Shunning the Other: Reading Passe H.A, The Use and Abuse of English, Common Errors in Ceylon English

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Introduction

Passe's 'Use and Abuse of English- Common Errors in Ceylon English' is believed to be a 'quintessential' example to manifest the existence of Sri Lankan English. This paper challenges the general belief that language standardization is in a continuum where to replace an existing structure one has to bring in another equally exclusive and oppressive standard. Further, the belief is premised upon a "natural" dialectical relationship between the Self and the other. In the first chapter of the book, Passe discusses the position of Sri Lankan English during 1950's in Sri Lanka. English had been utilized as the most common language of the island over the vernacular. The authority of English was unquestionable since it was the language of the ruling class to whom education was not a privilege as opposed to the lower middle class and below to who English education was one. Passe mentions that, "In Ceylon at present English is, and seems likely to continue to be for some time, the common language of educated people throughout the island." **(Passé, 1955, p.03).** This, itself is sufficient to substantiate the obvious demarcation between the speakers of vernacular and the speakers of English. The mere attempt of labelling English as the language of the 'educated' is suggestive of the plight of Sinhala and Tamil in 1950's. Written before the promulgation of 1956 Language Act, Passe highlights how English had been the focal point of every realm of the country. His explanation of

the correlation between the standard of English and the quality of education during the post-independence era is indicative of the fetish of the parents in the contemporary society to provide education to their children from former Anglican institutions which are renowned for their Standard English. Some traditional practices assist some of the old schools in the country to stand out from the mass, differentiating themselves from the means of providing education. Most of these age-old traditions have a very close relationship with practicing their students to use Standard English in writing and conversation. " The best schools endeavor to maintain their traditions and standards" **(Passe. H, 1955, p.03).** as these schools are much aware of the repercussions of a fall in standard English. Relegation of standard Sri Lankan English from its position as the language of instruction utilized by a dominant minority to a language spoken by the majority is highly correlated with the dispossession of the authority of the former. When the utilization of Standard English, which only existed amidst the frontiers of the elites back then, passed onto the "declassed" classes, a normalization of the usage of the language was observable, thus jeopardizing the authority held by the top most class.

The more it is used by the alterity, the more it will lose its power. Hence, an altering of the language of power, English, preserving their values in order to perpetuate their identity is discernible.

Deterioration of Standard Sri Lankan English

Passe posits that Ceylon has experienced a deterioration of Standard English. According to many, a continuation of this deterioration leads to "a queer dialect, understood by no one but the Ceylonese themselves" **(Passe. H, 1955, p.02)**. However, before going into the nooks and corners of this conundrum, is it

vital to decipher what Passe meant by deterioration through the connotation 'queer'? It is debatable whether the deterioration he explains in the book is a result of an amalgamation of local idioms, verbs, nouns, etc. into standard English. How can a language be deteriorated, if it's accepting the local idioms which are understood by the speaker of that particular region. Had the Indian English, Singaporean English, South African English or any variety of English been downgraded due to their local idioms? It rather adds a different flavor to the language that makes the learner understand the language. Ibrahim's **(2012)** standpoint on Gramscian perspective is fitting to analyze the aforementioned issue. Gramsci postulates that racial subjects represent the concerns of language learning of the dominant race while 'the other' is excluded **(Ibrahim.R, 2012, p.24).** Weber's perspective on speaking different varieties of English is noteworthy since his ideology totally contradicts with that of Passe. He highlights an example from a working class Scottish pub to manifest the problematization of utilizing standard English as the neutral way of communication.

