

Of Dictionaries and Dialectics: Locating the Vernacular and the Making of Modern Malayalam

Amritha Koiloth Ramath & Shashikantha Koudur
National Institute of Technology Karnataka, Surathkal
E-mail ids: amrithakr27@gmail.com / sasikant@nitk.edu.in

Abstract

This paper looks at Hermann Gundert's Malayalam-English dictionary at the juncture of the modernisation of the Malayalam language in the 19th century. Gundert, the then inspector of schools in the Malabar district, saw the dictionary as the first step towards the cause of a universal education through the standardisation of Malayalam language. But what did a dictionary for all and by implication a language for all mean to the Kerala society? For centuries, much of the literary output in Kerala was in Sanskrit language, even as Malayalam continued its sway. The diversity of the language system in Kerala navigated its way through the hierarchies of caste and class tensions, springing up new genres from time to time within these dichotomies. Like many other vernacular languages in India, the Malayalam language system remained as the society it was in, decentralised and plural. This fell into sharp relief against the language systems of modern post-renaissance Europe with its standardised languages and uniform education. The colonial project in India aimed at reconstructing the existing language hierarchies by standardising the vernaculars and replacing Sanskrit as the language of cosmopolitan reach and cultural hegemony with English. Bilingualism and translation was key to this process as it seemed to provide a point of direct cultural linkage between the vernacular Indian cultures and Europe. This paper argues that Gundert's bilingual dictionary features itself in this attempt at the modernisation of Malayalam by reconstructing the existing hierarchies of Kerala culture through the standardisation of Malayalam and the replacement of Sanskrit with a new cosmopolitan language and cultural values.

Keywords: Bilingual Dictionary, Colonial Language Policy, Vernacular, Education, Malayalam

Bilingual Dictionaries and Colonial Education

It was the year 1832. The college at Fort St. George in Madras was abuzz with activity. Bilingual dictionaries between English and the vernacular languages spoken in the Madras presidency were being procured, commissioned, or completed. Molesworth's Mahratta and English dictionary, Reeve's Carnataca and English dictionary, Morris's English and Telugu dictionary are among the many names that crop up in the records. The bilingual dictionary between vernaculars and English gradually came to be at the centre of education in the 19th century colonial India. In fact, vernacular education in much of the presidencies was actively conducted through bilingual study. The *Report on Public Instruction in the Madras Presidency, 1854-55* (1855) [further referred as Report] pointed out that translations formed the basis of examinations and were the criteria based on which prizes and rewards were given away to students. In fact, the absence of qualified vernacular teachers who could translate back and forth from the vernacular to English was a recurring problem,

"The great difficulty all along had been, to procure as teachers of the vernacular languages competent vernacular scholars, who were at the same time possessed of a sufficient knowledge of English to enable them to revise the translations of their pupils; and this want, the Board were disposed to think, would not be supplied, if the persons to be trained were to be required to possess no more than a rudimentary knowledge of the English language. They were at the same time sensible of the difficulty, in the present state of education, of inducing competent English scholars to accept situations as teachers of the vernacular languages" (p.8).

The German missionary Hermann Gundert, who was appointed as the first Deputy Inspector of Schools in Malabar and Kanara Districts in 1857 (Murti, 2001, p. 105), might have known the need for a tool that could be used to fulfill this gap. The need for this constant translation between English and the vernaculars arose owing to a peculiar pedagogy where all the modern education as a western product would be in English, which then had to be translated into the cultural universe of the vernaculars. The instruction regarding the curriculum in the English and Vernacular departments during the setting up of a Provincial school in Calicut gives a picture of the differential knowledge spheres that English and vernacular languages carried. The scheme included

"...instruction in the English language, in general Geography, in Elementary English and Indian History, Arithmetic, Euclid, Algebra, Plane Trigonometry, Mechanics, the Elements of English Literature, English composition and Mensuration. In the Vernacular department, the instruction is to be confined to a grammatical study of the Malayalam language, and translations from and into English" (ibid p. 15).

