

"Meh google and give": Selected Sinhala Discourse Markers in Sri Lankan English

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Abstract

This paper takes a corpus-based approach to analyzing the pragmatic functions of the Sinhala discourse markers aney, meh and ithin in Sri Lankan English (SLE) speech transcripts. Though small in size, a discourse marker's influence on a sentence and an interaction is both crucial and intriguing. Even though discourse markers have long been a central concern in pragmatics, it is an under-researched area in Sinhala and SLE. All examples of discourse marker used in this study are taken from the private conversations in the spoken section of the Sri Lankan component of the International Corpus of English (ICE-SL). This section was selected as it includes colloquial language, where the selected discourse markers are used frequently. The study uses both qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis, and the data are examined and analyzed both manually and by using AntConc, a corpus analysis toolkit. The analysis finds that the

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selected discourse markers are multifunctional in SLE speech. Further, the presence of Sinhala discourse markers in SLE demonstrates the influence of bilingualism, and the frequency and ease with which the markers have been able to transfer pragmatic norms between codes.

Keywords: *discourse markers, Sinhala, Sri Lankan English, ICE-SL, multifunctionality*

Introduction

Small in size, a discourse marker's influence on an utterance and an interaction are crucial and intriguing. In general, "discourse particles are small words that can perform various discourse-pragmatic functions" (Wee, 2004, as cited in Smakman and Wagenaar 2013, p. 310). A vast array of work has been done on discourse markers (DMs) of the English language but less so on DMs of other languages that are used by bilingual users of English. Such usage is especially evident in bilingual users of varieties of English from multilingual countries such as Sri Lanka. The presence of Sinhala DMs in Sri Lankan English (SLE) has the potential to demonstrate the influence of bilingualism on language, and how DMs can be multifunctional when pragmatic norms are transferred across codes.

This paper sets out to describe the functions of the Sinhala DMs *aney*, *meh*, and *ithin* used in SLE. Sinhala is the dominant language used in Sri Lanka, where English is a widespread colonial legacy (Gunesequera, 2005). SLE, an under-researched variety of English, is "the language spoken and understood by those Sri Lankans who speak English as their first language, and/or who are bilingual in English and Sinhala or Tamil" (Meyler, 2007, p. 11). It has been shaped by this setting in which bilingualism gives rise to code alternation in informal speech, leading to changes and developments such as the borrowing of DMs. Using a corpus-based study, this paper aims to broaden the knowledge of the multifunctionality of the selected DMs, but also of bilingual use of DMs in situations of code alternation (Torres & Potowski, 2008; Maschler, 1994; Hlavac, 2006; De Rooij, 2000).

In the second part of this article, we will synthesize prior work and

theoretical considerations on DMs, especially in bilingual settings. It will also include a summary of existing work on DMs of Sri Lankan languages. This will be followed by a description of the data and methodology used in this study. The remainder of the article will present the functions of the three selected Sinhala DMs as they are used in SLE (sections 4-6). Concluding remarks will follow.

Discourse markers: An overview

Discourse markers and their many functions

According to Fraser (1999), DMs have a “core meaning which is procedural, not conceptual, and their more specific interpretation is ‘negotiated’ by the context, both linguistic and conceptual” (p. 950). They expand beyond their semantic (literal) meaning to offer pragmatic meaning to utterances. Under this, a single marker can have multiple functions which can appear separately, or overlap with other functions, i.e. they are polysemous (Roggia, 2012; Tanghe, 2016; Bordería & Fischer, 2021). Brinton (2006) and Aijmer (2013) build on this by explaining that context can offer an expansion of meaning beyond the propositional. Hence, DMs and their functions inhabit several linguistic levels (Hlavac, 2006), which makes their analysis often difficult, especially when the setting involves more than one language and speakers may ‘carry over’ some pragmatic functions.

Multifunctionality therefore, is a common and defining property of DMs (Fischer, 2006). It deals with the idea that a single discourse particle can have several possible functional interpretations. According to Fischer (2000), “a discourse particle often fulfills several pragmatic functions at once” (p. 99). While having a predominant meaning and function, a multifunctional DM is able to establish multiple functions in more than one discourse domain. Exploring DMs in this manner helps to reveal how aspects such as function and position serve to expand the pragmatic scope of a word. Norén and Linell (2007) in their ‘theory of meaning potential’, make the interesting claim that DMs do not have a fixed meaning but a meaning potential, which describes the relationship between meaning and context in a different way: it is the context that selects the meaning of

the marker. This challenges the idea that some markers can be used only in certain contexts and that speakers are limited by the context they speak in. This is a significant interpretation when studying spoken language as there will be many situations where meaning will have to be developed in situated use due to the informal nature of DMs in private-spoken speech. A prime example is the multifunctionality of 'okay' in a police interview of 9 minutes (Gaines, 2011). It shows, as Aijmer (2013) writes, that the meaning potential of DMs is "in constant flux and is used creatively in new situations" (p. 18), and we can consider bilingual settings as prime situations for providing such new situations.

