

Linguistic competition and extinction in Southern India: The case of the Indo-Portuguese creoles

Hugo C. Cardoso
Universidade de Lisboa
hugoccardoso@gmail.com

The issue of language endangerment and language death has received wide attention in recent years, on account of the realisation that the rate of linguistic extinction is now probably higher than ever before (e.g. Crystal 2000, Moseley 2010). The processes of language obsolescence and death are unavoidably related to speech communities' response to changes in their linguistic ecology, usually the introduction of a new language or alterations in the social profile of already coexisting languages. Colonial languages have had (and still have) a particularly prominent role in the diminution of linguistic diversity worldwide, but they were also instrumental in producing new language varieties and new languages – including pidgins and creoles – which are themselves responsive to changes in their respective settings. In this talk, we will follow the historical dynamics of Portuguese and Indo-Portuguese with particular reference to South India. Indo-Portuguese, the generic term to denote the Portuguese-lexified creoles of South Asia, has a long and important history in India and Sri Lanka, and subsists in some locations with variable degrees of vitality (Cardoso 2006). In South India, the rise and fall of Indo-Portuguese were particularly dramatic – from extremely widespread up to the late 19th-century to extinct (with the exception of a small pocket in Cannanore [Kannur] and an even smaller one in Calicut [Kozhikode]) nowadays. Based on historical-archival evidence and oral histories collected in the states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu, we will characterise the past geographical and social implantation of Indo-Portuguese in South India, map its demise, and identify the reported reasons underlying its rapid contraction. What emerges is a history of obsolescence which to a large extent mirrors that of other endangered or extinct languages the world over – reflecting e.g. social restructuring, and changes in the region's political, economic and religious environment – but also with some specificities, in which ideological notions of (in)correctness, hybridisation and colonial associations take centre-stage.

Keywords: Indo-Portuguese creoles, Linguistic competition, Extinction, Southern India