
THE LINGUISTIC EVOLUTION OF MALAYALAM: FROM ADI-MALAYALAM TO MODERNITY

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This literary review examines the historical linguistic development of Malayalam, with particular focus on its earliest attested form, academically termed "Old Malayalam" (while acknowledging the query term "Adi-Malayalam"). The review traces the evolution from these early forms to contemporary Malayalam, examining phonological, morphological, syntactic, and lexical developments. Special attention is given to the influence of Sanskritization on the language's development, while highlighting the enduring Dravidian foundation. By synthesizing diverse scholarly perspectives and linguistic evidence, this review provides a comprehensive foundation for understanding the complex linguistic journey of Malayalam from its origins to present form.

1. Introduction: Setting the Stage for Malayalam's Linguistic Journey

Malayalam, a prominent member of the South Dravidian linguistic family, occupies a significant position in the cultural landscape of India. Primarily spoken in the state of Kerala and the union territory of Lakshadweep, it is one of the 22 scheduled languages of India and has been designated a Classical Language by the Government of India. While Malayalam possesses a rich literary heritage, its literary tradition is generally considered younger compared to some other major Dravidian languages such as Tamil and Kannada^[1].

This chapter undertakes a critical review of the existing scholarly literature concerning the historical linguistic development of Malayalam, tracing its trajectory from its earliest attested stages to its contemporary form. A particular emphasis is placed on examining what will be referred to as "Old Malayalam," aligning with established academic terminology while acknowledging the query term "Adi-Malayalam." This review addresses several key research

questions: What are the defining linguistic features of early Malayalam? What was the nature and extent of Sanskrit's impact on the structure and vocabulary of Malayalam? What significant linguistic shifts have occurred throughout its history?

The geographical isolation of the Malabar Coast from the rest of the Indian peninsula, created by the Western Ghats mountain ranges, played a crucial role in the linguistic differentiation of Malayalam. This geographical barrier facilitated the development of a distinct linguistic identity in Kerala, separate from neighboring Tamil Nadu^[2]. As this review will demonstrate, the evolution of Malayalam represents a complex interplay between its Dravidian foundations and various external influences, particularly Sanskrit.

The methodology employed in this review involves a systematic analysis of both primary sources (inscriptions, early literary works) and secondary scholarly literature. A comparative-historical linguistic approach is adopted to examine the development of Malayalam in relation to other Dravidian languages, particularly Tamil. This approach enables a more nuanced understanding of the distinctive characteristics of Old Malayalam and its developmental trajectory toward the modern language.

2. Defining the Earliest Form: Exploring "Adi-Malayalam" and Old Malayalam

The initial stages of the Malayalam language have been described using various terms in both academic and informal contexts. While the query term "Adi-Malayalam" likely intends to denote the primordial or original form of the language, scholarly consensus predominantly utilizes the term "Old Malayalam" to refer to the earliest attested phase of its development^[1]. This terminological distinction is not merely semantic but reflects important conceptual considerations about the language's early character and relationship to other Dravidian languages, particularly Tamil.

2.1 Periodization and Terminology

Linguistic historians generally periodize the evolution of Malayalam into three broad phases:

- Old Malayalam, spanning approximately from the 9th to the 13th century CE
- Middle Malayalam, extending from the 13th to the 17th century CE
- Modern Malayalam, commencing from the 18th century CE onwards^[3]

This periodization, while useful as a general framework, inevitably involves certain simplifications. The boundaries between these periods are not absolute but represent gradual transitions in linguistic features. The term "Old Malayalam" (Paḷaya Malayāḷam) refers specifically to the earliest attested form of the language found in inscriptions and early literary works^[2]. However, the concept of "Adi-Malayalam" could potentially represent an earlier, pre-Old Malayalam phase for which direct evidence is limited or absent. This distinction raises important questions about the reconstruction of earlier forms and the relationship between attested and reconstructed stages of the language.

2.2 Earliest Evidence and Attestations

The earliest tangible evidence of Malayalam as a distinct linguistic entity can be found in inscriptions dating back to the 9th century CE. Notably, the Vazhappally copper plate (circa 832 CE) and the Quilon Syrian copper plates (circa 849/850 CE) stand as crucial inscriptional records that are often considered the oldest available specimens of Old Malayalam^[3]. These inscriptions, while providing invaluable insights into the language of the period, have also been the subject of scholarly debate regarding whether the linguistic features they exhibit represent a fully distinct Malayalam language or rather a diverging dialect or variety of contemporary Tamil^[1].

