

How unique is Sri Lanka Malay? Recent work on SLM in the context of language contact studies

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Sri Lanka Malay was a relatively unknown language just a few decades ago – unknown to linguists, that is. In the past ten years or so, much more has become known, both with regards to the structural properties (language description) and the social history of the speakers. In addition to that, people other than specialists have developed an interest in it, apparently considering SLM a special case in the linguistic world.

I will discuss some recent work on the language in the context of study of contact languages. Some people have considered the language to be a creole, others a converted language, the result of convergence, an ex-creole and again others a language undistinguishable from other languages, to mention just a few labels. To some extent this is a question of one's definitions. In my view, the language does show a remarkable transformation and a significant break with its past, so that one can indeed speak of language genesis here.

How unique is the process that formed Sri Lanka Malay, and its twin Sri Lanka Portuguese? Both of these languages are the results of rapid language change (whether in the 18th, 19th or 20th century). Similar processes, however, have been observed in other parts of the world as well. In those other cases, we usually lack any information on a time dimension, and often cases of convergence are considered to have taken place over an extremely long period. Two questions remain especially intriguing, and those are (1) whether we can observe the same speed of the processes elsewhere, and (2) whether we can identify the precise social circumstances under which the transformation to SLM came about. A comparative approach can help us link the social with the linguistic dimension.