"If they ordered a pint of beer in perfectly correct Standard English, they might get, not a pint of beer, but a fist in their face!" **(Weber, 2015, p.44)**. This is an obvious indication of the impossibility of extracting the culture out of a language for the mere sake of 'standardizing' it. Further, Passe manifests the necessity of having one variety of educated English. "Our aim must be to make the English we speak and write one variety of educated English" **(Passe, 1955, p.72)**. This itself is prejudiced against the speakers of other varieties of English since having one variety of 'educated' English signifies that the other varieties are 'uneducated'. Ratwatte **(2012)** cites Samarakkody **(2001)** to depict two speech communities in Sri Lanka. " The Anglophone 'elite' to whom English was a resource, and the national bourgeoisie who considered English as a problem

or barrier **(Ratwatte, 2012, p.181)**. An obvious arbitrariness in identifying the frontiers of Sri Lankan English that leads to a further dichotomy between the elite speakers of English, whose English is a weapon to stigmatize the Other and the national bourgeoisie to whom English is a privilege, is perceptible throughout the book. Heart.M (2006) cites Passe to explicate the arbitrariness of his dogma. " Passe observed that some of the translated idiom that characterizes Sri Lankan English is 'not only defensible and acceptable' but also essential for effective communication **(Heart. M, 2006, p.65).**

Examples provided by Passe highlight the impossibility of resisting 'good' English in Sri Lanka during his time since it was the language of the educated people in the country. He further posits that, although people in France and Germany could survive without knowing English, in Sri Lanka not knowing English could drastically limit a person since, the authority of English was unquestionable in the country and the vernacular was regarded socially and politically trifling to the elites. "we cannot afford to be satisfied with bad or broken English; at least not as things are at present. It is worth learning to speak and write good English" **(Passe, 1955, p.72)**. Nothing is more apt than the above dogma to fathom the dire urge of the elite to ostracize the national bourgeoisie, which is responsible for the majority of the total population of the country, by stigmatizing them as incompetent in English. This conundrum is still observable in the country, yet in a different scale. Speakers of 'Not pot English' are still frowned upon and subjected to microaggressions in the work place, schools, etc. It is conspicuous that the elites utilize standard English as a shield to protect the stature, further demarcating themselves from the less-privileged. Ibrahim **(2012)** cites Fernando **(2010)** to elucidate that " English as a language is more of an instrument of social oppression, a prized possession of a privileged class and an exclusive emblem of upper class

status." Standard English has never been a possession of the majority, since the elites will preserve the frontiers of 'their English' to further their hegemonic identity. Ratwatte (2012) posits that "there is much public debate on the advantages conferred upon and enjoyed by those who are 'good' speakers of English and the 'privileges' denied to those who do not 'know' the language **(Ratwatte, 2012, p.181)**. What is meant by 'know' is indicative not only of an understanding of the language that would only cater to the bare survival amongst the local speakers of English but a native like understanding or a language that signifies a wannabe British/ American conduct. Students from former Anglican schools are still prioritized in many instances, simply due to their competency in English. One of the most apt examples to depict the partisanship of the schools based on their traditions is the All-Island Choir Competition where four former Anglican schools in Kandy are categorized as group 'A' schools. Other schools in Kandy are under groups 'B' and 'C'. Hence, even if the choirs of the schools under 'B' or 'C' are better than the choirs of group 'A', none of the schools can challenge the Anglican schools in group 'A'.

The dominant

Passe postulates that English doesn't have substitutes for some of the words found in vernacular. For instance, the word 'summa', which roughly carries the meaning " simply" is not understood by the English. Passe cites Times of Ceylon (1935) to suggest that the word should be borrowed into English as "It must be admitted though that it makes a useful addition to the English language and as such its use is justified" **(Passe, 1955, p.20).** However, it's conspicuous that the word has not been added to English language so far. This justifies the dire need of the upper hand to resist the needs of the underprivileged. As long as the ones in authority are not concerned about the need of

