

Bilingual Assessment of Simple Sentences – Malayalam (BASS-Malayalam)

An Expressive Language Screening Assessment of Early Sentence Production

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Assessment Language: Malayalam

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Malayalam

The four Southern States of India each have an official language of their own and are collectively called Dravidian languages. There are three other languages spoken by specific groups of people in the South of India: Tulu, Koadava, and Konkani, but these languages are only spoken by a closed community. Malayalam is spoken mainly in the state of Kerala which is a Southwestern State of India. Kerala is located on the southernmost tip of the sub-continent adjacent to the Arabian Sea. Malayalam is also spoken in the Lakshadweep Islands, which are 200-400 km from the Southwest Coast of India. The word Malayalam is a palindrome and can be split into words “malay” which means mountain and /a:lam/ or /a:lam/ which means place and depth respectively. This could translate to “mountain country” or the “land lying between the mountain and the deep sea”. Malayalam became a separate language in the 9th century from a Pro Tamil version. Malayalam is similar to Tamil but has been considerably influenced by Sanskrit, Prakrit, Pali, Arabic, Persian, Syriac, Portuguese, Hindi, and English. Malayalam has borrowed many words from these languages. In the 8th century in Kerala, Sanskrit was used for education, and Tamil was the language of administration. Eventually, Malayalam evolved in written documents and literature. Kerala has welcomed many cultures, religions, and languages through trade, and this has influenced the language immensely. Half of the state has a large coastline and was heavily influenced by trade and missionaries from Spain, Portugal, Britain, and France. Up until the 19th Century Malayalam did not have a standard grammar, except for a few brief treatises by Portuguese, Latin, and English missionaries. Hermann Gundert published the first proper grammatical treatise of Malayalam in 1861. A modern full-fledged grammar of Malayalam was, however, not attempted until 1997 when Asher and Kumari published the *Descriptive*

Grammar series edited by Bernard Comrie. This work represents the most comprehensive and in-depth coverage of Malayalam available (Ravishankar. 2012).

Orthography

Kerala is the state with the highest literacy rate (nearly 100%) in India (Ravishankar, 2012). This is a significant sociolinguistic feature of the people of Kerala. The state has the most literary publications in the form of newspapers and magazines than any other state in India. Malayalam was the medium of instruction in schools in Kerala but there is a preference for English medium schools due to the high status of English. There has been a movement in Kerala to encourage Malayalam as the medium of instruction.

Malayalam has a script. The orthography is *direct* (i.e., a phonologically transparent language) which means every sound has a written grapheme to represent it. The script has 13 consonants and 11 vowels. All consonants have a vowel attached to the end. For example, [ka], unlike English where a consonant is pronounced on its own, such as [k].

Dialects

Malayalam has many dialects and some dialects of Malayalam spoken by the people in the north of the state are difficult to understand by the people in the south. The dialects can be broadly divided into Northern, Central, and Southern. Dialects are influenced by religion, culture, and nearby languages, especially near the borders of the state. There is a formal way of speaking Malayalam which is of high status and used in official documents, newspapers, and by news reporters. Most people in Kerala understand this formal or “Sanskritized version”. Malayalam taught in schools and used in official documents follows this version (Sreekumar, 2020).

Malayali Diaspora

Many people have migrated to Kerala and a large population of the state has migrated and continues to migrate to countries such as Singapore, Canada, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Australia, New Zealand, and the Middle East. The third and fourth most common language spoken in UK according to the 2021 census is Punjabi and Urdu respectively. The largest population of Punjabi speakers were located in the West Midlands. However, the number of people speaking Malayalam has not been reported. There are a lot of associations of people from Kerala across the UK. People from Kerala try to maintain a sense of community and culture by joining associations celebrating festivals such as Christmas, Eid, Onam, and Easter.

Phrase Order (Word Order)

Malayalam follows an AGENT + PATIENT + ACTION

Subject-Object-Verb (SOV) word or phrase order:

Thematic role	AGENT <i>'doer'</i>	PATIENT <i>'affected / done to'</i>	ACTION
Surface form	<i>Subject</i>	<i>Object</i>	<i>Verb</i>
Malayalam	s̥tri:	paṅḍə	tu:ɽi'ku'nu
Morpheme-by-morpheme translation	lady	ball	kick + present tense marker
English equivalent	<i>The lady is kicking a ball</i>		

Verbs / Actions

Malayalam follows the system of marking semantic (thematic) roles and surface grammatical relations through a set of case suffixes, a feature common to the Dravidian languages. As roles and relations are conveyed through suffixes, word order changes do not normally alter sentence meaning in Malayalam. Verbs are **not** marked for gender or number Sreekumar (2020).

Verbs in Malayalam have a state of **being** or **action**. /ṅu/,/um/, and /i:/ are added as suffixes to convert a verb form into a different tense. For example /pa:ʈə/ 'to sing'. To convert into the future tense /'nu/ is added. A formal way of representing this is /pa:ʈuka/ /akuṅṅu/ but /akuṅṅu/ as a present tense marker is not used anymore and is more like "thee" and "thy" in old English. It's used in ritual language such as at church or in a temple. Therefore, the appropriate present tense would be /pa:ʈuṅṅu/. To convert a verb into future tense /um/ is added to the verb /pa:ʈ:um/ 'will sing'. To convert a verb into past tense /i:/ is added to form /pa ʈi:/. There are 12 different suffixes added to indicate past tense, this is based on the vowel at the end of the state of the verb. This is mentioned in Kerala Pananiyam which is a grammar text used by Post Graduate Malayalam students. The rules for using different morphemes depends on the vowel at the end of the verb sometimes and is beyond the scope of this introduction. Below are some examples of past tense variations in suffixes:

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Pert, S., Stow, C and Rajan, E. (2024)

Verb		Past Tense	
paṭṭikuka	study	pa ṭi ṭṭṭu	studied
karajuka	cry	kararu	cried
naṭakuka	walk	naṭaru	walked

Gender

Nouns have suffixes or prefixes added to them to mark gender. Gender is represented most by adding /ən/ to represent male, and /i:/ to represent female. Sometimes /a/ is a marker for the feminine gender,

For example:

- /addḥja:pi-ka/ 'female teacher',
- /addḥja:pak-ən/ 'male teacher'.

Variant gender suffixes are seen in a limited set of female nouns such as:

- /ṭatta-tti:/ 'goldsmith woman',
 - /aṇija-tti/ 'younger sister',
 - /maṭi-tṭṭi/ 'lazy woman'.
- (Gopinathan Nair, 2006)

In some instances, there are specific words to represent male and female animals such as 'fox' and 'vixen' in English. For example:

- /pju/ for 'cow', and
- /ka:|a/ for 'bull'.

Alternatively, 'girl' or 'boy' is added as a prefix to the word in order to mark gender, For example:

- 'girl-dog' /pən pa' ṭṭi/ ,
- 'boy-dog' /a: ṇ pa ṭṭi/ ,

or a particular prefix is added.

For example:

- /pu:vən/ (male), and
- /pida/ female

is added as a prefix to represent male and female in birds.

For example:

- /pida ko.li/ female duck,
- /pu:vən tharavi/ male duck.

Illustrations

The illustrations used in the Malayalam adapted BASS version are from the original Mirpuri, Urdu, and Punjabi BASS versions. The original BASS illustrations were modified to become culturally appropriate. For example, the sleeve lengths were modified from full sleeves to half sleeves, shoes were replaced with flip flops and the men were given moustaches without beards.

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