Interlingual texting: Texting in Sinhala using English fonts

Dr. Rohini Chandrica Widyalankara

Senior Lecturer
English Language Teaching Unit
University of Kelaniya
Sri Lanka

Abstract- In the sphere of communication in Sri Lanka using English fonts for recording Sinhala discourse during the use of Short Message Service or Interlingual Texting is very popular. Analyzing such discourse this study argues that the asymmetry in the phonologies of Sinhala and English, and the difficulty in graphically denoting of sounds of Sinhala in English make the deciphering of Interlingual texts complex leading to unintelligibility and ambiguity of the messages. Data analysis further identifies a formal vs. colloquial dichotomy in the register of interlingual texting. The nonvolitional and nonelective transfer of fossilized English loan phonology of Sinhala too is evidenced in the register. The spread of the language of Sinhala Interlingual texting to English print media too is noted in this sociolinguistic analysis.

Index Terms: Interlingual texting, formal vs. colloquial dichotomy, Sri Lanka, multiglossia.

I. INTRODUCTION

In Sri Lanka the majority of the population across all social strata uses the Short Message Service (SMS) as it is the least cost-effective mode of personal communication and disseminating information. Mobile phones are affordable and the technology is robust and reliable. It works well even in the rural areas with patchy coverage. SMS messages can be stored in the network’s server and can be forwarded when the phone appears within a signal range (de Silva et al., 2011)[1]. But at present texting using the fonts of the two vernaculars of Sri Lanka: Sinhala and Tamil is not possible. Thus Interlingual texting is a popular mode of communication and texting is done in this unique manner.

Interlingual texting is a record of discourse of one language by means of graphemes of some other language using the medium of SMS. In the context of this study it can be defined as the texting of Sinhala or Tamil discourse using English fonts or English fonts being used to type Sinhala or Tamil messages phonetically by consumers of the SMS on mobile phones in Sri Lanka.

This mode of communication differs from the normal texting where English font and a multitude of abbreviations are used to denote English words. In interlingual texting while the graphemes seen on screen are English the grapheme to phoneme conversion results in Sinhala or Tamil discourse. Thus what is evidenced at present is that interlingual texting generates uncertainty of the accuracy of the messages when translated back to Sinhala or Tamil.

According to Karunaratne et al¹ (2013: 1)[2],

The majority of SMS writers in Sri Lanka transliterate messages because of language barriers, which create various communication problems and ambiguity of messages.

Yet do all users of interlingual texting ‘transliterate messages because of language barriers’? This study argues that though interlingual texting in Sri Lanka is used by a majority to overcome language barriers others do so for diverse reasons.

From the president’s New Year message through various information dissemination promotions to personal communiqué interlingual texting is used for communicating in Sinhala or Tamil in Sri Lanka. In the first two instances above it is a popular and trendy mode of communicating and creating an affinity with the masses. The use of interlingual texting for personal communication is considered quicker by many users as less time is needed to compose the text. This is due to the fact that though many Sri Lankans are bilingual the dominant language in their repertoire is their mother tongue: Sinhala or Tamil. Thus thoughts come easier in their mother tongue. Furthermore for most bilinguals translating these thoughts to English is a time consuming hunt for translation equivalents in English. Therefore using interlingual texting saves time.

But on the downside, this study argues that a multitude of communication problems occur due to the lack of intelligibility and ambiguity of most messages. One reason for this is the disparity in the phonologies of Sinhala/Tamil and English influencing the graphemic representation of Sinhala or Tamil sounds in English during interlingual texting.

Henceforth this paper restricts its discussion and analysis mainly to interlingual texting in Sinhala.