This paper will utilize two main types of functions that Brinton (2006) has ascribed to DMs as constituting pragmatic meaning. The first, which is the "textual function" of language, "relates to the structuring of discourse as text" (p.310). Related functions are described in various terms in literature, and include DMs signaling topic initiators, topic change, reformulation of utterances, attentional cues, and pause fillers (Schiffrin, 1987; Aijmer, 2002). The second type of function, the "interpersonal function," relates to "the expression of speaker attitude and to the organization of the social exchange" (Brinton, 2006, p. 310). DMs that serve to intensify affect, as fillers that mark hesitation, and for face-saving or politeness strategies are classified within this category. Generally, they work together or a DM may perform both types of functions. Moreover, as aforementioned, it is when a DM can be identified as not being syntactically essential to the utterance and having meaning beyond its core semantic meaning that its contribution to the utterance in terms of textual and interpersonal functions can be explored.

Discourse markers in multilingual settings

When DMs are used in multilingual settings such as Sri Lanka, new DMs can enter a language or DMs from two or more languages can be used while speakers alternate codes. This is pragmatic borrowing, or the "incorporation of pragmatic and discourse features of a source language (SL) into a recipient language (RL)" (Andersen, 2014, p.17). Andersen (2014) states that pragmatically borrowed items have a bearing on subjective as well as interpersonal and textual functions.

Andersen's definition of pragmatic borrowing is broad, including (a) direct borrowings, (b), terms which have changed functions after being borrowed as well as (c) other forms such as paralinguistic features of politeness, intonation, etc.

At the same time, pragmatic borrowing is not a straightforward topic to investigate. How does one, for instance, distinguish between an instance of code-alternation in a multilingual speaker and an instance where the multilingual speaker speaks in one language that has borrowed DMs from other languages in its proximity? As Andersen (2014) himself says, "it is generally difficult to decide whether an innovation is due to pragmatic borrowing or parallel development in two or more languages" (p.21). A few tests for this have been identified: an SL term that is part of a quotation, an SL phrase, a translated phrase or part of metalinguistic commentary may flag code-alternation. If it is not part of these situations and appears regularly in the context of an RL, it is possibly a borrowing (Andersen, 2014).

DMs of one language appearing in the discourse of another language, regardless of whether they are pragmatic borrowing or not, have been described before. Zavala (2001), for example, describes what she calls the non-standard use of pues in Andean Spanish as such an instance. She describes pues in Andean Spanish as being used exclusively as a DM for clarification/confirmation, through the influence of Quechua, which uses more evidential markers in speech.

DMs from multiple source languages are now well-attested in varieties of English, and vice versa. These are mainly seen in bilingual settings in majority English-speaking contexts or in English-influenced post-colonial contexts. In majority-English speaking settings, the use of English DMs in other language speech is well-attested too. Hlavac's (2006) Croatian-speaking participants, Fuller's (2001) Pennsylvania German speakers, all bilingual, use many English DMs in their speech. This can be contrasted with Butterworth's (2020) study of Laurentian French speakers in Ontario, where the higher number of English DM use was from the bilingual community that was set in an English-dominant setting. A post-colonial situation is illustrated by Unuabonah (2020), studying the use of DMs from indigenous languages in Nigerian English and Ghanaian English. Corpus studies

show that speakers of both varieties of English use DMs of languages of the region, e.g. Yoruba, Hausa, and Akan (Unuabonah, 2020; Unuabonah & Anderson, 2023). This is a comparable situation to the Sri Lankan setting.

Other factors such as age and setting or type of data affect the differences in DM use too. In immigrant settings, age makes a difference. A higher frequency of English DM use is attested in the speech of younger speakers and second-generation immigrant bilinguals (Butterworth, 2020; Hlavac, 2006; Vickers & Goble, 2011). Butterworth (2020) also showed that in guided interviews there were less English DMs than in the open discussions, presumably due to the more-formal nature of the former setting.

In some instances, the pragmatic functions of the English DM have transferred to the other language. This can be seen in Laurentian French, where, while the use of English DMs are infrequent, the Laurentian French DMs show similar functions to their English counterpart, e.g. 'puis' and 'alors' used as 'then'/'or' DMs would be used Butterworth (2020). In Hlavac's (2006) Croatian-language interviews, where many English DMs were used, the speakers also used DMs 'da' (affirmation, clause ending) and 'kao' (flagging other language use) differently to how they would be used in Croatian. A similar phenomenon can be seen in the Pennsylvania German interviews that Fuller (2001) collected, where both the English and German counterparts of some DMs were in use.

