

CHAPTER TWO

THE MALAYSIAN IYERS

2.1 Introduction

The study of the language patterns of a community requires an understanding of the people who make up the community. Social reality is often seen through language. The language(s) that a community speaks determines the way that it perceives the world and influences its members' thoughts about the real world. The Sapir –Whorf Hypothesis (Ash, 1999) theorizes that a community is often at the mercy of the language it speaks because it becomes the medium of expression of that community and social reality is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. Understanding a community's social and cultural practices can aid in understanding possible motivations for language choice. Every community has its own shared set of values that can be seen through their social and cultural practices and this can aid in understanding that community's ethnography of communication (Wiezbicka, 1994).

2.1.1 Need for a Description of Malaysian Iyers

Milroy (1992) hypothesizes that communities that belong to a close and dense network are able to maintain their ethnic language. The concept of a network is that 'people interact meaningfully as individuals in addition to being part of a structured institution such as classes, castes or occupational groups' (Milroy, 1992:46). Therefore close examination of a community and how it organizes itself and whether

ties are maintained with one another can aid in understanding their language choices. An investigation into their geographical distribution and their motivations for migration from India to Malaysia can aid in understanding if they belong to a close and dense network and whether this close network aids in language maintenance.

2.1.2 The Purpose of this Chapter

Resistance to change of a language that is shifting to another can act as a mechanism and a pull factor for language maintenance. Social, cultural and religious customs and practices act as such a mechanism for language maintenance (see for example Smolicz, 1992, Clyne and Kipp, 1996, David, 1996 and Kundra, 2000).

This chapter provides a study of Malaysian Iyers so that the language maintenance and shift patterns of the community may be understood in the context of their cultural and social practices as such practices can act as push and pull factors for language shift and language maintenance. The objectives of this study are to document language shift and maintenance among Malaysian Iyers and to attempt to investigate the possible reasons for language shift and maintenance among them. A background knowledge of the Malaysian Iyer community will aid in achieving the above aims. This chapter is written in order to provide the background information that is necessary to understanding language choice among the Malaysian Iyers.

2.1.3 The Organisation of this Chapter

This chapter firstly provides a brief description of the Iyers, their origins and current demographic status. It then goes on to provide a history of their migration to Malaysia, their geographical distribution, network patterns and their socio-cultural practices.

The early arrival and migration of Malaysian Iyers has been put together through the verbal accounts given by several first generation Malaysian Iyers during interviews (Appendix B) to supplement available information on Indian migration patterns to Malaysia. Fifty home visits were made (Appendix C; see also 2.3.3.1) so that cultural and social practices could be observed. The information detailed in this chapter has been obtained through the above mentioned interviews with Malaysian Iyers and through visits to Malaysian Iyer homes.

2.2 The Iyers – A Brief Description

This section introduces the Iyers as a community. It provides a brief definition of the term 'Iyer', traces their origins, provides a brief description of the caste system and the different varieties of Tamil that are spoken by Tamils at large.

2.2.1 Definition

The Malaysian Iyers who migrated to Malaysia are from Tamil Nadu or Kerala in South India. According to the Iyer Heritage Site (1999) the word Iyer is:

A community name given to Tamil Brahmins or Brahmans. They live in Tamil Nadu in India and speak the language of Tamil Nadu i.e. Tamil.

Irschick (1969:6) explains that:

Tamil Brahmins were classed into two categories. The Sri Vaishnava Brahmans or Iyengars of the Tamil country were devotees of Vishnu while the great majority of the other Tamil Brahmin group, the *Smarthas* or Iyers, were *Shaivaites* or devotees of Shiva.

Shaivaite Tamil Brahmins are those who follow the teachings of both the Vedas and Shaivaite literature while the Vaishnavaites follow the teachings of the Vedas only (Irschick, 1969). In this study 'Iyer' refers to the Smartha or Shaivaite Tamil Brahmins who now live in Malaysia.

2.2.2 Origins

The Iyers are thought to be descendants of Aryan invaders from Sumeria who arrived in India between 750 and 350 B.C. (Irschick, 1969). These invaders are thought to have brought with them the four Vedas² ; namely Rig, Yajur, Sama and Atharva which detail Hindu philosophy about man's experiences and his ideas about himself (Zimmer, 1951).

As Brahmins, the Iyers have traditionally been vested with the responsibility of learning Sanskrit literature and religion (Irschick, 1986). This placed them in a position of power, indispensable as priests for religious purposes. The Tamil kings (of the southern *Chera*, *Chola* and *Pandya* areas) invited these priests to come to their kingdoms to conduct religious rites and settled them in different villages helped by grants of lands and gifts (Viswanatha, 1928). When the Brahmins arrived in Tamil Nadu they brought with them the caste system.

