"You don't thank your family." Intergenerational differences in the expression of gratitude in the English-speaking Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora

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The Sri Lankan civil war led to the dispersion of the Sri Lankan Tamil (SLT) community, which is now a multi-lingual, poly-centric but closely connected global diaspora. Proficiency levels of Tamil are diminishing with every generation, in particular in nations where Tamil is not a national language (cf. Canagarajah 2008, 2019; Sankaran 2021). Instead, individuals who were raised in predominantly English-speaking nations are usually native speakers of English (cf. Fernandez and Clyne 2007; Canagarajah 2008, 2019; Perera 2015; Sankaran 2021). Today, social media and an increase in global mobility enable the dispersed SLT community at large to defy spatial separation. Nevertheless, as this paper illustrates, English is often replacing Tamil as a lingua franca, particularly among members of the second and third generation.

Based on the analysis of a series of interviews that is combined with a corpus analysis, this paper shows how far Tamil conventions regarding expressions of gratitude are reflected in English. Compared to British English and American English, the direct expression of gratitude in the form of words is much more restricted in Tamil (Appadurai 1985: 236). According to Appadurai (1985), non-verbal ways of expressing gratitude are often used instead, which is reflected in the corpus analysed for the present analysis. Gestures such as nodding, see (1), are used instead and when gratitude is expressed verbally, it may also take the form of praise, e.g. complimenting the benefactor, see (2).

(1) Ruben **nodded his thanks**. (Chai Time in Cinnamon Gardens, Shankari Chandran)

(2) When I pushed him to acknowledge my sacrifice he'd murmured, "Yes, yes, **_you are a good grandson_**." (_Hungry Ghosts_, Shyam Selvadurai)

Appadurai (1985) relates this to the Hindu belief that every living being needs to fulfil their pre-determined duty and to the conviction that thanking someone may inflict the evil eye on the person that is being thanked.

The data analysis in this paper tests to which extent Appadurai's (1985) observations can be applied to variation observed in verbal and non-verbal expressions of gratitude in the English-speaking SLT diaspora by way of corpus analysis. The corpus data and the meta-pragmatic comments point towards a functional split between instances where code-switches to Tamil occur and instances where individuals choose English expressions of gratitude: Tamil *Nandri*, see (3) is used much more sparingly and not with phatic function, in contrast to English expressions of gratitude, see (4).

(3)   ***Romba nandri***, he said, thanking her in Tamil. (*Boat People*, Sharon Bala)

(4)   I'm very well, ***thank you***! (*Song of the Sun God*, Shankari Chandran)

The interviews furthermore reveal intergenerational differences. Those individuals who left their homeland Sri Lanka as teenagers or adults still follow Tamil conventions more closely than younger individuals who were born and raised in the diaspora. In addition, metapragmatic comments made in the interviews reveal that members of the younger generations often criticize the generation of their parents for "not being appreciative" (TT 27, GER). The analysis of the interviews indicates that this is a pattern that can be found in many families living in the English-speaking and German-speaking Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora, which is indicative of an apparent-time shift within the wider SLT diaspora community.

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Anke Lensch is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Cologne (Germany). She completed her PhD, which was concerned with a quantitative and qualitative corpus-based approach to morpho-syntactic variation in English *-er* nominalizations at the University of Mainz (Germany) and has since started to work on changing pragmatic conventions in the English-speaking Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora community. For this purpose, she has compiled a corpus of English prose fiction written by Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora authors amounting to 1.5 million tokens and she is currently conducting interviews with second-generation Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora members from Germany, Switzerland, the US, Canada, Australia and the UK. Her research interests include cognitive linguistics, sociolinguistics, varieties of English and multilingual politeness.