

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### REASONS FOR LANGUAGE SHIFT AND LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE

#### 7.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to investigate reasons for language shift and language maintenance. Chapter 5 showed that the Malaysian Iyers had shifted away from Tamil and were using English mainly and Malay to a lesser degree. Chapter 6 showed that language maintenance did exist in the form of functional usage of the Tamil language such as to accommodate elders and to show respect to them (see 6.3.3) and for religious purposes. This chapter will discuss the reasons for both language shift and for language maintenance and as in the previous two chapters, evidence from the questionnaires and the audio taped conversations (ATC) will be presented and discussed. Statistical evidence is provided through the questionnaire analysis. An attempt is also made to include some of the comments made by ATC respondents, which have been difficult to quantify for statistical purposes. Although one of the limitations of this study is that views of ATC respondents are difficult to quantify, it is felt that some of these comments are representative of the sample and therefore produced as relevant examples to substantiate statistical evidence taken from the questionnaires.

The questionnaire analysis reveals the reasons that respondents gave for both language shift and maintenance. Using the voices of the participants (where applicable), the data (from ATCs) speaks for itself, and further aids in understanding

the values and views held by the subjects about the maintenance of Tamil or shift to other languages (such as English and Malay). Attempts have been made to present only the more representative comments made by respondents of the ATC.

The following sections attempt to present the reasons for language shift and language maintenance.

## **7.2 Reasons for Language Shift**

In this section the reasons that questionnaire respondents gave as to why they had shifted away from Tamil are discussed. They are substantiated with respondents 'voices' as heard in the ATC.

### **7.2.1 The Importance of Economic Wealth and Status**

There was evidence (in Chapters 5 and 6) to show that there was a heavy emphasis on the importance of the English and Malay languages. Respondents clearly showed a preference for the English language by speaking it at home and socially (see 5.2.2; 5.2.3). Most of G2 and G3 respondents reported their proficiency in the English language to be better than that of Tamil (see 5.2.1). There was a small but significant shift to the Malay language by some G3 respondents (5.2.1.2). The ATC also showed that the dominant language spoken during intra community conversations was English with functional shifts made to the Tamil language to express relationships better, to accommodate and to show respect for elders and so on (see 5.2.1.3; 6.3.3). What appeared evident from the analysis in the previous chapters (five and six) is

that, this community seems to actively seek proficiency in English mainly and in Malay (to a lesser degree) so that they are able to pursue economic benefits reaped from a knowledge of these two languages.

The reasons for choosing languages other than Tamil can be attributed to the priorities of a migrant population. This was seen in G1 who sought a better life in Malaysia than in India, by equipping themselves with skills related to economic survival by actively pursuing the language(s) that would enable them to obtain employment. During that time, when the British were in power, a knowledge of the English language was seen as an important means to obtaining jobs. Many G2 were also educated in English medium schools while it is mainly G3 who had attended Malay medium schools. Some of the reasons for choosing languages that have economic currency can be seen in some of the following examples that are taken from the ATC:

English was seen in Tapescripts 31 and 32 as the language of 'livelihood and communication' and in order to survive in the world 'we cannot separate ourselves from the world' and therefore 'have to use English'. G1 found that the association with the British (during the colonial period in Malaysia) taught them that 'without English you can't speak or do anything'. Due to the importance of English, Iyers would 'send them (children) only to an English school' because English is 'an international language' and without English 'they cannot survive'.

39. N(G1): For your own culture and identity, Tamil is important. For the language of livelihood and communication, we can't separate ourselves from the world, we have to use English.

### Tapescript 31

Most G1 understood that in order to integrate in Malaysia and find a viable career that provided the necessary comforts of a materially successful life, they had to become proficient in English. The social network in Malaysia was structured in such a way as to privilege and reward those employees whose skills were valued in the workplace. Therefore G1 actively encouraged their children to pursue the things in life that would provide them with material success.

13.\*R: Or do you think that there might be some other reason? Why do you think people seem more comfortable with English in Malaysia than Tamil?

14. S(G1): Ah this is one of the big questions when I first came here. During the British time, without English you can't speak or do anything. Interviews will be done in English. I have studied English really well in India but I did not speak it that well. When I got here, I attended a course to speak the language better so that I could get a job. There were special courses. I could read and write really well.

\* Researcher

### Tapescript 32

31.*R:	Let us assume that the standard of Tamil is really good like in Singapore, perhaps. Do you think that you would send your children to Tamil schools if excellent schools were there from standard one till form five?
32. S(G1):	This is a very good question. <u>In my opinion I would send them only to an English school.</u>
33. R:	Why?
34.S(G1):	<u>Because it is an international language. Without the language they cannot survive.</u> Within your home or country you can survive, but what about outside?
*Researcher	

### Tapescript 32

In Tapescript 33, the Tamil identity was seen as one that was based on emotional attachment and it was only the 'older generation like me who will need and cling to Tamil'. However, if one did not know Tamil one 'can continue with life'. The younger generation were more 'materialistic' because they wanted 'a good life and lots of money'. Knowing the English language 'will get them these'.

