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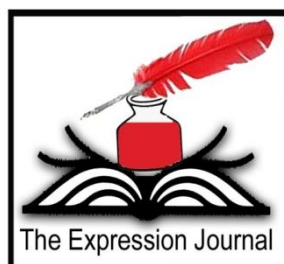
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Echoes of a Forgotten Tongue: A Sociolinguistic Study of Malayalam Vocabulary Attrition among Schoolchildren

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Abstract

Language functions as a repository of the collective memory, culture, and worldview of a community. In Kerala, the growing preference for English-medium education, long associated with modernity and social mobility, has contributed to the gradual erosion of Malayalam vocabulary among younger speakers. This study investigates the impact of the bilingual environment of Kerala on the linguistic competence of schoolchildren, with specific attention to their recall and usage of culturally embedded Malayalam words. Drawing on data from forty students in a rural CBSE school, the findings indicate a marked decline in familiarity with terms related to agriculture, domestic life, and local ecology. Framed within sociolinguistic and anthropological theories, the paper interprets this phenomenon as part of broader processes of language shift and globalization. It concludes that sustaining Malayalam requires an educational balance that affirms the cultural value of the mother tongue while accommodating English as a tool of wider communication.

Keywords

Sociolinguistics, Language Attrition, Bilingual Education, Cultural Identity.

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Introduction

Teaching and learning a language apart from its social context is futile, for language embodies the lived experiences, values, and imagination of its speakers. As Edward Sapir noted, it is “a guide to social reality,” reflecting the shared consciousness of a community. In Kerala, this interdependence between language and society has gained renewed relevance amid the rapid linguistic and cultural shifts brought by English education, urbanization, and digital communication.

Sociolinguistics, the study of how language interacts with society, offers the framework to understand such change. Scholars like William Labov, Dell Hymes, and Joshua Fishman have shown that language not only mirrors but also constructs social identity and power relations. In multilingual India, as Annamalai and Agnihotri observe, linguistic hierarchies embody historical inequalities as much as communicative diversity. Within this setting, English occupies a distinct position: once the language of colonial authority, it has become a marker of education, prestige, and social mobility.

This study engages with this sociolinguistic landscape through the lens of vocabulary attrition; the gradual loss of words in one’s mother tongue under the influence of a dominant second language. In Kerala, English has evolved from a colonial imposition into an aspirational language. To be “educated” often means to be fluent in English, a belief that leads many families, particularly in urban and semi-urban areas, to privilege English at home. Parents, motivated by hopes of global advancement, encourage their children to think and speak in English, unintentionally distancing them from Malayalam.

Yet, this shift entails more than linguistic change. As children adopt English as their primary language of thought, Malayalam words that once reflected the rhythms of agrarian life, terms for rural occupations, tools, natural cycles, and domestic artifacts gradually disappear. The loss of such vocabulary signifies not just linguistic erosion but cultural amnesia. As N.

Krishnaswamy and Archana S. Burde remark, “language is the autobiography of a community”; when its words fade, a part of its collective self-fades with them.

This paper results from the observation of how English-medium education reshapes children’s relationship with Malayalam in rural Kerala. It does not seek to romanticize the past but to understand the present: how far English-educated children have drifted from their linguistic heritage, which domains of vocabulary are most affected, and what these patterns reveal about changing cultural identities. Through the analysis of a small yet significant sample of schoolchildren, the study contributes to broader discussions on bilingual education, language preservation, and cultural sustainability in globalizing Kerala, where the young articulate both ambition and loss through the languages they speak.

Review of Literature

The relationship between language and culture has long been a central concern in the fields of Linguistics, Anthropology, and Education. Sociolinguistics, as a discipline, emerged precisely to address the interplay between these domains. According to Hymes (1974), the study of language cannot be confined to its grammatical or phonological aspects; it must also examine the social contexts that give meaning to linguistic practices. Language, in this sense, is not only a tool for communication but a social institution reflecting the norms, values, and worldviews of its speakers.

Language, Culture, and Identity

Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf were among the first scholars to explore how linguistic structures shape thought and perception. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, often summarized as linguistic relativity, posits that language influences how individuals conceptualize reality (Whorf 1956). While later linguists such as Chomsky (2006) challenged the deterministic reading of this theory by emphasizing the universal structures of human cognition, the core idea that language mediates cultural experience, remains widely acknowledged. Culture, as Raymond Williams (1983) describes, is “a whole way of life,” and language is its most intricate expression. The words people use reveal their material conditions, moral frameworks, and symbolic systems.

