

Catch me if you can: convergence towards a moving target

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Abstract

1 Introduction

2 Convergence

Convergence is generally seen as two languages becoming more like another. ?, however, holds that in many cases, it is better to speak of ‘advergence’, as there is usually one language which changes a lot in the direction of the other, while the other changes hardly at all.

A clear case of advergence would be Pennsylvania Dutch, which becomes more like English, whereas the surrounding varieties of English are hardly influenced by Pennsylvania Dutch. A clear case of convergence would be Kupwar, where all three languages (Urdu, Kannada, Marathi) underwent change in the direction of the others.

In this paper, I want to discuss language change processes in Sri Lanka and show that, depending on the subvarieties, there are multiple advergence processes going on in conflicting directions. This network of changes makes it difficult to exactly locate the origin of a change. For instance, Sinhala, at a broad level, converges towards Tamil. Certain (Muslim) Tamil dialects, however, converge towards Sinhala. Sri Lanka Malay, finally, converges towards these Muslim Tamil dialects. If we find a feature *X* in Sri Lanka Malay, how can we say whether it comes directly from Tamil, whether it comes from Tamil via Sinhala, or whether it comes from Sinhala via Muslim Tamil?

This paper is structured as follows: I will first give an overview of the Sri Lankan linguistic ecology, sketching the sociolinguistic, geographic and demographic setup of the relevant languages and giving some historical background. I will then discuss received wisdom about the contact situation. After taking a look at the dialectology of the respective languages, I will reassess the contact situation, showing that the language change processes are more complex than assumed.

3 The Sri Lankan linguistic ecology

The first language spoken in Sri Lanka that we know of is the **Vedda** language ???. Various proposals have been made as to its origins, but as a matter of fact, language attrition has proceeded to a point where little of any substance can be said about the affiliation of this language. Vedda as spoken today can be considered a variety of Sinhala with some lexical and morphological peculiarities. Due to the lack of material, Vedda will not be considered further in this paper.

Sinhala (Indo-Aryan) and Tamil (Dravidian) both arrived on the island about three millennia ago, although the respective order of arrival is a matter of heated debate. Sinhala has been shown to share some features with Western Indo-Aryan languages like Gujarati and others with Eastern Indo-Aryan languages like Bengali. This suggests two waves of immigration, but again the chronological order is unsure.

Sinhala is separated from its Northern cousins by the Dravidian languages of South India and is isolated within the family (disregarding Dhivehi (Maldivian), which is an offshoot of Sinhala). Due to prolonged contact with Dravidian languages, Sinhala became much more Dravidianized than any other Indo-Aryan language. In fact, the Indo-Aryan nature of Sinhala is so well concealed that in the 19th century, Rasmus Rask (?) classified Sinhala as a Dravidian language.

?? adds Sinhala to the South-South Asian Sprachbund, which comprises Southern India, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. Features which set off Sinhala from the Northern Indo-Aryan languages are absence of aspirates, long ē and ō, conjunctive participles without a same-subject requirement, evidentials, quotatives, and a very thorough left-branching structure. These features are shared with Tamil.

Sinhala is today the majority language of Sri Lanka with about 74% of the population speaking it as first language. Sinhala speakers are Buddhists or Christians. They mainly live in the West, Center, and South of the island, but can be found elsewhere as well. After the end of the Sri Lankan Civil War, there are ideas of settling Sinhala speakers in the Northern regions as well, which are predominantly Tamil.

Sri Lankan Tamil prides itself as a very old and pure form of this language. Tamil is spoken by the Sri Lankan Tamils (Hindu or Christian) mainly in the North, the Moors (Muslim) in the West and in cities, and the Indian Tamils (Hindu or Christian) in the central tea estates. These varieties differ considerably. Altogether, about 25% of the Sri Lankan population speak one variety of Tamil as their mother tongue. Sri Lankan Tamil uses the same script and orthography as Indian Tamil, but spoken Sri Lankan Tamil is not intelligible to speakers from India. The differences are so important that speakers from India frequently think that their interlocutor does not speak a variety of Tamil at all, but rather Malayalam. It should also be noted that Tamil is a diglossic languages, and that written Tamil differs considerably from any variety of spoken Tamil.

Jaffna Tamil is the most prestigious variety of Tamil on the island. Its main features are archaic phonology and morphology, a threefold deictic contrast, and a more differentiated negation system than Indian Tamil. The other varieties of Tamil on the island tend to be eclipsed by Jaffna Tamil in scholarly domains. We will return to this below.

Sri Lanka Portuguese arrived on the island during the Portuguese period (1503-1656) as a Creole. Due to intermarriage with the local population, the language became thoroughly Lankanized and is now the only Creole with a European lexifier to have

SOV word order or postpositions. The Dutch (1656-1798) continued to use Sri Lanka Portuguese as a lingua franca, a practice which continued into the early days of British rule (1798-1948). As a lingua franca, Sri Lanka Portuguese was also acquired by populations which otherwise had no connections to the colonial administration. Today, Sri Lanka Portuguese is spoken on the East Coast (Tamil-dominated) by about 4000 Portuguese Burghers, and by a very small number of Sri Lankan Kaffirs (descendants of slaves) on the West Coast. ? shows that the Burghers' Sri Lanka Portuguese is thoroughly influenced by Tamil. ? refers to a recording of a centenary speaker of Sri Lanka Portuguese in the Sinhala dominated region, whose speech shows more influence from Sinhala.

Sri Lanka Malay is the language of the descendants of immigrants brought during the Dutch and British period. It was mainly spoken in the centers of colonial administration, i.e. cities and towns in the center and in the South. Towards the end of the 19th century, Sri Lanka Malays were also employed as overseers on the emerging tea estates in the central Hill Country. Sri Lanka Malay has been argued to show influence from Muslim Tamil and/or from Sinhala.

