

# Loanwords in Chetty Language: Evidence of Contact with Tamil and Malay Language

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## Abstract

This study examines the lexification by Tamil and Malay of the Chetty language, a sociolinguistic variety spoken by the Chetty community in Melaka, Peninsular Malaysia. A mixed heritage community with Tamil roots, coupled with hundreds of years of assimilation into the Malay world, the Chetties provide a sui generis case of linguistic fusion. Based on spoken data, historical materials and community interviews, the paper presents core loan words in different semantic domains like food, clothing, kinship, religion, and general day-to-day life. Religious and familial concepts are used alongside a significant proportion of loanwords from Tamil, while administrative, culinary and social terms run the gamut of Malay loanwords. The research also shows that code-switching, borrowing, and phonological adaptation provide evidence of both historical contact and current identity. This kind of lexical blending represents not only bilingualism but also the preservation of cultural identity. Ultimately, the paper underscores the importance of Chetty as a contact language that embodies multicultural linguistic heritage.

**Keywords:** Malacca Chetty, Minority Language, Heritage

## Introduction

The interaction between two or more linguistic systems is the foundation impetus for linguistic change and innovation. When languages are in a sustained period of contact, it initiates a spectrum of evolutionary linguistic transformation process ranging from minor to significant restructuring, including the creation of pidgins and creoles (Thomason & Kaufman, 1988). The study of loanwords in particular offers a sui generis window into the socio-historical dynamics of a particular speech community, providing tangible representation of migration, trade routes, cultural exchange and the varying levels of prestige among groups (Winford, 2003; Zhan, 2023). Bloomfield (1914) divided loanwords into linguistic and non-linguistic viewpoint which the former looks at adoption of certain morphemes and grammar into a language whereas the latter showcases the culture behind it. When a community adopts certain words, it reflects a conscious desire to align with new realities, social status or cultural practises. Inversely, the resistance to adopting to new words in certain language

community may be an indication of cultural resilience or a purposeful self-containment (Parajuli,2021).

The Chetty community of Malacca represents a unique cultural and linguistic enclave that has evolved through centuries of migration, trade, and interaction with local populations. A descendants of Tamil traders who settled in Melaka during the Melaka Sultanate reign (15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century),(Muthusamy & Karpaya, 2017) and married local Malay women, the community speak a sui generis combination of Malay, Tamil and Chinese language. Despite the merchants mother tongue being Tamil, their trading activities necessitated proficiency in Malay as the trading language during the Melaka Sultanate reign (Mohamed, 2009). As a result of this prolonged multi lingual integration, a unique cultural identity emerged recognised as Chetty language or Chetti Creole (Pillai, 2015; Sankar, 2013).

Previous research on Chetty language highlights a blend of mixed characters drawing from the core lexicon and concepts from Tamil (Sankar, 2013; Hamzah et al.,2022), while its grammatical framework reflects the influence of Malay language (Sankar, 2013; David, 2008; Mohamed, 2019). Despite general observations, the documentation of loan words from both Tamil and Malay language together with their distinct phonological forms remains an area for attention. Building upon existing research, the study aims to add on to current research on the language used among the Chetty community. This is achieved by presenting sample word collections as such linguistic record is vital for safeguarding the Chetty's language vitality and enduring preservation for future generations.

#### *Overview of the Chetty Language*

The Chetty (or Chitty) community, primarily based in Melaka, Malaysia, and parts of Singapore, traces its ancestry to Tamil traders who migrated from South India during the 15<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Over centuries of settlement, the community developed a unique identity, blending Tamil Hindu traditions with local Malay cultural elements. Linguistically, the Chetty language evolved into a contact language with strong Tamil roots but heavily influenced by Malay, especially in lexicon and syntax (Raghavan, 1980; Pillai, 2007). The Chetty dialect is a creolized language that preserves the structural base of Tamil while incorporating Malay vocabulary and phrases, creating a distinct rhythm and tone. Many everyday terms, particularly those related to nature, food, clothing, and local traditions, are borrowed directly from Malay (Grimes et. al;1996; Mohamad, 2009). This fusion of languages reflects the community's deep connection to Malay society and sets them apart from other Tamil-speaking groups.