43.*R:	Do you think that the younger generation are losing something out by losing Tamil?
44. K.(G1):	<u>They are losing out but they don't think so. They are more materialistic. They want a good life and lots of money and knowing English will get them these.</u>
*Researcher	

### Tapescript 33

Many of those in G2 stated that they continued with the pursuit of English as a means to status and wealth. In the example below in Tapescript 25, according to one G1 lady, even grandmothers said with pride that their grandchildren spoke English like ‘*vellai karan*’ (white men). The route to success was seen in acquiring and possessing the English language which would then lead to a successful career. This philosophy is in opposition to the sentiments espoused about the Tamil language in Tamil Nadu where its speakers equated their lives with their language (see 2.2.1).

56. D(G2): When I was young, no one insisted that I should speak only Tamil.

57. F(G1): Well even in India didn’t the *paatis* take pride when they **grandmothers** said ‘*en peran vellaikaran mathiri pesuvan*’. It was a **‘my grandson white man like speaks’** directed effort to become anglicized.

Translation in bold

### Tapescript 25

In Tapescript 1 fear of losing touch with English was seen. When the national schools in Malaysia converted the medium of instruction to Bahasa Malaysia (Malay) there was worry over whether children would be ‘left out of English’. This led some parents to make a decision ‘that we will speak to them (children) only in English’ because English was seen as more valuable than Tamil or even Malay (in terms of economic success). This further enhanced whatever G2 had learnt from their parents about the necessity of English as a survival mechanism.

- |            |  |
|------------|--|
| 87. P(G2): | <u>With us, we kind of made a decision that we will speak to them [children] more in English</u> because with Bahasa education - whether they will be left out of English. |
| 88. M(G2): | Left out of English?   |
| 89. P(G2): | That is why we spoke in English.   |
| 90. L(G2): | Because they were having Malay in schools.   |
| 91. M(G2): | You thought that for survival, <u>English is more important than Tamil?</u>  |
| 92. L(G2): | Yes.   |
| 93. P(G2): | <u>No doubt about it. Not only in this country but worldwide.</u>  |

### Tapescript 1

Tapescripts 10 and 12 showed that the need for some respondents to be in the 'forefront' of 'new developments and inventions' not just in Malaysia but around the world, overrode considerations over mother tongue maintenance so much so that children were beginning to question their parents with statements such as 'what do I get by learning this language'? Since Tamil did not have a 'commercial tag' attached to it, one G2 parent found, a little belatedly, that his children were not interested in learning Tamil.

1. K. (G1): If we want to prepare for the twenty first century, the first thing is, there must be a mental shake-up. See? Because the twenty first century is one of Information Age. As such they should be more science-oriented and that doesn't mean they shouldn't be completely ignoring the arts. Science and Arts go hand in hand. But we should be more in the Science field so that when more developments and new inventions take place in Science and Technology and Computer Science and Telecommunications and all those, our boys and girls will be ready to face such challenges and be in the forefront.

#### Tapescript 10

74. S (G2): I feel that basically despite what I do I sometimes get accused by my own children that their English standard is low because I talk to them in Tamil at home and I'm not, as a professional, helping them to improve their English. So, in a way, after sometime.....nowadays everything has a commercial value . So people say, if you ask them to study something, ' what do I get by doing that?'. My children can talk very well, reading and writing minimal. When I force them to go to learn or write Tamil very well, they ask me, ' What do I get if I learn this language?'. So to some extent, I feel that there's not much of any commercial tag attached to the mastering or learning Tamil in this country.

#### Tapescript 12



Tapescripts 29 and 30 added on to the belief that English is an international language and that 'all available information' (see Tapescript 30) is in English made the language a particularly attractive one for those who wished not only to succeed nationally but internationally as well. The need to succeed in economic terms is a reason why one G2 respondent said 'I will not let him go to a Tamil medium school, no matter how excellent, beyond primary school'. Some G2 respondents felt that 'English education is a necessity' and that Tamil was needed only 'for communicative purposes' as seen in the observations such as for accommodating elders who spoke only Tamil. This was because, according to them, 'if you don't have the fluency and ability to compete, you will go nowhere'.

69. \*R: Suppose there were possibilities of university education in Tamil. Would you then continue his education in Tamil?

70. P(G2): Well I would have to consider the chances for his employment too. He may find it really hard to adapt in an international environment, his languages skills may be inadequate. I would have thought out about his future and based on that I would have to say no, I will not let him go to a Tamil medium school no matter how excellent beyond primary school.

\*Researcher

### Tapescript 29

40.K(G2):	English I would say is useful and can be used for communication irrespective of cultural background and <u>most available information is available in English</u> . Whereas <u>Tamil is concerned with limited applications</u> for the present time
52.I(G2):	No you have to see it as a whole. You can't run away from English education. <u>You need Tamil for communicative purposes , but English education is a necessity</u> . Fully Tamil medium – I don't think so.
53. K(G2):	I wouldn't because the grip on English will go. They will be handicapped at the Universities. <u>English is the language of technology and it is moving so fast. If you don't have the fluency and the ability to compete, you will get nowhere.</u>

### Tapescript 30

What can be seen from the voices of the respondents (as seen in some examples above), is that English is valued as a language that would open doors (for employment) for them and provide them with a successful future. A domino effect was seen with G1 starting the trend for English, continued by G2 and practiced by G3. English was valued more as an international language while Tamil was 'necessary for communication' with elders. This finding taken together with evidence pointing to the possibility that one's identity was not based on language (see 7.2.2 below) alone, showed that it was all too easy to give up the Tamil language in favour of the more 'glamorous' English which bestowed its speakers with not only material wealth but a 'high status' as well. The national language, Malay, was also useful for purposes of education and finding jobs but it did not appear to be pursued with as much aggression as English.

