History begins in Sri Lanka with the arrival of Vijaya and his followers. He came from North India with the traditions prevalent in his country and there can be no doubt that he was a Hindu by birth and Brahmanical in training (“Revolt in the Temple” 4). When the enlightened one set the wheel in motion and the great Emperor Asoka sent the royal missionaries Mahinda and Sanghamitta to spread the message in Sri Lanka, the reformed Buddhist traditions in education came into this land.

Within a couple of centuries, this religion and its attendant culture spread throughout the length and breadth of the land and became firmly established. Buddhist monasteries and temples of learning were established here. Eloquent testimony is found in the Mahavamsa about the well-developed social and educational institutions in Sri Lanka. Though epigraphically, records are available in plenty for the existence of Hindu educational institutions in South India; corresponding evidence, however, is totally absent in respect to Sri Lanka. Invasions and colonisations there were in plenty, but the invaders were almost always thrown back. The immigrants and those others who chose to remain behind in Sri Lanka

were duly assimilated into the local community. They had brought with them their Hindu traditions, and these enriched the Sinhala traditions in the country.

Postcolonial /Independent Sri Lanka

The status of the English language in post-independence Sri Lanka has been an iteration of the political dictum that history repeats. The agitation for ‘Swabasha’ education became strong because, during the colonial time, English education excluded many native people from social opportunities and advancement. In the thirty years or so from the mid-1950s to the mid-1980s, English was to all intents and purposes not recognized officially, and the use of this language was not condoned for administrative or educational purposes. Gradually, the country was pushed in the direction of using national languages for education. But in 1977, when the country opened its economy for all, there was a need for English. The private sector flourished, and it needed English-educated personnel for trade, commerce and international relations.

The lifestyle of Sri Lankans was also modified by the culture and language of the British. In order to maintain international contacts, to use it in education, science, technology and business, and to lead a modern life, there was a need for Sri Lankans to study the English language. The report of the Education Reforms Committee of 1979 elaborates on the role of English: “In the context of the rapid growth of knowledge in modern times and the speed with which this knowledge is communicated, it is not possible for students pursuing studies at higher level to achieve and maintain proper academic standards without the first and knowledge of an Report of the international language. For us in Sri Lanka English is the obvious choice” (Education Reform Committee of 1979 (1981)). The amended educational code of 1947 and the Education Act No. 5 of 1951 declared that English was to be the second language for Sinhalese and Tamils, and for Burghers, whose mother tongue was English, either Tamil or Sinhala was to be the second language. In this way, in Sri Lanka, English served as an instrument of integration. Therefore, the education system of the country must, willingly or unwillingly, accommodate English in the curriculum.

Today, Sri Lankan English arises as a result of the situations and circumstances that came into being to express key cultural concepts and linguistics identities which are not available in English. The speakers of Sri Lankan English often resort to a process of borrowing from and

altering local languages. As a result of this, Sri Lankan English has emerged with vocabulary, expressions and syntactic structures that have their origins in the Sinhala and Tamil languages. It is a good sign of promoting the Standard variety of Sri Lankan English for the integration of different communities. The “English” used by Sri Lankans has very much been a Lankanized form since the time the British landed on our land and propagated their language here.

Outline of the Research

This is a study of attitudes towards the English language from Sri Lankan society who have distinctive cultural identities in Sri Lanka. The study of Sri Lankans’ attitudes towards the English language during the colonial to the postcolonial period is to evaluate the attitudes of different ethnic groups towards different languages in the country. Research on this area has contributed substantially to the development of the field of postcolonial studies. There is a strong relationship between the languages used in the society and the attitudes of individuals towards language use. The underlying assumption is that in a society, social groups have certain attitudes towards each other, relating to their differing social positions. These attitudes affect attitudes towards the English language of that society and carry over towards individual members of the society. This study focuses on the Sri Lankan context both in colonial times and today.

A rich mixture of Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims and Burghers live on the island. English has often served as the ‘Lingua Franca’ and is typically the language of choice in contemporary governmental policies and practices. English in Sri Lanka is incredibly politically charged. Given the inability to remove this colonial past, and given present domestic political tensions and international pressure, the use of English in Sri Lanka is far from straightforward.