II. THE REGISTER OF INTERLINGUAL TEXTING IN SINHALA

This paper analyses interlingual texting as a genre within the registers of multiglossic Sinhala. A register is one of many styles or varieties of a language used for a particular purpose or in a particular social setting. More generally, a register is also used to

¹ This research of Karunarathe et al (2013) is an attempt to predict Sinhala sentences in mobile short messages. This is a timely necessity in Sri Lanka. The main advantage of the research is developing an effective algorithm for reducing the typing effort, saving time and avoiding language ambiguity.

www.ijsrp.org
indicate degrees of formality in language use. According to Agha (2007: 144) ‘a register is a cultural model that reflects social relationships and shared community ideologies through linguistic features’. The register of interlingual texting in Sri Lanka is a worthy example which reflects all the above criteria. It can be broadly divided into a formal register which is used in formal settings where the format is generally impersonal while the informal register reflects idiomatic usages and lexicogrammatical features of Colloquial Spoken Sinhala (CSS). This reflects the diglossic nature of Spoken variety within the multiglossic Sinhala. Gair (1998) discussing diglossia in Spoken Sinhala states that the Formal Spoken Sinhala lacks subject-verb agreement of Literary Written Sinhala. He further states that though the basic word order of both varieties can be categorized as SOV, it is much more flexible in the former. Gair (ibid: 226) recognizes the following glosses in Spoken Sinhala, 1) Formal spoken Sinhala, which makes use of one or more grammatical features of literary Sinhala (other than verb agreement) with relative consistency. It characteristically makes considerable use of a formal lexicon shared with literary Sinhala.

2) Colloquial Spoken Sinhala, which is the language of ordinary conversation.

One feature of Colloquial Spoken Sinhala is the high occurrence of assimilated loanwords from English. Analyzing interlingual texting based on the above classification it can be suggested that the influence of this Formal/Colloquial dichotomy is reflected in its register features.

III. STANDARD USE OF ENGLISH FONTS TO DENOTE SINHALA DISCOURSE IN LITERATURE VS INTERLINGUAL TEXTING: A REGISTER ANALYSIS

This linguistic analysis of register feature distinction is based on differences in the relative distribution of linguistic features. Any linguistic feature that has a functional or conventional association can be distributed in a way that distinguishes registers. Such features come from many linguistic classes, including the target area of this study: phonology, as the register of interlingual texting is phonetic. This study constructs a premise that the origin of interlingual texting can be traced to the phonetic representation of spoken Sinhala through English fonts in literature.

Linguistic documentation of Sinhala in literature over the ages has used transliteration and it can be suggested that a standard has evolved. I cite examples for a current standard through extracts from literature.

a) Zubair (2011: 42) states that data in his paper is solely from CSS. The following analysis identifies usages which denote the rules for transliterating CSS in his research.

1. \(\text{Rambutang\textsuperscript{7}}, \text{in this season? Were they even ripe?}\) (Zubair, ibid)

Note the mid word, upper case \(T\) used to denote the retroflex plosive \(\theta\) (\(\text{th}\) in Sinhala) graphically in the first word in the above utterance. This differentiates the retroflex plosive from the voiceless dental plosive \(\text{th}\) (\(\text{th}\) in Sinhala) which is denoted by Zubair (ibid) graphically as \(t\). But note that the voiced dental plosive \(\text{th}\) (\(\text{th}\) in Sinhala) is represented by \(d\). Also note the use of the symbols of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) for the velar nasal /\(n\)/. But the most significant usages are the letter \(a\) for the open central vowel /\(a\)/ and the IPA symbol \(\alpha\) for the mid central vowel /\(a\)/ thus differentiating the two sounds in the transliteration. This differentiation between these two phonemes is deemed necessary especially when they occur as vowels inherent to consonant graphemes of Sinhala. Also note the use of double vowel letters to designate a long vowel sound: /\(mee /me:/\).

b) Hilpert (2006: 267)\(^{[6]}\) too uses similar symbols for transliteration. But the dental plosives \(\text{th}\) and \(\text{th}\) are denoted as \(t\) and \(d\) respectively as seen in the example below.

1. \(\text{ge\text{dara} yan\text{na}/ home go!}\)

[Go home!]