Michael Agar (1994) further expanded this understanding through the concept of *languaculture*, a fusion of “language” and “culture” that underscores their inseparability. Agar argues that every linguistic act carries cultural knowledge, habits, and social expectations embedded within it. Thus, language loss inevitably entails a loss of cultural meaning. In the context of Kerala, where Malayalam encapsulates centuries of cultural memory, from agricultural life and local flora to oral traditions and kinship practices, the fading of native vocabulary among children signals a profound cultural disconnection.

Sociolinguistics and Language Shift

Joshua Fishman’s (1991) theory of *language shift* and *language maintenance* offers a crucial framework for analyzing such phenomena. Fishman describes language shift as a process in which a speech community gradually abandons its mother tongue in favour of another, often more prestigious or economically advantageous, language. In postcolonial societies like India, this process has been accelerated by the symbolic power of English as the language of education, mobility, and modernity. English functions as what Kachru (1983) calls a “second institutionalized language” in India simultaneously empowering and alienating.

Scholars of Indian sociolinguistics such as Annamalai (2005) and Agnihotri (2007) have noted that the preference for English-medium education often stems from a desire for socioeconomic advancement, but it also reinforces linguistic hierarchies that marginalize regional languages. In Kerala, this tension manifests in the paradox of a linguistically proud society that nevertheless privileges English at the expense of Malayalam in formal and domestic domains. The phenomenon aligns with what Crystal (2000) describes as *language endangerment* at the micro level: not necessarily the extinction of a language but the attrition of domains, functions, and lexical richness.

Language Attrition and the Vocabulary Dimension

While language shift studies often focus on syntax or phonology, vocabulary loss or *lexical attrition* represents the most visible and culturally charged aspect of linguistic erosion. As Schmid and Köpke (2017) note, vocabulary is highly susceptible to sociocultural pressures because it directly reflects material and experiential realities. When those realities change as with the transition from agrarian to urban lifestyles lexical items lose relevance and fall into disuse. This process can be observed in Malayalam, where words such as /am.mi/ (grinding stone), /u:ral/ (big mortar with pestle), and /ʃu:ra.la.vi/ (a traditional whisk) have disappeared from everyday speech along with the tools and practices they once named.

The phenomenon of *language and culture contact* also plays a role. As Wardhaugh (2010) points out, bilingual and multilingual speakers constantly negotiate linguistic choices depending on context, audience, and social aspiration. In Kerala's English-dominant education system, children internalize English as the language of success and social approval, while Malayalam becomes confined to informal or emotional use. This diglossic division accelerates the attrition of culturally specific vocabulary, especially among younger speakers.

Language and Modernity in Kerala

Historically, Malayalam has been a language of literary richness and regional pride. However, post-liberalization Kerala has witnessed a growing tension between linguistic tradition and global modernity. The expansion of English-medium CBSE and ICSE schools, combined with the aspirational drive of middle-class families, has created what linguists term *language anxiety* (Annamalai 2012); a belief that proficiency in English equates to intelligence and social mobility. Parents, motivated by this anxiety, often insist on English-only communication at home, inadvertently weakening their children's exposure to Malayalam.

Digital culture further complicates the issue. The proliferation of social media, texting, and code-mixed "Manglish" (Malayalam-English hybrid) has reshaped communication norms. While such linguistic creativity signals adaptability, it also contributes to lexical dilution. Terms once embedded in the collective life of Malayalees; agricultural, culinary, ritualistic, and ecological are fading from memory, replaced by English equivalents or simplified descriptions.

Pedagogical Perspectives

Scholars of bilingual education advocate for a balanced approach that values both global and local languages. Cummins (2001) emphasizes *additive bilingualism*, in which learning a second language enriches rather than replaces the first. Similarly, UNESCO's (2016) policy on *mother-tongue-based multilingual education* argues that foundational literacy and cultural identity are best nurtured in one's first language. In Kerala, however, the dominance of English-

medium schooling often results in *subtractive bilingualism* where proficiency in English comes at the cost of reduced competence in Malayalam.

The existing body of literature thus converges on a crucial insight: language and culture are mutually sustaining systems, and their disruption carries deep social consequences. Studies on language shift, cultural identity, and bilingual education offer valuable frameworks for understanding how Malayalam vocabulary attrition reflects broader cultural transformations in Kerala. Yet, empirical studies focusing specifically on children's vocabulary loss remain limited. The present research seeks to fill this gap by providing a grounded sociolinguistic perspective rooted in Kerala's rural educational context.

