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Interrogating the interrogatives in Malayalam language

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Abstract

Spoken by approximately 2.88% of Indians, Malayalam is a Dravidian language and one of the twenty-two scheduled languages of India. In the state of Kerala as well as the union territories of Lakshadweep and Puducherry, the language is recognized as an official language. In 2013, Malayalam was named a 'Classical Language in India'. Languages vary in how they form interrogatives. Malayalam has a dedicated interrogative inflectional form and it is often referred to as grammatical mood. Interrogatives in the Malayalam language are generally divided between yes/no questions, which ask whether or not something is the case and invite an answer of the yes/no type (/ate/-/alla/,/illa/), alternatively, a suffix added to the verb and wh-questions, which specify the information being asked about using a word like which, who, how, etc. can also give answers to the yes/no type questions. However, in the Malayalam language, the markers get meaning changes according to the context. As a result, the same marker can be used to give different meanings. This phenomenon is very evident in question formation. Malayalam use both syntax and prosody to distinguish interrogative sentences from declarative sentences and also marks interrogatives morphologically through a simple vowel change, i.e., by the inflection of the verb. This paper interrogates the interesting phenomenon of interrogatives in the Malayalam language by collecting data from various sources such as native speakers of Malayalam and some standard texts of Malayalam.

Keywords: Interrogatives, suffixes, vowels, Malayalam language, prosody, inflection

Introduction

Malayalam is a Dravidian language and is one of the twenty-two scheduled languages of India spoken by nearly 2.88% of Indians. The language has the official language status in the state of Kerala and the union territories of Lakshadweep and Puducherry. Malayalam was designated as the Classical Language in India in 2013 (Krishnamurti, 2023) ^[10]. Malayalam evolved from Tamil and belongs to the old folklore. Malayalam most likely originated from Middle Tamil (Sen.-Tamil) in the 6th century. Earlier Malayalam was considered as the west-coast dialect of Tamil. As a result of the significant progress that the language has undergone, Malayalam is now an independent Dravidian language, not a dialect of Tamil. Malayalam incorporated many elements from Sanskrit through the ages. Malayalam is a morphologically rich agglutinative language (An agglutinative language is a type of synthetic language with morphology that primarily uses agglutination. Words may contain different morphemes to determine their meanings, but all of these morphemes, including stems and affixes, tend to remain unchanged after their unions (*Agglutinating Languages*, 2023) with relatively free word order (Ramaswami Ayyar, 1936) ^[13]. Malayalam is a verb-final language.

Languages may use both syntax and prosody to distinguish interrogative sentences from declarative sentences. Syntax refers to grammatical changes, such as changing word order or adding question words, prosody refers to changes in intonation while speaking. Some languages also mark interrogatives morphologically, i.e., by the inflection of the verb. A language may use one or more of these methods in combination. The main syntactic devices used in various languages for marking questions are changes in word order and the addition of interrogative words or particles. Another common way of marking questions is with the use of a grammatical particle or an enclitic, to turn a statement into a yes-no question enquiring whether that statement is true. A particle may be placed at the beginning or end of the sentence or attached to an element within the sentence (Ginzburg & Sag, 2000) ^[6].

Non-polar questions (*Wh*-questions) are normally formed using an interrogative word. This generally takes the place in the syntactic structure of the sentence normally occupied by the information being sought. However, in terms of word order, the interrogative word (Or the phrase it is part of) is brought to the start of the sentence (An example of *wh*-fronting) in many languages. Such questions may also be subject to subject-verb inversion, as with yes-no questions. Questions may also be indicated by a different intonation pattern. This is generally a pattern of rising intonation. It applies particularly to yes-no questions; the use of rising question intonation in yes-no questions has been suggested to be one of the universals of human languages (Holmberg, 2016) ^[9]. Malayalam has an interrogative inflectional form. Interrogatives in the Malayalam language are generally divided between yes/no questions, which ask whether or not something is the case and invite an answer of the yes/no type (/ate/-/alla/,/illa/), the same applies when a suffix is added to the verb and *wh*-questions, which specify the information being asked about using a word like *which*, *who*, *how*, etc. Malayalam uses both syntax and prosody to distinguish interrogative sentences from declarative sentences and also marks interrogatives morphologically through a simple vowel change, i.e. by the inflection of the verb. This paper interrogates the interesting phenomenon of interrogatives in the Malayalam language by collecting data from various sources such as native speakers of Malayalam and some standard texts of Malayalam.

