

CHAPTER NINE

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

9.1 Introduction

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the main objective of this study is to document language shift and maintenance among the Malaysian Iyers and to investigate the reasons for such shift and maintenance. This final chapter presents a summary of this research study, discusses how a community that is close and dense (see 2.2.3.2) can shift from its ethnic language due to pressures faced from the outside world and looks at the language maintenance efforts that have been put in place by the Malaysian Iyer community who are the focus of this research study. The chapter also discusses the implications that arise from this study and give directions for future research.

9.2 Overview of Research

This is a study of the Malaysian Iyers, a Tamil Brahmin community who live in a multicultural and multilingual environment in Malaysia. The Iyers, who live as a closely knit community, are part of a larger Tamil community. Previous research in Malaysia has shown that ethnic minorities shift away from their ethnic languages, such as Punjabi (see Kundra, 2001; David, Naji and Sheena, 2003), Portuguese (see Ramachandran, 2000; David and Faridah, 1997), Sindhi (David, 1996), Malayalam (see David and Nambiar, 2002), Pakistani (see David, 2003) and Tamil (David and Naji, 2000) towards the dominant languages of Malaysia such as Malay and English (see 1.4). The main objective of this study is to determine whether the Malaysian

Iyer community has maintained the Tamil language or whether they have shifted away from it and it also investigates their reasons for doing so.

The Malaysian Tamils are mostly descendents of migrants from the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu (see 1.3.5). Waves of Tamils migrated to Malaysia over the last one hundred years or so when the British had an open migration policy to bring labour from India to supply demand for raw materials in Europe in response to the industrial revolution that was taking place in Europe (1.3.2). Indians arrived from India to work mainly in the plantation industry as labourers, administrators and clerks in the then British Malaya. Some also arrived to set up businesses or came to work in Indian companies which had set up branches in Malaysia. The first Malaysian Iyers arrived during the British administration and worked at a variety of jobs but mainly as clerks or administrators in the civil service.

The Malaysian Iyers are a closely-knit community who have formed networks through migration and kinship ties (see 2.4). The community's culture and traditions bind them as a cohesive group (see 2.3.3) and they have formed an association (BSM) for their religious, social and cultural needs.

A two pronged emic and etic approach was used so that respondents' views could be balanced with the researcher's views. A domain based questionnaire was administered to 291 respondents to obtain a macro picture of the community's language shift and language maintenance patterns. However, such an analysis, by

itself, will not reveal individual language choice, nor can it provide an ethnography of communication. Therefore, the questionnaire information was complemented with micro methods that would reveal actual language maintenance and shift. Intra community conversations were, therefore, audio taped and analysed using Hymes' Ethnography of Communication (Hymes, 1977) which helped to investigate in greater detail an ethnography of speaking by investigating speaker rules of interaction and the dominant languages that were actually spoken by respondents.

Interviews with first generation respondents were conducted to study migration patterns to supplement available information on the early arrival and settlement of the Indian community in Malaysia. Visits were made to fifty homes (see Appendix C) to study the community's cultural practices and these were complemented with personal observations of community interactions on 17 different occasions (see 4.3.2.2). Interviews were also held with leaders of the Malaysian Tamil community to supplement available documented information in order to provide current background information on the status and maintenance of Tamil in Malaysia.

9.3 Findings

The questionnaire findings revealed code-switches to mainly the English language in all domains except the religious one. Findings also showed that the Malay language was making inroads especially with G3. A generational decline in the proficiency of the Tamil language was seen. This is probably due to the fact that only the first generation had learnt the Tamil language formally in schools in India. Most of the

second and third generation had acquired the Tamil language in an informal manner at home or through relatives and friends (see 5.2.1.1) though 42.7% of G2 and 15.7% of G3 had learnt Tamil lessons offered in national schools where POL (Pupil's Own Language) lessons are offered on request.

A generational shift from the Tamil language to the English and Malay languages was seen, indicating that the process of language shift had already been put in place (see Chapter 5). Very minimal involvement in activities that could promote language maintenance (such as pursuing Tamil education, listening to Tamil programmes, reading Tamil materials and so on) also point to language shift although attitudes (such as expressing a need to maintain Tamil) towards the maintenance of the ethnic language were positive (see 7.2).

