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The Social Function of Sinhala Orthography

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ABSTRACT

Even though an examination of Sinhala orthography needs to be primarily based on its social utility and applicability, most of the studies conducted on the topic so far tend to merely explain spelling rules and conventions and are confined to providing lexicons containing the 'correct' way of spelling words. The reason why there has not been a discourse on the utility of Sinhala orthography may be the fact that the majority of Sinhala language scholars have approached the topic in question from a self-assumed perspective, which has confined their focus to a limited number of aspects in attempting to prove their assumptions. It is also noteworthy that such attempts have emphasized the grammatical function of spelling patterns alone. It is in such a context that taking into account the social utility of orthography is important, especially because language itself is a social process. Even though one can argue that Sinhala orthography is relatively complex by nature, it cannot be negated that there is such a social function that has paved the way to continue this discourse until today, even with contrasting arguments and debates. Hence, the present paper attempts to collect and analyze linguistic data in relation to the social function of Sinhala orthography based on an insider perspective of a native speaker from a descriptive and sociolinguistic approach. Data was collected from various occasions where calligraphy was used in various documents and social media. Some of the aspects of the social function of Sinhala orthography include the construction of identities or subject-positions, maintaining a linguistically elitist position within the scholarly discourse and also in the ordinary society, transcribing the words of another language, assigning a special status to the sounds of certain letters based on the belief that they possess a special power in domains such as sorcery, representing particular patterns of pronunciation, language-play, assigning new senses and implications (or emotions) to words etc. All these aspects equally suggest that there is an unavoidable social function of Sinhala orthography.

1. Introduction

Since there is a clearly noticeable inter-relationship between language and society, language can be considered an integral part of all forms of social relations. Therefore, it is necessary to take into account the social aspects of language in a linguistic study such as the present one. Especially, the concept of speech community is also of vital importance. The discussions on the social function of Sinhala orthography can be traced back to the first half of the 20th century. Conventional and reflective arguments,

arguments in favour of maintaining the traditional conventions related to spelling, and protectionist arguments are common parts of such debates. Even though certain positions appear to be reasonable and acceptable, there contrasting views that also deserve critical examination. However, there is no common agreement regarding this topic yet. The main reason behind such contrasting views may be the fact that a proper investigation has not yet been made into the purposes of the use of these orthographic

.conventions Further, it could be safely argued that both the social function and the linguistic function of Sinhala orthography play a decisive role, for it to remain in the Sinhala language for a considerable period of time. The objective of this paper is to critically observe the social function of Sinhala orthography. For, such an observation is crucial to suggest a more acceptable and comprehensive view of the spelling and orthography of Sinhala.

2. Material and Methods

Under qualitative research methodology, the researcher, having examined various arguments related to Sinhala orthography and Mark Sebba's work [1] which approaches orthography from a sociolinguistic perspective, will make use of the social situations implied by Sinhala orthography from an inner perspective as a native speaker and data was collected from various occasions where calligraphy was used in various documents and social media. Such data is then analysed from a sociolinguistic perspective.

3. Results and Discussion

Society-based orthography means the role orthographic patterns play in a speech community. In other words, it refers to the functions or purposes for which such patterns are used by a speech community. When considering society-based orthography, there are several uses of orthography in relation to factors such as the speech community and its function in relation to society. Some of the aspects of the social function of Sinhala orthography include the construction of identities or subject-positions, maintaining a linguistically elitist position within the scholarly discourse and also in the ordinary society, transcribing the words of another language, assigning special status to the sounds of certain letters based on the belief that they possess a special power in domains such as sorcery, representing particular patterns of pronunciation, language-play, assigning new senses and implications (or emotions) to words etc. All these aspects equally suggest that there is an unavoidable social function of Sinhala orthography.

3.1 The Construction of Identity

Constructing or assigning an identity implies the assignment of an autonomous status in order to differ from others. The ways in which orthography is used

by someone is also an implication of a reflection of her/his identity. Such a visual symbolization can be identified in several ways.

• National Identity

The 'Sinhalese' identity of a person who is born in Sri Lanka is not just a matter of her/his geographical locality or other factors such as religion. Rather, language plays a critical role in determining that identity. Hence, those who engaged in discourses on national identity have essentially paid attention to the Sinhala language identity as well. From time to time, they have made attempts to point out the national identity in terms of Sinhala orthography. For instance, some proponents of the '*Hela Hawula*' movement* tended to write the word '*Sinhal□a*' with an alveolar '*l□a*' sound instead of '*Sinhala*'.