Discourse markers in Sri Lanka

English in Sri Lanka has a similar identity to the English of other British Commonwealth countries such as Nigeria, India, and Singapore where it is one of multiple languages (Gunasekera, 2005). A number of languages are spoken in Sri Lanka. Sinhala, Tamil, and English are the dominant languages; minority linguistic communities who use Sri Lankan Malay, Sri Lankan Portuguese, and other languages exist. Sri Lankan English (SLE) speakers are bilingual to varying degrees. In comparison to other postcolonial varieties of English, e.g., Singaporean English and Indian English (Deterding, 2007; Wong, 2004; Balasubramanian, 2009; Lange, 2007), SLE is a

lesser researched variety. This extends to areas that go beyond the syntactic, lexical and stylistic features and look at particles that contribute to structuring and expressing ideas in utterances. Algama's (2014) corpus-based pilot study on here and men in Sri Lankan English explores their use in interpersonal aspects (different to other varieties of English), and hypothesizes that this may be due to the influence of Sinhala. It can be considered an initial study on DMs in SLE.

Further, the study by Perera & Strauss (2015) examines the functions of the two Sinhala DMs *meh* and *dæn* in Sinhala discourse and analyses *meh* as a filler and a clarification marker. Jayasuriya (2018) has explored the functions of *aney* and *aiyo* as interjections, and investigated social factors that affect their usage, although it does not manage to clearly highlight the multifunctional nature of these markers. In the process of highlighting the frequency of code-mixing in the Sri Lankan bilingual setting, Senaratne's (2009) study on Sinhala-English code-mixing refers to *aney*, *meh*, and *ithin*, especially in relation to code-alternation, but does not investigate their pragmatic functions in detail. Past studies, therefore, refer to some of the DMs explored in this paper, but the pragmatic functions of these words were not a central concern of the latter studies. All of these studies reveal a gap that is yet to be filled, concerning the influence of Sinhala DMs on SLE.

Methodology

The data for this corpus-based study were obtained from the International Corpus of English-Sri Lanka (ICE-SL). The ICE corpus has been used by other scholars studying varieties of English prior to this, including for pragmatics studies (Columbus, 2010; Unuabonah & Anderson, 2023). ICE-SL consists of language sourced from an acrolectal variety, since its aim is to represent "adults who received formal education through the medium of English to the completion of secondary level schooling" (Greenbaum & Nelson, 1996, p.05). ICE-SL contains a written section which contains printed and non-printed sub-sections and a spoken section. The spoken section of the corpus, used for this study, contains a total of 300 transcripts (each containing 2000 words). This section is divided into dialogues in both

private and public settings and monologues (divided into scripted and unscripted categories).

This study used data from the private conversation section. This is 100 texts with 2000 words each, and includes both face-to-face conversations (90 texts) and telephone conversations (10 texts). Scholars have found DMs to be most frequent in conversations and situations “characterized by intimacy and the close relationship between the participants” (Aijmer, 2013, p. 27). “Discourse markers are a typical feature of spoken language” (Lange, 2009, p. 208) and formality changes depending on the different purposes for which the speakers are engaged in conversation with each other. Due to this reason, informal private conversations which are assumed to be more intimate and comfortable in nature, were considered as best sources for the use of DMs.

The DMs selected for the study are *aney* /ʌne/, *meh* /me/ and *ithin* /iɾin/, as they are the most frequently used DMs in the private category of the spoken section of ICE-SL. We will use the spellings given below to denote these DMs. In excerpts from the corpus quoted as examples, we will use the original spelling used in transcriptions (e.g., *mey* instead of *meh* at times).

Table 1 presents a comparison of these three DMs across the 4 sections. While ICE-SL includes instances of usage of these three words that express their core semantic meaning, the table only focuses on the frequency of usage of these words as DMs.

Table 1. *Comparison of frequencies of the selected discourse markers*

	Dialogues: Private	Dialogues: Public	Monologues: Unscripted	Monologues: Scripted
<i>Aney</i>	117	1	0	0
<i>Meh</i>	125	10	0	0
<i>Ithin</i>	46	1	0	0

The initial analysis was conducted by the first author. The transcripts

in ICE-SL were searched with AntConc, a corpus analysis toolkit (Anthony, 2022). The transcripts were also manually searched and analyzed due to the methodologically-relevant problems in the transcripts described below. Our native speaker competence in the Sinhala language was helpful in understanding patterns of DM usage inspired by context. Additionally, scholarly work on DM-related studies were used to consider categories when analyzing the functions of the markers.

The ICE-SL transcriptions create a variety of problems for a pragmatics researcher. The foremost problem facing a researcher of spoken discourse is that the spoken section of the ICE-SL corpus consists only of transcripts, and no audio files are available. This is unlike some other corpora such as *Phonologie du français contemporain* (see Butterworth, 2020). This is a disadvantage since researchers are then unable to resolve any ambiguities or confusion which can occur when reading the transcript by checking it against the audio recordings. Columbus (2010) too notes the disadvantages of transcription variability and the unavailability of audio files in her work on the ICE sub-corpora. Words that are unclear are denoted as we see in column 1 of Table 2, but this means that a particular stretch of utterance cannot be fully analyzed by researchers. The transcripts carry varied spellings on the lexical items of the Sinhala language too. As we see in column 1 in the table below, ICE-SL has also not followed a transcribing convention that could aid spoken data analysis, e.g., the Jefferson Transcription System. These are all matters that can affect interpretation.