2.2.3 Caste

The caste system or the social stratification system by which Indian life is organized both socially and economically is one that is overwhelmingly important in the study of Indian society (Hypes, 1936). The origins of the caste system goes back to The Bhagavad Gita, a vedic scripture. Chapter 18 of the Bhagavad Gita describes *Varnasradharma* (or the caste system) and prescribes four castes: *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaisya* and *Sudra*.

The original philosophy underlying castes was associated with the type of work done by individuals. Today, it is purely of a hereditary nature and does not have very much to do with one's work or career (Saraswati, 1996).

Brahmins were those who strove for knowledge of the scriptures with faith in God and who wished to achieve self realization. They were vested with the responsibility of understanding philosophy and prayer. Brahmins were expected to

be filled with serenity, self- restraint, austerity, purity, forgiveness, uprighteousness, knowledge and faith in God (Saraswati, 1996).

Kshatriyas were leaders, politicians, rulers or kings. They were vested with the responsibility of the welfare of their citizens. Kshatriyas were expected to have the qualities of heroism, splendour, firmness, dexterity, braveness, generosity and lordliness (Saraswati, 1996).

Vaisyas dealt with material wealth connected with agriculture, cattle rearing and trade and were vested with the responsibility of ensuring enough food and money for the people. Vaisyas were expected to work in agriculture, cattle rearing, trade and serve society and not exploit them by any means (Saraswati, 1996).

Sudras were those who perform physical labour for all the above castes. Sudras were meant to offer service to society by taking orders from employers (Saraswati, 1996).

There are references to a four-fold caste system in Tamil *Sangam* literature. A description of the Tamil caste system is available in the *Tolkappiyam* which is one of the oldest Tamil literary works found. The four castes mentioned in Tamil are: *Antanar* (an equivalent for Brahmin), *Arasar* (an equivalent for Kshatriya), *Vanika* (an equivalent for Vaisya) and *Vellala* (an equivalent for Sudra). However this

system, was not rigid and movement between the castes was possible (Pillay, 1990). This caste system, too, like the caste system described previously, is hereditary.

The caste system that evolved in Tamil Nadu with the arrival of the Brahmins was to have a division between the Brahmin and non-Brahmin castes (Irchick, 1969). The Brahmins remained Brahmins according to *varnasramadharmā* while all other castes were categorized as non-Brahmin castes according to the divisions that they belonged to in the Tamil system.

Rajakrishnan (1984) in a study of caste consciousness among the Indian Tamils in Malaysia says that caste consciousness does exist but mainly in the rural plantation areas. The Tamil Brahmins form such an insignificant minority of the overall Malaysian Tamil population that they are not considered apart from the other castes in this country. Caste in Malaysia is simply divided into *Uyarnthajati* (higher caste) or *talnthajati* (lower caste). He lists 22 caste based organizations but notes that caste consciousness among the urban Tamils is less than in the rural areas.

Although little documentation is available on the migration of Iyers to Malaysia, Jain (1970:346) says that 'no Brahmans have ever migrated to work on Malayan estates' (see also 3.2.3.1). Caste does not play an important role in the daily life of urban Malaysian Tamils and is considered only 'where mate selection is concerned' (Oorjitham, 1979:16, also see 3.2.4). As will be seen in the next chapter, the

Malaysian Iyer's life, too, does not revolve around caste and this aspect features only when a marriage is being arranged.

2.2.4 Varieties of Tamil

Tamil is the dominant language of the state of Tamil Nadu in India. The language used for formal occasions (such as teaching, lectures and radio broadcasts) and in writing (newspapers, poetry, fiction) is *centamizh* (literary or classical Tamil) which is not based on the contemporary spoken variety. Literary Tamil is only acquired through education (Krishnamurti, 1979). Several regional and social varieties exist for informal purposes in the home and for other informal purposes. Formal Tamil is close to literary Tamil and it does not take into account changes that have taken place in speech since the time of Sangam literature (Shanmugam Pillai, cited in Krishnamurti, 1979:681).

Tamil linguistic variation is often classified in three dimensions: geography, caste and diglossia (Varma, 1998). Geographical variants exist in India according to regions while caste variants refer to the Brahmin and non-Brahmin dialects. The Tamil Brahmin variety is unique in that this dialectal variety alone does not change according to the geographical region that its speakers live in¹.

Although variations exist in Tamil language they do not usually hamper communication among the various communities as the division into distinct dialects into regional and caste basis refers only to the traditional domestic usage of Tamil

speakers (Southworth, 1979:166). In a study of Tamil dialects, Ramanujan (cited in Pandit, 1979) agrees that dialectal differences do not hinder or hamper communication, though he feels that social identity is often established through one's dialect.

Brahmin Tamil or Iyer Tamil refers to the variety that is spoken by Tamils who belong to the Brahmin caste through their heritage. Their variety is different from other varieties in lexicon (borrowed from Sanskrit), intonation and suffixes used (Varma, 1989).