### 7.2.2 Language and Identity

This section presents the responses from the respondents regarding their ethnic identity. The object of this analysis was to find out if there was an identity crisis among the Iyers, causing or resulting from the language shift from Tamil to English and Malay. In section C of the questionnaire, Question 3 asked respondents if they felt that speaking the Tamil language gave them the identity of being an Iyer, while question 4 asked respondents in the group to explain what they thought was the force that identified and unified all Iyers. Answers to the question were placed into several categories, though about 5% of the respondents reported that they were unable to say what exactly gave them their identity as Iyers. The respondents of the ATCs also sometimes spoke of what gave them their identity and some of the relevant responses are produced below to supplement questionnaire responses.

**Table 7.1**

<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>No Response</b>	<b>Total</b>
52(18%)	235(81%)	4(1%)	291(100%)

**Table Showing Responses to ‘Does speaking Tamil give you the identity of being an Iyer?’**

Only a very small percentage (18%) of the questionnaire respondents reported that speaking the Tamil language gave them an ethnic identity (as Iyers): the large majority (81%) said that it did not.

If language was not an integral part of identity, then what did give a person his or her identity? Question 3 in Section C of the questionnaire sought answers to this question. It required the respondents to write down what they felt gave them an identity as Iyers. The written answers were analysed and quantified into several categories as seen in Table 7.2 below:

**Table 7.2**

<b>Factors associated with ethnic identity</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Tradition and Culture (such as dress, customary practices).	101	43%
Brahmin Heritage	88	37%
Religion	19	8%
Vegetarianism	9	4%
Brahmin Tamil	7	3%
Unsure	11	5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>235</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table Showing Factors Associated with Ethnic Identity**

The above table shows that tradition and culture played a very large role in ethnic identity for many respondents (43%) followed by the Brahmin heritage (37%) ie

being born into a Brahmin family. These two factors were the two main factors followed by other factors such as religion, vegetarianism and language variety.

#### 7.2.2.1 Customs and Traditions

A considerable portion (43%) of those respondents who said that the speaking of the Tamil language did not give them the Iyer identity cited factors such as tradition and culture as factors that gave them a special identity as Iyers. The common social and cultural practices observed by the Iyers as a community were also factors that gave them their identity.

Tradition was described in terms of cultural and religious practices that were important to the Malaysian Iyer community in terms of rites/rituals that were conducted at marriages, funerals and prayers. One respondent wrote out in Tamil three important aspects of being an Iyer – *nadai* (manner of conducting oneself), *udai* (manner of dress), *pazhakka vazhakkangal* (customs) [a description of the traditions and customs of the Iyers is detailed in Chapter Two]. An important part of the make-up of the Iyers was the importance placed on religion. Approximately 8% of questionnaire respondents thought that being learned in the scriptures or having a greater awareness of religious practices and displaying a good understanding of religious philosophies including non-aggressive behaviour were essential to identity. Also important to the Iyer identity was the practice of vegetarianism as reported by 4% of questionnaire respondents. Speaking Iyer or Brahmin Tamil was seen by 3% of respondents as essential to an Iyer identity.

The way Iyers dressed, prayed, ate and practiced their traditions and customs gave them their identity. Tamil seemed to hold an emotional attachment for some first generation respondents but many felt that the language was useful only as a means of communication especially with the elders of the family or the community. As has been reported earlier, the Tamil language was viewed as a part of the tradition of being a Tamil Iyer by 18% of the respondents while 81% of questionnaire respondents cited other factors such as customs and traditions as essential to their identity.

ATC respondents were sometimes questioned about their identity if the researcher found an opportunity to do so (as the ATC were free flowing conversations, no forced attempt was made to interfere in the conversations unless an opportunity presented itself). Respondents who gave their views are quoted in the paragraphs below.

In Tapescript 31, when questioned about identity, respondent 'N' below said that that practicing 'the way things are in the teachings of a Brahmin way of life', would give an Iyer his or her identity. According to this respondent, following customs that were seen as inherent in Iyer tradition was an important aspect of being identified as one.

- 22 N (G1): If they marry outside the community and don't follow our customs, you can write them off, but not otherwise.
- 23 P (G1): But just because they don't know the Tamil language, you can't deny them the identity. We can't write them off.

### Tapescript 31

In Tapescript 31 above, it is seen that endogamy was considered an important factor in retaining the Iyer identity. However the same respondent said that one could not write off the younger generation and deny them their identity just because 'they don't know Tamil' or 'if they marry outside the community'. He felt that if they 'don't follow our customs' then you could 'write them off' as seen in the same conversation (excerpt above). If an Iyer 'practices the values that they are meant to' then the language 'should not be a barrier' to his identity (excerpt below).

- 25 P (G1): Provided you practise your values, but still it is an important aspect. If you are proud to call yourself a Tamil Iyer and practise the values you are meant to then the language should not be a barrier but whether they want to retain it or not is another question.