In presenting examples in this paper, we have ‘cleaned’ or edited the segment somewhat for ease of reading. Table 2 shows two unedited examples from the corpus (in column 1), one of which is ‘cleaned’ for use as an example (column 2).

Table 2. *Original segments from the corpus with an edited example*

Original segment from the corpus	Comments
B: Aney auntie thank you for the <unclear>word</unclear> <w>it's</w> very nice	Cleaned version used as example 10: Aney auntie thank you [...] it's very nice (S1A027#195-196)
B>With the thing <{1><[1>it was</[1> really <{2><[2>cool and I expected some</[2> super scary guy and then that bugger came and <w>I'm</w> like really <{3><[3>really <w>you're</w> not</[3> A><[1>Yeah yeah</[1></{1> C><[2>< unclear>several_words </unclear> <?>hot</?></[2></[2> C><[3>And they added</[3></[3> that one scene just to show that the < unclear>word</unclear> are useful <{><[><?>the next world <indig>kali</indig></?></[> B><[>No but</[></{> okay it was pretty stupid okay (ICE-SL:S1A-060#17-26)	Example of segment that could not be used as an example since it has too many unclear words

The symbols used in ICE-SL transcriptions have been removed from the examples in this paper for clarity and ease of reading. Only the pauses have been retained in some examples when they contribute to understanding functions such as hesitation. Short pauses are indicated by <, > symbol, while long pauses are indicated with <., >. In terms of glossing, it must be noted that the Sinhala DMs analyzed in this paper have not been translated into English or glossed with their

semantic meaning. We follow Aikhenvald's (2021) view that translations and glosses of DMs "are nothing but an approximation" (p. 8) and that it would be unjustified and misleading to postulate an understanding of the pragmatic meanings and norms of the language in consideration based on how it is translated or glossed into another.

The next three sections will discuss the three selected DMs, providing their semantic functions, and thereafter, their DM functions.

Aney

The meaning of aney

Aney is referenced by several scholars as an interjection, but not described fully. Sucharitha Gamlath's (2009) English-Sinhala bilingual dictionary classifies *aney* as an interjection similar to the English interjection "alas". In keeping with this, Chandralal (2010) lists it as indicative of grief, sorrow, helplessness, or sympathy but in an unrelated example glosses it as '[my] dear' (p.234). It can also mean 'please', as glossed in politeness related examples in Premawardhena (2007). According to Senaratne (2009), in SLE monolingual utterances, *aney* would be replaced by 'you know'. These examples show us that its use is already understood to be other than a negative affect marker. Yet, until now, its functions have not been described in detail. Given these examples from other scholars, it is unclear whether a core semantic property – as opposed to a pragmatic property – is available for *aney*.

This may be because it is often difficult to specify a core meaning of an interjection since they "have been claimed to have little propositional meaning" (Aijmer, 2002, p. 103). The mere utterance of an interjection whether as a standalone or as part of an utterance becomes a loaded term that can communicate a variety of emotions that, in the case of markers like *aney*, may only be available to users of that language. This makes it a phatic discourse particle that expresses attitudes and feelings, and can be analyzed in terms of politeness (Ajimer, 2002).

In the examples provided in prior literature, *aney* occurs in utterance initial and medial positions. In the data in ICE-SL, *aney* also appears

in utterance final positions and will also stand on its own as an utterance.

Pragmatic functions of *aney*

Senaratne (2009) has already classified some interjections of Sinhala, including *aney*, as DMs and analyzes the use of Sinhala interjections as “indicative of [code] alternation” (p.203). Her example is provided below:

I can't do it **anee**, I don't know how to talk I don't have a good voice.
In this paper, we anatomize the DM functions of *aney* as an affective adjuster and a politeness marker.

