

Dynamics of Multilingualism in the Maldives: Empirical Insights into the Interplay between Dhivehi and English

South Asia is home to hundreds of indigenous languages, but English has been integrated into the linguistic ecologies of all South Asian countries independent of whether they were directly administrated by the British like India or Sri Lanka or whether they remained self-governing nations like the Maldives or Nepal. While one might expect to find English more firmly rooted in countries with British colonial legacies due to institutional promotion of English there (Mukherjee 2007; Bernaisch 2015), the Maldives serve as a counter-example.

In 1887, the Maldives became a British protectorate retaining most of its administrative authority (cf. Meierkord 2018: 3). When the Maldives were formally recognised as a republic in 1953 (before their independence in 1965), estimates suggest that 3% of the Maldivian population were proficient in English at that point in time (cf. Mohamed 2020: 748) – with Dhivehi being the dominant choice across all communicative domains. Since then, the balance between Dhivehi and the non-postcolonial Maldivian English (cf. Buschfeld & Kautzsch 2017; Buschfeld 2020) has changed so radically that researchers anticipate a first-language shift from Dhivehi to the local form of English (cf. Mohamed 2020: 762–763). Against this background, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- To what degree are Dhivehi and English currently used across different settings in spoken, written and online communication in the Maldives?
- To what extent do Maldivians consider English a fit vehicle to represent their identities – particularly in the light of a potential first-language shift from Dhivehi to English?

Methodologically, the study works with 193 sociolinguistic surveys completed predominantly by younger members of the Maldivian speech community to evaluate the potentiality of an L1 shift to English. Informants self-report their language choices in different communicative set-ups in speech, writing and online media and share their attitudes towards Maldivian English.

The results underline the prominence of English in the multilingual repertoires of young Maldivians. While Dhivehi continues to play a dominant role particularly when interacting with family, English has become ubiquitous in most other communicative contexts. With a view to Maldivian English as a potential identity carrier, the informants overall accept the Maldivian way of using English and generally display a positive attitude towards it, but the majority uses English for functional reasons with only a minority projecting their identity through Maldivian English.

References

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