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative–quantitative mixed method approach to examine the phenomenon of Malayalam vocabulary attrition among children studying in English-medium schools in Kerala. The qualitative component provides interpretive insight into sociolinguistic patterns and cultural implications, while the quantitative aspect offers measurable data on children's knowledge of specific Malayalam vocabulary items. The mixed design was selected to balance empirical observation with cultural interpretation, thereby situating linguistic behaviour within its broader social context.

Objectives

The study attempts to examine the extent of Malayalam vocabulary loss among schoolchildren enrolled in English-medium education and to identify the categories of words most affected by this attrition, particularly those related to local culture, ecology, and daily life. It also explores parental and pedagogical attitudes toward the use of Malayalam in domestic and educational contexts and provide recommendations for sustaining Malayalam linguistic and cultural heritage through balanced bilingual education.

Hypotheses

The study assumes that children below the age of thirteen, especially those studying in English-medium schools, experience notable difficulties in using and recognizing a considerable number of commonly used Malayalam words. The study further posits that a majority of parents and teachers fail to recognize the extent of Malayalam vocabulary loss among their children and students.

Participants and Setting

The participants comprised forty students studying in the sixth standard at a rural CBSE school in Thiruvananthapuram. The rural school was chosen purposefully to ensure the inclusion of children with rural exposure who, theoretically, would have greater familiarity with traditional Malayalam words related to agrarian and domestic life. The students ranged in age from eleven to thirteen years.

Though rural in location, the school operated under the English-medium curriculum, with English used as the principal language of instruction and communication. Malayalam was taught only as a subject, limited to reading and writing exercises. Informal discussions with teachers and parents revealed that most families encouraged the use of English at home, believing it essential for academic and professional advancement.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through a word identification task designed to assess the \knowledge of students of the culturally embedded Malayalam vocabulary. Ten objects commonly derived from the coconut tree; an iconic element of Kerala's ecology and cultural life, were selected as stimulus items. Each object was shown to the participants, who were asked to name it in Malayalam. The expected words represented various parts of the tree and items traditionally used in Malayalee households: /'tʃi.ra.ʈa/ (coconut shell), /'ʈond/ (coconut-husk), /'ma.ɖal/ (leaf midrib), /'tʃa.ki.ri/ (the fibrous covering that clings to the coconut shell after the husk is removed), /'i:ri.kil/ (the long leaf stem used for weaving or cleaning), /'ve.ɭ:ak:a/ (baby coconut), /'ka.rik:/ (green tender coconut), /tʃu:ʈ:/ (the dried coconut leaf or the sheet-like structure made of the thin threads found inside the leaf stalk, traditionally used for lighting fires), /ko.'ʈum.bu/ (the thick leaf stalk of the coconut frond), and /kina:ɳpil/ (the slim, horn-like stalks on which coconuts are borne).

Table 1

Malayalam Word	Positive Response	Negative Response	Total	% +	% -
□□□□□□ /'tʃi.ra.ʈa/	28	12	40	70	30
□□□□□□ /'ʈond/	7	33	40	17.5	82.5
□□□ /'ma.ɖal/	2	38	40	5	95
□□□□□ /'tʃa.ki.ri/	22	18	40	55	45
□□□□□□□□ /'i:ri.kil/	35	5	40	87.5	12.5
□□□□□□□□ /'ve.ɭ:ak:a/	3	37	40	7.5	92.5
□□□□□□□□ /'ka.rik:/	40	0	40	100	0
□□□□□□□ /tʃu:ʈ:/	0	40	40	0	100
□□□□□□□□ /ko.'ʈum.bu/	5	35	40	12.5	87.5
□□□□□□□□□□ / /kina:ɳpil/	0	40	40	0	100

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed descriptively. Percentages of correct and incorrect responses were used to assess children's familiarity with Malayalam vocabulary items. The quantitative findings were complemented by qualitative observations drawn from classroom interactions and informal discussions with teachers. These observations helped contextualize the numerical data within the lived experiences of the children and their families.

Scope and Limitations

The scope of the study was limited to a single rural English-medium school, and the sample size of forty students restricts the generalizability of findings. Due to time constraints, the research focused on one semantic field; vocabulary associated with the coconut tree, representing a small but symbolically rich segment of the cultural lexicon of Malayalam. Future research could extend this framework to include multiple lexical domains such as agriculture, domestic life, folklore, and regional festivals. Despite these limitations, the study offers significant preliminary insights into the sociolinguistic implications of English-medium education in the cultural landscape of Kerala.

