

## **A Study of the Functional Shift and Lexico-Semantic Variation of the Interjection *here* in Sri Lankan English Speech**

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### **ABSTRACT**

English, once hailed for its supremacy, has now diverged from its singularity with the emergence of World Englishes and embarked on the nativisation of other varieties of English including Sri Lankan English (SLE). The current study focusses on the functional shift and lexico-semantic variation of the interjection *here* in SLE speech. Primary data for this study consisted of threads taken from Facebook and questionnaires distributed among 30 participants who are fluent speakers of SLE. Apart from its original usage in Standard British English as a demonstrative adjective, the findings show that *here* is used in SLE speech for diverse other functions such as conversation opener, discourse marker and even address form. Its nativisation has been fortified by socio-cultural implications with regard to its usage. Gender plays a predominant role in this process of nativisation as female participants tend to use *here* with higher frequency, whereas males often replace it with other address forms. Findings also show how power relations become significant because using the interjection *here* when conversing with people higher in status is considered disrespectful. This study demonstrates the nativisation and endonormative stabilisation of the word *here* leading to a functional shift resulting in semantic variation.

*Keywords:* Endonormative stabilisation, functional shift, lexico-semantic variation, nativisation, Sri Lankan English, World Englishes

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The transition from 'World English' or 'International English' to a more pluricentric idea, as is evident in the considerably new term, 'World Englishes', has opened many

doors for English to be used by speakers around the world. It has now spread from beyond its centre, Great Britain, and is spoken by a majority of non-native speakers in their own demographic, socio-cultural and linguistic contexts spiced with local flavour. With the emergence of World Englishes and the divergence from its singularity as the language of its former centre, more attention is paid to varieties of English and the nativisation<sup>1</sup> of those varieties (Bolton, 2005), so much so that, nativisation of the English language has become the focus of attention of many researchers and scholars such as Braj Kachru, Yamuna Kachru, Larry Smith, Kingsley Bolton, Cecil Nelson and Andy Kirkpatrick, among others. Although the volume of research on World Englishes is increasing at a notable pace, there seems to remain areas of contradiction and the absence of common ground among scholars on the topic is evident.

As Kachru (1996) mentioned in his article, "World Englishes: Agony and Ecstasy", pluricentricity has given rise to "issues of diversification, codification, identity, creativity, cross-cultural intelligibility, power and ideology" (p. 135) since the emerging varieties of English differ in form and function and are used in linguistically and culturally distinct contexts. These varieties of English Kachru (1996) terms "reincarnations of [the] English Language" (p.137), not necessarily because

they entail lexico-semantic and phonological divergences, but for the reason that they have facilitated the process of liberation from the traditional canons associated with English such as the supremacy of British English. In the same article, Kachru explained the process of nativisation or acculturation of the English language as the change undergone by localised varieties of English through acquisition of new linguistic and cultural identities; this then results in "the use of such terms as Africanisation or Indianisation of English or the use of terms such as Singaporean English, Nigerian English, Philippine English and Sri Lankan English" (Kachru, 1996, p. 138).

As highlighted by Kachru (1996) there exist issues regarding the varieties of English and codification. That codification permits a language variety to acquire a publicly recognised and fixed form is a notion accepted by many sociolinguists, including Cobarrubias (1983), Trudgill (2003) and Trousdale (2010). Trudgill (2003) mentioned that "the results of codification are usually enshrined in dictionaries and grammar books" (p. 24). Against these established notions of codification, Kachru and Smith (2008) contended in their book, "Cultures, Contexts and World Englishes", arguing that a variety of English cannot be invalidated for mere absence of documentation of grammar and other lexical or phonological features; in other words, codification should not be a prerequisite for legitimising a language or a variety. Seidlhofer (2003) too emphasized that many scholars grant authoritative sanction to dictionaries and grammar books

<sup>1</sup>Nativisation is Phase 3 of Schneider's dynamic model of World Englishes

when codification for English is primarily sociological, educational and indeed, psychological.

