

# The Linguistic Study of the Contemporary Context of *Vedda* Language with Special Reference to Dambana, Sri Lanka

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**Abstract:** The intent of this research is to examine the contemporary context of *Vedda* Language from the linguistic point of view, based on their overall socio-cultural background. The most popularly accepted theory on *Vedda* Language is a regional dialect of the Sinhala Language or a Creole and that there is no separate *Vedda* Language. Due to inadequate data of the original *Vedda* Language, it is difficult to identify the proper linguistic context of the early stage of *Vedda* Language. However the existing linguistic features of *Vedda* prove that the original *Vedda* Language is a simple hunting language. The findings of the research show the present day *Vedda* has borrowed not only lexical stocks but also sounds, grammar, and meaning from dominant languages, significantly from colloquial Sinhalese. These linguistic results of language contact induce it has become an extreme language mixture and the current situation of *Vedda* language is severely endangered. This research is based on Qualitative Empirical Research Methodology and the Participant Observation Method based on Case Study has been used for data elicitation.

**Keywords:** *Vedda* Language, Colloquial Sinhalese, Linguistics Assimilation, Language Contact Phenomenon, Endangered Language.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The aboriginal inhabitants, the *Veddas* in Sri Lanka are rich in many cultural values. In Pali '*Viyadha*' means; 'hunter with bow and arrow' and it is considered to be the word from which the Sinhala term *Vedda* is derived (Sorata, 1956). The people refer to themselves as *Vanniyalitto* which means; 'Forest or Nature Dwellers'. According to archaeological evidences, the *Veddas* in Sri Lanka have been regarded as the indigenous inhabitants of Sri Lanka who preserved a direct line of descent from the island's original Neolithic Community, 'The Balangoda Man' dating from at least 16,000 BC, probably far earlier. These evidences prove that the *Veddas* were living in most parts of the island before arrival of the Aryans (Deraniyagala, 1992). According to the present day *Veddas* of Sri Lanka, cultural aspect and their distribution can be divided into three major groups. The one group is scattered over a fairly large region in the South-east of the island, interior from the coast, including portions of Monaragala, Badulla, Amparai, and Batticaloa districts. These *Veddas* are best known in ethnographic literature, chiefly through the work of the Seligmanns (1911). The other group of *Veddas* can be found in Anuradhapura district. In 1978

James Brow has conducted research on this group of *Veddas* and he has written a book named 'The *Vedda* Villages of Anuradhapura'. The Anuradhapura *Veddas* practice wet rice agriculture supplemented with 'Chena' or swidden cultivation. The third major group of *Veddas* is found along the Eastern Coast of Sri Lanka between Valaichchenai and Trincomalee, and they are generally known as Coast *Veddas* (The local Tamil term for them is 'VeDar'). Unlike the first two groups, they speak Tamil as their mother tongue and are normally Hindus. They have little or no contact with the *Veddas* of the interior, although it is likely that they originally come to the coast from the interior district. Jhon Dart's 'The Coast *Veddas*: Dimension of Marginality' (1990) is a significant contribution to study of Coast *Veddas*.

The *Veddas* have been the focus of attention in recent years for the reason that the rapid change occurring in their habitat will drastically transform their life style. The major social development projects such as Mahaveli Irrigation and Agricultural Extension Projects, Post Tsunami Development Projects, Rambaken Oya Irrigation Projects, Tourism Projects, Road Development Projects and Electricity Projects several traditional *Veddas* settlements were evacuated and the *Vedda* people are re-settled in the new agricultural villages. Currently the *Veddas* are confined to small scattered communities in Dambana, Watuyaya, Gurukumbura, and Kotabakiniya. Apart from that present day *Veddas* are scattered in Henanigala attached to the 'Mahaweli C division' in the Mahiyangana, Dambana region in Ratugala and Nilgala which are situated beyond Inginiyagala in the Ampara district, in Pollebedda situated beyond Maha Oya, and in areas in close proximity to the sea such as those in the Trincomalee and Batticaloa districts. The result of this Social and economic transformation, *Vedda* has driven them towards diversity and their lives have become more complicated and complex.