In this context, bilingual translation between the vernacular and English was not a matter of communication but rather of a direct linkage between Malayalam language and the modern European culture. In a few years from then, Hermann Gundert would begin his study on Malayalam language going on to complete what has since then been one of the principal lexical texts in the language, *Malayalam and English Dictionary*. Gundert believed that the dictionary "will be found serviceable to the cause of education" in the province of Malabar (Gundert, 1872, p. 8). Gundert's objective of education is also clear in his other work *Malayala Bhasha Viyakaranam* published in 1851. This work was put to use in the schools started by the Basel Mission in Malabar (Kurup, 2009, p. 228). Since the early missionaries of the Basel Mission were also the ones who set up vernacular and English schools for the natives in Malabar and South Canara, the motive of education could not be separated from their other works.

Locating the Vernacular

However, the linguist found himself bound by a peculiar problem, namely, the preponderance of Sanskrit words that apparently had seeped into Malayalam. This he saw as the "chief" defect of the previous dictionary, compiled by another European, Benjamin Bailey.

"It is one of the chief defects of that, otherwise valuable work, that it does not discriminate between Malayalam and Sanskrit terms and leaves the student completely in the dark, both as regards the etymology and the proportional importance of words. For it concedes to unknown and useless words as well as those that are comparatively unimportant more space, than to words of the genuine native stock that occur frequently in idioms of daily current use" (Gundert, 1872, p.VI).

Bailey's sources were mainly the earlier Sanskrit dictionaries – both *Amaracoshā* and Wilson's Sanskrit dictionary – as well as other technical works like Anslie's *Materia Indica*. Bailey does not provide any context for filtering out older words. When the words are "not in common use, Malayalam renderings are given in addition to English" (Bailey, 1846, p. vi). These differences in the way the two lexicographers conceived their work could be associated with the very different purposes to which they assigned their dictionaries. Bailey clearly had a humble purpose, "to render the means of acquiring a knowledge of the Malayalam language more easy to Europeans and others than it has hitherto been" (ibid). He conceived of language as merely a tool for communication among different speakers as against Gundert, for whom the dictionary carried the larger purpose of universal education.

Gundert says, "[t]o determine the amount of Sanskrit words to be received into a Malayalam Dictionary has been a task of even greater difficulty" (Gundert, 1872, p.IV). This has been achieved painstakingly by comparing "bona fide" Malayalam productions. The author had "to sift and reduce enormous mass of mythological and botanical names and synonyms, many of which are confessedly very doubtful... and to devote particular attention only to those terms which are generally accepted as "fairly domiciled" in Malayalam" (ibid p.IV). Speaking of Tamil words which had "long ceased to be used in colloquial speech," he says, they "cannot be dispensed with, if the Dictionary is to give a true representation of the history of the language." Hence these words were included under the label of "aM. (ancient Malayalam)" (p. III). Speaking about "great books, Bharatam, Ramayanam, and the versions of the Puranas" composed "within the two or three last centuries," he says, "no *Dravidian* word found in them has been excluded, "for they constitute "the popular literature of all Malayalam readers"(ibid p.VI). [Emphasis added.]

What constituted "popular literature of all Malayalam readers" in the 19th century comes with its own problems. Did readers of the minority community consider these "great books" as "popular" reading material? Moreover, was the choice of "Malayalam readers" good enough to dictate what the speakers of that language used, including women, lower classes and castes, many of whom may not have been readers at all? Readership in Malayalam in the 19th century comes with a range of preoccupations, foremost among them being that education was often not associated with reading or literacy. In his work on the early roots of education in Kerala, Robin Jeffrey points out that schooling was not always associated with literacy or reading in Kerala. Speaking about the "old village schools" in Kerala that survived into the British period, he says, "the curriculum of old schools stressed learning through recitation rather than through literacy. Teaching people to read and write need not be the main aim of schooling... Literacy became a desirable goal only from about the 1860s onwards as a result of government policy, economic opportunities, and the growing availability of things that could – or had to – be read" (Jeffrey, 1987, p. 452). As such, to base the words of the dictionary on language choices of "all" readers would be a challenging exercise.

