Kaduwa, humor and language policing: Memes and Folk linguistics in Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

This article takes the position that knowledge and opinions about language and the intersections between language and society don't belong merely to the academic world but also are alive in, and activated by, the community. It considers Internet memes as folklore, and memes about languages in Sri Lanka and the English language in particular as expressions of folk linguistics — the field that investigates what non-linguists know and feel about language topics and any area of linguistics that non-specialist folk engage with — since everyone has an opinion about language in general or about particular languages and how languages should be used. Such attitudes can privilege some varieties and/or accents and languages over others, sustaining and re-creating power structures. Therefore, this article, drawing on the theoretical lens of Folk linguistics and Language Ideology, and taking the position that memes posted on the Internet depict grassroots level prescriptivist views about language, uses discourse analysis to examine a corpus of memes published on the social media platforms Facebook and Twitter between 2018 and 2022 in order to reassess the complexities and tensions as well as attitudes towards English in Sri Lanka. It was found that while old divisions related to English still exist and attitudes toward English are still complex and contradictory, there are more nuanced and complex views related to the learning of and speaking English in Sri Lanka.

KEYWORDS:

Language ideology; Folk linguistics; English in Sri Lanka; Grassroots prescriptivism; Memes

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"Every joke is a tiny revolution" (George Orwell, *An Age like this*)

Introduction

This article acknowledges and adopts Albury's (2017) position that knowledge and opinions about language and the intersections between language and society don't belong merely to the academic world but also are alive in, and activated by, the community. The field of folk linguistics "researches what non-linguists know, and what they feel, about language topics as they may relate to any conceivable area of linguistics that the folk may engage" (Albury, 2017, p. 39). Examples of folk linguistic knowledge are found in abundance in photo-blogs which photograph and ridicule signboards and notices with 'wrong usage'. They are also found in the form of 'Letters to the Editor' in the old media and in posts and dedicated pages on social media platforms such as Facebook; everyone has an opinion about language in general or about particular languages. Language is thus evaluated by non-linguists, and communities hold on to normative claims about how language should be used. Such attitudes can privilege some varieties, accents, and languages over others, sustaining and re-creating power structures. As Miller (2021) points out, even though folk linguistic ideas may sometimes be misguided or lacking in evidence, they still possess the capacity to influence behaviors and attitudes. Drawing from this idea of folk linguistics, and taking the position that memes — digital items, often humorous, satirical, or ironic, sharing common characteristics, typically taking the form of an image, video, or piece of text (Shifman, 2014) — posted on the Internet depict non-specialist and non-linguist prescriptivist views about language, this article investigates a corpus of internet memes (hereafter referred to as 'memes') about languages, particularly English, in Sri Lanka, in order to locate language ideologies in the folk linguistic (digital) landscape. The article will first discuss the place of English in the sociolinguistic landscape of Sri Lanka, and briefly explore the ambiguities it is characterized by. Next, the cultural concept of the meme is explored, along with some studies which investigate memes and their effect and role in discussing contemporary socio-political issues. This is followed by a brief discussion of Humor theories given the role of humor in folk linguistic evaluation of language varieties and standards, and the focus of this article, which are humorous memes. A section on language ideology follows, since folk linguistics and language ideology are closely intertwined concepts, and together frame the theoretical lens of this article. The methodology is discussed next, followed by the analysis and discussion of the findings.

Background: English in Sri Lanka

The main languages in Sri Lanka, Sinhala, Tamil and English, have been in an uneasy and complicated relationship ever since British colonization of the island in the mid-nineteenth century. As such, this relationship, even while in transition, has had far reaching consequences for social and economic inequality. In this context, in Sri Lanka, as well as many parts of the post-colonial world, the English language in particular functions as a marker of prestige and power and is believed to be potent in opening doors of opportunity in terms of economic gain and employment (Roberts et.al., 1989; Gunasekara, 2005). It is akin to a 'magic lamp' and the demand for learning English in Sri Lanka is unprecedented. English has, what Parakrama (2016, p. 23) refers to as

Extra Linguistic Value: the (additional) value conferred on a specific language (and often on its users) as a result of the geopolitical and socio economic (hegemonic) power   wielded by the language vis-à-vis other languages with which it comes into contact.

Despite the 1956 Official Languages Act of the Sri Lankan parliament which made Sinhala the sole official language of the country, English never lost its position as "the superior tongue" - to use a phrase from Reggi Siriwardena's powerful poem *Colonial Cameo*. As such, the English language in particular has been implicated in social divisions and conflict in Sri Lanka, and is still popularly called Kaduwa or Kadda. Kaduwa literally means 'sword' in Sinhala, a weapon for the elite to cut down the lower classes who do not know English. English still has the potential to divide, discriminate and denigrate even after more than 7 decades of independence from Britain (Medawattegedera, 2015). Kandiah (1984, p.139) eloquently explains how the metaphor crystallizes the socio - political psychological attitudes of the ... man who has no chance of beating the English dominated system... The sword, he knows, if grasped firmly in his own hands will endow him with the power ... to live with dignity in terms of equality with other men; in someone else's hands, it remains the instrument of his oppression, the means of his subjugation.

Therefore English, which still has a "hegemonic grip" (Mendis and Rambukwella, 2020, p. 179) on Sri Lanka, has populated the folk linguistic landscape of Sri Lanka and figures deeply in the popular imagination, in pop culture, in local tele-dramas and in popular music, utilized to great effect in indexing power and prestige on one hand, and ridicule on the other.

One way in which language is popularly evaluated by speech communities is rooted in humor. Laughter at learners' or 'non-native' speakers' errors when

speaking or writing in the target language is not a new phenomenon. On television, the very popular British TV comedy series *Mind Your Language* (Allen & Moses, 1977) is testimony to this. In the past, in Sinhala theatre, fun has been made of ethnic minorities in Sri Lanka and their comical failure to speak Sinhala properly and much of the laughter in Indu Dharmasena's comedy on stage is generated by characters' 'broken English' (Silva, 2004). This is also true of the popular theatre 'political' comedy series "Pusswedilla" where much of the humor generated is from the title character's mistakes in speaking English rather than the debacle that is his politics (Prasadika, 2018).