More than ten decades have passed since the Seligmanns (1911) did their field work, and the life of the *Veddas* has changed considerably. Since such significant changes have been taken place, it creates the dire need for an updated investigation in the field of *Vedda* studies. The particular research is based on first-hand data elicited from the current *Vedda* settlement areas, predominantly Dambana and it will contribute to a sound understanding of the contemporary linguistic context of the *Vedda* Language. Many areas of

literature relevant to the topic have been referred and it helped to identify the real contemporary linguistic context of the *Vedda* Language in Sri Lanka. The objective of this research is to examine the contemporary situation of the *Vedda* Language from a linguistic point of view based on their overall socio-cultural background. The specialty of this linguistics study is that, it has studied the issue in a broad point of view concerning all historical, archaeological anthropological and sociological, factors. Incorporation of these factors has been considered of vital importance which makes this study as a Macro Level, Multidisciplinary study. It is expected that this study which has a linguistic point of view considering all the aspects and details derived so far about the *Veddas* may fulfil the vacancy of a broad study about the *Vedda* Language.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Sinhalese history contains several references to the *Veddas*, that they are descended from 'Yakkhas'. The principal of historical chronicle of the Sinhalese, the Mahavamsa, written around the 6th century A.D., can be seen the *Veddas* as part of the historical background in the well known foundation myth of Sri Lanka (Geiger, 1950). There are innumerable references in ancient and medieval Pali and Sinhalese literature to link the *Veddas* and the Sinhalese.

The classical anthropological study of *Vedda* in Sri Lanka have conducted by C.G. Seligmann and B.Z. Seligmann 1911) based on actual Participation Observation Method and they have three-fold classifications of *Veddas*; the pure *Veddas*, the Village *Veddas* and the Coast *Veddas*.

In 1964 the comprehensive study of the *Vedda* Language was undertaken by M.W.Sugathapala de Silva (1964, 1972), K.N.O.Dharmadasa (1974, 1990) has put forward the view that *Vedda* Language is a Creole and to support this view he has explained some morphological process of *Vedda* Language. The conclusion of these researches has come up with the concept that *Vedda* Language is not a dialect but a Creole.

## III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

### A. Research Field

Dambana has situated about eleven miles (approximately 17.5 km) far from Mahiyangana along the Mahiyangana Padiyathalawa route in the Uva province and 300 km away from Colombo. The regions of Galkada-Bimmalamulla, Welpallewella, Dambana, Watuyaya, Kotabakiniya and Gurukumbura belong to the Dambana Gramaseva Niladari Division. Among these few hamlets, the *Vedda* folk are found inhabiting only in Dambana, Wathuyaya, Kotabakiniya, and Gurukumbura areas which come under Mahiyangana Provincial Secretarial Division.

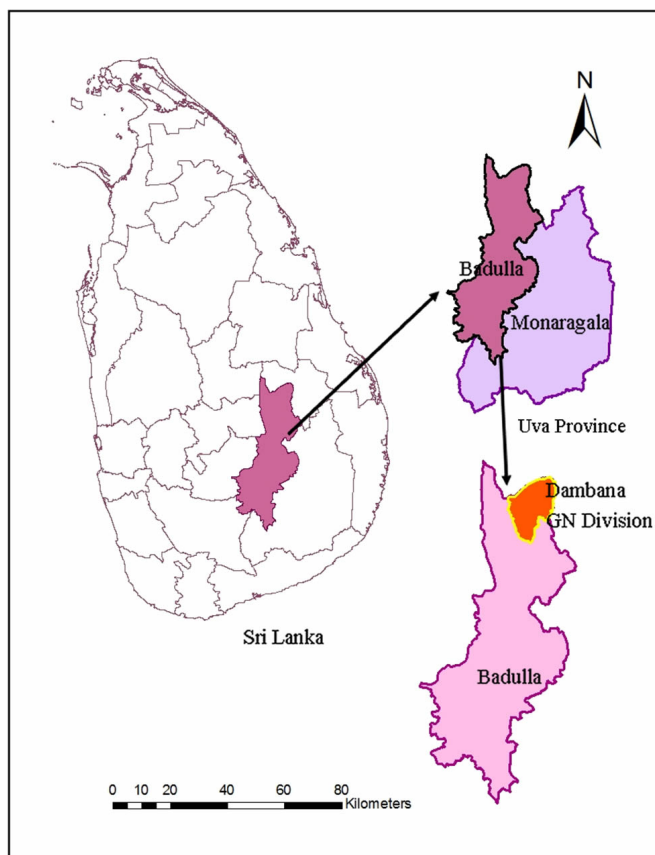


Fig. 1 Dambana GN Division

(Source: Survey Department of Sri Lanka, 1999)

The current *Vedda* settlement areas, Dambana, Wathuyaya, Gurukumbura, and Kotabakiniya are situated in a closed environment of a dense jungle. The village Gurukumbura extends up to the boundary of the Maduruoya National Park and the villages are prohibited to exceed the Maduruoya National Park barrier. The left hand side of the school in Dambana is the next boundary of the Maduruoya National Park. The *Vedda* chieftain Vanniyaletto and the families of his children live in a block of land which belongs to the sanctuary.

In 2013, the original population of Dambana Gramaseva Niladari Division encapsulates 1195 females and 1373 males and it calculates 2568 in total. Among this population, there are about 185 *Vedda* families currently residing in Dambana and the entire *Vedda* population in Dambana is approximately 750 (This data has been given by the Village Headman of Dambana in 2013).

