Review Articles

SLM is Dead, Long Live Sri Lanka Malay
A Review Article of Nordhoff 2013

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Abstract

This paper discusses the results of scholarship on Sri Lanka Malay based on the studies presented in Nordhoff 2013 in terms of theory, method, and social impact. It touches on a variety of topics including the significance of recent genetic evidence for old theories of language genesis, as well as the efforts for revitalization sparked by the scientific interest in the speech community. In evaluating this collection of variable significance, the author reflects on the transition of ownership of Sri Lanka Malay: from object of scientific curiosity to ancestral language of communal value.

Keywords


Sri Lanka Malay (SLM), the most restructured contact language amongst the Malay-based ones that we know of, has attracted the attention of a number of scholars in the past 15 years due to its ‘extreme’ nature, as captured in the subtitle of the book I review below. ‘Extreme’ must be interpreted as displaying serious typological restructuring. In fact, what this means is that we are looking at a language that, while still preserving distant links with its Malay heritage in some aspects, shows substantial Lankan aspects in many areas of grammar.
What is so interesting about SLM? First of all it is the fact that it allows us to observe the dynamics of contact in an environment where no European languages are involved. This, in particular when we think of the role Western varieties have played in the study of Creole languages, is very interesting. Secondly, the way in which SLM evolves warrants a number of different, at times conflicting, explanations. What kind of varieties were most involved in the contact? Who were the agents of change? What can we learn in terms of transfer mechanisms?

One of the controversies that has attracted academic interest centers on whether a simple bilingual route to acquisition can explain the formation of SLM, or whether we need to invoke a more complex, multilingual context in order to account for this radically restructured variety. The former position rests on the assumption of intermarriage between Malays and other Muslim (Moors) groups in Sri Lanka; the latter invokes metatypic models to explain the restructuring. As we will see, the book does offer an answer to this issue. Having written much about all these questions myself, what follows is indeed a review article and not just a review.

The book opens up with a short introduction to Sri Lanka Malay. The introduction contains all the necessary ingredients to form a background to the rest of the chapters. In particular it highlights the socially diverse and ethnically heterogeneous provenance of the so-called Malays, who really came from all corners of the Indonesian world, under Dutch and British colonial rule of Ceylon. It also highlights important points from a creolist perspective, namely the lack of Western European and West African substrate, the time span in which it evolved (300 years), and the significant degree of (morphological) development found in the language.

Chapter 2 presents a synchronic grammar of SLM that touches on all relevant aspects of the language. Nordhoff draws an excellent and clear picture of what is really a complex grammar, an achievement in itself. The chapter covers everything from orthography and intonation to discourse. For contact linguists what will be of particular interest is the careful attention given to the morphological properties of the language, which mark it aside from many other varieties that have been known as ‘creoles’. Equally intriguing and elegant is the analysis of semantic roles, one of the most striking Lankan features of this Malay variety already discussed in Ansaldo (2009, 2011, 2012). The significance of these features in terms of theories of genesis is treated in the last chapter, and I will return to it below.

The second part of the book presents three chapters that aim to reassess methodological issues as well as socio-historical data and their significance to theories of genesis of SLM. I find this part the least robust: theoretically there
is very little of innovative value; socio-historically there are a number of inaccuracies.

In chapter 3 Bakker presents a clear and sober take on the phenomena of contact that play a role in theories of SLM genesis. What is new here is the addition of genetic data that point to the Malays as the most endogamous group on the island. This corroborates a position already taken in Ansaldo (2008, 2009), which allows us to dissociate claims of language admixture from those of genetic admixture (or intermarriage). The former is clearly evident in the very grammatical nature of SLM, as Bakker himself notes, where Malay features combine with Sinhalese and Tamil ones (see also Ansaldo, 2009, 2010, 2011); the latter is clearly absent in the genetic make-up, thus corroborating less exact and more speculative data coming from historical archives. This is yet another nail in the coffin for the idea of intense Malay-Tamil bilingualism due to intermarriage, as already argued in Ansaldo (2008, 2009). Unfortunately, after an overall convincing chapter, there is a puzzling, final claim about the nature of multilingualism in the region: according to Bakker widespread multilingual patterns could not have existed here. The claim is made in passing and is not corroborated in any way. But it does go against multiple findings of current and past practices that show exactly the opposite, namely extremely widespread patterns of multilingualism. In addition, metatypic process must by definition be explained through widespread practices of multilingual usage, so a position that advocates for metatypy and against multilingualism strikes me as theoretically untenable (Ansaldo, 2009, 2011).