Some scholars including D. B. Jayatilake, A. M. Goonasekara, Charles Godakumbura, M. H. Goonathilake and Chandra Wikrama who did not have any relation to *Hela Hawula* also have used '*Sinhal□a*'. This way of writing the word '*Sinhal□a*' with an alveolar '*l□a*' sound is found in inscriptions such as the *Galpotha* inscription in Polonnaruwa, the Puliyanikulama slab inscription, the epigraph of King Sahassa Malla, the Gadadeniya rock inscription [2] and some scholars of the *Hela Hawula* movement have followed the same, considering it as a sign of national identity. They also reject the story in *Darmapradeepika* which states that the Sinhalese nation originated from a lion.

Wellala Jayamaha also promotes the use of '*l□*' in '*Sinhal□a*' by emphasizing that the national identity of the Sinhalese nation is better represented by it, on the grounds that the word '*Sinhala*' is derived from '*Sivu hel□a*' [3]. The veteran Sinhala scholar Kumarathunga Munidasa, from a quite different approach in an article published in *Subasa*, has rejected the use of both '*Sinhala*' and '*Sinhal□a*' along with the established belief that the Sinhalese nation descended from a lion and argued that the Sinhalese national identity is better represented by '*Hel□a*' [4]. It is interesting to note that both these arguments (Wellala: '*Sivu hel□a*' > '*Sihel□a*' and Kumarathunga: '*Sī -hel□a*' > '*Sihel□a*') are directed towards establishing a different national identity while attempting to imply that the Sinhalese are a prominent nation in the world by rejecting the use of

* The words 'some scholars' are used here in order to point out that this could not be considered the official argument of the proponents of *Hela Hawula*. In general, the scholars of the *Hela Hawula* movement attempted to protect and nurture the nation, language, and religion (Buddhism) though there were certain differences

among them. Another group of scholars started to promote imaginary stories related to Ravana and etymological assumptions in order to highlight the fact that everything was derived from the Sinhalese. Hence, it is better to consider some scholars' arguments not as the official stance of the movement, but as their own positions.

dental 'la' sound in 'Sinhala' as well as the story about the descendance from a lion.

• Group Identity

This implies the use of an alternative orthographic pattern or certain words different from the widely accepted convention based on their own arguments which may be correct or incorrect. Even after the correct Sinhala orthographic conventions were revealed by Rathmalane Dharmarama, certain scholars of the 'Vidyodaya School of thought' tend to use the orthographic pattern accepted by their school in order to maintain their group or collective identity [5]. The orthographic pattern used by some *Hela Hawula* scholars for writing certain words is different from the common convention.

• Personal Identity

'Personal identity' means the use of an orthographic pattern different from the common convention by an individual to differentiate her/him from others. In other words, this can be seen as a way of exhibiting one's personal identity by the use of a different orthographic pattern. In some cases, such uses can take place based on a personal argument, or without any specific position simply as a habit. For example, Mark Sebba, in the introduction to his work on 'Spelling and Society', explains this trend by citing scribbled writing on a bus halt in a semi-urban area near Lancaster [1].

Siri Gunasinghe's and Piyaseeli Wijegunasinghe's use of the dental 'na' sound in writing their names as in '*Gunasinha*' can be considered an instance of following a different and alternative orthography to highlight a personal identity based on an academic stance of their own. They considered that alveolar 'n□a' and '□a' were not necessary to write down Sinhala words. For the same reason, they were used to writing their names with the dental 'na' sound [6]. The subsequent writers as well have followed the same way of writing their names in their academic and literary writings. Even though the use of 'na' in writing words like '*Guna*' is considered grammatically incorrect, writing personal names such as '*Sirigunasinha*' is not treated the same way. Such uses are accepted as a characteristic of the intellect and the academic maturity of the respective scholars.

There are certain instances where some people follow an alternative and different method without any logical argument or position. Even though this too implies some sort of personal identity, such methods cannot be considered to reflect a specific personal identity as such. Rather, these methods of writing are merely based on personal interests. However, such methods may develop into an identity at some later stage. The Sinhalese surnames

'Dahanayake' and 'Dasanayake' have evolved into two different personal names in the same way. Some people deliberately use 'Dahanayake' instead of 'Dasanayake' as their surname to establish a unique identity for them. Ranjith Amarakeerthi, in his biography of Wijeyananda Dahanayake, mentions that 'Dr. Wijeyananda Dahanayake has constantly emphasized that Dayahanayake and Dasanayake were not the same surname, but two different names' [7].

3.2 Maintaining Linguistic Elitism

In some instances, scholars who approached the phenomenon of orthography from a conservatism perspective have responded to those who considered orthography as an unnecessary imposition on the language, based on superficial observations. The simplest among such arguments is the position that some people reject certain orthographic rules in Sinhala just because 'they do not know it correctly'. Interestingly, if rejecting such rules implies some kind of ignorance, then the opposite position that it is necessary to follow them strictly should reflect the knowledge and the level of academic maturity of such scholars. It can also be argued that many of the scholars who believe that orthographic rules are necessary maintain that position not because it is essential to communicate an idea clearly but as a strategy of highlighting the fact that it is an inherent aspect of the Sinhala language and maintaining an intellectually elite status in the academic discourse and also in the ordinary society. Hence, it is emphasized in many instances that the knowledge and the use of these orthographic rules imply a sense of intellectual maturity while 'misusing' it (whether one knows these rules or not) is an act of ignorance. This has resulted in an ideology in the speech community that promotes that 'orthography is essential'.

