ഇശൽ പൈതൃകം

Ishal Paithrkam

Kinship, Language and Cultural Identity: An Analysis of Kinship Terms in Hermann Gundert's *A Malayalam–English Dictionary*

Sijo Mathew
Dr. Sinumol Thomas

Hermann Gundert's *A Malayalam–English Dictionary* (1872) occupies a foundational position in the history of Indian lexicography, not merely for its philological rigour but for the depth of cultural knowledge embedded within its lexical entries. One of the most revealing dimensions of this work is its extensive documentation of kinship terminology, which offers a rare and systematic window into the socio-cultural fabric of nineteenth-century Kerala. Far from constituting a neutral or purely descriptive inventory of familial relations, Gundert's treatment of kinship terms reflects Kerala's pluralistic social order, shaped by matrilineal and patrilineal descent systems, caste- and community-specific practices, gendered modes of address, and marked regional variation. Drawing on a wide range of sources including classical literary texts, administrative and documentary records, and sustained interaction with oral informants, Gundert recorded both written and spoken registers at a historical moment when dialects and colloquial speech were largely excluded from scholarly lexicography. The dictionary documents fine semantic distinctions, dialectal variants, and multilingual borrowings from Sanskrit, Tamil, Kannada, Arabic, Persian, and Hindustani, situating kinship

vocabulary within longer histories of migration, trade, religious interaction, and cultural exchange. Many entries also register processes of semantic shift, social stratification, and taboo formation, whereby certain kinship terms fell out of use or acquired pejorative meanings over time. By analysing representative kinship terms in their historical, social, and linguistic contexts, this study argues that kinship vocabulary in Gundert's dictionary functions as a powerful marker of cultural identity, encoding social hierarchy, community affiliation, and ideological orientations toward language itself. In doing so, the article foregrounds Gundert's lexicographic practice as an early form of sociolinguistic and ethnographic inquiry, one that anticipates later theoretical concerns articulated by scholars such as Thomas R. Trautmann, Kamil V. Zvelebil, and Asif Agha. The study thus reaffirms the inseparability of language, kinship, and cultural identity in the historical development of Malayalam.

Keywords: Affinity, Consanguinity, Cultural Identity, Kinship Terms, Lexicography

Introduction

Dr. Hermann Gundert's *A Malayalam–English Dictionary*, first published in 1872 and commonly referred to as *The Gundert Dictionary*, is widely recognised as the first scientific dictionary of Malayalam. Compiled over several decades, the dictionary reflects Gundert's sustained engagement with the language, literature, and everyday speech of Kerala. Unlike earlier dictionaries, which largely privileged literary and heavily Sanskritised registers of Malayalam, Gundert consciously expanded the scope of lexicography to include colloquial, regional, and orally transmitted forms. This methodological shift marks a decisive break from prevailing philological practices of the nineteenth century and significantly broadens the linguistic and cultural archive of Malayalam. The enduring value of the dictionary is articulated by Gundert himself in the *Preface*:

> The materials for this work have been collected during more than twenty-five years' study of the language. The words have been taken from all available sources, from the lips of speakers of all ranks, castes and occupations, from the letters and records of many

different districts, and from the writers in prose and poetry of every age. A list necessarily imperfect of the literature which has been ransacked for contributions, will be subjoined under the head of Abbreviations. (Gundert, 1962, Preface, Para. 1)

This statement is crucial, as it signals Gundert's awareness of language as a socially embedded phenomenon rather than a purely textual or elite construct. By explicitly acknowledging caste, occupation, and region as sources of linguistic data, Gundert positioned his dictionary, perhaps unintentionally, as an ethnographic record of Kerala society under colonial modernity.

Kinship terms, which denote relations of consanguinity (by blood) and affinity (by marriage), are central to understanding any society's cultural organisation. In Kerala, kinship structures historically reflected the coexistence of matrilineal systems such as *marumakkathayam* alongside patrilineal forms, producing a complex social landscape. Kinship vocabulary therefore forms part of a community's core lexicon and functions as a key marker of social identity. As Trautmann argues, kinship in South India is not merely a system of classification but a cultural construction of social order.

