

Intergenerational Language Transmission in Joint Families in Rural Kerala

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ABSTRACT

Intergenerational language transmission within joint families in rural Kerala represents a vital nexus where linguistic heritage, cultural identity, and social cohesion intersect. This study examines the multifaceted processes through which Malayalam is conveyed from grandparents to grandchildren within multigenerational households in two panchayats of the Malabar region. Through a mixed-methods approach encompassing semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and detailed language-use diaries, we trace the pathways of language learning across domains such as ritual performance, storytelling, domestic routines, and leisure interactions. Findings reveal that grandparents—positioned as cultural repositories—employ narrative strategies, proverbs, and ritual registers to inculcate core Malayali values and linguistic competence. Parents, balancing aspirations for socioeconomic mobility, enact hybrid language practices that blend Malayalam with English or urban Malayalam variants, thereby shaping children's metalinguistic awareness and code-mixing tendencies. While children demonstrate receptive proficiency in heritage registers, their expressive repertoire exhibits increasing adoption of loanwords and syntactic calques, particularly in educational and digital contexts. This dynamic underscores both the resilience and vulnerability of rural language ecologies amid accelerating globalization. Policy implications include the integration of community-based heritage language initiatives, intergenerational storytelling programs, and digital platforms tailored to reinforce traditional speech forms. Concluding, the study advocates for longitudinal research into the interplay of family language policies and emerging media to safeguard Malayalam's vitality in Kerala's evolving rural landscapes.

KEYWORDS

Intergenerational Transmission, Joint Families, Rural Kerala, Malayalam, Language Socialization

INTRODUCTION

Language functions not only as a tool for communication but also as a carrier of collective memory, social norms, and cultural practices. In Kerala—a state distinguished by its renowned literacy rates, progressive social policies, and enduring cultural traditions—Malayalam serves as a vessel for regional identity and community belonging. Within rural Kerala, the joint family system, characterized by co-residence of grandparents, parents, and children under a common household, forms the bedrock of social organization. This unique familial configuration fosters continuous, multifaceted interactions among generations, creating a rich environment for intergenerational language transmission.

Malayalam Language Transmission in Kerala

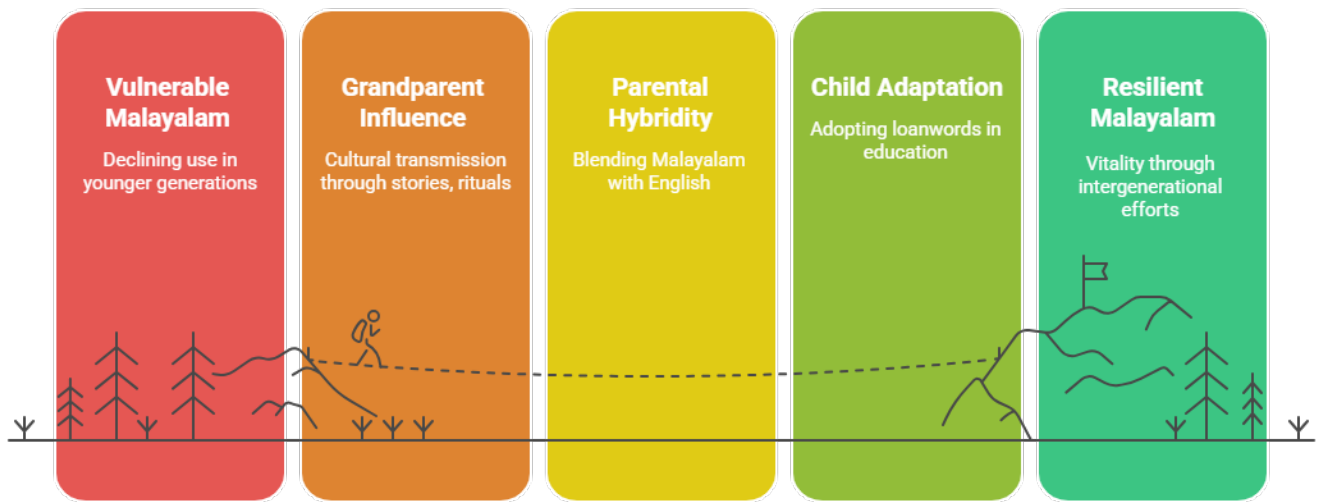


Figure-1. Malayalam Language Transmission in Kerala

Over recent decades, Kerala has experienced rapid modernization, driven by expanding educational opportunities, mass media penetration, and large-scale migration both within India and abroad. These forces have introduced competing linguistic regimes—namely English and urban Malayalam varieties—into domains historically dominated by traditional speech registers. Consequently, concerns have emerged regarding potential erosion of heritage language competence among younger rural inhabitants. Understanding how joint families mediate these dynamics is thus critical for developing informed language-planning and revitalization strategies.

