

# Gender in Malayalam Language Acquisition

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**Abstract:** *This study investigates the pattern of gender acquisition in the Malayalam language among children aged one to three. The research employs a descriptive and qualitative methodology within a developmental framework. The findings reveal that children begin identifying kinship terms from nine months, with overgeneralization observed in the early stages. By the age of three, children can use gender terms appropriately without conceptual errors.*

**Keywords:** Language Acquisition, Gender, Malayalam, Kinship Terms, Overgeneralization.

## 1. Introduction

First Language Acquisition is a very complex process. Children undergo morphological modulations within their first year of speaking itself. As they move more complex expressions of meaning they add grammatical morphemes. Gender is a category of morphosyntactic properties which distinguish classes of nominal lexemes: for each such class of lexemes, there is a distinct set of inflectional markings for agreeing words (Stump 1979). Franceschina (2005: 107) revealed that grammatical gender is one of the earliest properties to emerge in first language acquisition and, depending on the language being learned, also one of the earliest to be mastered.

### Research problem

The main goal of this study is to find out the pattern of acquisition of gender in Malayalam language between children of ages one to three.

### Objective

- To identify the use of grammatical gender in acquisition of Malayalam language in children.
- To identify the order of Kinships in acquisition of Malayalam.

## 2. Review of Literature

Research shows that children are capable of distinguishing differences in biological sex at around the age of 2; 62. It is at this particular period that they become aware of the existence of two sexes: in a picture, they recognize which person is a male and which is a female, and attribute himself/herself to one of the two sexes (Fagot et al.1986). The category of gender becomes an issue in the process of language acquisition when a child finds out that sex is an inherent property and does not change even if clothes are changed (Gelman et al.1986). It appears that already in their early childhood children become aware of the existence of certain rules related to natural gender.

Every human society known operates on a kinship system. A kinship system consists of members of a group who share a common language (linguistic community) who co - exist in a similar culture based on individuals' relationships of blood and marriage tied to rights and obligations (Nanda, 1994). Kinship terms are the set of terms actually used by a group to name relationships. According to stone (2002) Kinship systems all have terminology to classify different kinship roles. Different types of cultural kinship systems categorize

members into different categories of kin relations. A kin term represents a specific type of kin category expressed as a distinct semantic unit (Parkin 1997). The relationship among kinship terms and their systems type by language and culture; indicating that structure for kinship terms and systems is not universal.

Agha (2006) states that each kin - relational category has a semantic inverse or reciprocal relative, then B is A's relative. Children gradually develop relational character of kinships after their early learning of proper names. It is misleading to say that kinship terminologies are 'egocentric' relations that can be viewed from the 'outside' (Sahlins 2012: 25).

### Significance of the study

This study contributes to the understanding of gender acquisition in language, specifically in Malayalam, providing insights into the developmental stages of language acquisition among children.

## 3. Methodology

The study is a descriptive and qualitative one which comes under the developmental framework. There for it is executed as a longitudinal one.

### a) Sample / Participants

Data was collected from six informants belong to the Malayalam speaking community and were of the age from 1 to 3 years. The researcher has maintained an equal ratio of male and female distribution while selecting the informants. There were three female and three male informants. The investigator also has attempted to bring inclusiveness in the selection of informants. Therefore, children have been selected from Hindu, Christian and Muslim religion. To maintain an equality in the economic background of the informants the investigator has selected all the six informants from middle class family.

### b) Data collection procedures and data analysis

The data collection method of the present study followed the direct and participatory observation (involving parents and caretakers) method. The investigators designed a schedule to conduct the data collection in an effective and organized manner. According to the schedule constant observation of the informant was conducted, dairies were maintained for the six informants in which parents and care takers of the children could update entries and the investigators regularly reconfirm the observation entered in the dairies.

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**Grammatical gender in Malayalam**

In Malayalam there are three genders masculine, feminine and neuter. Masculine suffix in Malayalam is / - an/ and feminine are / - i/, / - tti/, / - tti/, / - al/, / - ſſi/. In Malayalam gender markers co - occur with nouns. Among pronouns 3<sup>rd</sup> person only takes gender markers. Nouns are of masculine and feminine gender in acquisition is exemplified in the following examples in kinship terminologies.

**Gender in kinship terms**

Malayalam kinship terminology is complex. There are different terminologies according to different religious communities.