Despite the controversies, the varieties of English used around the world today have produced a large body of literature. Commenting on the role of vocabulary in forming new varieties of English, Fernando (2003) highlighted that similar to American English, Australian English, Indian English and other varieties of English, Sri Lankan English too underwent a shift from Standard British English to its unique variety, largely because of vocabulary. Thus, she pointed out that the use of compounds and hybrids, borrowings and instances of code switching and code-mixing in Sinhala and English have been instrumental in transplanting and developing SLE as a national variety. However, the scope of Fernando's study limits its analysis to 'lexico-semantic variations' pertinent to SLE.

Bamiro (1997) and Tent (2001), in their study of Ghanaian English and Fijian English, respectively, extended their scope to conversions or functional shifts and reborrows. Conversion, also known as functional shift, occurs when vocabulary items borrowed from English undergo a switch from one word class to another as it becomes a part of a variety of English (Tent, 2001).

The frequent variations that can be seen in varieties of English prompt the question, whether all these variations can be accepted. Passé (1955) highlighted that there are permissible variations, and those who vitiate the language categorise 'translation errors'

and 'incorrect usages or ignorant English' as typical Ceylonese departures from 'the King's English'. He further stated that "all instances of translation from the local language into English are called translation errors" (p. 14) and some of these expressions are 'acceptable' or 'defensible' as they do not unduly offend English linguistic habits, while others are solecisms that should be eradicated. This idea contradicts with the ideology of contemporary scholars of World Englishes as varieties of English acceptably include lexico-semantic variations as well as functional shifts. However, it should be noted that Passé (1955) was here commenting on the variety of Ceylon English that has now evolved into Sri Lankan English. Quite interestingly, he predicted in 1955 that "many of the common colloquialisms are bad English but are probably ineradicable, and will in the course of time establish themselves as local usage" (p. 15).

It is noteworthy that while there exist lexico-semantic variations in varieties, functional shifts more often than not occur due to sociological factors as well. Thomas and Wareing (1999) analysed variation of speech or style-shifting, and stress on the fact that audience design provides a theoretical account of the reasons why speakers change the way they talk according to the context they are in and people they talk to on the grounds of solidarity and power relations. This phenomenon is termed 'linguistic convergence'.

The concept of World Englishes, despite certain controversies, has become a branch

of applied linguistics, drawing a large number of researchers around the world. That the legitimisation or acceptance of varieties of English has undergone and is still undergoing an irresolute scenario is also evident as codification in dictionaries and grammar books is considered a prerequisite for legitimising a variety of a language. However, scholars of World Englishes are in contention over this ideology and many studies (Bolton, 2005; Kachru, 1996; Schneider, 2007) have been conducted on varieties of English.

Sri Lankan English, into which a substantial amount of research has been conducted, is known to be a variety of English encompassing distinct variations in phonology, morphology and semantics. Although some of these variations unique to SLE are researched and documented, not all of them are codified in dictionaries or grammar books. However, the mere absence of adequate codification is in no way suggestive of the idea that such variations are not distinctive aspects of the Sri Lankan English linguistic repertoire. In fact, many researchers are encouraged and currently conducting work to provide empirical evidence that SLE is a variety of English encompassing linguistic features of its own (Fernando, 2003; Kandiah, 1979; Mukherjee, 2008; Passé, 1955).

In this context, the current study focusses on the functional shift and lexico-semantic variation of the interjection *here* in Sri Lankan English (SLE) speech. Though *here* does not appear in Michael Meyler's (2007)

*Dictionary of Sri Lankan English*<sup>2</sup> and is not adequately, or rather correctly, documented elsewhere, it is an interjection that is part of the Sri Lankan English linguistic repertoire, and is used in diverse contexts for multiple purposes. Passé (1955), the only individual who documented the use of the word, does not render justice to it as he labelled it as a 'translation error' that requires correction.