The Chetty language serves as a vivid testament to the community's syncretic heritage, encapsulating centuries of cultural interaction and adaptation. It stands as a resilient linguistic symbol, demonstrating how language evolves to reflect a community's historical trajectory and its embeddedness within Malaysia's broader cultural tapestry. As a rare and distinctive dialect, Chetty offers rich insights into processes of cultural fusion, exemplifying how diverse traditions can coalesce into a unique linguistic form. Through this language, the Chetty community affirms its intertwined Indian and Malay roots, contributing to the complex multicultural identity of Melaka and Malaysia. Despite its significance as a symbol of community heritage, the Chetty language remains understudied and faces the threat of language shift due to increasing assimilation into dominant language cultures.

### *Loanwords from Tamil and Malay Language*

Lexical borrowings, also known as loanwords, are terms that are borrowed into another language without being translated. For more than two millennia, Tamil and Malay, two of the most widely spoken languages in South and Southeast Asia, have interacted, mostly through migration and maritime trade (Hall, 2019). Malay, an Austronesian language spoken throughout Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, and Singapore, and Tamil, a Dravidian language spoken primarily in Tamil Nadu (India) and parts of Sri Lanka, have both impacted each other's lexicon, especially in the areas of daily life, religion, business, and governance.

The Chetty language predominantly rooted in Tamil has incorporated a significant number of words from the Malay language which are a result of the prolonged contact with local Malay speaking community and sociolinguistic diversity of Malaysia (Asmah, 1992; David & Naji, 2003).

Few revitalization efforts have been formally documented, though community festivals and oral histories remain important vehicles for language preservation. Comparisons can be made with other endangered contact languages such as Kristang (Portuguese Creole) and Baba Malay, where local efforts at documentation and cultural promotion have gained traction (Nadarajan, 2013; Lim, 2009).

### *Tamil Loanwords in Malay*

A significant number of Tamil words have entered the Malay lexicon, especially in the domains of food, trade, textiles, and religion. Examples include:

- **Kappal** (ship) from Tamil *kappal*
- **Peniaga** (trader) possibly from Tamil *vaniga*
- **Garam** (salt) from Tamil *karam*
- **Pasu** (cow) from Tamil *pasu*
- **Tali** (rope) from Tamil *taali*
- **Kedai** (shop) from Tamil *kadai*

These borrowings often underwent phonological assimilation to fit Malay phonotactics. The presence of Tamil loanwords reflects not only trade relations but also the settlement of Tamil communities in the Malay Peninsula, particularly in port cities like Melaka and Penang. Table 1 and 2 shows the explanation of the etymology and phonetic shifts for some Tamil and Malay loanwords in the Chetty language.

Table 1

## Tamil Loanwords in Chetty Language

Chetty Word	Tamil Origin	Etymology	Phonetic Shift	Notes
Ammā	அம்மா (ammā)	From Dravidian root for 'mother'	No shift	Retained in full; common in Dravidian kinship terms.
Appā	அப்பா (appā)	From Dravidian root for 'father'	No shift	Common across Tamil dialects.
Saapad	சாப்பாடு (sāppāḍu)	From <i>sāppu</i> (to eat) + <i>āḍu</i> (act)	Dropped final -u	Common contraction in colloquial Tamil.
Thanni	தண்ணீர் (taṇṇīr)	From <i>taṇṇīr</i> = <i>taṇ</i> (cold) + <i>nīr</i> (water)	Elision of second syllable -īr	Simplification common in spoken Tamil and Chetty.
Kaḍai	கடை (kaḍai)	Meaning 'shop'	No shift	Unaltered loan; standard noun.
Paal	பால் (pāl)	From root <i>pāl</i> (milk)	No shift	Core Tamil word retained.
Veedu	வீடு (vīṭu)	From <i>vīṭu</i> , meaning house	Chetty drops retroflex ṭ	Common in Chetty as <i>veedu</i> .
Thambi	தம்பி (tampi)	Used for younger brother	No shift	Kinship terms preserved.
Enna	என்ன (enna)	Interrogative from <i>eṇ</i> (what) + emphatic particle - <i>nā</i>	No shift	Preserved in spoken Tamil.
Vandhuttu	வந்துட்டு (vandhuṭṭu)	<i>vandhu</i> (come) + <i>uṭṭu</i> (completed action)	No major shift	Retains Tamil grammatical suffix.