The contribution by Slomanson (chapter 4) seeks to be primarily of historical and methodological nature. There has been quite a bit written on this with various degrees of accuracy (for a discussion see Ansaldo, 2008, 2009). The nature of this particular study constitutes by and large a direct critique, if you like, of the historical claims published in my own works on SLM. As I do not believe in the kind of repeated duets that characterize a number of sad exchanges between academics, and given that past work on the topic contains sufficient backing for its claims, I will not dwell on this chapter in detail. I will only highlight the salient points that might advance our understanding of SLM in the interest of the reader. The main claim Slomanson wishes to make in this chapter is that, unlike what is argued under the ‘Tamil bias’ label, namely the idea that the intense Malay-Tamil bilingualism mentioned above is, basically, historical fiction, Tamil-Malay marriage did indeed happen on a significant scale. This may be confirmed if the new or reinterpreted historical material presented is accurate. The implication of this would be that Tamil is indeed a fundamental element in the formation of SLM. This can be additionally corroborated by the role of a variety of Tamil known as Shonam allegedly spoken
in SLM communities. Unfortunately Shonam, as a variety, remains as elusive as ever in this volume under review. No other author apart from Jaffar makes reference to it, and he does so in passing. Slomanson does not give us any clue as to its linguistic relevance in the formation of SLM, so we cannot possibly appreciate it. Most authors in this book support a different model, akin to metatypy which invokes more than two languages in genesis: Bakker, Gair, Smith as well as Nordhoff in the final chapter who clearly states that the ‘creolization’ approach, which builds on this idea of Tamil-Malay intermarriage, is not supported by a multilayered approach, while typological convergence, which does not require any role of Tamil-influenced bilingualism, is likely to be correct for significant stages of the language.

In these respects, there is no progress here. Note that cultural contacts due to religious affinity are clearly acknowledged by all parties. Intermarriage is not. As I already stated in previous work, what is obvious is that, despite decades of belief in a Tamil-Malay admixture scenario, no significant linguistic evidence has been presented to back up an overwhelming or even exclusive influence of Tamil in the formation of SLM grammar. I rest my case.

The fifth chapter by Rassool addresses issues of prestige and the divide faced by the community in terms of heritage vs. standard language. I find this an interesting chapter as it presents an insider’s view of the SLM community. But perhaps this inside position is also its weakness as the chapter suffers from a number of misunderstandings. First of all it is surprising that the author sets out by claiming that little sociolinguistic work is available on the SLM community. She proceeds to analyze a number of papers, mostly by Ansaldo and Lim, on this aspect that clearly offer substantial information that Rassool wishes to take issue with. So perhaps it is not so much an absence of sociolinguistic work on SLM, but an absence of such work that the author can fully agree with that is lamented. The table presented below that draws on much work by Ansaldo and Lim shows this awareness has been there all the time, and Rassool’s chapter adds to this, but does not re-invent it.

<table>
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<th>Community</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
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<td>1. Colombo</td>
<td>Middle-upper class community in capital city; restricted usage of SLM in old-middle generations now under revitalization efforts; common Sinhala (and some Tamil) competence; English fairly fluent to native speaker competence; standardising in Malay; no SLM in younger generation</td>
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Community | Characteristics
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2. Slave Island | Lower class community in a poor district of Colombo; widespread SLM usage; strong Tamil influences; no English
3. Kandy and Upcountry | Middle-lower/rural class communities in the central hill country area; SLM in old-middle generations, and in some younger generation; Sinhala and Tamil competence; some English proficiency, especially in younger generation
4. Hambantota | Community on the south coast, traditionally heavy Sinhalese-speaking area; SLM in old-middle generations; often trilingual with Sinhala and Tamil; limited English
5. Kirinda | Fishing community on southeast coast; SLM dominant in all generations; fully trilingual with Sinhala and Tamil, especially in middle-younger generations; English limited to a few individuals