It is in this light that the current study ventures to correct the misinterpretation of prior research (Passé, 1995) on permissible and impermissible variations in Sri Lankan English speech with regard to the functional shift and lexico-semantic variation of the interjection *here*. In so doing, it attempts to identify whether the meaning or functionality of the word as an interjection extends beyond what has been documented both locally and internationally. In order to achieve this aim, the study will focus on discovering diverse usages of the interjection *here* in SLE speech and finding out whether gender has an impact on its usage since research has found that many variations in language are shaped by gender; for instance, women have been found to use more standard language than men (Romaine, 2008) and men lead in sound changes in speech (Labov, 1963). Romaine (2000) further mentioned that variation in speech is not necessarily a phenomenon that happens freely, but rather, is conditioned by social factors such as gender, age, style and social class. Accordingly, the study

<sup>2</sup>The only Sri Lankan English dictionary to date (2016)

will also assess the role of power relations in the usage of *here* in SLE speech for it is presumed that age and status make a clear distinction in the functionality of the word.

## MATERIALS AND METHOD

In the course of this study, quasi face-to-face conversation data taken from chat history and threads on Facebook from February 2015 to June 2015 were used as primary data. The reason for incorporating chat history and threads from Facebook is that the occurrence of *here* in verbal communication is quite random and spontaneous, and, therefore, it was not possible to record its occurrence in real-time speech. Online chat history and threads, which often involve groups, are instances of quasi-verbal communication as today, they have become the most preferable modes of communication among both the young and adult population for these forms of communication are less time and money consuming and are able to capture a somewhat real experience of conversation.

Both chat history and data from questionnaires were gathered from 15 male and 15 female respondents who are fluent speakers of Sri Lankan English, aged 20 to 35 years and are employed as university lecturers, teachers, engineers, lawyers and doctors. In relation to the primary data, chat history and threads were used for analysis with the consent of the participants and privacy and anonymity was thoroughly protected in all instances by deleting and omitting any mention of a name or any other personal information. The questionnaire used in the present study was designed to

elicit information on both the functionalities of the interjection *here* in SLE and the diverse attitudes towards the usage or non-usage of *here* in different circumstances. The design of the questionnaire was to some extent inspired by the method used in the study, “English in Sri Lanka: Language Functions and Speaker Attitudes” by Kunstler, Mendis and Mukherjee (2010). Accordingly, the questionnaire comprised nine questions, of which the first few questions aimed at gathering background information such as age, gender, profession, L1 and L2 of the participant and the different instances in which they used the interjection *here*. The primary data collected from Facebook were incorporated as examples for different usage, as it was believed the participants would find it easier to select from examples than have to recall actual instances of personal use of *here* when speaking in English. The latter part of the questionnaire included questions on usage and the participants’ attitude regarding the use of *here* with people who are older and higher in status than they. The limited number of L1 and L2 English-speaking respondents and geographic constraint of having to limit the study to Colombo and Gampaha districts in the Western Province, Sri Lanka were time and space.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Diverse Usages of the Interjection *here* in Sri Lankan English Speech

The Oxford Compact Dictionary (1996) defines *here* as an adverb as well as an interjection. For the purpose of this study,

the latter will be taken into account as the study dealt with the functionality of the word *here* as interjection: “here \*int. 1. Calling attention: short for come here, look here, etc. 2. Indicating one’s presence in a roll-call: short for *I am here*. \* *here and there*: in various places...” (Oxford, 1996, p. 463). Based on this Oxford dictionary definition of *here*, Passé (1955) pointed out a more nativised usage of the word in SLE: “here! [mē<sup>3</sup>]: used in calling to a person, often in place of the person’s name. *Here! Did you read this?* A husband often calls his wife ‘here!’ instead of using her name” (p. 25, emphasis added).

Accordingly, it is clear that the interjection *here* in Ceylon English, an older version of Sri Lankan English, has nuances of variation in its function when compared with its usage in British English. Although Passé (1955) terms this incorrect usage as an error that needs to be eradicated in Ceylon English, data gathered for this study showed that the interjection has become part of the Sri Lankan English linguistic repertoire, with more extended usage than has been discussed by Passé in 1955, before Ceylonese English<sup>4</sup> evolved into and came to be known as Sri Lankan English.

