

**Extra-Linguistic Value (of English in Sri Lanka) = *Z u g z w a n g* (for Non-Elite Users)****Arjuna Parakrama**

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**ABSTRACT:**

*This paper introduces a radically new concept to Linguistics and Language Studies Extra Linguistic Value which is best described as the (additional) value conferred on a specific language (and often on its users) as a result of the geopolitical and socio economic (hegemonic) power wielded by the language vis-à-vis other languages with which it comes into contact. There is a homology here with the economic concept of extra economic coercion that characterises feudal structures, but as a linguistic category it has much wider and more theoretically important applications in relation to English.*

*While there is no linguistic basis for this enhanced value, it clearly plays a crucial role in shaping language use and change, and is especially important in understanding the nature of language contact in multilingual settings, such as Sri Lanka. Key examples are used to demonstrate how extra linguistic value in turn affects linguistic judgments and even the quasi linguistic analysis of scholars themselves. Non elite users of English are caught in a double bind as they are doubly penalized whether they speak or not.*

**KEYWORDS: Extra Linguistic Value, Double bind, Non elites, English Language, Sri Lanka**

This paper introduces a radically new concept to Linguistics and Language Studies Extra Linguistic Value which is best described as the (additional) value conferred on a specific language (and often on its users) as a result of the geopolitical and socio economic (hegemonic) power wielded by the language vis-à-vis other languages with which it comes into contact. There is a homology here with the economic concept of extra economic coercion that characterises feudal structures, but as a linguistic category it has much wider and more theoretically important applications in relation to English.

While there is no linguistic basis for this enhanced value, it clearly plays a crucial role in shaping language use and change, and is especially important in understanding the nature of language contact in multilingual settings, such as Sri Lanka. Key examples are used to demonstrate how extra linguistic value in turn affects linguistic judgments and even the quasi linguistic analysis of scholars themselves. Non elite users of English are caught in a double bind as they are doubly penalized whether they speak or not.

***This paper has four movements:***

[a] A quick and dirty discourse study of key linguistic, especially ESL, trends, including the ramifications of the paradigms of “science” and “objectivity”.

[b] A plea for a new discourse of rights and justice in language studies, including a critical examination of the main arguments against such an approach.

[c] A discussion of insights that can be derived from a justice based understanding of (English) language in Sri Lanka, and the dangers of being rights blind and elite oriented in ELT.

[d] Doubling back to suggest that many of these issues can be explained by the concept of “extra economic value” as related to English (in Sri Lanka), which if not recognised and adequately addressed leads to *Zugzwang* (any move loses, *and* you must move now) for all those who are non-elite users of the language.

The first movement is crucial to my main argument because ultimately most of the positions that I critique here are examples of the extra-linguistic value conferred on hierarchies of English, especially in Sri Lanka, but not doubt also elsewhere.

1) **A discourse study of linguistics and especially (E)SL/FL thinking:**

- a. Lack of understanding/accounting of/for hegemony pointed out earlier
- b. Colonialist and neo colonialist baggage
  - i. Lankans seen only as native informants. On all other matters the West reigns supreme.

I cannot emphasize too much that the issue is larger than individual brilliance or conformity. Hence, the following example is most appropriate because the authors have done an excellent job, but yet the problems endemic and inherent in the discipline prevail. This piece has been selected for a symptomatic reading precisely because it remains among the best in written in recent times, because it attempts to maintain a balance, is even-handed and evidence based, because it has achieved international credibility through its publication in a key sourcebook of global Englishes, *The Routledge Handbook of World Englishes* published in 2010, and is the most recent overview of Lankan English in the public domain. It is, one could say, close to a definitive version.

“English in Sri Lanka dates back to British colonization at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In 1802 Sri Lanka, then known as Ceylon, was declared a Crown Colony, with English as its official language ....

Attempting a description of English as it is used and spoken in Sri Lanka today is challenging because of the many complexities involved in terms of speakers, status and functions, dialectal variation, and recognition and acceptance. As observed by Meyler (2007: x- xi):

Even within a small country like Sri Lanka, and even within the relatively tiny English-speaking community, there are several sub varieties of Sri Lankan English. Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims and Burghers speak different varieties; Christians, Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims have their own vocabularies; the older generation speak a different language than the younger generation; and the wealthy Colombo elite (who tend to speak English as their first language) speak a different variety from the wider community (who are more likely to learn it as a second language). ... [181]

There’s a lot of whining and whingeing here about the complexity and difficulty surrounding all aspects of SLE. It is precisely this kind of defensive and apologetic discourse that characterises writing and thinking in our field. All of the situations described are common to all language contexts the world over.

