



Original Article

## A Spectrum? Diglossia as Seen in Contemporary Sinhala Novels

Indira Mawelle

### Abstract

Sinhala, like many languages in South Asia, shows features of a clear diglossic situation. As against the definition of the term 'diglossia' which identifies two distinct varieties of the same language as used in specific functional domains, some scholars who have conducted research on Sinhala as a diglossic language, have raised the argument that the language has more than two diglossic variations spreading out into a spectrum of intermediate diglossic variations. In this paper, the researcher has made an attempt to conduct a study of the different ways in which language has been used in the authorial comments and descriptions in a selected number of contemporary novels, all of which have been written by award-winning authors, to determine the applicability of the above argument by scholars to a contemporary situation of language use. In this attempt, the researcher has employed the discourse on the lectal differences that could be applied to a study on a diglossic linguistic situation. The outcome of the study shows that the fiction writers concerned have employed the Sinhala language at various different styles and levels in both its grammar and vocabulary, thus validating the argument that Sinhala shows the existence of more than two distinct diglossic varieties and entails a gamut of intermediate varieties.

Department of English  
and Linguistics,  
University of Sri  
Jayewardenepura, Sri  
Lanka

[indira@sjp.ac.lk](mailto:indira@sjp.ac.lk)

**Keywords:** Contemporary Fiction, Diglossia, Sinhala, Spectrum of Varieties



This article is published under the Creative Commons CC-BY-ND License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/4.0/>). This license permits to use, distribute, and reproduce the contents of the publication for commercial and non-commercial purposes, provided that the original work is properly cited and is not changed anyway.



## Original Article

### INTRODUCTION

Sinhala, spoken by a majority of the population in Sri Lanka (spoken natively by approximately 74% of the population of the country, the language being a member of the Indo-Aryan language family), has been identified as a language which shows a distinctively diglossic situation. This is a feature which Sinhala shares with many languages of the South Asian region of the world, which includes languages such as Bengali, Burmese, Hindi and Tamil. According to the traditional explanation of this diglossic situation in Sinhala, the language consists of two distinct varieties which its speakers use for functional purposes in exclusively different domains of language use. The literary variety, or the prestigious (High) variety is generally the formal variety that is also used as the written language. Conversely, the spoken variety is considered to be the informal (Low) variety, which is the everyday home language of the speakers of Sinhala. It must be noted that a diglossic variety being termed as a Low variety does not indicate that it is an inferior version of the language concerned. The low variety, or the L variety is always the variety that is spoken by the people and acquired by the children as the mother tongue in a diglossic speech community.

The formal variety of Sinhala is used in all ceremonial and traditional/conventionally formal occasions such as in the ritualistic part in weddings and funerals and in all

official writing. The spoken form, used for communication by people in their daily life, contains all the informal words in the language and also the colloquialisms and slang. This is the variety that is acquired by children in their homes, whereas the children get exposed to, and are taught, the formal variety generally when they begin formal schooling.

The literary, or the formal Sinhala is considered to be the standard form of the language. It contains an abundance of Sanskrit-based words and is highly inflected in its verbs. The spoken variety, which is divergent from the standard, is devoid of inflected verbs. The two varieties differ markedly in their core grammatical structures (Englebretson and Genetti, 2005). According to Gair's (1986, p. 324) elucidation on the formal variety of Sinhala, "the chief defining characteristic is in the main verb forms, particularly the subject-verb agreement lacking in other varieties". It is imperative that the rules on subject-verb agreement are followed (and never violated) in formal writing, whereas this agreement is not observed in the spoken Sinhala. Hence, the spoken variety does not have to follow the rules on tense, person or gender demarcations. Even the spelling shows significant differences between the two forms, when the spoken variety is used as a written form in fiction, particularly in the speech of their characters.



## Original Article

Formal Sinhala includes elaborate nominal declensions and verbal paradigms and is the primary medium of bureaucratic and state-funded educational establishments. Colloquial Sinhala is the Sinhala used outside of institutional settings with simplified tense, pronominal systems and a distinct lexicon (Zubair, 2010, p. 01).

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Charles Ferguson (1959) examined his concept of classical diglossia in relation to the linguistic variation within the same language, where each variety had a specific functional role in the language concerned. According to Ferguson, a diglossic language has at least two such varieties in it, one variety being used for formal purposes (the High variety) and the other in the informal domains of language use such as family, friendship, etc. (the Low variety). As Ferguson further states, this diglossic situation can spread out into more than two varieties when a language contains such multiple varieties, enabling a High (H) variety, a Low (L) variety and other varieties between the H and the L varieties. The H variety is considered as the prestigious variety, and the L variety which is acquired as the mother tongue by the children of the particular speech community and used as the variety of daily communication and conversation.

Following Charles Ferguson's (1959) pioneering work on diglossia between co-existing varieties of the same language as used by single speech communities in distinctive functional domains (areas of human activity in which a particular variety of speech or a combination of such varieties are used, depending on the social context, role-relationships among the participants in a speech activity and/or the topic under discussion [Fishman, Cooper & Ma, 1971]), a considerable number of studies have been conducted on diglossia as a widespread phenomenon. Joshua Fishman (1967) applies Ferguson's argument to an extended diglossic situation which involves variation between two (or more) genetically unrelated languages operating in complimentary distribution in various functional domains, or areas of language use, one language being used in the H domains and the other in the L domains. Kloss (1966) suggests the term 'in-diglossia' for Ferguson's classical diglossia, and the term 'out-diglossia' for Fishman's extended version of diglossia. Some examples for diglossia in genetically related varieties are classical and vernacular Sinhalese, classical and vernacular Arabic, classical Greek (Katarevusa) and Demotiki, classical and vernacular Tamil, Sanskrit and Hindi, classical Mandarin and modern Pekinese, etc. (Fishman 1980; Ferguson 1959). An example for a diglossic situation between two genetically unrelated languages would be textual



## Original Article

Hebrew/Aramaic and Yiddish (Fishman, 1976).