Roland Miller, in his book *Mappila Muslim Culture*, speaks about how in the premodern period, or even to a point extending up to the 20th century, Muslims in Kerala chose to dissociate themselves from the Malayalam literary sphere owing to its association with Hindu religious expression. This was among the leading causes of the development of Arabic-Malayalam, "an artificial language that satisfied the desires for both literary and sacredness." Its "emotional source rests in the notion that Malayalam itself is not a worthy vehicle to carry Islamic ideas because of its association with Hindu religious expression" (Miller, 2015, p. 323). Arabic Malayalam evolved with its own script and continued to be used until the 20th century, declining thereafter. Gundert does not subject the so-called "foreign languages" to the kind of "doubtful origins" test that Sanskrit had to face. "The Arabic, Persian, Hindustani, Portuguese and even English terms, which conquest of

foreign creeds and arms with new laws and arts have introduced along this coast cannot be proscribed," he says. He has not been at a "liberty to exclude" them because of "the object being to present a faithful picture of the whole Malayalam tongue." In other words, he brings upon himself a burden of reconciling the vocabulary of foreign languages with a Tamil-Malayalam of Dravidian origins.

In his essay, "The Literary Culture of Premodern Kerala", Rich Freeman speaks about the tussle between Sanskrit and Tamil influence, with "missionary-linguists" on the one hand arguing that "Malayalam was merely a late offshoot and little more than a degraded dialect of Tamil, and... Tamil revivalists who caricatured Malayalam as an absurdly nasalized dialect that has sold out its Tamil heritage to the forces of Brahmanical Sanskrit" (Freeman, 2004, p. 447). Gundert, as mentioned earlier, aimed at what he thought was "a true representation of the history of the language," with its roots in a singular Tamil-Malayalam Dravidian language. Like his contemporary Robert Caldwell, Gundert extended his scepticism to Sanskrit as a later addition to the Dravidian language with the words derived from it being of "doubtful origins". He stated that Tamil and Malayalam were but "dialects" of the same family, and hence these words did not need the bonafide status that perhaps Sanskrit as a language that was introduced from outside required (Gundert, 1872, p. III). Such a history did not go uncontended during Gundert's own period. In his grammar of Malayalam language published in 1878, Kovunni Nedungadi visualised Malayalam language as a river with its origins in Sanskrit's snow-clad mountains which later mingled with the river of Tamil (Kumar, 2018).

One of the works that Freeman examines in an analysis of the premodern literary culture in Kerala is the 15th century work *Lilatilakam*. He points out that "... there was a spectrum of language styles (and languages) available for different forms that mixed local Kerala-speech both with Sanskrit and with literary Tamil in various ways." *Lilatilakam* points at a "variety of competing language forms then current in Kerala," that ranged from "those that were highly dependent on classically Tamil models of grammar and poetry," to those that were "rustic in language content or unilateral in their formal organization as texts from a Sanskritic perspective" (Freeman, 2004, p. 443). The language style named Manipravalam, which *Lilatilakam* argued for as being superior, was a heavily Sanskritised version of the language, in absolute polarity against Gundert's idea of Malayalam – a language that could cater to different people. His training in the language too, was non-Sanskritic, for he was trained by a traditional Tiyya family in a non-Brahmin set up (Kurup, 2009, p. 226). In his Introductory Remarks to the dictionary, he emphasised that his sources came from across the Malayali community. "The words have been taken from all available sources, from the lips of speakers of all ranks, castes and occupations, from the letters and records of many different districts, and from the writers in prose and poetry of every age" (Gundert, 1872, p.3). Gundert considered the antiquated *Payyannur Pattu* as an important source material. Besides, copper and stone inscriptions became significant sources in consolidating the language as vernacular. Idioms and usages from both south and north Kerala were taken up considering the particularities of local institutions, land tenures, etc (Kurup, 2009, p. 229). When Gundert spoke of the "whole of Malayalam tongue," the status pointed to a movement from the premodern Malayalam with its many language registers belonging to different social groups, each with its corresponding genres and literary spheres, to a language that was common to the whole community of Malayalam speakers.

Language Standardisation and the Modern State

The need to establish links between the colonial state and the vast majority of those who were ruled by it was something that found itself being reiterated in colonial documents. Macaulay's Minutes could be seen as among the early instance of this. While such an approach of denigration of the Indian languages was not always the path chosen by the colonial administrators, the concern over the absence of vital links between Indian people and the colonial state remained. Unlike the previous regimes in the country who had made India their home, the British suffered an absence of cultural links with the Indian people for, the colonial government continued to operate from a distant land with people bearing vastly different cultures. Legitimising such a colonial rule required vital connections.

