

The Malay language in Sri Lanka: creolization or dialectalization? (A study on corpus)

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ABSTRACT

Malayo - the Malay dialect of Sri Lanka - is essentially spoken among small communities settled in Slave Island, Hambantota, and Samanthurai.

There were in Sri Lanka several waves of migration by groups of Malay speakers from the Malaysian - Indonesian peninsula and archipelago for the past two thousand years.

In the history of interrelations between maritime peoples in the Indian Ocean, we observe that the Malay language before Malayo has largely provided Sinhala language with specific words.

Anyhow, Malayo as a minority language of Sri Lanka dates back from the last wave, when in the 18th century Muslim families from Java were deported to Sri Lanka by the Dutch.

Then Malayo remained a language confined to a micro-community, like Portuguese Creole. Malayo and Portuguese have been definitely cut off from countries majoritarilly using their respective reference languages, and were always practiced in a multilingual context: each speaker had to know also at least one of the majority languages (Tamil, Sinhala, or English) whatever may be the level of education and the social class.

The corpus studied here displays indication that Malayo shares with Sri Lankan Portuguese Creole many specific features (essentially syntactic), even though these two languages were never in contact with each other, even though Malayo has never been a pidgin once used nation-wide as for Portuguese. The retaining of an original corpus of vocabulary suggests how it remained a secret code, or identity maker. Finally, the common syntax shared by malayo, Portuguese, and especially Tamil and sinhala which are here the dominant forms, indicates a linguistic unity all over the island. As such, Malayo has been dialecatalized from the original Malay language to become a specifically Sri Lankan language.