2.3 The Malaysian Iyers

The Malaysian Iyers are categorized under 'Tamils' (see Tables 1.1 and 1.2) and comprise about 0.09% of the Indian population in Malaysia. The approximate size of the Malaysian Iyer population was determined through interviews with senior members of the community and was fixed at about 1,000 people.

2.3.1 Origins

The Malaysian Iyers originate from India. The Iyers started migration to Malaysia from the early decades of the 20th century in order to seek economic prosperity and to take advantage of the migration policy that existed during the British colonial days during the early decades of the twentieth century (see also 1.2.3). There were several reasons cited by elders of the community for leaving India, such as the Dravidian Nationalist Movement in Tamil Nadu (for information on the Dravidian

Nationalist Movement see Arooran, 1980; Irschick, 1969), the economic drudgery of their lives and the need to improve their lot in life and to join family members. Some of the elders interviewed said that they came to work as employees of Indian companies that had established branches in Malaysia.

The political atmosphere in Tamil Nadu during the early decades of the twentieth century was one of social reformation, where the Brahmins were viewed with much animosity at a time when Dravidian nationalism was strong and the anti-Brahmin movement was taking hold (Irschick, 1969; Arooran, 1980).

It was a time when the British were in power and so education and a knowledge of the English language were key ingredients to enter government service in India. The Tamil Brahmins were known for their high rate of literacy in general, and for their knowledge of English in particular (Arooran, 1980:38). This acted as an advantage for them to obtain jobs in the British administration. The Iyers, who were usually seen as poor priests, were now gaining economic wealth as well. The Iyers working for the British had two effects: one was the fact that they were seen as traitors working for the enemy; and the second was that they were seen to have economic power, which was not the case before. The landowning and merchant castes wanted political power and influence that was equal to their wealth and status in society and therefore started the anti-Brahmin movement (Irschick, 1969). The anti-Brahmin movement was a worrying trend for many Iyers who thought it an opportune time to look for safer places to live.

Another reason was that the Iyers had traditionally been economically poor as temple priests. Although they were well read, they had no economic power. With the advent of British rule in India, they found opportunities for using the education which they had pursued for years to better their positions economically as the British viewed education with favour and gave them positions of power in the government. These opportunities provided by the British in their administrative service to the Iyers were also viewed with much hostility and as a sign of disloyalty to the independence movement that was going on at that time. For many Iyers, it was a difficult situation because if they remained as priests, they would never prosper and if they worked in the government, they were seen as disloyal. This was another reason for several Iyers to move to Malaysia.

A third reason why the Iyers moved to Malaysia was that jobs in the Malayan civil service were apparently plentiful for the educated (Arasaratnam, 1979:34). The strongest pull factor for the Iyers to leave India for Malaysia was the availability of employment opportunities. British Malaya had the reputation for plentiful jobs that were available in the railways, civil service, schools, plantations etc. The private sector too had many job opportunities for those who spoke English. Several Iyers came to Malaya because they were provided opportunities to work in Malaya through Indian companies that set up branches in Malaya (Arasatnam, 1970:37). Companies such the Bombay Life Insurance, the Indian Overseas Bank, the United Commercial Bank and the Indian Bank which had set up branch offices here brought

Indian officers to Malaya to work in the branches here. Several first generation Iyers said that they came to Malaya in this way (personal communication: elders).

The fourth reason that pulled the Iyers to Malaysia was the ease with which they could leave India and arrive in Malaysia. There were no passport regulations or visa rulings (Arasaratnam, 1970:21). One just got into a boat and made a four day journey from Madras and landed at one of the three ports (Penang, Port Swettenham and Singapore) in the then Malaya. Many of them said that they had been summoned by their close relatives such as elder brothers and uncles to join them in Malaya. Jobs were usually already arranged for them and they had no worries about where to stay or work when they arrived (see 2.4).

