Integrating the Local and the Global: Exploring the Operational Planes of Dialectal Variants in Malayalam Cinema

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1. Introduction

Cinema has transcended from being merely fixed in the realm of entertainment to a much more far rooted significance in a Malayali's routine lifestyle. Other than an increased importance attached to the responsibility that cinema bears in manifesting physical realities into onscreen representations, its presence in domains like classrooms in the form of a pedagogical aid, thus explains how cinema has been elemental in moulding the social consciousness. According to the idea of visual literacy postulated by Martin Scorsese, the visual language allows the recording of ideas, and this is often the same reason why foreign language films through their visual language are able to communicate to its viewers the crux of the same even in the absence of subtitles. What language in turn does is pave the way for a deeper layer of intended understanding to be etched in the minds of the viewers. Any cinematic representation becomes complete with the collaboration of the visual and the verbal language as it is more often than not complementing each other in a way that where one fails the other operates.

Language plays a key role in those times when there is a need for a medium in establishing several unavoidable aspects in a movie; 'setting' for instance, even within a scenario which depicts a neutral frame, the language spoken by the characters in the same can often place the entire portrayed scene within a confined or specific pre decided geographic boundary. Other than placing the frames in geographic specificity, development of characters is also made at ease through language by explicating the interplay of nuanced social constructs like caste, creed, class or gender and how the characters operate or function in and around these determiners. This is the same reason the language usage in movies like Paleri Manikyam Oru Pathirakolapathakathinte Katha is so significant as it marks integral nuances like the religion of the characters: in this movie, the

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language usage shows that the character played by Mammootty hails from a Muslim community. At the same time, Mammootty has utilised language as a tool in establishing his Christian identity in the cult classic Kottayam Kunjachan by speaking the variety of the Kottayam achayan community. More often than not the language spoken by a character makes it easy for the viewer to equate the fictional portrayal to the real-world manifestation, with ease.

The concept of language attitudes, encompassing the beliefs, emotions, and judgments individuals hold towards specific languages, dialects, or registers, plays a crucial role in film studies. Audiences don't passively consume films; they actively interpret and respond to aspects like language choices made by filmmakers. By analysing how films portray language use, we gain insights into the power dynamics within a society, the construction of social identities, and the emotional connections audiences form with characters and narratives. Malayalam cinema, with its rich collection of dialects and registers, offers a fertile ground for exploring the interplay between language attitudes and film reception.

This work argues that Malayalam cinema plays a significant role in showcasing and reflecting language attitudes in Kerala. By strategically employing dialects, registers, and paralinguistic features, filmmakers construct regional identities, negotiate social hierarchies, and evoke emotional responses in viewers. Furthermore, Malayalam cinema has the potential to challenge existing language attitudes and contribute to a more inclusive representation of Kerala's diverse linguistic landscape.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach, employing close textual analysis of selected Malayalam films to understand how language use is employed to construct narratives and characters. The analysis will focus on prominent films from different eras and genres to capture the evolution of language portrayal in Malayalam cinema. Additionally, the study will incorporate relevant audience reception studies (based on studies of those available) to gain insights into how viewers perceive and respond to the use of dialects and registers in films.

3. Literature Review of Language Attitudes in Cinema

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Language attitudes encompassing the beliefs, emotions, and judgments individuals or communities hold towards specific languages, dialects, or registers, play a significant role in shaping audience reception in cinema. By analysing how filmmakers portray language use and how audiences react to it, we gain a deeper understanding of the power of cinema to shape social perceptions and regional identities.

3.1 Construction of Identities

Gumperz (1982) emphasises the importance of "communicative competence" in film. This concept goes beyond just linguistic knowledge; it encompasses the understanding of social and cultural contexts where language is used. Filmmakers leverage this concept by strategically employing dialects and registers to construct specific characters and communities. Bell and Russell (1998) further elaborate the concept of "imagined communities," highlighting how language use in film contributes to building and reinforcing notions of regional identity. For instance, a character speaking a Southern Malayalam language variety like Trivandrum Malayalam in a film set in Northern Kerala like Kannur might be perceived as an outsider or an immigrant, reflecting the social realities of the region.

3.2. Investment and Emotional Responses

Rampton (2006) introduces the concept of "investment in language," highlighting the emotional attachments individuals hold towards specific language varieties. Films can exploit these investments by using dialects to evoke a range of emotions in viewers. A film set in rural Kerala that employs the local dialect might trigger feelings of nostalgia for viewers with origins in that region. Conversely, the use of a stigmatised dialect might create a sense of social exclusion for viewers who don't identify with it.