In this study, the most popular method of field linguistics that is the interview method based on multiple case studies was adopted to collect the data (Abbi, 2001). The eight key informants including six males and two females were selected from Dambana and other key informants have been selected from where *Vedda* have scattered in other areas in Sri Lanka such as Henanigala, Pollebedda, Rathugala, and Wakarai. In addition face-to-face interviews were done with the present chief of the clan Vanniyaletto for many times. Apart from the

key informants to get a fairly representative sample of society, twenty general informants were interviewed from Dambana including all social and economic classes, genders and all age groups above the age of twelve. The *Vedda* Youth, *Vedda* elders, *Vedda* agents (e.g. Shaman), *Vedda* elite (those who have some educational background e.g. graduates and the teachers of *Vedda* region), State officials relating to the *Vedda* community, people who speak Binthenne dialect which is most influence to the *Vedda* Language as the categories were included in the data base for selecting cases. In the process of, understand In-depth interviews were used to data collection and scheduled questionnaire method was not utilized for the purpose of gathering data, because the study was solely based on especially the old generation of *Vedda* who lack of literacy. The debates, group discussions, normal day-today conversations were used to clarify the data and the research was successful in extracting much data from these methods.

IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. The Linguistic Features of Contemporary Vedda Language

At present the phonemic inventory of the *Vedda* Language is very similar to Sinhalese. As Sinhalese, the *Vedda* Language also has seven basic vowel qualities. There are two degrees of vowel length for each vowel quality, except for 'ə' (schwa) which is illustrated in the following table (The data of the following tables based on the information of key informant during the field visit in Dambana).

Table 1: Present Day Veddas Vowels

	Front	central	Back
High	ɪ, i:		ʊ, u:
Mid	ɛ, e:	ɤ	o, o:
Law	{, {:		ʌ, ʌ:

Table 2: Present Day Veddas Consonants

	Glottal	velar	palatal	retroflex	alveolar	bilabial
Plosive		κγ	χ	∞	τδ	π b
Nasal		N	ɟ		v	μ
Trill					ρ	
Lateral					λ	
Fricatives	η		Σ		σ	
approximant			φ			W
Per-nasalized stops		γ~	χ~	∞~	δ~	β~

Phonologically, the inventory of *Vedda* Language sounds is the same as that of colloquial Sinhalese. The occurrence of these sounds in *Vedda* Language is different from those in Sinhalese, thus marking it off from any variety of colloquial Sinhalese. The occurrence of high frequency of the voiceless

palatal affricate consonant (c) and voiced palatal affricate consonant (ɟ) is a prominent phonological feature of the *Vedda* Language which is not found in colloquial Sinhalese.

With regard to grammatical categories, *Vedda* nominal has the same number and case systems as colloquial Sinhalese. As Sinhalese nouns, *Vedda* nouns also inflect for number, definite/indefiniteness and case marking. Nouns are broadly classifiable into two major classes as animate and inanimate nouns. Morphologically, three word classes can be identified in *Vedda* language such as nouns, verbs and invariables. The *Vedda* Language sometimes relies upon the verbal and non verbal context instead of signifying the meaning structurally. Sinhalese would use the singular and plural distinction clearly, for instance: for singular 'mamə' 'I' and for plural 'apɪ' 'we'. The number distinction should be understood by the verbal and non-verbal contexts of the utterance.

Table 3: The following examples shows, the word '{tto' itself implies plurality

Vedda: bofɛkAvδ~A:λ{ττο κ{λ{:πo□□≅ πA{{:ρ≅γ≅v≅ μANγAχχ≅v≅θA:
English: The elephant runs wild through the jungle
Vedda: bofɛkAvδ~A:λ{ττο τηυv≅μεκ κ{λ{:πo□□≅ πA{{:ρ≅γ≅v≅ μANγAχχ≅v≅θA:
English: Three elephants run wild through the jungle

However, the following examples in *Veddas* animate nouns show the number distinction significantly adding 'vAI' morpheme to the singular form like Sinhalese and this is also assumed as the influence of Sinhalese:

Table 4: Veddas animate nouns

rukθπo□□≅ (tree)	rukθπo□□≅ +vAI (trees)
βA:σA:πo□□≅ (language)	βA:σA:πo□□≅ +θAλ (languages)

In *Vedda* Language, formation of feminine gender from masculine gender is very much similar to Sinhalese, as Sinhalese, 'i' denotes the feminine gender and 'A' denotes the masculine gender.