### Tapescript 31

The values expressed by the respondents gave credence to the view that cultural groups differ in the extent to which 'they emphasize their mother tongues as core

values which act as pivots around which the social and identification system of the group is organized' (Smolicz, 1992:279). The Iyer identity appears to stem from a cultural identity rather than a language identity since 'you can be an Iyer without knowing Tamil'.

#### **7.2.2.2 Brahmin Heritage**

The Iyers are Brahmins by caste (see 3.2) and this appeared to be an important part of the Malaysian Iyer identity. Language was not entirely associated with ethnic identity as seen earlier in Chapter 6 (see 6.7). The importance of caste identity can be seen in the formation of the Brahmana Samajam Malaysia, (see 2.2.3.3) and in the formation of a close and dense network society based on a Brahmin birthright. When conversations were being taped attempts were always made to discuss the issue of the importance of language, especially mother tongue maintenance. More than a third (37%) of questionnaire respondents who said that language alone did not give them their identity said that the Brahmin heritage is an important part of their identity.

The Brahmin lineage or link was described in several ways by the questionnaire respondents. The most common were:

- a. The men should wear a '*poonal*' (the sacred thread worn as an important identifying mark of being a Brahmin).



- b. One should have a Brahmin '*gothram*' ( The family name inherited from one of the eight original *rishis* ( original gurus) who started the Brahmin clans).
- c. The women should wear a '*madisar*' (a special manner of wearing the traditional sari among the Iyer ladies) especially for weddings and funerals.
- d. Prayers, customs and religious practices should conducted in accordance with orthodox Brahmin beliefs.
- e. The '*avani avittam*' (the yearly custom of changing the poonal) should be celebrated.

ATC respondents concurred with the above findings from the questionnaire that class or caste, (according to the definitions provided in this study) in Indian terms could have a strong bearing on cultural or ethnic identity because identity was seen as one that was obtained 'at birth'. So while Tamil was 'useful for communication with elders' it had 'limited applications at the present time' (see excerpt below).

35.*R:	If language is a very integral part of our culture and identity, can you then say that a Tamil Iyer who does not speak Tamil or does not speak it well, loses his identity as an Iyer?
36 K(G2)	You cannot say that. But it is just that you feel that that person will be handicapped. <u>His identity is obtained at birth, his relationships etc. Therefore he has his identity, that is there.</u> But he will be handicapped for other things. Communication with elders, religious practices etc.
40 K (G2):	English I would say is useful and can be used for communication irrespective of cultural background and most available information is available in English. <u>Whereas Tamil is concerned with limited applications for the present time.</u>
*Researcher	

### Tapescript 30

According to Tapescript 30 above, identity was established by the caste 'bloodline' and by 'birth' and 'not speaking the language does not make him a non-Iyer'. Some respondents felt that ethnic language was an important part of their identity but they also felt that the non-maintenance of the ethnic language could not deprive a person of his/her identity as an Iyer so long as he/she 'is a Tamil Brahmin by birth'. It was possible, according to some, to maintain an Iyer identity because you can be a 'Tamil Iyer without knowing Tamil'. A generational shift can be expected when Tamil is only 'useful for communication with elders' but otherwise has 'limited applications'.

49. \*R: Just now you said that Tamil is a very important part of our culture. So would you say now that it is no longer possible to call you children Tamil Iyers? Because they don't really speak much Tamil?  
50 Mrs.K(G1): No they are still Tamil Iyers without knowing Tamil  
\*Researcher

### Tapescript 32

52.\* R: So are we talking about a bloodline here?  
53 A(G2): Yes, of course. If he is a Tamil Brahmin, by birth, then not speaking the language does not make him a non-Iyer. We can talk to him in English to communicate.  
\*Researcher

### Tapescript 33

Cultural identity is important to ethnic minorities and efforts are made to retain the 'core values' that give the communities their identities (Smolicz, 1992:279). In this study too, it appears that certain values such as the traditions and customs practised by this community such as their traditional dress, the holy thread and the Brahmin heritage could give them an identity as Iyers. Many older respondents (G1 and G2) found that caste was an important factor in their identity while younger respondents (especially G3) found that caste was a deterrent to speaking the

language as the Iyer or Brahmin variety gave them away as Brahmins, an identity that some younger respondents were not keen on maintaining.

The issue of caste affected these people (G3) as seen in Tapescripts 27 and 22 below, but for different reasons from G1 and G2. While G1 and G2 maintained that caste gave them the Iyer identity, much more than the Tamil language, some G3 respondents reported that the caste identity was not one that they sought out but one which they were forced to contend with especially since the Tamil variety that they spoke 'gives them away' as Brahmins, an identity that they 'do not like being known' as. Therefore if friends could make out the difference in the variety of Tamil spoken by the Iyers, then they 'will stop speaking Tamil'.