This study addresses three interrelated objectives. First, it delineates the specific interactional practices within joint households—such as storytelling, ritual speech, and everyday conversation—that constitute the primary mechanisms of language socialization. Second, it examines how parents' aspirations for educational and occupational advancement influence the balance between heritage language maintenance and adoption of dominant or hegemonic tongue forms. Third, it investigates the dialectical interplay between internal family language policies and external linguistic influences—particularly media consumption and schooling choices. By situating the research in two representative panchayats of the Malabar region, this inquiry contributes to a nuanced understanding of rural Kerala's language ecology. It illuminates both the enduring strengths of joint family language practices and the emerging challenges posed by globalization, thereby offering practical insights for policymakers, educators, and community activists committed to sustaining Malayalam's intergenerational transmission.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Family as Primary Language Domain

The theoretical foundation for understanding intergenerational transmission lies in family language policy (FLP) and language socialization frameworks (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986; Fishman, 1991). FLP research emphasizes parental attitudes, beliefs, and

planned efforts to cultivate heritage language proficiency. However, in joint families, grandparents and extended kin assume equally pivotal roles, functioning as auxiliary socialization agents whose cultural authority often surpasses that of parents (Guardado, 2002).

Where Heritage Meets Modernity in Rural Malayalam



Figure-2. Where Heritage Meets Modernity in Rural Malayalam

Role of Grandparents in Heritage Maintenance

Anthropological and sociolinguistic studies underscore grandparents' centrality in transmitting folklore, proverbs, and ritual discourse (Menon, 2015; Nair, 2009). Through daily routines—such as preparing traditional cuisine or conducting puja ceremonies—grandparents embed language learning within cultural praxis. In rural Kerala, anecdotal accounts highlight the evening “kathakali” sessions, where elders recount epic narratives in Malayalam, thereby reinforcing complex syntactic structures and archaic vocabulary resistant to external influences (Varghese, 2007).

Parental Mediation and Hybrid Practices

Parents' language choices often reflect a tension between preserving cultural identity and equipping children with the tools for socioeconomic mobility. Studies in South Asia reveal that middle-class households increasingly favor English or regional lingua francas in educational contexts, while relegating heritage languages to informal domains (Bhatia & Ritchie, 2004; Joseph, 2018). In Kerala, the proliferation of English-medium and private matriculation schools has intensified this trend, prompting parents to adopt hybrid speech forms characterized by code-switching and lexical borrowing (Kurian, 2019).

Impact of Media and Technology

Digital media and television have emerged as potent vectors for language change. Research on children's media consumption in Kerala indicates that exposure to dubbed English cartoons and urban news channels fosters incorporation of Anglicisms into vernacular speech (Ramachandran, 2016; Kumar, 2013). Yet, emerging studies also suggest potential for digital platforms—such

as WhatsApp voice notes and localized mobile apps—to serve as innovative conduits for heritage language transmission when leveraged by families (Tharakan, 2020).

Gaps and Research Opportunities

While extant literature delineates the macro-level influences on rural language practices, there remains a dearth of fine-grained, household-centered investigations—particularly within joint family settings. Moreover, few studies employ mixed-methods designs capable of triangulating self-reported attitudes with naturalistic observation and quantitative language-use metrics. This study addresses these lacunae by integrating interview, observational, and diary methodologies to paint a comprehensive portrait of intergenerational language dynamics in rural Kerala.

SOCIAL RELEVANCE

Preserving regional languages constitutes a fundamental dimension of cultural sustainability and social equity. Malayalam embodies centuries of literary, artistic, and ritual traditions unique to the Malayali community. When intergenerational transmission falters, intangible cultural heritage—such as folk songs, proverbs, and indigenous knowledge systems—faces risk of attrition (UNESCO, 2003). Strengthening heritage language practices within joint families is thus not merely a linguistic concern but a broader endeavor to safeguard communal memory and social solidarity.