The following list of phonological features is drawn from the early work of S. Fernando (1985) and the more recent observations of Meyler (2007), on the basis that the same or similar features being attested to after twenty years is a reasonable argument for relative stability. Before proceeding, however, a few points must be made. Fernando’s 1985 list is much more comprehensive than Meyler’s, and includes features that Fernando herself refers to as ‘learner interlanguages’ (1985: 53). Her differentiation between such features and those of a more ‘standard’ dialect of SLE is further support for the argument that SLE has more than one dialect. All of Meyler’s observations, however, pertain to the high prestige variety of SLE, which he refers to as ‘standard SLE’. The list that

follows, therefore, is representative of features discernible in the high prestige variety of SLE. [187].

*And here's Meyler in 2009:*

English literature in Sri Lanka still has a way to go when compared to India, with its extra ordinary array of internationally recognized English language writers; Amit Chaudhuri, Amitav Ghosh, Anita and Kiran Desai, Rohinton Mistry, R. K. Narayan, Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, and Vikram Seth, to name a few. One of the problems is the widely held feeling that Sri Lankan English is not appropriate in the context of creative writing. But there are a number of English-language writers who are starting to forge a Sri Lankan fictional identity in their work, and who have in the process helped to define the identity of SLE itself. Apart from diasporic writers like Michael Ondaatje, Romesh Gunsekera, Shyam Selvadurai and Michelle de Kretser, others writing locally, and employing a more authentically Sri Lankan idiom, include Yasmine Gooneratne, Ameena Hussein, Lala Medawattegedera, Carl Muller, and Manuka Wijesinghe.[p.60]<sup>1</sup>

This makes one wonder who referees such submissions! Isn't it amazing that all those alive today in Meyler's list of Indians he describes as "internationally recognised English-language writers" with the exception of Arundhati Roy live outside India, and yet he makes exactly this distinction vis-à-vis

Lankan writers identifying Ondaatje, Gunsekera, Selvadurai and de Kretser as "diasporic", but he includes Yasmine Gooneratne and Manuka Wijesinghe as "writing locally, and employing a more authentically Sri Lankan idiom", though this is far from accurate. More serious is his sanctioned ignorance of earlier generations of Lankan writers. The substantive point he makes deserves repeating here: Sri Lanka with its 20+ million population apparently falls short of India with its 1 billion people in terms of English Literature and a key reason for this is not population, history, geography etc., but the 'widely held feeling that SLE is not appropriate in the context of creative writing.' Not only is this statement false in fact it would appear that its opposite is most likely true as an argument to justify why Lankan writing doesn't match Indian writing in English it is mind bogglingly absurd.

- c. The discipline lacks self reflexivity or a critical edge sees itself as doing unquestioned and self evident good
- d. Practitioners/theoreticians see themselves as neutral and/or transparent, benevolent and infallible: successes are firmly credited to teachers and methodologies, failures are equally firmly the responsibility of the learners.
- e. Lacks theoretical sophistication and/or explanatory power.
- f. Hence, much of what passes off as ELT theory and practice is jargonized common sense.

All this is old hat, you may say, though we seem to be doing nothing about it, as evidenced by the five studies presented at iPURSE on 4 and 5 July 2014.

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<sup>1</sup> *English Today 100*, Vol 25 No 4, Dec 2009, UK: Cambridge University Press. Accessed at [http://mirisgala.net/PDF/English\\_Today\\_Article.pdf](http://mirisgala.net/PDF/English_Today_Article.pdf)

*Papers on ELT at the iPURSE Sessions on 4 & 5 July 2014*

TOPIC	METHODOLOGY	FINDINGS	CONCLUSION
Effective reading strategies for tertiary level ESL learners (JU)	50 first year Arts students were taught “effective reading strategies”	Remarkable improvement	Effective reading strategies are effective
Effective ESL learning through group work at tertiary level (JU)		Participation in group learning increases proficiency in speaking skills	Group work is effective in learning ESL
Attitudes of ESL learners at SU and UWU	69 first year undergrads from UWU and 110 second year students from SU	80% of learners show positive attitudes.	Attitudes of learners are an important factor in LPP.
Developing L & S skills of ESL learners through CALL (ATIs teaching HNDE in J)		Students perceive ATIs using CALL as beneficial	
How do SL learners learn to perform verbal communication? (UWU)	Questionnaire, including 18 speaking strategies, given to 44		Employing speaking strategies will benefit L2 learners.