Table 2

## Malay Loanwords in Chetty Language

Chetty Word	Malay Origin	Etymology	Phonetic Shift	Notes
Kasut	<i>kasut</i>	From Dutch <i>kasut</i> (shoes) via Malay	No shift	Dutch origin; absorbed via Malay trade era.
Baju	<i>baju</i>	From Persian <i>bājū</i> (garment) via Malay	No shift	Used in both Chetty and Baba Malay.
Rumah	<i>rumah</i>	Malay for house	No shift	Often used interchangeably with <i>veedu</i> (Tamil).
Lauk	<i>lauk</i>	Side dish (esp. curry or meat)	No shift	Culturally specific to Malay cuisine.
Cakap	<i>cakap</i>	From Proto-Malayic <i>cakap</i> (speak)	No shift	Verbal use, retained in mixed Tamil-Malay speech.
Sapu	<i>sapu</i>	Malay for sweep	No shift	Common in Chetty homes for house chores.
Bakul	<i>bakul</i>	Basket, from Sanskrit <i>vākula</i> (via Malay)	No shift	Malay influence from Indian Sanskrit.
Tikar	<i>tikar</i>	Mat, possibly Austronesian root	No shift	Describes domestic item.

Chetty Word	Malay Origin	Etymology	Phonetic Shift	Notes
<b>Kereta</b>	<i>kereta</i>	Vehicle, via Portuguese <i>carreta</i>	Pronounced <i>kereta</i> / <i>keretā</i>	Shows colonial influence through Malay.
<b>Duduk</b>	<i>duduk</i>	To sit or reside	No shift	Also means “live/stay” in some contexts.

The phonetic loanwords of Tamil and Malay showcase differing strategies of adaptation based on the phonological system of a given language. Unlike other languages, Tamil translations seem to require changes to fit into colloquial Tamil. An example of this is the final vowel drop of certain nouns, where *tamizh saappadu* (meal) is colloquially *saapad*. This change illustrates the tendency of spoken Tamil to drop vowel endings for brevity and expedience. Furthermore, Tamil loanwords may also exhibit simplification such as the flattening of retroflex consonants like in *vuxed* (house) rather than *vīṭu*. Even with these simplifications, suffixes on verbs such as in *vandhuttu* (has come) from the more formal version of the word *vandhuṭṭu* suggest the preservation of some form of syntactic information, showing some structural information is still relevant even when spoken in colloquial or borrowed forms.

On the other hand, Malay loanwords incorporated into Tamil tend to be more faithful in retaining the pronunciation of the words. Such words are mostly two phonological syllables long which be monosyllabic or disyllabic. These forms align well with the phonotactic constraints of Tamil and therefore can blend more easily. Some words remain untouched by Malay, such as *kasut* (shoes), *baju* (shirt), and *kereta* (car) which reflect borrowings shaped by Portuguese, Dutch and Persian.

### Conclusion

Loanword integration in Chetty showcases the dynamic interplay between identity, heritage, and sociolinguistic adaptation. Tamil words reinforce group identity and link to ancestral customs, while Malay terms signify acculturation and interaction with the host society. The Chetty language, through its hybrid vocabulary, stands as a living testament to centuries of cross-cultural contact in Melaka. This paper highlights how loanwords from Tamil and Malay enrich the Chetty language, reflecting deep-rooted cultural ties and adaptive strategies in a multilingual environment. The findings underscore the value of contact linguistics in documenting minority languages and preserving linguistic heritage. Further research could explore generational language change and the influence of English in modern Chetty speech.

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