

Prolegomena to the Study of Ceylon English

I

THE dialect of English spoken in Ceylon and generally going by the name "Ceylon English" has intrigued the Ceylonese for many years, chiefly as a source of amusement and bemusement, as, for example, in the popular dramas of H. C. N. de Lanerolle and in the occasional journalism of Tarzie Vittachi, S. M. J. Louis, and others. The only serious study of the subject is Professor H. A. Passé's *The Use and Abuse of English* (based on a part of his doctoral dissertation). The phonology of Ceylon English has been much analyzed and quarreled over by scholars trained in modern linguistics. These studies reflect the structural linguists' enchantment with the sounds of language to the neglect of the more important subjects of syntax, lexicon, and etymology. In this area, there is only Passé's pioneering work, so far as I know, and it is only a beginning and not altogether satisfactory. The work could be fruitfully undertaken again. The subject not only has intrinsic linguistic interest but is also relevant to pedagogical problems of English language teaching in Ceylon.

Most writers shy away from the word "dialect," preferring the non-committal "Ceylon English." But "dialect" is justified, I think, and of some importance, for it makes a difference whether you regard the language as a dialect or as a second language. True, for many, English is a formally acquired second language, but for many others it is still learned both at home and at school as a native speaker learns it; and the version of English that is learned itself grew up the way a dialect does in relative isolation. Again, though one may think immediately of a dialect as a variation uninfluenced by another language, yet there is more than enough precedent for such influence: the dialect of Brooklyn owes much to Yiddish, as does "Pennsylvania Dutch" to German, and Irish English to Gaelic. The English of Ceylon has not only phonological but also syntactical and lexical peculiarities arising largely, but not entirely, from the influence of Sinhalese and Tamil. The contrast with English as a second language is quite evident if we consider the Scandinavian countries, where, as in Ceylon, a large number of people, particularly in urban areas, are fluent in English. There

one finds some peculiarities of pronunciation (a "Swedish accent"), but few if any of syntax and virtually none at all of lexicon. The English of Denmark is much closer to Standard English than that of Ceylon, and both are closer than the English of some areas of England itself. The use of a spoken second language in Europe is to communicate with naïve speakers, a function irrelevant to a dialect, which is used for communication among speakers of the same dialect—as in Yorkshire and in Ceylon. A dialect has a certain resistance to assimilation to the "standard" dialect, a resistance unknown, except phonetically, to a second language.

Educated Englishmen of provincial origin often speak both the "standard" dialect of London and their own dialect, as readers of D. H. Lawrence will recall. The phenomenon is rare in Ceylon, simply because so few Ceylonese have spent enough time in southern England to acquire that dialect. But I have heard at least one eminent Ceylonese educator speaking very elegant "Oxford" English to an Englishman and to me and the next moment speaking to a group of Ceylonese schoolteachers in their dialect. I have had the experience myself of attempting to converse with students in my flat American phonation, and being met by mute stupefaction; but by imitating the pronunciation and intonation of the Ceylon dialect, I was understood at once.

The dialect status of the English of Ceylon suggests that the pedagogical ideal of instilling Received Pronunciation is quixotic. The speech habits are too firmly entrenched to be significantly altered. It does not follow, of course, that dialectical variation should be encouraged, for communication with non-Ceylonese speakers of English is obviously of value. But Ceylon English should be accepted for what it is, a dialect. This acceptance can and should dispel some of the bugaboos of "correctness" which plague many speakers. The greeting "How?" is no more an error than southwestern American "howdy."

The dialect is as definable in its general characteristics as any other dialect, these characteristics obtaining from Jaffna to Matara, from Colombo to Trincomalee. Some people interested in the subject have expressed doubts about the possibility of adequately describing the dialect, citing variations from place to place and from class to class. Such variations exist, of course, but so do they in all dialects, which are no more than collections of idiolects. The problem is to identify those features that obtain generally and to base any further refinements of description on them. This can be done for phonetic as well as for other features, despite consider-

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able variety among the indigenous languages and dialects. Obviously a suitable range of informants is necessary. My own sources for the present sketch include university graduates, businessmen, and government officials as well as cooks and drivers, both Tamils and Sinhalese, chiefly from Colombo, Kandy, Jaffna, Negombo, and the towns of the western coast. I assume that language features shared by such diverse informants may fairly be taken to comprise the main stock of the general English dialect of Ceylon. The kind of patois collected by Vittachi is sub-dialectical.

