

Evolution, endangerment and documentation

Documentation of Sri Lanka Malay

Sri Lanka Malay is a 'high contact variety'. This means that this language has undergone heavy language contact, in fact more than most other known languages. Spoken language corpora are especially important to analyze the extent of influence from the neighboring languages Sinhala and Tamil in a scientifically acceptable way.



The audience at the symposium of the Women's association of Sri Lanka Malays about the future development of the Sri Lanka Malay

In distinction to most other Dobes documentation projects, we documented an urban population. The Malays were always close to the colonial powers and resided in barracks close to the colonial centers. Language endangerment is often seen as the languages of globalization encroaching upon the homelands of the 'native' population. Sri Lanka Malay calls this conceptualization into question: without globalization/colonization, the Sri Lanka Malays would not even exist. This being said, English is currently making inroads into all languages of Sri Lanka, especially among the urban populations. Given that the Sri Lanka Malays reside in urban centers, they are more affected by this development than other ethnic groups.



Elicitation involves cultural objects unknown in Europe, here a rice winnow

There are about 50 000 Malays in Sri Lanka. The exact number of speakers is unknown, but it is probably less than half. When the project started, a pessimistic scenario was assumed, despite the rather large number of speakers, as attrition in Colombo was very rapid. Closer investigation of smaller towns in the Upcountry showed, however, that the language is much more vital there than initially assumed.



The Salim family uses the new computer to transcribe Sri Lanka Malay texts.



The Sri Lankan civil war led to the 2008 meeting with consultants being held in the Netherlands

The project was scheduled to start in January 2005, but due to the Tsunami on 2004/12/26, the first documentation efforts could only be made in late 2005. The project began during the cease-fire of the Sri Lankan civil war, but hostilities broke out again some time later, which meant that in 2008 the researchers met the Malays in the Netherlands rather than in Sri Lanka. In spite of the worsening security situation, documentation and transcription efforts could be kept up thanks to good collaboration over the Internet.



After the disbandment of the Malay Rifle Regiment, many Malays were employed as overseers in the tea estates.

The corpus features as a highlight one of the last weddings with the support of the late Mr Cassiere, who was the last one able to direct and perform the traditional chants in Sri Lanka Malay. Currently, efforts are underway to produce primers and connect with the younger generations on Youtube to preserve Sri Lanka Malay's status as a living language.



A Sri Lanka Malay family from Slave Island, Colombo.

CONTACT ADDRESS

Umberto Ansaldo
Associate Professor of Linguistics
School of Humanities
The University of Hong Kong

uansaldo@gmail.com