adding the word into their vocabulary, it won't be added to the vocabulary. This is a clear indication of the authority exercised by the dominant power. Passe's ideology about Sri Lankan English indicates a similar locus where English of the elites in Sri Lanka is recognized as the Sri Lankan English discounting English spoken by other classes as a wrong version of English that relegates the standard of Sri Lankan English. For example, Passe identifies using the word 'dhoby' instead of laundryman in Sri Lankan English quite accurate, while using yesterday afternoon over last afternoon erroneous. Passe finds 'yesterday afternoon' erroneous as the elites in the country are not used to the Sri Lankan equivalent of 'last afternoon'. However, the term, 'yesterday afternoon', is prevalent among many speakers of Sri Lankan English. On the contrary, the term 'dhoby' is highly useful to the elites of Passe's period since the term 'laundryman' was rarely utilized in conversation. Hence, the book indicates some symptoms of an attempt to codify Sri Lankan English spoken by the elites as the standard Sri Lankan English disregarding other forms of Sri Lankan English. " for instance, we speak of a dhoby and not a laundryman, and there are many words for things peculiar to Ceylon…" **(Passe, 1955, p.73)**. This arbitrariness in marking the frontiers of Sri Lankan English in this composition is derogatory to the national bourgeoisie since, their English has been recognized as erroneous. It is apparent that Passe has not properly comprehended the fuzziness of the borders among the different varieties of the same language that makes the varieties interdependent. De costa's **(2020)** manifestation that "Indeed, linguistic racism is amplified when a speaker is multilingual and shuttles between different languages and language varieties because more often than not, her ability to translanguage **(Wei 2018)** is seen as a liability instead of an asset" **(De Costa.P, 2020, p.01)**. Hence, code switching and code mixing of the incompetent learner of English is discouraged even in the contemporary ESL

classroom. However, inside the elitist domain, code switching such as “dhoby, and direct translations such as “ funeral-house”, “wedding-house” are acceptable. It is conspicuous that this acceptability is a mere justification of the utilization of the elitist jargon. Passe’s ideology that “ the words we use and the way in which we use them express our individuality, the degree of intelligence, experience and sensibility we possess” **(Passe, 1955, p.86)** Passe’s endeavor to shun the incompetent speaker of English is apparent throughout since, he further asserts that “ a ‘neutral’ style is likely to go with a colorless personality” **(Passe, 1955, p.86)**. It is noteworthy that Passe debunks his own fallacies in the latter part of the book accepting the vibrancy of the varieties of English since, neutrality is also a variety.

It is conspicuous that the national bourgeoisie to whom English is a burden doesn’t have adequate vocabulary to switch their style according to the situation. Hence, their style is more neutral as Passe posits and looks monotonous, characterless and unexciting to the Anglophone elite who can switch between styles. This verifies some of the prominent ideologies brought forth by weber in ‘Language Racism’ (2015), “language rather than race is increasingly used to exclude people from the societal mainstream and it has been normalized” **(Weber, 2015, p.22)**. Excluding the linguistically deficient is common among the urban speaker of English. The quandary discussed earlier manifests a close similitude to the issue discussed here. He further postulates that speaking and writing are natural abilities even though one can be scaffolded to a certain extent. “ The degree of skill in speaking and writing any one of us will acquire will depend partly on natural ability, but every one of us can acquire a reasonable degree of skill if we try hard enough and are given some guidance” **(Passe, 1955, p.109).** Plausibility of the above extraction is highly debatable, as it is symptomatic of the perpetuation of the hegemony of the affluent West over