This paper revisits Gundert's documentation of kinship terms to demonstrate how his dictionary embodies the socio-cultural complexity of nineteenth- century Kerala. Moving beyond descriptive listing, it analyses kinship terms in relation to their literary, documentary, and oral sources; their multilingual borrowings; their regional and caste-based variation; their gendered usage; and their semantic transformation over time. Drawing implicitly on sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropological insights, particularly Agha's concept of language as socially indexical, Trautmann's analysis of kinship as foundational principle of social order in South India, and Zvelebil's work on Dravidian linguistic history, the study foregrounds kinship terms as cultural signifiers that encode identity, hierarchy, and historical change.

Kinship Terms and Gundert's Lexicographic Method

A striking feature of *The Gundert Dictionary* is the density of information attached to individual lexical entries. A single kinship

term is often accompanied by phonetic detail, semantic range, dialectal variation, cognates in related languages, and notes on social usage. For instance, the entry for *amma* records its pronunciation (am'ma), its presence across Dravidian languages such as Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Tulu, and Kannada, and its semantic variation, including the fact that in Tulu the word may denote 'father'. Gundert further notes Sanskritised forms such as *amba* and related compound forms like *moothamma*, *ilayamma*, and *chittamma*, which distinguish age and relational proximity.

Such entries demonstrate that Gundert did not treat kinship terms as static labels but as socially situated forms whose meanings vary according to region, community, and linguistic contact. In doing so, he captures fine distinctions between relations of consanguinity and affinity, showing how Malayalam encodes genealogical proximity, marital alliance, and social distance through differentiated lexical forms. From a sociolinguistic perspective, these variations function as what Agha describes as social indexes forms that point beyond referential meaning to social relations and identities. Gundert's lexicographic method thus anticipates later approaches that view lexical meaning as ideologically mediated and socially embedded rather than purely referential.

Literary Sources: Kinship and Classical Texts

Gundert explicitly acknowledges his reliance on a wide range of classical and pre-modern literary texts, including *Amarakosam*, *Adhyathma Ramayanam*, *Ashtangahrudayam*, *Bhagavata*, *Mahabharata*, *Balaramayana*, *Brahmandapurana*, *Krishnacharitham*, *Panchathanthram*, and *Ramacharitham*. These texts provided not only lexical material but also cultural contexts in which kinship terms were embedded.

For example, the term *achcha*, meaning 'mother', is cited from *Vairagya Chandrodayam* in a context relating to breastfeeding (*achchathannudemulanalkanam*). The word *achan*, denoting 'father', is drawn from *Santhanagopalam* (*achanennuu n nika lennevi lichidum*) (Gundert, 1962, p.36). Terms such as *angala*, *ponnangala*, and *ponnanian*, referring to brothers or affectionate

male kin, are traced to *Thacholippattu*. Gundert also records the variation of *sodaran* (brother) as *thotharan* in *Ramacharitha*, illustrating phonological and regional diversity within literary Malayalam (Gundert, 1962, p. 950).

These literary attestations reveal how kinship relations were articulated within religious, poetic, and ethical discourses. The prominence of Sanskrit-derived forms in such texts reflects processes of Sanskritisation and the symbolic prestige attached to certain kinship terms—a phenomenon that aligns with Bourdieu's notion of 'linguistic capital'.

Documentary and Oral Sources

Beyond literary texts, Gundert relied extensively on contemporary documentary materials such as the *Thellicherry Records*, *Chirakkal Records*, *Calicut Kerala Origin*, Benjamin Bailey's *Malayalam–English Dictionary*, *Portuguese–Malayalam Dictionary* etc. From these sources, he records terms like *kettiyavan* and *kettiyaval* (husband and wife), *nathan* (husband), and *makan* (son), often noting their administrative or legal usage (Gundert, 1962, pp. 294,516,704). In such contexts, precise distinctions between consanguinity and affinity were essential for determining inheritance rights, marital legitimacy, and guardianship.

Equally significant is Gundert's systematic use of oral informants. At a time when spoken language was rarely treated as legitimate data, Gundert incorporated dialectal and community-specific forms directly from speakers. Words such as *vappa* (father), derived from Hindustani *bappa* and Persian *baba*, are explicitly identified as belonging to the speech of the Mappilas, the Muslim community of Malabar. Similarly, *uppa* (father) and *moothayuppa* (uncle) are recorded as living oral forms—terms actively used in everyday speech rather than fossilised literary survivals.

Terms like *thantha* and *thalla*, drawn from Ezhava informants, and *pengal* (sister), also adopted from oral usage (Gundert, 1962, pp.644,645), illustrate Gundert's commitment to documenting sociolects typically marginalised in elite writing. In contemporary terms, this method anticipates informant-based dialectology and

sociolinguistics, situating Gundert as a precursor to later ethnographic approaches to language.