Although the community was shifting towards English and Malay, the Tamil language was being maintained for reasons such as communicating with elders, to express religious and cultural terms, adhering to rules of interaction such as respect for elders and using culture specific speaker-addressee modes of address (see 6.3.3) to express relationships. These functional shifts to Tamil were evident in conversations.

9.4 Language Shift and Language Maintenance

The questionnaire findings as well as evidence from the tape-scripts, confirmed the fact that the Tamil language was being taken over by English largely and by Malay to a lesser degree. However, there was evidence to show that the Tamil language was still being maintained in the religious domain. The Malaysian Iyers, have placed much importance on religious affairs (see 2.3.3) and this had probably prompted the use of Tamil to a larger degree in this area of language use. The religious domain, perhaps more than the other domains, demanded ethnic language maintenance since most prayers and rituals were still conducted in either Sanskrit or Tamil. This could explain the reason for the high maintenance of Tamil in the religious domain.

The Tamil language was used at home, though not exclusively. It was used mainly for communication purposes with elders of the community who are not proficient in English. The language was also used for kinship terms, food items, and words with religious or cultural meanings that could not be translated adequately into English.

The findings from the questionnaire suggested that Tamil was maintained to a larger degree than was evident in the tapescripts. This finding adds to the understanding among sociolinguists that self reported data such as those found in questionnaire surveys or in interviews come with inherent limitations such as respondents' answers not always reflecting actual behaviour (Vassberg, 1993:29).

In the Audio Taped Conversations (see Table 6.10) the first generation were the only ones using Tamil for conversing during intra community conversations. They were also the cause of the conversations in English shifting to Tamil. The reason for this could be found in the questionnaire findings which showed that the first generation were the ones who were most proficient in Tamil and who had learnt the language in India (see 5.2.1.1). Therefore, it is possible that they were the ones who spoke it mostly, whereas most of the second and third generation were not so proficient in Tamil and therefore used the language only functionally by restructuring the use of the language mainly for words that could not be translated into English or to communicate with and to accommodate elders.

Motivation for Tamil language maintenance did exist with about 90.3% of the questionnaire respondents agreeing that the Tamil language should be preserved (see 7.2). This bodes well for the future of the community's linguistic identity. However, it is interesting to note that the community did not appear to be motivated enough to translate their words into actions that would actually help preserve the language for posterity.

If the only motivating factor for using the Tamil language is communication with relatives and elders who were not very proficient in English, this then brings about the question of the survival of the language in the future. The third generation's self report data showed that their proficiency is at the basic level with regard to the speaking skill (see 5.2.1). They virtually showed no proficiency in reading and

writing. Therefore, there is no guarantee that efforts to maintain Tamil would continue.

In several studies of the Indian community in Malaysia, a shift to English has been found among the Punjabis (see David, Naji and Sheena, 2003), Tamils (David and Naji, 1999), Malayalees (David and Nambiar, 2002) and the Sindhis (David, 1996). The same finding holds for this community who are shifting to English in all areas except the religious one. Although Tamil is a minority language in Malaysia, this phenomenon of language shift among the Tamils in Malaysia is unique since the Tamil environment in Malaysia is fairly rich compared to other ethnic languages such as Punjabi, Sindhi and Malayalam.

The national language, had not yet replaced Tamil in the language shift of this community although it is the medium of instruction in national schools. Having said that, it is significant to note that with some G3, the national language was the cause of language shift. While it appeared that English was the language that had mainly taken the place of Tamil, the influence of the Malay language could not be dismissed. The shift to English was probably because the English language was seen as a more economically advantageous language especially since it is an international language as well. Also most of G1 came to this country to obtain jobs when the British (who are English speaking) were in power. To add to this, most G2 were educated in the English medium since the national language was made the medium of instruction only in the 1970s. It is therefore reasonable to expect that the

influence of Malay can only begin to be more deeply entrenched henceforth; signs are already in place that the Malay language is slowly making inroads especially with G3 showing signs of using more Malay than both G1 and G2 (see Figure 5.1).