Generally, the status and functions of English in the Sri Lankan society have been and are governed by the language policy of the government. The societal attitudes too have been responsible for the position of English to date. English had to continue to be the official language, even in free Sri Lanka, until 1956. It was difficult to replace English with native languages immediately after independence. After independence, the status of languages and the societal attitudes have differed in some marked ways. Generally, English bilingualism has differed in the political, social, cultural, linguistic, and attitudinal networks of these societies in which it developed and flourished as a dynamic communicative tool.

This study will examine notions and attitudes on English that prevail in Sri Lanka today among writers, language planners, teachers and students, habitual speakers and infrequent users, as well as elite and non-elite groups in the country.

The influential scholarly research cited comes from the publications of Prof. Thiru Kandiah, Prof. D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke, Prof. Wimal Wickramasinghe, Prof. Arjuna Parakrama, and Prof. Manique Gunesekera. All have done partial analyses on this subject, but not full-fledged analyses. The primary criterion for the selection of the above Sri Lankan writers' works is that they provide valuable background for this analysis. On the model of these earlier studies, we can assume that a few English texts written from the other communities, such as Burghers and Muslims, also invite close analysis. This study also selectively examines colonial and postcolonial writings in three communities. The Sri Lankan Diaspora's works are included in this study because of their growing concern with use of the English language.

List of the major books:

1. Kandiah, Thiru- published articles in *Journal of Linguistics*, *Language Learning*, *Navasilu*, *Journal of South Asian Literature*, *Multilingual*, *English World Wide*, *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, and *Papers in Linguistics*, among others, and contributed chapters to various books including *English Around the World: Sociolinguistic Perspectives* (ed. J. Cheshire), *Perceiving Other Worlds* (ed. E. Thumboo), and *Honouring EFC Ludowyk* (ed. P. Colin-Thomé and A. Halpé).
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Objectives

The present study aims to focus Sri Lankans' views on English language during the Colonial and Postcolonial eras. The following objectives have been aimed at:

- a) Studying in detail the Sinhalese's views on English.
- b) Studying in detail the Tamils' views on English.
- c) Studying in detail the Muslims' and the Burgers' views on English.
- d) Exploring and correlating the social factors which can influence the language change.
- e) Exploring English language as a signifier of social stratification in the literary texts of Sri Lankan writers.

Problems to be investigated

This study attempts to discuss the views of different categories of people towards the English language in this multi-ethnic and multicultural country. As a preamble, a historical view is presented of the position occupied by languages during the colonial period, especially before the independence of Sri Lanka. Generally, the status and functions of English in the Tamil society and the Sinhala society have been and are governed by the language policy of the government. The societal attitudes of various social factors are found in both these communities.

Methodology

The present study uses the direct method to measure the language attitudes of the main societies: Tamils and Sinhalese. All the information will be gathered from both the communities. In addition to quantitative and descriptive analysis, this study uses comparative and information analysis to strengthen the research. The methodology has to be modified to suit the nature of the study.

The primary sources and secondary sources were used through library research. Qualitative research methods have been developed in this study to enable the study of social and cultural phenomena of both communities. Qualitative research methods were designed to help the researchers

understand the people and the social and cultural contexts within which they live. Qualitative data sources of this research include interviews/personal communication (semi-structured face-to-face), discussions, documents, reports and texts, and the researcher's impressions and reactions.

Significance of the study

After independence, the status of languages and the societal attitudes have differed in some marked ways in the two major societies in Sri Lanka, namely Sinhala society and Tamil society. Generally, English bilingualism has differed in the political, social, cultural, linguistic and attitudinal network of these societies in which it developed and flourished as a dynamic communicative tool. According to social psychology and anthropology, language, primarily the first language, has great influence on perception thought process. In learning English, a Tamil student usually perceives a Tamil model of English. Similarly, a Sinhala student perceives a Sinhala model. So, it is pertinent that separate studies are made on Sri Lankans' attitudes towards language during the Colonial and Postcolonial eras.

