

Language and Identity after Five Hundred Years of Colonization

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This paper examines the controversial issue of the status of the official, national or link language/s of Sri Lanka. The focus of the study is on perspectives of language and identity among speakers of English in Sri Lanka's multilingual urban population.

The objective of this study is to examine what languages or varieties are associated with identity in Sri Lanka. The data collection was done from 2003 to 2005 in Colombo, Gampaha, Kandy, Jaffna and Galle. This preliminary study is the forerunner to a more detailed analysis of varieties of English in Sri Lanka. Additionally, leading politicians were interviewed to learn their perspectives on language in contemporary Sri Lanka.

The findings of the study indicate the confusion regarding ownership of language in Sri Lanka. For example, the terms 'mother tongue,' 'home language,' and 'native speaker' are used to denote different languages. This is possibly the result of legislation from 1956 demanding that citizens declare their mother tongue. Another finding is the ignorance of Sri Lankans regarding the status of English, which has been in use from 1796 to the present. Most users of English in Sri Lanka are uncertain about its status.

The most crucial finding of this study is the non-recognition of Sri Lanka's variety of English by its users. The leading politicians claim that they speak British English, and the majority of respondents from Colombo, shares the same view. Urban respondents from outside Colombo seem to be at ease in claiming Sri Lankan English as their own, which may be a sign of leading to ownership of language. However, the gap between English and identity in Colombo and the rest of urban Sri Lanka is an indication of the problems of language and identity as reflected in the recognition or non-recognition of Sri Lankan English.

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