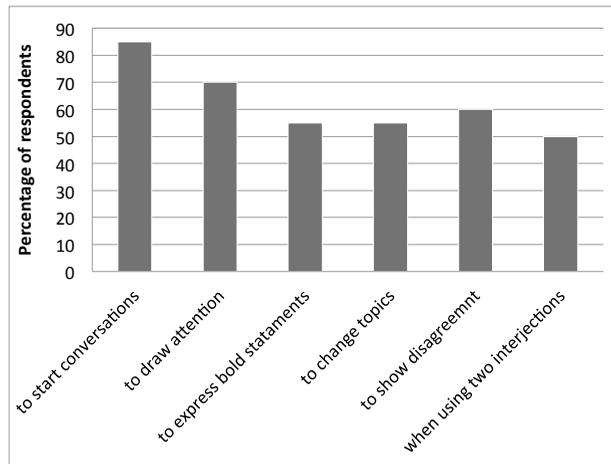


Figure 1. Instances where *here* was used as an interjection by respondents

As Figure 1 denotes in the first part of the questionnaire aimed at identifying diverse functionalities of *here*, out of the 30 respondents, 10 claimed that they did not

use *here* in any of the mentioned instances, while 20 respondents claimed to use it in diverse other instances. A clear majority

<sup>3</sup>Mē<sup>3</sup> is a Sinhala interjection used to focus someone’s attention. It is also used as an address form

<sup>4</sup>Sri Lanka was earlier known as Ceylon and Ceylonese English is an early stage of Sri Lankan English, which is in use at present. SLE is a phonologically, morphologically, lexically and syntactically developed variety of English compared with Ceylon English

of 85% claimed that they use *here* to start conversations. Some of the examples that can be found from Facebook chat history to demonstrate that *here* is used to start conversations are as follows:

*Here, did any of you collect the degree certificate yet? I was thinking of going on Monday.* (Respondent A)

*Here, is it necessary to include interviews men? Last time I didn't.* (Respondent B)

On the other hand, 70% of the respondents stated that they used *here* to draw someone's attention, which is the original usage of *here* as an interjection, as per the definition of *here* in the Oxford English dictionary. However, the functional shift is quite evident as a considerable number of respondents (60%), claimed to use *here* when expressing disagreement in such instances as:

*"here hw [how] come my post is bfr [before] urs [yours]? i saw urs [yours] bfr [before] i posted noh\*" (Respondent H)*

*"here I cant [can't] send you life ne ane\*..you have to ask me a for a life then i can send you one<sup>5</sup>" (Respondent A)*

<sup>5</sup>Quasi face-to-face conversation data from chat history, more often than not, deal with personal matters, online networks and games

\*[noh], [ne] and [ane] are Sinhala tags that are often used when speaking English to tag code-switch. They can be considered equivalents to the English tags, *right* or *yeah* used at the end of an utterance for confirmation.

It is also noteworthy that more than half of the respondents (55%) claimed to use *here* as an exclamation when making bold statements, such as in the following examples from Facebook chat history:

*"here! What is this ah?" (Respondent C)*

*"Here! You should do what you say or say what you do okay?" (Respondent H).*

Using *here* as an exclamation when making bold statements is more evident in speech as the effect is mostly produced by intonation. A similar percentage of respondents used the interjection to change topics as well. This is closely tied to the function of drawing attention because when changing a topic one draws another's attention from one idea to another. Below are some of the examples of data gathered from Facebook chat history regarding the use of *here* to change a topic of a conversation:

*we'll see whether we can..here, igta [gotta] go. tata (Respondent D)*

*Don't know what happened. I hit my leg in the bus also..Here I am getting chilli chocolates!!* (Respondent F)

Another interesting phenomenon is the use of vernacular interjections along with *here* as 40% of respondents stated they did. Vernacular interjections taken into consideration are the Sinhala interjections [mē] or [mey] that are used to draw attention when speaking in Sinhala. If, as Passé (1955) stated, *here* means [mē]/[mey] in Sinhala, the use of both interjections in following instances can be considered instances of reduplication, but in two languages.

*here, mey, hv [have] u [you] quit smoking* (Respondent E)

*Mey, here, if you guys come across like a job vacancy thing just lemme [let me] know...* (Respondent B)

Although it was assumed that those who use a vernacular interjection and *here* are L1 Sinhala and L2 English bilinguals, the data gathered did not explicitly demonstrate a connection between the two variables. Hence, there exists no perceptible reason behind a usage of that nature, unless it is possibly an instance similar to tag code switching, where the speakers' familiarity with Sinhala interjections comes into play.