Pauwels (1986) proposes a diglossia that is different from both diglossic situations discussed above. His argument related to the High variety of a diglossic language is contrary to that of Ferguson's, in that Pauwels suggests the possibility of a diglossic situation to occur among some migrant groups in a country. If those migrants are already speaking a particular variety of a language as their native language, and if another variety of that language is spoken as the majority language of the host country, Pauwels suggests that when most of the migrants acquire the variety of the host country, their native variety is likely to become the Low variety whereas the variety of the host country, which is the High variety that attracts prestige, gradually becomes the native language of those migrant groups. Kyriakou (2019), explaining Pauwels' standpoint in this regard, further states that Pauwels also proposes a *rigid diglossia* with "minimal functional overlapping between two varieties" and a *fluid diglossia* where the functions are "less strictly attached to a particular variety" (Kyriakou 2019, p. 337).

While Ferguson (1959), Gair (1968) and Paolillo (1997) argue that the high (H) and the low (L) varieties of the same language exist as discrete and distinct, yet related entities, each having a distinct range of functions (Rajapakshe, 2017), de Silva (1974; 1979) proposes a continuum model for the diglossic

situation in some languages such as Sinhala.

Sociolinguistic studies by de Silva (1974, 1976), Gair (1968; 1986; 1992), Dharmadasa (1967; 2009), Paolillo (1991; 1997) *inter alia* have argued that Sinhala obtains at a clear diglossic situation where the H variety differs distinctly from its L counterpart in its lexicon, syntax, phonology and morphology. The extensive studies in Sinhala diglossia carried out by de Silva, include its features of convergence and typology, as well as its relationship with literacy (de Silva 1967; 1974; 1976; 1979; 1986). In keeping with Ferguson's (1959) original argument, de Silva (1967) states that languages with a long history show a fairly marked difference between their literary or the written varieties and their spoken varieties, making the literary/written variety parallel the standard variety of the language in its grammatical structures, vocabulary and phonology. Investigating the history of diglossia in Sinhala, Dharmadasa (2009) focuses on its origin and continuance, citing the western Christian influence posing a possible threat on the language.

Gair (1968), through his research, has confirmed the solidly stable quality persistent in the Sinhala diglossia. The arguments of Gair (1968) and Scotton (1986) in their references to diglossia as proposed by Ferguson (1959) are very much applicable to Sinhala. Gair (1968) states that Ferguson's original



## Original Article

statement (see below) on diglossia "fits the Sinhalese situation in almost all particulars" (Gair, 1968, p. 01).

[Diglossia is] a relatively stable language situation in which, in addition to the primary dialects of a language (which may include a standard or regional standards) there is a very divergent, highly codified, (often grammatically more complex) superposed variety, the vehicle of a large and respected body of written literature, either of another period or in another speech community, which is learned largely by formal education and is used for most written and formal spoken purposes, but is not used by any sector of the community for ordinary conversation (Ferguson, 1959, p. 336)

Gair (1968, p. 01) states that the colloquial Sinhala is the variety used by "everyone, at all social levels, educated and uneducated alike, for all normal face-to-face conversation", and the formal, written Sinhala shows a sharp distinction from the colloquial Sinhala. Scotton (1986), too, declares that Sinhala shows features of a truly diglossic situation in that all its users speak its low (L) variety as their mother tongue and they never use the high (H) variety in their informal conversations. According to both Gair and Scotton, such conditions clearly meet with the criteria proposed by Ferguson in his pioneering study on diglossia in 1959.

The disparity between the H and the L varieties of Sinhala is so recognizable that according to Wijayathilake and Parrila (2019), even though the basic literacy rates in Sri Lanka are quite high, the strong diglossic situation in Sinhala makes extensive and extended study essential for the acquisition of advanced literacy skills, a requirement which is unquestionably related to the High variety of the language.

Gair (1986) further proposes that the Sinhala language shows more than two varieties in its diglossia, with "recognizable sub-varieties" in the colloquial Sinhala, and intermediate varieties of formal spoken Sinhala which employs most of the lexicon and grammatical features of the literary variety (or the H variety), but without the verb agreement (Gair 1986, p. 324) which practice is imperative in the use of the H variety. Gair also presupposes the existence of other regional sub-varieties in the colloquial (or the L variety) Sinhala. Although de Silva (1974) expresses his doubts as regards the existence of a formal spoken variety of Sinhala, Gair (1978; 1986) contends that it is the formal spoken variety, and not the literary (H) variety of Sinhala that is used in some of the domains which Ferguson (1959) describes as requiring the use of the H variety. For example, formal spoken Sinhala is used in the domains/functions such as university lectures and sermons in the places of religious worship, while in Ferguson's classification, it is the formal or high (H) variety of the



## Original Article

language of a speech community that is used for such purposes (Gair 1986, p. 327). As Paolillo (1994) postulates, in the event that varieties (other than H and L) which can be considered intermediate exist in a diglossic system, then the essential 'two-ness' of Ferguson's (1959; 1991) characterization would break down". However, Paolillo (1994), concludes through his studies "that a two-ness does exist in Sinhala diglossia, **but that a modified view is necessary**" (emphasis mine).

