Negombo Fishermen's Tamil and Sri Lanka Gypsy Telugu: Two Sinhala-Influenced Dravidian Minority Dialects from the Sinhalese Heartland

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Negombo Fishermen's Tamil (hereafter NFT) and Sri Lanka Gypsy Telugu (hereafter SLGT) are two less-studied Dravidian dialects from very different sociological contexts in majority Sinhalese areas of Sri Lanka. Both of these dialects have undergone significant grammatical and lexical changes as a result of contact with Sinhala (NFT and SLGT speaker communities are both bilingual, with Sinhala as the language used outside of intimate community circumstances), but both the degree and nature of these changes are very different, owing to differing degrees of intensity of contact and the very different sociological roles played by these communities vis-à-vis the Sinhalese. In the case of NFT, which this researcher documented via intensive in-field elicitation and recording of conversation in Negombo in 2000-2001, the Sinhala-influenced lexical and grammatical changes are pervasive. Not surprisingly, the NFT speaker community, largely Roman Catholic, self-identifies as Sinhala and frequently intermarries with Sinhalese in the Negombo area. They are typically fisher folk who are an integral part of the local economy. By contrast, the SLGT speaker community living in Kudagama near Anuradhapura (where this researcher began field documentation in February 2001), although now largely Buddhist, maintains itself as a "gypsy" community apart from the Sinhalese; many in the community still practice the traditional occupations of snake charming and monkey dancing, and endogamy is still preferred. SLGT, while importing many Sinhala words, has not imported nearly as many grammatical features as has NFT. This paper compares and contrasts the sociolinguistic circumstances of these two less-studied Sri Lankan minority communities, and concludes that contact-induced language change is primarily oriented towards lexical borrowing in cases of weak societal assimilation (SLGT), and towards morphosyntactic borrowing in cases of strong societal assimilation (NFT).

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