



## Borrowings in Sri Lankan English Novels: An Analysis of Types and Functions

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### Abstract

The present research investigates the types of linguistic borrowings used in Sri Lankan English (SLE) novels and their role in shaping linguistic and cultural identity. As a distinct postcolonial variety of English, SLE has evolved through continuous interactions with Sinhala and Tamil, embodying a dynamic blend of linguistic influences that highlight Sri Lanka's multilingual and multicultural context. This study closely examines the use of borrowings in three Gratiaen Prize-winning novels: *The Jam Fruit Tree* by Carl Muller, *The Road from Elephant Pass* by Nihal De Silva, and *Playing Pillow Politics at MGK* by Lal Medawattegedera. Employing a qualitative content analysis framework, the borrowings in these novels are categorized into three primary types: loanwords, loan blends, and loan shifts. Loanwords frequently represent culturally specific items, practices, and concepts within the narrative, grounding the stories firmly within a Sri Lankan setting and allowing readers to engage with the cultural specificity of SLE. Loan blends, which combine English with local language elements, facilitate the expression of nuanced cultural concepts, making these terms more accessible to Sri Lankan readers while preserving local meaning. Although less frequent, loan shifts adapt idiomatic expressions and metaphors from Sinhala and Tamil, preserving their cultural significance while integrating them into English. The study concludes that these borrowings significantly enrich the authenticity and cultural relevance of SLE literature, highlighting the hybridity and adaptability of SLE within the broader framework of postcolonial Englishes and reflecting its unique position in the evolving landscape of World Englishes.

**Keywords:** Sri Lankan English; borrowings; Loan Words and Blends; Multilingualism; Cultural Identity

### Introduction

Sri Lankan English (SLE) represents a unique linguistic variety within the broader framework of World Englishes, shaped by the country's multilingual and multicultural milieu. This variety of English has evolved through its continuous interaction with Sinhala, Tamil, and other local languages, resulting in a distinctive blend that reflects the island's complex sociocultural dynamics. The use of linguistic borrowings from local languages is a hallmark of SLE, particularly evident in its literature. These borrowings, which include loanwords, loan blends, and loan shifts, play a crucial role in embedding Sri Lankan cultural identity within English texts, thus offering a window into the island's rich heritage and social fabric.

The academic importance of this study lies in its potential to contribute to the field of sociolinguistics, particularly in understanding how postcolonial English varieties like SLE evolve through the incorporation of local linguistic elements (Gunasekera, 2005; Kachru, 1986). This research not only expands the theoretical understanding of linguistic borrowing but also provides practical insights into how these elements are utilized in literature to convey cultural specificity. In the context of Sri Lanka, where English serves as a link language and a medium of education, the study of SLE and its borrowings is crucial for understanding the role of language in cultural transmission and

identity formation (Parakrama, 1995).

Despite the growing body of literature on SLE, there remains a significant gap concerning the systematic categorization and functional analysis of borrowings in SLE novels. While previous studies by scholars such as Gunasekera (2005), Parakrama (1995), and Fernando (2011) have explored various aspects of SLE, including its vocabulary, syntax, and phonology, these studies have not comprehensively addressed the specific types of borrowings and their roles in literature. This gap highlights the need for further investigation to better understand how SLE novels use linguistic borrowings to reflect and shape Sri Lankan cultural identity.

The primary research question addressed in this study is: What are the types of borrowings used in Sri Lankan English novels, and how do they function to represent Sri Lankan cultural identity? The objectives of this research are threefold: (1) to identify and categorize these borrowings; (2) to analyse their functional roles within the texts, focusing on how they contribute to the expression of cultural identity; and (3) to examine their implications for the broader understanding of SLE as a dynamic and evolving variety of English. By examining the ways in which loanwords, loan blends, and loan shifts function within narratives, this study will explore how these borrowings enrich the cultural authenticity and depth of the texts, enhancing readers' understanding of Sri Lankan society. In doing so, this research provides a detailed exploration of borrowings in SLE literature, thus contributing to the broader discourse on the intersection of language, culture, and identity.