Although there is a substantive body of research on diglossia in different languages of the world including Sinhala, studies on Sinhala diglossia have focused mainly on the differences in grammar and vocabulary between the High and the Low varieties. Furthermore, investigations into the existence of diglossic features in the contemporary use/functions of the Sinhala language could also be identified as scarce. This is the gap which I strive to fill through this research study.

Fishman's (1971) extended version of diglossia which prevails between languages (for example, as in the United States, between the standard variety of American English which is considered the high variety of English and the Afro-American English which functions as the low variety) is not discussed in this paper as it is outside of the central issue explored in it, which

focuses on an endo-diglossic (in-diglossic) situation.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

My intention in the study in connection with this paper is to attempt to ascertain the validity of Gair's (1968; 1978; 1986) argument for the existence of more than two sharply-defined diglossic varieties in the Sinhala language as applicable to how it is used today, thus trying to identify a diversification of at least three, or even more, varieties which show the distinctive features of a diglossic situation among them.

I will be exploring the above phenomenon through an analysis of the language as used in the authorial narrative and description in a selected set of contemporary Sinhala prose literature. Excerpts from the authorial narrations and descriptions of the selected texts will be analyzed with a focus on their use of language to explore the diglossic variation in the types of Sinhala used in those different texts. The Sinhala literary texts thus selected belong to the genre of contemporary prose fiction, i.e. six novels written by six prominent writers of the contemporary Sinhala literary scene. These writers are, namely, Rupa Sriyani Ekanayake, Norbert Ayagama, Liyanage Amarakeerthi, Mahinda Prasad Masimbula, Sunethra Rajakarunanayake and Sumithra Rahubadda, and five out of the six novels selected have won the most-



## Original Article

coveted state awards, at times the same novel winning more than one such award.

The rationale for selecting these particular novels for the purpose of this study could be elaborated thus: Liyanage Amarakeerthi is a contemporary writer who has been experimenting with the colloquial use of language, and one of his novels was thus selected for the study as appropriate material to be placed in a diglossic hierarchy. Mahinda Prasad Masimbula and Sunethra Rajakarunanayake are two writers of the present who tend to incorporate segments from the regional dialects of the settings where they have located the plots of their stories, and therefore a novel from each of the two writers was considered as appropriate for a study on diglossic variations as found in contemporary Sinhala novels. Both Rupa Sriyani Ekanayake and Norbert Ayagamage adopt ornate rhetoric in their writings, but in two different styles, and Sumithra Rahubadda uses simple, day-to-day conversational styles, and their novels were deemed proper material to be placed among different positions on the diglossic scale.

In addition to analyzing the language in the selected literary texts, I will also be drawing information from interviews given by the relevant authors to different types of mass media on their writings. Particular attention will be given to the sections of

these interviews where the authors have expressed their views on the use of language and their preference to use such language in their fiction. I use this as a supplementary method predominantly to substantiate my findings from the analysis of the language in the authorial narrative and descriptions in the novels I have selected for the study.

In exploring the authorial narration and descriptions of excerpts from the above novels for their diglossic aspects, I will be using the premise of the lectal difference in some languages as proposed by William Stewart (1965). Although Stewart originally used this premise in his description of a post-creole continuum, I will be applying it to describe the diglossic situation explored by me in the language of the novels which I have selected for study in this research.

A 'lect' has been identified as a distinct variety of a language, such as a standard variety or a sub-standard or non-standard dialect, etc. (Stewart 1965). If this proposition is applied to a diglossic situation, there can be an acrolect which is closest to the prestigious, standard variety, a basilect that is the remotest and the most divergent from the standard variety, and a mesolect (or even different levels of the mesolect) which, in comparison with the acrolect and the basilect, is an intermediate variety or a range of intermediate varieties, of the language concerned (Bickerton, 1975).



Original Article

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Where the authorial narrative and descriptions in the selected novels are concerned, it is quite evident that the writers, all of whom are highly skilful in the art of fiction writing, have opted for different, yet very convincing styles appropriate for the depiction of individual and social realities explored in their respective pieces of work.

Rupa Sriyani Ekanayake employs a formal, almost rhetorical style and an equally formal vocabulary, in her first-person authorial narrative in the award-winning novel Bherunda Kedella (2022)<sup>1</sup>, written around the theme of book piracy.

වරුණ හේමපාල නිශ්ශබ්දය. පොත් පිටු පුරා කළු අකුරින් ලියවෙන වර්ණනා, උපමා-උපමේය, හැඟීම්, දැනීම් රස භාවයන් ගැන කිසිවක් නොදන්නකු මෙන් වරුණ හිස් බැල්මෙන් බලා සිටියේය. ඔහුගේ නිහඬ බව සැබැවින්ම මා වෙත අත්කර දෙමින් තිබුණේ පුදුමයක් නොව අරුම පුදුමයකි. ඔහු ගැන මා සිතා සිටි සියලු උපකල්පන හා මනෝචිත්‍ර බොද වෙමින්, වියැකෙමින් තිබේ. අඩුම ගණනේ පොත් ප්‍රදර්ශනයේදී මා ඔහු වෙතින් ඇසූ නොරුස්නා උස් හඬද නැසී ගොසිනි.

Bherunda Kedella (p. 60)

Transliteration:

Waruna Hemapala nishshabdaya. Poth pitu pura kalu akurin liyewena warnana, upama-upameya, hengeem, deneem, rasa bhawayan gena kisiwak nodaththaku men Waruna his belmen bala sitiyeaya.

