

# South Asia: It takes a village to save a language

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## **Pidgins, creoles and mixed languages of Southasia.**

Home to 544 living languages belonging to six language families – Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Austro-Asiatic, Tibeto-Burman, Andamanese, Kra-Dai and some isolates – Southasia has always been the hotbed of language contact and convergence. This extensive contact between genetically unrelated languages has given rise to a linguistic area where languages share many unique linguistic features such as retroflex sounds, word order and echo words to various syntactic devices. In discussions around language contact and convergence in Southasia, however, pidgins, creoles and mixed languages are often neglected. The disdain towards them is visible in their names which are often prefixed by words such as *bastard*, *broken*, *lazy* or *pig*. Until recently, they were seldom recognised as languages and were often treated as corrupt versions of some dominant languages.

## **Origins**

Pidgins and creoles are contact languages that develop over a period of time from the need for communication among people who speak mutually unintelligible languages. The word *pidgin* is attested to be from the Chinese Pidgin-English pronunciation of the word '*business*'. Chinese Pidgin English was an 18<sup>th</sup>-century trade language that developed in coastal China among English speaking traders and their Cantonese speaking workers. The word *creole* is related to Latin *creare* (create, breed) borrowed into English through French or Spanish. It originally referred to a person of European descent born especially in the West Indies or Latin America. In linguistics, creoles differ from pidgins in that they become the mother tongue of an entire speech community and are spoken at home, too. Pidgins, meanwhile, remain a secondary language to be used in specific situations. Both can act as a lingua franca, ie, a contact language outside of home.

Interestingly lingua franca itself was an Italian-based pidgin language spoken among traders in the eastern Mediterranean and later in northern Africa and West Asia. Pidgin and creole languages are the low-prestige varieties of dominant languages in the sense that they continue to be stigmatised and shunned because in popular discourse (even for their native speakers) they are considered corrupted or degenerate forms of standard languages. Due to this stigmatisation and lack of institutional support, pidgins and creoles are largely oral languages and lack written literature or writing systems.

On the other hand, mixed languages are languages with split-ancestry which arose primarily due to expressive needs in a multilingual community, and whose linguistic ancestry is difficult to define. Since pidgins and creoles do not descend from a single ancestor language, they defy the concept of language families. This unique process of evolution of pidgins and creoles challenges our existing theories of language. Pidgins, creoles and mixed languages may help us to understand how human languages have evolved over the centuries, what are the differences between child language acquisition and adult language acquisition, and how unrelated languages in large areas like

Southasia come to share a large set of linguistic features.

## **Spread**

Indian Ocean world has always been a dynamic space for language contact stretching from China to Southeast Asia to Arabia and Europe. From the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards, European colonialism created port towns and colonies where people speaking completely different languages were brought together and forced to find shared means of communication. This is reflected in several pidgins and creoles spoken in the coastal areas of the Subcontinent, such as Diu Indo-Portuguese creole (India), Sri Lankan Portuguese creole, Sri Lankan Malay (a mixed language), and Korlai creole (spoken in Maharashtra) – although this does not mean that the birth of these new languages was restricted to outlying areas of the Subcontinent. Notable exceptions to this were Butler English, a domestic workforce pidgin spoken by domestic servants during 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century British India; and Nagamese creole spoken as lingua franca in Nagaland by different groups.

## **Portuguese connection**

Portuguese colonisation in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries gave rise to Portuguese-controlled trading posts, forts, and colonies in the Subcontinent. This led to the birth of some interesting pidgins and creoles for which Portuguese was the lexifier language (a language from which pidgins/creoles derive their core lexicon).

One of the Portuguese lexified creoles still spoken in India is Korlai Creole Portuguese. Spoken by around 800 people of the coastal village of Korlai, located about 150 kilometres south of Mumbai, Korlai Creole was formed between the 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> century when Portuguese came in contact with Marathi, an Indo-Aryan language. Also known as Kristy or Nau lin, what sets Korlai Creole and the other Indo-Portuguese creoles apart from their Portuguese-lexified Atlantic counterparts is the nature of the contact situations prevalent in Southasia compared to the Atlantic world. While Portuguese-based Atlantic creoles formed in situations in which several languages were in contact with each other, Indo-Portuguese creoles formed in two-language contact situations. A majority of Korlai Creole's core lexicon is from Portuguese. Due to the Catholic church in Mumbai adopting Marathi post 1964, and it being the medium of education in schools, the Korlai has become highly endangered and may become extinct in a few decades.

Another Portuguese-lexified creole spoken in Southasia is Diu Indo-Portuguese from Diu Island, lying on the western side of Gujarat. Portuguese occupied the island in 1554, and this led to a mixed population of Eurasians, Portuguese-creole-speaking communities from southern India, and African slaves. Diu Indo-Portuguese evolved among the residents of this island as a common contact language. Linguist, Hugo C. Cardoso writes how Diu Indo-Portuguese survives among the Roman Catholic natives of this island because they consider it a defining trait of their community. There is evidence of contact between speakers of Portuguese-based creole from Malabar (Kerala) and variants spoken in Korlai and Diu islands. Both these creoles have borrowed Malayalam language words for example appam (unleavened rice pancakes) is borrowed as ap and kaṭuva (tiger) as khadya.

In Sri Lanka, there is Sri Lanka Portuguese creole (SLP) spoken by a small number of people belonging to the Burgher community living in Batticaloa, Trincomalee and Ampara in eastern Sri Lanka. It is also spoken by some families belonging to the Kaffir community – an ethnic group partially derived from domestic servants, navigational assistants and soldiers brought by the Portuguese in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The arrival of the Portuguese in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century in Sri Lanka paved the way for the contact between Portuguese, Sinhala and Tamil communities. Sri Lanka Portuguese remained a contact language even after the arrival of Dutch in the latter half of the 17<sup>th</sup>

century. Since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Sri Lanka Portuguese creole has seen the introduction of written literature in the form of textbooks, dictionaries and language descriptions. Some basic phrases in SLP are as follows (Source: [Documentation of Sri Lanka Portuguese Project](#)):

Portuguese creoles in northern areas (Diu and Korlai) had Indo-Aryan substrate in the form of Gujarati and Marathi, respectively, while in the southern area, they were developing a Dravidian substrate in the form of Malayalam in Malabar district, and in Sri Lanka a mixed substrate of Sinhala and Tamil. Moreover, during the peak of Portuguese colonial activities in Southasia, there were movements of people from one creole community to the other. These movements and connections resonate in a folk song titled *Shingly Nona* (Sinhalese Lady), popular in Portuguese lexified creoles from Southasia to Southeast Asia.

Shingly Nona, Shingly Nona

Eu kara casa

Casa notha, Porta notha

Kalai lo casa

Hapa lo assa

Minha nona

Pootoo lo kusa

Hasi minha nona (minja dosi nona)

Nos lo casa.

Sinhalese lady, Sinhalese lady

I want to marry.

I have no house. No door.

How shall we marry?

I will cook hoppers.

My lady

I will boil rice cakes.

Thus, my (sweet) lady

We shall get married.

(Verse and English translation from *Sing Without Shame* (1990) by K.D. Jackson).

A version of this folk song recorded in 1998 for the album "[Desta barra fora : Damão, Diu, Cochim, Korlai](#)".

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**P.S.**

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