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Adding the Malabar creoles to the Luso-Asian family

The coastal stretch of Southwestern India, formerly known as the Malabar, was the locus of the earliest Portuguese settlements in Asia and, therefore, the earliest sustained contact situation between Portuguese and an Asian language. As a result, the Indo-Portuguese creoles of Malabar are, at least potentially, the oldest of all Asian-Portuguese creoles and may have influenced the formation of the others.

On account of their near-extinction, Malabar Indo-Portuguese varieties were for a long time among the least well-known within Asian-Portuguese, while other Indo-Portuguese creoles, such as those of Sri Lanka, Korlai and Diu, have already been substantially documented (Smith 1977, Clements 1996, Cardoso 2009). Because of this, Malabar Indo-Portuguese is not represented in major databases designed for comparative studies (e.g. Holm & Patrick 2007, Michaelis et al. 2013).

However, a project aimed at documenting and describing Malabar Indo-Portuguese, on the basis of recordings made in Vypeen [Cochin] and Cannanore, is currently under way. This process has unearthed striking similarities with Sri Lanka Portuguese in various domains, from grammatical structure to the lexicon. On the basis of these similarities, Cardoso (2013) has proposed the definition of a “southern cluster” within Indo-Portuguese (akin to the well-established “norteiro” cluster) encompassing the Malabar and Sri Lanka. The argumentation for this was, however, impressionistic rather than quantitative. In this talk, we will test the validity of this cluster with resort to phylogenetic tools and a methodology developed for the large-scale comparison of creole languages (Huson & Bryant 2006, Daval-Markussen & Bakker 2011, 2012).

References

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