

How could Dhivehi (Maldivian) be placed on the Malay linguistic map?

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Modern Dhivehi is a language of its own in South Asia, even though it is traditionally considered as being derived from Sinhala. Maldives are historically situated at the maritime crossroads between several *linguae francae* which could have been of decisive influence in its historical formation: Swahili along the East-African coast; Malay in the Indian ocean; or Arabic, which has been a unifying factor through islamization over the same Indian Ocean under the Yemenite influence.

Given the geographical position of Maldivian islands and their sea-related culture, it would be surprising that the islands' language, Dhivehi, had nothing to do with the Malay linguistic stock. Globally considered, Dhivehi is definitely not to be classified as a Malay/Austronesian language, unlike for example Malagasy. However the question here is: didn't it receive any substantial influence from Malay? To say it otherwise: If Maldives underwent a Malay impregnation, ethnically and culturally as it is obvious, Dhivehi too as a language might have a position in the Malay linguistic area.

Dhivehi originated from an early Sinhala substratum from Southern Sri Lanka (we can guess between the 4th and the 8th century AD), to which were later added many other linguistic adstrata after the coming of Islam in the Maldivian archipelago now a thousand years ago: Arabic, Persian or Hindustani. We know well of the input of these languages on Dhivehi, but less on Swahili or Malay possible inputs which have yet to be seriously investigated. Moreover a good amount of entries in the Dhivehi lexicon can not be traced from either Sinhala, Tamil, Arabo-Persian or any North-Western Indian languages.

Maldives being at midway of the sea-road between Madagascar and Eastern Africa on one side and on the other side the Malay/Indonesian archipelago, and given for example the persistent 'Achenese' tradition prevailing among Maldivians, the contention here is that Malay could constitute another adstratum of Dhivehi explaining many a word and several specific features. An attempt is done in this paper to propose a methodology to trace possible Malay loan words in Dhivehi and to classify them according to a periodisation of the registers affected in the process of borrowing – including loan words from Arabic, Portuguese or Dutch possibly imported through Malay.

Finally a decisive Malay influence could possibly explain several other phonological as well as syntactical features which helped to historically characterize Dhivehi: reduplication, classifiers, consonant-vowel syllables, a SVO pattern at least when V is a copula, the specific use of glottals, among others.
