

Ecolinguistic Analysis of Toponyms in Malayalam

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Abstract

Toponymy is the scientific study of place names and Ecolinguistics as an approach, perceives language as an ecological phenomenon. Sociolinguistic research has contributed significantly to an understanding of language use and language in social context just as Ecolinguistics has created awareness of language as an ecological phenomenon (Haugen 1972). Malayalam, a language spoken in the southernmost part of India has a rich tradition of literature and classical status.

Present study tries to portray the types of Toponyms in Malayalam language and its status as the memory of the past interrelations between humans and nature. Absence and presence of certain characteristics in place names do indicate the eco-cultural dimension of a speech community. In this paper, lexical as well as grammatical properties of Malayalam Toponyms are approached from ecolinguistic point of view, by analyzing its current dynamisms of reinventing etymologies for ideological substantiation. This paper also tries to classify Malayalam Toponyms as far as possible according to its various functions.

Keywords: Toponyms, Ecolinguistics, Malayalam, Nature-Culture Dichotomy

1. Introduction

Research in the area of Ecolinguistics perceives language as an ecological phenomenon (Haugen 1972). Since its inception as a discipline in Western

universities during 1990s, this approach of language gained scholarly attention both as a field of discourse analysis and as an interactive platform for lexico-grammatical studies. What is left behind in Sociolinguistic approach, though it is more concerned in contextualizing language, is the prime objective of Ecolinguistics, which can better be visualized as a ‘foregrounding technique’ adapted from media studies, which take into account every background detail; in the context of language we can call it as its environment.

An ecolinguistic point of view considers Toponyms as important cultural and environmental artefacts and events (Nash 102).

In considering human language, just as any other factor of natural habitat, place names can contribute much to the study of Ecolinguistics, precisely because it is the area where the historical traits of different human settlements are preserved symbolically. Naming of places occurs due to several factors, such as natural diversity, crops and cultivation patterns, landscape details, climatic conditions, topographic as well as geographical references, etc. It may even carry historical events as local memory. Many urban places all over the world still have a rural or even primitive - nature related - place name as its distant root with the past. Toponymy, being a scientific study of place names can definitely shed light to the

growing field of Ecolinguistics, by giving abundant clues to the use of human language in respect of its ecology. Present study intends to analyse Malayalam Toponyms more from an ecolinguistic point of view and try to classify them as much as possible using tools of language ecology.

2. Classifications of Toponyms: A Model

There are a number of classification scheme of Toponyms, none complies with the need to encompass all the varieties of place names. Urazmetova and Shamsutdinova (2017) have systematized hitherto existing classifications into 11 types. For our present purpose, they have been customized into four types found in Malayalam language. They are, 1) Ontological, (Manmade Vs. Natural) 2) Origin (Native Vs. Borrowed), 3) chronological (Ancient Vs. Obsolete) and 4) Structural (simple, derivative, compound and complex)

2.1. Ontological classification of Malayalam Toponyms

This is actually a major area of Toponyms found in the languages of the world. They can be divided into two groups: 1) names of natural objects and 2) names of manmade objects. Natural objects include hydronyms (all water objects). Since Keralais blessed with a long stretch of seashore having almost 600 km length, 54 rivers, innumerable water bodies, like Lakes, ponds, etc. in respect of

hydronyms, Malayalam is a rich language having place names related to Oceans, Seas, rivers, lakes, swamps, brooks, springs, wells, etc. Oronyms are another sort of natural objects which denote places related to mountains, headlands, hills, hillocks, hollows, etc. Speleonyms refers to caves, chasms, grottoes, mines and underground systems. Drymonyms are forests and Insulononyms are names of islands. As being an Union Territory with majority of people speaking Jasi an offshoot of Malayalam language, Insulononyms are found in Lakshadweep.

Since this is an ecological understanding of place names in Malayalam language, it is relevant to focus much on this division. Kerala is blessed with 54 rivers, 600 kms of seashore, large number of back water lakes, interior natural ponds, water falls, etc. Unlike other states, Malayalees build living spaces independently, occupying more natural environments and prefer closer to water bodies. Many of the cities in Kerala carry their natural past in their place names like the heart of Thrissur district is $\text{t e:kkinka\text{t}umai\text{d}a:nam}$ (it still remembers the long past when there was a forest of Teak wood at the very centre of Thrissur town.) Manmade objects include horonyms (having definite territories, in modern times, earlier place names of reference with Feudal jurisdiction are still prevalent, and sometimes cultural boundaries of earlier settlements are sustained as horonyms),

oykonyms (settlements), and urbanonyms(blocks, streets, memorial monuments, etc.). Elements of manmade objects include street names, names of enterprises, names of buildings and religious centres, roads, parks, institutions, etc.

