

## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

### **CONCEPTUALIZING LANGUAGE SHIFT AND MAINTENANCE AMONG THE MALAYSIAN IYERS**

#### **8.1 Introduction**

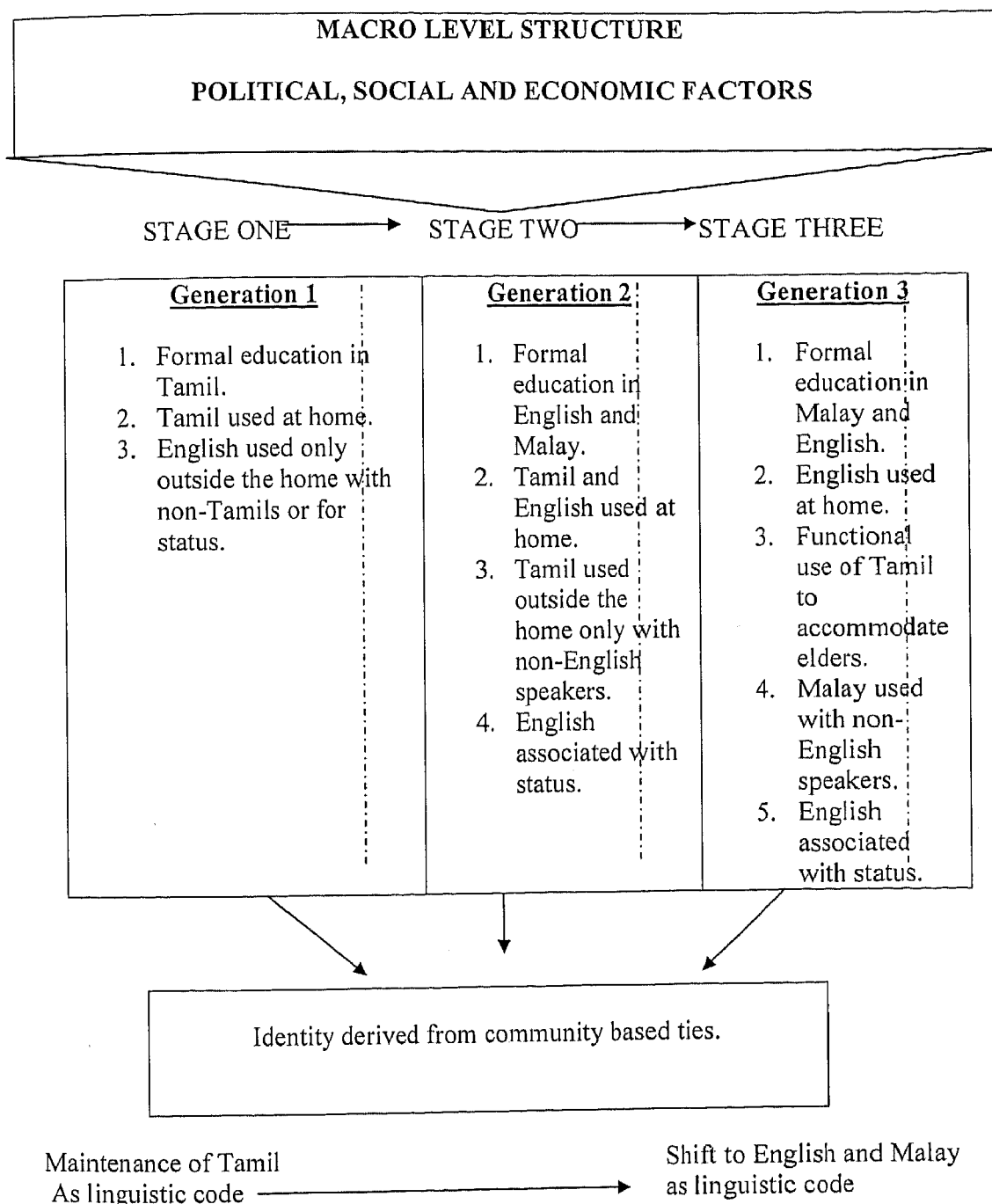
The phenomenon of language shift is very evident, as seen in the previous chapters. A profile of language shift among Malaysian Iyers was presented in Chapter Five, followed by a description of efforts to maintain Tamil in Chapter Six while Chapter Seven discussed reasons for language shift and maintenance.

In this chapter, the findings from this research study are studied as a whole in an attempt to understand the process of language shift and maintenance among the Malaysian Iyers. This process is presented in a diagram (see Figure 8.1) in an attempt to understand this phenomenon.

#### **8.2 Understanding Language Shift and Maintenance**

The preceding chapters have shown that the shift from Tamil to English and Malay is quite prevalent among the Malaysian Iyers. The shift has occurred due to several reasons such as the greater viability of the English language as a language of commerce and industry, one that opened the window of opportunity and bestowed prestige or status on the user and the fact that Malay was the national language of this country.