Ohuge nihanda bawa sebewinma ma wetha athkara demin thibune pudumayak nowa aruma pudumayaki. Ohu gena ma sitha siti siyalu upakalpana ha manochitra bonda wemin, wiyekemin thibe. Aduma gananne poth pradarshanayedi ma ohu wethin esu norusna us handada nesi gosini.

Translation of the passage in English:

Waruna Hemapala is silent. He kept looking on as if he is oblivious of all the glory he is given in pages and pages of books, the metaphors, the feelings, the emotions. Honestly, his silence amazed me absolutely. All the images and imagination I had about him was getting shattered. Even the annoying loud voice I heard from him at the book exhibition has faded out by now. (Translation by the researcher)

In this novel, as in many other novels by the same author, the influence of the conventional Sinhala classical literature on the author can be seen, thus prompting her choice of a high (acrolectal) variety of Sinhala for the authorial narrative. In an interview to a well-known newspaper of Sri Lanka in 2023<sup>2</sup>, the author herself has claimed that it is her preference to use a high variety of the language in her work, as

<sup>1</sup> Suriya Publishers, Colombo, 2022. This novel won the Swarna Pusthama (the Golden Book) Award for the best novel published in 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Sunday Observer, 19 March 2022





Original Article

she believes "the strength of [her] expression lies in the written language"<sup>3</sup>. In this interview, Rupa Sriyani Ekanayake asserts:

"We have a rich conventional classical literature in the written language .... [O]ne cannot empty it using its positive elements for his or her writing. ... As I belong to the older generation inspired by the classical Sinhala literature, I cannot help using the written language. Moreover, I feel that my strength of expression lies in the written language".

(Sunday Observer, 29 October 2023)

Norbert Ayagamage is another novelist in Sinhala who opts for a quite formal grammar in his description, but with a shifting of vocabulary from an acrolectal Sinhala to a mesolectal form as appropriate in his authorial description, as evident in his novel *Kala Nadee Gala Basi* (2013)<sup>4</sup>. Even the mesolectal Sinhala he uses is of a higher layer of that variety, which does not always parallel the conversational mesolect of the usual spoken Sinhala. The vocabulary thus selected from the acrolect and a higher mesolect of Sinhala are embedded in a careful arrangement of precisely formal, and therefore acrolectal, grammatical structure.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

කබල් ට්‍රොලිය කොරිඩෝව දිගේ කල්ලු වී එන හඬ ඇසුණේද එවිටය. ඔහු දඩ්බිඩියේ ලිපිය තුනට හතරට නවා කොළ පිටින්ම සාක්කුවට ඔබා ගත්තේය. මේසය මත වූ දොස්තර නලාව ගෙලට දමා ගත්තේය. බැරැරැම් මුහුණින් මේසය මත වූ කොළයක් දෙස බලා සිටියේය.

Kala Nadee Gala Basi (p. 203)

Transliteration:

Kabal troliya coridowa dige thallu wi ena handa esuneda ewitaya. Ohu daibidiye lipiya thunata hatharata nawa kela pitinma sakkuwata oba gaththeya. Mesaya matha wu dostara nalawa gelata dama gaththeya. Bererum muhunin mesaya matha wu kolayak desa bala sitiyeaya.

Translation of the passage in English:

It was then that the sound of the old trolley in the corridor could be heard. In a mighty hurry he folded the letter and put it in his pocket, put the stethoscope around his neck, and kept gazing at a piece of paper on the desk. (Translation by the researcher)

In this novel the writer unfolds, in a richly metaphorical and idiomatic language, the changes in the history of several generations of the inhabitants of a remote village in Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) in an encroaching colonial backdrop. This work is infused with an outlook shaped by a mature

<sup>4</sup> Fast Publishing (Pvt.) Ltd., Colombo 10, 2013. This novel was awarded the State Literary Award for the best novel published in 2013.



**Original Article**

understanding of the transience of life, to communicate which the author appropriately employs the acrolect of Sinhala.

එය සොබාදහමේත් සංසාර ගමනේත් නියාමය විය. අප ජීවිතය දෝතින් පිළිගන්නවා සේම මරණයද දෝතින්ම පිළිගත යුතුය. උපදින මොහොත තීන්දු කරන්නා වූ සාධකය විසින්ම මිය යා යුතු මොහොතද තීන්දු කරන්නේය. වෙනස උපන් මොහොත දන්නා අප මියෙන මොහොත නොදන්නා බව පමණෙකි.

Kala Nadee Gala Basi (p. 421)

Transliteration:

Eya soba dahameth samsara gamaneth niyamaya wiya. Apa jeewithaya dothin piligannawa sema maranayada dothinma piligatha yuthuya. Upadina mohotha theendu karannawu sadakaya wisinma miya ya yuthu mohothada theendu karanneya. Wenasa upan mohotha danna apa miyena mohotha nodanna bawa pamani.

Translation of the passage in English:

It was the law of nature and of the journey of samsara. As we welcome life with open arms, we must welcome death, too, with open arms. The element that decides the time of birth, also decides the time for death. The only difference is

that we know the time of birth but not the time of death. (Translation by the researcher)

In an interview for the mass media, the writer expresses his view on the use of language in his novels<sup>5</sup>, emphasizing the importance of employing such a rich, yet authentic, language as a resource to add vividness to the experience presented in his work. Here, he articulates his preference to develop his plots in a language rich in figures of speech, particularly similes and metaphors.

"Today, many idioms inherent to our language are hardly used in the writing of fiction. Those idioms which are loaded with meaning, can be used to express complex thoughts and ideas. Literary Sinhala of a high standard can be a wealth of a resource to enrich one's writing. It adds value to our literary identity as well".