2. \(\text{gem\text{ba} boot\text{el\text{a}-yen\text{jan/ p\text{a\text{e}

pa\text{e}-la gi\text{y\text{aa}/}}\}

The frog from the bottle escaped

[The frog escaped from the bottle]

2. Lychee: a small fruit originally from China, with sweet white flesh and a single large seed inside. A seasonal fruit in Sri Lanka.

3. \(\text{th}\) in Sinhala.

4. \(\text{th}\) in Sinhala.

5. \(\text{th}\) in Sinhala.

6. \(\text{th}\) in Sinhala.
What is evidenced in the above transliterations is the strategic use of IPA symbols/uppercase graphemes to differentiate between phonemes. This minimizes ambiguity.

As this study traces the origin of interlingual texting through transliterations recorded in literature on Sinhala it cites the following usages in other scholarly work on Sinhala where, for example, the English graphemes \( th \), \( dh \) are used to denote the aspirated sounds \( \tilde{t}h \), \( \tilde{d}h \) respectively.

Karunatillake in 2001 conducted a diachronic analysis of the evolution of the phonology of Sinhala. He discusses the merger of the dental stops with the aspirated equivalents in Old Indo Aryan which coalesced as dental stops in Old Sinhala and backdates to 1c. BCE. The transcription used for the phonemes of the dental stops with the aspirated equivalents in Old Indo evolution of the phonology of Sinhala. He discusses the merger following usages in other scholarly work on Sinhala where, for example, the English graphemes \( th \), \( dh \) are used to denote the aspirated sounds \( \tilde{t}h \), \( \tilde{d}h \) respectively.

In other literature too the graphemes \( th \) are used for transcribing the aspirated sound \( \tilde{t}h \) and \( dh \) for \( \tilde{d}h \). But recall that Sinhala has a diglossia between written and spoken language. Thus though the aspirated graphemes occur in written Sinhala they do not carry a phonemic value.

In most informal interlingual texting at present the register is Spoken Sinhala and deciphering \( th \) as \( \tilde{t}h \) carries validity. But the use of the graphemes \( th \) to signify the phoneme \( \tilde{t}h \) would lead to ambiguity if the register of interlingual texting gains in formality and aspires to represent the aspirated sounds, for example, \( \tilde{t}h \) and \( \tilde{d}h \) of Sinhala.

Based on the above analysis it can be suggested that one main reason for the ambiguity in the register of interlingual texting is that the user’s scope of word entry is restricted to the fonts of the 26 letters of the English alphabet. This creates a multitude of problems when deciphering interlingual texts. Table 1 below highlights some areas which are liable to create ambiguity during interlingual texting.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Sinhala letters which need differentiation</th>
<th>Current symbols for transliteration in literature</th>
<th>Letter in interlingual texting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Voiceless dental plosive ( \tilde{t}h )</td>
<td>( \tilde{t}h )</td>
<td>( t )</td>
<td>( th )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voiced dental plosive ( \tilde{d}h )</td>
<td>( \tilde{d}h )</td>
<td>( d )</td>
<td>( dh )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voiceless retroflex plosive ( \tilde{t}h )</td>
<td>( \tilde{t}h )</td>
<td>( t )</td>
<td>( \tilde{t}h )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voiceless retroflex plosive ( \tilde{d}h )</td>
<td>( \tilde{d}h )</td>
<td>( d )</td>
<td>( \tilde{d}h )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opaque back vowel ( a )</td>
<td>( a )</td>
<td>( a )</td>
<td>( a )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central mid vowel ( \tilde{a} )</td>
<td>( \tilde{a} )</td>
<td>( a )</td>
<td>( \tilde{a} )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Front low mid vowel ( \tilde{e} )</td>
<td>( \tilde{e} )</td>
<td>( \tilde{a} )</td>
<td>( \tilde{a} )</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus analyzing the register of interlingual texting what is noted is that the use of \( th \) for the voiceless dental plosive \( \tilde{t}h \) and \( t \) for the voiceless retroflex plosive \( \tilde{t}h \) denotes an accepted norm. But the other five usages result in ambiguity during deciphering. Moreover this is only one area which gives rise to problems in deciphering interlingual texting. Two other areas identified in this study are misspelt English words and the occurrence of deviations from Standard Sri Lankan English pronunciation in loanwords assimilated from English to Sinhala. These features many arise in the informal register of interlingual texting but not in its formal counterpart.