The ideal person to undertake a comprehensive study of Ceylon English would be trilingual, and he would have the assistance of an Englishman and an American to point out peculiarities to which his own ear would probably not be attuned. With little Sinhalese and no Tamil, I have had myself to rely quite abjectly on informants, and no doubt many errors of ignorance will appear plainly enough in what follows. Whoever studies the subject naturally begins with Passé's *The Use and Abuse of English*, the only reasonably comprehensive effort to account for distinctive Ceylonisms. An admirable and partially successful effort, it is nevertheless not always reliable and suffers from a general inadequacy of approach. Though rather tentative and noncommittal about the status of Ceylon English, Passé does nevertheless devote the most important chapter of his book to "translation errors," which are not errors, for the most part, but dialectical peculiarities. The nomenclature is not particularly damaging, but it does mislead, and fails to distinguish genuine translation errors. Of these, "to drink a cigarette" is a good example: It is a direct translation of Sinhalese *bonava* but does not belong to any dialect or sub-dialect of English. It is thus altogether different from, say, "He is from Maradana side" (Sinhalese *pätta*, Tamil *pakkam*), also a translation, but an accepted locution in the dialect. The use of "put" (*Use and Abuse*, page 34), "What else?", "Who else?", and "Who said?" (pp. 40-41), cited as errors by Passé, are in fact not even dialectal variations, all being common in both British and American English. The value of this chapter is the possible Sinhalese sources of Ceylonisms. Here, once or twice, Passé falls into the trap of confounding translation and equivalency. Thus he gives the source of "play out" as *tattu karanava*; both may mean the same thing, but the English cannot possibly be a translation of the Sinhalese "make a touch," where there nothing to translate is or even suggest "play." The same is true of *nidi maranava* as the source of "break rest"; it is not credible that the Sinhalese word for "kill" should be translated as "break." In investigating such expressions, one must obviously find a word that, in the first example, can be translated "play," a word that in the source language is used not only in this expression but also in other

contexts, such as "The children are playing," or "They are playing cards." Now in fact there is a source for "play" and "play out" in Tamil: *Aven ennai vilayādi pottōn*, "He played me (out)" (cf. *Chimappillaikal vilayādukirārkal*, "The children are playing"); and in somewhat low Sinhalese *Ū maṭṭi keliya*. Similarly "break rest" must have something to do with Sinhalese *ninda kaḍanava* (cf. *Mama piṅgāna kāḍuva*, "I broke the plate").

Most egregious is Passé's complete neglect of Tamil, which has certainly had as much influence on Ceylon English as Sinhalese and possibly more. In most instances it is impossible to ascertain on linguistic grounds alone whether a Ceylonism comes from Tamil or Sinhalese, but Passé gives the impression, perhaps inadvertently, that Sinhalese is the chief or only source. His treatment of "put" as a verbal factotum is a case in point. The examples he gives, supposed to be derived from *damanava*, are actually standard colloquial English. On the other hand, he fails to cite the peculiarly Ceylonese use of the verb as in "I'll put a short walk up the lane," "The dog put a shout to me," "Thanks for putting me awake." This construction is Tamil in origin: *Athu saththam pottathu*, "He put a shout" (cf. *Avar puththahaththai kiilai pōttār*, "He put the book down"). There is apparently no Sinhalese equivalent.

An historical study would reveal, I suspect, that Tamil is the first source of most Ceylonisms (a study that should include, as Passé suggests, early school books), readily assimilated by Sinhalese speakers because of the parallels in their language; for the Indians and Ceylon Tamils, having taken up English sooner and more intensively than the Sinhalese, probably established the basic shape of Ceylon English.

I suspect, too, that much of Passé's material is no longer current. The "what-child-how-to-say-no-to-the-face" kind of thing seems now to be generally regarded as an amusing quaintness of an older generation. I doubt that the conversational style of Ludowyk's classic play, "*He Comes from Jaffna*," is any longer to be found outside the drama.*¹ If this is the case, it would be most interesting to know why. The chronology of the change suggests that the post-independence national language issue, along with the general decline of English, may be of significant relevance.