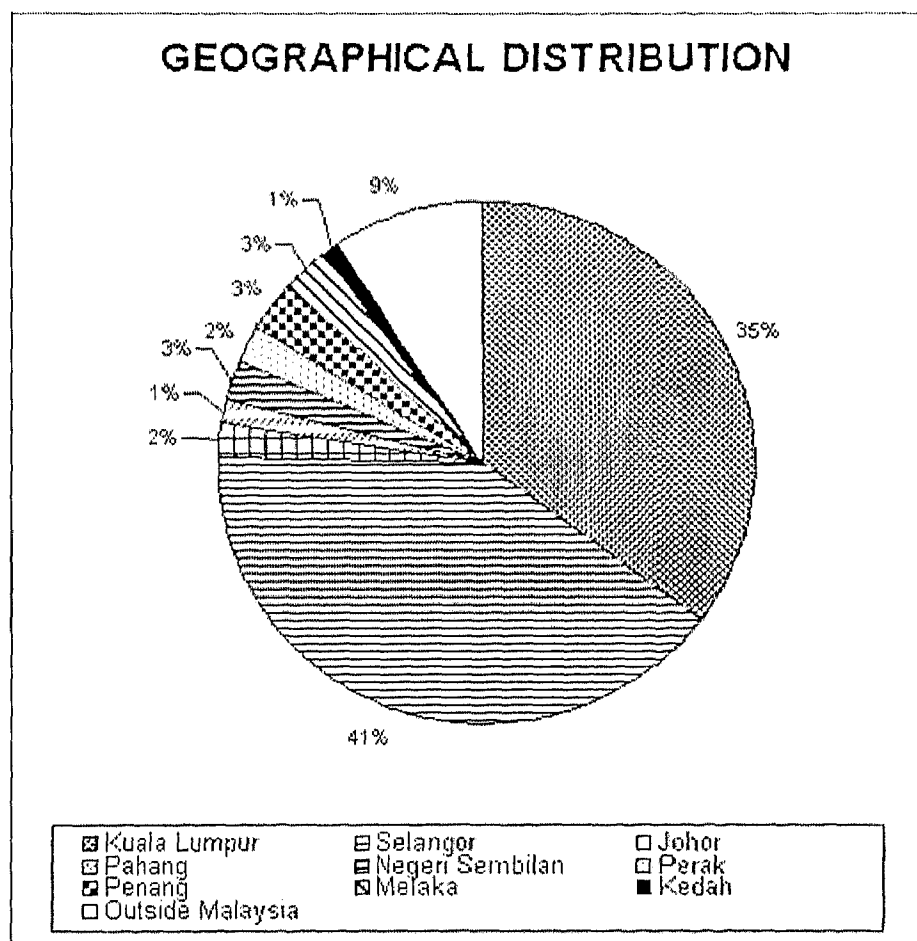
2.3.2 Demographic Profile

Figure 2.1 shows the geographical distribution of Malaysian Iyers. The Malaysian Iyers are an urban community living mostly in the Klang Valley (Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya). The majority (about 76%) of Malaysian Iyers live in Kuala Lumpur and in Petaling Jaya. The rest live in the capital cities of the individual West Malaysian states such as Penang, Johor Baru, Alor Star, Kuantan, Seremban and Ipoh. Today there are about 273 families or approximately 1,000 Tamil Iyers resident in West Malaysia. These include:

1. The first generation (approximately 20%) who were born in India and came to Malaysia to find employment or a better standard of living than that available in India;

2. The second generation (approximately 41%) which consists of those born in Malaysia but whose parents or one of them were born in India;
3. The third generation (approximately 39%) whose parents were both born in Malaysia.

Figure 2.1



The Distribution of Iyers in Malaysia

Source: Brahmana Samajam Membership Directory, 2002

2.3.3 Socio-Cultural Practices

Sometimes even when a community shifts away from its ethnic language due to economic pressures, their traditional customs are retained (Asmah, cited in David, 1998). Therefore an understanding of a community's cultural practices can aid in analysing the ethnography of communication. The following sections outline important customary practices of the Malaysia Iyers. Personal observations made during home visits also aided the writing of this section (see Appendix C).

2.3.3.1 Practices Found in Malaysian Iyer homes

Traditional practices are an integral part of a community's identity. Many of the traditions practised usually need to be carried out in their ethnic language. 50 home visits were made in order to find out whether the Tamil language is maintained for the practice of customs and traditions. These traditions are outlined in the following paragraphs.

Outside the house, somewhere in the front porch, there is a *tulasi* (basil plant) *maadam* (a square concrete structure in which the *tulasi* plant grows). The *tulasi maadam* has an aperture in the front for a lighted lamp to be housed. In the evening the lamp is normally lit. Elders explained this tradition as homage paid to a plant that has come to be revered as it is supposed to have several medicinal properties. The Tamil term *Tulasi Maadam* is retained and the English equivalent 'basil' is not used.

The entrance to a Malaysian Iyer home is usually decorated with a *kolam*. A *kolam* is hand drawn artwork made of either rice flour or a wet rice batter that is worked by hand with a small roll of cotton wool. Colouring is sometimes added for beauty. The *kolam* is drawn every day by some and weekly by others. It serves as both decoration of the home as well as bird and ant feed. The *kolam*, is referred to in Tamil as it does not have an English or Malay equivalent.