Scheme of the study

The present study has been classified into the following chapters:

Chapter One - Introduction

Chapter Two - Cultural History of Sri Lanka

Chapter Three - Sinhalese views on the English Language

Chapter Four - Tamils' views on the English Language

Chapter Five - Muslims' and Burghers' views on the English Language

Chapter Six - The English language as a signifier of social stratification in the literary texts of Sri Lankan writers

Chapter Seven - Exploring and correlating the social factors

Chapter Eight - Conclusion

Bibliography

Research book composition

The research consists of eight chapters, including the “Introduction” and “Conclusion.” In the first chapter, an elaborate introduction is given which covers the position of Sri Lankan majorities and minorities in the colonial and postcolonial periods and explains the need for this research with a conceptual framework of the study.

According to the above-mentioned scheme, the second chapter of this study is the cultural history of the study and it reveals the history of Tamils, Sinhalese, Muslims and Burghers; their socio-economic, cultural, and political backgrounds.

The third chapter is “Sinhalese views on English”, which gives a broad description of the Sinhalese people’s attitudes towards the English language.

The fourth chapter is the views of Tamils, which gives a broad description on English language.

The fifth chapter is the “Muslims’ and Burghers’ views on the English Language”. Like the previous chapters, attitudes from the Sinhala and Tamil Muslims are also discussed elaborately from their different perspectives. The focus is given to the minority community’s attitude towards the English language.

The sixth chapter is “English language as a signifier of social stratification in the literary texts of Sri Lankan writers”; it also explores the Diaspora’s contribution by their writings in English.

“Exploring and co-relating the social factors” is the seventh chapter. This chapter explores and correlates the social factors which can influence language change. It has been found that the two communities are similar in their social factors.

The eighth chapter is the conclusion and sums up the findings of this study. This conclusion briefly elaborates the findings of the present work and points out the areas to be explored further.

The texts, reports, Hansards and all the other materials collected for this study have been incorporated as “Bibliography”.

The above chapters are to throw light on the attitude of Sri Lankans towards English and its status and position in society. As a result of this, Sri Lankan English developed with vocabulary, expressions, pronunciation, and syntactic structures that have their origins in the Sinhala and Tamil languages. The findings reveal the efforts that the Sri Lankans have taken to maintain their own attitudes towards English in postcolonial years up to modern times.

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CHAPTER TWO

CULTURAL HISTORY OF SRI LANKA

The Need for English

The need for English in Sri Lanka now does not stem from its colonial legacy, but from various other factors, which are to some extent determined by the role of English as an international language. As Lee McKay puts it, “as a language of wider communication, English is the international language ‘par excellence’” (*Teaching English* 1). And in many instances, it is a language of wider communication, both among individuals from different countries and between individuals from one country. In this way, English is an international language in both a global and a local sense. This study invariably necessitates the analysis of the factors which put a demand on the local population to learn and use English. Smith, as quoted by Lee McKay, in defining English as an international language gives four reasons for its status:

1. As an international language of communication between countries and in a local sense as a language of wider communication within multilingual societies.
2. As it is an international language, the use of English is no longer connected to the countries where English is the primary language (native speakers).
3. As an international language in a local sense, English becomes embedded in the culture of the country in which it is used.
4. As English is an international language in a global sense, one of its primary functions is to enable speakers to share with others their ideas and culture (12).

One cannot dispute the fact that English tends to establish itself alongside the local languages Sinhala and Tamil in multilingual contexts composed of bilingual speakers. In this context, David Graddol gives some very interesting facts “based solely on expected population changes. The number of people using English as their second language will grow from

235 million to around 462 million during the next 50 years. This indicates that the balance between L₁ and L₂ speakers will critically change, with L₂ speakers eventually overtaking L₁ speakers” (62). What he meant in this comment is that learners of English as their second language will outnumber the native speakers of English. Linguists such as Kachru, Crystal, Graddol and others have identified three types of English speakers in the world. These three types can be arranged in concentric circles:

1. The inner circle refers to what we identify as native speakers in the USA, UK, Ireland, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.
2. The outer circle refers to the non-native speakers of English who use English as their second language in countries such as Singapore, India, and Malawi and over fifty other countries. Sri Lanka also falls into this category.
3. The expanding circle or the outermost circle includes speakers of English in countries like China, Japan, Greece, Poland and a steadily increasing number of other countries. These countries do not have a history of colonization by members of the inner circle. English is studied or used as a foreign language in these countries.

