Selective Acquisition of Malayalam

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Abstract

In this paper, I will present a curated account of my linguistic reflections on my journey into the Malayalam language community of my husband. My reflections can be classified roughly into three parts—morpho-syntax, phonology, and literary engagement with the second language.

Introduction

Living within a language community to become a part of it is quite different from learning a language for a specific purpose. In that sense, the particular case of second language acquisition of Malayalam discussed here is comparable to contexts of first language acquisition. Both are without any particular objective or communicative goal. However, from every other perspective it is the typical case of a second language learner, fraught with misinterpretations. The reflections conclude with the observation that being a linguist, and being consciously aware of the descriptive generalizations, has hardly helped in the actual acquisition of Malayalam.

One of the professional hazards of being a linguist is disappointing hundreds of people who enthusiastically ask you, "How many languages do you speak?" Rarely do linguists speak any more languages than they would if they had been doctors or engineers instead of linguists. Our job entails thinking about various aspects of language, analysing data from hundreds of languages to observe recurrent patterns, making generalizations, and theorizing about it all. Most of us are quite incapable of generating a cogent sentence in any of those languages, let alone thinking in them. However, faced with a natural context that demands adult language acquisition, do we as linguists, with all the baggage of theoretical knowledge, approach the task differently? That is the central question that I will be reflecting on in this paper within the anecdotal bounds of my personal journey with Malayalam.

Malayalam is the language spoken by the people of Kerala, which includes the family that I have been married into for the last fifteen years. For most of my husband's relatives, I was the first non-Malayali that they had to accommodate within the intimate familial space, and the lack of language was both convenient and an impediment. The lack of comprehensible language between me and most people, and my foreign sounding name with the usual Bangla vowel harmony being a mouthful, contributed to me being re-named as well as being infantilized. In Kerala, I was a word-less child, with a name that nobody outside Kerala called me by. I was no longer an adult, a wife, or an eloquent academic.

Morpho-syntax

Every new person we encountered back home [*naaṭ-il-e*] asked the same question "*Malayalam ari-o*?" ["Do you/does she understand Malayalam?"]. Initially I was not sure if the question was directed at me, the non-comprehending non-Malayali, or my spouse, my interpreter. As a linguist, I knew that Malayalam has no agreement, and like all South Asian Languages, it is a pro-drop language; so the question was ambiguous between second and third person. As I stood pondering on this, my spouse would assume my silence to signal non-comprehension, and reply that I did not understand the language, and people would stop talking to me.

It is true that I did not understand clearly; but I still wanted *ammachi-maar* [grandmothers], *cheechi-maar* [elder sisters], *paappan* [uncles], and everyone

to speak to me. So I started saying "*aria, paray-illa*", which amounts to something like [I understand, but cannot speak]. This was a good compromise since it was followed by long monologues from my interlocutors that served as excellent language input. It is not as if I could not get Malayalam inputs from the overheard conversations between other people, but it was exponentially more difficult to follow those, particularly because most people speak very fast and sloppily, and often while chewing tobacco or arecanut. Speech specifically directed at me was mostly slower, repetitive and exaggerated, so it helped a lot.

I started using the dative case marking in Malayalam very early, telling amma "*eni-kkiməɖi*" ["it is enough for/to me"] at dinner time, as she tried serving another ladleful of rice into my plate (around the same time, I started using "*ɖa*", a sort of interjection; in a matter of weeks, I was ordering the dog, "*kuːʈʈiːpo-ɖa*" ["go to your kennel"]). This could be partly because I was primed to notice the dative case marking due to my knowledge of its existence as a linguist, or because it was extremely common. It would indeed be interesting to see if Malayalam children start using dative case marking in the two-word stage like I did. Acquisition evidence from Tamil, a closely related language, in fact indicates that children make an early distinction between subject and non-subject dative (Lakshmi Bai, 2004). That could be a factor in adult acquisition as well, since I cannot recall any regular uses of dative case that were not cases of non-nominative subjects.