The purpose of the introduction is to stimulate the reader's interest and to provide background information relevant to the study. Explain the broad theme/topic of your study in an opening paragraph in such a way that the reader can clearly understand what the study is about. Explain the academic and practical importance of the study. Compile the available literature by synthesising the existing knowledge instead of summarising and citing the most important previous studies which are directly

relevant to your research problem. Highlight the important gaps and inconsistencies based on the existing literature, which needs further investigation. If it is relevant specify the objectives of your research with no more than three objectives.

### **Materials and Methods**

A qualitative content analysis approach was adopted to explore and categorize the linguistic borrowings within the texts of selected novels, guided by established principles of qualitative content analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Content analysis serves as a research method to identify the occurrence of specific words or concepts within texts. As Krippendorff (1980) posits, content analysis enables a close examination of text by facilitating both qualitative and descriptive insights through the analysis of categories and relationships. Cavanagh (1997) describes content analysis as a versatile tool for analyzing text data, making it particularly suitable for investigating how linguistic borrowings function within literary works.

The study employed a purposive sampling method, selecting three Gratiaen Prize-winning novels: *The Jam Fruit Tree* by Carl Muller (1993), *The Road from Elephant Pass* by Nihal De Silva (2003), and *Playing Pillow Politics at MGK* by Lal Medawattegedera (2013). These novels were chosen based on their critical acclaim and their ability to reflect Sri Lankan culture and language, making them ideal for examining the incorporation of borrowings in Sri Lankan English (SLE) literature.

Data collection entailed an extensive reading of these novels, with an emphasis on identifying linguistic elements classified as borrowings from Sinhala, Tamil, or other local languages. These borrowings were further categorized into three types: loanwords, loan blends, and loan shifts, following the frameworks established by scholars such as Gunasekera (2005) and Fernando (2011).

The analysis was conducted using a thematic analysis approach as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), wherein recurring patterns and themes associated

with the use of borrowings were identified and examined. Thematic analysis commenced with an initial phase of familiarization, whereby the researcher engaged in repeated readings of the texts to develop a comprehensive understanding of the language and context of the borrowings. This was followed by a coding process, in which each instance of borrowing was classified into one of the three categories (loanwords, loan blends, or loan shifts) and examined for culturally specific elements, such as terms associated with Sri Lankan customs, foods, and cultural practices. Each borrowing was assigned initial codes that underscored its relevance to cultural identity and narrative authenticity.

Emergent patterns facilitated the identification of themes by clustering related codes, illustrating the functional roles of borrowings in conveying cultural significance. This phase of analysis emphasized how borrowings contribute to narrative authenticity and highlight Sri Lankan cultural identity. Subsequently, themes were refined to encapsulate the nuanced roles of loanwords, loan blends, and loan shifts in representing Sri Lankan cultural identity within English literature. This systematic approach allowed for an in-depth analysis of how borrowings contribute to the portrayal of cultural identity in SLE literature.

By exclusively emphasizing qualitative aspects, this study provides a rigorous examination of how SLE novels incorporate and utilize borrowings to reflect and shape cultural narratives. The detailed thematic analysis offers insights into the unique ways that loanwords, loan blends, and loan shifts function within the selected texts, thereby underscoring the significance of linguistic borrowing in expressing Sri Lankan identity in English-language literature.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Loanwords in Sri Lankan English Novels**

The analysis of the selected Sri Lankan English (SLE) novels revealed a notable prevalence of loanwords, which are direct borrowings from Sinhala, Tamil, and other local languages. This prevalence was determined through a detailed content analysis that

identified the frequency and contexts in which these terms appeared, reflecting their integral role in the narrative. These loanwords are used extensively to represent culturally specific items, concepts, and practices. For instance, in *The Jam Fruit Tree* by Carl Muller, terms such as “kiribath” (milk rice) and “kokis” (a traditional Sri Lankan sweet) frequently appear. Both kiribath and kokis hold deep cultural significance in Sri Lankan society, particularly during celebrations like the Sinhala and Tamil New Year. Kiribath is typically prepared on auspicious occasions, symbolizing prosperity, while kokis, a crunchy sweet treat, is a staple during festive gatherings. The use of these terms in the novel not only provides a glimpse into Sri Lankan culinary traditions but also serves to situate the narrative within a distinctly Sri Lankan context, reinforcing the cultural landscape for readers. This helps to create a sense of authenticity and intimacy for those familiar with these traditions, while offering international readers a window into Sri Lankan culture (Meyler, 2007).