Materials and Methods

The data for this research has been collected using both primary and secondary sources. The informants for collecting the data on Malayalam are the native speakers of Malayalam and some standard texts of Malayalam. Data has been collected from people of several age groups. Native speakers provide judgments on Malayalam utterances in contexts, provided translations to and from English, translations to and from Malayalam, and gave alternative semantically equivalent utterances for given example sentences or phrases. Hermann Gundert, presents a strategy for understanding the basics of Malayalam Grammar. It gives information in three parts - Orthography, Etymology, Syntax, with an Appendix on Rhetorical figures of speech and compounds. It helps to understand the basic structure of Malayalam. It cannot be denied that grammatical tradition in Malayalam has remained too long within the ambit of a grammar that was written nearly a century back. Malayalam follows the system of marking grammatical relations and semantic roles through a set of case suffixes, a feature common to the Dravidian languages. As roles and relations are conveyed through suffixes, word order changes do not normally alter the sentence meaning in Malayalam (Gundert, 1868) ^[8]. Holger Diessel's study provides two types of expressions that seem to exist in all languages, demonstratives and interrogatives. Based on representative samples it is shown that demonstratives and interrogatives have some striking features in common. It is argued that demonstratives and interrogatives have a special status in language and basic demonstratives and interrogatives are immediately concerned with the speaker-hearer interaction. Interrogatives encode semantic features and have a number of morphosyntactic properties in common. Both types of

expressions initiate a search for information that is guided by their semantic and syntactic features (Diessel, 2003) ^[3]. Ramaswami Ayyar study shows the influence of tradition in Malayalam and the morphology. The gradual development of the language can be traced from the book. The book talks about the inflections in the language. The book distinguishes the unique characteristics of Malayalam morphology and classifies the linguistic characteristics of the language. The constant embodiment of the inflections and the incorporation of the sound in the verb are explained here. The major classical grammars of Malayalam, following the Sanskrit grammatical tradition, treat the genitive as a case. However, syntactic evidence supports the contrary view. Malayalam is based on noun-verb relations. The genitive noun remains outside the basic sentence structure (Ramaswami Ayyar, 1936) ^[13]. Peter Siemunt discusses about three types of interrogatives across the world's languages. They may be used (i) to ask whether a proposition or its negation is true, (ii) to inquire which values (if any) instantiate the variables of an open proposition and (iii) to query which element of a set of alternatives makes an open sentence true. The paper explains about Interrogative systems and how they are related to many other subsystems of grammar (relative pronouns, indefinite pronouns, conditionals, etc.) and interrogative marking can be derived from or expand into these areas (Siemund, 2021) ^[15].

Ginsburg and Sag's study mirrors the grammar of interrogatives. It helps to acquire the information in interrogative constructions and it seems a universal property of natural languages, languages differ substantially in the strategies they employ for coding interrogatives. There are seven basic strategies of deriving interrogatives, some of them being restricted to particular types of interrogatives: (i) intonation, (ii) interrogative particles, (iii) interrogative tags, (iv) disjunctive constructions (v) the order of constituents, (vi) verbal inflection and (vii) interrogative words (Ginsburg & Sag, 2000) ^[6]. Antonini study helps to understand the morphosyntactic and morphosemantic contributions of the copula verb in Malayalam. The copula verbs seem to overlap in locative and property concept. The "elsewhere copula" /a:ŋə/ and the "existential copula" /uŋtə/ are treated as interrogative markers as being in overlapping distribution in locative and property concept predicates, motivated by semantic or pragmatic changes and not by syntactic differences. Depending on the type of copular clause (Specification or predication), the topic/focus assignments and the information structure of these phrases can vary (Antonini, 2020) ^[2]. Mohanan and Mohanan's study discusses the interchangeability of the copulas. The difference between the semantic representations of the two copulas may lie in the differences in the presuppositions they trigger. This paper helps to investigate the syntactic and semantic distribution of two copulas in Malayalam that exhibit what appears to be a considerable overlap in spite of the strong intuition of distinction in forming the interrogative markers (Mohanan & Mohanan, 1999) ^[12]. The word order is generally subject-object-verb (SOV) pattern, although other orders are often employed for reasons such as emphasis. The class of words includes common nouns, proper names, numerals, pronouns, and some adjectives. They are inflected in different contexts. The plural is formed by adding a suffix to the singular.