Affective adjuster

As others have already indicated, **aney** is a marker that can adapt to any emotion that it is used with, and not only negative emotions. Thus, we propose the term ‘affective adjuster’ to describe such markers that flexibly adjust to the emotions and moods of the speaker, similar to the English discourse particle ‘Oh’. The analysis of such functions of **aney** can happen while it performs a modifying, contextualizing, or an interactional function. An example of the adjustment made in an interactional role can be seen below:

- (1) A: I think he wanted Han to come out and face him
B: Really
C: Yeah [...]
A: His plan was to kill him all along
B: **Aney** but that was so sad
B: I mean I knew he was gonna kill him but still that was awful
A: Yeah yeah like for the moment like Leia and he like hugged and everythin' I'm like 'he's gonna die not coming back <O>laugh</O>
(S1A-060#34-41)

The above example is an excerpt from a conversation about the movie Return of the Jedi, where B's use of **aney** modifies their utterance. B's utterance would remain syntactically intact without the use of **aney**. Yet, the meaning that is expressed changes with the inclusion of the marker. B's utterance begins with **aney** as a direct response to A's revelation that the character has planned to kill Han all along. Here,

the meaning of the marker is derived from B's regret and sadness about the death of the character. This sadness is communicated to the hearer through **aney** before the utterance that follows, which signals an interactional function. Further, B's next utterance reveals their intention to clarify their expression of sadness which is communicated by: "I mean I knew he was gonna kill him but still that was awful". This clarification reiterates the emotion that is accompanied by **aney**.

The DM can also appear by itself, and is shown below in a stand-alone utterance:

(2) B: I want a kitten

[...]

B: They're like little balls of like fluff

[...]

A: They are so cute and they are clean

[...]

B: Like that day some of them went to sleep on my bag

A: **Aney**

B: And I felt so bad coz I had to go [...]

(S1A-013#42-57)

In such instances, the marker's function as a DM could be questioned on the grounds that it does not modify an emotion as it occurs on its own. Yet, the use of **aney** in (2) can be analyzed as a DM by taking into consideration its interactional function in the conversation. Even though A's use of **aney** is not modifying an accompanying utterance, it informs and modifies the discourse content by playing an interactional role. Speaker A uses **aney** in response to B's affectionate description of the kittens to express acceptance of and agreement with B's utterances. A agrees with B's emotion and the presence of the marker in the conversation encodes a notion of acceptance and interaction to the conversation.

On an interpersonal level, intensification is a main pragmatic function of **aney**. It acts as an affective adjuster to intensify adjectives and their emotions.

(3) B: We're exercising now

A: Ahh

C: Ahh

A: Good no

C: Good **aney**

(S1A-014#457-461)

Excerpt (3) shows an instance of **aney** being used in clause-final position. Here, the marker accompanies a positive adjective and amplifies it, thereby indicating a positive attitude to the hearer. In excerpt (4), **aney** is used to intensify the feeling of sadness and nostalgia over missing school and the marker is used in both boundaries of the utterance which results in further reinforcement.

(4) A: **Aney** I miss school **aney**

[...]

B: I wish we could go back just at least just to visit

(S1A-079#269-272)

This utterance is preceded by a group of friends reminiscing about their schooling days which triggers the speaker's comment about missing school. In this instance, instead of merely "I miss school", adding **aney** to the utterance intensifies the feeling of missing which marks the expression of an interpersonal function. The marker plays an interactional role here as it communicates how the surrounding discourse about school has affected the emotion and attitude of speaker A.

(5) B: Your brother is so spontaneous...

A: He's so crazy

B: How is he

A: **Aney** good **aney**

(S1A-010#17-20)

In (5), the speaker's delight and gratitude for being asked about their brother are communicated by the double use of **aney**. On an interactional level, the double use of the marker conveys that the question moves the speaker and that they express gratitude for the inquiry. In (6), the speakers are discussing wedding plans and what colours should be worn by the bridal party. Speaker A is the bride and her use of **aney** at the end of the utterance indicates an annoyance at

B's inability to understand what she has previously explained. This pragmatic meaning would be absent without the DM in A's utterance.

(6) B: You mean you're gonna have like orange colour for the for you or bridesmaids

A: No the bridesmaid **aney**

B: Okay okay okay

(S1A-033#14-16)

The effect of the marker being used for that function is made clearer by B's response. Their repetition of the word "okay" aims to pacify speaker A. Similarly, in (7), the speaker expresses their annoyance at not being able to get a document signed by someone.

(7) Aiyo I can't get her to sign the form **aney**. This is madness

(S1A-009#192)

In (8) the speaker is annoyed at their mother for not bringing chocolate ice-cream, and **aney** serves to emphasize the emotion. Speaker A interrupts their mother (addressed as 'ammi' in Sinhala) to express their displeasure and disappointment over the absence of chocolate ice-cream.

(8) A: What's there for dessert ammi?

B: There's fruit and

A: **Aney** why the aney ammi why didn't y'all bring chocolate ice-cream?

(S1A-011#23-25)

As seen above, **aney** as an affective adjustor works at both interactional and interpersonal levels to pacify, intensify, or corroborate emotion.

Aney as a politeness marker

Emphasizing politeness is a significant pragmatic function of **aney**. This is linked to the DM's role as an affective adjustor but we have chosen to present the politeness separately as well since we feel it is a significant role. **Aney** as a politeness-related DM is usually employed in informal or casual settings and is often but not always

attached to directives - questions, commands, requests and suggestions - to make them sound less direct, and hence more polite, as example 9 shows.