30. D(G3): Now, in college I speak a little. They say it sounds so funny because I speak 'correcter' Tamil than them.
31. C(G2): Do they recognize the accent?
32. D(G3): They don't know its Brahmin Tamil – That's why I speak it.
35. *R: Do they laugh at your Brahmin Tamil?
36. D(G3): Not ha-ha making fun. They just think it's so different and smile. My friends are nice.
37 A(G2): It gives you away usually.
38 D(G3): <u>And I don't like being known a Brahmin.</u>
39 A(G2): I don't know why you are shy of who you are.
* Researcher

### Tapescript 27

7. A(G3) For me the whole thing is about Brahmin Tamil and non Brahmin Tamil. Like in college now. I am starting to talk Tamil to Indians. I talk one sentence or so in Tamil. That's only because they don't know that I'm Brahmin and even if I talk they can't tell, they think it's a funny accent. And if they did know I wouldn't talk to them in Tamil.

8. B(G3) My Indian friends, many friends are not really Tamil speakers. Their Tamil is accented as well. We all have our eccentricities and it pretty much works out. They think it's a bit weird.

### Tapescript 22

G3 respondents in Tapescript 5 below found that the need for fitting in and getting peer approval without having the issue of caste stand in their way was an important factor for young respondents who attended college especially since a certain solidarity was found among Indians. Younger respondents 'don't really care about the caste system,' or 'are not bothered by it' and 'just mix with Indians or any other race'. They did not understand the 'orthodox behaviour' of the older generation who were always talking of the 'do's and don'ts' of a Brahmin. When they went out with Indian friends they 'try not to speak Tamil like an Iyer' because their friends always 'figure out from the way you speak that you are an Iyer'.

- 2:H(G2):Not in Malaysia, not where we are now. Maybe in some villages in India or something. Yeah, I don't see any difference between me and any other Indian.
- 3 RE(G3):I don't think that I have any dislikes about being Brahmin itself. But one thing I don't like is, people – let's say the older generation – they have certain orthodox behavior. Like, we are the younger generation and we don't really care about the caste system, we are not bothered about it. We don't care whether you are Brahmin or from other castes. We just mix with any other Indians or any other races. But some of the people from the older generation – they feel that this is what you should do. For instance, marriage – why are you always getting married to a Brahmin? Then again, lets say if it's just Brahmin against Brahmin. Say this girl or this guy marries a non-Brahmin – why do they become outcastes? Why can't people accept them? There are some things that I don't like but then again you have to accept it. Everyone around is like talking about your do's and don'ts that's something I don't like. You're not allowed to do what you want. So you're constantly asked, 'You're a Brahmin, you know, you should have this or that'. At least, when I go out, I try not to speak Tamil like an Iyer. They always figure out from the way you speak that you're an Iyer. At least you try to mingle around with them. Being an Iyer, they try to keep you away. They're really picky. Like you go for dinner and you say you're an Iyer and they're gonna say, 'Okay so we have to be extra cautious, she's vegetarian' – and stuff like that. It's a disadvantage.

### Tapescript 5

Many young male respondents, as seen in Tapescript 11, faced problems associated with caste identity in their day to day lives because of the wearing of the '*poonal*' the holy thread worn by Brahmin males who had been initiated. Wearing the *poonal* is an external sign of being Brahmin and this brought them embarrassment because friends 'make jokes out of it'. Others might 'look at me and say...or tend to think of me as superior' and 'start making fun' even in the boys changing room because they don't like it when people say 'you're higher, you're

lower'. It really did not matter to these respondents whether anyone was a Brahmin, other races, Hindus or whatever because 'we're all the same'.

1.*R: Do you guys wear your <i>poonal</i> ?
2.PR(G3):No, because people see it and they <u>make jokes out of it and fun of it</u> . In the changing room they pull my underwear - things like that.
3. *R: Have you tried explaining to them the significance?
4.PR(G3):I have explained the religious reasons. But they end up joking. Then another reason is about India and its races, the history and they say Brahmins are the highest born. <u>So they look at me and say....tend to think of me as superior and .....</u>
*Researcher

#### Tapescript 11

However, according to some of the respondents (see Tapescript 11 below) the Iyer traditions and culture should be carried on to 'differentiate ourselves from others' but since Iyers were no longer involved in Brahmin vocations, they should 'perhaps not call themselves Brahmins'.

57. *R:	Yeah and only the spiritual leaders were Brahmins, but today accountants, lawyers, doctors are Brahmins. So, do you think that if Brahmins are no longer priests; do you think you are Brahmins?
58. S(G3):	Yes.
59.R:	Why?
60. S(S3)	Er...because...
61.PR(G3):	Through a bond. We should carry on our traditions laid out by our ancestors. Why are Chinese still Chinese? <u>To differentiate ourselves from others.</u>
62.P(G3)	So we should still be Iyers. <u>Perhaps not call ourselves Brahmins.</u> We should still be Iyers as different from any other community but not necessarily higher or better than them.
*Researcher	

### Tapescrpt 11

Findings in Chapter 5 showed, as mentioned previously, that the Tamil language was not seen as the single most important factor in the Iyer identity. To many Tamils, the Tamil language stood for solidarity and the Tamil language was a much revered one (see 2.2.2). However, with this particular community of Tamils, the loss of the Tamil language did not appear to have brought about an identity crisis. This perhaps, is one reason why there was an extensive shift away from Tamil.