Moreover, distinctions have emerged between the value of prestige and non-prestige varieties of (Sri Lankan) English and there still is elitism associated with speakers who acquire English at home, as a first language, as opposed to those who have to acquire it as a second language, in a classroom (Rambukwella, 2021). Much of this elitism is visible in the form of comments on social media and new media, such as comments on YouTube videos.[1] Be that as it may, the divide between those who know (and speak) English and those who do not, can no longer be viewed in simplistic and binary terms. Over the years, and due to both local initiatives such as the Speak English Our Way campaign (Ratwatte, 2016) and the transnational nature of communication and trends such as the concept of translanguaging, the idea of 'standard (Sri Lankan) English' has changed. Further, because there are large numbers of learners and speakers of English as a second language, it cannot be claimed that English is still, only the language of an elite few. Certain events that were played out in the media and particularly on social media platforms in 2018 and 2019 bear witness to these deep ambiguities that characterize English and the national languages in Sri Lanka. For example, the then President of Sri Lanka, Maithripala Sirisena was ridiculed on social media for his lack of fluency in a speech he made in English while visiting a foreign country (Mushtaq, 2019). On the other hand, former Sri Lankan cricket captain Kumar Sangakkara was made fun of, on account of his flawless 'British accent' used while commentating on cricket matches (Fernando, 2015; "Sangakkara's commentary available", 2017).

These are just a few instances which reflect folk linguistic beliefs about the English language and the ambiguity that surrounds the status of English in Sri Lanka. They also represent attitudes about being proficient in it (or not) and the complex and sometimes contradictory power relationships between languages in the country. In

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[1] For example, Rambukwella (2018) cites the response to Sri Lankan cricketer Sanath Jayasuriya's 'mistake' while commentating on a cricket match in 2011 - ridicule- as an example of this elitist attitude to non-elite speakers of the language and juxtaposes it with the adulation generated by Kumar Sangakkara's "Spirit of Cricket" speech in England that same year, to demonstrate the language/class division and prejudice that still exists

recent times, memes have begun to make metalinguistic declarations, adding to the folk linguistic imagination related to English in Sri Lanka. Because of the fact that digital communication is persistent by nature and also has a particular "participatory appeal" (Heyd, 2014, p. 490), it is an ideal vehicle for linguistic prescriptivism and for spreading folk linguistic beliefs. As Miller (2021, p. 2) points out, scholars have cautioned that "regardless of the scientific standing of folk beliefs about language, many of which are empirically wrong… they should nevertheless be studied for what they reveal about culturally salient meanings and values".

In such a context, I wish to examine the nuances of these attitudes as well as reassess ambiguities related to English as reflected in memes about language/s circulated widely on social media. Memes qualify as contemporary folklore (McNeill, 2017); thus, irrespective of the opinions held by professional language scholars, the perspectives of non-specialists on language will result in varied and extensive consequences. In order to do this, I use the two lenses of folk linguistics and language ideology, which are both concerned "with metalanguage, the explicit thematizing of language in everyday speech or writing, and the way this language-about-language or talk-about-talk expresses people's personal attitudes, cultural beliefs and social prejudices" (Thurlow, 2014, p. 481). Following Shifman (2012), I employ the concept of a meme as a "prism for shedding light on aspects of contemporary digital culture" (2012, p.189).

Since it is the language ideologies and folk linguistic beliefs located in memes that are the focus of this article, a definition of and discussion of memes as a cultural concept follows. A few studies that examine memes as a cultural unit are also reviewed.

Memes - concept and a literature review

Memes are now very much part of digital culture. "Through their very identity and format, memes at best reflect culture. They are distinguishable, adaptable and enduring" (Illoh, 2021, p. 4). "Some of the most fundamental aspects of contemporary culture" (Shifman, 2014, p. 4) can be captured by memes. The word meme derived from the Greek *mimema*, meaning something to be imitated. The term was coined by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*, as a cultural parallel to genes. Dawkins used the term 'meme' to describe a cultural unit (e.g., an idea, behavior, or style) that spreads from person to person within a culture through copying and imitation. More recently, according to Shifman (2014), the term has been adopted to mark the more specific phenomenon of memes which are a type of meme that spread rapidly on the internet. They are groups of digital items, often humorous, satirical, or ironic, sharing common characteristics, typically taking the

form of an image, video, or piece of text. Memes are often shared and modified by internet users who change parts of it to input their own ideas, "while keeping a consistent resemblance to the memetic group" (Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2018, p. 295).

Memes can become part of internet culture and even mainstream culture. DeCook (2018) points out that they are a characteristic aspect of digital culture that has spread from the peripheral part of the web into mainstream culture because the web environment has become more user-friendly, and because almost anyone can learn content production.

The origin of specific memes can vary widely, but many popular memes have their roots in online communities such as 4chan, Reddit, and Tumblr (Segev et. al., 2015). According to Dawkins, memes include socially transmissible units such as beliefs, ideas, tunes, catchphrases, and clothes fashions, which, as genes propagate themselves, "leap from brain to brain" via an imitation process (Dawkins, 1976, as cited in Shifman, 2014, p. 206). In other words, memes are literally ideas with a life of their own. Wang and Wang (2015) call them a cacophony of emerging voices. Memes are anonymous by nature. Generally, memes quickly respond to whatever current crisis is being played out, as observable in Sri Lanka after the constitutional crisis of 2018 —where the then President Maithripala overnight, replaced the incumbent Prime Minister, Mr. Ranil Wickremasinghe with the former President, Mr. Mahinda Rajapaksa on 26th October 2018 (Abi-Habib and Bastians, 2018). As pointed out by Harlow et. al. (2018, p. 1060), creating and sharing memes can be viewed as "a micro-political act"; thus, social media was flooded with memes after this event, as well as after the Easter attacks of April 2019 (Perera, 2019) and the Government's response to them. The Economic Crisis and People's protests of 2022 (Vaidyanathan, 2022), in Sri Lanka also generated many memes which were shared on social media.

Memes- "bite sized nuggets of political ideology and culture that are easily digestible and spread by netizens" (DeCook, 2018, p. 485), have become a powerful tool for spreading propaganda and influencing public opinion, especially in recent years. This is largely due to the ease of creating and sharing memes on social media platforms, which allows for quick and widespread dissemination of information. Thus, memes are a manner of political participation in the context of wider movements in society and they engage in the construction of identity and community (Mina 2018; Nagle 2017; Shifman 2014 cited in DeCook, 2018). The significance of memes is rooted, to a certain extent, in their apparent lack of significance. As small pieces of content that are mundanely passed around by Internet users, memes do much more then entertain; indeed, a growing body of research has demonstrated that they are

used for an array of purposes such as emotional expression, community building, and political protest (Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2018).

They also play a role of art form that is generated by internet users, even though they may seem frivolous. Memes, then, serve as a vehicle to express either an individual or a collective voice; "They are a reflection of the cultural spaces from which they emerge" (DeCook, 2018, p. 486). Thus, memes about language use in Sri Lanka can be seen both as a reflection of folk linguistic beliefs, as well as a reproduction of such ideologies.

The political power of the meme and its capacity to influence public perception was investigated by Bebic and Volarevic (2018) in the context of Croatia, in relation to its former President who was imprisoned on several criminal charges. The study which investigated a corpus of internet political memes reveals that the set of memes which portrayed Ivo Sanader in a positive light and as a problem solver were responsible for the way he was presented in the media during the debates about his release from prison. It implies that the memes helped gain a positive outcome for the former President.