Example 1

Singular	പട്ടി /patti/ = dog
Plural	പട്ടികൾ/pattikal/ = dogs

Usually /ka/ suffix is added to the singular noun to make it plural. There are exceptions for this case which is discussed later. As roles and relations are conveyed through suffixes, gender marker can also be added in between the root noun and plural marker. Nouns denoting human beings form the plural with a special suffix.

Example 2

Singular	അമ്മ /amma/ = mother
Plural	അമ്മമാർ/ammamá/ = mothers

Personal pronouns are marked for person, case and number. Some of the words are similar to Sanskrit words and also have a touch of Tamil and other Dravidian languages in its literature. Moreover, Malayalam literature has a polite way of expressing plurals. Gender is marked only in the third person singular. There is an inclusive and exclusive form of first-person plural. A dual inclusive pronoun is seen in Malayalam that distinguishes between two people or more people, including the speaker, and includes the listener. In dual exclusive pronoun, which also distinguishes between two people, but excludes the listener.

Example 3

Inclusive	നമ്മൾ /nammal/ = We
Exclusive	ഞങ്ങൾ /ñañal/ = We

Usually, Second-person pronouns vary less in form than other kinds of personal pronouns. There used to be a clearer distinction between singular and plural, as well as between formal and informal in the use of second person pronoun. There is an informal and a formal second person singular.

Example 4

Informal	നീ /ni:/ = you
Formal	നിങ്ങൾ /niñal/ = You

Malayalam verbs are inflected by using suffixes. A typical Malayalam verb consists of a verb base plus a grammatical suffix. Malayalam mood indicates whether the action of the verb is unreal, possible, potential, or real, Verbs are not marked for number or gender, and there are simple and continuous tenses formation for verb. The following example illustrates how the various formations of a verb happen. Any verb having the similar suffixation will fall in this category of the verb For example, /kañuka/ (see) will become /kañunnu/(present), /kañdu/ (past), and /ka:ñum/(future). To denote a relation to the verb or any other name some morphophonemic modifications are added to the noun in Malayalam sentences. This phenomenon is

known as *vibhakthi*. *Karakam* is the object which performs an action. *Karakam* gives importance to meaning and *vibhakthi* gives importance to morphology of Malayalam language (Gundert, 1868) [8].

Morphologically, Malayalam is richly inflected by the addition of suffixes with the root/stem word. Malayalam uses a different word order as compared to English. It is a verb-final language and all the noun phrases in the sentence normally appear towards the left of the verb. Malayalam verbs can be inflected into different forms. The inflection includes finite, infinite, adjectival, adverbial, and conditional forms of words. These vary from one set of verbs to another. Malayalam has postpositions instead of prepositions in English. The adjectives and relative clauses precede their head nouns in a sentence. Variations in intonation patterns, vocabulary and distribution of grammatical and phonological elements are observable along with the parameters of the region, religion, community, occupation, social stratum, style and register. There is no one-to-one mapping between prepositions in English and the postposition in Malayalam. When suffixes or postpositions or any other base word itself is added to one base word, changes can occur to the word. These changes are generally called *sandhi* (Morphophonemic alternation) changes (Gundert, 1868) [8]. In Malayalam, nouns are inflected for case and number, whilst verbs are conjugated for tense, mood and the causative nature and not for number (Plurality) or gender. Malayalam adjectives, adverbs, postpositions, and conjunctions do not undergo any inflection; they are invariant. The dictionary form of verbs ends in /-uka/, and this ending is replaced while inflecting verbs. Malayalam employs two defective verbs as its copulas. The first, /-a:ñ /, is the plain equative copula and the second, /uññ/, is the locative copula and is also used to indicate possession (with the subject/possessor in the dative case).