Mistaken is the claim that Ansaldo and Lim recommend a movement towards the Standard. In much writing as well as in public talks with the SLM communities, these authors have argued exactly the contrary, that the alleged value of learning Standard Malay was overstated and that in the geopolitical context of Sri Lanka it would make little difference to the status of the community. But the authors have also tried to present the sensible pragmatic values that proponents of the movement might have had in mind, in the interest of presenting a balanced view and not advocate specific positions. The conclusions of the chapter, namely the split alliance with standard vs. heritage language found in the community, are very valid, and have already been presented in the sociolinguistic work that Rassool finds lacking (Ansaldo and Lim, 2006; Lim and Ansaldo, 2007; Ansaldo, 2008, 2010; Ansaldo and Lim, forthcoming).

In terms of endangerment, the claim that this is a construct that can be over-extended is very welcome. But here Rassool fails to appreciate more sophisticated aspects of the process. The following relevant observations for the practice of documentation summarize Lim and Ansaldo’s position (2006, 2007, forthcoming):

i. Identity, in particular linguistic identity, which is essential for vitality, is a process of negotiation between ideologies upheld within the community, and idea projected upon the community from the outside. We refer to this as identity alignment.
ii. The outside refers not only to the known institutions including policies, education and economy but, crucially, include linguists, both in the person of the ‘touch and go’ data collectors as well as the more heavy-handed documentarists. In this sense, we are powerful agents of identity construction process and the related vitality attached to it.

The discourse of endangerment as a whole, as it grows and reaches minority groups around the world such as the Malays of Sri Lanka, becomes an essential measure for linguistic vitality. It has a significant positive impact on communities whose language is in need of revitalization, and this also means it has a powerful role to play in the dynamics of identity construction and identity alignment.

Part 3 of the book is perhaps the most interesting one from the point of view of adding new findings to our current knowledge. Most successful in this is Jaffar whose analysis of S&CS (chapter 9) presents fresh data and further reflections on the complex nature of adstrate admixture in the formation of SLM grammar. In his thorough analysis of serialization in SLM, he notes how many of the patterns seem to be calques of Colombo Muslim Tamil. This is a very interesting reflection and points out indeed that the communities must have been close, as their religious affinity would lead us to believe. The direction of calquing is however a matter that still needs to be established. In addition, a number of patterns also reveal Sinhala influence, as expected, as well as Malay origins, in particular in the notorious pseudo-passive as well as in reduplication.

In chapter 6 Paauw offers a convincing lexical portrait that corroborates what has been so far assumed, namely a Javanese origin, at some stage, of many of the speakers who would eventually make it to Sri Lanka. This strengthens the evidence for at least a prolonged period of permanence on Java of the exiles, laborers and soldiers on their journey to Sri Lanka (Ansaldo, 2009) and weakens, though does not eliminate, the possibility of more eastern, origins such as the Moluku suggested in Adelaar (1991). In fact, as Paauw wisely concludes, both origins should be taken into account.

The chapters by Gair and Smith (chapters 7 and 8) further corroborate the areal features of South Asia such as sov and strong right-headedness present in SLM. This indicates how strongly SLM participates in the notorious Sprachbund. Smith looks at ‘abduction’, a process akin to the better-known relexification, of Dravidian nominalized verbs in South India and Sri Lanka through a comparison between SLM with Sinhala, Sourashtra, and Sri Lanka Malay Portuguese. His message is that different grammars will adopt and adapt
different features in differential ways in language contact, and reminds us that contact-induced features cannot be expected to be identical to each other.