The Languages of the Colonial Rulers

Language use in Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) society after the advent of the Colonial rulers marks a significant phase in its history. Sri Lanka was under foreign rule for nearly 450 years. The Portuguese (1505-1658) were the first to invade Sri Lanka and the Dutch (1658-1796) ruled over the island for about another 150 years. The British Empire took control of Sri Lanka in 1796 and its rule continued until independence in 1948.

The activities of the colonial rulers brought about a great deal of changes, not only in the status of the native languages, but also in the entire linguistic behaviour of the masses. When the local languages, Sinhala and Tamil, came into contact with the Portuguese, Dutch and English languages, multilingualism resulted. People had to learn these languages to adapt and adjust themselves to the needs of the times. These invaders brought with them their culture, tradition and religions, in addition to their languages.

It cannot be disputed that the interference of these languages, though temporary, led to their development as well, from the local languages to social life. The major local languages, Sinhala and Tamil, became enriched and resourceful because of borrowings from these languages.

Portuguese Period (1505-1658)

The Portuguese arrived in Sri Lanka in 1505. This period marks a very significant phase in the status and role of national languages. For the first time, history saw an entirely alien language coming into contact with the un-spoilt indigenous languages of the East—particularly the Sinhala and Tamil languages in Sri Lanka. This was not merely an introduction of another medium—a common medium—between the invader and the invaded, it was a formidable force in full swing unleashed on the unsophisticated, almost monolingual communities.

Portuguese became the language of administration. The officials had to employ interpreters for communication with local inhabitants. Direct communication became possible only when the Ceylonese (Sri Lankans now) had learnt Portuguese and not by the reverse process of the Portuguese officials learning the languages of the country. It was, in fact, the Ceylonese who became lusitanized, accepted the religion of the Portuguese, learnt their languages and adopted their culture, customs and language manners. Consequently, they won the favour of the Portuguese and were promoted to positions of importance.

The Portuguese ruled over Ceylon for a little over one century and a half. During their rule, the activities of the missionaries and those in administration were more intensified in Jaffna than in any other parts of the island. There were many reasons for this and these reasons were instrumental as to the widespread use of Portuguese in these areas.

Sri Lankan (Ceylonese) parents themselves were, doubtless, glad to have their children educated in Portuguese as it was the language of the ruling power and of administration, and because knowledge of it brought opportunities for securing better positions of importance under the foreigner, for trade and social intercourse with him and for rise in social status (Ruberu 21).

The Franciscan and Jesuit missionaries introduced an educational system in Sri Lanka to suit their needs and purposes. These missionaries gave importance to their language, Portuguese, and to Latin, which was the language of the church. The vernacular languages were not obliterated. But the impact of Portuguese on them was great.

Dutch Period (1658-1796)

The Dutch were the next to capture Ceylon. They adopted somewhat different policies, but they were nonetheless significant in their own way. The Dutch engaged themselves in proselytizing activities with greater enthusiasm from the time they seized power in 1658. They, in turn, made Dutch the language of power and administration, and the Dutch missionaries set up schools and built up their contacts with people through both political and religious activities. They were not much concerned about thrusting their language over the masses. Schools were opened to the natives and they were converted to Christianity (Protestantism). The Dutch 'Predikants' (preachers) followed the methods used by the Catholics in their work. Rev. Philip Baldeus, who came to Ceylon in 1656, was the spiritual leader of the final stage of the Dutch conquest of Ceylon. As language was a barrier in this missionary endeavour, Baldeus asserted that all Predikants should learn the indigenous languages (Anton Matthias 15; Ruberu 34). The Dutch had close cultural and religious ties with people living in the islands and the coastal areas of Ceylon. Those who sought power and positions in the administration had to study Dutch.

The Dutch believed that the surest way of reaching the people was through the medium of their own language. Unlike the Portuguese, they adopted a liberal policy towards the medium of instruction at schools and the use of the native languages in the country.