The aforementioned analysis and the graph display that the usage of *here* in SLE speech is not, as mentioned in the Oxford English Dictionary or Passé's (1955)

article, limited to calling for attention or replacing a name, but functions in multiple layers, serving diverse purpose. It is more commonly used in SLE as a conversation opener and, to a considerable extent, as a discourse marker to show disagreement. Such semantic variations or the functional shift of lexical items from Standard British English can be considered a unique feature that makes Sri Lankan English yet another variety of English that has a distinct flavour of its own.

### **The Correlation between Gender and the Use of *here* in SLE Speech**

Akin to any other variety of English, Sri Lankan English too was subjected to constant change over time. While new linguistic items are added to the SLE linguistic repertoire as borrowings, blends and conversions, vernacular words and phrases such as *aiyo* are even included in Oxford Online Dictionary (Oxford Online, 2016). However, it does not, by any means, denote that all SLE speakers use SLE words and phrases in their speech in the same manner for the same purposes and with the same frequency. Social factors such as gender, age and nationality of the speakers may have an impact on the choice of linguistic properties one uses in conversation.

As discussed earlier in the literature review, variations in language are often shaped by gender (Labov, 1963; Romaine, 2008). In a similar vein, it was hypothesised that the frequency of and the purposes for

using the interjection *here* could have a correlation with the gender of the speaker.

On closer observation of the findings of the questionnaire, both males (60%) and females (74%) indicated that they used *here* when they speak in English. However, the frequency of usage among females was quite high; their response indicated that they used *here* in many more instances than their male counterparts. In the section

on function, when posed the question, “In which instances and for what purposes do you use the word *here*?”, female participants claimed to use *here* for many purposes such as to start conversations, to draw attention, to change the topic of a conversation, to replace names, to express disagreements and to make bold statements, whereas male participants indicated that they used *here* to start conversations and to draw attention.

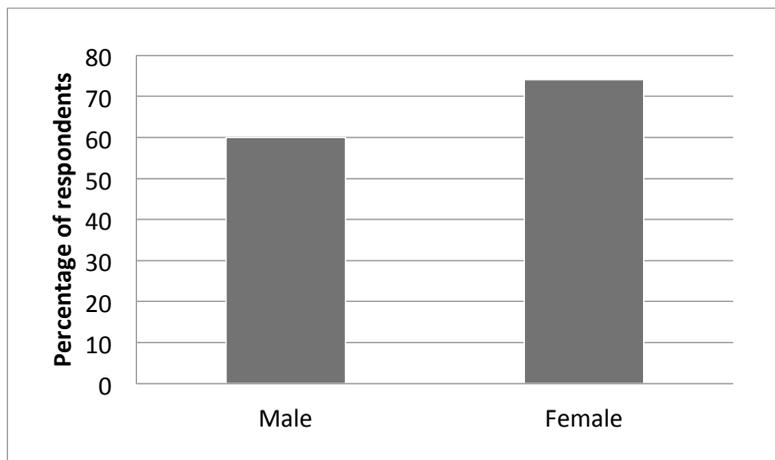


Figure 2. Frequency of usage of *here* by gender

It is also interesting to note that the respondents who used *here* as an interjection used other interjections/address forms such as [*mey*], [*machang*], look, [*ado*]/ [*addey*], hey and the name of the person

interchangeably. Those who stated they did not use *here* when speaking in English used the aforementioned interjections and address forms in place of *here*.