Figure 8.1



**Diagram Showing Language Shift and Maintenance Among Malaysian Iyers**

Although the Tamil language is used in the media on a daily basis, the language was used only functionally by this community to cite terms that were better expressed in the Tamil language such as religious and cultural terms. Tamil was also used by the second generation users in order to accommodate elders who did not speak English. Very little Tamil was used by the third generation who were proficient in Malay and English, but chose to use English on most occasions when choice was available.

Language use across the three generations of Malaysian Iyers had been affected by macro level reasons that were connected to the political, social and economic factors and micro level reasons connected to individual needs and desires. The language shift from Tamil to English can be seen in three stages starting from Generation 1 respondents who were from India and educated formally in Tamil and English, going on to Generation 2 who were mainly educated in English medium with Malay as the second language in Malaysia and ending with Generation 3 who were educated in Malay medium with English as the second language.

### **8.2.1 Macro level reasons for language shift**

Language shift among Malaysian Iyers can be attributed to macro level reasons that exist from the political, social and economic conditions that exist in Malaysia (see Figure 8.1). The decisions made at the political level on language policy and language use for official purposes have had an impact on the language used by Malaysian

Iyers. The history of the Malaysian Iyers dated back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (see 2.3.1). When they arrived as the first migrants to Malaysia, they sought work with the British who used English for all official and government purposes. These early migrants were educated in Tamil and English in India. The second generation of Malaysian Iyers were educated in British Malaya where they attended English medium schools and learnt Malay as the second language. When Malaysia received independence from the British, the language of the government and education changed from English to Malay slowly resulting in a complete switch to the Malay medium by the 1970s. The third generation attended Malay medium schools and therefore learnt Malay as their first language and English as their second language. Therefore politicians and politics have had an effect on the language that was used for education purposes and for work in the government.

Secondly, Malaysia is a country comprising several ethnicities as seen in Chapter One (see 1.3.2). This fact presents a multilingual scenario where several languages co-existed on a daily basis. Malaysian society is generally multilingual with several languages co-existing. For Malaysians to integrate successfully with several races, they should know at least one other language other than one's ethnic language preferably Malay which is the language of the government and/or English which is the language of the private sector.

Last, for economic reasons (which deal with the acquiring of jobs or business opportunities), English is a very important language of commerce and industry. As

an international language it is much sought after as a prestigious language that bestowed a high status on its speakers (see 1.3.2 and 7.2.1). The Malaysian government has introduced the teaching of Science and Mathematics in English since January 2003, making English a very important language. Having said that, the Chinese community, however, are able to get along really well without a knowledge of English. This is due to the fact that they traditionally operate businesses and use their language even in business (Kong, 1999).

The three reasons mentioned above have had impact on language maintenance and shift among the Malaysian Iyers. The overview of the Malaysian scene shows that political machinations on language policy has a great deal to do with the languages that are formally taught in schools such as Malay (see 1.3.2). In most instances economic necessity required<sup>s</sup> those who wish to succeed in the Malaysian private sector to have a good grasp of the English language (5.2.7) while the social scene in Malaysia is one where several ethnicities co-existed~~d~~ making it important for Malaysians to be at least bilingual in order to survive on a day to day basis (1.3.1). Having said that, it must be observed that with the Chinese community, the Chinese language appears to be an important tool even in business. The Malaysian Chinese have traditionally been involved in business and use their language even in the daily carriage of business (Kong, 1999).

### 8.2.2 Stage One of Language Shift

The first stage in the process of language shift among Malaysian Iyers occurred with changes in the language use of the first generation mainly through the process of migration from their homeland in India to Malaysia. The process of language shift in stage one could be seen through bilingual education that they received in India (Diagram 5.1, Table 5.3). As first migrants who were educated in India, they were proficient in Tamil and English (see 5.2.1.2). It was because of this very reason (being proficient in English) that they were able to find jobs in British Malaya. The need to know another language for employment purposes created a situation where there was a possibility for language shift in the work domain.

The findings showed that 71.4% of first generation Malaysian Iyers use Tamil in the home (see Figure 5.3). This is a good percentage for maintenance of the ethnic language though it must be noted that 30.6% use English which signals a shift in language use. The first generation compartmentalized the use of the Tamil language for communication with people of Tamil origin and for the home while the English language was used for work and business purposes.

The Malay language has had little or no effect on the first generation probably because they did not need to use it for work or for social purposes. This put the Malay language in the backseat even though it is the national language of Malaysia. Several first generation respondents reported that without a knowledge of English

there was very little that they could do in British Malaya (see 2.3.1) as the language was essential for performing well in interviews and for obtaining jobs.