The origin of the Malayalam calendar dates back to year 825 CE, coinciding with the period when the language was beginning to establish its distinct identity^[2]. Beyond inscriptional evidence, the earliest extant literary works in Malayalam that demonstrate a clear divergence from the Tamil literary tradition are Ramacharitam, an epic poem composed in the late 12th or early 13th century, and Thirunizhalmala, which predates Ramacharitam by about a century^[3]. These literary works, written in Old Malayalam, offer further material for understanding the linguistic characteristics of this formative period.

It is important to note that Old Malayalam was employed not only in literary contexts but also in official records and transactions at the level of the Chera Perumal kings and the upper-caste (Nambudiri) village temples^[2]. Most of the inscriptions in Old Malayalam were found in the northern districts of Kerala, those adjacent to Tulu Nadu, suggesting a particular geographical center for the early development of the language.

3. Theories of Origin: Unraveling Malayalam's Ancestry

The precise origins of the Malayalam language remain a topic of ongoing scholarly discussion, with several prominent theories attempting to unravel its ancestry. These theories vary in their emphasis on the relationship between Malayalam and Tamil, the role of Sanskrit and Prakrit, and the broader context of Dravidian language development.

3.1 The Tamil-Malayalam Relationship

The prevailing view among historical linguists posits that Malayalam evolved from a western coastal dialect of early Middle Tamil, with the linguistic separation becoming evident sometime between the 9th and 13th centuries CE^[3]. This theory, championed by scholars like Robert Caldwell in his seminal work "A Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South-Indian Family of Languages" (1856) and further elaborated upon by A.R. Raja Raja Varma, highlights the numerous shared linguistic features and historical connections between Tamil and Malayalam^[3].

A key aspect of the Tamil-Malayalam differentiation process that deserves greater attention is the development of distinctive phonological features. For example, "Old Tamil's alveolar stop was being lost in common speech east of the Western Ghats... as early as the 12th century" while being preserved west of the Ghats in proto-Malayalam areas^[4]. This phonological divergence represents a significant marker of Malayalam's emerging distinctive identity. The maintenance of the alveolar stop in Malayalam, which contrasts with dental and retroflex stops, represents a preservation of a feature present in Old Tamil but lost in modern Tamil varieties—a telling example of how Malayalam maintained certain archaic features even as it developed its own distinctive character.

The relationship between Tamil and Malayalam is further complicated by the fact that renowned poets of Classical Tamil such as Paranar (1st century CE), Ilango Adigal (2nd–3rd century CE), and Kulasekhara Alvar (9th century CE) were Keralites, suggesting that the cultural and linguistic connections between the regions were complex and multifaceted^[2].

3.2 The Proto-Tamil-Malayalam Theory

An alternative perspective suggests that both Tamil and Malayalam developed independently from a common ancestral language known as "Proto-Tamil-Malayalam," potentially during the prehistoric period or in the middle of the first millennium CE^[3]. Proponents of this view argue that Malayalam retains certain archaic linguistic features that are not even present in the oldest historical forms of literary Tamil, indicating a separate developmental trajectory from a shared proto-language^[2].

This theory accounts for the fact that Malayalam and several Dravidian languages on the Western Coast have common archaic features which are not found even in the oldest historical forms of literary Tamil^[2]. However, the significant number of shared innovations with Tamil during a specific historical period makes a completely independent descent less likely^[3]. Rather, a model of gradual differentiation from a common ancestor, with periods of shared development followed by independent evolution, may better account for the linguistic evidence.

3.3 The Sanskrit-Origin Theory and Its Critique

The notion that Malayalam primarily originated from Sanskrit, once a prevalent idea, is now largely discredited within mainstream linguistics^[4]. While Sanskrit has undoubtedly exerted a substantial influence on Malayalam, particularly in its vocabulary, the fundamental grammatical structure and core lexicon remain firmly rooted in the Dravidian family.

However, this view deserves more nuanced treatment than simply dismissing it outright. While the core structure is indeed Dravidian, the Sanskrit influence was so profound that some scholars like Attur Krishnapisharady considered it worth discussing, even if ultimately rejecting the view^[5]. Krishnapisharady noted that "Malayalam and Sanskrit are same family members and is a mixture of Tamil and Sanskrit," pointing to "some grammatical resemblance with that of Sanskrit which Malayalam possess."^[6] Though this view overreaches in claiming the same family status, it correctly identifies the significant structural influences that merit scholarly attention.

A more balanced approach would recognize that while Malayalam's fundamental structure and core vocabulary are undoubtedly Dravidian, the language's development involved a complex process of interaction with Sanskrit that affected not just vocabulary but also certain structural and stylistic features.

