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# REASONS FOR LANGUAGE SHIFT IN PENINSULAR MALAYSIA

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## Abstract

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual country with a population (1999) of about 22 million people and at least a hundred languages. There are three main ethnic groups in Malaysia i.e. Malays (61%), Chinese (28%), Indians (8%) (Khoo: 1991:40). Within each ethnic group, there are found a variety of languages and dialects. Malay is the medium of instruction in national schools, in contrast Chinese and Tamil are used as the medium of instruction in national type schools. However, at the secondary level, Malaysians can only attend national school where Malay is used as the medium of instruction. As for English, it is a compulsory second language in both types of schools. The Third Malaysian Plan 1976-80 states that "Bahasa Malaysia (Malay) is the basis for national integration" but the Plan also states quite emphatically that "measures will be taken to ensure that English is taught as a strong second language" (Government of Malaysia 1976:386). Given this background, we find that many communities in Peninsular Malaya are experiencing language shift (see, for example, David, 1996 on the Sindhis; David, Naji and Sheena, 2003 on the Punjabis in the Klang Valley; David and Naji 2000 on the Tamils, David and Noor, 2001 on the Portuguese in Malacca; David and Nambiar 2003 on the Malayalee Christians; David, 2003 on the Pakistanis in Machang, Kelantan; Nambiar 2002 on the Malayalee Muslims; Mohamad Subakir Mohd Yasin, 2003 on the Javanese community, and Mukerjee, 2002 on the Bengali community). It is surprising that the same thing should be happening to so many groups at the same time when we consider that the languages themselves are so different from each other, the attitudes about the surrounding society are different, and their histories are so different. The language they are shifting to is different, some are shifting to the national language or a dialect of Malay while

others are shifting to an international language, English. Why, with such diversity, are these languages in such a similar precarious situation? Finding an answer to this question is important for the speakers of indigenous languages in Malaysia and is important for anyone involved in language-related work in these communities.

### Background to the Setting

Any attempt to study language shift or maintenance of a particular community cannot be undertaken in a socio-political vacuum. The historical, social, political and economic conditions must all be taken into account for examining the community's language use. With this in mind a short background of the country is apt.

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual country with a population (1999) of about 22 million people and at least a hundred languages. There are three main ethnic groups in Malaysia i.e. Malays (61%), Chinese (28%), Indians (8%) (Khoo: 1991:40). Within each ethnic group, there are found a variety of languages and dialects. Malay, the national language is the medium of instruction in national schools, in contrast, vernacular languages like Chinese (Mandarin) and Tamil are used as the medium of instruction in national type schools. However, at the secondary level, Malaysians can only attend national schools, where Malay is used as the medium of instruction. As for English it is a compulsory second language in both types of schools and more recently the language to teach maths and science (see David, 2004). The Third Malaysian Plan 1976-80 states that "Bahasa Malaysia (Malay) is the basis for national integration" but the Plan also states quite emphatically that "measures will be taken to ensure that English is taught as a strong second language" (Government of Malaysia 1976:386).

Given this background, we find that many minority ethnic communities in Peninsular Malaya are experiencing language shift (see, for example, David, 1996 on the Sindhis; David, Naji and Sheena, 2003 on the Punjabis in the Klang Valley; David and Naji, 2000 on the Tamils, David and Noor, 2001 on the Portuguese in Malacca; David and Nambiar, 2003 on the Malayalee Christians, David, 2003 on the Pakistanis in Machang; Nambiar, 2002 on the Malayalee Muslims, Mohamad Subakir Mohd Yasin, 2003 on the Javanese community, and Mukerjee, 2002 on the Bengali community) It is surprising that the same thing should be happening to so many groups at the same time when we consider that the languages themselves are so different from each other, the attitudes about the surrounding society are different, and their histories are so different. The language they are shifting to is different some are shifting to the national language or a dialect of Malay while others are shifting to an interna-

tional language, English. Why, with such diversity, are these languages in such a similar precarious situation? Finding an answer to this question is important for the speakers of indigenous languages in Malaysia and is important for anyone involved in language-related work in these communities.