Similarly, in *The Road from Elephant Pass* by Nihal De Silva, the use of terms like “vedda” (indigenous people) and “poya” (Buddhist holy day) highlights the cultural and religious fabric of Sri Lanka. The vedda community, being one of the indigenous groups in Sri Lanka, embodies a unique heritage that is crucial to understanding the country’s history. The term poya refers to a day of religious observance in Buddhism, marking the full moon and associated with significant rituals and community activities. By using these loanwords, the novel not only fills lexical gaps in English but also preserves meanings that are deeply embedded in the social fabric of Sri Lanka, offering readers an immersive experience of the country’s rich traditions (Fernando, 2011; Herath, 2001).

### **Loan Blends and Their Functions**

Loan blends, which involve the combination of English with elements from Sinhala or Tamil, were also prevalent in the novels and served specific cultural functions. These blends effectively express cultural concepts that may not have direct equivalents in English, bridging linguistic gaps. For

example, in *Playing Pillow Politics at MGK* by Lal Medawattegedera, the term “bana preaching” combines *bana*—a Pali term referring to Buddhist teachings—with the English word *preaching*. This blend captures the essence of religious hybridity in Sri Lanka, where Buddhist sermons (bana) are an integral part of spiritual life, particularly during events such as poya days. The term resonates with local readers by invoking the familiar cultural practice of listening to bana sermons, while also making the concept accessible to non-local audiences through the use of preaching.

Similarly, the phrase “thovil ceremony” found in *The Road from Elephant Pass* combines the Sinhala term *thovil*—a ritualistic exorcism performed to ward off evil spirits—with the English word *ceremony*. The thovil is a cultural practice steeped in folklore, often conducted in rural areas to heal individuals believed to be affected by spiritual disturbances. By blending thovil with the English term, the narrative retains the ritual’s local specificity while making its significance understandable to a broader audience. This use of loan blends illustrates the adaptability of SLE in incorporating local cultural elements into English, enriching the narrative and making it relatable to Sri Lankan readers while providing insight into local customs for international readers (Meyler, 2007; Fernando, 2011).

### **Loan Shifts and Cultural Adaptation**

Loan shifts, including loan translations and semantic shifts, were less frequent but played a crucial role in adapting local idioms and expressions into English. The relative infrequency of these shifts was determined through a comparative analysis of the number of instances of loan shifts versus loanwords and blends. For example, in *The Jam Fruit Tree*, the phrase “feeling like a ripe jak fruit” is a direct translation of a Sinhala idiom that describes a state of contentment or fulfillment (Gunasekera, 2005). In the context of Sri Lankan culture, the jak fruit ripening represents a state of fullness, maturity, and readiness, making this idiom deeply meaningful within the local context. Such idiomatic expressions,

which might be unfamiliar to international readers, are seamlessly woven into the English narrative through loan shifts, preserving their original cultural meaning while making them accessible.

These loan shifts showcase the linguistic creativity inherent in SLE, as authors skillfully navigate between languages to express culturally specific ideas in English. By incorporating such shifts, authors preserve the semantic richness of expressions from Sinhala and Tamil, ensuring that the unique cultural nuances are retained rather than lost in translation. This approach allows the expression of complex cultural ideas that might not be easily conveyed through direct English equivalents, thus maintaining the cultural integrity of the narratives (Silva, 1999; Kachru, 1994).