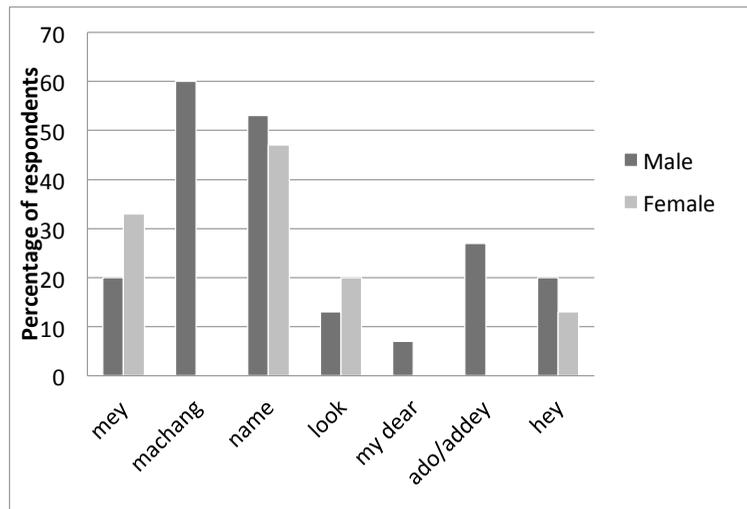


Figure 3. The use of other interjections/address forms by male and female respondents when speaking in English

The data in Figure 3 further clarify why *here* is used less frequently by males; it appears that they tend to use other interjections or address forms, such as [*machang*]<sup>6</sup> (60%), persons' names (53%) and [*ado*]/[*addey*]<sup>7</sup> in the sentence initial position shown in Figure 1. Additionally, 45% of the male respondents had specifically mentioned in the questionnaire that they often used [*machang*] or [*ado*]/[*addey*] with males in informal conversation, while the name of the person or *here* was used more with females in the same context. Thus, it was possible that one reason male participants had not opted to use *here* in many instances was because of the availability of other

interjections or address forms established for use by men. Nevertheless, it can be observed in the Sri Lankan context that [*machang*] and [*ado*]/[*addey*] are commonly and popularly used by men when speaking in both Sinhala and English. What comes as surprising is that, as it can be seen in Figure 3, no female respondent claimed to use [*machang*], [*ado*]/[*addey*] or *my dear*. Female respondents who opted less for other interjections/address forms, except for the person's name, seemed to use *here* more frequently when speaking in English, as shown in Figure 2.

Overall, what became evident was the fact that respondents opted for not only other interjections but address forms such as [*machang*], [*ado*], [*addey*] and names as well. Furthermore, if they used *here* interchangeably with or to replace address forms, it is possible this was so because *here* functions as an address form and has thus undergone a semantic shift in SLE speech,

<sup>6</sup>'Machang' is a vernacular address form mostly used among males in Sri Lanka. It is an informal address form that is an equivalent for 'brother'/'bro'/'dude' in English

<sup>7</sup>'Ado/Addey' are vernacular address forms mostly used among males in Sri Lanka. They are informal address forms often used among people in the same solidarity scale and is an equivalent for 'Yo!', 'Heyya!' in English

as the OED defines it only as an interjection and an adverb (Oxford, 1996, p. 463).

### **The Power Semantics in the Usage of *here* in SLE Speech**

According to Brown and Gilman,

There are many bases of power - physical strength, wealth, age, sex, institutionalized role in the church, the state, the army or in the family. Power is a relationship between at least two persons and it is nonreciprocal in the sense that both cannot have power in the same area of behaviour and the power semantic is similarly nonreciprocal. (1960, p. 255)

The nature of power semantics can be better explained by the two pronouns 'tu' and 'vous' in French language. The superior in power says 'tu' and receives 'vous'. However, in English language the pronoun 'you' has no power semantics influencing its usage and it is used by and for superiors and subordinates equally.

Although not a pronoun, *here* in Standard British English functions as an interjection and has no power semantics attached to its usage. However, in Sri Lankan English, *here*, as discussed in this paper, serves many functions including that of address form. Thus, it has been hypothesised based on the observation that power semantics influences the use of *here* in certain situations.

The final section of the questionnaire investigated the attitude of respondents

on whether power relations and power dynamics such as age, status and seniority of the speaker and listener would matter in their usage of the interjection *here* when speaking in English. The following is a selection of answers provided by the respondents to the question whether they would use *here* as an interjection when addressing persons who were older in age or higher in status.