(9) B: **Aney** bring the soother cream will you

C: Ahh

B: It's on top of the cupboard

(S1A024#165-167)

This is an instance of **aney** being used to dampen the directive force of a request. While 'bring the soother cream' would be an imperative and therefore more forceful, the 'will you' addition does not reduce this force, since it is often used in Sri Lankan English as a question tag for directives. The contribution of **aney** as a politeness DM can be understood in two different ways. First, the marker is understood to be 'friendly'. **Aney** is used instead of 'please' even though the two words are not synonymous, and this downtones the force of the request. Second, the marker signals that the speaker is taking care of the hearer's face needs (Fischer, 2006). It makes the utterance more hearer-oriented and less intrusive. The use of the marker then conveys that the speaker has taken the listener's perspective and attitude into account.

Even when it is not associated with a directive, example 10 shows that by intensifying gratitude, it will still add to the polite form.

(10) **Aney** auntie thank you [...] it's very nice

(S1A027#195-196)

Here, the speaker addresses an older woman who is not a relative but someone they are familiar with, as the term of address 'aunty' (a term of address for older women in SLE) shows.

The analysis of the functions of **aney** in section 4 highlights modification as one of its core functions and demonstrates its interactional and interpersonal functions.

Meh

The meaning of meh

According to Gamlath's (2009) English-Sinhala bilingual dictionary, *meh* is the deictic expression meaning "this" in English. A simple translation of *meh* can be confusing, however, since Sinhala has a four-way deictic system in contrast to the two-way deictic system of English. As a deictic demonstrative, it refers to entities that are "proximal to speaker or to both speaker and the hearer" (Chandralal, 2010, p. 228), from which the example below is taken.

meh	palaatə	hari	rasne-i	needə?
this	province	very	hot-AM	isn't it

This region is very hot, isn't it? (p. 231)

As a deictic expression, *meh* occurs before the noun phrase. In its role as a DM, its placement varies. In ICE-SL data, the *meh* DM generally occurs in clause-initial and -medial positions.

Pragmatic functions of Meh

Meh as a filler

Many DMs act as fillers occupying a space in an utterance that would otherwise be silent, i.e., a pause. *Meh* is one such marker in the Sinhala language. A pause filler can indicate hesitation and utterance planning difficulties. (11) is an instance where the marker *meh* has fulfilled this textual function. It also demonstrates how the speaker uses the filler to hold their turn while they plan how to complete the utterance.

(11) When we were on our way *meh* <.,> on our way to the uh the hotel [...]

(S1A-058#520)

This use of *meh* signals to the hearer that they have not finished speaking. In this specific situation, hesitancy is marked not only by *meh* but also the use of another filled pause ('uh'). This also shows an instance of word-search for the purpose of reformulation.

As pointed out by Clark & Tree (2002), in some situations, hesitation markers can signal the speaker's willingness to give up their turn, or the hearer may use it as an invitation to complete the utterance, as happens in (12).

(12) C: I think because it's a stock price and not the **meh**

A: The retail price no

C: Yes

(S1A-033#306-308)

Here, when C utters **meh**, A appears to interpret it as a pause and an opportunity to take the turn, and help the speaker finish the utterance. It is the **meh** that allows for this interpretation. Whether an actual pause occurred, or whether it was a latched turn, is unclear since the audio files are not available and the transcripts do not include such aspects.

In some instances, fillers also precede reformulation as can be seen in (13) (also evident in Perera & Strauss (2015).

(13) **Meh meh** so I'm going to handle a customer meh uh from <,> I need customers from next week <,,>

(S1A-058#289)

Here, halfway through the utterance, the speaker changes their mind about how they wish to articulate that utterance and pauses to reformulate it. The DM serves to indicate that something has gone wrong in the production of the utterance and fills the pause preceding the reformulation.

In (14), speakers A and B are trying to persuade the hearer (not present in the excerpt) to call Thanuri and explain something that as B says, is Thanuri's idea.

(14) B: And here <,> mey <,,> can you like call Thanuri and explain to her <,> what this is aney eyage ne idea eka

(the idea is hers isn't it)

A: You're the one who has <,> like a rough idea about the whole thing

[...]

B: Na because like mey we talked about writing something else
ne <,> now <,> she has no outset on like <,> that

(S1A-049#169-172)

The hesitation in this excerpt communicates a reluctance to make the request which contributes to helping avoid the hearer from feeling like the request is an imposition. This effect is made clearer by the frequent pauses and the use of the DM “like” which is a hedging device (Müller, 2005). Both instances of the marker co-occur with the English DM “like” and pauses, thereby emphasizing the tentative nature of this request. According to this discussion, the functions of meh as a hesitation marker confirm the identification of meh as a filler by Perera & Strauss (2015), and add to it by identifying the interpersonal function of tentativeness.