Mainly there are four types of sentences in Malayalam such as Declarative sentence, Imperative sentence, Interrogative sentence, and Exclamatory sentence (*Sentence Types Based on Grammatical Classification and Functionality*, 2023). A declarative sentence simply makes a statement or expresses an opinion. In other words, it makes a declaration. This kind of sentence ends with a period. For example,

Malayalam Sentence	ഇന്ന് ഒരു നല്ല ദിവസം ആണ് /inn oru nalla divasam a:ñ/
Word-to-word translation	↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ Today a good day is
Meaning	Today is a good day

An imperative sentence gives a command or makes a request. It usually ends with a period but can, under certain circumstances, end with an exclamation point. In Malayalam, it can be a verb alone. For example,

Malayalam Sentence	ഇരിക്കൂ /irikju/
Word-to-word translation	be seated
Meaning	Please be seated

/ -uka/ forms are also used after the verb in formal language to denote imperative meaning and it is an example of using infinitive form of the verb as a formal imperative. For example,

Malayalam Sentence	ഇരിക്കുക /irikjuka/
Word-to-word translation	be seated
Meaning	Please be seated

An interrogative sentence asks a question. This type of sentence will have interrogative markers or it may be yes/no questions. For example,

Malayalam Sentence	നീ എവിടെ പോയി? /ni: evide poji?/
Word-to-word translation	You where went?
Meaning	Where did you go?

Here, /evide/ is the interrogative marker. Interrogative suffix /o/ is added to the verb after all other suffixes to make a sentence into yes/no interrogative. For example,

Malayalam Sentence	നീ പോയോ? /ni: pojo?/ -
Word-to-word translation	You went?
Meaning	Did you go?

An exclamatory sentence is a sentence that expresses great emotion such as excitement, surprise, happiness and anger, and ends with an exclamation point. For example,

Malayalam Sentence	നമ്മൾ ജയിച്ചു /nammal dzejtʃu/
Word-to-word translation	We (inclusion) won
Meaning	We won!

The current Malayalam script bears high similarity with Tigalari script, which was used for writing the Tulu language, spoken in coastal Karnataka (Dakshina Kannada, and Udupi districts) and the northern most Kasargod district of Kerala. Tigalari script was also used for writing Sanskrit in Malabar region (Malayalam, 2023). The influence of Sanskrit was very prominent in formal Malayalam used in literature. Malayalam has a substantially high number of Sanskrit loanwords (Godavarma, 1946) [7]. Loanwords and influences also from Hebrew, Syriac, and Ladino abound in the Jewish Malayalam dialects, as

well as English, Portuguese, Syriac, and Greek in the Christian dialects, while Arabic and Persian elements predominate in the Muslim dialects. The Muslim dialect known as Mappila Malayalam is used in the Malabar region of Kerala. Another Muslim dialect called Beary bashe is used in the extreme northern part of Kerala and the southern part of Karnataka (George, 1998) [5]. Malayalam script consists of a total of 578 characters. The script contains 52 letters including 16 vowels and 36 consonants, which forms 576 syllabic characters and contains two additional diacritic characters named anusvāra and visarga (Malayalam, 2023).

Results and Discussion

An interrogative word or question word is a function word used to ask a question, such as *what/entə/, which/e:tə/, when/eppl/, where/evide/, who/a:ə/, whom/a:re/, whose/a:rude/, why/entine/, and how/enjane/*. They are used in direct questions as follows:

Malayalam Sentence	അവൻ എവിടെ പോകുന്നു? /avan evide pokunnu/
Word-to-word translation	He Where is going?
Meaning	Where is he going?

Yes/ no questions can be created with question tag /a:ɲo/, /alle/ or with the addition of a suffix to the verb. Question intonation can also be used in this context. To question the different elements in the sentence, *copula verb + interrogative suffix /o/* is added to the questioned element in Yes - no question (Antonini, 2020; Geethakumary, 2002) [2, 4].

Malayalam Sentence	കുട്ടികൾ വയലിൽ ആണോ കളിക്കുന്നത്? /kuttikal vajalil aano kalikkunnata?/
Word-to-word translation	Children field copula verb play + Interrogative suffix
Meaning	Are the children playing in the field?