In a study that examined over 300 memes that were generated following the refusal of a county clerk named Kim Davis in Kentucky, USA to issue gay marriage licenses even after gay marriage was legalized, Harlow et. al (2018) found that instead of acting as a substitute platform where marginalized voices can be heard, memes were actually upholding the current state of affairs. The authors employed a perspective grounded in feminist humor theory, and the findings indicate that individuals aiming to counter anti-gay ideologies ended up employing anti-feminist discourse, directing it at Davis's feminine attributes and employing conventional 'slut humor'.

The cultural concept of memes emphasizes how memes play a role in realizing and propagating social relations, generating and shaping the mind-sets and significant forms of behavior and actions of a social group (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007, cited in Wang and Wang, 2015) It is this concept of memes, and their capability in generating and shaping mindsets and behavior that prompts this article's investigation of memes in relation to the English language in Sri Lanka. Since memes are primarily humorous, it would be pertinent to discuss some relevant theories of humor at this point.

Humor and its forms

Humorous content is any message that is delivered with the intention to be funny. At an individual level, people use humor as an expression of superiority, to relieve tension, and to deal with incongruity (Hurley et. al., 2011). The incongruity theory of humor suggests that humor arises from a violation of our expectations or from a sudden change in the pattern of events (Clark, 1970). Incongruity is what creates the element of surprise, which in turn creates the humor. This theory suggests that humor results from the sudden realization of a mismatch between our mental schema and what is actually happening. Hurley et. al. (2011) point out that one of the oldest and most developed theories of humor is that which happens when there is an incongruity between what we expect and what actually happens. According to them, this theory of humor was adopted by Kant and refined by Schopenhauer (Hurley et. al., 2011). The superiority theory suggests that humor arises from a feeling of superiority over others such as when we feel like we are smarter or more competent than someone else (Lintott, 2016). This theory is based on the idea that we find things funny when they make us feel good about ourselves. Thomas Hobbes' ideas about humor are primarily discussed in his work *Leviathan* first published in 1651. In Book One, Chapter VI, he writes about the various passions of human beings, including laughter. He suggests that laughter and humor arise from a sense of superiority over others. Lynch (2002) points out that the incongruity concept of humor suggests that it is a human reaction to ambiguity within the environment. Ambiguity, along with superiority, is the key to the relationship we have with English. Hence, incongruity and superiority theories of humor have relevance to this article, which looks at humor in the form of memes. The memes thus utilize humor to deal with the complexity (including the anxieties) related to English and speaking English in Sri Lankan society. But humor also has a social function, for example, creating identity or creating a sense of control (Lynch, 2002). The fact that memes are spread due to social choices made by people who bear folk linguistic perceptions, makes memes a vital part of the digital linguistic landscape. The next section discusses the framework of language ideology that this article utilizes.

Language Ideology

According to Irvine and Gal (2000, pp. 35-36), linguistic ideologies are held not only by the immediate participants in a local sociolinguistic system; they are also held by other observers. There is no "view from nowhere", no gaze that is not positioned (Irvine and Gal, 2000, p. 36). They found similarities in the way ideologies "recognize" (or misrecognize) linguistic differences: how they locate, interpret and rationalize sociolinguistic complexity identifying linguistic varieties with "typical" persons and activities and accounting for the differentiations among them. Irvine

and Gal (2000) point out that it has become commonplace in sociolinguistics that linguistic form can be a pointer to (indices of) the social identities and the typical activities of speakers. But speakers and hearers often notice, rationalize and justify such linguistic indices thereby creating linguistic ideologies that purport to explain the source and meaning of linguistic differences. To put this another way, linguistic features are seen as reflecting and expressing broader cultural images of people and activities. Irvine and Gal (2000) identify 3 important semiotic processes by which this works: iconization, fractal recursivity and erasure. Linguistic features that index social groups or activities appear to be iconic representations of them, as if a linguistic feature somehow depicted or displayed a social group's inherent nature or essence. According to Irvine and Gal (2000), iconization refers to the process of taking a cultural practice or symbol and using it to represent an entire culture or group of people. This process can lead to the creation of stereotypes and essentialized representations that erase the diversity and complexity of a culture. Fractal recursivity involves the projection of an opposition, salient at some level of relationship, onto some other level. The myriad oppositions that can create identity may be reproduced repeatedly either within each side of a dichotomy or outside it. Fractal recursivity refers to the way that cultural symbols and practices can be repeated and modified at different scales, creating a sense of continuity and coherence within a culture. When certain symbols or practices are iconized, it can lead to the erasure of other cultural practices or beliefs that do not fit into the dominant representation. Erasure is this process in which ideology, in simplifying the sociolinguistic field, renders some persons or activities (or sociolinguistic phenomena), invisible (Irvine and Gal 2000).

Methodology

For the investigation to take place, the author built a corpus of memes which were shared on Facebook and Twitter between the years 2018 and 2022. As a social media user, the author collected and digitally stored screenshots of all and any memes that had content related to language/s and language use in Sri Lanka, in order for the corpus to reflect contemporary ideas about English in Sri Lanka. Some of the memes in the corpus were those that were shared with the author by colleagues who knew the author's interest in this area. According to statistics, there were on average, by January 2023, about 7.2 million active social media users— one third of the population of Sri Lanka, and 6.5 million active users of Facebook (Kemp, 2023). Almost 1/3rd of the population are active users of Facebook. Hence it was deemed that these memes were circulated widely.

Memes are publicly circulated on the Internet and their authorship is often anonymous and indecipherable because they follow popular templates. For the purpose of academic study, the author uses the phrases in these memes while acknowledging that information about the authorship of these memes is not available

and cannot be verified. Some of the memes used by the author involve public figures in Sri Lanka. Wherever possible, the identities of these public figures have been anonymized and used strictly for the purpose of academic study in this article. However, the specific identities of the public figures are often central to many of the messages that are communicated in these memes. Balancing the study of these memes while also anonymizing the data is, therefore, challenging and limits the prospects for drawing deep insights.

This article used the approach of Discourse Analysis (DA) to analyse the corpus of memes as a sample of the folk linguistic (digital) landscape of English. DA is a valuable research tool used in various fields including linguistics, sociology, anthropology, psychology and media studies. It involves the systematic examination and interpretation of language in written, spoken or visual forms to understand the social, cultural and cognitive aspects of communication (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002). Researchers use DA to study how language constructs and reflects meaning, identity, power relations and social interactions within specific contexts.