British Period (1796-1948)

The period of British foreign rule in Sri Lanka is an important part in the history of Sri Lanka. The British imperialists who took possession of the island in 1796 were the last of the colonial rulers of Sri Lanka, then known as Ceylon. All the invaders—the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British—worked in a set pattern. They wanted to expand their empire and at the same time propagate their religious faith in the foreign soil. For these purposes, they used their language as the tool or medium. The proselytizing strategies of the British were different from those of the Dutch and the Portuguese. The British colonial rulers wanted very much to serve the needs of the existing religious and educational structures of that time. Alexander Johnston, the Chief Justice of Ceylon from 1805 to 1819, met William Wilberforce, who led the evangelicals in England, and expressed to him his desire to see a Protestant mission to undertake religious and educational activities in Ceylon. The British governors of

that time wanted English to be the “Superior language”. Governor Brownrigg once stated “...the cultivation of the English language must necessarily be a principal objective of any system of education to which I can in a public capacity give my concurrence” (Jeyasuriya 37). The British having brought the entire island under their control, the conversion of as many of the inhabitants as possible to Christianity led, undoubtedly, to the converts occupying all the important places.

Governor Frederick North realized education was, par excellence, the means to this end. This was an idea to which North reverted again and again, emphasizing the distinctive role to be performed by a handful of native young men selected and given a special education in Ceylon and in England (Jeyasuriya 37). This was the beginning of an educated class of locals called the elites—the privileged group of citizens. These men had access to English education and the opportunity to taste the western culture in England.

This clause appears to have made it possible for the Roman Catholics to open schools, whereas Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims had schools in their temple (kovil) or mosque premises. No schools were established by these groups outside the premises of places of worship during this time. Governor North also drew up plans for re-organizing education in Ceylon according to which the Parish schools were to be recognized. In them, the medium of instruction was Sinhalese or Tamil, according to the area in which the schools were situated. A few schools of a superior nature “for the education of the children of Burghers and of those natives whose families are eligible to the office of Mudaliyar (interpreter) and to other dignities and charges given by Government to its native servants” were to be established. These schools would place emphasis on the study of English (Jeyasuriya 141).

Jeyasuriya further describes the elites as “the group of Ceylonese who, having received an English education often with distinction, developed aspirations for recognition in political and professional fields. This led to the nationalist movement, which sought to defend the interests of the natives, to a certain extent the English education given by the British to them proved to be a course of embarrassment to the British themselves” (141). English education nurtured both conformists—loyal British subjects who adored everything British—and dissidents. These dissidents, who constituted the educated class, played an increasingly vital role by participating in agitation for more responsible positions for the Ceylonese,

for a greater share in the management of their own (Ceylon) affairs and, ultimately, and for a move toward independence.

Decline of the English language in the island gathered momentum after Sri Lanka gained independence in 1948. The English language, which enjoyed the prestigious position of being the official language, the language of administration and the medium of instruction at schools, began to lose its importance gradually. The native languages became the medium of instruction from kindergarten up to the university with the introduction of the Swabasha system. W.L.A. Don Peter states “It used to be said that the sun never sets in the British Empire, it is no more. But there is another empire, the empire of the language of the British, which is vaster, vaster than any empire we have known” (156).

The importance of mother tongue cannot be disputed or ignored but at the same time we must take cognizance of the practical usefulness and necessity of a world language such as English. Without English, we cannot communicate with the outside world nor have access to a world of knowledge. The English language continues to hold sway not as an official language thrust on the people by the colonial rulers or a symbol of elitism, but as an international language with added significance.

Whatever the language policy in education, the people have come to realize the value of English and, consequently, there is a big demand for it today. In spite of the system of Swabasha education up to university level, it is still those who have a command of English who are in the advantageous position of being able to secure employment in this country and abroad. Modern mass media have accelerated the spread and use of English throughout the world. W.L.A. Don Peter adds “Not only in countries colonized by the British and in others, which were once under British rule and are now independent, but even in countries which have not been colonially or politically subject to Britain, English is being used more and more, especially in the scientific and business fields” (156).