### Reasons why shift takes place

While the rate of shift appears to be greater for some groups than for others, the fact of shift and the direction of the shift seem inevitable. As Fishman (1989) says, "What begins as the language of social and economic stability ends, within three generations or so, as the language of the crib as well, even in democratic and pluralism-permitting context" (p.206). Extensive research of immigrant and minority communities such as Clyne's (1982), Fishman's (1965) and Haugen's (1972) have demonstrated that there is an overall decline in the retention of the ethnic language from one generation to the next. Though such scenarios are unfolding all over the world, the impact is most keenly felt in multilingual settings with settlements of immigrant communities.

There are several possible hypotheses or reasons explaining the decline of languages in a multilingual setting. First, their decline could be caused primarily by internal factors. According to this hypothesis, the communities have views and act in ways that bring about the loss or death of their respective languages. For instance, the lack of literacy in the minority language is one of the factors that can hasten language shift. Second, language loss could be caused primarily by external factors putting pressure on these different communities. For instance, language policies have been shown to have links with language shift. At times both internal and external factors can work in tandem to cause language loss and shift, at others some factors may play a stronger role in triggering shift.

Ultimately however, language maintenance or loss is a function of the decisions and behavior of the members of the community themselves. This is captured clearly by Fishman's (1991) term *intergenerational transfer*. Almost all cases of societal language shift come about through intergenerational switching (Lieberson, 1972, 1980; Anandan, 1995). If each generation passes on the language to the next, the language lives. If it does not, the language dies. It is important to know what language parents use when speaking to their children. Joshua Fishman notes, "Vernaculars are acquired in infancy, in the family, which means in intimacy. They are handed on that way, in intimacy and in infancy" (1996:192).

This paper explores the possibility that for Peninsular Malaysia, although there are a range of different reasons that set the stage for language shift, these reasons can be categorized as internal and external factors causing lan-

guage shift. At the same time, it should be emphasized that no one single reason causes language shift. It is a combination of reasons working in tandem over time and working differently for different families which eventually cause a shift away from the use of the ethnic language. Underlying these multifarious reasons might be a desire to do something for the betterment of their offspring. This paper suggests that while there are many reasons for shift, an inbuilt desire to improve life for their children can act as a catalyst to language shift.

This goal of parents of young children is to prepare their children for life. As it becomes increasingly necessary for community members to go to schools and later work at jobs that require the use of Malay/English in Malaysia, this can result in revised perceptions on the part of parents regarding what training their children need in order to survive in both the school and work domain. So, parent talk to them in the language they consider useful and has transactional value instead of the minority ethnic language. The children grow up with this language and not the ethnic language. Over a three year study of the Malaysian Sindhi community, a small minority community which makes up only 700 of Malaysia's 22 million people, I found that older members of the community were accommodating and using English with younger community members in some cases, because of recommendations for teachers (the grandchildren were in a private school where English is the medium of instruction). Since parents are concerned with preparing their children for life in school and work domains, the language they encourage children to learn will be influenced by their perceptions of what language skills are required to meet needs in these domains. This was illustrated in a conversation with an elder who said, "What will they do with Sindhi?" (David, 1996).

Many Sindhis of the younger generation have and are shifting away from traditional occupations i.e. merchant retail shopkeepers. Many are today teachers, lawyers and doctors. These jobs require them to speak both the national and international languages. When asked why the children were not learning the ethnic language the response received was "What use is it?" So, when a minority ethnic community like the Malaysian Sindhis deems that its ethnic language has no transactional value in the larger host community, they will shift to the language they perceive as having a transactional value – in this case, English and Malay. Given the social, political, and economic changes occurring within the nation state and worldwide (the community has ties with Sindhis who have migrated and settled down in all parts of the world and who too have generally shifted to English, see Dewan, 1987 on the Sindhis in Metropolitan Manila, Daswani and Parchani 1978 on the community in India and Daswani 1985, Detaramani and Lock 2004 on Hong Kong Sindhis, David

2000 on Singapore Sindhis) Malaysian Sindhis no longer feels compelled to owe allegiance to their ancestral language.

