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## LANGUAGE CONTACT AND CHANGE: AN ANALYSIS OF HERITAGE

### KONKANI IN KERALA<sup>1</sup>

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#### Abstract

This paper analyses the extent of language contact induced change in the sound system of heritage Konkani community of Kerala, India. Heritage Konkani, belonging to different castes namely *Gowda Saraswat Brahmins (GSB)*, *Saraswat non-brahmins*, *Konkan Sonars*, *Vaishya Vaniyar* and *Kudumbi*, started migrating to Kerala in the late 13th century. The upper caste GSBs remained as a closed community until 20th century, which helped in the maintenance of their language. Linguistic data for the study was collected from 20 GSB youths of the age group 18-35 using Snowball sampling method. The analysis of the data shows loss of features such as aspiration and nasalization, which are inherent to Konkani. This indicates the vulnerable linguistic situation of the GSB community whose mother tongue exhibits linguistic variations, as a result of prolonged coexistence with the majority language, Malayalam.

**Keywords:** heritage Konkani, phonetics, language contact, variation, caste dialect

#### CONTACTE LINGÜÍSTIC I CANVI: UNA ANÀLISI DEL PATRIMONI KONKANI A KERALA

#### Resum

Aquest article analitza l'abast del canvi provocat pel contacte lingüístic en el sistema fonètic de la comunitat Konkani patrimonial de Kerala, Índia. Els konkani patrimonials, que pertanyen a diferents

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castes, com ara els bramans Gowda Saraswat (GSB), els no bramans Saraswat, els sonars Konkani, els Vaishya Vaniyar i els Kudumbi, van començar a migrar a Kerala a final del segle XIII. Els GSB de casta superior van romandre com una comunitat tancada fins al segle XX, cosa que va contribuir al manteniment de la seva llengua. Es van recollir dades lingüístiques per a l'estudi de 20 joves GSB del grup d'edat de 18 a 35 anys mitjançant el mètode de mostreig de *Snowball*. L'anàlisi de les dades mostra la pèrdua de característiques com ara l'aspiració i la nasalització, que són inherents a Konkani. Això indica la situació lingüística vulnerable de la comunitat GSB la llengua materna de la qual presenta variacions lingüístiques, com a conseqüència de la convivència prolongada amb la llengua majoritària, el malayalam.

**Paraules clau:** herència Konkani, fonètica, contacte lingüístic, variació, dialecte de casta

### **CONTACTO LINGÜÍSTICO Y CAMBIO: UN ANÁLISIS DEL PATRIMONIO KONKANI EN KERALA**

#### **Resumen**

Este artículo analiza el alcance del cambio provocado por el contacto lingüístico en el sistema fónico de la comunidad patrimonial Konkani de Kerala, India. Los konkani patrimoniales, pertenecientes a diferentes castas, a saber, Gowda Saraswat brahmanes (GSB), Saraswat no brahmanes, Konkani sonares, Vaishya Vaniyar y Kudumbi, comenzaron a migrar a Kerala a finales del siglo XIII. Los GSB de casta superior permanecieron como una comunidad cerrada hasta el siglo XX, lo que ayudó al mantenimiento de su idioma. Los datos lingüísticos para el estudio se recopilaron de 20 jóvenes de GSB del grupo de edad de 18 a 35 años utilizando el método de muestreo *Snowball*. El análisis de los datos muestra la pérdida de características como la aspiración y la nasalización, inherentes a Konkani. Esto indica la situación lingüística vulnerable de la comunidad GSB cuya lengua materna presenta variaciones lingüísticas, como resultado de la coexistencia prolongada con la lengua mayoritaria, el malayalam.

**Palabras clave:** herencia Konkani, fonética, contacto lingüístico, variación, dialecto de casta

#### **1. Introduction**

Variations and changes in the linguistic features of a language can be due to various external or social reasons of which contact, need and prestige are considered to be more conspicuous (Labov 1963: 273-309, Thomason 2001: 1-10, Aitchison 2012: 46-59, Siebenhütter 2020: 1-22). In a multilingual society, where two or more languages are in contact, it is natural to have words or other linguistic features borrowed from the dominant language. This may lead to a diglossic situation, language shift or in extreme cases, language death. In this paper, the linguistic situation of a heritage community which speaks the Indo-Aryan language, Konkani and has been in contact with the Dravidian language Malayalam will be analyzed.