IV. FORMAL REGISTER OF INTERLINGUAL TEXTING

Stylistic variations in language cannot be judged as appropriate or not without reference to the participants in the interchange. The formality of interlingual texting too is generated through the sender-receiver status. Note the formal nature in the Sinhala segment of the New Year greetings sent in 2014 (Figure 1 below) where the sender is the then president of Sri Lanka.

Note that ‘Oba Samata Suba Nawa Vasaraka Wewa!’ utilizes English font to type Sinhala words. In ‘Ungal Anaiavurakkum Puththandu Nalviaththuka!’ English font is used yet again to type Tamil words. Thus the text in Figure 1 below uses a trilingual mode of transliteration.

Figure 1: The 2014 New Year message from the president of Sri Lanka.

Following are some short examples of other formal SMSs10 shortlisted from the mobile phone inboxes of 15 randomly selected Sri Lankan bilinguals on 6 June, 2014. They are broadly categorized as formal dispatches as they typify promotional communiqués sent by service providers in Sri Lanka to consumers.

i. STAR FRIENDS thulin obage priyathama thanruwa11 …
   Star Friends through your favourite star12
   …
   samaga SL vs SA cricket match eka …
   with Sri Lanka vs. South Africa cricket match the

---

9 Source: https://www.google.lk/search?q=texting+in+sinhala&tbm=isch&bo=u&source=univ&saom%252F2013%252F05%252Ftea-be-or-not-tea-be.html%3B213%3B320

According to the editorial of the Daily Mirror the current President Maithripala Sirisena’s new year ‘message was identical to the one Rajapaksha sent on January 1, 2014’ http://www.dailymirror.lk/69399/editorial-avnuru-text-andunanswered.

10 Henceforth all words of SMSs are highlighted. In each selection the highlighted section denotes the original appearance of the text with English fonts used to type Sinhala words.

11 A film star

12 The second line records the closest broad signification of each word.

www.ijsrp.org
narabeemata awasthawak!!!  Kondesi adalewe.
to watch an opportunity. Conditions apply.

[An opportunity to watch the cricket match Sri Lanka vs. South Africa with your favourite star through Star Friends. Conditions apply.] 13

ii. Anuradhapure yanna 365 amatha Mobitel14 …
To Anuradhapure to travel 365 call Mobitel
m-ticketing within denma dumriya praveshapath……
m-ticketing through now train tickets
wenkara ganna. Gasthu ha kondesi adala we.
reserve payments and conditions apply

[To travel to Anuradhapura call Mobitel (and) through m-
ticketing book train tickets now. Payments and conditions apply.]

A. Informal register of interlingual texting

The following personal communiqués are categorized under
Informal register as the rhythm and idiom of CSS is more
evidenced when compared to the promotional communiqués
discussed above. Additionally code mixing is more prevalent in
these texts.

i. mee api tama at hom. tatta yanne ne.
Here, we still at home. Father going not

[We (are) still at home. Father (is) not going.]
Note the misspelt hom in the above text.

ii. mama kata kerapu 3 wil eka aava.
I called three wheeler came
[The three wheeler I called came.]

iii. ane mis ada exam liwa.
Oh! miss today exam wrote
[Oh! miss I wrote for the exam today.]

iv. mage yaluwek konde firm kala. shook.
My friend hair permed. Nice.
[(one of ) my friend(s) permed her hair. (It is) nice.]