Pragmatically speaking, one would expect that adults would learn to frame questions as a priority. After all we spend an inordinate amount of time in the Indian subcontinent teaching the syntax of question-formation to second language learners of English. In my personal experience with Malayalam, this is one of the more rare constructions that I have had to use, if we ignore the question particle "*-o*" in the usual Malayalam salutation "*sukʰ-əm aɳ-o*?"["Is everything well?"]; albeit the lack of performance data is not real evidence that I did not develop the competence or ability to frame real *wh*-questions in Malayalam. Perhaps this is so because we are culturally more apt to utter a sentence with a polar question intonation than ask a real *wh*-question. For example, if I am not able to find amma in the house, I am much more likely to utter "*amma town-ilpoy-o*" ["Has amma gone to town?"], with a rising intonation, than ask "*amma evade*" ["Where is amma?"]. Also, the question particle "*aɳ-o*" when used by itself translates to ["Is that so?"], and is therefore an independent entity that punctuates and perpetuates all gossip and is an essential tool in the arsenal of any adult. Coupled with "*aɖipoḻi*" ["awesome"], it forms the bedrock of casual conversations among cousins.

Phonetics and Phonology

Unlike syntax, where being a linguist has perhaps aided language acquisition, my linguistic knowledge has had nearly no impact on my phonetic and phonological acquisition. For the longest time, I struggled with the insecurity that I would utter "*kuḻich-o*?" with the retroflex lateral, in my attempt at saying "*kəɻich-o*?" with

the retroflex rhotic. The former literally meant "Have you taken a bath?", while the latter would mean "Have you eaten?", and serves as a regular conversation starter among Malayalis. It is the cultural equivalent of the comments on weather among the British. The source of my apprehension was obviously that the Bangla speaking tongue was not made to be curled in retroflection; and accidentally asking people about their cleansing routine is not a great idea and perhaps even impolite. There is also the intermediate "*kuḍich-o*", with the retroflex flap, which means, "have you drunk?", and has a very specific connotation so that brides in the family typically do not ask about their specific drinking habits from other family members. So, I needed to steer clear of that as well. The same case of insufficient retroflection served as a source of endless mirth to the children in the household when I said things like *pəḷḷi:ppoy-o*, intending "Did he/they go to church?" Instead, it would sound like "Did he/they go to lizard [*pəlli*]?", due to insufficient retroflection of the lateral.

Years before I tried becoming a Malayalam speaker, when I was doing my M.A. in linguistics, we had done a perception experiment on stops using Malayalam speakers, as part of a Phonology course. Basically, we had recorded some singleton and geminate stops uttered by Bangla speakers and asked a set of Malayalam speakers to tell them apart. When they could not do it accurately, we recorded Malayalam speakers producing the same sounds and tried comparing their acoustics. The hypothesis was that Bangla and Malayalam speakers use different acoustic cues to comprehend geminate and singleton stop consonants. Armed with such very specific knowledge, fifteen years after becoming a part of a Malayalam speaking community, my brain is nonetheless incapable of registering the distinction between "*pani*" ["fever"] and "*panni*" ["pig"].

In the summer of 2019, as we drove through the north Malabar landscape and I sat rolling my tongue and pronouncing the unpronounceable place names that littered the landscape, the linguist within me finally figured something out. The name of the place we were passing by was Chakitapara; it was a familiar name as a relative lived close by. The mud-spatter on the signage forced me to pay attention to the sign in Malayalam lettering instead of the convenient English, and I made a casual comment on spelling norms. At this point both amma and her son clarified that the /k/, /t/ and /p/ in Chakitapara were indeed geminates for them ('Chakkittappara'), and there was no error in the Malayalam spelling. For native speakers, there is voicing neutralization in medial position unless the consonant sound is a geminate[1]. So all medial voiceless stops are both written and perceived as geminates, irrespective of actual phonetic factors such as VOT or stop duration. For example, the word ["ten"],"*pəṭṭə*", is written with a geminate "*ṭ*", but ["thirteen"],"*pəṭimuunə*", is written with a singleton "*ṭ*" (which is voiced when pronounced). In sound contrast, where my Bangla processing brain perceives a voicing distinction, the Malayalam speaking people perceive a distinction between a singleton and a geminate consonant. In short, very few adults who are trying to acquire Malayalam may know as much about Malayalam phonology as I do, but this has not helped me in the acquisition of Malayalam phonology. My