Heritage Language is a language that is spoken by a community at a place where they are a minority. Valdés (2000), in the context of Mexican immigrants in the United States of America, defined heritage language as a language that is spoken by immigrants. Nevertheless, it is a linguistic scenario in which a language, which once used to be primary and native, becomes a secondary language because of its restricted use. Heritage Konkani (HK) speakers of Kerala migrated from Goa to Kerala during 13th to 16th century (Mallaya 1994: 2-3) and identify themselves as Konkanis who live in Kerala and can also speak Malayalam, the majority language of the state. Military campaign by the Mughal ruler Alauddin Khilji and Portuguese inquisition of Goa led to the massive migration of Konkanis to various parts of the country. They fled their lands to escape the compulsory conversion to Christianity by the Portuguese and found shelter in various parts of India (Robinson 1993: 65-83). In Kerala, the southernmost state of India where Malayalam is the official language, HK speakers are found to have settled in the northern districts such as Kasargode and Kozhikode, and in the southern districts of Ernakulam, Alappuzha, Kollam, and Thiruvananthapuram. The northern district Kasargode previously belonged to the Southern Canara district of Madras presidency of British India and therefore, the influence of the Dravidian language Kannada and Canara Konkani is evident in the speech of HK speakers of Kasargode and its neighbouring district, Kozhikode. On the other hand, Konkani in southern Kerala does not have this influence but has incorporated a number of Malayalam words.

Montrul (2012: 1-29) distinguishes a second language learner and a heritage speaker on the basis of their order of language acquisition and language use in socio-political and functional domain and accordingly, the Konkanis of Kerala qualify as heritage speakers. Although they acquired Konkani first, their primary language is Malayalam which is also the majority language of the state. Heritage Konkani community of Kerala, like any other minority/immigrant group, had to learn the majority language in order to thrive and prosper in their new land. The close contact of Konkani and Malayalam for centuries and multilingual situation among the Konkani group has led to linguistic exchange on various levels. Prior studies (Seliger 1996: 605-625, Cook 2003: 268, Benmamoun, Montrul & Polinsky 2013: 129-181) on similar

bi/multilingual situations show a systematic encroachment of second language on an individual's native language. Such an encroachment could be on phonetic, morphological or syntactic levels. Although Konkani spoken in the southern Kerala has a wide range of Malayalam influence, this paper will only focus on the phonological features of HK variety spoken in Kochi, a coastal town located in the Ernakulam district.

Various studies on the sociolinguistic situation of Goa (Sardesai 2004: 44-51) suggest that Konkani has caste, social, and religious dialects. The variety of Konkani spoken by Goan Christians is largely different from that of Goan Hindus. Among Hindus, each caste has its own variety in addition to the social and regional varieties. Sardesai (2004: 44-51) observed that more than geographical barriers it is the social barrier that has distanced the speakers of Konkani. She cites the example of a Hindu Brahmin and Christian Brahmin who have been living as neighbors for a long time and another Hindu Brahmin who lives miles away. Hindu Brahmins, despite regional differences, have similar speech variety whereas Konkani spoken by neighbors who belong to different religion have disparities. While Goan Konkani has dialectal difference based on religion, the Konkani in Kochi has dialectal differences based on caste. *Gowda Saraswat Brahmins (GSB), Saraswat non-Brahmins, Konkani Sonar, Vaishya Vaniyar, and Kudumbis* are the heritage Konkani of various castes who belong to Kochi. The GSB community belong to the upper caste and enjoys higher social, economic and political status than the rest of the communities, especially *Kudumbi* community which belongs to the Scheduled Caste (SC). The members of the *Kudumbi* community had also migrated along with GSBs as their service providers/servants but are on the verge of language endangerment. Though GSBs started migrating to Kerala in the late 13th century, they remained as a closed community until 20th century due to various socio-political reasons. Since GSBs fled their land to protect themselves from the compulsory massive conversions, language maintenance along with preservation of culture and identity are of paramount significance to them. They feared death of their language and culture should they mingle with the local people. Centuries of isolation kept their language and culture intact, unlike that of the *Kudumbis*, who have assimilated with the *Malayali* community, with most of them giving up Konkani and starting to identify themselves as *Malayalis*.

