

Setting stars: disappearing systems of spatial reference in Dhivehi

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Dhivehi (Indo-Aryan) is spoken throughout the Maldives, an Indian Ocean archipelago comprising nearly 1200 islands in 26 atolls. Although Dhivehi is not currently endangered, radical social, technological, and environmental changes in the Maldives loom as serious threats to the future of the language, including massive internal migration to the capital, Malé, the introduction of English-medium schooling, and rising sea levels (the Maldives is the world's lowest country, with almost all of its land less than two metres above sea level (Woodroffe 2008: 88)). While Dhivehi overall may survive the abrupt changes to the social and physical environment in which it is spoken, several traditional features of spatial reference in Dhivehi are being lost. This paper reports on these, drawing on data collected in nine months of recent fieldwork.

One of these features is a 32-point sidereal compass originally borrowed from medieval Arab traders. The names of the 32 points refer to the rising and setting points of various stars and constellations, e.g., *agurabu īrān* 'Scorpio rising' (i.e., SE by E or 123.75 degrees). However, although most old men still remember the sidereal compass and can point out the 32 directions accurately, very few younger speakers are even aware that such a system exists. Other endangered features include an inland-beachward directional axis; horizontal senses of the directional verbs *aranī* 'going up' and *erenī* 'going down'; and an unusual application of terms for 'front' and 'back' to the inner and outer sides of items in ring-like formations. These features of Dhivehi spatial language appear to be disappearing under the influence of urbanization, bilingualism, and modern technologies such as GPS navigation that make the traditional systems redundant. In addition, the use of (non-sidereal) Absolute cardinal terms is increasingly being replaced by terms invoking Intrinsic and Relative frames of reference, and the use of ad hoc landmarks. The paper concludes by underlining the value of documenting traditional systems of spatial reference even in widely spoken languages, given the sweeping social, technological and environmental changes taking place in many communities.

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Woodroffe, Colin D. 2008. Reef-island topography and the vulnerability of atolls to sea-level rise. *Global and Planetary Change* 62: 77–96.