In the same way, second generation Punjabi Sikhs in the Klang Valley have experienced high upward mobility and many of them are in private sector jobs which require the use of the English language and in government jobs which these days, necessitate a need for both the national and international languages (see David, 2002 on the role and status of the English language in Malaysia). Many changes have taken place in the Sikh community since the arrival of the first Sikh migrants in Malaysia. Initially, they concentrated in such services as the police and military force. Today, Sikh immigrants and their descendants are found in almost every major sphere of the country's economy, being particularly prominent in the professional groups. Although the majority had come to Malaya with no financial assets, today a large number are comparatively wealthy and well established (Sarjit, 1999) The Sikh community in Malaysia though small in absolute numbers, has made a great impact on all phases of the Malaysian socio-economic and political scene, especially in business, education, agriculture and dairy farming, the armed forces, sports, politics as well as specific professions like education, law and medicine (David, Naji and Sheena, 2003).

Education for the rapidly upwardly mobile Punjabi community appears to have come with a price, the loss of their ethnic language. Nearly half of the sample (see David, Naji and Sheena, 2003) in the Klang Valley (44.7% and 57.9 respectively) who have a degree and/or post-graduate degree tend to use solely English or a mixed discourse of dominant English and less of Malay and Punjabi. Invariably, the use of English (with spouse and children) is found to be associated with higher education, while the use of ethnic language (Punjabi) with lower education.

Another internal reason for language shift is when a significant number of exogamous marriages and out-migration takes place. In a study of two Malaysian families constituting about 50 people it was found that a large majority of Malayalee Catholics had contracted exogamous marriages or had left Malaysia (David and Nambiar, 2002). Similarly, 20-25% of the Malaysian Sindhi community has married non-Sindhis. When an exogamous marriage is contracted it has been found that English, no one partner's language, normally becomes the language of middle class professional families. This use of English as the language in the home domain has also been noted in a study of the Chindians in Kuala Lumpur (see David 2004b). The Chindians are the offspring of Chinese and Indian parents.

While some communities have shifted to English others have shifted to Malay, the national language. In a need to assimilate and be part of the larger community the Pakistanis in Machang have shifted not to standard Malay but

to Kelantanese Malay, a dialect used in the east coast of Kelantan in Peninsular Malaya (David, 2003). Government policies that impact the ethnic integration of a community have significant implications for language shift. Pakistani men who had married Kelantanese Malays, shifted to Malay – i.e. Kelantanese dialect in a state where the Kelantanese Malays formed the large majority and have high ethnolinguistic vitality (see Zuraidah, 2003). Sharing the same religion Islam it was easier to assimilate with the Malay community and by speaking Malay, practising Islam and having a Malay way of life they complied with the constitutional definition of being Malay i.e. a *pribumi*. Along with this came the attendant rights of being a *bumiputra* i.e. a son of the soil. Mohamad Subakir Mohd Yasin 2003 discussing the Javanese community in Malaysia suggests the same reason for shift. For the Javanese he says the desire to be identified as Malay is the main factor that causes the shift to Malay. This is because, the Javanese perceive themselves and are perceived by other ethnic Malays negatively because they speak a minority language. To present themselves in a more positive light, the Javanese have decided to switch to Malay. In the same way Narayanan (2001:23 cited in Nambiar 2001) in his study of the early Muslim Malayalee immigrants to Penang discusses “their inter-marriage and assimilation into the local Muslim population [hence] resulting in their identity being diminished.” Nambiar, 2002 discussing the Malayalee Muslims in Johore, another state in Peninsular Malaya also suggests similar reasons for the shift to Malay. It could be expected that those government policies that impact the integration of minority Muslim communities have more significant implications for language shift to Malay. The reason for this shift then is to be assimilated with the Malay community. This is not unlike Labov’s studies and belief way back in 1963 that in a given context, people could sound like those with whom they claimed group membership

Government policies can also accelerate language shift. The emergence of Malay as a language in the mixture of languages used by the younger Punjabis with their children (personal observation in Ipoh and other smaller towns) does suggest that the change in language policy and medium of instruction has affected, to some extent, the codes and choices of languages used with children. However, it should be noted that Malay is not cited by the respondents in the Klang Valley study of the community from the middle and the oldest age group as a language they use with their children (see David, Naji and Sheena, 2003). This is because for this age group Malay was not the medium of instruction. It is clear then that language policy and medium of instruction in Malaysia prior to independence and after independence also impinges and affects language choice.

