Beyond the Dichotomy of Standard vs. Non-standard: A Sociolinguistic Study on the Features of Standard Language Formation in Malayalam

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Abstract

Standard language is a codified form of language that is accepted by a larger speech community which also serves as a model (Garvin 1959). The various criteria which are significant in the standardization of any language include the intrinsic properties of that language, the functions of that language within the culture of a speech community, and the attitude of the speech community towards the standard language. Therefore, as properties of language unification, social status and prestige are considered symbolic to the process of standardization.

While a set of parameters have been proposed to identify one variety of any spoken language as "standard" and others as "non-standard", most of the arguments boil down to the question of power held by the speakers of a particular variety in terms of cultural, financial, and political capitals (Trudgill 2000; Kachru 1976 & 1996). General observations within the discipline point to the fact that it is based on this high status that certain varieties of any spoken language is recognized as standard, and all public discourses, spoken and written, are carried out in that particular variety.

The case of English, being a global language and the most widely used lingua franca of the world, is not unique in this regard. Despite many varieties of the language being used across the world and some of them even being used as the first language of larger populations, a strong tendency to standardise the language on the basis of how the language is used in the inner circle, is prevalent. Although this has been the case with most of the languages, a few deviants are found to be in existence against this observation in a language like Malayalam.

Among the 13 identified varieties of the language, the standard variety, i.e, the variety used for administrative and official purposes, is not observed to have been used by the speakers of a particular geographic locality or a community as a spoken language. Therefore, through this research, by looking into the process of the formation of standard language in Malayalam which is the central point of study, we claim that the English type standard vs. non-standard dichotomy does not fit well in the spoken discourse of varieties of Malayalam.

Key words: Standard language, Non-standard, Dialects, Variations, Malayalam

1 Introduction

The focus of this paper is to locate the case of standardization of Malayalam into the larger literature of the discourse on language standardization. Therefore it is necessary to lay the foundation of the framework and define some of the key terms involved in this research. It is also important because suggesting alternative methods to explain the standardization of languages that are less explored, has been included within the scope of this study. Thus, bringing together some of the major arguments and views on language standardization will be insightful.

Garvin (1959) is one of the first who attempts to conceptualize the framework of language standardization and proposes a number of parameters to identify one variety of any language as standard and others as non-standard. He defines standard language as "a codified form of language that is accepted by a larger speech community which also serves as a model." This work identifies two major properties of a standard language, i.e., flexible stability and intellectualization. The former refers to the codification of language and its flexible nature to accommodate changes, whereas the latter refers to the ability of language to function both in formal and informal contexts as well as to adapt to various new functional domains. Another set of parameters that the work proposes, is about the major criteria that discusses the standard language. They are i) intrinsic properties of a standard language, ii) the functions of a standard language, and iii) the attitudes of the speech community towards a language. As the nature of these parameters suggests, the first two can be investigated directly, while the third one can only be subjectively inferred through cultural practices, observations, and attitudes.

Garvin also observes that having literacy in a language does not mean that a literate speaker is able to use standard language. In other words, literacy cannot be equated with standard language. This observation does not stand true in the case of Malayalam, which is the primary focus of this study. It is also noticed that the increase of newspapers and migration of people across the Malayalam speaking region has led to the proliferation of the "standard" Malayalam irrespective of regions and communities. Also, though it has not been documented by scholars, it is commonly observed that the wider acceptance of mass media among the Malayalam speaking population has led to the wider use of standard spoken Malayalam across the population, which emerges as a research gap for future scholarly works in this regard.

However, oriental scholars working on language standardization and language policies do not completely accept this model. They cite a number of reasons for their disagreement. Schiffman (1998), in his work on the standardization of spoken Tamil, states that although the definition and parameters proposed by Garvin accommodate the case of Tamil to an extent, the accommodation is not exhaustive. He argues that the framework proposed by Garvin does not take into account languages that are understudied or languages that show diglossic behaviour. Though the work does not explicitly mention the case of Malayalam, the closest Dravidian language to Tamil, this lack of representation can also be extended to Malayalam, considering its diglossic nature. Apart from these, some major arguments concerning language standardization need to be discussed in order to verify whether any of them can accommodate the findings of this study. One such argument is given by Hasnain (2022) who states that the European colonial empires failed to comprehend the linguistic and cultural diversities of south Asia because Europe was more homogenized than the Asian region. Their main objective of implementing various strategies for codifying vernacular language was the propagation of religious texts. In Hasnain's words, "They not only lacked Asian sensibility to language, but at times were also insensitive to the nuances of India's diversity." Further, he states that although attempts to codify vernacular languages in the south Asian region can be traced back to as early as 15th century, it gained momentum in late 18th and early 19th century with the introduction of the printing press. The lack of codification of these languages enabled the colonial powers to think that no vernacular language could be taught 'unless there was one codified sufficiently to be called a language'.