(Talking Books, 2023)

Mahinda Prasad Masimbula, in the authorial descriptions of his novel *Senkottan* (2012)<sup>6</sup>, opts for a vocabulary that is often uncomplicated, while employing conventional grammar in the construction of sentences. Set in the Sabaragamuwa highlands of Sri Lanka, *Senkottan* explores the social and psychological struggles of its characters who belong to an unjustly

<sup>5</sup> Talking Books, TV Derana, 11 October 2023

<sup>6</sup> Santhawa Publishers, Gampaha, Yakkala, Sri Lanka, 2012. This novel won the State Literary Award, the Vidyodaya Literature Award and the

Godage Literary Award for the best novel, and was nominated for the best novel category of the Swarna Pusthaka Award, from the novels published in 2012.



**Original Article**

downtrodden traditional caste system, covering a time span from the 1930s to the contemporary times.

එකදහස් නවසිය තිස්ගණන්වල එක් සවස් වරුවක පින්තල බඩු පුරවාගත් කරමක් විශාල බර කරත්තයකින් ඒ හඬ ඇසෙන්නට විය. ඒ වනවිට එය ඇඹිලිපිටිය පැත්තේ සිට එමින් පල්ලෙබද්ද පසු කරමින් රත්නපුරය පැත්තට ගමන් කරමින් තිබිණ.

Senkottan (p. 09)

**Transliteration:**

Ekadahas nawasiya thisgananwala ek sawas waruwaka piththala badu purawagath tharamak wishala bara kaththayakin e handa esennata wiya. E wanawita eya Ambilipitiya peththe sita emin Pallebedda pasu karamin Ratnapuraya peththata gaman karamin thibini.

**Translation of the passage in English:**

It was an evening of the nineteen thirties. The sound was coming from a fairly big bullock cart carrying a full load of brassware. By that time the cart had been coming from Ambilipitiya, and, having passed Pallebedda, was heading towards Ratnapura. (Translation by the researcher)

As can be seen in the above excerpt from the novel, most of the vocabulary is very much simple and colloquial, for example, "එකදහස් නවසිය තිස්ගණන්වල" [ekadahas nawasiya thisgananwala]; "ඇඹිලිපිටිය පැත්තේ" [Ambilipitiya peththe]; "රත්නපුරය පැත්තට" [Ratnapuraya peththata]". However,

there are words and phrases which also have overtones of a formal Sinhala (for example, "ඒ වනවිට එය" [e wanawita eya]; "සිට එමින්" [sita emin]; "පසු කරමින්" [pasu karamin]; "ගමන් කරමින්" [gaman karamin]).

This formal quality of the vocabulary and the sentence structures can be seen in some other instances of the authorial narrative as well.

මේ ලොව ජීවත්වන කිසිවෙකු සත්‍ය නොදැන සිටියද, සත්‍යය යන ගුණාංගය සදාකාලිකවම කොතැනක හෝ මේ විශ්වය තුළ ජීවමානව පවතිනු ඇතැයි ඔහු විශ්වාස කළේය. එය සැබෑය. එය කිසිවෙකු දැන නොසිටියාට කම් නැහැ. ඔහු යළිත් සිතුවේය. කිසිවෙකු දැන සිටියද නොදැන සිටියද සත්‍යය යනු සත්‍යයමය; ඔහුට බෝධිය දෙසින් දැනෙන්නට වූයේ හඳුන්කකුරු - තෙල් - මල් සුවද නොවේ. ඒ සත්‍යයේ සුවදය; එනම් රෙදි සෝඩා මිශ්‍ර කම්බපු රෙදි සුවදයි. ඔහු ඒ සුවද හොඳින් ආසුරාණය කළේය. ඒ සත්‍යයේ පමණක් නොව, තමාට ජීවත් කරන්නට වෙර දැරූ ඒ උදාර මිනිසාගේ සුවදයි.

Senkottan (p. 165)

**Transliteration:**

Me lowa jeewath wana kisiweku sathyaya nodena sitiyada, sathyaya yana gunangaya sadakalikawama kothenaka ho me wishwaya thula jeewamanawa pawathinu ethei ohu wishwasa kaleya. Eya sebeya. Eya kisiweku dena nositiyata kam netha. Ohu yalith sithuweya.



Original Article

Kisiweku dena sityada nodena sityada sathyaya yanu sathyayamaya; ohuta bodhiya desin denennata wuye handunkuru – thel – mal suwanda nowe. E sthyaye suwandaya; enam redi soda mishra thambapu redi suwandai. Ohu e suwanda hondin aghranaya kaleya. E sathyaye pamanak nowa, thamawa jeewath karawannata wera deru e udara minisage suwandai.

Translation of the passage in English:

He believed that even though no one of this world knew the truth, that quality called truth will exist somewhere forever in this universe. That is the truth. It is alright even if no one knew it. He began to think again. Even though someone knew it or didn't know it, truth will always be the truth; the fragrance he felt coming from the bo-tree was not of incense, oil or flowers. It was the fragrance of truth; the fragrance of clothes steamed with washing soda. He deeply inhaled that fragrance. That was the fragrance not only of the truth, but also that of the great man who struggled to let him live. (Translation by the researcher)

Thus, in the depiction of the ingenuous existence of the inhabitants of a certain part of Sri Lanka, Masimbula appears to have expressed the authorial voice through a frequent use of the

unsophisticated mesolect and when appropriate, the acrolectal variety of Sinhala. In an interview with the mass media<sup>7</sup>, Masimbula states,

I believe that the Sabaragamuwa region has a beautifully poetic dialect which is now going into extinction. The most tragic situation which a language faces is the death of some of its words. Writers of literature have a responsibility to preserve that language for future generations. My intention in my fiction is to make the readers frequently encounter such language, so that these words will continue to live among us.