Multilingual Borrowings and Cultural Exchange

Kerala's long history of maritime trade, migration, and intercultural contact is inscribed in its kinship vocabulary. Gundert's dictionary records borrowings from multiple languages, each reflecting specific historical and social contexts. Sanskrit-derived terms such as *janakan*, *jamata*, *dauhitran*, *putran*, and *putri* indicate processes of Sanskritisation, particularly among upper-caste and literate groups.

Tamil influence is evident in terms like *annan*, *appan*, *kanavan*, *pontatti*, and *thampi*. Gundert repeatedly notes the porous boundary between Tamil and Malayalam, especially in southern regions, where sustained bilingualism facilitated lexical exchange. Arabic and Persian borrowings—*umma*, *uppa*, *ikka*, *kakka*—reflect the linguistic ecology of the Mappila Muslim communities of Malabar, shaped by Islamic learning, trade networks, and religious institutions. Hindustani terms such as *baba*, *bappa*, and *vappa* likely entered Malayalam through military and mercantile channels, while Kannada influence is visible in northern Kerala through terms like *achi*, *ammoman*, *ammochan*, and *aliyan*.

These borrowings confirm Zvelebil's observation that Dravidian languages evolved through sustained contact rather than isolation. Kinship terms thus function as linguistic archives, preserving traces of historical interaction and cultural exchange.

Regional and Social Dialects

Regional variation is one of the most prominent features of kinship terminology in *The Gundert Dictionary*. Gundert's fieldwork was concentrated in North Malabar, and this regional focus is reflected in the lexical density of northern terms compared to those from southern Kerala. Terms such as *ammayi* and *ammavi* exhibit semantic variation across regions, sometimes referring to the wife of the mother's brother and elsewhere to the mother-in-law (Gundert, 1962, p.67).

Variants of 'elder brother'—*chettan*, *ettan*, and *annan*—map on to regional linguistic zones influenced by Sanskrit, Kannada,

and Tamil respectively. Similarly, the multiplicity of terms for 'mother's brother' (*ammavan*, *ammaman*, *ammoman*, *ammochan*, *kunjachan*) reveals the intersection of region, caste, and occupation. Such patterns underscore Agha's argument that linguistic forms circulate within socially stratified registers, indexing identity and belonging.

Semantic Change, Gender, and Address

Gundert's dictionary provides valuable evidence of semantic change. Several kinship terms recorded in the nineteenth century have since altered in meaning, fallen into disuse, or acquired pejorative connotations. The term *ikka*, originally denoting an elder guardian (*karanavar*), now commonly refers to an elder brother. The word *achi*, once meaning 'mother', now often carries a derogatory sense when used for a wife.

Gendered usage is equally significant. Certain terms are restricted to female speakers (*angala*, *nathoon*), while others such as *pengal* are used primarily by men. Vocative forms like *acho* further illustrate the pragmatic dimensions of kinship language. Gundert's marking of vulgar forms (*Vu*) as in *machoonan* and *pengalamar* (Gundert, 1962, pp. 772, 697) documents processes of taboo formation and social regulation.

Major Findings

1. Systematic documentation of oral and written kinship terms

The Gundert Dictionary records kinship terms from both literary texts and everyday speech, integrating classical, administrative, and oral sources. This inclusive approach produces a layered lexical archive that captures the coexistence of formal, colloquial, and regionally inflected registers of Malayalam, a practice uncommon in nineteenth-century lexicography.

2. Sanskrit-derived forms and caste hierarchy

Sanskrit-derived kinship terms frequently index caste hierarchy, ritual status, and symbolic prestige, particularly within elite and literate contexts. In contrast, *tadbhava* and non-Sanskrit forms circulate more widely across social groups, reflecting everyday usage and less formal communicative domains.

3. Prominence of Thiyya and Mappila kinship lexicons

Kinship terms associated with Thiyya and Mappila communities appear prominently in the non-Sanskrit lexicon of the dictionary. Their inclusion demonstrates Gundert's attentiveness to community-specific sociolects and foregrounds linguistic practices that were often marginalised or excluded from canonical literary traditions.

4. Regional variation and contact influences

The dictionary documents extensive regional variation in kinship terminology, reflecting sustained linguistic contact with Tamil in the south, Kannada in the north, and coastal trading cultures along Kerala's littoral zones. These variations reveal the permeability of regional boundaries and the role of bilingualism in shaping kinship vocabulary.