Analysis and Discussion

1. Vocabulary Attrition and Cultural Detachment

The data collected from the forty rural CBSE students reveal an unmistakable trend: a substantial portion of Malayalam vocabulary traditionally associated with the coconut tree, a symbol deeply rooted in Kerala's agrarian culture is unfamiliar to the younger generation. While certain words such as /ka.rik:/ (tender coconut) and /i:r.kil/ (leaf stem) remain widely recognized, others like /t̪u:t̪:/ (dried coconut leaf or the sheet-like thread structure used for lighting fires), /kina:ɲpil/ (the horn-like stalk on which coconuts are borne), and /ma.dal/ (leaf midrib) have fallen almost entirely out of use among children.

The striking fact that not a single student could identify /t̪u:t̪:/ or /kina:ɲpil/ points to a deepening gap between language and lived experience. The vocabulary once used naturally within households and communities has become alien to children educated in English-medium environments. This disconnection is not simply linguistic; it reflects a larger erosion of cultural knowledge. As Fishman (1991) argues, the loss of language domains often parallels a community's dislocation from its cultural and ecological contexts.

In the case of Kerala, the cultural significance of the coconut tree extends far beyond utility; it embodies the rhythms of rural life, self-reliance, and traditional craftsmanship. When words tied to these material and emotional landscapes fade from use, children's understanding of their cultural environment becomes increasingly abstract, mediated through textbooks or English equivalents. Language, as a repository of cultural memory, is thus being replaced by a globalized lexicon that fails to carry the same symbolic weight.

2. English-Medium Education and Linguistic Hierarchies

The results of this study must be viewed against the backdrop of Kerala's educational transformation. English-medium schools, once a privilege of the elite, have proliferated across both rural and urban areas. Parents, driven by aspirations for global mobility, prefer English-medium instruction for their children, equating fluency in English with intellectual superiority and social advancement.

However, this phenomenon creates a sociolinguistic hierarchy where English is admired and Malayalam is subtly marginalized. Children absorb this hierarchy early; they begin to associate Malayalam with informality, domesticity, or even backwardness. As a result, Malayalam vocabulary associated with rural or manual labour contexts; /tʃa.ki.ri/, /tɒnd/ /ma.dal/ are often perceived as irrelevant or “low-status.” The social evaluation of language varieties, as Guy (2011) observes, reflects broader power relations: “The belief in the existence of some inherently superior variety of language is one of the most deeply held tenets of public ideology.”

Thus, the decline of Malayalam vocabulary is not due to linguistic incapacity but social conditioning. The prestige attached to English discourages natural use of Malayalam even in homes, leading to reduced input, less reinforcement, and ultimately attrition. Teachers and parents, often underestimate the cultural consequences of this shift, focusing instead on academic performance in English.

3. The Role of Languaculture and Identity Formation

The concept of *languaculture* (Agar 1994) provides a powerful lens for understanding this phenomenon. Languaculture refers to the inseparable link between language and the cultural schemas, behaviours, and worldviews that it encodes. In the context of this study, Malayalam words such as /tʃa.ki.ri/, /vel.lak.ka/, /tʃu:t/, and /kina:ɲɲil/ embody specific cultural practices, childhood games, household chores, harvest rituals, that once shaped social identity.

When children lose access to these words, they also lose access to the experiences and values those words represent. The cultural schema encoded in Malayalam vocabulary is replaced by an English-mediated worldview emphasizing modernity, efficiency, and global belonging. While bilingualism ideally enriches identity, in this case it has become subtractive rather than additive (Cummins 2001): English proficiency grows at the expense of Malayalam fluency.

This dynamic has far-reaching implications for identity formation. As Hall (1996) argues, identity is not fixed but constructed through language and cultural practice. The diminishing presence of Malayalam in children’s daily lives weakens their connection to local identity, replacing it with hybrid or detached forms of cultural belonging. What emerges is a generation fluent in English but estranged from the emotional and symbolic universe of their mother tongue.

4. Technological Mediation and Linguistic Hybridization

Another important factor accelerating Malayalam vocabulary attrition is the impact of digital culture and social media. The rise of “Manglish”, the Malayalam-English hybrid prevalent in texting and online communication demonstrates the creative adaptability of language users but also the dilution of linguistic boundaries. The digital medium privileges brevity, informality, and global intelligibility, often at the expense of local vocabulary richness.