According to Milroy & Milroy (1985), standardization of spoken language is merely an "ideology" or an idea, not a reality, as opposed to the standardization of written form which can easily be standardized. They also say, "If languages were not standardized, they would break up into regional spoken dialects and end in mutual unintelligibility." It is necessary at this point to distinguish between a language and a dialect.

Dialects are defined as differences between kinds of language, which are differences of vocabulary and grammar as well as pronunciation (Trudgill 1974). He also adds that the term 'dialect' refers not only to a non-standard variety of a language but any variety that is unique from other varieties. In this sense, any variety of a language can be considered as a dialect and vice versa. With this information on the standardization of language, we move to the next section, which discusses variations in language and speech.

1.1   *Variation in Speech Patterns*   Variation, being a fundamental feature, is inherent to languages and their structures (Labov 1969). Hence, even within a single language, the dialects are varied. As noted by Underhill (2009), Humboldt considers language as the dynamic fusion of human experience itself. By applying Hegelian 'Dialectical' philosophy, Humboldt considers language as the dynamic or active product, but not as an end-dead product (Aarsleff, 2002). The dynamicity in the language is eternal, so change and variation in languages are inevitable. However, this variation is not random, rather it has some boundaries and norms (rules). It creates an identity for the individual and groups.

Studies on variation deal with identifying, examining and explaining the varying forms, functions and structures of dynamic linguistic systems. As Labov states, the linguistic variables can relate to non-linguistic ones in order to explore society. Variations are at different linguistic levels, called linguistic variables (Sankoff and Labov 1979), including phonological, morphological, syntactic, and lexical variations. In this study, we observe the different speech patterns (at the phonetic and lexical level) in different Malayalam varieties. With these variations, we arrived at our conclusion that the assumed Kottayam variety is not the standard variety of Malayalam in the spoken discourse; indeed, the speakers of the standard variety of Malayalam are not identified with the existing varieties of this language.

2   Objectives of the Study

As we mentioned above, we are considering standardization as an abstract ideology that sole purpose is to make the intelligibility between the varieties. Malayalam, the language under study belongs to the Dravidian language family and is spoken by more than 35 million people spread across the state of Kerala and the union territory of Lakshadweep. In the case of Malayalam, this definition of language standardization is applicable by showing that the spoken discourse of the standard variety may not be identifiable with a particular geographical area of Kerala. In the light of this observation, the main objective of this study is to question the process of standardization through the lens of Malayalam standardization. Thus, one particular variety does not get the

standard status as far the spoken discourse is concerned. The variety that is assumed to be a standard variety in Malayalam (i.e., Kottayam) has deviant features from the standard language. Hence, in this study, we are considering two different varieties of Malayalam (i.e., Kannur and Kottayam) to show how both the Kottayam and Kannur variety show deviation from the standard variety of Malayalam whose written form is in school curriculum and formal media discourse.

3 Methodology

We have collected three hours of telephonic conversational data where the informants from two different varieties of Malayalam participated in the conversation. The varieties which are taken in the study are Standard variety in its written form, and Kottayam variety and Kannur variety in their spoken form. The data consist of three sets of conversations. The first data set consists of a one-hour conversation between two speakers from the Kottayam district. The second set consists of a one-hour conversation between two speakers from the Kannur district, and the third set is a one-hour conversation between one speaker from Kannur and one from Kottayam, help us reach a conclusion on whether the Kottayam variety can be considered as the frame of reference for the standard spoken Malayalam.

The total number of participants is four. Among them, the two informants are MA students (one is the first author), One informant is an undergraduate from Kottayam and one woman participant of around 50 years (the first author's mother from Kannur).