Each of the fifty Malaysian Iyer homes visited had an elaborate prayer altar. Most homes had a room assigned for the prayer altar while some had space in some part of the house set aside for prayer. The prayer room or altar had pictures of various deities. Some homes had small statues of Hindu gods and goddesses. In the centre of the altar is a *kuttu vilakku* which is a decorative lamp made of silver or brass. The lamp was placed on a *kolam*. The *kuttu vilakku* is cleaned and decorated with *chandanam* (sandalwood paste) and *kumkumam* (a reddish powder made of tumeric powder and lime). A wick made of cotton wool is placed in a recessed part of the lamp which is filled with coconut or sesame oil. The *kuttu vilakku* is lit in the mornings and evenings. In all of the fifty homes visited, the hosts reported that incense, flowers and food are offered twice a day, with prayers recited in Tamil.

On leaving a Malaysian Iyer home, married Hindu women are offered *kumkumam* which is placed as a dot in the centre of the forehead. This decorative dot is called *pottu* or *tilakam* and is regarded as a sign of *sowbagya* or the auspiciousness of the

married state. Tamil is the language used for issuing an invitation to partake of the *kunkumam*.

2.3.3.2. Vegetarianism

The Iyers are vegetarians, though some have departed from this. The concept of vegetarianism practised by an Iyer is that a Brahmin's virtue is to subsist by destroying nature the least (personal communication.: Mr.Lakshmanan). The principle is one that is recommended in the *Bhagavad Gita* (Saraswati, 1996) that, one should eat what is suitable for fulfilling ones's duties. The kitchen of most homes visited had stainless steel utensils, plates, glasses, serving dishes and spoons. Food cooked was vegetarian and Tamil was used to describe the food items, condiments and vegetables.

2.3.3.3 Taboos and Rules Pertaining to Food

There appear to be several rules regarding the preparation and serving of food in most Iyer homes. Women having their monthly period are not allowed to cook the food as they are said to be weak and susceptible to illness at that time and also viewed as unclean.

Some of the Iyer homes visited observe the traditional taboos of *echhil* and *pattru*. *Echhil* literally means 'saliva' in Tamil. It is taboo to pass on anything contaminated by *echchi* to another. Glasses must be washed thoroughly before passing on to another user. One cannot use the hand used for eating to also serve food

on the table, the principle being that the *echhil* can somehow transfer itself to the food on the table and contaminate the whole pot. When placing eating plates on the table, one has to be careful that they do not touch one another as the *echhil* can pass on from one plate to the other. When cooking food or tasting food, the spoon used for tasting cannot touch the taster's mouth and then be placed back in the cooking pot. The entire pot then becomes contaminated by *echhil*.

Patru generally refers to cooked food. The taboo concerning *patru* is deeply entrenched in Iyer culture. The principle behind *patru* is that perishable food should not touch imperishable food. Food that has been cooked such as vegetables, lentils, rice or bread cannot be placed next to yoghurt, *ghee* (clarified butter) or *papadoms* (lentil crisps) which are considered imperishable and can be kept overnight without turning *tamasik* or unclean. Therefore, there are rules about the placing of food on a table and serving them as well. Hand washing is necessary between serving of the two different varieties of food. Otherwise the imperishable food also becomes *patru*. Elders of the community revealed that the concept of *patru* and *echhil* was essential in the olden days because germs could spread diseases as refrigeration facilities were not available. The practice of such taboos are usually found in homes where an elderly or traditional person lives (usually a grandmother), otherwise these rules are observed only when preparing food for religious ceremonies.

Garlic and onions are not allowed to be used for religious purposes or as offering for prayers. While garlic is still taboo in many Malaysian Iyer homes even for non-

religious purposes, onions are used daily in most homes visited. The taboos were referred to in Tamil in the homes visited.

2.3.3.4 Fasting

Another concept associated with food is *vrutham* or fasting. There are certain days of the month when the more traditional or orthodox Iyers fast. These days are dictated by astrological elements. A fast could be any type of abstinence; from not consuming any solids, to consuming milk and fruits only. The manner of fasting is usually up to the individual. A fast is said to cleanse the body of toxins and teach one discipline. The *vrutham* is normally followed by prayers conducted in Tamil.

2.3.3.5 Patriarchy and Extended Families

It is believed that the presence of grandparents usually aids in the maintenance of the ethnic language (Kundra, 2000; David, 1996). The existence of the extended family was investigated among the fifty homes visited.

In most homes visited, children were expected to obey and respect their parents. The community practices a patriarchal system. The eldest son is expected to care for his aged parents. Unmarried sons and daughters live with their parents. If a daughter remains unmarried she will live with her parents and upon their demise she normally lives with her eldest brother (see Table 2.2). Men conduct religious rites while the women provide the support services such as preparing the *prasadams* (food offerings) during religious ceremonies. Sons conduct death rites for parents,

daughters do not. Women are given away in marriage through a ceremony called '*kanya dhaanam*' or the giving away of a maiden.

Table 2.1 shows the preponderance of the extended family system in the fifty homes that were visited. Of the fifty homes visited, 40% had unmarried working children living at home, 34% had parents living with them and 8% had unmarried siblings living within the household. Only 18% of the homes visited consisted of nuclear families.