"Some Europeans, wrote Sir Thomas Munro, were 'arrogant enough to suppose that we can, with our limited numbers, do the work of a nation... To build a single system of political authority and a common loyalty required special knowledge and understanding. Personal bonds, professional contracts, and patron-client obligations... could be extended only so far. A more permanent structure required a more comprehensive integration, more systematic acquisitions of information, and deeper understandings of the cultures of India. Most of all, a more comprehensive kind of ideological cement had to be found, stolen, or invented" (Frykenberg, 2008, pp. 301-302).

In modern education, this need was amply fulfilled, for it was much sought after by the elites in India themselves, who were the backbone of British governance. But while higher and elite education would be given in English, the project of cultural assimilation could not be completed unless these values of modernity could be percolated down to the masses through vernacular languages

"...the final aim of these measures should be, to imbue the masses of the Hindoo community, as far as it is practicable, with the spirit of Western Civilization... In order, however to carry out this design we deem it of importance to point out the necessity which exists for a more efficient cultivation, in the higher native Schools, of the Vernacular language simultaneously with that of the English, and that the students be taught systematically to clothe the ideas, which they have acquired through the Medium of the English, in their own native idiom" (Report, 1855, pp. clvii - clviii).

In her work, *Language Politics, Elites and the Public Sphere*, Veena Naregal speaks about the role of bilingual education as being at the heart of the spreading of colonial modernity. The translation of the Bible into the vernacular languages from Greek and Latin post-renaissance lead to a linguistic objectification of these languages. This was followed by the 'direct' inputs through translation from other Greek and Latin texts. She says, "[t]he idea of translation as it has developed in the West since the European Renaissance did not merely imply retelling; the practice amounted to a more or less direct transaction of transfer from one language to another" (Naregal, 2002, p. 40). In South Asia, on the other hand, the earlier cosmopolitan language Sanskrit continued to hold its sway on the vernacular languages long after the "literarization" of these languages, as seen in the case of Malayalam. A direct transfer through translation was ruled out owing to the multiplicity of registers in the vernaculars and the absence of standardization as against those in the European vernaculars. The British saw this as an opportunity. Standardization of the vernaculars within the critical norms of English could replace the space that Sanskrit had left vacant (ibid, p. 41).

"If the European vernacular textual repertoires were renewed through linguistic 'transfers', surely the philosophical and cultural discontinuities between 18th C Europe and South Asia

too could partially be resolved if viewed as a 'mere' linguistic problem. The huge cultural unfamiliarity could pragmatically be ironed out through the potent technique of translation. This would replace English as the new normative classical language against which the native vernaculars could be redefined and modernised" (ibid, p. 44).

This would involve two phases, one being the standardization of the language and secondly the ability to perform direct translations from these vernaculars to English – bilingual dictionaries between vernacular languages and English being at the heart of both processes.

Conclusion

By the end of the 19th century, with the popularization of the print culture, the idea of a common standardized Malayalam that could be spoken by everybody as against a range of Malayalam dialects was fairly vibrant in the Kerala literary sphere. In 1892 C.D. David, a regular columnist in the *Vidyavinodini*, wrote that the "Malayalam language is the equal right of everyone in the Malayalam rajyam... and must be treated as a community wealth (samudaya swathu)" (Arunima, 2006, p. 71). The role of Sanskrit in the new language continued to find itself under debate. While the *Pacca Malayalam* and the *Venmani* movement emphasised a language that distanced itself from the Sanskritised versions, other intellectuals like Murkoth Kumaran took a more refined view in between "indiscriminate use of Sanskrit" on the one hand and the English/missionary model (*pathiri Malayalam*) on the other (ibid).

Bilingual dictionaries like Gundert's thus mark a vital transition from a feudal and premodern use of language to a modern one, with centralized government bodies and language systems with its common public sphere that is the hallmark of a modern society. They can be seen as the harbinger of a new order of language use that would go on to drastically change what Malayalam language meant to its speakers, creating not only new ways of using language, be it in the form of new genres like novels and magazine articles, but also new ways of thinking about notions of a language community.

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Amritha K R is a Research Scholar at the National Institute of Technology Karnataka, Surathkal
Shashikantha Koudur is Professor at the National Institute of Technology Karnataka, Surathkal