5. Arabic and Persian borrowings and maritime history

Arabic and Persian kinship terms embedded in Malayalam point to Kerala's long-standing maritime trade networks and the cultural influence of Islam, particularly among Mappila communities. Such borrowings attest to historical processes of migration, religious exchange, and transregional interaction.

6. Kinship terms and historical marital practices

Certain kinship terms preserve traces of historical marital arrangements such as *sambandham*, reflecting culturally specific configurations of affinity and household organisation. These terms offer linguistic evidence for alternative family structures that do not always align with later, legally codified models of marriage.

7. Gendered usage and vocative density

Many kinship terms exhibit gender-specific usage, with some restricted to male or female speakers, and others functioning primarily as vocatives. This pattern highlights the role of kinship language in regulating gendered modes of address, intimacy, and authority within social interaction.

8. Semantic change, obsolescence, and taboo formation

The dictionary captures processes of semantic drift, whereby kinship terms change meaning over time, as well as instances of lexical

obsolescence and taboo formation. These shifts reflect broader transformations in family structure, social hierarchy, and moral regulation within Kerala society.

Together, these findings confirm that Gundert's lexicography is not merely linguistic but deeply ethnographic.

Conclusion

Hermann Gundert's *A Malayalam–English Dictionary* remains a landmark not only in the history of Malayalam lexicography but also in the cultural history of Kerala. His meticulous documentation of kinship terms—drawn from literary texts, administrative records, and oral speech—reveals how familial vocabulary functions as a key marker of cultural identity. Kinship terms in the dictionary encode consanguineal and affinal relations while simultaneously indexing social hierarchy, caste affiliation, gender norms, regional belonging, and Kerala's long history of intercultural contact. By foregrounding dialectal variation, sociolects, and multilingual borrowings, Gundert anticipated central concerns of modern sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology. When read alongside theoretical insights from Trautmann on kinship and social order, Zvelebil on Dravidian linguistic history, and Agha on language and social relations, Gundert's work emerges as an early ethnography of language in colonial South India.

As Malayalam continues to evolve under new social and linguistic pressures, revisiting Gundert's dictionary reminds us that kinship vocabulary is not merely a residue of the past but an active site where language, culture, and identity intersect. The dictionary thus remains an indispensable resource for scholars of lexicography, cultural history, kinship studies, and Malayalam linguistics.

References

Agha, A. (2007). *Language and social relations*. Cambridge University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power* (G. Raymond & M. Adamson, Trans.). Harvard University Press. (Original work published 1982

Gundert, H. (1962). *A Malayalam–English dictionary*. SPCS. (Original work published 1872)

Morgan, L. H. (1871). *Systems of consanguinity and affinity of the human family*. Smithsonian Institution.

Nair, G. S. (1986). *Gundertnighantuvum desyabhashayum punaralochana*. NBS.

Nair, S. P. (1982). *Nighantu vinjaneeyam*. Kerala Bhasha Institute.

Nampoothiripad, U. (1990). *Malayalathile sambodhanapadangalude samoohikapaschathalam*. Kerala Sahitya Academy.

Nampoothiripad, U. (1994). *Samoohika bhasha vinjanam*. Kerala Bhasha Institute.

Thomas, S. (2018). *Thaiverukalude sabhdhangal*. Logos.

Trautmann, T. R. (1981). *Dravidian kinship*. Cambridge University Press.

Trautmann, T. R. (2000). India and the study of kinship terminologies. *L'Homme*, *154–155*, 559–572.

Trautmann, T. R. (2012). Kinship and the cultural construction of social order in India. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, *18*(1), 1–18.

Zvelebil, K. (1992). Dravidian linguistics and cultural history. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, *55*(2), 287–303.

Sijo Mathew

Assistant Professor of English

Govt. College Mananthavady

Wayanad, Kerala, India

Pin: 670645

Ph: +91 9495647534

Email. sijomundakutty@gmail.com

ORCiD: 0000-0002-2913-1683

&

Dr. Sinumol Thomas

Professor of Malayalam

Govt. Model Degree College (RUSA)

Thrissilery, Mananthavady

Wayanad, Kerala, India

Pin: 670645

Ph: +91 9447089587

Email. sinumolthomas@gmail.com

ORCiD: 0000-0002-0290-2185