**Identification of gender in kinship terms in Case 1A.**

**Table:** Identification of gender in kinship terms in Case 1A.

Age	Masculine	Feminine
<b>5- 12 months</b> 9 months 10 months 11 months	/bakka/ ‘father/mother’ /pakka/ ‘father/mother’ /pappa/ ‘father’	/mummi/ ‘mother’
<b>13- 16 months</b> 13 months 14 months	/appacci/ ‘father’s father’	/ammaccamma/ ‘mother’s mother’
<b>17- 20 months</b> <b>17 months</b> <b>19 months</b>	/appacca/ ‘mother’s father’ /tetta/ ‘elder brother’	X
<b>21- 24 months</b> <b>21 months</b> <b>23 months</b>	/koppakka/ ‘father’s younger brother’	/kuññicci/ ‘mother’s sister’
<b>25- 30 months</b> <b>29 months</b>	/appuppa/ ‘old man’	X
<b>31 - 36 months</b> <b>31 months</b> <b>34 months</b>	/māma/ ‘mother’s brother’ /valyappa/ ‘father’s elder brother’	/ammūmma/ ‘old woman’

**Table:** Identification of gender in kinship terms - case 4D.

Age	Masculine	Feminine
<b>5- 12 months</b> 10 months 12 months	/appa/ ‘father/mother’	/amma/ ‘mother’
<b>12- 16 months</b> 16 months	tetta/ ‘elder brother’	X
<b>17- 20 months</b> 20 months	/accacca/ ‘elder brother’	X
<b>21- 24 months</b> 23 months	X	/ammamma/ ‘Mother’s mother’
<b>25- 30 months</b> 30 months	/appuppa/ ‘older man’	X
<b>31 - 36 months</b> 34 months	X	/appacci/ ‘father’s sister’

**Table 1:** Identification of gender in kinship terms in case 5E

Age	Masculine	Feminine
<b>5- 12 months</b> 10 months 12 months	/atta/ ‘father/mother’	/emmi/ ‘father/mother’
<b>13- 16 months</b> 18 months	/attatta/ ‘Grand father’	X
<b>17- 20 months</b> 24 months	/kka/ ‘elder brother’	X
<b>21- 24 months</b> 23 months	X	/attammacci/ ‘father’s mother’
<b>25- 30 months</b> 24 months 31 months	/vāppuppa/ ‘mother’s father’	/ammiyāma/ mother’s mother’
<b>31 - 36 months</b> 33 months 35 months	/kottatta/ ‘Father’s brother’ /māma/ ‘father’s sister’s husband.	/māmi/ father’s sister

According to the data kinship terms are identified from 9 months itself. At this early stage, over generalisation in kinships are identified. In later development overgeneralisation is avoided.

According to psycholinguists gender is a concept which is expressed in a consistent way by a native speaker. It is expected from a native speaker to store the gender terms properly and retrieve them promptly. According to the data the first identified nouns are the kinship terms. The data reveals that the acquisition of kinship terms is identified in a general order. The kinship terms for father and mother are acquired before 12 months. According to the environmental exposure kinship terms for grand parents or siblings are identified between 12 to 20 months. In between 24 to 36 months kinships for uncle or aunt are acquired. kinships for distant relations are generally identified late.

The native speaker's capability to retrieve appropriate gender terms is not merely with the help of memory alone. Instead there is a mental process that is underlying behind this. This mental process become evident when children overgeneralise kinship terms in the initial stages of their usage. e. g the informant use the term /bakka/ meaning /papa/ 'father' (case 1A; 9 months), for referring to both his parents. This Over generalisation reflex the underlying mental process involved in using gender terms. Native speaker typically makes few or no mistakes in the use of gender; if the gender of a noun were remembered individually, we would expect more errors. (Corbett, 1991). Gradually children develop a tendency to use correct gender terms while using native language Malayalam. For instance, children after attaining an age of one year tends to use correct gender terms for both father and mother. From the observation of the data it becomes evident that children when they complete the age of three years (36 months) they attain a capability to use gender terms appropriately without any conceptual mistake.

#### 4. Conclusion

According to Saussure (1959) psychological concepts represented in the mind are linked to 'linguistic' sounds which are reflected in a physiological process. The brain transmits an impulse of instruction corresponding to the (sound) image to the organs for the production of sound. This is followed by conversation to the physical sound waves which in turn must be received by a hearer and, in reverse, converted to psychological concepts represented in the mind.

This study reveals that children begin identifying kinship terms from nine months, with overgeneralization observed in the early stages. By the age of three, children can use gender terms appropriately without conceptual errors, contributing to our understanding of gender acquisition in the Malayalam language.

Kinship terms is identified in a general order. The kinship terms for father and mother are first acquired. Secondly kinship terms for Grand parents or siblings. Thirdly kinships for uncle or aunt are acquired. kinships for distant relations

are generally identified late. The over generalization in kinships identified only at the early ages.

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