Liyanage Amarakeerthi adopts a clearly conversational mesolect of Sinhala in the authorial voice of his novel Kurulu Hadawatha (2013),<sup>8</sup> a tragic story of an innocent youth who attempts a way out from the suffering he has to undergo for being one of an oppressed caste, ultimately falling prey to the new mass communication media, the very realm in which he seeks refuge. In the novel the writer uses sentence structures which resemble those found in the conversational styles of Sinhala, and a choice of words which are largely colloquial.

සරත් ආඩම්බරකාරකම් පෙන්නන්න ඉගෙනගත්තු නව කවි සරණිය පොත හොයාගෙන කියෙව්වත් ඒකෙ පෙරවදනෙ කියෙන කවි නිඵව්වන විභාගෙට ලියන්න

<sup>7</sup> Talking Books, TV Derana, August 2022

<sup>8</sup> Fast Publishing (Pvt) Ltd., Colombo 10, 2013. Amarakeerthi's novel won the Swarne Pusthaka Award for the best novel published in 2013.



## Original Article

මිසක් කවි ලියන්න එව්වර ප්‍රයෝජනයක් නැති බව ඔහු තීරණේ කළා. සමහර කවි වලින් කියන්නේ මොකක්ද කියලවත් පැහැදිලි නෑ. ටිකක් හරි හිතට වැදුණේ මොනිකා රුවන්පතිරණගේ 'ලොකු බේබි කියයි' විතරයි.

Kurulu Hadawatha (pp. 111-112)

Transliteration:

Sarath adambarakarakam  
pennanna gaththu Nawa Kawi  
saraniya potha hoyagena  
kiyewwath eke perawadane  
thiyena kawi nirwachana  
wibhageta liyanna misak kawi  
liyanna echchara prayojanayak  
nethi bawa ohu theerane kala.  
Samahara kawi walin kiyanne  
mokakda kiyalawath pehedili ne.  
Tikak hari hithata wedune Monica  
Ruwanpathiranage 'Loku Baby  
Kiyai' witharai.

Translation of the passage in English:

Although he found and read the book Nawa Kawi Saraniya which Sarath studied to show off, he decided that the analyses of the stanzas in its preface were useful only for exam purposes but not much as an aid to write poetry. The meanings of some of the poems were not clear at all. The only one that had some small impact on him was Monica Ruwanpathirana's 'Loku Baby Kiyayi'. (Translation by the researcher)

Amarakeerthi's vocabulary, narrative style and sentence structures in this

novel are primarily conversational, thus making the Sinhala he uses an unreservedly conversational mesolect, which is of a different layer from the higher mesolectal vocabulary and the acrolectal structures chosen by Norbert Ayagamage and Mahinda Prasad Masimbula, in their own different ways. Amarakerrthi's choice vocabulary is so mesolectal that it verges on the basilect at times.

රැගක කිරීම ආරංචි වෙලා අහළ පහළ ගම්වලින් කවිවිය කවමක් එනවා. එයාලා ටෙලි නාට්‍යයක් ගහනව බලනව. ... ගැණු කවිවියක් කිව්වි ගානව. ගැටවරියො සමරු පොතයි පැනුයි අත්වල අරන් නොඉවසිල්ලෙන් ඉන්නවා.

Kurulu Hadawatha (p. 326)

Transliteration:

Roogatha kireema arambha wela  
ahala pahala kattiya thawamath  
enawa. Eyala tele nattiyak ganawa  
balanawa. ... Genu kattiyak  
kichibichi gaanawa. Getawariyo  
samaru pothai penui athwala aran  
noiwasillen innawa.

Translation of the passage in English:

Shooting has started and people from the neighbourhood are still coming. They are watching the shooting of a tele-drama. ... Some women are chattering. Young girls are waiting impatiently with the autograph album and pens in their hand. (Translation by the researcher)



Original Article

In an interview to the media<sup>9</sup> Amarakeerthi voices his stance on the type of language he uses in his prose writing, both novels and short stories.

I do not like embellishments in my writing. I take care to bring the reader inside the picture I paint and touch the reader's heart exactly where I want. I use language primarily for that purpose. I try to creep into the reader's consciousness through my language.

Another highly acclaimed writer in the genre of Sri Lankan fiction, Sumithra Rahubadda, too, uses an uncomplicated, entirely conversational style in the authorial narrative of her novel *Kandak Sema*<sup>10</sup>.

රංගන හැම තිස්සෙම බැලුවෙ ගෙදරින් පිට වෙලා ඉන්න. අම්මා වැඩියෙන්ම හුරුකල් කෙරුවෙ රංගනව. බඩපිස්සා හින්දා තාත්තත් කාටවත් නොපෙන්නන බුරුලක් රංගනට පෙන්නවා. උදේට එළකිරි කාලක් ගන්නලා බොන්න දුන්නා. එළකිරිවල වතුර කියලා එළකිරි ගෙන මිනිහත් එක්ක රංගන රණ්ඩු අල්ලනකල්ම තාත්තා රංගනට එළකිරි ගෙනලේලා දුන්නා. රංගන ඇත්දේ ඩෙනිම් කලිසම. අත්කොට කමිස. කෙටිටු ඇඟ වුණාට උස හින්දා කැපිලා පෙනුනා. නගරෙ කොල්ලන්ගේ මෝස්තර එක ශරීරෙකට අරගෙන සාරාංශයක් දෙනවා නම් ඒකට හොඳම මිනිහා රංගන.