With the first generation, English is largely used for work and for socializing with non-Tamils, and Tamil for communication at home, socializing with Tamils and for religious purposes. The use of Tamil at home and English outside the home made Tamil the preferred linguistic code at home.

### **8.2.3 Stage Two of Language Shift**

The second stage in the process of language shift happened with the second generation. Second generation migrants were born in Malaysia and therefore their formal education has one other language that their parents (the first generation) did not have – the Malay language. The second generation are mainly educated in the English medium and had learnt Malay as a second language. The medium of education shifted from English to Malay in the National Schools during the 1970s turning the Malay language into the most important language in this country.

Only 42.7% of the second generation (see Table 5.4) have learnt Tamil in school. Tamil education in Malaysia is available only in primary school (see 1.3.6) and therefore continuity is not available for Tamil education. A large majority 70.5% (see Table 5.15) of second generation Malaysian Iyers have been educated in the English medium of education and look upon English as a very important language that bestowed status and economic wealth on its users (see 7.2.1).

The shift in language use from Tamil to English can be seen with the inclusion of the English language in the home with 50.46% of second generation Malaysian Iyers using the language in this domain (see 5.14) compared to 24.1% of the first generation using English in the home. The move from Tamil to English from one generation to another is clearly visible especially with the intrusion of a foreign language into the home domain which is considered the bastion of language maintenance.

Both the first and second generation respondents reported that English was essential in their lives as means to economic wealth and prosperity as the language had a 'commercial tag' (7.2.1). The language is perceived as important in giving prestige and status to its users in addition to wealth and prosperity.

The fact that the first generation know English aided the process of language shift as second generation respondents use Tamil only to accommodate those who can not speak English (6.3.3.2 and 6.3.3.5). When formal education is not in Tamil then the proficiency in that language is reduced to the spoken level and does not extend to the reading and writing areas (see Tables 6.6 and 6.8). As the final blow that sealed the fate of the ethnic language, Tamil is not seen as a language of status and power and therefore did not get the attention it needed to keep the language alive through maintenance efforts (see 6.3 and 7.3.1.2).



#### 8.2.4 Stage Three of Language Shift

The third stage in language shift happened with the third generation Malaysian Iyers. As a generation that is well entrenched in Malaysia, they were born and brought up in Malaysia and typically even their parents were Malaysian. As the third generation they attended schools which conducted classes in the Malay medium and taught English as a second language. Their parents (the second generation) were educated in English and had already shifted to English even in the home domain. Only 15.7% of them (see Table 5.4) had learnt Tamil formally in schools while the rest had learnt the language informally through relatives, friends or private tuition.

A majority of the third generation (88.8% - see Figure 5.1) reported that English was the language that they are most proficient in and only 13.5% reported using Tamil at home, showing that English has slowly taken over from Tamil as the legitimate linguistic code even in the home domain. This shift is made possible by the fact that the second generation themselves introduced English into the home domain and speak Tamil with only those with limited abilities in English. The generation being fluent in English, can be seen as the ones who made English the language of the home with their children (the third generation).

The third generation also reported using Malay only to communicate with those who do not speak English in school. They prefer to speak English to those who could. The lack of prestige and status associated with Tamil makes them avoid speaking the language in school. The Malay language is not spoken much outside of schools and is seen as a language that is necessary to 'pass exams' but not essential in the 'workplace' (see ATC 20).

The third generation used the Tamil language functionally mainly to accommodate elders or to refer to cultural and religious terms (see 6.3.3). The fact that they have little or no formal training in the Tamil language is bound to affect their proficiency in the language. Therefore attrition in the use of the language is bound to happen, as a consequence of lack of proficiency. Having parents who themselves speak Tamil minimally to accommodate those who did not speak English provided further impetus to the shifting process. A belief that the Tamil language is not as important as the English language in terms of economic prosperity has further reduced maintenance efforts. All of these causes signal a shift from the ethnic Tamil language to the more useful (economically) English language.

#### **8.4.6 The Role of Ethnic Identity in Language Shift**

The findings of this research study indicate very definite language shift patterns. Fishman (1989) says that language is not merely an ethnic symbol but "flesh of the flesh and blood of the blood and therefore more powerful as a conveyor, as a symbol....well worth living and dying for" (pg. 27). In view of such a powerful notion attached to language and identity, the question to ask is: what constitutes identity for the Malaysian Iyers if not their language?

##### **8.4.6.1 Paternity**

Fishman (1989) explains that the notion of ethnicity centres around the twin concepts of paternity and patrimony. Paternity refers to ancestry which is passed on from generation to generation in a bio-kinship sense. Language is often taken as a biological inheritance and its association with paternity is powerful. The Malaysian Iyers, who are also Brahmins, view paternity as an important part of their ethnic identity (see 5.2.7.1). The idea of paternity is caste system that is practiced by Malaysian Iyers today (one which emphasizes a birthright based on biological origins) is based on paternity. The sense of identity expressed by the respondents show that the Brahmin heritage (see also 2.2.2) based on paternity rather than the original concepts (based on occupation), is important to them.

