

The Decolonization of Sri Lankan English: The Need to Break the Rules and Expand the Borders

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Sri Lankan English (SLE) is generally identified within academia as the variety of English used in Sri Lanka and therefore bears its own unique identity. This study examined the perceptions, beliefs and attitudes of three English teachers about the situation of English in their individual teaching contexts to understand the status of SLE in the sphere of education. The study gathered its data through informal interviews with the three English teachers who have more than thirty years of experience teaching English in private and public sector schools in the western province. In their observations about the situation of English in their teaching contexts, the participants identified the distinction between the mid-closed short back-rounded vowel /o/ and the mid-open short back rounded vowel /ɔ/ as the principal phonemic characteristic distinguishing between high and low forms of SLE, the reluctance to assimilate indigenous terms, the non-deviation from the input variety in the written form and the general lack of opportunity for and acceptance of creative uses of language as key factors preventing the indigenization of English in Sri Lanka. They further noted that as a result of these factors, the ownership of English in Sri Lanka has remained amongst its speakers within the upper-middle-class social stratum to whom proficiency in English comes as a birthright, thus effectively preventing it from growing in to a truly Sri Lankan variety with its own unique identity. The observations made by the participants suggest that the conservatism surrounding the rules governing the use of English in Sri Lanka has caused the variety that is the least deviant from the input variety spoken by the upper-middle-class, first language speakers of the language to be upheld as the standard form. The paper uses the participants' observations to argue that although presented as the characteristics that give it its unique identity, the rules governing the use of English in Sri Lanka have prevented the language from growing into a truly Sri Lankan variety and functioned as a barrier against the decolonization of English in Sri Lanka in postcolonial times. The paper calls for the rules pertaining to SLE to be revised and the lines marking its borders to be extended to encompass new and creative uses of the language produced by its multifarious users.

Keywords: Decoloniality, Language ideology, Postcoloniality, Sri Lankan English, World Englishes