



**HAL**  
open science

**Review of Gamliel 2020 "A Linguistic Survey of the Malayalam Language in Its Own Terms", Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz**

Emilie Aussant

► **To cite this version:**

Emilie Aussant. Review of Gamliel 2020 "A Linguistic Survey of the Malayalam Language in Its Own Terms", Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz. 2021. hal-03327930

**HAL Id: hal-03327930**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03327930v1>**

Submitted on 27 Aug 2021

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Ophira Gamliel, *A Linguistic Survey of the Malayalam Language in Its Own Terms*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz Verlag, 2020, ISBN 978-3-447-11267-3, 324 pages.

The first version of this book appeared in 2017 (The Hebrew University Magnes Press, Jerusalem), it was intended as a tool for Malayalam classes, then offered by the author at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

The 2020 book is divided into 16 chapters and 10 appendices (paradigms, kinship terms, glossary, further readings, Malayalam sources). Exercises are provided for each chapter (up to the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter) and Appendix H offers a key for exercises.

Chapter one includes an introduction, a section on script (single letters) and a section on pronunciation. The introduction (5 pages) gives very brief notes about the earliest written documents in Malayalam, the evolution of the writing system as well as some information regarding the various names used to denote the language through the course of history. The topic that receives most attention is standardization (2 pages). A few lines are devoted to the previous grammatical descriptions of Malayalam. Gamliel mentions the *Līlātilakam* (a poetical treatise of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, composed in Sanskrit *sūtras*, which describes – among other things – the morphological and phonological characteristics of *Maṇipravālam*, the mediaeval literary language of Kerala defined as a mixture of the *Keraḷabhāṣā* and Sanskrit) as well as three more recent works: (1) *malayālmayūṭe vyākaraṇam* (*A Grammar of Malayalam in the Language Itself*, published in 1863), written in Malayalam by George Matthan, an Indian priest of the Anglican church, (2) *malayālabhāṣāvyākaraṇam* (*A Grammar of the Malayalam Language*, published in 1868), written in Malayalam and in English by the German missionary Hermann Gundert and (3) A.R. Rajaraja Varman's *Keraḷapāṇinīyam* (*The Kerala Paniniad* as translated by Andronov,<sup>1</sup> published in 1896), which is written in Malayalam and which relies on the Sanskrit grammatical tradition. At the beginning of the section Gamliel devotes to nouns (chapter 6, p. 93), one finds also a brief mention of the Sanskrit and Tamil grammatical traditions as well as the traces they have left in the description of the Malayalam language (in the present context: two words to denote the noun, *nāmam*, which is of Sanskrit origin, and *pēr* which is of Tamil origin). And that's about it.

I noticed a lot of typos, some instances of clumsy phrasing<sup>2</sup> and factual errors: it is now well established that Pāṇini lived around the 5<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> century (not in the 2<sup>nd</sup> cent.!) BCE, and that he composed a grammar in the form of condensed rules, i.e. *sūtras* (not *kārikās*!). But, above all, I could not find a single word about the description of the language “in its own terms”, though the title of the book itself explicitly announces this. From the perspective of descriptive linguistics/linguistic typology, to describe a language “in its own terms” means to describe a language through an analytical approach which stresses the inherent structure of the language, without forcing it into the Greco-Latin model organized in parts of speech. The *Handbook of American Indian Languages* directed by Franz Boas (four volumes published between 1911 and 1943) is generally considered as foundational to this approach. On page 81 of his (long and rich) introduction,<sup>3</sup> Boas writes: “In accordance with the general views expressed in the introductory chapters, the method of treatment has been throughout an analytical one. No attempt has been made to compare the forms of the Indian grammars with the grammars of English, Latin, or even among themselves; but in each case the psychological groupings which

---

<sup>1</sup> Michail S. Andronov, 1996, *A Grammar of the Malayalam Language in Historical Treatment*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz Verlag (Beiträge zur Kenntnis südasiatischer Sprachen und Literaturen 1).

<sup>2</sup> For instance, on p. 105: “Syntactic Functions of Nouns at a Glance. 1. Nominative subjects. A. The subject is the agent of a wide range of actions and states expressed by verbal predicates. B. The nominative is also used with the subjects of nominal predicates and with the nouns that serve as their predicates (combined with the copula).”

<sup>3</sup> *Handbook of American Indian Languages* by Franz Boas, Part 1, Smithsonian Institution Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 40, Washington, Government Printing Office, 1911, pp. 5–83.

are given depend entirely upon the inner form of each language. In other words, the grammar has been treated as though an intelligent Indian was going to develop the forms of his own thoughts by an analysis of his own form of speech.” This way of describing languages is still in use today and, to some extent, has even been “theorized” by typologists such as Robert M. W. Dixon and Matthew S. Dryer (see their works on what they call “Basic Linguistic Theory”) and, from a different perspective, by Martin Haspelmath, who argues for a “framework-free grammatical theory.” I would add that, in some cases, we do have access to the thoughts of any “intelligent Indian” to use Boas’ words (who was of course referring to the people nowadays often called Native Americans): native grammarians certainly described their language in their own terms. In this respect, Malayalam offers an extremely interesting case for study. Gamliel’s “linguistic survey” does not say a word about this. It is really a pity.

Émilie Aussant  
CNRS, UMR 7597 HTL  
Université de Paris