#### 8.4.6.2 Patrimony

The notion of patrimony stems from learned behaviour and is flexible while paternity, which is inherited and has a stamp of ancestry, is rigid and therefore not negotiable (Fishman, 1989). Patrimony refers to how ethnic communities behave, and what members do in order to express their membership, such as customary rites, rituals and practices (see 2.3.5). The idea of community solidarity is important as one of the basic functions of ethnic identity is to bind individuals as a group. A community's sense of belonging could arise from common manners, rituals, values and a common speech community (Prattis, 1981).

Language is only one indicator of a group's identity in some communities. In a study conducted on the economic and cultural effects of the oil industry in Lewis, a place offshore to Scotland, Prattis (cited in Haugen, 1981:23) says:

One has to realize that language use is just one indicator amongst others that seek to maintain a distinct identity – Gaelic speech has symbolic importance in defining group life and cultural distinctiveness within Lewis.

Therefore, ethnicity is not just an inherited status as paternity implies but also refers to a set of behavioural patterns as patrimony implies. Paternity refers to those who inherit a heritage while patrimony is a set of defining behaviours that distinguishes them as a community. For the Malaysian Iyers, paternity refers to the patri-lineal link to a Brahmin heritage while patrimony refers to their collective behaviours and norms as a community (see 2.2.6.1).

#### 8.4.6.3 Cultural Identity and Language

An equally important factor in identity is culture which is subsumed under patrimony. Deshen (1974) says that ethnic patrimony (as outlined by Fishman) and culture are inter-related but not necessarily one and the same. Not all of culture needs to be viewed as descent related but there is obviously a cultural component to ethnicity. Patrimony can be viewed as a set of cultural norms that have been practiced for generations (see 2.2.6.1). In the case of the Malaysian Iyers, many of their cultural norms can be practised without a thorough knowledge of Tamil. Therefore their identity can stem from their cultural practices rather than from language alone.

In a study of Italian Americans, Eastman (1984) suggests that ethnic identity does not always coincide with the language used. Her study found that in the United States, Italian Americans who associated the Italian language with their ethnic identity knew few Italian words. Therefore, while language may have a symbolic association with ethnic identity, it may not be used and maintained in some ethnic minority situations.

Pandaripande (1992), too, found no correlation between loss of language and loss of cultural identity in her study of language shift in India. She quotes the experience of the Persian community which migrated to India in the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. which had lost its language but which has meticulously maintained its cultural identity. She further found that Marathi speaking subjects underwent language shift

to achieve socio-economic development in the dominant city cultures that they had migrated to. The shift from their ethnic language to the language of dominant city culture was not perceived by them as a loss of their cultural identity which they could preserve through their traditional rituals, dress patterns, food habits and unique values. Language shift was seen as a strategy to succeed in the dominant culture. The Iyers in this study show similar traits and sentiments about their ethnic identity (see 5.2.7.1).

So, what does constitute ethnic identity? Is it a birthright, paternity (derived from biological origins) or is it patrimony (a set of behavioural patterns) which may be termed as cultural practices, behaviours or values? Is language essential for ethnic identity? David (2001:194) states that 'The Malaysian Sindhis.....fiercely proud of their ethnicity, do not appear to see language maintenance as critical for the preservation of their culture and identity'. Therefore language may be seen as a part of culture, which may or may not be essential for retaining culture depending on the community that views it and decides what exactly comprises their ethnic identity (see 7.2.2). The Malaysian Iyer notion of identity stems from their birthright and through their cultural practices. The findings do not indicate language maintenance as an essential part of their ethnic identity.

## 8.5 Conclusion

A generational decline in the Tamil language has occurred among the Malaysian Iyers. The language shift occurred due to macro level reasons such as political, economic and social reasons which stimulate language choice.

The shift occurred in three stages beginning with generation 1 who maintained the Tamil language at home but used English for work and business purposes. The first generation had been formally educated in both English and Tamil and were therefore proficient in both languages. The pattern changed with the second generation who had been formally educated in English and Malay. This generation introduced English into the home domain. As most first generation spoke English, the second generation reserved the speaking of Tamil to those who did not speak English. The Tamil language faced further attrition with the third generation who were educated in Malay and English. This generation used Tamil only functionally for communicating with elders of the community.

The profile of language shift is not only clear but sharp too. The failure to maintain the use of the ethnic language can be attributed to the notion of ethnic identity that is derived from cultural practices and caste identity rather than from language alone.