Table 2.1

Extended Families (types of family members living with householder)			Nuclear Families	Total
No of families with unmarried working children living with parents	No of families with parents living with married son	No. of families with unmarried siblings living with a married brother		
20 (40%)	17 (34%)	4 (8%)	9 (18%)	50 (100%)

Diagrammatic representation of the percentage of extended families living under one roof

2.3.3.6 Respect for Elders

Respect for elders is common and traditionally elders are given respect in several ways. Reverence to elders is shown by seeking their blessings by prostrating oneself at their feet. One does not sit when an elder is standing, nor does one cross one's legs in front of them or show disrespect for them by challenging them openly in any way, even when a point is being disputed.

Elders are addressed politely as *mama* or *mami* (uncle or aunt). The respectful term in Tamil *neengal* (a respectful 'you') rather than *nee* (which is 'you' when referring to peers) is used when addressing them (see 7.3.1).

2.3.3.7 Rites and Rituals

Hindu lifecycle ceremonies and customs prescribed in Ayyar's South Indian Customs (1992) are practiced by Malaysian Iyers . The presence of relatives and the extended family ensures that many of the customs are adhered to while the close knit nature of the community assures interaction, help, advice and attendance at various ceremonies that are conducted.

Some functions such as the *navarathri* celebrations which last nine days are celebrated in many Malaysian Iyer homes. Married women are offered *manjal kumkumam* (tumeric and a red powder made from sandalwood powder denoting auspiciousness of the married state) by the hostess who decorates her house with an elaborate nine-step structure (*kolu*) with many statues of deities arranged on each step.

The yearly changing (*avani avittam*) of the *poonal* (the holy thread worn by Brahmin men) is another important ritual that is observed by Malaysian Iyer men. Ladies of the community get together and organize a vegetarian meal for those present while the resident priest organizes the changing of the holy thread. Men who

have been initiated through the *upanayam* (initiation into the Brahmin clans) ceremony wear this holy thread and change it during *avani avittam*.

A death in the family of a community member is usually a rallying point for all members of the community who turn up without invitation. While the men of the community take over the organization of the death rites, the women comfort the bereaved family and prepare meals for them for several days. This is due to a period of mourning observed by the bereaved family, when they are not allowed to cook during the first 12 days of a family member's death (Ayyar, 1998).

Ceremonies such as weddings and *upanayanams* (where a male child is initiated as a Brahmin) tend to be a celebration for all members of the community as many aid in the conduct of these ceremonies. The decoration of the wedding hall with *kolam*, the wedding dais, the dressing of the bride and groom are usually taken care of by community members. Provision of drinks and sweetmeats halfway through the ceremonies are made possible by ladies of the community while young girls and boys serve these refreshments for those present.

2.4 Establishment of Networks

The word 'network' is used here to describe the interaction of individuals meaningfully in addition to being part of a structured institution. Milroy (1992) says that a social network formed by minority groups, living among a more dominant social group aid in the maintenance of language. The Malaysian Iyers established a

social network system through migration and kinship ties and have established a registered organisation called the *Brahmana Samajam, Malaysia* (BSM).

The social networks of the Malaysian Iyers was investigated using information from the BSM Membership Directory and by interviewing officers of the BSM. In addition to this, senior members (see Appendix B) of the community were approached for assistance to trace kinship ties among the Malaysian Iyers.

The earliest Iyers arrived in Malaysia during the first decade of the 1900s. Most were men who came alone as they were unsure of the conditions in Malaya and whether it would be suitable for their womenfolk, who practised very orthodox Brahmin lifestyles. Many brought their families over from India once they had established themselves in Malaysia.

Travel from India to Malaysia was by boats, which ferried passengers from Madras and Nagapattinam in India to either Singapore, Penang or Port Swettenham in Malaya. Early migrants (such as Chellam Iyer) arrived in Singapore in 1908 and did not have a network to help them and they consequently played an important part in aiding further arrivals to settle down in the new country. The early migrants formed a support group (such as Neelakanta Iyer in Kuala Lumpur, T.R. Subramania Iyer in Klang, Seetharama Iyer in Johor Baru, Chellam Iyer in Singapore and Chidambara Vadhyar in Penang) to sustain one another and also to help new arrivals with food, lodging and finding them employment. Those who were already

established with a job in Malaya sent for their siblings and other relatives to join them. In this way family networks were established as more and more members of the same family arrived (see 2.4).

Food was a problem to the Malaysian Iyers, who were vegetarian and practised orthodox lifestyles (see 2.3.3.2). The difficulty in eating outside the home was a reason for sending for their wives and children to join them in Malaysia as soon as they had settled down with a job. Some of them went back to India after about five years to get married and brought their wives back. The ones who initially intended to return to India found that their children were deeply rooted here and therefore decided to make Malaysia their home.