Children increasingly engage with technology, media, and entertainment predominantly in English. As Verma (1989) notes, language evolves with social change, but when one language monopolizes technological spaces, others lose their expressive range. Malayalam words once associated with domestic and natural environments are being replaced by English or hybrid substitutes. For instance, traditional words describing kitchen tools /am.mi/ /u:ral (*ammi*, *ural*), rice varieties /'pɒk:ali/ /peru'val:a/ (*pokkali*, *peruvella*), or household items /'vati/ /'muram/ (*vatti*, *muram*) are rarely heard among urban or semi-urban youth. This trend

echoes global concerns articulated by Crystal (2000), who warns that “every time a language dies, a worldview dies with it.”

5. Pedagogical and Social Implications

The findings underscore the urgent need for pedagogical reform in language education. A balanced bilingual approach, as advocated by Cummins (2001) and UNESCO (2016), must be adopted in Kerala's schools. English should be taught as a means of global communication, not as a replacement for the mother tongue. Teachers and curriculum designers must consciously integrate Malayalam vocabulary linked to everyday cultural practices, ecology, and heritage into classroom activities.

The role of parents is equally important. Families can act as micro-level language preservation units by reintroducing Malayalam into daily conversation, storytelling, and cultural rituals. Encouraging children to use Malayalam words for familiar objects, foods, or traditional practices helps restore natural linguistic connections. The revival of Malayalam vocabulary, therefore, requires not only institutional policies but also grassroots re-engagement with lived culture.

6. Reclaiming the Human Element

Beyond its linguistic and educational dimensions, this study also gestures toward a more humanistic understanding of language. Words carry emotional and moral weight; they are repositories of affection, humour, and collective wisdom. The fading of Malayalam words is not a trivial linguistic shift but a quiet erosion of cultural intimacy, a forgetting of how people once interacted with the world around them.

As Shakespeare's oft-quoted line reminds us, “There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.” The labelling of certain linguistic forms as “inferior” or “outdated” stems from human perception, not inherent linguistic deficiency. To reclaim Malayalam vocabulary is, therefore, to reclaim a way of seeing and feeling the world. In revitalizing their language, Malayalees reaffirm the dignity of their cultural imagination and their intergenerational continuity.

Conclusion

Language is more than a medium of expression, it is the heartbeat of culture, the vessel through which a community remembers itself. The findings of this study reveal that the attrition of Malayalam vocabulary among schoolchildren is not a mere linguistic phenomenon but a symptom of a deeper cultural disconnection. The words that once defined the Malayalee way of life drawn from the soil, the sea, and the rhythm of domesticity are quietly fading from children's tongues as English becomes the language of aspiration, success, and global belonging.

The study demonstrates that even in rural Kerala, where environmental and cultural exposure might be expected to preserve local linguistic practices, English-medium education and shifting parental priorities have contributed to a loss of lexical intimacy with Malayalam. The inability of children to recognize culturally specific words is emblematic of a larger cultural drift one in which familiarity with English increasingly replaces engagement with local experience. Sociolinguistic theories from Sapir and Whorf to Fishman and Agar affirm that language is not separable from the worldview it constructs. When Malayalam words tied to

traditional life vanish, the worldview that shaped them weakens as well. What disappears is not just vocabulary but an entire ecology of meaning an intricate network connecting people to place, craft, and collective memory. This process, though gradual, has profound implications for cultural continuity and identity formation in Kerala.

Yet, the situation is not irreversible. Revitalizing Malayalam does not mean resisting English or retreating into linguistic isolationism. Rather, it involves cultivating a balanced bilingualism in which both languages coexist and complement each other. English can open doors to global opportunities, while Malayalam keeps those who speak it rooted in their history and environment. Educational institutions, parents, and policymakers must collaborate to design pedagogies that reaffirm the emotional and cultural significance of the mother tongue. Lessons can include regional vocabulary, folk songs, proverbs, and idioms linguistic bridges that connect the classroom with lived experience.

Equally, there must be a conscious effort to dignify the use of Malayalam in public spaces. When children see their mother tongue celebrated in literature, media, and digital platforms, they learn that linguistic pride is compatible with modern identity. The preservation of Malayalam lies not in statutory recognition as a “classical” language but in its continued use; spoken, sung, and lived by its people. As language lives through tongues, the renewal of Malayalam must begin with the youngest generation. Ultimately, to save a word is to save a world. The echoes of forgotten Malayalam words call upon us to listen to our past, to our elders, and to the wisdom embedded in our speech. If these echoes are nurtured rather than silenced, they will continue to resonate across generations, reminding Malayalees that linguistic diversity is not a relic of the past but the living essence of their cultural identity.

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