Konkani GSBs of Kochi live together as a community around a temple. However, as the situation demands, Konkani is only spoken in restricted domains such as inside their homes and within the community. The majority language, Malayalam, has become their primary language as it is used everywhere else (schools, colleges, hospitals, offices, business, etc.). However, as an attempt to promote Konkani, schools run by the GSBs recently introduced Konkani as a third language and teach it to all students in the lower primary school. Despite the attempts made by other communities to propagate Konkani, many of them have not been using Konkani even within their community or households, owing to the dominance of Malayalam and its functionality. Although, there are differences in vocabulary and pronunciation patterns according to each caste, most of these varieties are mutually intelligible. Table 1 shows the differences in the realization of vocabulary by *Gowda Saraswat Brahmins*, who belong to the upper strata of caste division, and *Kudumbis*, who belong to the scheduled caste category.

Lexeme	Kudumbi	GSB
pond	to:le	te:le
ladder	ṅisso:ṅi	ṅisse:ṅi
sandalwood	gje:nṅə, ga:nṅə	ga:ng <sup>h</sup> ə
umbrella	sanṅu:li	sattṅu:li
small	sa:ṅṅu	sa:nu

Table 1. Differences in GSB and *Kudumbi* speech

Such differences in caste dialects are still maintained among the heritage speakers of Kochi to maintain their distinguished identity. Although the number of people in Kochi who belong to each caste is really low, they still mark their boundaries in speech and lifestyle. Each of these groups lives in separate lanes around their temples and have separate mechanisms/institutions for language propagation, keeping in mind the disparities in their speech. Ferguson's (1959: 232-249) concept of diglossia can be extended to understand the linguistic situation of the heritage Konkani speakers. That is, there is a diglossic situation within the community wherein the GSB Konkani enjoys the privilege of being the "High" (H) variety and others remain as

“Low” (L) varieties due to socio-political reasons. According to Ferguson, “in all the defining languages the speakers regard the H as a superior to L in a number of respects. Sometimes the feeling is so strong that H alone is regarded as real and L is reported to be not to exist” (1959: 237). Therefore, it is not surprising to see the Konkani of lower castes fading into oblivion, with not many speakers.

The GSB variety, the H variety, continues to overpower the L varieties and has many young speakers even today, which is a good sign of language maintenance and one of the major reasons why linguistic data for this study was collected from them. Data was collected from the informants of the age 18-35 (male and female) using snowball sampling method wherein one informant gave leads to the other. It was maintained that the informants are native speakers of Konkani who have spent at least the first eighteen years of their life in Kochi. Interview method and questionnaires were also used to collect the desired amount of data, which was later closely analysed. The following section will discuss the extent of influence of the majority language Malayalam on Konkani.

## **2. Influence of Malayalam on Heritage Konkani**

As discussed earlier, caste dialects of Konkani function as linguistic markers of social identity and the L varieties have not been successfully maintained. The question of concern now is whether the GSB variety, which has speakers of all age group, has been successful in evading the Malayalam impingement? The very fact that the language is still spoken by the community indicates the importance of language preservation for its members, as it manifests their culture and identity. However, variations are observed within the GSB community which predicts the possible death of the language (Kloss 1984: 65-76) in the near future.

A number of GSBs of Kochi hitherto live around their temple which is the center of socio-cultural activities. It is intriguing that a small community of people who belong to the same caste and reside in the same locality has disparate vocabulary, which in turn throw light to the vulnerability of Konkani in Kochi. That is, the speakers of the

same community have different realizations for the same lexeme as observed in Table 2. A detailed analysis of the data collected from the GSB speakers of HK suggests that features like aspiration and nasalization, inherent in Konkani, are not realized by the younger generation in all phonetic environments. Omission of these features can be understood as a contact induced shift, as the primary language Malayalam does not have nasalization and aspiration as contrastive features.