Most of these migrants were bilingual in Tamil and English and therefore found jobs as clerks and managers in the then British Administrative service (in sectors such as the Railways, Postal Services and the Public Works Department) and the private sector. Those who were already employed found jobs for the new arrivals as soon as they arrived.

2.4.1 Formation of an Association

In the early days, the Iyers lived reasonably close to each other and socialised amongst themselves a great deal. In 1932, the need for a Brahmin Association was mooted by Malaysian Iyers living in the Klang Valley (see Table 3.5) but the

organisation was formed only in the late 1940s, in Kuala Lumpur and was called the Brahmana Samajam, Malaysia (BSM). The objectives of this Association are:

1. To cater to the religious, social and cultural needs of the members;
2. To promote in general the interests and welfare of its members;
3. To purchase, take on lease or otherwise acquire land and /or building and erect a building in any land so acquired;
4. To do all other acts as may be decided from time to time by the General Body that will be conducive to the attainment of the above objectives (see Appendix B for the Memorandum of Association of the Brahmana Samajam, Malaysia).

The BSM which is situated in Kuala Lumpur holds prayer meetings twice a month and holds classes for children on Saturdays for hymn singing and learning of prayers. A resident priest from India is in attendance for members' needs, and to conduct all religious ceremonies either at the BSM premises or in members' houses. Monthly *bajanas* and *pournami poojas* are attended by approximately fifty members. During the annual *Rama Navami* celebrations which lasts nine consecutive days in April/May, approximately 250 members attend the function (personal communication with President (1999) Dr.K.S. Kannan, BSM).

There is evidence of Sanksrit, Telugu and Kannada (Indian languages) in the BSM. However, these languages are not spoken or used daily as a form of communication among themselves. These languages are used for reciting prayers

and hymns or for singing. As most members can read only Tamil or English, prayer books and hymns are made available in Tamil and English script though the original language of the prayers or hymns was Telugu, Kannada or Sankskrit.

Elders of the community explained that the famous Indian classical composers of *Carnatic* (south Indian classical music) music were Telugu, Kannada or Tamil by ethnic origin and therefore many of the songs or hymns are in those languages (see also Iyengar, 1998:25). Sanskrit is the language of the *Vedas* and therefore prayers are in the Sankskrit language.

2.4.2 Kinship Ties

Milroy (1987:182) suggests that communities that are 'close' and 'dense' tend to maintain their ethnic language. A 'close and dense network', refers to a community or group that consists of members who share kinship ties and who live in close geographical locations to one another (see 4.2). The Malaysian Iyers live in close and dense networks because of ties that have resulted from migration patterns (see 2.2.3) and kinship ties resulting through marriage among members of the community. They are mostly situated in the Klang Valley (Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya) in Malaysia.

The Brahmana Samajam, Malaysia Directory (BSMD) 2000, lists 273 families.

✓ An examination of the families listed in the BSMD with the help of senior community members shows that eighteen large family networks consisting of

between six and ten families in each network exist. Similar, but smaller networks exist for about twenty three families. Each of these family networks is made up between three and five families each. All other members make up very small units of about two families each. These number forty three (see Table 2.3). These family networks are similar to Milroy's (1992:20) 'close' and 'dense' networks (see Table 2.2).

Table 2.2

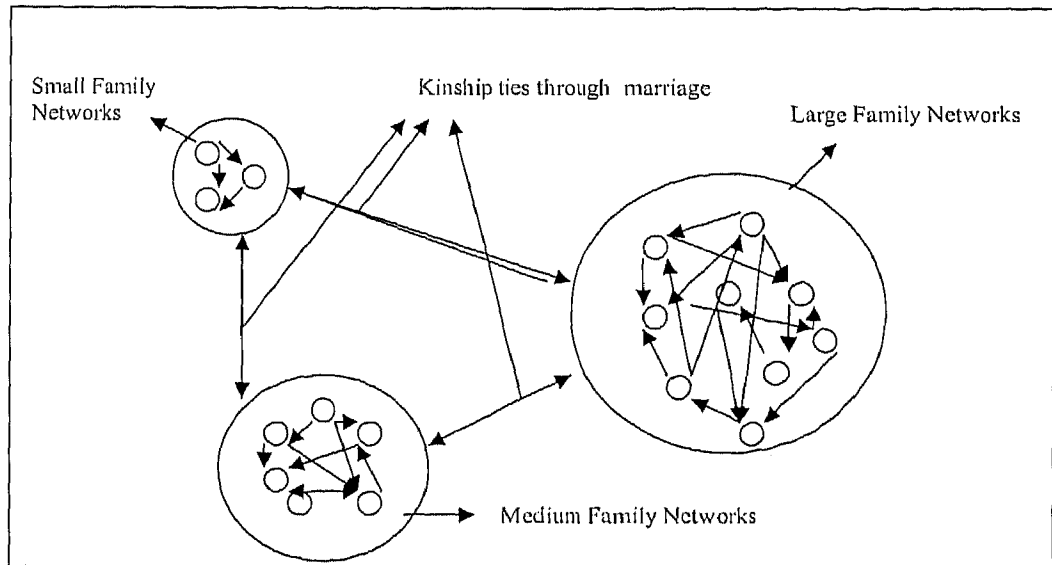
Size of Family Network	Number of Networks
Large Networks (between 6-10 families)	18
Medium Networks (between 3-5 families)	23
Small Networks (between 1-2 families)	43

