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Engaging with modern Sri Lanka Portuguese

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Creole languages are formed in particular socio-historical settings conducive to intense linguistic contact (Thomason & Kaufman 1988; Holm 1989; Winford 2003). They are responsive to their formative conditions and, as they were traditionally not the object of standardisation, also to subsequent changes in their linguistic ecology, which makes them important historical documents to reconstruct social and linguistic interactions throughout history. This has been the case of the Portuguese-based creole formed in Sri Lanka, known as Sri Lanka Portuguese (SLP) or Burgher Portuguese. It was the product of Portuguese colonial relations with the island and, while mostly associated with the Burgher and Kaffir communities, rose to prominence in the territory well beyond these. As Smith (1979; 1984) has clearly shown, the removal of sustained direct contact with the Portuguese language from the 17th century led to SLP developing an unmistakable South Asian typology in its structure, all the while retaining the prominently European lexical component that reveals the linguistic environment in which it formed. This has made it an important case study in the field of language contact theory.

However, certain developments in SLP's context, including also environmental factors, have led to a significant contraction in domains of usage and number of speakers, to the extent that the language can now be considered seriously endangered – Nordhoff (2013) estimates the current speech community to be composed of a few hundred families in and around Batticaloa and Trincomalee with a profound break in generational transmission, especially in Batticaloa. In this talk, we will introduce an ongoing project to systematically survey, document and preserve the use of SLP and the speech-community's oral traditions in modern-day Sri Lanka.

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