*Here are the usual terms that symptomatically appear in these texts:*

- **(High)Prestige variety/dialect:** this formulation deliberately dissimulates the political and power-related dimensions of language hierarchies. “Prestige” is conferred, not demanded. It has clear connotations of merit and consensus, quite the opposite of imposition, coercion and extra linguistic value related to the dividends of power.
- **Input Variety:** this is a once and forever privileging of an originary “source”, and essentialises a hierarchical link between what are now sibling languages. In the hegemonic version, SBE will always and eternally be the “input variety” for SLE, even when far more “inputs” come from other languages, such as Sinhala and Tamil. What this denies entirely is that SBE and SLE are now equal and distinct but related languages. Any hierarchies among Englishes is ideological and (neo) colonialist.
- **Special (apologetic, defensive) case syndrome:** Foregrounding difficulties/problems in identifying, analysing, demarcating SLE, as if these issues only obtain for SLE (and its colonised cousins). This leads to fixation on **stability (over time), consistency, limits to variation, policing of “error”** and a host of similar conditions which are never applied to the mothership and her white children.
- **Feigned impartiality by using discredited terms in quotation marks** (as if this makes a real difference beyond linguistic table manners, when there is no serious attempt to identify and use non racist alternatives).

The point I wish to reiterate here is that it is not an accident that rights/justice discourse is largely absent in ESL research and theory. This approach is precisely what ESL must avoid if it is to continue with the sleight of hand that camouflages and misdirects the political into the technical.

2) *A plea for a new discourse in ELT:*

To make this point, please permit me what may appear at first blush to be a digression.

Taking a quick look at the key areas of contemporary disciplines, we can see that all of them have a rights-based and/or justice oriented component. This is a lynch-pin and over arching determiner in Gender Studies, whatever its stripe, in Conflict Studies it separates the rubbish from what's worthwhile, so too in Development Studies across its myriad variations. I will risk the following generalization: rights-based approaches characterise serious interventions in the spectrum of disciplines that they appear. The idea of justice is fundamental in all major disciplines in the social sciences.

It is explicitly missing in the natural sciences, and this model is precisely what Linguistics appears to be emulating. As I have announced *ad nauseam*, the rise of Linguistics as a discipline mirrored both the rise of colonialism and the dominance of positivist science. Alas, Linguistics has doubly negative legacy, which doubly alas it seems not to want to question. ELT is the thinnest edge of this wedge, triply alas and alack.

Let us rehearse some of the key arguments presented in defense of current ELT practice, and by extension the Linguistic principles they embody:

**\* Linguistics is a science; hence in the model of science, the linguist as scientist needs to be value neutral and invisible in his/her work.**

In what sense is linguistics "a science"? In Peradeniya we were told last week at iPURSE that laboratory experiments with rats could be extrapolated to human learning. If our students are rats, what are we? This one-sided notion of "science" and being "scientific" has infected the Sri Lanka Qualification Framework which the UGC has apparently adopted on our behalf. It states, for instance that .....

As argued by the late Prof Rajendra Singh, it is possibly only in the case of Phonetics that even a basic claim can be made for inclusion as a science in the traditional mode, but here too there are a number of difficulties to overcome, many problems to sweep under the carpet.