The memes were analyzed for both their image and text. Then, they were coded for folk linguistic beliefs and language ideologies expressed in relation to English, its function, uses, and its relationship with other languages and for the semiotic processes of language ideology outlined by Irvine and Gal (2000). Due to the researcher's lack of knowledge of Tamil, the scope of this article is limited to memes that use only English and Sinhala. It is acknowledged that this is a limitation of this research.

In analyzing the memes, certain categories and themes emerged and those are discussed in the next section.

Findings: Folk Linguistic prescriptivism and Language Ideology in Memes circulated about Language(s) in Sri Lanka.

In this section, the corpus of memes related to English and the function and role(s) of English are categorized according to the themes that emerged from analyzing them. Each category is discussed separately, with examples of the relevant meme(s). The sub-headings indicate the 10 categories/themes. In each instance, the relevant meme will be described, (and where necessary, translated) and linked to the theoretical frameworks of folk linguistics and language ideology. It will also be analyzed in terms of the type of humor used.

Standard Language Ideology

This category tells us that wielding the Kaduwa is an activity that is alive and well. In this category, the memes laugh openly at 'broken English' in the manner

of English-knowing elites denigrating non-elites. This is the behavior which was denounced by the 'Speak English Our Way' campaign and specified as the cause of the fear and anxiety which prevented young people from practicing the English they learn (e.g., Fernando, 2009). These memes reiterate and reproduce the concept of the English language as a weapon in the hands of the elite. For example, Meme 1 below is instrumental in mocking and laughing at Sri Lankan non-elites whose English accent betrays their lower social class by showing the influence of their mother tongue (Sinhala/Tamil) on their pronunciation. In the meme, the waiter pronounces the [f] in 'fish' and 'beef' as a [p]. It generates amusement by also exoticizing the speaker of the 'sub-standard' variety, iconizing him as 'non-elite' but also patronizing him with the phrase "we love your accent". The meme indicates much amusement at those who do not speak 'standard Sri Lankan English' and assumes that they either had no access to English in the home or were not wealthy enough to acquire it in 'posh' schools.[2]

Meme 1

The meme is heavily localized; this is a characteristic feature of memes, to show the specific context of the humor and the target of the laughter. In this case, the target is "waiter Aiya", denoting Sinhala non-elites who are unable to pronounce the phoneme [f] working in restaurants as wait staff. Meme 2 is similar meme, denigrating non-elites, again a waiter in this context. The phrase written in Sinhala font translate as "Rice and Curry" but phonetically reads "Raishun curry". First-language Sinhala-

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[2] The format of this meme is the group of memes called "I Love Your Accent, Say It Again". "I love your Accent, Say it Again' is a quote from *Dexter's Laboratory* an American comic science fiction animated television series created by Genndy Tartakovsky *for Cartoon Network*, in which the protagonist accidentally forces himself to only say "Omelette du Fromage" in a French accent. A girl character says "I Love Your Accent, Say It Again," to which he replies "Omelette du Fromage." (Know Your Meme, 2019)

speaking learners of English often confuse the pronunciation of [s] and [sh] due to a phenomenon arising in language contact situations, called 'hypercorrection'.

Meme 2

As Kandiah (1999, p. 39) points out, "for most of the English-using middle class and, particularly, for very large numbers of its powerful elite, it provided a means of reaffirming their separateness from the people among whom they lived and asserting their superiority to them". This, then, is such an example; superiority expressed in a meme, and an example of iconization, where non-elite actors are indexed as not being able to pronounce English words in the 'correct' way. In addition, it is an example of the promotion of standard language ideology which indexes language purism and prescriptivism.

In the context of the constitutional crisis in Sri Lanka which happened in October 2018, there is another interesting meme that reiterates the Kaduwa discourse. Meme 3 below is another example of iconization, where the then Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe is indexed as being educated, urbane and 'posh' because he replies to a letter in English. The letter is the one in which he is officially being dismissed from his post, by the then President Maithripala Sirisena (who hails from a rural background). The President's letter of dismissal is written in Sinhala. The analogy in the meme is that this reply in English, to a letter in Sinhala is akin to [a female] being cat-called in Sinhala and replying in English. The Sinhala phrase in the foreground of the meme is "Ah Nangi" which directly translates as "Oi, younger sister". It is a common phrase used in cat-calling girls in Sri Lanka. Replying to a Sinhala language cat-call in English would be a classic instance of fighting back using English as a weapon to cut someone down to size, as it were. In this meme, there is a sense of approval conveyed, a kind of poetic justice for the then Prime Minister, conveying the idea that he was able to outsmart his opponent by using the Kaduwa.
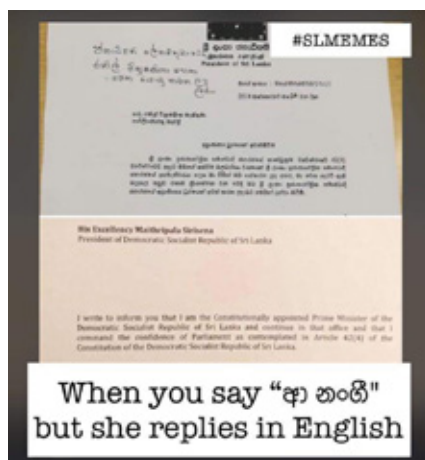
Meme 3

Extra linguistic value: English and fractal recursivity

In this category of memes which denigrate those who are unable to speak English fluently, we find a category of memes that reflect the linguistic ideology of fractal recursivity. For example, in the memes that follow, well- known real life social actors are denigrated for non-linguistic reasons and are shown to be unable to speak English correctly, even though this may not factually correct.

Meme 4 (a)

To contextualize the meme in Meme 4a (which mimics a Facebook post) above, the question is posed by a young Sri Lankan woman who relatively recently, won a place at a Miss Teen beauty pageant in Sri Lanka and a model who also acts in local music videos. In local celebrity gossip websites, she is described as being controversial. The music videos she appears in, often have controversial themes, such as pornography and nudity and are both visually and lyrically explicit. As shown in Meme 4(b), for example, she is lampooned for not looking feminine enough or 'beautiful' enough for her role. In Meme 4(a), which takes the form of a fake Facebook post, she is represented as not knowing how to spell or pronounce

the word "shopping" and "buy". Further, the 'comment' replying to the question in the post says "a dictionary", indicating that she does not know even basic words in English.