2.2. Type according to Origin (Native vs. borrowed)

Toponyms in Malayalam can be broadly divided into Native and Borrowed according to its type of origin. Native category of Malayalam Toponyms is very vast because they form the topographic base of most of the place names. Their location, surrounding references, territory, land marks, historical information, resource information, etc. are imprinted in them. It is a fact that Malayalam Toponyms maintain the Dravidian roots mostly in hill and coastal areas. It is indeed a matter of contradiction that many urban Toponyms still carry information regarding their earlier natural past. We can easily sketch the landscape map of our past with the help of these place names.

Borrowed place names are of two category; 1) borrowed vocabulary and 2) nativised forms. Borrowed vocabularies bear traits of multiple invasions by different colonizers such as Portuguese, Dutch, French, Arab, Chinese and British. As like other forms of Malayalam vocabulary, there are considerable amount of borrowed words found in Toponyms as well. The way the colonizers perceive our own native

life environments are reflected in conceptual as well as pronunciation levels of place names. As and when the colonizers leave this land, they deposit their traits of language and culture into our vocabulary.

2.3. Chronological elements (ancient vs. obsolete)

Chronological elements of Malayalam Toponyms are maintenance and loss of archaic forms. Both first and second elements of compound Toponyms bear such archaic forms. Many words still lack clear cut grammatical as well as semantic explanation due to its archaic nature. They are still prevalent through the centuries even without the knowledge of its users. Scholars like Vishnu Namboodiri (2010) have tried to explain some of the archaic forms that form pattern in different topography. a:tə (land), a:yi (being), o:ti (good land for cultivation), a:am (place), t̪a:nam (position), kari (barren land) are some examples.

Even language as a whole are prone to be extinct, archaic forms having no social function are destined to be discarded by the speech community. Such obsolete forms are of concern for eco-linguistic researchers. When caste system was at its peak, and ethnic purity was performed widely, the Toponyms also were carrying such social taboos. As we transform our social life, such obsolete linguistic units do not have any particular function, and soon they will become extinct.

2.4. Structural elements

Toponyms in Malayalam are seen either as a single word unit or of compound structure. Single units are rare. (ka:ra, cha:la, chovva are such names.). Many of the place names end in an affix ‘am’ (muttam, patyam, mukkam, kottiyam, etc.). A good number of place names carry a locative case affix at the end of them (va:raṭṭa, kupaṭṭa, kaṇṇoṭṭa, etc.). The same can be the effect with names ending with “o:m” (as in periṇṇo:m, e:ṇṇo:m, etc.). locative markers like “il”, “al”, “kal” are maintained in many of the place names (such as aṭṭiṇṇal, ṭalaviḷ, koṭṭummal).

Compound words in Malayalam Toponyms are of a combination of an adjective (or more) and a noun (valiyaṭuṭṭa, cemmala, kaṇṇaṭṭippa:ṭa). This is a common rule for ninety percent of Malayalam compound place names (Vishnu Namboodiri112). There are multiple compound structures like iratṭakkuḷaṇṇara (iratṭa + kuḷam + kara) as well.

2.4.1. Ecological common names as second element

Place names in any language or culture carry ecological information as its second element. There are names denoting to hills and mountains (kuṇṇa mala), rocks, hillocks, (paṭṭa, kallā), layers of rocks (aṭṭukkam, paṭṭam), plane lands (ṭaṭṭa), low

land (munḍa), forest (ka:ṭə, ka:nam, cə:la), rivers (puḍa, a:ṭə, kaṭavə), natural ponds, streams, rivulets, (kuḷam, ciṛa, ca:lə, ṭ o:ṭə), and islands (ṭ uruṭṭə).

As respect to nature – culture division there is enough space for agricultural terms in place names. They denote directly to the place and type of crops and cultivation. The second element in place names denote the specification of lands, such as agricultural land (vayal,ṭ o:ṭam, pṛam, kaḷam, kaṇḍam), inhabited land(akam, aṛa), bridge(pa:lām), waste land (kari), crops (viḷa).

There is also references to settlement patterns in Toponyms. Village (pa:ṭi), common settlements (ce:ri), divine place (i:ṣwaram, maṅgalam), Jain, Buddha centres (paḷḷi) are some examples. Most of the place names refer to “place” itself (u:rə, puram, pa:ṭi, na:ṭə, vaṭṭam, a:ṭə, aṭam). Among these names, the word “u:rə” is highest in occurrence, a Dravidian noun meaning place. The prefixing elements with these words are mostly of natural connection. They bear topographical as well as geographical information as identification marks. This is a common phenomenon in Dravidian language.