### **Implications for the Representation of Sri Lankan Cultural Identity**

The findings from the analysis indicate that linguistic borrowings in SLE novels play an essential role in the representation of Sri Lankan cultural identity. By incorporating loanwords, loan blends, and loan shifts, authors construct narratives that are deeply rooted in local culture while remaining accessible to a global audience. This linguistic hybridity reflects the broader sociocultural dynamics of Sri Lanka, where multiple languages and cultures coexist and interact. The strategic use of borrowings ensures that cultural meanings and practices are preserved within the literary texts, allowing readers to engage with the authentic cultural essence of Sri Lanka. Furthermore, these borrowings highlight the adaptability and evolution of SLE as a variety of English that continues to respond to both local and global influences (Parakrama, 1995; Kandiah, 1981).

### **Evaluation of Results and Their Implications**

The results of this study align with previous research on Sri Lankan English (SLE), particularly regarding the significant influence of Sinhala and Tamil on its vocabulary and syntax (Meyler, 2007; Parakrama, 1995). The identified borrowings in the novels reflect not only the linguistic diversity of Sri Lanka but also serve as a conduit for cultural expression, allowing

authors to convey the nuanced experiences of Sri Lankan life in a manner that feels authentic and immersive. This authenticity is achieved through the use of culturally specific terms that resonate with local readers, as these borrowings capture traditions, practices, and social values unique to Sri Lankan society. For international readers, these borrowings provide a more engaging narrative by embedding cultural markers that enrich the storytelling, creating a deeper, more vivid understanding of the Sri Lankan setting and character dynamics. This approach underscores the role of SLE as a literary medium capable of bridging local and global audiences by integrating elements that are both familiar to Sri Lankans and intriguing to non-local readers.

The implications of these findings are significant for the broader understanding of SLE as a dynamic and evolving variety of English. This study demonstrates that linguistic borrowings extend beyond mere lexical imports, serving as vital elements of cultural representation within English literature. By incorporating these culturally specific terms, SLE enriches the language, allowing it to resonate more deeply with Sri Lankan readers who recognize and identify with these cultural references, while simultaneously offering insight into Sri Lankan culture for international readers. This capacity to blend local authenticity with global accessibility reflects the adaptability of SLE and its potential to serve as a meaningful vehicle for cultural exchange.

In conclusion, the findings of this study highlight the integral role of linguistic borrowings in SLE novels and their effectiveness in representing Sri Lankan cultural identity. This study contributes to the understanding of SLE as a dynamic and evolving variety of English, shaped by its multilingual context and the cultural diversity of Sri Lanka. Through these borrowings, SLE achieves a unique linguistic hybridity that honours local traditions while adapting to broader, global influences.

### **Conclusions**

The primary conclusion of this study is that linguistic borrowings in Sri Lankan English (SLE) novels play

an essential role in representing and preserving Sri Lankan cultural identity within English literature. The analysis of borrowings, including loanwords, loan blends, and loan shifts, demonstrates how SLE authors creatively incorporate elements from Sinhala, Tamil, and other local languages to embed culturally specific concepts, practices, and idioms into their narratives. This not only enriches the English language but also ensures that the cultural essence of Sri Lanka is conveyed to both local and global audiences.

A secondary conclusion is that the use of these borrowings reflects the dynamic and evolving nature of SLE as a distinct variety of English. By integrating local linguistic elements, SLE authors contribute to the development of a unique literary tradition that bridges the gap between local and global contexts. This highlights the adaptability of English in postcolonial settings and its ability to serve as a medium for expressing diverse cultural identities (Fernando, 2011; Parakrama, 1995). Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of recognizing and valuing linguistic diversity within English literature. By documenting and analysing the specific types of borrowings in SLE, this research contributes to a broader understanding of how languages evolve and interact in multilingual societies. It also emphasizes the significance of language as a tool for cultural preservation and expression, which is crucial for the betterment of humanity in fostering cross-cultural understanding and appreciation.

Overall, this study offers valuable insights into the role of linguistic borrowings in shaping the identity of SLE and its literature, while also contributing to the global discourse on World Englishes and the importance of linguistic diversity in literature.

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