Moreover, in Sinhala-English bilingual speech, meh at times marks the switch from one language to the other, acting as the “boundary that separates the two mixed strings” (Senaratne, 2009, p. 216).

(15) A: Mey <,> Diamond Rush kiyala it's really cool it's about a guy
tch <,>

(called Diamond Rush)

who goes mey arooge phone eke thibbe mey <,>and he goes around
and he just

(mey it was in that dude's phone mey)

gathers diamonds [...]

(S1A-049#210)

In (15), the two instances of meh in the middle of the excerpt presages code-alternation. The DM acts as a filler, while the speaker gathers their thoughts, and the code-alternation is possibly felt to be the best way to continue the thought process. This specific function can be analyzed as a continuation of the two functions of meh as a pause filler and a signal of reformulation.

Meh as an attentional cue

As seen in the excerpts below, meh can be used to change an existing topic or start a new one. This use of meh could be quite abrupt as seen in (16), and is usually used among friends or speakers who are comfortable with each other. Meh as an attentional cue is related to its DM functions of topic change since the context in which this happens typically gives rise to frequent turn-taking changes, backtracking and topic changes, and reinforce the camaraderie and solidarity between the speakers. Hence, the marker could be interpreted as having both textual and interpersonal functions.

(16) C: shall we play cricket today dude

A: Mey mey mey mey is that a embassy

(S1A-048#377-378)

In (16) speaker A's sudden utterance seems to be prompted by them seeing what might be an embassy and the circumstances seem to demand that they be abrupt about it. The repeated meh is also an indicator of surprise. Speaker A would have been comfortable enough around Speaker C to change topics in this manner. Meh can also be used as an attention-getting device where instead of addressing someone by name, the speaker utters meh instead. This particle whose textual function is served in the utterance-initial position, would usually only be used with people who are one's peers and equals. Whether this stands in for a term of address is yet to be researched and is not addressed here as it is outside our scope.

(17) A: Whey protein is milk isolates

D: Mey Google and give

C: Google what

D: What is whey

(S1A-048#195-198)

(18) B: Mey ethakota ah when we were in the drama mathakada

(mey so ah when we were in the drama can you remember)

A: Mmh mmh

B: Mey e kaaley like they thought they didn't know what it was
(mey those days)

(S1A-049#140-142)

Excerpt (17) includes an imperative. Speaker D beginning their command with *meh* attracts the listener's attention. In (18), Speaker B begins the utterances with *meh* to retain the attention of the listener. *Meh* in (17) acts as an attention-getting device while (18) demonstrates it as an attention-keeping device.

These findings that are focused on attention are additional to *meh*'s topic shifting function listed by Perera & Strauss (2015) and Algama (2014) and shows the importance of studying DMs across a range of contexts. The discussion in section 5 has shown that while acting as a pause filler, the textual functions of hesitation, word search, self-repair, turn-holding, topic-changing, and reformulation can overlap in the use of *meh*.

Ithin

The meaning of ithin

Ithin is translated into English as "so", an adverb and conjunction (Gamlath, 2009). Gair & Paolillo (1997) list *ithin* as a member of the small group of Sinhala adverbs. As an adverb, it occurs at sentence boundaries (Senaratne, 2009), and it is used as a conjunction to connect sentences (Chandralal, 2010). The following examples from Senaratne (2009) are provided to illustrate its semantic functions.

Ithin as an adverb

Itin we came after the funeral without staying for *arə malə batə Tə*
So we came after the funeral without staying for the funeral meal
(p.302)

Ithin as a conjunction

oyaa	exam	ekak	kəra	haebaey	exam	eken
		fail				
2sg	exam	NM.IND	do.PST	but	exam	NM.INS
		fail				
vuna	itin	oyaa-Tə	upset	ee	gaenə.	
be.PST	so	2sg-DA	upset	that	about	

You did an exam but failed and you are upset about that. (p.146)

Pragmatic functions of ithin

Chandralal (2010, p.56) has classified ithin as a discourse particle. In ICE-SL data, the DM appears in clause-initial, -medial and -final positions. Ithin is polysemous and the following are its pragmatic functions as a DM.

Ithin as a filler

As a filler, ithin is associated with the usual filler functions such as hesitation, stalling, attention-keeping, gaining time for cognitive processes such as word search, and planning. It co-occurs with other fillers and pauses as can be seen in (19), where A is describing an incident which features their elder brother (addressed as aiya in Sinhala).

(19) A: So then aiya had given me the address wrong hari

B: Ah

A: And uh but then ithin uh am I don't know ne

A: I posted it and uh it returned last week

(S1A-058#112-115)

In (19), ithin co-occurs with 'uh' (similar to meh) and is used as both a time-creating device and an attention-keeping device. Here, it shows a false start followed by an attempt to fill the pause as the speaker holds their turn to finish the utterance. Accordingly, it signals hesitation and acts as a turn holder while the speaker decides what to say.