* Interestingly enough, Mr. de Lānerolle has told me that many of the Ceylonisms of his delightful plays were actually taken by him from Passé directly.

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Of the following Ceylonisms, most are not cited by Passé; the others are not, in my opinion, adequately accounted for. I include only expressions verified from diverse sources.

Blackguard. A favorite verb in Ceylon, but rare and extremely old-fashioned in British and American English. Evidently an inheritance from the colonial period.

Break rest. Sinhalese *ninda kaḍanava*, "spoil, disturb sleep." In the sense "keep awake," possibly a blend of this and *nidi maranava*, "kill sleep," the latter alone hardly accounts for the English. There seems to be no parallel Tamil expression.

Chap. Briticism less current in England than in Ceylon.

Fellow. Another Briticism. But in Ceylon it is regularly extended to animals and not infrequently to inanimate objects. A mature elephant is usually "the big fellow," a young elephant is "the little fellow." A dentist may refer jocularly to your teeth as "these fellows."

Finished! A general exclamation for any kind of bad or unpleasant result. In a discussion of athlete's foot: "If I don't dry between my toes, finished!" "If I go without telling the home people, finished!" Usually the apodosis of a conditional statement, as in the examples. Tamil *mudiniuthu*, Sinhalese *ivurai* are both used in the same way as exclamations. (Cf. *Mama potha kiyavala ivarai* and *Nan puththakam vāsitchu mudiniuthu*, "I have finished reading the book.")

Formerly. "Formerly the road was here," "Formerly he was rich," carrying over the habit of both Tamil (*munne*) and Sinh. (*issara*) of using an adverb where British and American English prefer "used to be," and sometimes "once" "Formerly" in these examples would be stilted and unidiomatic in Standard English.

From where. "From where are you coming?" (SE: "Where do you come from?") Perhaps overlearned from the old-fashioned textbook rule of not ending a sentence with a preposition.

Go and come. Sinh. *Mama gihin ennaṇi*, Tamil *Nān poi varen*, exactly the same construction (“Having gone, I come”) and usage, common in India as well as Ceylon, and the most enchanting expression to a foreigner. It is said to express the folk belief that it is bad luck to take a final leave. As a valediction it conveys, then, the same sentiment as Italian *arrivederci*, Spanish *hasta mañana*. German *aufwiederschen*, etc. But it is more than a formula: “I’ll go to Colombo and come,” “I’ll put a wash and come,” “I’ll have my food and come.”

Hammer (on) “The police hammered him.” This is very common, indeed more common than “hit,” “strike,” etc. There seems to be no verb in either Sinhalese or Tamil that could be readily so translated.* Both languages use the same verb for striking a nail or person (*gahanava*, *aḷikkirathu*), but they are obviously more generalized than “hammer.” The nouns, Sinh. *miṭṭiya* and Tamil *suthial*, have no verbal derivatives. Sinhalese *miṭa molavanava*, “make, clench a fist,” comes close. In fact, the expression undoubtedly comes from British boxing slang of the nineteenth century, from which it passed into wider usage and was picked up by the Ceylonese.

Hopeless! An exclamation usually equivalent to “Impossible!” “I tried to see the commissioner all day. Hopeless!” The word is common enough in this sense in Britain and America, but it is almost always part of a predication (“The post office is hopeless”), rarely an interjection. Neither Sinhalese nor Tamil seems to have any equivalent. It is probably an instance of truncation (discussed below).

How? So How? So how after a long time? The first version of this common greeting is common to both Sinhalese (*Kohomada?*) and Tamil (*Eppidi?*); the second is probably Tamil (*Pinṇei eppidi?*), the third Sinhalese (*Kohomada huṅgak kalakata passe?*).

Is it? “You want some trousers, is it?” “You are leaving on the fourteenth, is it?” Not nearly so common as *isn’t it*, it probably translates the interrogative suffixes *-da* and *-iya*. Unlike *isn’t it*, it asks a real question. The use of *is it* allows the speaker to avoid the inverted word-order of Standard English and to preserve the structure of Sinhalese and Tamil.