Fishman (1989), in a paper discussing problems of smaller national languages says that 'small' national languages have to cope with competition from international languages as well as sub-national languages. In the Malaysian situation, the Malay language has to compete with English (international language) as well as the Chinese languages and Tamil 'sub-national languages'. This study revealed that the shift was largely from Tamil to English. The reasons for the shift seemed to be that English was perceived as rather important for economic success. Further, because Malay is the medium of instruction in public schools, some ATC respondents expressed a fear that the proficiency in the Malay language may be at the cost of the English language. This they felt, could result in the loss of career opportunities because the English language was seen, by them, as a passport to jobs not only in Malaysia but outside of the country as well. The excerpt below shows this :

"..... we made a decision that we will speak to them (children) more in English because with Bahasa (Malay) education - whether they will be left out of English".

(Tapescript 1)

As mentioned earlier, the medium of instruction in national schools is Malay, and bearing in mind the fact that English will clearly be maintained, due to its status as an international language, the language that is being compromised is Tamil. The language shift to English was more extensive on micro analysis than was apparent in the macro analysis. This is further evidence that respondents' self appraisal of their language use did not always reflect the actual situation but rather was skewed with the subject or respondent's need for what the situation should be, that is, for greater use of Tamil.

In the final analysis, the Malaysian Iyers have shifted rather extensively to the English language and to the Malay language less extensively. They use Tamil for areas where they have to such as for religious purposes or for communication with elders who speak little or no English. Since the majority of the first generation and a small percentage of the second generation are the only respondents who are proficient in Tamil, it does not seem possible that the shift to English and/or Malay will be reversed in the near future, given the fact that Tamil does not enjoy the same status as Malay and English as will be explained in the next paragraph.

The Tamil language does not possess any official status in Malaysia. The language is seen and heard through the media daily through radio and television broadcasts, but formal training and study of Tamil is not available consistently through education. Although Tamil medium education is available through the national type Tamil primary schools, there are no Tamil secondary schools, thus

creating a gap between primary school and university (where Tamil education is available). This raised fears among some of the ability of children to follow Tamil education through while in Malay medium national secondary schools. Problems associated with Tamil schools act as a further impediment for some Malaysian Tamils who prefer national schools to national type Tamil schools (Ramasamy, 2003). Also, because English was seen as the vehicle of livelihood, its maintenance in the community (over that of Tamil) was guaranteed since respondents had indicated that English language proficiency would always be given top priority.

9.5 The Reasons for Language Shift and Language Maintenance

Milroy (1992) suggests that minority communities maintain their language when they form networks that are close and dense (see 2.4). However, this study revealed that this may not be the case for all communities, especially if their languages are not able to compete efficiently in providing a means of livelihood (see 7.2.1). The need for an ethnic identity is a basic necessity for people (see 7.2.2) and if language cannot provide this identity, then the community may look for other means by which they can identify themselves as a community (see Table 7.2).

Linguists such as Gal (1979), Putz (1991) and Milroy (1992) have found that communities that live in close and dense networks do maintain their ethnic language much better than those who do not. However, studies in Malaysia (see 3.4.2.3) have shown that ethnic minorities who live in close knit communities have shifted away from their mother tongues (see for example, David, 1996; Ramachandran, 2000).

In this study, the Malaysian Iyer community was in the process of a language shift from Tamil to English and Malay. The Tamil language was used for purposes such as communicating with elders, for functional reasons such as respect for elders, for maintaining cultural or religious specific terms and for creating a common Malaysian Indian identity. The choice of language seemed to be dependant on the functions that it performs (see 6.3).

Although the community was in the process of shifting towards English, traditional and cultural norms of interaction were evident in intra community interactions. Therefore, even though there seemed to be a shift in the language, there was maintenance of traditional speaker norms of interaction within the community. So, if a speaker was required to speak in Tamil he or she did or at least tried to do so. While the language of choice in intra community talk was English, it was fairly obvious to the researcher that members of the community, especially the G2, were bilingual and quite capable of speaking in Tamil if required by tradition to show respect for an elder, to accommodate a speaker or to express kinship terms. However, they appeared to be more comfortable expressing themselves in English. The reason could probably lie in the formal education that most G2 have received which was in English (since the Malay medium was implemented only in 1971). Most have had no formal education in Tamil (5.2.1.1) and therefore found themselves more proficient in English.