3.3 Transcribing Words of Another Language

Correctly writing words of another language is an example of one's knowledge of that language. It can also be seen generally that even when words of classical languages, which are no longer used widely, are written down, the orthographic rules and conventions of the original language are followed as they are. Further, it is not a reasonable practice to violate the rules and conventions of another language and accept such attempts as an established practice. Hence, orthographic conventions are useful in transcribing/writing words and sounds of another language and this practice also helps represent the sound pattern of such language.

3.4 Assigning a Special Status to Orthography in Domains such as Veda Texts, and Sorcery

In domains such as sorcery, it is highly believed that certain letters that represent a given sound exactly must be used to fulfil the intended result. Rev. Alagamawatte Sumanasamsa who has written a book on sorcery titled *Ravindraarthadeepani Hewath Mahaa Bhootha Vidyaa Prakaranaya* has explained the 'power' of sounds in sorcery and has pointed out (using terms such as *Bindu*, *Shakthi* and *Prakrurthi* that 'there is a special power generated by certain sounds' in sorcery which is full of letters, no matter whether they imply meanings or not. According to another writer, "Since life (*jeeva shakthi*) originated in the universe which is full of various sounds, from a sound itself, the sound is the originator of everything" [8]. He further has to state that 'in order to achieve the results of sorcery-related activities which make use of the power of sounds, the correct use of orthography is essential' [8].

3.5 Representing Pronunciation

It can be seen that orthography is used in some cases in order to represent the way in which a given word or a sound is pronounced [1]. For example, the common practice is to write the word 'bhasā' (which means language/languages) taking into account the fact that it is a loaned word from Sanskrit though the same word can be found in Pali as well. Hence, if one takes this word from the Pali language, it should be written as 'bhasā'. However, Ajith Thilakasena who is a famous Sinhala writer has written this word as 'bhasā', to represent the palatal pronunciation of the sound. Further, a person named Ashan Weerasinghe has written the word 'sāpāda' on Facebook even though the orthographically correct spelling of the word is 'sāpa da' to imply a specific way of pronouncing this word. The use of words like 'sādhewa' to replace the grammatically correct spelling of 'sudewa' is now common on social media. This shows that there are specific ways of writing certain words in order to imply a special pronunciation.

3.6 Language-play

The contributions of the young generations play a decisive role in diversifying languages with many different forms and features. Especially, young people increasingly engage in language plays as mentioned above. This play includes orthography as well. For example, words such as 'kavuda' and 'pav' are sometimes written on social media as 'kauda' and 'pau' respectively. Further, some of these social media users are not simply attempting to show off an added intellectuality 'without knowing' the correct orthography. It is also interesting to note that such language plays are mainly intended to generate

humor and sarcasm in specific contexts in which they occur, to make an idea interesting and relevant.

3.7 Assigning Emotions to Words

When language is used as a means of communication, in certain speech events the speakers tend to embed some level of emotions and 'actions' in the words they use. Emotions or moods of words also influence the ways in which they are pronounced. Even though the speakers clearly know that such uses are sometimes grammatically incorrect, they continue to do so in order to convey an emotional implication. There are occasions when such uses of words are absorbed into writing as well the standard spelling is changed to imply emotions. Even though the correct and standard spelling is 'adbhuta' (mysterious), it is sometimes written as 'adbhūta', with a long 'bhū' sound. By converting the short vowel in this word to a long vowel, the speakers embed the emotion or feeling of 'mysterious' in it.

Similarly, even though the standard spelling is 'gambhīra', this word is often written as 'gāmbhīra', again with a long 'gā' sound, sometimes in order to increase its sense. All these suggest that certain orthographic patterns are intended at conveying emotions or moods along with words.

4. Conclusion

Since language is a social phenomenon, different uses of language (or linguistic trends) have an influence on society. Certain special features of language are especially linked with its social function. Hence, it can be argued that there is a strong inter-relationship between the social and linguistic functions of the Sinhala language. This relation between orthography and society plays a key role in identity formation, maintaining linguistic elitism, transcribing words of another language, believing that there is a special power in the sounds of Sinhala in domains such as sorcery, representing different pronunciations, and also as a process of language-play. Accordingly, Sinhala orthography has not only had a linguistic utility but also had a social function since historical times. It is due to these reasons that certain conventions related to Sinhala orthography such as the *nā, na, lā, la* standards cannot be easily eliminated.

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