Kandak Sema (p.18)

Transliteration:

Rangana hema thissema beluwe

gedarin pita wela inna. Amma wediyenma hurathal keruwe Ranganwa. Bada pissa hinda thaththath katawath nopennana burulak Ranganata pennuwa. Udetta elakiri kaalak gennala bonna dunna. Elakiriwala wathura kiyala elakiri gena minihath ekka Ranganata randu allana kalma thaththa Ranganata elakiri genalla dunna. Ranga ende denim kalisama. Athkota kamisa. Kettu enga wunata usa hinda kepila penuna. Nagare kollange mosthara eka shareerekata aragena saaranshayak denawa nam ekata hondama miniha Ranganata.

Translation of the passage in English:

Rangana always tried to stay away from home. It was Rangana who amma pampered the most. Since he was the youngest, even thathththa had a soft corner for Rangana, which he never had for anyone else. Every morning he got down a quarter of cow's milk for Rangana. Thathththa did this until the day Rangana had an argument with the man who brought cow's milk, accusing him of having water in the milk. Rangana wore denim trousers and short-sleeved shirts. Though he was thin, his height made him attractive. If the fashions of all youngsters of the town were to be compressed into one body, Rangana

<sup>9</sup> Book Mark, Sri Lanka Rupavahini, 23 August 2023

<sup>10</sup> Author publication, 2009. This novel won the State Literary Award, the Vidyodaya Literature

Award, Swarna Pusthaka Award, the Godage Literary Award and the Ran Piyapath (Golden Wings) Award in 2010 for the best book published in 2009.



Original Article

would be the best example for that. (Translation by the researcher)

Rahubadda, too, uses basilectal forms such as "බඩපිස්සා" [badapissa], "රණ්ඩු අල්ලනකල්ම" [randu allanakalma], etc. which render her writing become very much a reflection of the daily conversations of the speakers of Sinhala.

Sunethra Rajakarunanayake is another writer who employs a highly colloquial style in the authorial narrative, as seen in her novel Sandun Gira Giniganie<sup>11</sup>.

කිරිඅම්මලාගෙ ගේ තියෙන්නේ කුසුමෙලාගෙ ගෙදරට වඩා හුඟක් පහළින් කන්දේ පාමුලට වෙන්න. කුසුමෙලාගෙ ගෙදර ඉඳන් බැලුවම කිරිඅම්මලාගෙ ටකරන් වහල ජේනවා.

Sandun Gira Giniganie (p. 16)

Transliteration:

Kiriammalage ge thiyenne Kusumelage gedarata wada hungak pahalin kanda pamulate wenna. Kusumelage gedara indan beluwama kiriammalage takaran wahala penawa.

Translation of the passage in English:

Kiramma's house was more towards the bottom of the hill, far below from Kusume's house. The tin roof of Kiramma's house could be seen when looking down from

Kusume's house. (Translation by the researcher)

The writer of this novel goes even further into using a dialectal variety of Sinhala, as a feature inherent to the people of the specific setting of her story, thus verging on a basilectal form of the language.

කණ්ණාඩිය හේ දිලිහෙන කතාවයි පොළව මදින මැසිං කතාවයි කුසුමෙට තේරුණේ නෑ වත්තෙ බංගලාවටත් ගෙහුං නැති එකේ එව්වා හිතාගන්නෙ කොහොමද? මානා හෙවිල්ලපු කුසසි කැල්ලෙන් දුම්රොටු ඇදෙනවත් අදුන ගන්න පුලුවන්. සමහර දවසට කිරිඅම්මා ඉලපතෙන් මිදුල අතගානවත් අදුන ගන්න ඇහැකියි.

Sandun Gira Giniganie (p. 26)

Transliteration:

Kannadiya he dilihena kathawai polawa madina mesin kathawai Kusumeta therune ne. Watthe bangalawatath ngehun nethi eke ewwa hithaganne kohomada? Man hewillu kussi kellen dumrotu edenawath anduna ganna puluwan. Samahara dawasata kiriamma ilapathen midula athuganawath anduna ganna eheki.

Translation of the passage in English

Kusume didn't understand this thing about floor-polishing machines and to glitter like a mirror. When she has never been to the estate bungalow, how could she

<sup>11</sup> Sarasavi Publishers, Nugegoda, 1989. This novel was nominated in the category of best novel for the D R Wijewardene Award.



## Original Article

imagine such things? Trails of smoke coming from the thatched kitchen can be seen. Kiriamma sweeping the garden with the ekel pile can also be seen on certain days. (Translation by the researcher)

As it can be seen in the above analysis, where the authorial narrative and description are concerned, writers of the selected novels have chosen different vocabulary and styles of language which range from the acrolectal to the lower mesolectal and colloquial varieties of Sinhala. Some of these writers seem to have followed the highly acrolectal, conventional styles in their choice of both grammar and vocabulary, while some others have opted for a diversity of in-between varieties with both the acrolect and the mesolect in their writing, yet others employing a lower mesolect, a conversational and colloquial style in the expression of their authorial narrative.

## CONCLUSION

According to the texts analyzed for language use and the interviews mentioned in the study, some writers of fiction show a preference to employ a classical, literary style of writing in the authorial descriptions of their novels, which practice makes this research study categorize the language used in those novels under the acrolectal variety of Sinhala. As evident in the interviews, writers of such novels tend to employ the classical styles for

different reasons. It is sometimes the context and the period in which they gained their education which have provided them with ample opportunity to familiarize themselves with those styles. At other times it is their personal choice to opt for a vocabulary with traditional figures of speech and sentence structures which are considered to be 'correct' by conventional linguistic standards, in conveying complex ideas. It is also because they expect to make the narrative experience richer and more appealing to the reader by using vocabulary and sentence patterns influenced by classical and rhetorical styles.