Interrogative suffix /o/ is added to the verb after all the other suffixes to make a sentence into interrogative.

Malayalam Sentence	കുട്ടികൾ വയലിൽ കളിക്കുന്നുണ്ടോ? /kuttikal vajalil kalikkunno?/
Word-to-word translation	Children field do play?
Meaning	Do the children play in the field?

In this example, /o/ suffix is added to the verb / kalikuka/ (which means play) to make it an interrogative marker.

Malayalam Sentence	നീ സ്കൂളിൽ പോയോ? /ni: skulil pojo?/
Word-to-word translation	You school did go?
Meaning	Did you go to school?

Similar to the previous example here, /o/ suffix is added to the verb /pokuka/ (which means to go) to make it an interrogative marker.

Malayalam Sentence	നാളെ	നീ	വരുംമാ?
	/na:lɛ	ni:	varumo/?
Word-to-word translation	↓	↓	↓
	Tomorrow	you	will come?
Meaning	Will you come tomorrow?		

In the above example, /o/ suffix is added to the verb /varuka/ (which means to come) to make it interrogative. The negative verbs /alla/ and /illa / take /e/ suffix to form confirmatory questions. It is normally used to create yes/no questions.

Malayalam Sentence	നീ	വയലിൽ	പോയി	അല്ലേ?
	/ni:	vajalil	poji	alle/
Word-to-word translation	↓	↓	↓	↓
	You	in the field	went	didn't ?
Meaning	You went to the field, didn't you?			

In the above example /alla/ is the negative verb turns to /alle/ to make the sentence into an interrogative form. Here, /alle/ acts as the question tag for the sentence. In the example given below, /illa/ is the negative verb turns to /ille/ to make the sentence into an interrogative form. To question the different elements in the sentence, /alle/, /ille/ is added to the questioned element.

Malayalam Sentence	ഇവിടെ	സ്കൂൾ	ഇല്ലേ?
	/ivide	skul	ille/
Word-to-word translation	↓	↓	↓
	Here	School	is not ?
Meaning	Is there no school here?		

The conditional form of the verb (stem + a:l) takes the interrogative suffix /o/ to form a question; the information sought through the question and is not fully expressed.

Malayalam Sentence	അവൻ	വന്നാലോ?
	/avan	vanna:lo/
Word-to-word translation	↓	↓
	He	if comes?
Meaning	What if he comes?	

Here, conditional question is formed by /varuka/ + / a:l/ + /o/ (/varuka/ is the verb which means to come).

Malayalam Sentence	നമുക്ക്	അവളോട്	ചോദിച്ചാലോ?
	/namuk	ava o:d	tʃoditʃa:lo/
Word-to-word translation	↓	↓	↓
	We (Inclusive)	her + to	do ask?
Meaning	Why don't we ask her?		

Here, conditional question is formed by /tʃodikuka/ + / a:l/ + /o/ (/tʃodikuka/ is the verb which means to ask).

Conclusion

Malayalam language is simple in its structure. Malayalam use both syntax and prosody to distinguish interrogative sentences (which pose questions) from declarative sentences (which state propositions). Syntax refers to grammatical changes, such as changing word order or adding question words; prosody refers to changes in intonation while speaking. Also, Malayalam mark interrogatives morphologically, that is by inflection of the verb. Malayalam is richly inflected by the addition of suffixes with the root/stem word and the language is agglutinative in nature. The inflection includes finite, infinite, adjectival, adverbial and conditional forms of words. These vary from one set of verbs to another. Interrogative suffix /o/ is added to the verb after all other suffixes to make a sentence into interrogative. The copula alternate in interrogative constructions in Malayalam. The two copulas introduce different operators into the structure. The negative verbs /alla/ and /illa/ take /e/ to form confirmatory questions. Non-polar questions (wh-questions) are normally formed using an interrogative word such as *what/entə*, *which/e: tə*, *when/eppo*/, *where/evide*/, *who/a: ɔ*/, *whom/a:re*/, *whose/a:rude*/, *why/entine*/, and *how/enane*/. This generally takes the place in the syntactic structure of the sentence. However, in terms of word order, the interrogative word (or the phrase it is part of) is brought to the sentence after the subject of the sentence.

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