*In Sinhalese there is the verb *taḷanavā*, to strike, to beat and also to flatten with a hammer, to hammer out. But as the author suggests the Ceylonism may be derived from boxing Slang. Ed.

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Isn't it? Sinh. *nēda*, Tam. *illeya*, both with the same morphemic structure, i.e., the word for "no" with an interrogative suffix. This is a ubiquitous tag in Ceylon and India, and can be used with any kind of statement. "He is going to cite an instance, isn't it?", "You know what the Tripitika is, isn't it?", "That is not the real thing, isn't it?" In Standard English, of course, the pronoun is expected to have a proper antecedent. As a reiterated demand for reassurance in conversation, it corresponds to the "hello" that punctuates telephone conversations in Ceylon. Passé's explanation—"Some speakers, in trying to avoid *no*, fall into the error of substituting *isn't it* indiscriminately for *no*"—is improbable. It is more likely that *isn't it*, introduced as the general equivalent of *needa* and *illeya*, has simply leveled out the other forms. The use of *isn't it* and *no* is paralleled in many other languages: Spanish *no*, French *n'est-ce pas*, German *nicht wahr*, etc. It is not, however, generally characteristic of English, though many individuals punctuate with functionally similar expressions such as *you see*.

It seems. A curiously common expression with no parallel in Sinhalese or Tamil, it appears to owe its popularity to the fact that it allows the speaker to avoid indirect discourse and the subjunctive. "Kuvani was reborn as a leopard, it seems." "He is a great womanizer, it seems." It is normal English, of course, but nowhere so formulaic as in Ceylon. As a verbal formula it had wide vogue a generation or so ago as an introduction to a narrative joke: "It seems there were three Irishmen . . ."; and I should not be surprised if the British colonial Joker were the immediate source of this habit of Ceylon English.

Junction. As explained by Passé but it may be added that Tamil *santhi* is used in the same way as Sinh. *handiya*.

Mean. "I have a terrible job. Terrible job means, must work on Poya Day." This is probably too rare a pattern for inclusion here—I have heard it from only two sources—but it is a very interesting construction; it occurs in both Sinhalese and Tamil, but is altogether alien to Standard English, which does not express the relationship between the two sentences: Sinh. *Maṭa jarā raksāvaka tibenava*. *Jarā raksāvaka kiyanne Pōyadavase vāḍa karanna tibenava*, Tamil *Ennudaya velai mulu koodathu*. *Ennanda Poyadaysille velaiseiya venum*, English *I have a terrible job; I have to work on Poya Day*.

No? Same as *isn't it*.

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Not to worry. I used to worry about this common and charming expression (a westerner has mixed feelings about the sentiment, however). Why the infinitive? It looks like a structural carry-over from a first language, but Sinhalese and Tamil would yield only the imperative, corresponding exactly to General English.

Don't worry. Then I came across the phrase in the cartoon strip "Andy Capp" and realized that, of course, it's Cockney. Partridge (*A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*) says it came into general vogue in 1957-8. But it originated in the services, and may have come to Ceylon during the second world war. As with *hammer*, it can be seen how easily one can chase a chimera: the first language is not the only source of the dialect. The expression is engaging, I think, because it is less an injunction than a philosophy.

Play (out). Sinh. *kelinava*, Tamil *vilayadu*, discussed above. There is also the occasional usage *play for*: "He is playing for my watch" (i.e., looking for some probably devious way of appropriating it). Partridge records this in British slang and says it came from America circa 1930. But I have never come across it in the United States, nor is it given in the standard dictionaries of the American idiom. It seems more likely that the expression is a contribution of Ceylon and India to British English.

Put. Tamil *pōdu*, discussed above.

Scold. In General English only a parent or a person *in loco parentis* "scolds." When a journalist reports that the President scolded the press, he suggests humorously that the President treated the newsmen like children. In Ceylon English as in Sinhalese (*bcninava*) and Tamil (*eesurathu*), anyone can scold anyone else. The general use of the word probably derives originally from over simple translation (cf. *formerly*).

Side. "He lives on Moratuwa side." Explained by Passé, to which may be added Tamil *pakkam*, used the same way as Sinhalese *pätta*. Both words, like the English, may also refer to the side of a house, the side of one's body, etc.

