

EXPLORING VARIATION THROUGH MANY 'MALAYALAMS': A STUDY ON 'NORTHERN KANNUR DIALECT OF MALAYALAM'

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to study variation in Malayalam, one of the Dravidian languages spoken in Kerala, by comparatively analysing two dialects in the language. The focus of the study is on 'Northern Kannur Dialect', one of the variants spoken in Northern Kerala. 'Northern Kannur Dialect' is compared with 'Southern Kerala Dialect'. This paper investigates the linguistic features that distinguish between the two dialects, which are called Variable markers. Variation, in this paper, is addressed at two levels; between the dialects and within the dialect. Based on the nature of variation identified, the study asserts the 'multilingualism' that exists within the language. In addition to that, the paper brings out the variation within the dialect by analyzing the nature of distribution of variable markers.

Keywords: Variation, Dialect, Malayalam, 'Northern Kannur Dialect', Multilingualism

1. Introduction

Language is the sum total of diverse speech varieties. Thus conflicts happen often regarding the 'authenticity' of a variant. 'Secular linguistics'¹ is the term introduced by William Labov to disqualify the language hierarchy and treat each and every variety as equal (Labov, 1972). Labov studied language varieties within the context of social variables and provided a sociolinguistic form for it (Labov, 1966). 'Authority in Language' (Milroy & Milroy, 1991, p. 21) and 'Style: Language Variation and Identity' (Coupland, 2007, pp. 4-7) argue that stressing variation is significant because it resists the standardization or authentication of certain variants over others. Each speech variety being the embodiment of speakers' culture and identity, it is important to stress on variation studies to assert the same. Thus Labov's idea of language secularism lays the basis for variation studies. Language variants which are socially and regionally distinctive and characterized by particular set of words and grammatical structures are known as dialects (Crystal, 2008, p. 142). The occurrence of dialects as social and geographical continuum makes it difficult to identify and label dialects. Drawing a dialect boundary is purely arbitrary given that language variation is cumulative in nature (Chambers & Trudgill, 2004, p. 7). Thus variation study according to Coupland is a probabilistic study which relies on the statistical averages (Coupland, 2007, pp. 4-7).

Kerala² has long been identified as a monolingual and culturally homogeneous state. Kerala came into existence by merging three Malayalam speaking independent provinces in the south-western coast of India; Malabar, Kochi and Travancore whose internal cultural variations were extensive. The demand for '*Aikyakeralam*'³ (Devika, 2007, p. 7) had its roots in the presupposition that there exists a common culture and a common language across the south-western coast even though this 'uniformity' was the construction of certain socio-political groups. The cultural homogeneity and the monolithic 'malayali' identity that 'emerged' thereafter has been severely criticized for restoring and wiring 'savarna' to it (Devika, 2007, pp. 10-11). This has fostered the need for rearing cultural heterogeneity and reimagining the status of the marginal through that. Monolingualism (Malayalam as the only aboriginal language spoken) in Kerala is a