Ithin as a topic changer and initiator

Much like the English marker "so", ithin functions in the "organization of transitions in participation framework" (Schiffrin, 1987, p. 217). It occurs at potential transition locations in conversations when the speaker offers the hearer a turn to talk by letting them answer a question or change the topic. Therefore, in addition to topic changing, ithin's function here is characterized by the speaker's willingness to let the hearer have the floor.

(20) A: So have you learned everything you need for Monday

B: Uh yeah

A: Ithin how long is your training process usually three months
(S1A-058#322-324)

(20) is an interesting excerpt that includes both “so” and ithin. “So” marks both a turn taking change and a topic transition. Since speaker B is not being responsive, speaker A tries to create another transition by initiating with ithin to coax B to take the floor. This is done with the aim of sustaining the conversation. Likewise, ithin fulfills an important textual function as it helps adjust how conversational tasks such as turn taking, initiating, and maintaining discourse topics are allocated (Schiffrin, 1987).

Ithin as a downtoner

Tags have the ability to function as hedges and soften utterances. When there are no formal ties to the preceding text, tags appear to downtone utterances (Aijmer, 2002). This is a usage that will be avoided in writing unless a direct quotation is given. Karunathillake (1992) asserts that ithin “usually occurs in the absolute initial position of a sentence” (p. 55). While this is true for most of its other functions, we propose that ithin is a Sinhala tag that acts as a downtoner at the end of utterances to weaken their force and to express politeness, as in (21). This makes the utterance-final ithin a significant feature of SLE because it is different to other utterance-final tags used in SLE.

The excerpt below includes two instances of ithin in two different positions.

(21) A: I was gonna put the picture of us and then I realized there were that's

B: Okay that's fine

A: Kinda weird

B: Why

A: Tch mandha ithin you haven't even told anyone no
(I don't know ithin)

B: Yeah that's fine ithin (S1A-058#2-7)

Speaker A is talking about their decision not to post a picture with speaker B's partner. The utterance-medial "mandha ithin" indicates hesitation and signals that the speaker is treading lightly and politely so as not to offend speaker B. To this, speaker B responds using *ithin* as a tag which serves to establish a common ground between the two speakers. Without the two uses of *ithin* in the above excerpt, the exchange could be rude and abrupt. By softening the force of 'that's fine', *ithin* saves face here. The use of *ithin* as a downtoner can then also be classified as a politeness-related DM.

The discussion of *ithin* in section 6 has highlighted its downtoning function as a unique feature of SLE. Further, its functions as a topic changer/initiator and hesitation marker were also analyzed.

Conclusions

According to Fraser (1999, p. 932), over time, "the study of discourse markers has turned into a growth industry in linguistics, with dozens of articles appearing yearly". Yet, this growth in research is not one that can be witnessed in relation to Sri Lankan languages. In this paper, we provide a descriptive account of the meanings and functions of the Sinhala DMs *aney*, *meh*, and *ithin* used in SLE. All of them embody both interpersonal and textual functions. As an affective adjuster, *aney* embodies an interpersonal function that cannot easily be realized by other words as the marker allows the speaker to express their thoughts without having to explain it. *Meh* and *ithin* have similar textual functions such as hesitation and topic changing, and it is interesting that two markers with very different core semantic meanings can share the same pragmatic functions. However according to corpus data, the DM *ithin* is used less frequently in SLE and in comparison; the DM *meh* is a more abrupt marker due to its attention-getting function when changing topics. *Ithin* on the other hand was found to have a 'softer' function of aiding smooth participant and topic transition in discourse. Apart from its core semantic functions as an adverb and conjunction, *ithin* plays a key pragmatic role in organizing and sustaining discourse. In addition to its textual functions, this paper has highlighted the utterance-final use of *ithin* as a downtoner as a unique feature of SLE speech.

Language is always changing, and phenomena such as bilingualism, which allows for code alternation, the sharing of language norms and borrowings, become common paths for change. We have recorded the use of three Sinhala words that function as DMs in SLE. However, as discussed before, it is still difficult to discern whether these particular instances of usage are code alternation or pragmatic borrowing. Future research with a larger dataset with audio recordings and more detailed speaker information may be able to determine this. They may also be able to use the albeit limited, sociodemographic data of the speakers in ICE-SL data to explore how and whether social factors inform the usage of DMs.

A study of DMs such as this has many implications to the field of pragmatics. What was frequently observed in the use of DMs in this paper is the transfer of pragmatic norms from one language to another due to Sinhala-English bilingual speakers using shared pragmatic norms. While this study aimed at analyzing the pragmatic functions of Sinhala DMs, it has also demonstrated how code alternation in bilingual speech has given rise to the use of Sinhala DMs in Sri Lankan English. The study of DMs and pragmatic functions in bilingual settings, and in relation to code-alternation, is growing and we hope we contribute to it with this paper.

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