Thrice. Archaic in Standard English, the adverb is current and universal in the Ceylon dialect. "I have gone to that play thrice." Probably influenced by the morphological regularity of the ordinal numbers in Sinhalese and Tamil and by Biblical English.

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True? Sinh. *ättada?* Tamil *Unmaiyaahavaa?* English, *Is that so? Really?*

Upcountry. Sinh. *uḍa-ṛaṭa*, as explained by Passé. Add Tamil *mēlnādu*, the same in morphology and usage.

What to do? Sinh. *monava karannada?* Tamil *enna seikirathu?* English *What can you do? What's to be done?* Here is the structural carry-over from the first language to the dialect. Once common perhaps, such locutions (*Where to see? How to say no?*, etc.) I think are disappearing.

Why not! A: "The minister is taking bribes." B: "No!" A: "Why not!" As far as I know, this usage is distinctive to Ceylon, where it does not mean "Why shouldn't he?" but "Of course." "Why should you be surprised?", "Everyone knows it," "Decidedly!" It is not a question, but an emphatic affirmative answer to an expression of doubt or disbelief. A: "You mean they want you to work on Poya Days?" B: "Why not!" A: "Was he really bitten by a viper?" B: "Why not!" (The ordinary use of *why not* is also current.) There seems to be nothing in either Sinhalese or Tamil that could account for this usage; it is probably a generalization from its original restricted usage* (cf. *scold* and *formerly*).

III

Among grammatical peculiarities is the construction of such utterances as "I am a tailoring man," "I am an unemployed man," "I am a centless man." "I am a new man," where Standard English has "I am a tailor," "I am unemployed" (American "I'm out of work"), "I have no money" (American "I'm broke"), and "I am a stranger here." Both Sinhalese and Tamil use the construction: *Mama mahana minihēk, Nān oru thaiyalkaran.*

Highly characteristic of Ceylon English is the repetition of imperatives: "Come, come, Doctor, sit, sit!" These repetitions are common in both Sinhalese and Tamil as polite requests. Polite Standard English, however, avoids the imperative—"Won't you sit down?"—or appends "please": "Please come in." The bare imperative, especially when vigorously enunciated, may startle an outsider. At a smoky party I once heard a young American remark to a Ceylonese gentleman he was chatting with that it was rather stuffy and he thought he would step outside a moment for a

* The equivalent of "why not!" in Sinhalese is *Mokada nātte!* Ed.

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breath of fresh air. "Yes, yes," the gentleman boomed alarmingly, "get out, get out!" Similarly the repetition of "yes" (*ou, ou*) in Standard English often carries the connotation, "Yes, I know all about that, let's not waste time."

The expression "Come, come, sit, sit" also illustrates the Ceylonese habit of truncation. Standard English is "Come *in*, sit *down*." Indeed Standard English, as Passé has observed, uses adverbs prolifically in this way, a fact that has made possible the system of "Basic English." Standard English is characteristically reluctant to leave a verb without some kind of complement or qualifier. The opposite seems to be true of Sinhalese and Tamil, and we have such typical Ceylonisms as these: "I don't think" (I don't think *so*), "You like?" (You like *it?*), "You want to see?" (Do you want to see *it?*), etc., and in response to such a question as "Will you have some tea?" the answer, "No, I had" (No thanks, I just had *some*). Truncations of the heads of sentences are familiar in Ceylonese "Can do," "Can manage." The translation expressions "True?" and "Finished!", noted in the preceding section, are also typical truncations.

These phenomena obviously arise from the characteristics of the indigenous languages. Yet it must be noted that when a Ceylonese says, "Get out, get out!" or "Finished!" or "Can do" (*puluva, seiyat celum*), he is not translating from his "native" language. In many instances English may be as much his native language as Sinhalese or Tamil; moreover, he may not even know the swabasha equivalent. The point is that, though the characteristics of the Ceylon dialect originated for the most part in carry-overs from Sinhalese or Tamil to English, they do not now constitute translations at all, let alone translation errors.