Table 5: Vedda Language formation of feminine gender from masculine gender

Masculine	Feminine
kAb≅rA	kAb≅rI
κ{κυλA:	κ{κυλI:

The *Veddas* have a colourful morphological word formation process and most often they use bound morphemes for word formation. For animate nouns they use '{tto' as a bound morpheme, and 'hu:rA, n{:nI' are used as honorific bound morphemes. Some researchers have identified these bound morphemes as affixes, but in the word structure another morpheme is added after these morphemes and therefore they can be identified as bound morphemes rather than affixes. In

the word formation process of the *Veddas*, these bound morphemes most of the time play the role of affixes.

Table 6: The bound morphemes: *Veddas*

<i>Vedda</i>	gloss
AmmIl{tto	"mother"
AmmIl{tto + γεν	" from mother"
AmmIl{tto + τ≅	"to mother"

'hu:r≅' as an honorific bound morpheme for a male and 'n{:nl' for a female is used in the *Vedda* Language.

Table 7: The honorific bound morpheme of *Veddas*

<i>Vedda</i>	gloss
mA:hu:rA (mAhA+ hu:rA )	"chief/ someone very high in his rank"
huduhu:rA (hudu+ hu:rA )	"white man"

The bound morpheme 'ma99A' is used with certain animals.

Table 8: The bound morpheme 'ma99A' in *Veddas*

<i>Vedda</i>	gloss
el≅mA99A (el≅+ mA99A)	"bull"
mI:mA99A (mI:+ mA99A)	"buffalo"

For inanimate nouns *Veddas* use 'πo□□≅, γε□□≅, t{n≅, por, rukul≅, dAnd≅, k{cc≅, r{cc≅, m{cc≅, φAμ≅κεε as bound morphemes which must be attached to another morpheme..

Table 9: The most productive inanimate bound morpheme of *Veddas*

<i>Vedda</i>	gloss
koτ≅bAkInIφ≅por	"the village kotabakiniya"
γInIr{cc≅	"fire"
dAn□uk{cc≅	"vehicle like car, van, lorry, bus..."

'πo□□≅∇ bound morpheme found frequently in the present day *Vedda* Language as the most productive inanimate maker. The words borrowed from Sinhalese or some other languages to the *Veddas*, τηεψ added the bound morpheme 'πo□□≅∇ to these words and they become *Vedda* words.

Table 10: The bound morpheme '□□□□≅∇ in *Veddas*

Sinhalese	<i>Vedda</i>	gloss
hit≅	hItπo□□≅ (hit≅+πo□□≅)	"mind"

English	<i>Vedda</i>	gloss
Three-wheeler	trI:wI:l(πo□□≅)	"Three-wheeler"

Due to long time cultural and linguistic assimilation present day verbal forms in *Vedda* language are semantically similar to colloquial Sinhalese. In the research area, Dambana region one can see influence of Binthena dialect significantly. In 1911 Seligmans also identified the influence of Sinhalese language on *Vedda* Language. The word order in *Vedda* Language is similar to Sinhalese. *Veddas* as hunters they did not have many things to talk and they spent a very quiet simple way of life in the jungle. Hence the limited vocabulary is sufficient to communicate. Thus one verb has more than one meaning and we can understand the meaning of the words only by understanding the context in which the sentence is uttered.

### V. CONCLUSION

Present day *Vedda* Language has become a critical endangered language due to internal forces. According to Key informants investigation, at present *Veddas* in Sinhalese speaking areas; Dambana, Henanigala, Rathugala, Nilgala, Dimbulagala, Pollebedda are greatly influenced by colloquial Sinhalese, particularly the regional dialect of Sinhalese. Moreover, the East coast *Vedda*, in close proximity to the sea beyond Dalukana, Vakara, Patalipuram, Kungnamkulam, Mankanie, Vettalaikatti, Kalladi those in the Trincomalee and Batticaloa districts *Vedda* speak almost all the Tamil Languages. During the last six decades drastic cultural and social changes have occurred in the *Vedda* society. As a result of cultural and social assimilation, *Veddas* had to shift from their ancestral hunter-gatherer society to agricultural society. In the field investigations it was observed that this external force is the major cause for the *Vedda* neglects their mother tongue. One of the major internal forces for language endangerment of *Vedda* was observed during the field visit, such as a negative attitude towards their own language particularly the younger generation of *Vedda* community. It is observed that, the young ones in the *Vedda* community generally felt that the *Vedda* Language was not worth learning and speaking so far. Therefore, it was also observed that the children generally address their parents in Sinhalese and the parents also converse with them in Sinhalese. The present generation of the *Veddas* are neither conversant with their cultural practices nor are they fluent in their language, hence making them rapidly Sinhalized. In the other parts of the country where the Tamil people live, they have already become Tamilized. Therefore, the *Vedda* Language is one of the Indigenous languages which have become an extreme language mixture due to long time cultural and linguistic assimilation. As the result the present satiation of *Vedda* Language is severely endangered language. Through the empirical findings of this research is clearly evident that the language of the *Vedda* is fast disappearing due to long time cultural and linguistic assimilation.

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