4 Findings

In the speech discourse, we have observed the following differences at phonetic, morphological and syntactic level between the Standard variety (SV), Kottayam variety (KV), and Kannur variety (KaV) in the three sets of the data.

The phonetic level differences are listed in the below Table 1 between the three varieties.

S.No.	Standard Variety (SV)	Kottayam Variety (KV)	Kannur Variety (KaV)	Meaning
1	*und*	*ond*	*and*	there
2	*enda*	*enna*	*œnna* or *œnna:nu*	what

Table 1: General Phonetic Differences

In the first set of the data (between two Kottayam speakers), we have observed 19 differences between Standard Variety (SV) and Kottayam Variety (KV). Some of them are listed in Table 2.

S.No.	Meaning	Standard Variety (SV)	Kottayam Variety (KV)
1	what	*enda*	*enna or ennada*
2	above or at a height	*mugaLil*	*manDœ:L*
3	luck	*bagyam*	*fagyam*
4	to you	*ninno:Du*	*ninDeDuttu*
5	I won't read that book	*njan a: pustakam va:yikk-illa*	*njan a: pustakam va:yikka-thi-lla*

Table 2: Lexical & Morphosyntactic Differences between SV & KV

In the second set of the data (between two Kannur speakers), we observe 37 differences between Standard Variety (SV) and Kannur Variety (KaV). Some of them are listed in Table 3.

S.No.	Meaning	Standard Variety (SV)	Kannur Variety (KaV)
1	there	*aviDe*	*a:Da*
2	child	*kuTTi/ kunyu*	*kunyi*
3	to me	*Enikku*	*anakku*
4	I have watched that movie.	*njan a: sinima kanDittunD*	*njan a: sinima kanDini*

Table 3: Lexical & Morphosyntactic Differences between SV & KaV

In the third set of data (between one speaker from Kannur and one from Kottayam), we have observed 26 differences between the Standard variety (SV), Kannur variety (KaV), and Kottayam variety (KV). Some of them are listed in Table 4.

S.No.	Meaning	Standard Variety (SV)	Kannur Variety (KaV)	Kottayam Variety (KV)
1	what	*enda*	*ennænu*	*enna*
2	here	*iviDe*	*eDa*	*iviDe*
3	there	*aviDe*	*a:Da*	*aviDe*
4	tapioca	*kappa*	*koLli*	*kappa*
5	above	*mugaLil*	*me:la*	*manDæ:L*

Table 4: Combined Lexical & Phonetic Differences

At the phonetic level, in Table 1, the first and second examples of the Kannur variety start with the central vowels (/a/ and /æ/), which are distinct from other varieties. The Kottayam and standard variety also have the distinction in the first example. The initial vowel of the Kottayam variety is 'o', and it is 'u' for the Standard variety. Likewise, Tables 2, 3, and 4 have morpho-syntactic and lexical level differences.

From the Table 2, we have an interim conclusion that the spoken discourse of the Kottayam variety is not the standard variety. From Tables 3 and 4, we conclude that the Kottayam variety is the one that is more similar to the standard variety, and the Kannur variety has the least similarity with the standard variety.

4 Conclusion

The paper focuses on the Kottayam variety of Malayalam, while also looking at other related varieties for comparison. Here, we have discussed how in Malayalam the phonetic, lexical and morpho-syntactic cues from both the formal and informal discourse and their regional counterparts help us to claim that the 'standard' and 'non-standard' dichotomy does not fall into the same category that we observe in other languages of the world, especially English. We also understand that the language standardization is mainly concerned with qualitative understandings of language. However the approach adapted in language variation studies emphasize more on numeral and quantitative approach, that includes spoken data and attitudes of individuals. We also notice that in among 13 identified varieties of this language, the standard variety, i.e, the variety used for administrative and official purposes, is not observed to have been used by the speakers of a particular geographic locality or a community as a spoken language. Through this research, we also claim that the Kottayam variety of Malayalam, which is commonly considered to be the standard variety, in the spoken discourse, does not fall in complete alignment with the features of the standard variety. Further, our contention is that the non-adherence of language standardization in the spoken discourse of Malayalam can be used as a point of departure to further studies where we can bring more Indian languages to the fold of our research.

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