3.4 The Role of Prakrit

The potential influence of Prakrit, another ancient Indo-Aryan language, on the development of Malayalam warrants greater consideration than it has typically received. Given the historical presence of Prakrit in South India, particularly in religious and literary contexts, it likely played a role in shaping some aspects of early Malayalam.

C.V. Vasudeva Bhattatiri observed that "Malayalam departed from Tamil due to the influence of Prakrit, Sanskrit, Kannada, Tulu and other regional differences."^[6] The influence of Prakrit is

particularly evident in the realm of vocabulary and potentially influenced the literary style of early texts. For instance, Prakrit's influence can be seen in Manipravalam literature, a hybrid literary style that combined Malayalam with Sanskrit^[3].

Further research is needed to more precisely delineate the specific contributions of Prakrit to Malayalam's development, distinguishing them from broader Sanskrit influence and identifying distinctive Prakrit features that may have been incorporated into the language.

4. Linguistic Features of Early Malayalam: Glimpses into the Past

The linguistic characteristics of Old Malayalam, as gleaned from inscriptional evidence and early literary texts, reveal a language that shares a close affinity with contemporary Tamil but also exhibits distinct features that set it apart. Analysis of inscriptions like the Vazhappally and Quilon Syrian copper plates and early literary works such as Ramacharitam provides valuable insights into the phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicon of this period.

4.1 Phonological Characteristics

Phonologically, Old Malayalam displayed certain features that differ from both modern Malayalam and Tamil. These include the nasalization of adjoining sounds, the substitution of palatal sounds for dental sounds in certain contexts, and the contraction of vowels^[2]. These phonetic characteristics contributed to the distinct soundscape of the language during this era.

One of the most distinctive phonological features of Malayalam, which represents both a preservation of an Old Tamil feature and a point of differentiation from modern Tamil, is its system of stop consonants. Malayalam preserves a three-way contrast between dental, alveolar, and retroflex stops that was present in Old Tamil but has been lost in modern Tamil varieties^[4]. This contrast is "exceedingly rare for a language to have" and represents "remarkable continuity through millennia."^[4] The alveolar stop in particular serves as "a tangible marker of its linguistic continuity with Old Tamil," connecting modern Malayalam speakers with the phonological system of ancient Sangam poetry^[4].

This system of stop consonants involves three distinct articulation points in close proximity:

- Dental stops (like the "th" in the Indian English pronunciation of "thin")
- Alveolar stops (unique to Malayalam among modern Dravidian languages)
- Retroflex stops (like the "t" in the Indian English pronunciation of "tin")^[4]

The preservation of this three-way contrast, despite the articulatory similarity of these sounds and the "ease with which the tongue could simplify it," represents a remarkable case of phonological stability that connects modern Malayalam directly to its ancient roots^[4].

4.2 Morphological Features

Morphologically, Old Malayalam exhibited grammatical inflections and word formation processes that, while related to Tamil, also showed unique developments. Notably, Old Malayalam rejected the use of gender markers in verbs, a feature that distinguishes it from both later forms of Malayalam and contemporary Tamil^[2]. This absence of gender agreement in verbs represents a significant grammatical divergence and warrants more detailed analysis as a key differentiation from Tamil.

The morphological features of Old Malayalam can be organized into nominal morphology (concerning nouns and their inflections) and verbal morphology (concerning verbs and their conjugations). In nominal morphology, Old Malayalam shared with Tamil a system of case marking that included nominative, accusative, dative, sociative, genitive, and locative cases, among others^[3]. However, certain distinctive patterns of case marking and plural formation were beginning to emerge that would later characterize Malayalam as distinct from Tamil.

In verbal morphology, beyond the absence of gender marking, Old Malayalam was developing distinctive patterns of tense-aspect-mood marking that would become more pronounced in Middle and Modern Malayalam^[3]. The analysis of verbal forms in texts like Ramacharitam reveals a system in transition, with some features shared with contemporary Tamil and others pointing toward the distinctive character of later Malayalam.

4.3 Syntactic Patterns

The syntax of Old Malayalam, while generally following a subject-object-verb word order typical of Dravidian languages, exhibited certain distinctive features and variations^[3]. Detailed analysis of the sentence structures in early inscriptions and literary works reveals both continuities with broader Dravidian patterns and emerging distinctive characteristics.

One important feature is the development of participle constructions that function to connect clauses in complex sentences. These constructions, while present in other Dravidian languages, show certain distinctive patterns in Old Malayalam that would become more pronounced in later stages of the language^[3]. Additionally, the patterns of case marking in

relation to syntactic roles show certain distinctive developments that contribute to the emerging identity of Malayalam.