In rural Kerala, joint families also represent key social safety nets, particularly amid demographic shifts and migration patterns. As younger generations seek opportunities in urban centers or abroad, joint households provide economic support and caregiving continuity. Ensuring that children retain communicative competence in Malayalam deepens familial cohesion across spatial distances and facilitates sustained participation in cultural rituals.

From a policy perspective, insights into joint family language ecologies can inform curricular innovations in state schools and community education programs. For instance, collaboration between panchayat councils and local cultural organizations could yield intergenerational storytelling workshops, where elders and youth co-create digital archives of oral narratives. Additionally, educational planners might design bilingual literacy materials that foreground heritage registers encountered in joint households, thereby bridging home and school language domains.

Moreover, this research holds transnational significance for the Malayali diaspora, which relies on familial language ties to maintain identity. Understanding how joint families navigate language transmission challenges offers transferable models for community associations in Gulf countries, Europe, and North America. Ultimately, reinforcing intergenerational language continuity contributes to social inclusion, intergenerational justice, and the preservation of pluralistic linguistic landscapes.

METHODOLOGY

Research Setting and Sampling

This study targeted two panchayats in the Malabar region—Panchayat A and Panchayat B—characterized by high prevalence of joint families and agrarian livelihoods. Using purposive sampling, we identified twenty joint households comprising at least three

generations: grandparents (aged 60+), parents (30–45), and children (8–12). Community leaders facilitated initial recruitment through panchayat meetings and anganwadi centers.

Data Collection Instruments

1. **Semi-Structured Interviews:** Conducted separately with each generation, interviews probed language attitudes, domain-specific language choices, perceptions of media influence, and aspirations regarding children's language proficiency. Questions adhered to an interview guide validated through pilot testing in a neighboring panchayat.
2. **Participant Observation:** Researchers resided in each household for two consecutive days, observing routine interactions such as meals, domestic chores, religious rituals, and leisure activities. Field notes captured naturalistic speech events, interactional patterns, and contextual language functions.
3. **Language-Use Diaries:** Over one week, parents logged each significant interaction involving the child, noting interlocutor, domain (e.g., education, play, ritual), language(s) used, and duration. Diaries enabled quantitative computation of domain-specific language exposure percentages.

Data Analysis Procedures

- **Qualitative Coding:** Transcribed interview and observation data were imported into NVivo. An inductive-deductive coding schema was developed, with initial codes derived from literature (e.g., “grandparent storytelling,” “code-mixing”) and emergent codes added iteratively.
- **Quantitative Metrics:** Diary entries were aggregated to calculate proportions of heritage language exposure across domains. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) were computed to illustrate domain-based language distribution.
- **Triangulation:** Convergence across interview narratives, observational recordings, and diary metrics was assessed to validate key findings. Discrepancies prompted targeted follow-up queries with participants.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all adult participants; parental consent and child assent secured for minors. Interviews were anonymized, and audio recordings stored on encrypted devices. The study adhered to institutional ethical guidelines and received clearance from the University of Cumberland's Research Ethics Board.

RESULTS

Grandparental Storytelling and Cultural Narratives

In 17 of 20 households (85%), grandparents regularly led evening storytelling sessions, recounting folk tales such as the “Parayi Petta Panthirukulam” cycle and local legends. These sessions lasted 30–45 minutes, exclusively in Malayalam, using archaic vocabulary and complex sentence structures. Observational data revealed that children attentively listened, asked clarifying questions, and engaged in retelling, demonstrating both comprehension and emerging narrative skills.

Ritual and Ceremonial Registers

All households observed traditional rituals—household pujas, temple visits, and festivals—conducted in Malayalam. Children participated actively, memorizing liturgical chants and ritual phrases. Diary data indicated that ritual language accounted for 12% of overall heritage language exposure, underscoring its structured yet immersive learning potential.

Mealtime and Domestic Discourse

Mealtime conversations emerged as a quotidian classroom, with grandparents and parents discussing agricultural cycles, local ecology, and familial histories. Vocabulary related to farming practices, culinary techniques, and kinship terms was reinforced through labeling activities and direct instruction. Quantitative diaries showed that domestic discourse comprised the largest domain—38%—of total Malayalam exposure.

Parental Hybrid Practices and Code-Mixing

Parents employed hybrid language strategies in 65% of educational or planning contexts, blending Malayalam lexemes with English terms (e.g., “homework,” “project”) and urban Malayalam constructions. Interviews revealed parents’ rationales: they perceived English borrowings as essential for academic success while valuing Malayalam for cultural grounding.