The tenth and last chapter by Nordhoff presents a sophisticated linguistic historical account of the formation of SLM in which five different phases of formation are postulated, summarized below:

1. Dialect leveling, in which different varieties of Malay emerge as a more homogeneous variety.
2. Substrate reinforcement, during which Malay features that are present in one of the adstrates, Sinhala or Tamil, are retained.
3. Where the problem lies: ‘creolization’ or metatypy? Nordhoff’s answer is metatypy, which according to him holds along the lines laid out in Ansaldo (2008, 2009): typological convergence lead by frequency effects.
4. Shift\(^1\) to Sinhala/attrition: increased bilingualism in Sinhala leads to shift towards the dominant language.
5. Independent (recent/new) developments (i.e. not contact-induced)

I find this an impressively sophisticated, theoretically sound and empirically accurate account of genesis in SLM. In this respect I think the editor and author achieves something very close to a state of the art account of SLM. The only regret I have is the omission of a deeper explanatory dimension to (3) in terms of the actual social (those found lacking in SLM research by some contributors to this volume) and developmental dynamics in support of metatypy. The claims of metatypy have in recent years been backed up by sociolinguistic as well as acquisitional claims on the role of prestige, frequency, and cognitive salience. As these are fundamental for a proper appreciation of SLM genesis, they could have had at least a mention in this book. I review them below for the sake of the reader.\(^2\)

Ansaldo (2010) presents the linguistic process that contributes to the emergence of a unique SLM identity as a matter of alignment in a multilingual space. Identity alignment, already mentioned above, refers to language shift and linguistic restructuring observed in many multilingual diasporic minorities caught in the crossfire of two, opposed trends: (i) convergence to the dominant culture(s) and (ii) preservation of unique own identity. It is within such a conceptual framework that the process of creation of a new grammar such as SLM can be understood. In many multilingual communities around the world,

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1 Nordhoff uses ‘convergence’ but he really seems to mean shift.
2 To be sure, the shortcoming is just as much on the part of this author, who could not contribute to this book, as to its editor.
where multilingualism is not institutionally supported through schools, education etc., multilingual individuals may experience shifts within their multilingual competence. For example, if one of the codes used becomes limited to the home domain, it typically grows weak, and interference from the more frequently used languages is expected. This essentially is language attrition and also shows the following characteristics (Thomason and Kaufman, 1988):

- There is gradual abandonment of ancestral language (AL).
- It is typical for minority groups under (a) colonization and (b) nation-expansion processes.
- It is typical of stigmatized linguistic codes.
- It happens in the transition from monolingualism in AL to multilingualisms in L2/L3.
- L2/L3 take over domains of usage.
- The number of AL speakers gradually decreases and so does competence in AL.
- If AL has vitality, some features survive; if not, death occurs.

In the transition process described above, L2/3 dominant individuals lead the change through intense code-mixing, structural and lexical transfer in which features from the dominant languages interfere with features from the weaker code. In this transfer the speaker reorganizes, sometimes drastically, the known language through the newly acquired one. One common motivation is the AL speakers’ increasing accommodation to L2/3 under strong social and structural pressure through increased multilingual competence (Ansaldo, 2009; Ansaldo and Lim, 2006). In rare contexts where AL is vital, a partial maintenance is indeed possible (e.g. Anglo-Romani, Thomason and Kaufman, 1988).

From the discussion above it is clear that this context fits perfectly in the genesis of SLM. Once the Malay speech community had stabilized in Sri Lanka, the culturally significant adstrate, Tamil, and the dominant language of the majority, Sinhala, entered the linguistic ecology of SLM. Because of the notable typological congruence between their grammars, they could exert the necessary pressure for such a radical typological restructuring as the one observed in SLM. This is where type frequency comes into the picture, as shown most clearly in the case system of SLM which is essentially Lankan. The retention of, mainly, a Malay-derived lexicon shows the strong vitality the community has always preserved, and still preserves today.

