**English and what counts as Malayalam: Revisiting Kala (1977)**

What are the boundaries of a language? Where does one begin and another end? This question is particularly fraught in high-contact, multilingual contexts of language use, where speakers (and linguists) can readily identify the origin of various words and constructions as having a “non-native” origin. Here, I address this question using the example of Malayalam, a high-contact language whose speakers freely use elements which can be traced to a variety of languages, including Arabic, Portuguese, Hindi, and most pervasively, Sanskrit and English. I connect more recent data from sociolinguistic interviews about attitudes towards English in Malayalam to previous work on Hybrid Conversational Malayalam (Kala 1977) to investigate how the social role of English has changed for Malayalam-speakers living in Kerala over the past 40 years, and, similarly, how the status and meaning of English-origin words has changed.

Kala describes English-origin words used by multiple generations of speakers in Walluwanaad, Kerala. These words were not limited to novel words for novel items (such as $\text{i}v\text{i}$ for ‘TV’), but were also English-origin words which were used in the place of existing words in Malayalam, as shown in (1) and (2):

(1) a. $\text{tce:n}$
   ‘(necklace) chain’
   (English-origin: $\text{chain}$)

   b. $\text{tcaN:ala}$
   ‘chain’
   (Sanskrit-origin: $\text{CriNk} h\text{ala}$)

(2) a. $\text{fa:pò}$
   ‘shop’
   (English-origin: $\text{shop}$)

   b. $\text{kaàa}$
   ‘shop’
   (Dravidian-origin; cf. Tamil $\text{ka}d\text{ai}$)

Kala lists the English-origin words as being used by people under 55, and the other words being used by or directed to people over 55. Taking a traditional apparent-time perspective, we might expect that the (a) examples would have been replaced by the (b) examples; what we see instead is unique patterns of semantic change. For example, in (1), the forms have undergone further semantic specialization: Kala states that $\text{tce:n}$ was used to mean the chain of a necklace; this connotation persists, while $\text{tcaN:ala}$ is more associated with thick chains or shackles.

Kala states that an “ideal conversationalist” should “bear in mind that the locally recognised popularity of English or Malayalam words maximizes the effect of the speech. He should not therefore make a laborious attempt to bring in a Malayalam word which is normally confined to the press and the radio. (Kala 1977: 271).” Notably, this means that, in some cases, using words which are categorized as Malayalam (usually of Sanskrit-origin) are dispreferred and seen as overly formal in comparison with English-origin words.

This describes very well the conversational norms of contemporary Malayalam-speakers as documented by sociolinguistic interviews I conducted in 2016; following global patterns, the integration of English into Malayalam has continued and intensified. I present the results of detailed language background interviews of 112 Malayalam-speakers (aged 16-86) who grew up in Kerala and lived in villages or towns near Thrissur, in central Kerala.

90% of participants (101/112) stated that they do not avoid using English words when speaking Malayalam, with many of them stating that English is a part of Malayalam; some representative quotes are below (translations mine).
Participants in general see English as part of Malayalam, and many describe language mixing as natural and subconscious.

Speakers also shared their anxieties about Malayalam and English. In responses to the question “What do you think about the future of Malayalam?”, 29 participants (about 26%) made a comment about English taking over or replacing Malayalam, and many discussed the hybrid nature of Malayalam and English, in both positive and negative ways:

- “People aren’t speaking English nor are they speaking Malayalam. They don’t know either; they are speaking a mix of the two which is neither”
  P52; age 17

- “Malayalam is regressing; people are speaking Manglish [mix of Malayalam and English]”
  P98; age 21

- “Young people are speaking Manglish; adding new English words to Malayalam”
  P59; age 24

Along with more positive feelings about the influence of English on Malayalam, we see the idea of languagelessness (Rosa 2016) being ascribed by Malayalees to themselves or ‘the young people’ due to their use of a hybrid variety.

The remainder of the presentation focuses on semantic and phonological changes to English-origin words in Malayalam; as experience with and use of English has increased, more English-like novel forms have been introduced (the (a) examples are older, and (b) newer):

(3) a. arpisə  
    b. ofisə  
    ‘office’
(4) a. pena  
    b. penə  
    ‘pen’
(5) a. kəpi  
    b. koʃi  
    ‘coffee’
(6) a. ku:pə  
    b. kəpə  
    ‘cup’

I discuss these examples in the context of models such as Ito & Mester (1993) which predict that increased phonological adaptation accompanies nativization; here, we see the exact opposite pattern, which, I argue, is due to the circumstances of contact between English and Malayalam.

While Kala’s work was written over 40 years ago, her insights remain relevant today – not just for Malayalam in Kerala, but for language use across South Asia and beyond. I conclude by discussing how a hybrid approach to Malayalam can affirm the language practices of speakers themselves while also pushing us linguists to expand our empirical foci.