**\* We're not engaged in politics or radical social change. We have no reason to take sides here. We're simply providing what students need (and/or what is universally accepted), and researching the best ways in which to do this.**

Indulge me a moment: imagine if this kind of argument will work in Gender Studies, to take just one example of many. The (parallel) argument will go like this: Since our students want only to know about traditional gender roles and responsibilities we will teach them only those, since their views are our sole criterion and guide. Won't wash, will it? The point is that these disciplines have matured and developed beyond such self seeking and know nothings disclaimers. Having a strong rights orientation, engaging in a sustained dialogue with justice issues is, in this view, a measure of maturity and seriousness of a social science and humanities discipline. It is a sine qua non for rigour

Concepts such as ideology and hegemony have been developed to explain why people often "choose" systems that are not in their own long-term interest and/or are unjust/unfair. In this

instance, teachers of (English) language help reinforce hegemony, dissimulate ideology in the service of elite privilege.

**\* Language norms and standards, like rules of usage, are consensual and unforced, even natural.**

This is a very tenacious myth that as Shakespeare would say “betray us with deepest consequence.” In the Lankan context we can see clearly that rules are, in fact, enforced and not consensual, unless we only consider the group of gate keepers. This is one of the key values of the “other” Englishes that it exposes otherwise hidden hegemonies.

Language Studies

**3) Insights from a justice based approach to ELT/L and the consequences of being rights blind:**

De politicizing, and hence distorting, the lived language and larger than language realities has resulted in, or at least exacerbated the conceptual and methodological problems I have identified/analyzed above. What comes unstuck and undone when we institutionalize justice based approaches to the study of language and especially ESL/EFL is the neutrality and objectivity of the all knowing teacher, who needs to be replaced by the teacher as learner aided by learners as teachers.

**4) Doubling back to the double-bind: every move loses but one must move now**

There is an (im) possible Double Bind here, as discussed by Spivak in her eponymous essay in *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*. Is it an inevitable double bind (or Zugzwang) that is being made (in) visible here and now? A **double bind** is an emotionally distressing **dilemma in communication** in which an individual (or group) receives two or more conflicting messages, and one message negates the other. This creates a situation in which a successful response to one message results in a failed response to the other (and vice versa), so that the person will automatically be wrong regardless of response. The double bind occurs when the person cannot confront the inherent dilemma, and therefore can neither resolve it nor opt out of the situation. Double bind theory was first described by [Gregory Bateson](#) and his colleagues in the 1950s. Double binds are often utilized as a form of control without open coercion the use of confusion makes them both difficult to respond to as well as to resist.<sup>2</sup>

Zugzwang is taken from chess and denotes a situation where the player who has to move loses because an move s/he makes will be disadvantageous (catastrophic) to him/her, and this is precisely where non elite users of English finds themselves in when trying to negotiate the extra-linguistic value arrayed against them.

Yet, surprisingly, this added value conferred on English (which is invariably unconscious in the sense of not being understood as such) has resulted in its increased use in Sinhala and Tamil (the local languages in Sri Lanka) to convey nuanced meanings as well as to add (a socio economically classed) value to the concepts and lexis that it is substituted instead of.

*Examples of English stealing into Sinhala and Tamil to add respectability (value!):*

**Sinhala Language**

1. Eyaa “**d(r)ink** eka” daanawa, as opposed to Eyaa “bonawa”.
2. The use of “**Subject**” to signify/legitimise a range of sexual and related practices.
3. The use of “**fun**” with dual purpose – enjoyment and sex. Also “**enjoy**”

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<sup>2</sup> The foregoing paragraph has been taken from the Wikipedia entry on “double-bind.”

## Tamil Language

4. “drink”: Avan **drink** pan(nu)ravan. Avan kudikiravan. Avan very kutty.
5. “muscat” to mean extra-marital sex. Girl married, but man not. Avan **muskattukku** poran. Batticaloa usage: Avan madai waika poran. [madai: mixed food offering to the Gods]
6. Kebir (for Kfir). Avan **kebir** kudikka poran.
7. Aval **ice cream** kudikka poran.

## Shared by both Sinhala and Tamil Languages:

8. Avan **Sign** panna poittan (Jaffna: pottan) = Eya **Sign** karanna giya., Eya **office** ekata giya.

## Conclusion:

More work is needed to expand and nuance this new conceptual framework, which has great explanatory power in describing the politics of language contact in multi lingual and post colonial societies the world over. Suffice it say, at this early stage, that Extra Linguistic Value as a theoretical concept can help enhance our understanding of how language, power and hegemony participate in the process of subalternizing those with little access to lines of upward social and political mobility.

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