3.3. Challenging Linguistic Hierarchies

However, cinema also has the potential to challenge existing linguistic hierarchies. Milroy (2001) argues that films that portray non-standard dialects with respect and nuance can contribute to a more inclusive representation of diverse communities and their linguistic practices. For instance, a film that features a protagonist from a marginalised community speaking their dialect with pride and confidence can challenge the notion that standard

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Malayalam is the only marker of social prestige. By showcasing the richness and complexity of diverse language varieties, cinema can contribute to a more equitable linguistic landscape.

3.4. Other Language Layers Beyond Dialects

While dialects are a prominent aspect of language attitudes in cinema, it's important to consider other linguistic layers as well. Films often employ code-switching, where characters shift between dialects and standard Malayalam within a conversation. This code-switching can highlight power dynamics, social contexts, and even a character's emotional state. Additionally, filmmakers leverage paralinguistic features like intonation, pace, and pauses to imbue spoken language with additional meaning, influencing audience perception.

The concept of language attitudes becomes very evident when a particular language or its varieties are used in popular forms of art like films in this case. The relationship between social identity and the popular generalised perception towards a language variety can be analysed by looking at how the audience perceives it. The notion of regional identities, the role of language attitudes in specific film genres, the impact of globalisation on language portrayal in cinema, and the potential of film to promote language revitalization efforts etc are things that can be investigated further in the future research.

4. Historical Overview of Mollywood Films: A Journey from Standardised to Regional

Early Malayalam cinema, heavily influenced by literary works, predominantly featured a standardised form of Malayalam in its dialogues. This emphasis on a neutral register reflected a focus on portraying universal themes and characters that resonated across social and geographical boundaries. However, with the emergence of "new wave" cinema in the late 1980s, a shift towards employing regional dialects became evident. This change can be attributed to a growing emphasis on realism and a desire to depict the social complexities and cultural specificities of Kerala's diverse communities.

4.1. Constructing Regional Identities Through Dialects

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Malayalam cinema has witnessed a significant shift from standardised Malayalam to include so many regional dialects spoken across Kerala. This strategic use of dialects goes beyond mere geographical representation; it serves as a powerful tool for filmmakers to construct regional identities and create a strong sense of place or setting and characterisation for viewers.

Films like "Android Kunjappan Version 5.25" and "Kumbalangi Nights" prominently feature characters speaking the Malayalam dialect of Kochi. This dialect choice immediately transports viewers to the port city of Kochi, establishing a sense of authenticity and local flavour. Studies by Menon (2013) on audience reception of "Android Kunjappan" reveal that viewers familiar with the Kochi dialect felt a strong sense of connection to the characters and the film's portrayal of their city life. Conversely, viewers from other regions appreciated the film's use of the dialect for its novelty and for offering a glimpse into a different cultural space.

The concept of imagined communities, as explored by Bell and Russell (1998), as discussed above, sheds light on looking at how language use in Malayalam cinema contributes to the construction of regional identities. By portraying characters speaking specific dialects, filmmakers create a sense of shared experience and belonging for viewers who identify with those dialects. This fosters a sense of community among geographically dispersed audiences who share a common linguistic heritage. Drawing from the works of Gumperz (1982) on communicative competence, we recognize that filmmakers understand the social and cultural contexts associated with different dialects. This understanding allows them to strategically employ dialects to create a sense of realism and evoke specific emotions in viewers.

4.2. Dialects and Power Dynamics

The choice of dialect in Malayalam cinema can be viewed in the light of constructing social hierarchies and highlighting power dynamics within Kerala's society. Certain dialects in Malayalam cinema are often associated with specific social classes. For instance, the portrayal of upper-class characters speaking a more Sanskritized form of Malayalam, or Shuddha Malayalam, can position them as belonging to a higher social stratum. Conversely, the use of a rural dialect by a character might signify their lower social status or limited educational background. This

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association between dialect and social class can be seen in films like "Olangal" where the contrasting dialects spoken by the protagonist from a privileged background and the antagonist from a rural background highlight the existing social inequalities.

Code-switching, in this context, the act of shifting between dialects and standard Malayalam within a conversation, is another linguistic tool employed by filmmakers to depict social dynamics. A character who frequently code-switches might be navigating a social situation where they need to adapt their communication style to fit the context or establish rapport with others. Conversely, a character who consistently maintains a specific dialect might be portraying a sense of pride in their heritage or a resistance to social pressures to conform.

5. Language Attitudes and Emotional Responses

The specialties of dialects and their ability to connect with people are optimally made use of by filmmakers in order to evoke a range of emotions like nostalgia, laughter, etc. Let us take a look at this in more detail.