The question of correctness is more slippery when verb forms are at issue. Three deviations from Standard English practice, though not very widespread, are not altogether uncommon. Sometimes the simple past is used where careful Standard English prefers the present perfect. For instance, in a newspaper article about a University Professor at the time of his departure for the United States, the writer used the past tense so consistently as to suggest that he was writing an obituary. E.g., "He had the humility not to describe those who disagreed with him as charlatans." The past tense usually being used for events that are over and done with, the sentence seems to imply either that the subject is dead or that he no longer has any humility. The present for the future appears in such expressions as "Are you in Ceylon next year?" It is surprising that this

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doesn't occur more often considering the several alternatives of Standard English: "Are you going to be in Ceylon next year?" "Are you to be in Ceylon next year?" "Will you be in Ceylon next year?" *Would* for *will* is sometimes seen or heard: "So you are going to Europe. I'm sure you would like it."

So common that it may be called dialectical is the use of the continuous aspect of a verb for the simple aspect. The following are all from the newspapers: "If you are having [if you have] a copy, why are you asking?" "For each one accepted, we are throwing out [we throw out] ninety-five" "He said that the National Government was thinking [thought] it could make the people forget." "The capitalist press and capitalist merchants may be thinking [may think] that the country can be ruled according to their whims and fancies." The predilection for the present continuous may account for this: "Is the human skull that of the temple's chief incumbent who is missing [who has been missing] since the night of September, 17th?"

None of these verbal variations is the result of translation, of course, but rather from a compromise with (or confusion of) the intricacies and subtleties of a highly complex verb system very difficult to master. Similar simplifications are going on in Standard English: the future perfect, for instance, can scarcely be said to exist in the colloquial language. The Ceylonese extension of the present continuous seems rarely to lend itself to misunderstanding, nor does it seem to me to attenuate linguistic refinement or precision.

Deviations from standard word order sometimes occur which apparently stem directly from the structure of the indigenous language, and represent at least a dialectical tendency, though not an outstanding one. Again from the newspapers: "But from where did this about one year's stock of paper come?" "Mr. Senanayake: Don't go. You fascinate me. Dr. Perera: Oh? I didn't know you were that way inclined." (The last has a fine Irish lilt: cf. "And what if I have a wee drop taken?") Both Mr. Iriyagolle and Dr. Perera may have been misquoted, but no apology is called for: from a rhetorical point of view, the constructions are, if anything, an improvement upon Standard English.

IV

The rhetoric of Ceylon English has been most deplorably neglected. Particularly grievous is Dr. Passe's neglect, for although he devotes a major

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section of his book to rhetoric, he uses exclusively English and American material when all about him bloom the flowers of a veritable rhetorical paradise. There is, as everyone knows, something in the national character that loves eloquence; it is discernible from the lowliest rustic village to the Olympian heights of Temple Trees. What occasion can go by without a display of oratory? And what is remarkable and relevant to a study of Ceylon English is not only the love of words but the search for the *mot juste*, often surprisingly successful, which is not at all characteristic of colloquial English in America and Britain. As already noted, Standard English relies heavily on a small basic stock of words, particularly the verb-adverb groups. The Ceylonese have little use for these, preferring the Latinate equivalents. And this is true even for those with very minimal English. Thus a servant says, "Did master apply that ointment?" And the professor of English responds, almost shamefacedly, "Yes, I *put it on*." The same professor is abashed to hear his driver, who has at best a desperate grip on English, say, "The motor is not operating properly." And most crushing of all: the three-year-old child who observes casually that "the beetle is clinging to the paper."

Conversely, Basic English is the English least understood. Early in my first visit to Ceylon, I was talking to a young man about the possibility of arranging a dance performance. His English was excellent, and I was making a concerted effort to overcome my propensity for a mumbling monotone, but to no avail. All my remarks had to be translated by Mr. A. J. Selvadurai, of the Vidyalankara University (who is very expert at this sort of thing). I would say, for example, "If you need a place, I can get one." Nonplussed, the young man appealed silently to Mr. Selvadurai who translated, "Doctor says, if it is a question of accommodation, suitable quarters can be arranged." Which was understood perfectly. The problem was not my phonation, but my lexicon: "place," "get," "one"—these are all too abstract and therefore confusing. It is only in a mathematical sense that Basic English is simple: it has a small number of lexical symbols, but the number of combinations is very great and difficult to manipulate. In this respect English differs from most other, especially non-Germanic, languages. Neither Sinhalese nor Tamil, I am told, is at all comparably rich in factotum words. It is thus quite understandable that the Ceylonese will say "operating," "employed," "succeeding," "studying," etc., where I should simply say "working." This is also a characteristic difference between spoken and written English; written English makes far less use of the "basic" vocabulary than does the spoken language. And since the Ceylonese student learns English much more from written texts

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than from the spoken language—which is, of course, exactly as it should be—his spoken English is likely to be more Latinate than that of a British or American student, and thus to have a more eloquent ring to it.