Meme 4 (b)

In analyzing the memes, it was also found that laughing at someone's 'broken English' functions as a second tier of insult to minor celebrities or models like this young woman who are stigmatized for non-linguistic reasons. In other words, the subject is projected as being bad at speaking English just because s/he is considered to be 'bad' in some other way, or at something else. This is an instance of fractal recursivity, a semiotic process of linguistic differentiation from the field of language and ideology, which "involves the projection of an opposition, salient at some level of relationship, onto some other level" (Irvine and Gal, 2000, p. 37). As such, the meme in Meme 5 below was circulated after the Easter Sunday attacks of 21st April 2019, showing this same young woman as unable to distinguish between the English words "terrorist" and "tourist". It is significant that the 'punch line' section of the meme is in Sinhala, accompanying the characteristic troll face which appears in memes, and it is thus a Sinhala voice that is correcting her, saying "The word is Terrorist, idiot, not Tourist", It is also more than a little ironic that the pronunciation of both words, "terrorist" and more importantly "tourist" in the Sinhala font, (which tells this young woman what the 'correct' word is, exactly), is not using the standard English pronunciation. This is a manifestation of the hegemony of English and ideology in operation, whereby the notion that English is superior, and using it correctly means you are better in ways that are non-linguistic, has been uncritically accepted by non-elite speakers as normal and natural. It shows that non-elites who are indexed here by non-standard pronunciation (te-ROAR-rist, rather than te-RA-rist) can also choose to wield the 'Kaduwa' to cut down those they perceive of as being incompetent in English, and to reproduce linguistic inequalities.

Meme 5

Meme 6 is another example in this category. To some extent it is possible to view the jokes about a former President's command of the language (or the lack thereof) as an instance of fractal recursivity, since he started becoming increasingly unpopular after the constitutional crisis of October 2018, and memes depicting him as being stupid flooded the internet. Meme 6 can be interpreted a direct instance of those who wield the 'Kaduwa' simply laughing at someone whose linguistic background positions them as rural and not 'English educated'. In the meme, we find a well-known internet saying which is meant to be serious – i.e., 'don't laugh at someone who speaks broken English, it means they know another language' – and then subverts this platitude with the preposition/speech particle "hitang" (written at the end of the sentence in Sinhala script). This expression "hitang" is a common expression used by this former President. Thus, an empowering quote is completely turned on its head. This meme is thus an example of fractal recursivity.


Meme 6

Another instance of this language ideology in operation in terms of fractal recursivity is Meme 7 below, featuring a Sri Lankan hip-hop and rap artiste performing in Sinhala, and whose social background is not the same as many other Rap and Hip-hop artists who are from Colombo's middle and upper middle class. His videos in particular are controversial. A recent music video by this artist was described by a journalist as one of the increasing amount of music videos that are erotic. Such music videos with sexual undertones are currently produced and distributed on YouTube by other Sri Lankan rappers. These videos are full of half-naked women and replete with references to various sex acts (Cats Eye, 2018). Thus, Meme 6 can be interpreted as one where the binary of decent/indecent is mapped on to another dichotomy, that of being good in English/bad in English.
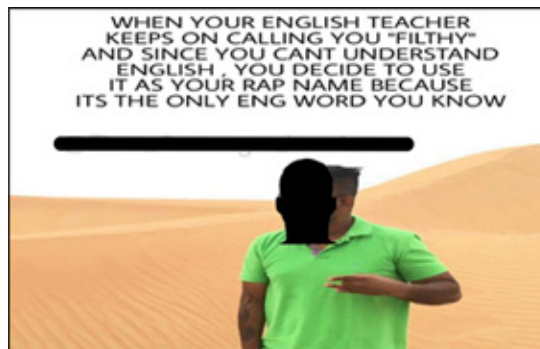
Meme 7

Another example of memes in this category, where a lack of knowledge in English is mapped on to a non-linguistic aspect in the form of fractal recursivity, is Meme 8. It features a controversial former minister. In Meme 8 below, he is portrayed as not understanding the contextual aspect of English and as a result, giving inappropriate answers to linguistically ambiguous interview-style questions. Portraying someone who is hated for other reasons as someone who is bad in English assumes a type of hate-speech.
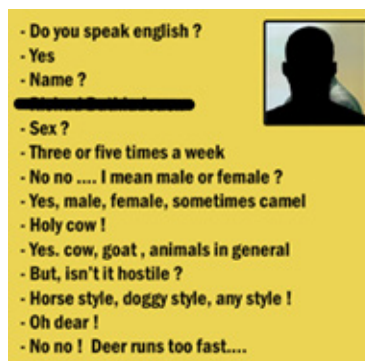
Meme 8

English is just a language: A tool, not a weapon

In what may be a classic case of resistance to the hegemony of English, and a contrast to the two categories of memes mentioned above, a third category of memes posit that English is just a language, denying that it has what Parakrama (2016, p. 23) calls "Extra Linguistic Value". For example, Meme 9 below contextualizes this stance within an incident related to a former Mayor of a Municipal Council being unable to read out mathematical figures in Sinhala (Lanka News Web, 2018). The meme proclaims that English is no measure or proof of being intelligent, and that even an uneducated beggar in England uses English to beg for money. Above all it proclaims, that hence, even 'the former mayor' knows how to speak English. This meme appeared on the internet shortly after what was seen as the former mayor's 'debacle' when attempting to read out numbers in Sinhala. This type of meme can be seen as a resistance to iconization of English-speaking people as smart and intelligent and, at the same time, indirect iconization of the inability to speak Sinhala, as stupid. In a similar context, Meme 10 depicts the mayor unable to articulate the year 2019 in a "Happy New Year 2019" message: The Mayor is shown as saying "may the forthcoming year, two hundred and one and nine be bountiful". In an extension of this theme, Meme 11 shows a then Minister sarcastically inviting her to read out the National Budget in Parliament. These memes iconize the former Mayor as being unintelligent despite the fact that she is able to speak English, thus challenging the idea that people who inhabit higher social strata and speak English fluently are somehow better and more intelligent.

Meme 9

Meme 10

Meme 11

Another example in this category is Meme 12 which basically portrays the same ideology, but using a compare and contrast format. In the meme, 'Westerners and 'Sri Lankans' are polarized in a table format and contrasted in terms of their attitudes to the English language, cars, mobile phones, and multinational fast-food chains respectively. In the column for 'Westerners', it proclaims that for them, English is just a language, cars are merely a means of transport, phones are only a means of communication, and fast-food outlets are just places where you go to eat. In contrast for Sri Lankans, it proclaims, English is a measurement of intelligence, cars are status symbols, mobile phones are an indication of sophistication and multinational fast-food outlets are places to take photographs. At the bottom of the meme, we are asked "So how can we ever progress?". In this meme it is unconsciously ironic that what the 'white man', i.e., person in the English speaking developed world, believes and does is privileged as being admirable, and what the local (Sri Lankan) does is condemned. The subtext seems to be 'Let us learn some good and unpretentious values from them', iconizing western English-speaking people as rational and practical. This is consistent with the ideology promoted by the "English as a Life Skill" or Speak English Our Way" campaign which sought to encourage an ideology of English that positioned it as a mere tool and a skill and not as a weapon nor a marker of prestige or power (Ratwatte, 2016).