Lexeme	Realization 1	Realization 2	Realization 3
Well	bã:j	bɑ:ĩ	-
River	ŋ <sup>h</sup> ẽ:ji	ŋ <sup>h</sup> ə:hi	ŋə:ji
No	ŋ <sup>h</sup> əji	ŋaji	ŋə:ji
Gravel	soŋkro	sɔrɔŋko	-
Foot	pau	pɑ:ul	-
left	ɖɑ:və	ɖ <sup>h</sup> ɑ:vo	-

Table 2. Different realizations of same lexeme by GSB speakers

### 2.1 Nasalization

Konkani is rich with nasal consonants and nasalized vowels that are in contrastive distribution with their non-nasalized counterparts. Nasalization in Konkani also performs grammatical functions and nasalized vowels also bring significant changes in complex words. For example, both oral and nasalized vowels of Konkani mark gender, number, and tense. Konkani nouns can be categorized as masculine, feminine, or neutral based on gender. The final vowel of the noun helps in identifying the gender of a noun as seen in Table 3. That is, masculine nouns mostly end with the vowel sounds /o/ and /u/, whereas feminine nouns end with /i, ə/, and neutral nouns end with the vowel sounds /ẽ/ and /ə/. The plural allomorphs also vary according to the final vowels. Since a discussion on the morphological features of the language is beyond the scope of this paper, we will only look at the omission of phonetic features that may or may not have grammatical functions.

During this research, it was observed that 60% of the HK speakers only partly realize nasalization in their speech production. Out of the 20 informants, 11 produced the same word for both singular and plural noun forms and did not have nasalized vowel production in the realization of feminine and neutral plural nouns.

Gloss	MASC SG	MASC PL	FEM SG	FEM PL	NEUT SG	NEUT PL
Dog	petto	pette	hetti	hettijõ	su:ñẽ	su:ñĩ
Cat	bukko	bukke	mad3d3ə:ri	mad3d3ə:rijõ	mad3d3ə:rə	mad3d3ə:rẽ

Table 3. Nasalization in Konkani

Word	Singular	Plural	HK realization of plural words
Animal	mrəgə	mrəgã	bo:rɲu mrəgə
Shop	aŋgə:dʒi	aŋgə:dʒijõ	mas̩tə aŋgə:dʒi
Paper	kə:gəʈ	kəg̃t̩	bo:rɲu kə:gəʈ
Sister	akki	akkijõ	akkima:r

Table 4. Realization of Plural Words by HK GSB speakers

As depicted in Table 4, instead of using nasalized vowels to mark plurality, majority of the HK speakers relied on the adjectives /mas̩tə/ and /bo:rɲu/, meaning ‘many’. They claimed that they had never heard of the realizations with nasalized vowels when asked if they were correct. It is of further interest to analyse the plural realization of the word /akki/ ‘sister’. The HK plural realization /akkima:r/ ‘sisters’ stands out as it neither uses the adjectives /mas̩tə/, /bo:rɲu/ ‘many’ nor uses the nasalized vowel. The lexeme /akki/ ‘sister’ has been made plural using the suffix /-ma:r/ which is borrowed from the majority language Malayalam. Malayalam has two plural morphemes, /-ma:r/ and /-ka/, out of which /-ma:r/ is used when the noun is specified for a gender (masculine or feminine) and the suffix /-ka/ is attached to animate and inanimate neutral nouns. The Konkani noun /akki/ ‘sister’ marked for feminine gender takes the Malayalam suffix /-ma:r/, which is only attached to gender assigned nouns in Malayalam. This choice of borrowed suffix /-ma:r/ shows the borrower’s knowledge in the respective source and target languages’ grammatical categories. While they are unaware of their first languages’ plural marker, the HK speakers are competent in their second language’s grammatical features.



Similar patterns of substitution of nasalized vowels are found in suffixes attached to verbs as well. For example, the data in Table 5 portrays another example to substantiate the minimal use of nasalized vowels in HK.