There is good reason for assuming a very strong vitality throughout the history of the Malay community in Sri Lanka (see Ansaldo and Lim forthcoming). To start with, it is plausible to entertain the theory that the 7th century AD a
powerful trading network centered on the Indonesian island of Java started extending its reach to the South Asian continent. Known as the Srivijaya culture, these traders sailed to Tamil Nadu as well as Sri Lanka probably on their way to the Arabian Peninsula and established regular trading hamlets in this part of the Indian Ocean and the Arab Sea (see Ansaldo, 2009). It has been suggested that the southern town of Hambantota, where a SLM community lives, derives this name from the fact that it was the place where Sampans – i.e. vessels from the Indonesian archipelago – landed. While there is no solid historical or archeological evidence for this so far, this widely held belief underlies the identification of members of the SLM community with an era that predates Western colonial expansion and carries an aura of prestige and power. Until the advent of the Chola dynasty in South India (9th c. AD), Srivijaya fleets commanded much respect in the region and thus constitute a powerful association for the purpose of a Malay (specifically Javanese – these are not clearly distinguished in the context of SLM) identity in Sri Lanka. Though it is difficult to prove whether Hambantota was really founded by Indonesian and Malay traders, the quasi-mythical association plays a role in local writings and narrative of SLM origins and identity.

Secondly, during British colonial rule a regiment of soldiers of Malay and Indonesian provenance was established to help colonial powers keep order among local Lankan ethnicities. The Ceylon Rifle regiment was a prestigious institution that could lead to attractive careers after service; indeed many former soldiers ended up as police officers, plantation overseers and other official positions under British rule. Association with the history of the Regiment is important in SLM historiography as it portraits the Malays as the chosen group in colonial Sri Lanka, above the local majority of Sinhalese and the significant minority of Lankan Tamils. Already during Dutch rule a practice of bringing over fighters from the Indonesian and Malay colonies had resulted in the Malays being regarded as fierce and dependable soldiers, qualities that are still glorified in local historiography of the SLM community. When we trace back the origins of SLM families it is clear that the fact that the Malays were not natural allies of Lankan ethnic groups, as well as their inherent multilingual nature, made the chosen intermediaries between colonizers and locals in both Dutch and British Sri Lanka (Ansaldo, 2009).

Finally, it is crucial to realize that a majority of SLMs are Muslim. This is a strong centripetal force within the community Island-wide that clearly sets them apart from all other groups with the exception of the Moors. The Moors are descendants of Arab, Gujarat and Tamil traders who also follow the Muslim faith. Speculations suggesting that SLM communities descend predominantly from Tamil-Malay intermarriages have already been dismissed. They generates
much negative feeling among SLM community members who do not at all identify with this group, as it would detract from their unique Malay identity (Ansaldo, 2008). Having said that, it is clear that Islam has been a strong factor in maintaining a distinct cultural and linguistic identity. A weekly prayer in SLM is still being offered at the Slave Island Mosque. And identification with a pan-Malay identity has much to do with identification with a model Islamic society.

To sum up, I see this volume as an excellent conclusion to a field of study that has been most fascinating. It is a conclusion because, despite the valiant attempts, the progress is limited. In terms of genesis there is further confirmation of the metatypic approach. In terms of genetics we find additional evidence against Malay-Tamil intermarriage. And the editor offers a most detailed diachrony of stages of formation. But no matter how much more research and argumentation we devote to this topic, we have to heed Smith's conclusion very seriously: that considering the typological convergence that characterizes SLM, and the opaque – and arguably not very significant – nature of typologies of contact language, we need to accept that we will hardly ever be in a position to achieve total clarity or agreement on a number of issues. I believe this not to be an indication of poor scholarship. It is a reflection of a topic that has by now been sufficiently probed into. What could be discovered, has been discovered, what could be inferred, has been inferred. Let us not ignore that, thanks to this scholarship, as well as the documentation and revitalization work embraced by the community, SLM is a language that is no longer just the exclusive domain of linguistic inquiry. It is first and foremost a vital communicative system in the hands of its speakers, who are finally aware of its historical pedigree and once again proud to speak it and to transmit it. Thus the title I chose for this review article: SLM is dead, long live Sri Lanka Malay. In whichever varieties, and mixing, best suit the constantly changing ecology of the Malays of Sri Lanka.

References