Diagrammatic representation of the relationship between large medium and small family networks among Malaysian Iyers

The above family networks are related to one another in a bio-kinship sense and tend to be related by blood ties such as brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts similar to the close networks suggested by Milroy. These Malaysian Iyer family networks are further strengthened through marriage ties. The community, being small, tends to arrange marriages among its members and therefore the above networks are related to one another through marriage as well (see Table 2.3 and Fig. 3.1). They therefore have 'multiplex ties' (Milroy, 1992, see also 3.2) as they are not only related to one

through marriage but also maintain social ties through an association formed for this purpose (see 2.4.1).

Fig. 2.2



(all arrows show marriage ties)

Diagrammatic representation of the multiplex ties between the family networks because of marriages between the networks

Endogamous³ marriages or marriage between members of the Iyer community are common among community members (see Table 2.3) although exogamous marriages or marriage between an Iyer and a non-Iyer have also taken place. If brides or grooms of the Iyer community are not available in Malaysia, usually a marriage is arranged with Iyers who live in India or in other parts of the world. In order to see a trend in the marriage profile of the Malaysian Iyers the marriages that occurred between the years 2000 and 2003 were investigated. It was found that 73.5% of the marriages between the years 2000 and 2003 were endogamous while 26.5% were exogamous.

While the number of exogamous marriages appear to be small in comparison to endogamous marriages, the fact that exogamous marriages are taking place shows a shift in tradition regarding marriage patterns and norms. This might have significant implications for language shift and maintenance.

Table 2.3

Malaysian Iyer Marriages	Endogamous Spouse	Exogamous Spouse	Total
Men	16	4	20
Women	9	5	14
Total	25(73.5%)	9(26.5)	34

Diagrammatic representation of the number of endogamous and exogamous marriages during the years 2000 – 2003

2.5 Conclusion

A background study of the circumstances leading to this community's migration from India to Malaysia will aid in understanding their adaptability to new environs as a migrant community living in the midst of a dominant culture. The history of the migration of the Malaysian Iyers from India was investigated by interviewing first generation Iyers while the socio-cultural history was pieced together through visits to fifty Malaysian Iyer homes and through consultation with senior members of the community.

Malaysian Iyers may be categorized as Hindus by religious faith (2.2.1), urban by geographical location (2.3.2), educated middle class (2.4) and Brahmins by caste (2.2.1). Most of them live geographically close to one another in Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya. Their migration patterns have contributed to the building of strong networks among them, further enhanced through kinship ties resulting from marriage among the various family networks that live here in Malaysia. It is believed that minority communities that have built social networks among themselves are able to maintain their language (Milroy, 1992).

The existence of customs and practices which identify the Malaysian Iyers as a community and the practice of these traditions must be understood in order to understand the language choices made by the community and the impact that these choices have on maintenance efforts or lack thereof by the Malaysian Iyers.

ENDNOTES:

- ¹ There are two Tamil Brahmin varieties: Iyer and Iyengar according to Varma, 1989. There are lexical differences between Iyer and Iyengar Tamil especially in food names. Varma says that the Tamil Brahmins are unique in that their dialectal variety does not change whichever part of India or the world they live in. The researcher visited a Tamil sociolinguist, Dr. Deiva Sundaram at the University of Madras in March 2004. He said that Iyer Tamil is used by Iyers from different walks of life and neither social status nor geographical location changes the variety of Tamil that they speak.
- ² The Vedas, according to Thurston and Rangachari (1993) represent orthodox Hindu philosophy that has been compiled in the form of hymns. Tamil Brahmins follow, for purposes of fulfilling religious rites, the Rig, Yajur or Sama Vedas. This division does not stop them from socializing or intermingling in any way. Hypes (1936) says that every aspect of Indian life is organised and touched by philosophy whether it is social or religious.
- ³ Endogamous marriages refer to marriages that unite an Iyer woman with an Iyer man. It has no bearing on geographical location of the bride or groom. A marriage is considered endogamous if the bride and groom are of Tamil Brahmins by birth and belong to the Iyer community. Exogamous marriages refer to all other types of marriages where one party is Iyer and the other is not.