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Tribute to Cochin Creole Portuguese

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Rozario, the last speaker of Cochin Creole Portuguese.



Rozario with Hugo Cardoso, researcher of languages.

Few people knew about the death of a language in Kochi recently: Cochin Creole Portuguese. Researcher Dr. Hugo Canelas Cardoso mourns the death of this language.

Like people, languages also die. With the death of William Rozario this August in Vypeen died Cochin Creole Portuguese. Rozario was the last fluent speaker of this language, which resulted from contact between Malayalam, Portuguese and probably a host of languages spoken by the various communities in ancient Cochin, which was a melting pot of so many cultures, so many languages. Rozario's death brought to an end a language, a rich culture.

Minority languages are going extinct at an alarming rate. Linguists believe that an indigenous language disappears every two weeks. Therefore language endangerment is of serious concern, says Dr. Hugo Canelas Cardoso, a post-doctoral research fellow at the Research Centre for Luso-Asian Studies, Department of Portuguese of the University of Macau. He was recently involved in the documentation and description of the Indo-Portuguese Creole of Diu as part of his PhD in General Linguistics from the University of Amsterdam. During one of his many visits to Diu, Cardoso came to Kochi where he contacted Rozario. It was the beginning of a friendship that extended beyond language.

Cardoso remembers his kind friend Rozario, mourns his death and that of the language. With composed factuality he realises that the language, which was the mother tongue many families for five centuries is gone forever. In an e-mail interview Cardoso shares his thoughts on Rozario, the languages, and the impact of their death. Excerpts:

On William Rozario

William Rozario grew up at an estate in Wayanad but his family was partly from Cochin and partly from Cannanore, and therefore his mother tongue was the Creole. He told me that, in his childhood, this was the only language spoken in his house and within his extended family. In

2007, while I was in Diu, I made a short side-trip to Kerala. At the time, several members of the Indo-Portuguese community in Fort Cochin directed me to Rozario as being the last fluent speaker of the Creole in the whole of Cochin, so I visited him in his Vypeen home. He was an extremely generous and affable man, and seemed delighted to be able to speak his mother tongue again, because the second last speaker, his friend Mr. Paynter, had passed away a few years earlier. Rozario and his family always welcomed me so warmly to their home, I was touched. The last time I visited them was in January this year, and Rozario agreed to spend some time teaching me his language.

Why the language was not passed on to his family?

In the specific case of Rozario's family, it may have had to do with the fact that his wife does not speak it, but I guess at that time, the use of the language in general was already in decline. The process of abandonment of the language, on a community level, must have started long ago. Languages are central to the identity of every community, but they will only survive long-term if there are domains of daily life in which they can be used, such as, for instance, education, work or religion. I believe the use of Cochin Creole among the Catholic community was gradually encroached on by other languages, and that broke the transmission of language from the parents to children.

On Creole Portuguese

When the Portuguese language arrived in Asia in the late 15th century, it came into contact with the local languages, and that gave rise to a string of new languages which once dotted the coasts of India, Sri Lanka and beyond. Such languages, born from intense contact between two or more languages, are what linguists call creoles. In Cochin, the equation involved Malayalam, Portuguese and probably a host of languages spoken by various communities there. Since this was the first place where the Portuguese established a stable presence in South Asia, it is usually accepted that Cochin Creole may have been the earliest of all Indo-Portuguese Creoles to be formed, and, if so, probably determined to some extent the development of the other varieties. This language developed hand-in-hand with the formation of Catholic and Indo-Portuguese households, and it was so vital by the time the Dutch took over that it managed to thrive under the new rulers.

Language characteristics

In very broad terms, many of the words in the Creole of Cochin are of Portuguese origin but the grammar is very different, and a number of these differences reflect the influence of Malayalam. For instance, where Portuguese (like English) has prepositions, Cochin Creole has postpositions, which appear after the noun. And there is also a strong tendency to place the verb at the end of the clause, which is contrary to the grammar of Portuguese but not to that of Malayalam. The verb system works very differently and there are also striking differences in the shape of the words and even the sounds of the two languages. Even though the Creole is known locally simply as 'Portuguese' or 'Cochin Portuguese', it is in fact a new autonomous language which owes as much to Portuguese as it does to the languages of India. This was the language of a good part of the Cochin population for five centuries, and a monument to a crucial period of the city's history

Has death of languages become common?

Languages have appeared and disappeared throughout history, these are natural processes; but there is something in the modern world which is making languages die at an unprecedented rate. As for India, since it is home to such immense linguistic diversity, it has also witnessed a number of these cases. Earlier this year, for example, the death of a woman in her 80s in the Andaman Islands marked the end of the Bo language.

Have we become insensitive to history, to the invaluable heritage?

I wouldn't say we have become completely insensitive; in fact, if you walk around Cochin, you will come across many exemplary cases of heritage preservation. But I do feel that we don't pay the same amount of attention to all types of heritage. Language and other kinds of intangible cultural heritage are too often neglected in comparison with, for example, built-up heritage. The other real danger, of course, is that we preserve selectively based on political or ideological convictions. And there, I would argue, anything perceived to have a colonial ring to it may be at a disadvantage in modern-day India. The country has definitely awakened to the problem of language extinction, as shown by some government initiatives to document indigenous languages. And that is very positive. But it would be important for the public and the authorities to realise that the Indo-Portuguese Creoles – still spoken in places like Diu, Daman, Korlai or Cannanore – are not foreign languages. On the contrary, they are, by any definition, languages of India, and exclusive to India.

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