The writers who prefer informal vocabulary and conversational sentence patterns in their novels consider formal styles ornate and therefore unnatural. They are of the view that conversational styles are closer to real-life and thus make their writing more credible, enabling them to address their audiences in their everyday language, and therefore, without effort. They are of the view that conversational styles create a sense of intimacy between the reader and the text.

Speaking from a diglossic point of view, it could be stated that contemporary writers of prose fiction appear to be functioning through a whole gamut of writing styles ranging from the conventional and formal (acrolectal), to the informal colloquial





## Original Article

and conversational patterns (mesolectal, at times verging on a higher form of the basilect), and an array of the in-between (mesolectal) styles which once again, form a continuum of various different layers of intermediate styles.

The choice of a range of styles in the narrative descriptions discussed above show that there are definitely more than two varieties in the diglossic language Sinhala, and this range of styles could vary among the High (H) variety, the Low (L) variety and a gamut of intermediate mesolectal varieties which obtain at different levels or degrees of informality. As such, the argument raised by Gair (1968; 1978) can be accepted as valid as seen in the use of the Sinhala language in the authorial description and narrative in the contemporary Sinhala prose fiction.

## References

- Amarakeerthi, L. (2013). Kurulu Hadawatha. Colombo: Fast Publishing (Pvt) Ltd.
- Ayagamage, N. (2013). Kala Nadee Gala Basi. Colombo: Fast Publishing (Pvt.) Ltd.
- Bickerton, D. (1975). The structure of polylectal grammars. In R. Shuy (Ed.), *Sociolinguistics: Current trends and prospects* (pp. 17–42). Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press.
- de Silva, M. W. S. (1967). Effects of purism on the evolution of written language. *Linguistics*, 36, 5–17.
- de Silva, M. W. S. (1974). Convergence in diglossia: the Sinhalese situation. *International Journal of Dravidian Linguistics*, 3, 60–91.
- de Silva, M. W. S. (1976). Diglossia and Literacy. Mysore, Karnataka: Central Institute of Indian Languages.
- de Silva, M. W. S. (1979). Sinhalese and other island languages in South Asia. Baden-Württemberg: Tubingen.
- de Silva, M. W. S. (1986). Typology of diglossia and its implications for literacy. In B. Krishnamurti, C. P. Masica & A. K. Sinha (Eds.), *South Asian languages: Structure, convergence, and diglossia* (pp. 304–11). Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Ekanayake, R.S. (2022). Bherunda Kedella. Colombo: Suriya Publishers.
- Englebretson, R., & Genetti, C. (Eds.). (2005). *Santa Barbara papers in linguistics: Proceedings from the workshop on Sinhala linguistics*, University of California, Santa Barbara: Department of Linguistics.
- Ferguson, C. (1959). Diglossia, *Word*, 15, 325–40.
- Ferguson, C. (1991). Epilogue: Diglossia revisited. *Studies in Diglossia: Southwest Journal of Linguistics*, 10 (1), 214–34.
- Fishman, J. (1967). Bilingualism with and without diglossia; diglossia with and without bilingualism. *Journal of Social Issues* 23, 29–38.
- Fishman, J. (1968). (Ed.). *Readings in the sociology of language*. South Holland: The Hague.
- Fishman, J. (1972). *Language in sociocultural change*. Stanford University, California: Stanford University Press.
- Fishman, J. A. Cooper, R. L, & Newman, R. M (Eds.). (1971). *Bilingualism in the Barrio*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press.
- Kloss, H. (1966). Types of multilingual communities: A discussion of ten variables. *Sociological Inquiry*. Wiley Online Library.
- Masimbula, M. P. (2012). Senkottan. Yakkala, Gampaha: Santhawa Publishers.
- Myers-Scotton, C. (1986). Diglossia and code-switching, In J. A. Fishman (Ed.), *The Fergusonian impact*, 2 (pp. 403-15).



## Original Article

- South Holland, The Hague: Mouton De Gruyter
- Paolillo, J. C. (1991). Sinhala diglossia and the theory of Government and Binding. *Studies in Diglossia: Southwest Journal of Linguistics*, 10 (1), 41–59.
- Paolillo, J. C. (1992). Functional articulation in diglossia: A case study of grammatical and social correspondences in Sinhala. Michigan: Ann Arbor.
- Paolillo, J. C. (1994). Finding the “two” in diglossia. *University of Texas at Arlington Working Papers in Linguistics* 1, 15–31.
- Rahubadda, S. (2009). *Kandak Sema*. Author Publication.
- Rajakarunanayake, S. (1989). *Sandun Gira Giniganie*. Nugegoda: Sarasavi Publishers.
- Rajapakshe, E.R. M. W. (2017). Diglossia in the Sinhala language as a positive feature, *Third International Conference on Linguistics in Sri Lanka*. University of Kelaniya: Department of Linguistics,
- Myers-Scotton, C. (1986) Diglossia and code-switching, In: J.A. Fishman, (Ed.), *The Fergusonian impact*, 2 (pp 403-15). South Holland, The Hague: Mouton De Gruyter
- The Sunday Observer, 19 March 2023
- Zubair, C. (2010). Diglossia versus register: discursive classification of two Sinhala varieties. Berkeley: Berkeley Linguistics Society.