Such considerations indicate the purely linguistic groundwork for the style of Ceylon English, but are not of themselves sufficient to account for it. The most important forces have been cultural. First, the Ceylon dialect was formed primarily during the Victorian era, when a florid and pompous literary style was in vogue, particularly in British officialdom, which has remained very influential. Second, there is the proclivity in the indigenous culture and languages toward the same kind of high rhetorical style. This is undoubtedly of greater significance, for it surely explains, the favorable reception of the Victorian style by the Ceylonese (just as for instance, the cultural importance of lyric poetry in Japan explains the markedly poetic style of Japanese English). One of the most interesting and rewarding kinds of language study could be made of this phenomenon, for the analysis of style can reveal a great deal about the inner character of its users.

Following are some examples of typical Ceylonese grandiloquence, with a typical range of success.

Petitionary grandiloquences:

Honoured Sir,

I most humbly beg to bring the following facts to your most gracious Honour's kind, merciful and sympathetic consideration with the fervent hope of obtaining immediate and adequate redress in the light of these facts:—

Further to my letter of the 3rd July, 1964 and 16th August, 1965—along with which I forwarded to you a copy (certified) of the Electoral lists in which my name appears—to which I have had no response as yet—I shall be grateful if you would kindly transfer the said allotment in the name of my wife—Mrs. D—M—P— nee Miss D—M—S—.

Begging that immediate action be please taken in this matter.

Thanking your honour.

I am, Honoured Sir,

Your Humble and Obedient Servant.

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Business grandiloquence:

Dear Madam,

We have to bring to your kind notice that we supplied on hire the above refrigerator to your upstairs flat on 1/9/65 in good working condition.

However on the 2nd of October, 1965, we were made to understand that the refrigerator is not in working order. On this request our representative went along with our electrician to attend to same, when they had found the refrigerator functioning well, but no cooling shown in the chamber.

After they had inspected the machine well they had found the gass pipe inside the chamber been damaged (pierced by a sharp blade) at two places, and whatever gass for cooling and freezing is not restored in the pipes, but forced out through these dentures, and as a matter of fact no coolness is given to the chamber. This matter was pointed to the gentleman who occupy this flat.

When he was asked since when the freezing had stopped, he had said that since four days no cooling of chamber nor formation of ice was shown.

It would cost us nearly Rs 350/- to attending to refrigerant leak in the sealed system, dehydrating and re-charging same with fresh refrigerant.

We believe that you will realize our position with regard to this matter.

Is there also a certain love of mystery in the national character? It is very unclear exactly what the substance of these two epistles might be. The following instance of secretarial grandiloquence was a response to my simple inquiry, "Can I see the Registrar some time tomorrow?":

Dear Sir,

I wish to inform you that I have spoken to the Registrar regarding your request and that he has asked me to inform you that he shall be awaiting to meet you at 11-30 a.m. on Tuesday the 15th instant (i.e. tomorrow) in order to discuss the matters referred to by you.

PROLEGOMENA TO THE STUDY OF CEYLON ENGLISH

Mr. T— was not available at the time of writing this note. Hence I could not get an appointment to include him. But I shall certainly inform him to join your discussion at 11-30 a.m. if it is possible.

Advertising grandiloquence:

Sufferers from Catarrh are unable to be engaged attentively in any studies, business or profession or associate freely with their friends.

Therefore all who are interested in their studies, business or profession, children and friends are kindly advised to take proper treatment for the dire disease known as catarrh without delay and get themselves cured.

It should not be inferred, however, that a highly succinct, plain style is unavailable when occasion demands. The following newspaper article is reprinted in its entirety:

They stink

Kelaniya, Aug. 29

Kelaniya and Dalugama

Town Council areas stink.

JOHN HALVERSON