The word firm in example iv above illustrates substitution of
f for p which is a characteristic in weak bilinguals who deviate
from Standard Sri Lankan English (SSLE) pronunciation. Personal communication with the sender led to the discovery that the
word firm was used for perm an abbreviation for a permanent
hair style.

13 The restructured sentence broadly following the grammatical word
order of English is indicated by [] and is given in the third line..
14 A mobile telephone company in Sri Lanka.
15 This is the closest transliteration in the given context which conveys
dissatisfaction on the performance at a particular examination.
gramasewaka or Grama Niladhari is a Sri Lankan public official appointed by the central government to carry out administrative duties in a Grama Niladhari division, which is a subunit of a divisional secretariat. The duties of a Grama Niladhari include issuing of permits, gathering statistics, maintaining the voter registry and maintaining peace by settlement of personal disputes. They are responsible to keep track of criminal activity in their area and issue character certificates on behalf of residents when requested by them.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grama_Niladhari
(Retrieved 13 June, 2014)

In Sri Lanka the emergence of deviations from SSLE is termed as the practice of using ‘broken English’. An equivalent can be found in ‘murdering Queen's English’.

The photo depicts a midwife tucking into a creamy ice cream cone while clutching another one, most probably for a colleague.

Aney ... ekkak maddhi de?

Note that the usages bay and jP especially the latter which is a unique abbreviation in Sinhala interlingual texting for jeesu pithai.

Linguistically these interlingual text messages create a new register in Sinhala and accelerate the rise of Colloquial Spoken in Written Sinhala communique in functional domains. While some Sinhala texts written in English font can be confusing to many proficient users of Sinhala, including myself, most habitual users of this form of texting know how to do a speedy transliteration.

But it has to be noted that there is a high frequency usage of assimilated English loanwords in Sinhala especially in personal communiqués.

VI. ENCROACHMENT OF INTERLINGUAL TEXTING FORMATS TO CURRENT ENGLISH PRINT MEDIA

On the other hand what is linguistically disturbing is the encroachment of interlingual texting to current print media. Below is an extract from the Sunday Times of Sri Lanka which is a premier upmarket English-language publication with a wide readership.

The caption which is the title line of this feature article in Figure 3 below bears evidence of the encroachment of Sinhala words typed with English letters into English print media. The register is CSS which is trendy but reflects erroneous usage of Sinhala which creates humour as it conveys that the writer, though a proficient user of English, is a user of ‘broken Sinhala’.25

Figure 3: A caption which uses English font to write Sinhala words from a featured article in print media26

In the caption extracted from Figure 3 cited below the word ekkak /ekkak/ results in the gemination of the letter k and maddhi has a non-aspirated d and an aspirated dh signifying the following in Sinhala.

Aney27… ekkak maddhi de?28

21 A gramasewaka or Grama Niladhari is a Sri Lankan public official appointed by the central government to carry out administrative duties in a Grama Niladhari division, which is a subunit of a divisional secretariat. The duties of a Grama Niladhari include issuing of permits, gathering statistics, maintaining the voter registry and maintaining peace by settlement of personal disputes. They are responsible to keep track of criminal activity in their area and issue character certificates on behalf of residents when requested by them. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grama_Niladhari (Retrieved 13 June, 2014)

22 Punctuation is added from this point to get the sense of the extract.

23 An endearment for someone highly valued such as dearest but loosely used in this context.

24 I needed help during deciphering jP.

25 In Sri Lanka the emergence of deviations from SSLE is termed as the practice of using ‘broken English’. An equivalent can be found in ‘murdering Queen’s English’.

26 The photo depicts a midwife tucking into a creamy ice cream cone while clutching another one, most probably for a colleague.