Sri Lanka Malay is relatively homogeneous. There is a small pocket of Sri Lanka Malay speakers on the South coast (Kirinda and Hambantota), which has some dialectal differences, but overall mutual intelligibility is good.

4 Who goes where, 1st iteration

The standard view about language contact in Sri Lanka is that all languages that get there converge towards Tamil. This assumption is based on the observation that Sri Lankan Tamil is an archaic variety (?), which suggests that it has not changed a lot. Given that Sri Lanka is a sprachbund (?), potentially within a larger South-South-Asian Sprachbund (?), the logical conclusion is that all other members have converged to the archaic language, Tamil in this case. This is received wisdom for Sinhala (???), Sri Lanka Portuguese (??) and Sri Lanka Malay (???). Exclusive Tamil influence in Sri Lanka Malay has been challenged recently (??).¹

5 A closer look at the contact situations

While at first sight, it appears that Tamil provides the typological sink all languages of the island move towards to, closer look at the actual varieties in question casts doubt on this scenario. I will now delve deeper into the internal diversity of the languages of the island and show, that at a closer look, the language change processes a far more complex than presented beforehand.

¹The oldest language of Sri Lanka, Vedda, is moribund and heavily sinhalized. Besides noting attrition, little more can be said about the language contact phenomena at work.

5.1 Sinhala

Tamil influence on Sinhala syntax is clear and widely accepted. The phonological features of long mid vowels and lack of aspiration also distinguish Sinhala from Northern Indo-Aryan languages, and make it appear closer to Tamil. This led ? to argue for an extensive phonological influence from Tamil on Sinhala. In a very detailed study, however, ?, drawing on material by ?, shows that all the mentioned changes towards Tamil were accompanied by changes *away* from Tamil in the very same periods. For instance, retroflex sonorant were lost in Sinhala despite Tamil having them. Furthermore, vowel length was first lost, despite Tamil showing this feature, only to be reintroduced later and so on.

5.2 Tamil

The internal diversity of Tamil is very high. The first division to be made is between written Tamil and spoken Tamil. In the context of this paper, written Tamil is not relevant. Spoken Tamil can be divided into Indian Tamil (with further subdivisions) and Sri Lankan Tamil. Sri Lankan Tamil is not intelligible to Indians. The reverse is not true, due to the exposure to Tamil media and television.

Within Sri Lanka, the most prestigious variety is Jaffna Tamil, spoken by Hindus and Christians. Next to Jaffna Tamil, the varieties of Trincomalee and Batticaloa also deserve mention. These varieties can clearly be distinguished. Tamil as spoken by Muslims differs from the variety used by the Hindus and Christians. Muslim Tamil itself is divided into a North-Eastern variety, close to Batticaloa Tamil, and a South-Western variety, which is heavily Sinhialized.

Another Sinhialized variety is Negombo fishermen's Tamil (?), which, like South-Western Muslim Tamil has lost verbal agreement.

Things are further complicated by Indian migrant workers in the central tea estates, who arrived in the late 19th century. They spoke Indian dialects of Tamil (and other Dravidian languages), and their speech today is still closer to Indian Tamil than to Sri Lankan Tamil. Among these dialects, processes of dialect levelling probably took place ?, but this is in need of further research.

As far as language change is concerned, the varieties of Jaffna, Trincomalee and Batticaloa are generally seen as archaic, with little or no change towards Sinhala having taken place. Muslim Tamil shows Arabic influence in the lexicon, and South-Western Muslim Tamil and Negombo fishermen's Tamil show syntactic influence from Sinhala.

Estate Tamil varieties are underresearched.

5.3 Sri Lanka Malay

Sri Lanka Malay shows quite a great deal of internal variation, but this variation does not pattern geographically. Serious differences in phonology, morphology or syntax can be found within the same town. The only clear regional difference observed up to now is a much more contracted speech in Hambantota and Kirinda on the South coast as compared to the other varieties.

5.4 Sri Lanka Portuguese

Sri Lanka Portuguese dialectology has not been studied extensively. The major division is between the Eastern variety of the Portuguese Burghers and the Western variety of the Ceylon Kaffirs. The latter variety is likely to have undergone more influence from Sinhala, but it is moribund, so the extent of this influence is difficult to ascertain. Within the Burgher variety, the varieties of Trincomalee and Batticaloa are very close, but some morphological differences set them apart, e.g. the imperative marker. In all varieties, there is lexical influence from Tamil, and to a lesser extent, from Sinhala.

6 Who goes where, 2nd iteration

Wrapping up what has been said in the previous section, we can state the following:

1. Vedda changed towards Sinhala
2. Sri Lanka Malay changes towards South-Western Muslim Tamil
3. South-Western Muslim Tamil changes towards Sinhala
4. Negombo Tamil changes towards Sinhala.
5. Sinhala changes towards Tamil
6. Sri Lanka Portuguese changes towards Tamil in the East and West, and probably changed towards Sinhala in the West.

If we take point 2, we can say that Sri Lanka Malay changes towards (a variety of) Tamil, which is received wisdom. If we add point 3, it suddenly appears that Sri Lanka Malay changes towards Sinhala, via South-Western Muslim Tamil. But if we finally add point 5, it appears that the ultimate target is Tamil again. It is thus very difficult to catch the exact language change target of Sri Lanka Malay, as the target is ever-moving, and none of the relevant varieties are static enough to allow firm conclusions.

7 Conclusion

Convergence is an idealization Languages change, so the target changes as well The Sri Lankan situation is especially complex The multiple convergence processes are very hard to disentangle and often make it impossible to trace a borrowed structure to exactly one language Addendum SLE