2.4.2. Adjectival part of a place name

Most of the place names in Malayalam are of two-part composition, of which the second part we have discussed so far. It is equally important in analysing the

adjectival part of Malayalam Toponyms. The names carrying the bio-diversity of Kerala can be found even in the preliminary observation of this part. A variety of flora and fauna are used in Malayalam Toponyms (names of trees, shrubs, creepers, climbers, parts of plants, etc. are used to identify places as regards their availability or abundance). Most of the words referring to the flora of Kerala are remaining only in the memory of older generation. Many of them are already extinct. Names of birds, animals, fish, insects, etc. are also used with good number of places. When combined with the second part with a meaning of “place”, these Toponyms constitute the perfect locational reference. There is much to study in this area of environmental references because, it is one of the main indicators of the evolution of human advancement from nature to culture, which culminated nearly in total exhaustion.

The cities in Kerala bear clear indication of its natural past with their Toponyms. It may also help in situations of disaster like flood, landslide, earthquake, etc. During the last two years, Kerala has experienced extreme cases of flood, after a long gap of hundred years. They taught Malayali psyche, a good lesson, which a thousand awareness programmes cannot yield. There are certain references

of previous flood affected areas as land marks which is maintained in the form of place names.

3. Eco-linguistic issues in Malayalam Toponyms

3.1. Sanskritisation and Urbanisation

During Post-colonial period, especially in recent times, there is a growing trend in Indian languages to change the colonial naming structure to native forms such as Bombay to Mumbai, Bangalore to Bengaluru, Trivandrum to Thiruvananthapuram, etc. It is also seen as a growing trend in Malayalam Toponyms, of hypercorrection with an orientation towards redefining our places and culture in connecting with Indian mythologies. There are centuries old place names in Kerala, bearing mythical characters and places of incidents. Characters like Rama, Sita, Bheema, Hanuman, Ravana, Panchali, Kunthi, Kanwa, Krishna, Ganapathi, Bharatha, Vamana, Lakshmana, Sabari, Sasta, Sreekanta, Sreenarayana, etc. are always already there in our place name repertoire. But a new trend is found emerging in the recent past in finding Sanskritised etymology for local place names in Malayalam. Most of the place names are anglicized due to British regime. It is a fact that during the period of colonisation, the colonisers have destroyed our native tongue in order to fit into their phonetic patterns . pa:lakka:d becomes

Palghat, തൃശ്ശൂർ becomes Trichur, തിരുവനന്തപുരം becomes Trivandrum, കൊച്ചി becomes Calicut, so on and so forth. The phenomenon which I am referring to is somewhat different. There is a trend of reinventing Sanskritised etymology for each and every local place names. തൃശ്ശൂർ becomes തൃശ്ശിവപേരൂർ, എറണാകുളം becomes തൃശ്ശിനാഗകുളം etc. In some cases, it is far more serious in suppressing a local history by redefining the place name with Sanskritised etymology.

Urbanization in Toponymy is another field of interest. Many of the place names have changed during recent past as an aftermath of urbanisation. People tend to avoid certain place names which bear tones of substandard or taboo words. As they develop and assume more civilized and urbanized way of life, they try to avoid earlier naïve forms. Some place names are viewed as obscene and they name their place with a modern name. These are common with all places and cultures, but what invite attention from an eco-linguistic point of view is that the more we are civilized we try to destruct the place names bearing linguistic diversity. Civilized man identifies reluctantly with the natural habitat of certain environment. They perceive nature as infinite treasure of raw material for their urbanized life.

3.2. Colonial impact on Malayalam Toponyms.

Kerala witnessed mainly four main cases of colonization, other than its earlier phase of Aryanisation and later on followed by Arab and Chinese influence; they are Portuguese, French, Dutch and British. Majority of the Malayalam language is Aryanised with Sanskrit linguistic structures. Though it is still prevalent in coining new technical terms, it is our choice to be on the safe side of Sanskrit with its high productivity of derivative forms. But it is not the case with Toponyms, where we can find very few Sanskritised forms. The lineage of Malayalam language towards Sanskrit is reflected in the vocabulary, but the percentage is very less in Toponyms. Portuguese, Dutch, French, Chinese and English influence can be easily identified from the vocabulary level but they too are found in nativised fashion as in the *atb^h*avaforms of Sanskrit. Dutch are referred to as *lan_{tan}* and Portuguese as *aspa_{an}ki*. There are place names with these adjectival forms.

3.3. Maintenance of bio-diversity and Human – nature relationship

Toponyms of any language play a major role in maintaining the awareness of bio-diversity of a given territory. Toponyms simply do not carry the topographical information of a land, instead, they make the inhabitants aware of the natural diversity of their surroundings. They always make the people alert of the climatic conditions, natural indications, adaptability of human life, etc.