Studies by Milroy in Belfast (1982) and Gal in Oberwat (1979) demonstrate that women are the catalysts in linguistic change. This is perhaps be-

cause the new language they shift to is seen as a language of power. David and Naji, 2000 show women have led linguistic change in the Tamil respondents studied. For instance, more men (66.7%) than women (49.1%) use Tamil in the home domain and the women tend to use English or a mix of languages. By and large however, the shift away from Tamil does not appear as severe or as quick as it has been for the Malaysian Sindhi and Punjabi communities. This could be explained by their lower economic standing in the country. The majority of the Tamils came to Malaysia to work in the rubber estates and although many of them have moved away from the estates they have moved to low paying jobs in the urban areas. The upward occupational mobility among the majority in this community has not been as rapid as it has been with the other two communities cited.

In Oberwart (Gal 1979) as well as in East Sultherland (Dorian 1981), the older speakers were the loyalists, i.e. those who still used their language most often. Younger generation speakers and children were the ones with the most widespread use of the 'prestigious' languages. Gal's and Dorian's work show that younger community members play the role of shift agent and are catalysts of community language use. The study of the Punjabi Sikh community in Petaling Jaya, using an 85-item questionnaire directed at 312 respondents, show that the community is shifting to English and/or using a mixed code which consists of three languages i.e. a mixture of English, Malay and Punjabi. The shift away from using Punjabi at home is greatest among the young and middle age groups (19-25, 26-36, and 37-45). English is the dominant language for two fifths (130 out of 312 or 42.2%) of the respondents followed by Punjabi (27.3%). The lack of literacy in the minority language among younger community members is one of the factors that can hasten language shift. Respondents' abilities in Punjabi decrease with age. While the overwhelming majority (between 91.3-100%) of the oldest age group i.e. those above 70 among the Punjabi community revealed that they are very good in all the four language skills of Punjabi, two-thirds of the middle age groups (46-55 and 56-70) revealed modest abilities in all skills of Punjabi (David, Naji and Sheena, 2003). In a qualitative study of the choice of language with a young Punjabi child by parents and grandparents it is also apparent that the older respondents accommodate to the preferred language choice of the young i.e. English (David and Baljit, 2004). David (2004c) also provides many examples of the old accommodating to the preferred code of young Sindhis in intergenerational family discourse.

Leslie Milroy (1988) citing a study of language maintenance in the United Kingdom presents an argument for the usefulness of social network theory for predicting language maintenance or shift. In social network analysis, language is treated as a tool for network maintenance. Milroy argues that if a

community has strong and dense networks, chances of language maintenance are stronger. In the studies of the Malaysian Sindhi (David, 2003); Punjabi (David, Naji and Sheena, 2003); Bengali (Mukherjee, 2003); Malayalees (Govindasamy and Nambiar, 2002); Tamil Chitty (Vijaya- personal communication); Portuguese in Malacca (David and Faridah, 2002)- all communities who have strong and multiplex networks, shift has occurred. This is because use of the new language, English, has not resulted in the breaking of such ties and the communities still retain close networks and maintain other ethnic cultural norms (see David, 1998 on how the Malaysian Sindhis have maintained their ethnic and cultural norms of discourse in the English they use and Govindasamy and Nambiar 2003 who discuss the social network theory and its applicability to minority communities). This finding alerts us to the dangers of accepting theories and results in the west and assuming that the same will apply in multilingual settings like Malaysia.

### **Conclusion**

Language shift describes a situation that through a course of action, leads to a movement away from the habitual use of the ethnic language two or even three generations later for an entire community. There are many factors involved in language shift. Many things are happening at once so it is difficult to clearly identify the specific role of one factor or another. Further, the reasons which apply to some communities do not claim to apply to all communities. In the same way, the reasons which apply to some families do not claim to apply to every family. Similarly, within the same country some communities may shift to an international language, English while others shift to the national language, Malay for different reasons.

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