The meme also resists the hegemony of English with claims that we cannot "progress" with values like those which equate English with intelligence. This meme simplifies the field, and the semiotic process of erasure is detected, rendering invisible the class system and related values that prevail in English-speaking 'western' countries. As a category, these memes typify the incongruity theory of humor.
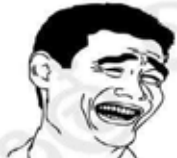

Meme 12

Covert prestige: We don't know English but that is cool

The fourth category is where, in acts of iconization, a series of memes index the use of English as being pretentious and a form of posturing. They also exhibit covert prestige (Labov, 1972) which indexes non-standard forms and less powerful languages as being 'cool' and enforcing a particular local identity. For example, Meme 13 lampoons those who post on Facebook in English, telling them directly, in the Sinhala language, "White folk do not look at your profile page, since we are the ones who look at it, please post in Sinhala". This category of meme also posits that "we" do not know English. This constructs an alternative identity resisting the iconization of those who do not know English as non-elite. Meme 14 is similar, proclaiming in Sinhala that "some people share English posts [on social media] not because they find those posts appealing but only in order to show us that they are posh, important people". These memes refer to posts on Facebook and iconize that act with the ideology of 'poshness' which affirms the extra-linguistic value of English and accuse those who share English posts on social media of posturing. In addition, the idea of using national or local languages to communicate with fellow Sri Lankans is expressed, reproducing the link between language and identity, and resisting the idea that English is part of a Sri Lankan identity.

Meme 13

Meme 14

Meme 14 accuses those who use English to post on social media of being hypocritical and inauthentic. This too is an instance of indexing the act of using English as pretentious. However, it possibly targets a particular social class, those who have learned English as a second language, who are accused of posturing. Here the humor adopts a stance of superiority, in line with the superiority theory of humor. Superiority humor is usually associated with laughing at others' inadequacies, but it can also take the form of self-derision (Lynch, 2002).

Interestingly, in a meme that refers to the interlinguistic relationship, the reverse of the above is addressed. The accusation that posting and sharing in English on social media is pretentious is extended to those who pretend to be unable to speak Sinhala, the majority national language of Sri Lanka in Meme 15. The meme asks first in English "So you think not being able to speak Sinhala is posh?" and then adds a rejoinder in Sinhalese which translates as "Just get lost, you are not fooling anyone!" The juxtaposition of the two languages in Meme 15 serves the semiotic process of iconization; it firstly addresses those who speak English (and are indexed as pretentious) and then is dismissive of them in Sinhala, thus constructing a textual resistance to the hegemony of English. It can also be interpreted as positioning/ indexing Sinhala as the language that is 'real' and the language in which you can confront the 'truth'. This meme demonstrates the semiotic process of erasure, where speakers of Tamil, for example, are rendered invisible.

Meme 15

Meme 16 and Meme 17 below also index speaking English as pretentious. In Meme 16, it sarcastically says in Sinhala, "if you want to express exasperation, do not use the Sinhala expression for it; instead use the English expression "oh shit" because that is posh, my friend". Meme 17 is more complex. It has two levels of linguistic prescriptivism: First, it prescribes that Sinhala should be spoken with a Sinhala accent, and second, it says that English should not be spoken with grammar mistakes (The gender dimension of this meme is beyond the scope of this paper). It also engages in the process of iconization, by indexing speaking Sinhala with an English accent as indicating pretentiousness. However, it goes on to also engage in fractal recursivity, positing that such pretentious speakers are actually not 'good' in their English. Meme 17 also engages in a process of iconizing a social class that did not have access to English in the home, but learned it as a second language. The subtext of the meme is "If you pretend that Sinhala is not your mother tongue, then you must at least know English properly". This is a meme that captures the ambiguity of attitudes towards English in Sri Lanka.

There is some degree of erasure in these memes which focus only on one of the national languages, rendering first-language speakers of Tamil invisible.
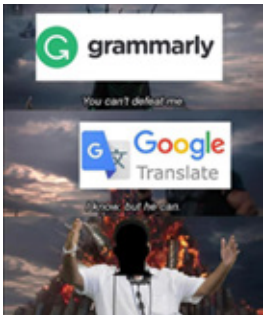

Meme 16

Meme 17

Use of hypercorrect varieties of English is pretentious and serves no purpose

A prominent elected representative is portrayed in many memes as using pretentiously bombastic English which is inappropriately formal, after he was seen in the media using polysyllabic words in English to refer to the economic crisis. This category of memes also iconize hypercorrect and high-flown English as ridiculous and unnecessary. This ridicule can also be interpreted as the semiotic process of fractal recursivity, since he is also seen as being ineffectual in relation to his responses to certain events which were the outcome of the People's Struggle (Aragalaya). This elected representative's responses were widely ridiculed on social media platforms, often in the form of memes. In this context, his use of polysyllabic words in English iconizes his general ineffectuality and conveys the belief that hypercorrect varieties of English are unrealistic and ludicrous. In Meme 18, which is in the form of a table, the top left square contains a phrase in Sinhala which translates as "ordinary folk". Thus, the Opposition leader is contrasted with ordinary folk who simply say "happy birthday". In Meme 19, he is better than the commercially available grammar correction language application, "Grammarly".

Meme 18

Meme 19

If you study hard, you can learn English

The meme categories mentioned above indicate that English is just a language and it is cool to speak in the local languages. However, the other key theme found in memes about English revolve around the idea that attributes mistakes made while speaking in English to having skipped English classes at school. In that sense, they are more nuanced than the memes that simply denigrate speakers who are not proficient in English, that index the use of English as being pretentious or denigrate those who cannot speak English. This category of memes challenges simple binaries of the elite who know English and the non-elite who do not, and acknowledges that English can be learnt, given the correct behaviors and proper opportunities and avenues of learning. It acknowledges that English can also belong to those who learn it at school and not only to those elite who know English because it is the language spoken at home, thus empowering Sinhala- (and Tamil) dominant bilinguals. In Meme 20 below, for example, it may seem like the meme is poking fun at the incorrect orthography in a "Do not Block the Gate" signboard. However, the punch line, written in Sinhala, translates as a warning: "This is what happens when you skip your English class at school". Thus, it addresses an audience of English as a second/foreign language speakers, offering an explanation for incomprehensible written English. This meme too, promotes standard language ideology and invites the application of the superiority theory of humor.

Meme 20

There are also memes which iconize formal channels as legitimate mechanisms to learn English and poke fun at those who do not follow those methods and mechanisms. For example, Meme 21 shows that people get "Dutch courage" to speak English when they are intoxicated, even if they are not fluent in the language.