In Chapter 6 it was found that maintenance efforts among the Malaysian Tamil Iyers were not very good though a large majority (80%) of the respondents felt that the Tamil language should be maintained. Therefore one can assume that while there appeared to be an emotional attachment to the mother tongue, it also seemed very evident that this attachment was not followed aggressively with positive maintenance efforts because their identity was perhaps not necessarily at stake. It seemed also



possible that since the respondents had indicated that identity was not completely dependant on language, the urgency for remediation of Tamil language attrition was not felt strongly.

Apte (1972), made a study of the Marathi people of the Maharashtra region in India when they migrated to Tamil Nadu in South India. Although the single most important factor for a collective identity was language, he found other criteria equally influential in an extended culture contact situation. For his study he studied two groups of Marathi people in Tamil Nadu : the Marathi Brahmins and Marathi tailors (because he identified them as a separate caste group). The Marathi Brahmins leaned towards their counterparts, the Tamil Brahmins at the socio-cultural levels while the tailors emphasized their caste identity within the framework of pan Indian social structure and their regional affiliation to their homeland. Apte suggests that the primary parameters of identity in that situation appeared to be caste, religion and region rather than language. In the current study, too, there is evidence to show that language alone did not provide ethnic identity. Other factors such as customs and traditions also contributed to the identity of being an Iyer.

### **7.2.3 The Status of the Tamil Language**

The taped conversations showed a substantially higher percentage of respondents speaking English rather than Tamil. In Chapter Six , it was found that English was the more dominant language spoken among the ATC respondents (87%) who were

mostly G2 or G3. Tamil was used mainly by G1. The questionnaires and conversations were analysed for reasons why Tamil was abandoned in favour of the English language which was considered economically more viable than Tamil or the national language Malay which was needed for education. The following sections discuss reasons for the shift away from Tamil.

Tamil is the language of a minority group in Malaysia. As such it does not represent itself as the language of economic and social mobility. It was seen in Chapter 1 that Malay is the national language of Malaysia and English is a compulsory second language in all government schools. The English language is gaining further importance with the teaching of Science and Mathematics in English from the year 2003. Furthermore, the education system that exists in Malaysia, at present makes it difficult for one who wishes to study Tamil but also be proficient in Malay and English a little difficult because Tamil medium education is available only at the primary level. In order to progress to the secondary level, students have to switch to the Malay and English medium. It is possible that since this community does not depend wholly on the Tamil language for its identity, they have chosen economic success through the English and Malay languages and have neglected the Tamil language in order to pursue economic and social mobility.

Some ATC respondents (see Tapescript 34 below) spoke about the need to choose the right school for their children so that they 'do not suffer or get left behind'.

57. *R:	Suppose you had to choose whether to send your child to a Tamil or English school, which would you choose?
58. S(G2):	An English school.
59.*R:	Why?
60. V:	<u>Because of his future. He has to come up.</u> Tamil school children are suffering when they get to secondary school. In the Tamil Primary schools they learn everything in Tamil and when they get to the secondary levels where they have to learn everything in English or Malay, <u>they suffer and get left behind.</u>
61.S(G2	If they go to the Tamil school, then they are in an environment that is not so good because not too many middle class parents send their children there. <u>Further more how many Tamil Universities are there for them to attend?</u>
*Researcher	

#### Tapescript 34

Some respondents, as exemplified in Tapescript 31, spoke about the limitations of Tamil as a language of education since it 'is concerned with limited applications at the present time'. This statement voiced the fear that if one wanted to pursue education and information at higher levels then Tamil was not the language to pursue.

40 K (G2): English I would say is useful and can be used for communication irrespective of cultural background and most available information is available in English. Whereas Tamil is concerned with limited applications for the present time.

\*Researcher

**Tapescript 31**

In Tapescript 6, one G1 respondent complained about the Iyers being 'infatuated' with the west while another respondent (Tapescript 32) complained of them (the community) having a tendency to 'become westernised too easily'.

36. \*R: Eyn Brahmana mattum pesarathillai?  
**Why Brahmins alone not speak?**

37. T(G1):Avalukku konjam moham jaastiya irukku.  
**They are a little infatuated much (with the west).**

**Translation in bold**  
\*Researcher

**Tapescript 6**

24. S(G1): But Tamil is still important. You can't reject a mother tongue. Because Iyers tend to be more forward thinking, they tend to become westernized too easily but the language will never die in Tamil Nadu, don't worry.

**Tapescript 32**

The above comments, though vocalised only by a few respondents, did present a reason why there was a very large shift away from the Tamil language as seen in both the questionnaire as well as the ATC respondents.

## 7.2 Reasons for the Maintenance of Tamil

Chapter 5 showed extensive shift to English and Malay while Chapter 6 showed that Tamil was used more by G1 and G2. However, most respondents from all three generations reported that they could understand the language (Tamil) at least partially if not fully. Motivation for maintaining Tamil appeared to be high in all three generations (see Table 7.3). However, this motivation had not been translated to action as seen in Table 7.4. The following sections attempt to find the reasons why the Malaysian Iyer community maintains Tamil.