4.4 Lexical Composition

The lexicon of Old Malayalam comprised a core vocabulary rooted in Dravidian origins, with the gradual introduction of Sanskrit loanwords^[3]. Examining the presence and nature of these early Sanskrit borrowings in texts like Ramacharitam sheds light on the initial stages of lexical Sanskritization.

A systematic study of the vocabulary in Old Malayalam texts reveals several layers:

- Core Dravidian vocabulary shared with Tamil and other South Dravidian languages
- Distinctive lexical items that appear uniquely in Malayalam or show distinctive semantic developments
- Early Sanskrit borrowings, often showing phonological adaptation to Malayalam sound patterns
- Potential Prakrit-derived vocabulary, distinguished by characteristic sound changes^[3]

The analysis of these different lexical strata provides valuable insights into the cultural contacts and influences that shaped the early development of Malayalam.

4.5 Number Systems and Mathematical Traditions

Old Malayalam utilized its own set of numerals, distinct from the Hindu-Arabic system prevalent today^[3]. While the basic numerals likely shared common ancestry with other Dravidian languages, the system of representing larger numbers and fractions had its own specific characteristics.

Significantly, "Malayalam (like Tamil) originally lacked zero and was not based on place value until the mid-19th century."^[1] This represents a major distinction from other Indian numeral systems and highlights an important aspect of Malayalam's mathematical tradition that deserves greater attention.

Furthermore, systems like the Katapayadi system, an ancient Indian alphasyllabic numeral system used to represent numbers through letters, were in use in Kerala during this period. This system provided "the flexibility in forming meaningful words out of numbers which can be

easily remembered" and was extensively used in astronomical and mathematical texts^[7]. The system assigned numeric values to consonants according to a specific pattern and allowed for the encoding of numbers in meaningful words or verses, facilitating both memorization and transmission of mathematical knowledge^[8].

The Katapayadi system represents a uniquely Kerala mathematical-linguistic tradition that showcases the sophisticated integration of linguistic and mathematical knowledge in the region's intellectual history^[8]. Its presence in Malayalam texts from an early period demonstrates the advanced state of mathematical thinking in Kerala and the way in which the language was adapted to express complex numerical concepts.

5. The Impact of Sanskritization: A Transformative Influence

The influence of Sanskrit on Malayalam represents one of the most significant factors in the language's historical development. This process of Sanskritization, however, was not a simple case of unidirectional borrowing but a complex interaction that reshaped the language in profound ways while still maintaining its fundamental Dravidian character.

5.1 Historical Context

The historical context of Sanskrit influence in Kerala is closely intertwined with the migration of Sanskrit-speaking communities, most notably the Namboodiri Brahmins, from the Indo-Gangetic plains to South India^[3]. While the precise timeline of this migration is debated, evidence suggests a significant presence by at least the 9th century CE, coinciding with the early stages of Malayalam's development. The Namboodiris, revered as custodians of Sanskrit language and Vedic culture, held considerable socio-economic and religious influence in Kerala, which facilitated the permeation of Sanskrit into the local language^[3].

This historical context requires consideration not merely as background information but as an essential factor in understanding the sociolinguistic dynamics that drove language change. The Namboodiris' position as a socially and culturally dominant group meant that Sanskrit elements entered Malayalam not just through casual contact but through systematic cultural and religious influences that carried significant prestige value.

5.2 The Nature and Extent of Sanskrit Influence

The impact of sustained contact with Sanskrit has been multifaceted and transformative for Malayalam. Perhaps the most evident impact is on the lexicon. Malayalam has absorbed a substantial number of Sanskrit words, both in their original forms (tatsamas) and in modified forms adapted to Malayalam phonology (tadbhavas)^[3]. This borrowing is particularly prominent in literary and formal registers, with Sanskrit loanwords often used for abstract concepts, philosophical terms, and even for expressing emotions.

The phonological system of Malayalam has also been influenced by Sanskrit. The Malayalam script, which evolved from the Vatteluttu script, incorporated Grantha characters specifically to represent Sanskrit sounds that were not present in the original Dravidian phonetic inventory^[2]. These include aspirated and voiced obstruents, as well as certain sibilant sounds and consonant clusters. However, the extent to which these Sanskrit-derived sounds are consistently produced by native Malayalam speakers in everyday speech is a subject of ongoing linguistic investigation^[1]. While the writing system accommodates these sounds, their actual phonetic realization can vary depending on factors like formality of speech and individual speaker habits.

Regarding grammar, the influence of Sanskrit on the core grammatical structures of Malayalam is less pronounced. Malayalam retains its fundamental Dravidian grammatical features, such as agglutinative mor

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