inability to tell geminates apart is paralleled only by my inability to utter retroflex consonants with any degree of consistency.

At this point it is clear that on account of being a linguist, I was not unfamiliar with Malayalam as a language when I travelled to Kerala and started acquiring it. But that is true only if I consider syntactic and phonological acquisition to be language acquisition. Were I to include lexical words as the beginning point, then my real introduction to Malayalam was definitely mediated by the spices, utensils and ingredients in my kitchen. The kitchen was a magical personal space where neither of us wanted to bring in the mediating languages—Hindi or English—that otherwise interceded between the Bangla and the Malayalam universe. Between "*posto*" [poppy seeds], and "*kappa*" [tapioca], we discovered a natural context for lexical acquisition. Consequently, by the time I set foot in our village in North Malabar, I had a veritable arsenal of culinary vocabulary—*maɲɲəl* [turmeric], *uppə* [salt], *pəncəsaarə* [sugar], *ʈeŋga* [coconut], *ʈəyirə* [curd], *poʈʈə* [beef], *koɾi* [chicken], *mi:n* [fish], *cemmi:n* [prawns], *uḷḷi* [onion], *payerə* [string beans], *veḷḷərikka* [gourd], *veḷḷuʈuḷi* [garlic], *inji* [ginger], *kəriapille* [curry leaves], *kəɾuga* [mustard seeds], *pəcəkəri, erišeri, puḻišeri* (types of curries), *catti, pappəɖəmkuʈʈi* (types of utensils)—and many more such words at my disposal.

Literary Engagement with the Language

With regard to reading, I would like to draw a distinction between whether one can read in a language, and whether one actually reads it. Being an avid reader, one third of my day involves reading and a fair amount of it is literature. But, I have never read books in Malayalam. It is for the same reason that I have not read books in Bangla. Just as I have never had any formal education in Malayalam, I have never studied Bangla in school, perhaps on account of it not being the State language where I grew up. Although our parents ensured that all of us siblings can read and write Bangla, none of us ever put in the effort to read books or newspapers in Bangla. My literacy with regard to Malayalam has not been very different. Just as the home I grew up in was full of Bangla literature, our home in Delhi abounds in my spouse's ever-growing collection of Malayalam literature. In both cases, I read the labels, dust the covers and arrange the books on the bookshelf. This points to the lack of "bildung"—a word coined by the Germans to refer to the development of the self and potential though intellectual nurture. Languages acquired in informal circumstances, whether first or second, have the potential to realize the communicative goals of second language acquisition, but fall short of being the language in which one thinks, and develops and expresses intellectual thoughts. In my personal journey with the five languages that I can speak, read and write—Bangla, Hindi, Odiya, English and Malayalam—I use only one to think in and express my thoughts. That language is English. While English is a second language for me, it is the only language in which I received formal education. For my parents, that language is Bangla, and for my spouse it is primarily Malayalam and then English.

For me, the act of writing this paper itself has been a negotiation between the two worlds of Malayalam that I inhabit. The first is a teleological journey from the outside to the inside through interaction with people and places. The second is an academic quest to theorize the first through reflexivity. The complement would be if my partner, a non-linguist, were to reflect on his acquisition of Bangla in the non-formal familial spaces of my Bangla-speaking universe of North Bengal.

Notes
1. Compare Geetha Durairajan's observation (this issue) about intervocalic voicing of p in Tamil—Ed.

References

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