Meme 21

In this we see a common meme of using two screen captures from *Drake's* "Hotline Bling" music video to denote preference of one thing over another. Here, "my friends" prefer to get motivated to speak in English by the level of alcohol in their system over being motivated to do so by learning English (via the dictionary). Thus, we see that speaking in English needs courage, and reiterates the power of the Kaduwa, and the fear that people may have to speak the language. In poking fun at those who reject learning English in 'proper' ways, but instead, who attempt to speak English only when high on alcohol, a statement is made both on the value of learning English properly as well as the degree of courage needed to speak the language if you are not of the social class who speaks English as a first language, acquired at home.

In this category, there is a sub-category of memes about English that denounces and pokes fun at the English (private) tuition industry. There is, in Sri Lanka, as in many other parts of the world, an unprecedented demand for spoken English skills. In the recent past, television and the internet have been used as media to improve English speaking skills (Medawattegedera, 2018). Posters advertising classes for improving spoken English skills line the walls of buildings in urban and suburban Sri Lanka and there is a proliferation of teachers and courses as well as locally produced textbooks promising to improve the English of children and adults (Medawattegedera, 2018).

As with all non-formal and shadow education systems in this country, there are no mechanisms to assess or monitor quality and it is widely believed that teachers with no qualifications or skills tap into the intense demand for learning English and conduct courses of low quality, deceiving unsuspecting learners into believing they acquire valuable skills (Wijeyekoon, 2022). Meme 22 below addresses this phenomenon, by juxtaposing two quotes in faulty English by two learners in the

format of Facebook comment, replies to a question in mixed language "Is the British way English Academy a good place to learn English"? At the bottom in Sinhala, the meme says ironically, "Seriously, this sounds like a great English course". The meme does not miss the irony of the title of the course and private institution - British way English Academy - which evokes 'proper' and 'standard' English. This meme too promotes standard language ideology and reproduces the notion of sub-standard English as being something to laugh at evoking the superiority theory of humor. However, its main target seems to be private institutions that are ineffective and do not do the job they are paid for.

Meme 22

Embedded in this satirical take on low quality English teaching programs is the idea that being unable to speak English properly is a reason to be laughed at. This is denoted by the 'student' writing a comment in sub-standard English and the laughing Yao Ming meme image. This reiterates the idea that the Kaduwa has extra-linguistic value, and reinforces the hegemony of the English language in Sri Lanka.

The critique of private tuition classes and non-formal English education programs continues with memes that proclaim ironically that some of these courses are so good that even 'foreigners' i.e., native English speakers, would want to enroll their children to study English in these classes, if they saw the posters advertising them. In Meme 23 below, a dialogue in Sinhala takes place, and the following is a translation of it:

A: There are some English classes which promise that you would be able to speak English   fluently [like water] within 3 days, a week, a month. They polish the sword that well!

B: Yes, dude, you find these classes everywhere!

A: Dude, why do they print their posters and banners so small and hang them up in a way that looks like they are hidden?

B: Because if foreigners [white people] see them, they would bring their own children here to get them taught English, dude.

This meme also pokes fun at, and/or is critical of, the lofty promises and assurances given by various non-formal English education programs (classes to polish the sword) in their promotional posters and banners, such as the ability to speak English fluently within three weeks. It is also noted that there is an assumption in this group of memes that 'white people' know English better than anyone else, promoting not only standard English ideology, but also the idea that the ideal speaker/teacher of English is a native speaker of English, reproducing the native speaker fallacy (Philipson, 1992).

Meme 23

Tuition classes and Private tutors are also satirized as being opportunistic and unscrupulous as seen in a meme (Meme 24 below), which takes its context from the post-Easter Attack tension between Sinhalese and Muslims and a subsequent incident where a Facebook post provoked an argument which led to a dusk-to-dawn curfew being imposed in Chilaw (Aneez & Sirilal, 2019). This was believed to have sparked the beginning of the violence against Muslims mainly in the North-Western Province. The meme was quick to appear, correcting the language of the original provocative post which seemed like a threat by a Muslim. The meme gives the 'wrong' version and 'right' version of the phrase and warns the audience in Sinhala, "Can you see? There will be a disaster if you make a mistake in English". It is then packaged as a promotional advertisement/banner for a tuition class, with a fake name and telephone number, mocking the English tuition industry and its opportunistic marketing. In addition, this meme points to and reiterates the power of English

and how it can have extra-linguistic consequences. It reinforces the hegemony of English, pointing out that a general truism can seem like a threat if you write it wrong in English and by asserting that English is the natural and normal choice for a lingua franca among different ethnic groups. It promotes standard language ideology.

Meme 24

English is difficult to learn

The next category of memes takes the stance that in spite of the fact that English can be learnt (according to the meme category discussed above), English is a difficult language to learn. Many scholars have pointed out that part of the Kaduwa syndrome is that English is perceived as a hard language to learn, and that resentment toward English was in part because of the difficulty in learning it and thus gaining the ability to wield the Kaduwa. Ratwatte, (2012, p. 181) points out that Kandiah, (1984, 1999) documented the existence of two speech communities in Sri Lanka — the Anglophone 'elite' to whom English was a resource, and the national bourgeoisie (Samarakkody, 2001), who considered English as a problem or barrier. Kandiah (1984, 1999) and Fernando (1977) have pointed out that it is the national bourgeoisie or the non-habitual English speakers who are documented as displaying antipathy towards English. It is assumed that much of this antipathy is due to a lack of opportunity to learn it properly, unlike the elite sections of society who acquire English at home. However, in the memes that point out how confusing English is and how difficult it is to learn, there is more of the humorous element than in the other memes. This could be because in this instance, it is the language that is considered to be the cause of difficulty, and not unscrupulous tuition teachers. Further, there are many jokes on the internet which poke fun at how confusing the English language is, not only for Sri Lankans, but for learners in general. In Meme 25, a grammar-translation method of learning English is assumed, and the language is made fun of in terms of how confusing it is when translation into Sinhala is relied

upon. The meme plays on the ambiguity and illogical lexicon of English, where orange is both the color and the fruit, and on the fact that in Sinhala there are two different vocabulary items for the color and the fruit. It proclaims, "The word for orange in English is orange, but in Sinhala we say 'thembili' [orange in Sinhala], for the color orange, and for 'thembili' the word in English is 'king coconut'" The meme's punch line asks "how, then, can we learn English?" The pronoun "we" is significant in indexing a collective, a speech community (Labov, 1972).

Meme 25: The Confusion of translating English into Sinhala

In Meme 26, the meme simply proclaims in Sinhala "It is true, I don't know English, but hey I have done a course [in English] and even got a Certificate" which seems to be more of a comment on how hard it is to learn English than a critique of the quality of the English course. The humor here is based on the incongruity theory of humor, since not knowing English even after studying it is incongruous and illogical. As Lynch (2002, p. 428) points out, jokes and laughter may also stem from the recognition that something is inconsistent with the expected rational nature of the perceived environment. Something can be found funny if it is irrational, paradoxical, illogical, incoherent, fallacious, or inappropriate. In both Meme 25 and Meme 26, some degree of erasure exists, where those who are able to learn English successfully are not acknowledged.