This study shows that even closely knit communities that live as closely knit networks in densely populated areas may shift due to external social and linguistic pressures. When ethnic identity is not tied up with language or when a community is unable to maintain their linguistic identity, then other means of enforcing an identity is pursued. In this study, the Malaysian Iyers had established networks and formed an association (BSM) to maintain their identity.

The results of this study do not correspond with findings made in other countries where migrant populations exist in close and dense networks such as Gal (1979) in Germany, Putz (1991) in Australia and Milroy (1992) in the United Kingdom. While language maintenance was good in these studies, the present study shows that the ethnic community is shifting from its language despite living in a close and dense network.

9.6 Implications Arising from the Study

This study establishes that language shift from Tamil to the English and Malay languages does indeed exist and that the trend is gaining momentum, among the Malaysian Iyers. The Tamil language, in Malaysia, while possessing no official status, is in a good position to be maintained the language since it is quite vibrant and alive in Malaysia through education, the media, and through religious, social and cultural activities (1.3.6). In spite of the available resources, the Malaysian Iyers are in the process of shifting and have chosen the more economically viable English and Malay languages over the Tamil language.

Although there is a picture of extensive language shift among the Malaysian Iyers, it is not all doom and gloom as the Tamil language is used for purposes of listening to the radio and watching television. These activities fulfill the need of the community for Tamil without going into a formal study of the language. Some leaders of the Tamil community agree that many Malaysian Tamils fulfill their emotional need for Tamil through radio and television and consider this to be adequate exposure to Tamil (personal comm.: Mr. Adi Kumanan, Dato Teagarajan,). Some Malaysian Tamils have preferred integration rather than isolation and therefore the results of the study should be seen in the light of the Malaysian context where English and Malay are equally or even more important than Tamil, for economic reasons. Although many the community may not be able to speak, read or write the literary language (*centamizh*) they are able to speak their colloquial variety for limited purposes dictated by social needs and demands.

The Malaysian Iyer community needs to pay heed to the erosion of their ethnic language among their younger members. A restoration process could be put into place through the implementation of formal Tamil lessons conducted in the way that the Christian churches conduct Sunday School or by patronizing tuition centres that teach Tamil. Since the Malaysian Iyer community has a resident priest to oversee religious activities, perhaps it might be possible to obtain a Tamil language teacher that the Brahmana Samajam Malaysia could hire for the conduct of language lessons during the weekends. The language needs serious attention, urgently, as the findings

imply that the next generation of Malaysian Iyers could all be English and Malay speakers with extremely limited understanding of Tamil.

The possibility of a serious erosion of the Tamil language is brought to the attention of the Language Planners of Malaysia, who, it is hoped, will investigate this trend thoroughly and put into effect corrective measures that will maintain the ethnic language of the Tamil peoples of Malaysia. Tamil should be offered in all primary and secondary national schools as a compulsory third language for all Malaysian Tamil children, within the existing school timetable, so that it is convenient for students to study the language within the system rather than outside of it. Such a move will ensure integration of the Tamils into the national school system as well as the preservation of their mother tongue.

9.7 Directions for Future Research

This study provides a basis for the belief that language shift is in progress for Malaysian Tamils, especially the younger generation. It is something that is worth investigating further. Language shift among Malaysian Tamils could be further examined from the geographical location point of view to find out if geographical location plays a role in language shift. As most Malaysian Iyers are from the urban areas, another study that examines Tamils from a rural perspective could provide a basis for comparison as urban and rural experiences could vary especially since the rural Tamil population in Malaysia have had the benefit of Tamil schools having been established especially in the plantation sectors.

Future research among other Tamil communities investigating different Tamil language varieties could provide a basis for a discourse analysis of two or more varieties, their differences and the impact of these differences could be an interesting direction for a study of the Tamil language.

Research in the area of language and its contribution towards ethnic identity would also be an interesting area for further research among different cultures and communities both Indian and otherwise to find out how great a role language plays in a community's sense of identity.

Studies using ethnography as a qualitative method of researching a community would provide new information on a community's ethnography especially to investigate cultural norm maintenance as an alternative to language maintenance. This would be a new direction in the field of language shift and language maintenance in Malaysia.