the subjugated colonies/East. This rather confounds the non-habitual speakers of English as Passe verifies that non habitual speakers **(Kandiah, 1984)** can achieve only a 'reasonable' degree of communication. The word 'reasonable' carries rather a vague connotation of impossibility, incompetence and imperfection. This issue is totally congruous with Oyama's Critical period hypothesis (1976) where language acquisition of a learner after his/her puberty is highly challenging. "The hypothesis, then, was that there is some developmental period, stretching roughly from 18 months to puberty, during which it is possible fully to master the phonology of at least one (and the upper limit is as yet undetermined; children have been known to learn three or four languages virtually concurrently) nonnative language, and after which complete acquisition is impossible or extremely unlikely"**(Oyama. S, 1976, p.263)**. Similar to Passe's dogma of the dearth of 'natural ability' that impedes the non- habitual speaker of English further to master the language, Oyama's theory posits that language should be acquired at an early stage. If not the learner ends up having a 'reasonable' degree of command of language. One can comprehend that both theories are derogatory towards the non- native speaker of English and non- habitual speaker of English as these ideologies prohibit them from being on a par with the urban learner of English or native speakers. As challenging the status quo is a threat to the very existence of the upper class, they simply desire to perpetuate the gap between the non- native speakers and themselves. Humiliation based on the incompetency of the second language learner is widely observable in the ESL classroom. Even though, " errors are no longer seen as devil signs of failure to be prevented and educated" **(Gheichi. M, 2011, P.159)**, in the Sri Lankan context errors are still considered an indication of not being up to their standards. The utilization of error as a tool of excluding the linguistically deficient, stigmatizing them as less advanced, provides the elitist

a welcoming atmosphere to maintain the authority without being questioned by the lower classes. Hence, standard Sri Lankan English, creating an inhospitable atmosphere to the national bourgeoisie, has become rather a tool of intimidation.

Conclusion

Arbitrariness of the standards of Sri Lankan English depicted by Passe is debatable. Passe's deliberate effort to identify and codify English spoken by the elitist Sri Lankan as the standard English of Sri Lanka is conspicuous throughout the book. One decisive factor that should have been understood is that " a major reason why there are so many varieties of English is that languages inevitably change when they enter into contact with other languages" **(Weber, 2015, p.23).** Weber points out three different ways of conveying the same sentence in English.

I am after eating rice	Irish
I have just eaten rice	British
I just ate rice	American

One may question whether the Irish variety is 'correct' in terms of its grammatical structure. But, one may hardly question the other two varieties for its grammatical formation. Majority have a tendency to identify the 'standard' variety as 'the language' relegating the other varieties as wrong and not up to the standards. Weber depicts that sometimes " the children who speak such a nonstandard variety may even branded as linguistically deficient" **(Weber, 2015, p.26)** Linguistic discrimination is a ubiquitous practice even in the Sri Lankan ESL classroom. Many highlight the drastic incompetency between the rural learner of English to whom English is a privilege and the urban leaner to whom English is ubiquitous and easily

accessible. For instance, undergraduates from rural areas who grapple with their English is subjected to humiliation in state universities. The clear demarcation between the competencies of the urban student and the rural student leads the urban student to better opportunities in the university. Thiruvarangan's (2012) ideology of Sri Lankan English is apt to delineate the quandary mentioned earlier. " is Sri lankan English a hegemonic variety of English that privileges some users of English and discriminate against some other" **(Thiruvarangan. P, 2012, p.12)**. The mere fact that languages and varieties are politically determined rather than linguistically is indicative that a discrimination among the language users exists since nothing that correlates with a political affiliation ends unprejudiced. However, Thiruvarangan(2012) cites kandiah(1998) manifesting the transformation of the formation of Sri Lankan English as a "less-privileged variety of English" **(Kandiah, 1998, p.86)** right after the independence to Kandiah's period where Sri Lankan English is identified as a " linguistic manifestation of postcolonial resistance to the dominant varieties of English" **(Kandiah, 1998, p.86).** Although this has " contributed to the formation of a national English linguistic identity" **(Thiruvarangan. M, 2012, P.13)**, a 'supreme variety' of Sri Lankan English exclusive only to a set of urban elites. "Standard Sri Lankan English has emerged as a hegemonic variety of English in its relationship with the different economic and ethnic communities in Sri Lanka" **(Thiruvarangan. M, 2012, p.13)**. Thus, resisting Sri Lankan English, labelling it as a language of the other, is ubiquitous in many local contexts. This resistance rather leads to a rigidified authority of the elites than an empowerment of the less-privileged since English is politically better positioned globally.

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