The English language enjoys an enviable position in the world today. It has now developed into a global language. As David Crystal stated in his book, *English as a Global Language*:

There has never been a time when so many nations needed to talk to each other so much. There has never been a time when so many people wished to travel to so many places. There has never been such a strain placed on the conventional resources of translating and interpreting. Never has the need for more widespread bilingualism been greater, to ease the burden

placed on the professional few and never has there been a more urgent need for a global language (12).

The Postcolonial situation with English

The status of the English language in post-independent Sri Lanka has been an iteration of the political dictum that “history is repeated”. The declaration of independence and the subsequent enthroning of the Swabasha as the official language in 1956, along with the implementation of the mother tongue as the medium of instruction in education signalled the decline of the English language, which was supreme in all the spheres in the pre-independent era of the country. Ryhana Raheem and Hemamala Ratwatte, quoting David Hayes in one of their joint research papers, comment as follows:

Within a decade of independence from colonial rule, the status of English in the island was to undergo a radical change from being the dominant language of local society. In the thirty years or so from the mid-1950s to the mid-1980s, English, to all intents and purposes, was not recognized officially, and the use of this language was not condoned for administrative or educational purposes. This, however, was the ‘official’ attitude... The reality, as we are all aware, was far removed. At every level of what we have described as the ‘opinion,’ competing goals, values, practices and beliefs contributed to the continued use of English. (28)

The years that followed immediately after independence saw extensive changes in the language policy of the country and the educational system as a whole. The native languages, Sinhala and Tamil, were enthroned and English was almost relegated to the background with the introduction of ‘Swabasha’ in administration and education. The “Sinhala Only” bill was passed on June 15, 1956. The ‘Swabasha’ (mother tongue) Sinhala, and Tamil, were made the media of instruction from kindergarten up to the university.

The linguistic concomitant of all this is that the English language continued to play a much more significant role in the affairs of the country than the “restoration” of the native languages might have indicated. The Official Language Act of 1956 did replace English with Sinhala as the one official language of the country, while the Tamil Language (Special Provisions) Act of 1958 did make provision for the use of Tamil too for official purposes. And it is true that, after this, as Sinhala and Tamil began to be used more and more in Government offices, public places, and for communication, education, entertainment and social activities and so on,

English did lose considerable ground to these languages. It is important, however, not to exaggerate the extent of this displacement of English. First, although it does make sense to speak of the displacement of English by Sinhala and Tamil in various spheres of life, we cannot overlook the fact that much of the work that the native languages were now called upon to do was not work that was “taken over” from English, but new work that was thrown up by the social changes of that time, changes that, by facilitating the participation of far more non-English-speaking people in these spheres than earlier, had caused the hitherto-limited scale of operations within them to be greatly extended.

Apart from this, the simple fact was that English continued to be the dominant language at the higher levels in most of the important spheres of society. The de Lanerolle Committee, which investigated the teaching of English in the island around 1972, reported that a knowledge of English was considered to be necessary for effective action, at least at the higher levels, in several important spheres of society, such as Commerce and Industry (both public and private), Banking, Transport, the Postal Services, Medicine, Science and Technology, Law, Broadcasting, International Transport and Communication, and in a considerable number of fields in tertiary education (de Lanerolle, *et al.* 1). There was nothing surprising or objectionable in this. Sri Lanka was, after all, struggling to recover from the disastrous effects of four and a half centuries of colonial rule and to build itself into a truly strong and independent modern nation that could take its place on a footing of equality and dignity among the nations of the world. English, in far greater measure than other languages, had several advantages from this point of view: it was international in character; it provided easy access to modern knowledge and expertise, including, particularly, scientific and technological knowledge and expertise; and it was already familiar in Sri Lanka. Given these advantages that English had, it seemed to be entirely right that it should be given a place of significance, particularly in those areas in which it would facilitate the realization of the aspirations of the nation.

English in Education

Education was in the hands of Christian missionaries when it was not directed and controlled by British officials. Writing in 1907 in “The Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon”, Mr. E. W. Perera, who himself figured prominently in politics two decades later, said that the first articulate clamour for free institutions commenced in the days of the