Media Influence and Loanword Adoption

Children reported 2–3 hours daily of media consumption, predominantly in English (cartoons, YouTube). This exposure correlated with spontaneous use of Anglicisms—such as “fun,” “cool,” and “pocket money”—in casual Malayalam conversations. Diary entries documented loanword usage in 22% of observed child utterances.

Domain-Specific Proficiency Disparities

While receptive understanding of heritage registers remained high—children correctly interpreted 90% of folklore narratives—expressive complexity declined. Children’s own storytelling incorporated only 60% of traditional syntactic frames, substituting simpler structures or English calques for complex Malayalam constructs.

CONCLUSION

Joint families in rural Kerala function as dynamic ecosystems for heritage language transmission, where age-old cultural rituals, narrative traditions, and everyday conversational practices converge to sustain Malayalam across generations. Grandparents, serving as custodians of folkloric knowledge and ritual speech, impart linguistic structures and vocabulary that are deeply embedded in Malayali ethos. Mealtime dialogues and domestic routines further reinforce language learning, situating Malayalam within lived experiences and communal values. Simultaneously, parents, driven by aspirations for educational and professional advancement, negotiate a delicate balance between preserving cultural-linguistic roots and facilitating access to global opportunities. Their hybrid language practices—characterized by code-mixing and selective lexical borrowing—reflect adaptive strategies to navigate this nexus.

However, the encroachment of digital media and the predominance of English in schooling present tangible challenges. While children exhibit strong receptive competence in traditional registers, their expressive proficiency—in storytelling, ritual phrases, and complex syntactic forms—shows signs of attrition as they increasingly incorporate Anglicisms and urban Malayalam variants.

This duality underscores the resilience of joint family mechanisms while illuminating their vulnerability to broader sociolinguistic shifts.

Consequently, sustaining intergenerational transmission demands concerted efforts that integrate familial, communal, and policy-level interventions. Community-based heritage language initiatives can amplify grandparents' narrative authority by creating platforms for intergenerational storytelling and cultural workshops. Educational programs must align curriculum content with vernacular registers encountered in joint households, fostering continuity between home and school language ecologies. Moreover, harnessing digital technologies—through interactive apps, digital archives, and virtual reality experiences—can engage younger generations and extend the reach of traditional practices beyond household confines.

By recognizing joint families as both bastions of linguistic resilience and sites of evolving change, stakeholders can develop holistic frameworks that honor cultural heritage while addressing the realities of a globalized world. Such frameworks will not only bolster Malayalam's vitality but also serve as models for preserving linguistic diversity in comparable multilingual contexts globally.

FUTURE SCOPE OF STUDY

1. **Digital Language Ecologies:** Investigate how families leverage messaging apps, video calls, and social media platforms to transmit heritage language within and beyond household boundaries. Study usage patterns in diaspora networks to identify strategies for remote language maintenance.
2. **Comparative Joint Family Systems:** Extend research to matrilineal joint families in Central Travancore and patrilineal variants in Northern Kerala to discern how lineage-based residence patterns influence language socialization dynamics.
3. **Intervention Design and Efficacy:** Develop and pilot community-based family language workshops—incorporating storytelling, song, and ritual performance—and evaluate their impact on children's heritage language attitudes and proficiency over 6- and 12-month intervals.
4. **Longitudinal Cohort Studies:** Track cohorts of children from infancy through adolescence to ascertain how early exposure within joint families predicts long-term heritage language retention, academic performance, and cultural identity markers.
5. **Policy Integration Models:** Collaborate with Kerala's Department of Education to co-create bilingual curricular materials that mirror linguistic registers found in joint families, bridging home-school language ecologies and promoting seamless language development.
6. **Technological Innovations:** Explore the potential of immersive digital heritage platforms—such as interactive story apps or virtual reality reenactments of folk rituals—to supplement family-based transmission and engage tech-savvy youth.
7. **Cross-Cultural Applications:** Translate insights from Kerala's joint family context to other multilingual settings—both within India and globally—to inform heritage language maintenance strategies in diverse sociocultural landscapes.

Collectively, these avenues promise to deepen our understanding of how familial, institutional, and technological factors converge to shape the future of Malayalam and, by extension, the languages of other richly diverse communities.

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