27 Other possible significations in the given context obtained from a Madura online dictionary are: Oh, dear, dear me! or the word may be used for chastising someone for a mischievous deed. (transliteration is from Madura dictionary http://www.maduradictionary.com/?find=+dear)

28 A question marker in Sinhala.
written discourse was formerly Formal establishment of CSS is strongly evidenced in areas where such usages in a Sinhala matrix states, is acceptable in CSS discourse. Senarathne (ibid: 55) discussing resort to a high frequency usage of assimilated loan phonology in words and deviations from SSLE pronunciation in assimilated acceleration of the use and the fossilization of ill spelt English of importance is that the rise of interlingual texting results in the phonological grammar of CSS in literature. Moreover what is interlingual texting flouts even the norms of usage in population of mobile phone users with differing levels of proficiency in Sinhala and English. Furthermore the register is at the learner English users resort to a high frequency usage of assimilated loan phonology in interlingual texting most bilinguals who are proficient in English evidence learner user features of Sinhala, even in CSS, during their attempts at producing Sinhala words typed with English letters.

VII. SUMMARY STATEMENT

In sum what can be concluded is that the advent and establishment of CSS is strongly evidenced in areas where written discourse was formerly Formal or Literary. Disanayaka, way back in 1976[12], had perceived the first notions of this sociolinguistic evolution in Sinhala. The gradual but steady influx of patterns of Spoken Sinhala into writing, coupled with changes within literary Sinhala itself, has brought about a number of variants in literary usage (ibid: 31).

Furthermore according to Disanayaka (ibid: 32) the formulation of a literary Sinhala standard has led to an impasse ‘between the two main schools of thought, the puristic, which maintains that the pristine purity of the language must be preserved at any cost, and the pragmatic, which recognizes change in language as a natural phenomenon’. Even if interlingual texting is given recognition under ‘the pragmatic which recognizes change in language as a natural phenomenon’ in this instance the change is controlled by a large population of mobile phone users with differing levels of proficiency in Sinhala and English. Furthermore the register is at present denied a standard which is difficult to achieve due to the restrictions imposed by the number of letters and symbols which could be used during message construction. It is evidenced that interlingual texting flouts even the norms of usage in the phonological grammar of CSS in literature. Moreover what is of importance is that the rise of interlingual texting results in the acceleration of the use and the fossilization of ill spelt English words and deviations from SSLE pronunciation in assimilated loanword phonological contours especially in weak Sinhala/Sri Lankan English bilinguals. The nonvolitional and nonelective transfer of fossilized loan phonology to English speech discourse will further alienate these bilinguals from SSLE pronunciation. Though most English loanwords when used in a matrix of Sinhala flout SSLE norms, according to Senarathne (2009[13]), it is acceptable in CSS discourse. Senarathne (ibid: 55) discussing such usages in a Sinhala matrix states,

It is important to note that as lone lexical items occurring in predominant Sinhala utterances these nativizations are not considered as mistakes or errors. She further observes that these nativizations have occurred in the integration of lone words into Sinhala creating unexpected phonological patterns. Based on this premise flouting the norms of SSLE pronunciation in English loan assimilations occurring as lone words in a Sinhala matrix, for example in interlingual texting, which are utterances in CSS discourse would be acceptable.

Thus at present in the evolutionary status of Sinhala there is a vigorous preference for the pragmatic which requires a shift from literary to CSS in most registers in functional domains. Sociolinguistically this can be identified as a withdrawal from the linguistically difficult code to the undemanding. In the context of interlingual texting the entry of its register with a high rate of assimilated loanword phonology to written formats which depict CSS is not only detrimental to the purity of Sinhala it will also accelerate the rate of occurrence of deviations from SSLE pronunciation in S/learner SLE bilinguals.

REFERENCES


AUTHOR BIO

Dr. Rohini Chandrika Widyalankara received her Ph.D. and M.Phil. degrees in Linguistics from University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka. She read for her M. Ed. in TESL and Diploma in TESP at the University of Manchester, UK under the Hornby Trust Award granted by the British Council. Currently she is a Senior Lecturer at the English Language Teaching Unit, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka.

E mail: rdhrcw@yahoo.com