Correct form	Realization	Gloss
saŋgillẽ	sa:ŋgine	Say.PST.PRF [perfet]
ḡakkeilẽ	ḡakkeine	Show.PST [Past]
ʃikku:nəṭilẽ	ʃikku:nəṭine	study.without
karṭalĩ	karṭani	do.FUT(ure)

Table 5. Realization of Nasalized Verbs in HK

Here, the final syllable with alveolar lateral consonant and nasalized vowel is substituted by alveolar nasal consonant followed by oral vowel. While nasalization on the final vowel is lost, the preceding consonant is realized as a nasal sound.

## 2.2 Aspiration

Miranda (2003: 729-765) lists aspiration as an important feature of Goan Konkani along with nasalization. The phonemic systems of Goan Konkani and HK were compared to see the variations in consonants. Although many deviations are not noted, the analysis gave ample evidences for minimal use of aspirated sounds in HK. Among the aspirated sounds /p<sup>h</sup>, b<sup>h</sup>, t<sup>h</sup>, ḡ<sup>h</sup>, t̪<sup>h</sup>, d̪<sup>h</sup>, k<sup>h</sup>, g<sup>h</sup>, m<sup>h</sup>, ŋ<sup>h</sup>, v<sup>h</sup>, l<sup>h</sup>, tʃ<sup>h</sup>, dʒ<sup>h</sup> /, the sounds /m<sup>h</sup>, ŋ<sup>h</sup>, u<sup>h</sup>, l<sup>h</sup>/ are exclusive to Konkani and are not a part of the Malayalam phonemic system. While rest of the aspirated sounds are still realized by HK speakers, the usage of nasal aspirates and approximant aspirates is getting minimal, which can also be attributed to the influence of Malayalam, wherein aspiration is not a contrastive feature.

Lexeme	HK word	Variant 1	Variant 2
Stone	p <sup>h</sup> at̪to:ru	fat̪to:ru	-
Groom's procession	u <sup>h</sup> o:ra:ŋə	ho:ra:ŋə	uo:raŋə
Elder brother's wife	u <sup>h</sup> onni	honni	onni
River	ŋ <sup>h</sup> ə:ji	ŋə:ji	-
Puffed rice	l <sup>h</sup> a:ji	la:ji	-

Table 6. Realization of Aspirated Sounds in HK

In most cases, the aforementioned aspirated sounds are replaced by their unaspirated counterparts, substituted by another sound or sometimes the Konkani word itself is not realized but replaced by a Malayalam word, as seen in Table 6. The feature of aspiration, however, is not as affected as nasalization majorly because of the presence of aspiration and absence of nasalized vowels in Malayalam. The primary language of the speakers and its features play a crucial role in deciding which feature is adversely affected. That is to say, features of the heritage language that are common to the majority/primary language have higher chances to be preserved while linguistic features that are exclusive for the heritage language disappear in a faster rate.

### **3. Conclusion**

Like any two linguistic communities in close contact with each other, linguistic exchange of phonetic, morphological and syntactic features can be identified in heritage Konkani as well. The prolonged coexistence of Konkani and Malayalam and the dominance of Malayalam has resulted in the borrowing of Malayalam features to Konkani and has expedited the assimilation and appropriation of Konkani. The assimilation of GSB Konkani despite fierce attempts to maintain the variety is intriguing. Unlike the other varieties of HK, the GSB variety has been included in the school curriculum and has many speakers.

Sarangi (2018: 47-67) gives a detailed account of the Konkani script controversy. Devanagari, Kannada, Roman, Malayalam, and Perso-Arabic scripts are, till now, used to write Konkani by Konkani immigrants to different parts of India. The Malayalam script used by HK speakers of Kerala does not do justice to the language when it comes to representing nasalized vowels and aspirated nasal/lateral sounds; features that are absent in Malayalam. Therefore, the absence of a proper script and thereby the absence of literary works in Konkani has accelerated the shift of Konkani towards Malayalam. However, this shift is not complete yet as the feature of nasalization has been maintained to an extent in HK in such a way that the speakers of the language

still realize nasalized vowels as a phoneme. Thus, it is safe to conclude that although the linguistic structure of HK has been encroached by the majority language, it is not too late to prevent further “encroachment” (Benmamoun, Montrul & Polinsky 2013: 129-181). Proper documentation, codification and instituting adequate language policies will ensure the presence of HK in Kerala.

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