*"No. Because I find it more like a word which is used in small talk and friendly conversations rather than in professional ones. And I think it must not be used in addressing persons elder than us coz it doesn't give the proper respect"* (Respondent A)

*"No. I think it is disrespectful when you use it to a person higher in status. But if I really wanna show my anger or disappointment, I won't hesitate to use it."* (Respondent E)

*"No. It sounds disrespectful if used when speaking with elders, seniors etc. I would use 'here' when speaking with friends, acquaintances or subordinates. 'Here' can be used to show authority also, "here, you can't skip lectures like this!"* (Respondent B)

*"No. It doesn't sound correct. It is disrespectful and doesn't go with our culture."* (Respondent B)

A total of 93% of the respondents including the above-mentioned responses showed clear rejection of using *here* as an interjection when addressing people who are older or higher in status. Thus, it can be considered an instance of linguistic convergence when speakers change their pattern of speech to fit the status of the person they happen to be talking to (Thomas & Wareing, 1999).

Among the above-mentioned statements, Statements (2) and (3) deserve close attention. Statement (2) declares that the respondent would not hesitate to use *here* to show anger and disappointment; this suggests that *here* can be face-threatening according to power relations between the speaker and listener. Statement (3) emphasises further the idea that *here* can also be used to show authority. Thus, on the whole, what becomes clear is the idea that the majority perceived *here* to be 'disrespectful', 'impolite', or 'rude' for addressing seniors, elders or people higher in status.

If, in this light, one were to reconsider Passé's (1955) definition of *here* in SLE speech that "a husband often calls his wife 'here!' instead of using her name" (p. 25), one would become conscious of the socio-cultural context in Sri Lanka and the power relations between a wife and husband in the institution of family. Unmistakably and quite evidently, power and authority are invested in the husband, while the wife is the subordinate receiver of 'disrespectful', 'impolite' and 'rude' form of address.

Although Passé wrote this in the 1950s, to what extent the situation has changed in the present time is open to debate.

On the whole, the findings suggest that age, status and seniority function as bases of power that ultimately manipulate who has the right to use *here* and against whom it can be used. In a way, it is surprising how a mere interjection in British English (BrE) can be loaded with socio-cultural nuances of the Sri Lankan context, and is governed by its own politics of usage, creating a functional shift and a lexico-semantic variation from its original British English usage.

## CONCLUSION

The present study examined the usage of the interjection *here* as it is used in SLE speech today, while assessing the validity of Passé's (1955) definition of the word. Survey results proved that the function of the interjection *here* undoubtedly extended from what was mentioned by Passé (1955) as well as the Oxford English Dictionary (1996). As discovered, *here* is used in SLE speech for diverse functions such as conversation opener, discourse marker of disagreement, and most importantly, as address form. This study brought into focus the functional shift and lexico-semantic variation of the word *here* in relation to Standard British English. The nativisation of this word has also been fortified by socio-cultural implications with regard to its usage. As the survey data suggested, gender too plays a predominant role in the usage of *here* in SLE speech as the female

respondents tended to use *here* with high frequency, whereas the males, used it to a certain extent only as they tended to replace it with other interjections/address forms, subject to linguistic convergence. Finally, yet most importantly, power semantics become significant as using the interjection *here* when conversing with people higher in status or older was considered disrespectful and impolite; this could be due to the socio-cultural framework in Sri Lanka. Though the results are intriguing and insightful, it must also be admitted that the methodology had several constraints. The study was based on a limited sample. The sample was specifically confined to a population of bilinguals with a sound academic background and geographically located in the Western Province, Sri Lanka. However, no viable alternative was available for incorporation as “English language bilingualism is rather an elitist phenomenon in Sri Lanka” (Kunstler et al., 2010). Nevertheless, the study brought into focus the functional shift and the lexico-semantic variation of the interjection *here* as used in the SLE linguistic repertoire and showed how gender and power relations shape its usage. Although Passé labelled its usage an error, the study revealed how it has become nativised and even endonormatively stabilised in the Sri Lankan context. It would appear that Passé’s (1955) prediction that SLE colloquialisms, though substandard English, would in the course of time establish themselves as local usage, has now become a reality. This study was based on one English word that has undergone a functional shift as well as

semantic variation and become part of the SLE linguistic repertoire. It should be noted that there are many other similar words that have not found their way into dictionaries or lessons in grammar books. Yet, all those words are evidence of a variety of English that is our own, Sri Lankan English.

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