**Table 7.3**

	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>No Response</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Generation</b>				
<b>G1</b>	69 (83.1%)	8	6	<b>83</b>
<b>G2</b>	111 (93.2%)	5	3	<b>119</b>
<b>G3</b>	83 (93.2%)	4	2	<b>89</b>

**Table Showing Answers to ‘Do You Think It Is Important To Preserve The Tamil Language?’**

**Table 7.4**

	Yes	No	No Response	Total
<b>Generation</b>				
<b>G1</b>	6 (7.2%)	72	6	<b>83</b>
<b>G2</b>	5 (4.2%)	99	16	<b>119</b>
<b>G3</b>	11 (12.3%)	71	7	<b>89</b>

**Answers to ‘Are You Involved In Any Way  
To Maintain The Tamil Language In Malaysia?’**

Questionnaire respondents were asked to say what motivated them to maintain the Tamil language and were asked to list why they thought that Tamil should be preserved or maintained. Table 7.5 summarizes the responses given by questionnaire respondents.

**Table 7.5**

Reason	Count
Heritage	87 (34.4%)
Preservation of Ancient Language	76 (30.0%)
Mother Tongue	65 (25.7%)
Malaysian Indian Identity	15 (5.9%)
Communication	10 (4.0%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>253</b>

**Reasons why Tamil should be maintained**

**7.2.1 Preserving Tamil As Part of Heritage**

Most respondents cited the need to preserve the Tamil language as their heritage as the main reason for language maintenance. Responses were written in a variety of

ways but they could be summarized into the above categories (see Table 7.5). An examination of these showed that the first three categories belonged to a similar ideal, which was the maintenance of Tamil because it is part of their heritage, Tamil is an ancient language and it was also their mother tongue. The fourth category showed that the Malaysian Iyers wished to be a part of the Tamil speaking population of Malaysia by having a common Indian identity through the Tamil language. The last category showed that Tamil needed to be maintained in order to accommodate and communicate with those Indians who did not speak any language other than Tamil. The situation in Malaysia can be a little complex with several languages interacting with one another and therefore communication in Tamil can be for a variety of reasons such as establishing familiarity and network ties or for excluding others, establishing a bond etc. (see 3.4.4).

Several questionnaire respondents felt that every person and community should have a language to call his/her own and the Iyers too, should maintain Tamil so that they had their own language. About a third of the respondents (30.0%) said that the Tamil language is an ancient and rich one and therefore it should be preserved because it is a classical language and should be revered and maintained as part of their heritage.

There were some comments made by ATC respondents who made references to the need to preserve Tamil for the continuity of culture and religion. One respondent (see Tapescript 31 below) said that although she speaks English to her children for

everyday communication, she switched to Tamil when talking about beliefs, customs and habits. This practice, she felt, would entrench the Tamil language, at least in the traditional and cultural areas that she held dear to her heart:

P (G1): “Of course when I am talking to my children, about day to day affairs, then English comes automatically because it is easy for them to understand. But if I want to tell them something about our beliefs, habits, customs or anything then I switch to Tamil”.

**Tapescript 31**

Another respondent felt that in order to associate oneself with one's culture, language was important (see Tapescript 30). Yet another respondent was worried that traditions and culture would be followed blindly if language was lost. Therefore language was seen as an important part of culture that needed to be maintained (Tapescript 33).

K (G2): Well there is still the cultural purposes. You still need the language to associate yourself with our culture you must know the language.

**Tapescript 30**



Dr (G1): It is like this. Language is very important to keep up with culture and to know what it is. But if they don't know, if the next generation doesn't know, and just follow traditions blindly, the culture will be lost. They will know a little bit but they won't know much about the history and meanings. If you ask them about Santhanam or Ramani, they won't know who they are.

### Tapescript 33

About a quarter (25.7%) of the respondents said that Tamil should be maintained because it was their mother tongue. Respondents cited reasons such as 'Tamil could and should be passed on to the next generation' and 'it should be preserved at least at the spoken level' so that the language lived on so that 'a bond with one's own language' could be maintained. During conversations, too, references were made to the importance of the mother tongue, even though many were not actually using it to communicate with one another. An example is provided below:

P (G1): English is a language of necessity and of status to some people. Tamil is our mother tongue. That itself gives it a certain status, isn't it?"

### Tapescript 31

The conversations, however, revealed a greater level of language shift than that suggested in the questionnaires (see 5.2.1.3). It is possible that the emotional

attachment to the Tamil language made the questionnaire respondents answer their questions more conservatively about their level of shift away from their mother tongue than the actual case may have been. In fact one of the limitations of the questionnaire as a tool (as seen 4.2) is that it represents individual perceptions rather than objective reality, as can be seen here. The individual perception of most of the respondents was that one should maintain Tamil because it was their mother tongue and so on. However, the objective reality of the situation was that in a multi-lingual situation such as in Malaysia, other languages have roles to play and languages (such as English and Malay) can be seen to be more important than Tamil in terms of obtaining jobs and education. This perception (that one should maintain their mother tongue) interferes with the reality of the actual situation of needing to pursue economic wealth. This clash therefore can present a distorted view. However, since this study uses authentic taped material as a second tool to validate the findings from the questionnaire, one is able to see this difference between perception and reality.