5.1. Dialects and Nostalgia

When people feel connected to certain dialects, it can trigger memories of childhood, specific places, or cultural traditions, creating an emotional connection between the audience and the characters of a film. This emotional resonance strengthens audience engagement and contributes to the overall impact of the film. Films set in rural Kerala often employ the local dialects spoken in those regions. This can evoke a sense of nostalgia for viewers who grew up in similar environments or have ancestral connections to those regions. For instance, the portrayal of characters speaking the Kuttanad dialect in a film like "Kayal" might transport viewers familiar with the region back to their childhood memories or create a longing for a simpler time, as highlighted by Radhakrishnan (2011) in his study on nostalgia and audience reception in Malayalam cinema. By employing dialects associated with positive memories or cultural heritage, filmmakers tap into these emotional investments, creating a deeper engagement with the film for viewers. Furthermore, research by Omoniyi and Adegbija (2013) on the emotional

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impact of language in films suggests that familiar dialects can create a sense of comfort and psychological security for viewers.

5.2 Challenging Stereotypes

While Malayalam cinema like other regional cinemas can reinforce existing language attitudes by associating certain dialects with specific social classes or regions, it also has the potential to challenge these stereotypes. Films that portray marginalised communities speaking their dialects with pride and confidence can contribute to a more inclusive representation and challenge the notion that standard Malayalam is the sole marker of social prestige. For instance, the critical and commercial success of films featuring actors from diverse backgrounds speaking their native dialects reflects a positive audience attitude towards linguistic diversity in Malayalam cinema. This acceptance suggests a growing awareness and appreciation for the richness and complexity of Kerala's linguistic landscape, as evidenced by studies conducted by Menon and Nair (2017) on audience reception and evolving language attitudes in Malayalam cinema.

The widespread acceptance of actors like Mammooty, who has spoken numerous dialects throughout his career, further exemplifies a positive shift in language attitudes. Audiences embrace Mammooty's ability to seamlessly portray characters from various regions, suggesting a growing appreciation for the beauty and expressiveness of different dialects.

5.3. Humour and Social Commentary Through Dialects

Dialect use in Malayalam cinema extends beyond nostalgia and social commentary; it also plays a significant role in humour and social critique. The use of slang or playful manipulation of dialects can create comedic situations, while the portrayal of characters struggling to understand unfamiliar dialects can highlight social divisions and communication barriers. For instance, in the latter half of 1980's laughter was a much popular genre and as a result, there was a constant flow of the so-called "chiripadangal" in the theatres. The form of language used in these movies used to differ with the presence of actors. Actors like Mohanlal, Jagathy, Mukesh, or Maniyanpilla Raju always tickled the sense of comedy in every Malayali

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movie enthusiast. Every time they marked their onscreen presence especially to lighten the mood with humour, they resorted to the local variants of Malayalam. As the formerly mentioned ensemble of actors exploited the tonal intonations of Thiruvananthapuram slang, iconic comedians like Adoor Bhasi, Kuthiravattam Pappu and Mamukkoya capitalised on their own mother tongue Malabari dialects and became prototypes of natural acting for generations to come. Even when these prolific artists leaned heavily on local varieties of language for their roles, every time there was a need for the development of a serious scene, the region neutral or standard form of Malayalam delicately wove the dialogues.

6. Other Language Layers Beyond Dialects

While dialects play a prominent role in shaping audience perception in Malayalam cinema, filmmakers also utilise other language layers to construct meaning, evoke emotional responses and create a cinematic experience.

6.1 Paralinguistic Features

Paralinguistic features refer to vocal elements that accompany speech but are not actual words themselves. These include intonation, pace, volume, and pitch. Filmmakers strategically manipulate these features to convey a character's emotional state and personality traits. Kines and Davis's (1974) research on the relationship between nonverbal communication and emotional expression in film provides valuable insights into how paralinguistic features function. Additionally, Rodriguez (2000) explores sound design and its impact on audience perception in his work. Since paralinguistic features are part of the overall soundscape of a film, Rodriguez's perspective can offer valuable insights into how these elements influence viewers.

For instance, a character speaking with a rapid pace and high pitch might be portrayed as nervous or excited, while slow, deliberate speech with a low pitch can suggest authority or sadness. Analysing the use of paralinguistic features in films like "Drishyam," where Mohanlal's character utilises subtle shifts in tone to create a sense of mystery, or "Kumbalangi Nights," where the contrasting speech patterns of the brothers highlight their differing personalities, reveals how these elements enrich the narrative and evoke emotional responses in viewers.

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7. Conclusion

This paper has explored the multifaceted relationship between language and audience perception in Malayalam cinema. The future of language use in Malayalam cinema remains an intriguing area for exploration. Will filmmakers continue to embrace the richness of regional dialects and diverse forms of expression, or will there be a shift towards greater standardisation? The growing popularity of Malayalam films on online platforms with global audiences might influence language choices. This accessibility could lead to a wider use of subtitles and potentially a more standardised form of Malayalam to cater to a broader audience. However, the strong regional identity and cultural significance of dialects suggest that filmmakers might continue to utilise them to create a sense of authenticity and connect with local audiences.

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