In the ancient Tamil text, Tolkkappiyam, there are 14 types of landscape divisions, among them 7 are “akam” (inside) category and remaining 7 are “puṛam” (outside) category. These divisions are called “ṭṭiṇai” (environmental motifs). Even among the 7 "akattṭiṇai's 5 are most important, and they are ‘kuṭṭiṇai’ (forest area), ‘mullai’(bushy and shrubby area), ‘maruṭ am’ (mid land with lot of water resources for cultivation), ‘pa:lai’(sterile land with constant lack of rain), and ‘neyṭ al’(coastal belt with plain sandy area). We can still find place names in Malayalam bearing references to this Sangham age which dates back to the first centuries of Christian Era. mullakkara, maruṭ aṟo:də pa:lakka:də, neyṭ alakka:və are some examples of place names from different part of Kerala showing its direct connection with Samgham age.

The importance of the concept of ‘ṭṭiṇai’ is that it is a key to human – nature relationship as reflected in flora and fauna, natural phenomena, topography and climatic conditions. Though it is an aesthetic description of Sangham poetry, the necessity of the harmony with our natural environment is glorified in them.

Apart from such considerations of natural harmony, the Toponyms still maintain the natural vocabulary as a reminder of our bio-diversity. Mountains, hills, high lands, forests, trees, rivers, streams, islands, etc. are regarded as indicators of

human settlements in many of the place names. Toponymy as a branch, sheds some light to the areas of Eco-folklore and Ethno-Botany by marking diverse environmental factors(Vishnu Namboodiri110). Beautiful landscapes and natural view points are also imprinted with high sensitivity and aesthetic perfection in Malayalam Toponyms. The mythological reference seen in many of the place names give more of a mystic dimension to the physical environments. Naming of places occur due to different reasons through the times. Some give them in its experience of first sight, some give it as a subjective experience, some give it as a personal creative expression, so on and so forth. In each case, the nature of nature – human relationship is the point in question.

3.4. The question of nature – culture dichotomy

Nature – Culture divide or dichotomy is the theoretical foundation of contemporary anthropological studies. Man acquires culture by sacrificing his/her umbilical bond with the nature is its prime argument. Ecolinguistics criticize the anthropocentric approach of civilizations. It is very much explicit in the renaming of places in contemporary scenario. Man's approach towards nature is highly utilitarian and exploitative. Toponyms are everlasting witness of human interventions towards nature. This is what is referred to as nature – culture dichotomy.

... Ecolinguistics consists of questioning the stories that underpin our current unsustainable civilization, exposing those stories that are clearly not working, that are leading to ecological destruction and social injustice, and finding new stories that work better in the conditions of the world that we face. These are not stories in the traditional sense of a narrative, however, but rather discourses, frames, metaphors and, in general, clusters of linguistic features that come together to convey particular worldviews (Stibbe 2).

The point where Stibbe(2010) and others (Goatly, A. (2001), Halliday, M. (2001), et. al. coincide is that language use can be a constant resource for eco-linguistic analysis. Even among the language use, study of place names plays a major role in explicating the nature – culture divide in modern societies. Kerala society can be placed somewhere in between rural and urban characteristics. One can find both Globalization and Localization trends simultaneously in Kerala society. Semi-feudal, semi-urban, semi-post-industrial structure of this culture can very well be studied with the dynamism of Toponyms more than any other language situation.

4. Conclusion and findings

This paper has tried to shed some light on some of the areas of Toponymy with special reference to Malayalam language from Eco-linguistic point of view. The main task that was facing Malayalam Toponymy is the lack of perfect classification. In this study a customized form of classification has been adopted from a detailed model developed by Urazmetova and Shamsutdinova (2017). Out of 11 types proposed by the above authors, Malayalam language situation needed only 4 types. They are explained with examples and focus has been given to ontological division of natural and manmade objects as toponymical references. Typological division according to origin and chronology are explained with examples. Structural elements of Toponyms are described in detail with special emphasis on lexical and grammatical structures.

Eco-linguistic issues of Sanskritization and Urbanisation and some traits of colonialization are put into context. Maintenance of bio-diversity and sustainable nature – human relationship were the role of Toponyms, at least in Malayalam Language. The nature – culture dichotomy was also discussed with an anthropocentric blame from eco-linguistic side.

Here are some findings from this short observation.

1. Toponyms are potential agents of our natural habitat.

2. The divide between nature and culture can very well be studied in a deep analysis of Toponyms.
3. Malayalam Toponyms have a long-lasting history dates from the Sangham age with its geo-environmental motifs.
4. The current crisis of environmental resources and climate emergency is the result of uncontrolled expanse of unsustainable development projects and human greed of natural exploitation. This can be traced from the renaming and redefining patterns of Toponyms.
5. Increasing trend of Sanskritization and hyper correction of toponymic etymology is another area of interest from eco-linguistic research.

With these findings, the present paper tried to invite scholarly attention to the re-examination of the field of Toponymy from Ecolinguistic perspective. Unlike other 8.7 lakh of species in the nature, man is always engaged in speaking with his potential weapon of language. It is high time from our side to stop talking and start listening to other life forms of our planet.

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