### **7.2.2 For Accommodation of Elders**

A small number of the respondents (4%) said that Tamil had to be preserved for communication with the elders who may not speak any other language. Accommodation for elders of the community was apparent in the questionnaires (5.2.2.2) as well as the ATC (see 6.3.1.5). It was also observed during conversations that respect for elders and accommodation for those who did not speak English were important reasons for switching to Tamil. Even when a respondent was speaking in

English before the elders joined in the conversation, an effort was always made to switch to Tamil so that elders could be included in the conversation.

**Table 7.6**

<b>Generation</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>No Response.</b>	<b>Total</b>
G1	69	11	3	83
G2	109	9	1	119
G3	85	4	-	89
<b>Total</b>	<b>263 (90.4%)</b>	<b>24 (8.2%)</b>	<b>4 (1.4%)</b>	<b>291</b>

**Respondents who claim to speak in Tamil to Elders**

It can be seen from Table 7.6 that all three generations reported that they would attempt to speak in Tamil to elders of the community. A very large majority (90.4%) claimed to speak to elders in Tamil while a very small minority (8.2%) reported that they did not do so.

**Table 7.7**

	<b>Count</b>	<b>Tamil</b>	<b>Code-switch English/Tamil</b>
<b>Grandfather</b>	87	53(60.9%)	16(39.1%)
<b>Grandmother</b>	110	86(78.2%)	15(21.8%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>197</b>	<b>139(70.6%)</b>	<b>31</b>

**Language Spoken by Respondents To Their Grandparents**

Of the respondents who said that they have a grandfather, approximately two thirds (60.9%) of them reported speaking in Tamil to them while a little more than a third (39.1%) said that they spoke a combination of English and Tamil to their

grandfathers. Of the respondents who had grandmothers, a very large majority (78.2%) of them spoke Tamil to them while about a fifth (21.8%) reported that they spoke a combination of English and Tamil. The presence of a grandparent seemed to ensure the use of Tamil at least for basic communication with them. While many of the respondents reported that Tamil is not the language they speak most proficiently, it appears that many of them used it for communication purposes, mainly with an elderly relative.

### **7.2.3 For a Common Malaysian Indian Identity**

A small proportion of questionnaire respondents (5.9%) reported that the Tamil language should be maintained so that they are part of the Malaysian Indian community (of whom the Tamils form the majority– see 1.1). When this finding was cross referenced with the fact that respondents reported speaking more Tamil during inter-community talk (with Malaysian Indians who speak Tamil) than during intra-community talk (with Iyers), it appeared that there could be a need, among some Malaysian Iyers, to establish ties with Malaysian Indians through the Tamil language, so that they could belong within the larger group of Malaysian Indians.

### **7.2.4 For Functional Use**

Certain words, such as food items and relationships terms were best expressed in Tamil because Tamil is a much more 'expressive' language and has cultural value, while English is a foreign language that should not and in most circumstances could not be used for such purposes. In Chapter 6 (see 6.3.3) it was seen that Tamil was

used in conjunction with certain functions such as to express relationships or kinship terms better, to show respect for elders, for better and more authentic expression of food items, for words that had religious or cultural significance, to accommodate those who did not speak English and for direct quotes.

### 7.3 Conclusion

This chapter analyses the reasons for language shift and language maintenance among the Malaysian Iyers. Evidence showed that the Malaysian Iyers have shifted to English to a large extent and to Malay a lesser extent.

Investigation of the tapescripts of conversations held among community members and the questionnaires revealed three main reasons for the shift to English. The first reason was that the Malaysian Iyers have placed an emphasis on professional and economic development and therefore have pursued those languages that would achieve that aim. The shift away from Tamil can be seen in the chase for economic success, measured by a western style of education which provided opportunities not only nationally but also internationally.

Second it also seems possible that the Malaysian Iyers have other means of obtaining a group identity apart from a linguistic identity that stems from language. Their Brahmin heritage appears to be a strong point in providing an identity. In other words one could be an Iyer without speaking Tamil so long as he/she was a Brahmin by birth. Many respondents felt that they could retain their

customs and traditions without using Tamil and also reap the benefits of material wealth through the pursuit of an English education.

Third, the Tamil language does not really have any official status in Malaysia. At best it can be studied at primary level but students have to prepare themselves for the transition to the Malay and English languages if they wished to continue education at the secondary level. This makes Tamil third in importance after Malay (the national language) and English (compulsory second language which enjoys an enviable status as an international language).

While it is true that there appears to be a considerable shift from Tamil to English and Malay, the Tamil language was maintained for four main reasons. First, the language was seen as part of their heritage as mother tongue which must be preserved. The Tamil language was also seen as part of their culture. Moreover it was revered as an ancient language that was seen as equivalent to Sanskrit and Greek.

Second it acted as a communication tool with elders and others who did not speak English or Malay. Therefore, the language was maintained so that the communication link with elders was not lost.

Third, Tamil is the language of the majority of Indians in Malaysia. The Iyers are too small a community to have a separate identity in this country. Therefore if they

wished to be part of the Malaysian Indian community , then the Tamil language needs to be maintained.

Last, Tamil was maintained at a functional level so that aspects of culture such as respect for elders, kinship terms, relationship terms and so on were retained. Words that had religious or cultural significance were also retained as they sounded more authentic in the original state.

It can be concluded that while a large scale shift is seen from the Tamil language mainly for economic success, the language is being maintained for culture, heritage and communication.