Meme 26

Meme 27: English is hard to learn

In yet another example of humor relating to how difficult it is to learn English, Meme 27 proclaims in Sinhala, "The words I like best in an English exam are 'the first one is done for you'" implying that even after following a program of study of English, it is challenging to answer questions at an English exam correctly. This category of memes seems to be part resistance to learning English and part admission of the desire to learn English, indexing both the anxiety associated with gaining access to the Kaduwa, and the problematic relationship with the language and its extra-linguistic value in the folk linguistic landscape of Sri Lanka.

It is essential to learn English to have access to the world outside

This category of memes revolves around the idea that it is essential to learn English. Despite the existence of unscrupulous tuition teachers and the difficulty of the language (portrayed in the meme categories immediately preceding this category), it is acknowledged that we need to learn English to migrate or communicate with the rest of the world. The hegemony of English as a lingua franca and dominant discourses around English and globalization are asserted by the ideology reflected in this group of memes. In Meme 28 below a girl proclaims that since she doesn't know English, she has no hope of being reincarnated in the western world (which is shown to be more advantageous to live in). In the meme, the male asks the female "when you die, in which country would you like to be reincarnated?" and she replies "in Sri Lanka of course". He then exclaims "Oh no! Why would you want that?" and she replies "How could people like us be born abroad, when we do not know English?"

Meme 28

Meme 29 draws its context from the Buddhist monk, Venerable Ratana's claim that it is better for students in Primary grades at school to learn in the medium of their mother tongue rather than in the English medium (Perera & Siriwardana, 2019). This created an intense controversy and the meme below posits that in the

future (i.e., in 2030) when a foreigner (white man) greets someone in Sri Lanka in English, she would not be able to do as much as even return the greeting in English. The monk's opinion is stated in Sinhala in the meme, and an exchange between the foreigner and the Sri Lankan takes place below that. The response given by the Sri Lankan as a reply to the greeting is an irrelevant one: a phrase from a Buddhist sutra (Ratana Sutraya) which puns on the name of the monk. Thus, the meme valorizes English medium instruction for all age groups in schools as one of the surest ways in which children can learn English in order to communicate with the rest of the world. This category of memes too, reinforces the popularly held uncritical folk linguistic belief that learning in the English medium magically enables you to be proficient in the language. It also indexes English as being a progressive language which could be a passport to a better future and better communication. These memes reflect the intense demand for learning English and English medium education, reproducing dominant ideologies of English that assert its hegemony as the most prestigious international language in the world.

අවුරුදු 1 ඉඳන් 5 වෙනකම් ලමයින්ට
ඉංග්‍රීසි භාෂාව ඉගෙනගැනීම තහනම්
කල යුතුයි - රතන භාමුදුරුවෝ

2030 අවුරුද්දේදි

සුද්දා - Hi How are you doing?

ලංකාවේ එකා - රතනං පණීතං

Meme 29

English indexes common sense and authority but is alienating

In memes like the one below (Meme 30), the clipped and no-frills directives commonly used in English such as "please do not litter" are posited as having little or no effect on Sri Lankans. Instead, a banner which signifies various deities and curses, with the speech acts of threats and curses towards entire families of those who litter the places is shown to be more effective in order to communicate the message effectively. Thus, within the structure of the meme, English is iconized as an alienating set of rules that do not speak to the hearts of Sri Lankans and is in conflict with their culture. However, it is possible to also interpret this meme as being self-deprecating, indexing Sri Lankans as illogical and backward, and English as progressive.

Meme 30

Iconization of English speakers as westernized and urbane

This last category of memes is from a series with a distinct and consistent format known as Tuxedo Winnie the Pooh Memes (Elder, n.d.). An example is Meme 31, which by itself directly iconizes English: The phrase 'Colombo Uni' is indexed as being modern and urbane by being juxtaposed with the picture of a girl who is fair skinned, has dyed red hair, wears sunglasses, a dress with straps and lipstick, and is smiling. Sinhala, on the other hand is iconized as being rural, conservative and old-fashioned because the girl juxtaposed with the Sinhala version which is 'Colomba campus', is dark-skinned, frowning, wears dowdy and old-fashioned clothing, and has a conventional 'rural' hairstyle. Iconization and stereotyping are overt in this series of memes, which reproduces dominant discourses of English being a language of modernity and 'progress'.

Meme 31

Conclusion: Blunting the Kaduwa

The analysis of memes being circulated on social media in Sri Lanka point to complexity, contradiction and tensions between English and the national languages. It seems that what Tollefson (2000, p. 8) pointed out more than two decades ago, is still relevant:

> Ambiguity surrounds the status of English in Sri Lanka. In practice, English is seen as advantageous, desirable and valuable. In spite of that it is also as an instrument of inequality - first because those individuals not fluent in English are denied opportunities for socioeconomic advancement, and second, because distinctions have emerged between the value of prestige and non-prestige varieties of English – a phenomenon characteristic of the South Asian region.

It indicates that while divisions related to knowing or not knowing English still exist, and English-knowing elite still laugh at the way non-elite speakers pronounce certain words, these divisions are not as stark as previously thought to be. The memes point to positive attitudes towards learning English, an evaluation of the ways in which English can (and cannot) be learned, and a significant resistance to indexing English as the language spoken by the intelligent. There is considerable hostility towards private institutes which have exploited the demand for English and unscrupulous private tutors who do not teach English effectively. The analysis also reflects that there is significant covert prestige in rejecting English for day-to-day communication, and a certain division of labor being advocated - mother tongue to be used when communicating with other Sri Lankans, or when using social media, and English to be used, when necessary, as a tool and not a weapon. English is also necessary to communicate with the outside world. Posturing by using high indexed varieties of English or fake UK/US English accents are ridiculed, thus pointing to a belief and acceptance of a local variety of (Sri Lankan) English. The memes point also to the value of local languages. The memes also reproduce dominant ideologies that English indexes modernity and is essential for success and economic progress with little critical commentary. The semiotic processes of iconization and fractal recursivity are observable in many of the memes, indicating that folk linguistics are a vital part of language ideology, and consequently, can shape language behavior and language attitudes (Miller, 2021), including the reproducing of stereotypes. At the same time, some memes reiterate and reproduce the ideology that knowing English indexes superiority at many levels, and indicates that English is still a weapon used by the powerful elite, a Kaduwa whose blade may have got blunt over the years, but still, a weapon, nevertheless.

Conflict of interest

The author has no conflict of interest to declare.

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