

## CHAPTER SIX

### LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE EFFORTS

#### 6.1 Introduction

The previous chapter showed that there was extensive shift from the Tamil language to the English language and, and to a lesser extent to the Malay language, in all domains except for the religious one. A generational decline was seen in the use of the Tamil language showing that the process of language shift had indeed set in. In this chapter, evidence gathered from the same two tools the questionnaire and the audio taped conversations (ATC), are presented and discussed but with regard to language maintenance efforts made to arrest the trend of language shifting from Tamil to English and Malay. The ATC present authentic examples of Tamil used by respondents and show the actual extent to which the language was used for communication among respondents of this study while the questionnaire findings show us the intentions of the respondents to maintain the Tamil language. The findings from the questionnaire analysis and the audio taped conversations are presented in an effort to meet the second objective of this study which is to describe the language maintenance efforts of the Malaysian Iyers. Wherever possible, as in Chapter Five, findings from these two tools are presented side by side.

## 6.2 Ability to Understand Tamil

The questionnaires were examined to assess the ability of respondents to understand Tamil. This was compared to information pertaining to where they were born and where or from whom they had learnt the language.

Table 6.1

Language	Fully Understands	Partially Understands	Does Not Understand	Total
English	260 (89.3%)	21 (7.2%)	10 (3.4%)	291
Malay	158 (54.3%)	108 (37.1%)	25 (8.6%)	291
Tamil	218 (74.9%)	62 (21.3%)	11 (3.8%)	291

### Full or Partial Understanding of Languages

About three quarters of the respondents (74.9%) reported that they understood Tamil fully, while about a fifth of them (21.3 %) said that they understood the language only partially. A very small percentage (3.8%) of the respondents claimed not to understand the Tamil language at all. In contrast, a huge majority (89.3%) stated that they understood English fully. Only a very small minority (3.4%) of the respondents did not understand English while the remainder (7.2%) reported that they understood English partially at least. More than half (54.3%) of them reported that they understood the Malay language fully, while more than a third of them (37.1%) reported that they partially understood Malay. Only a small minority (8.6%) reported that they did not understand Malay at all. The overall picture presented here is that on the spoken level most of the respondents were able to understand three languages; the one that most understood was English followed by Tamil and then Malay.

**Table 6.2**

	Language Most Proficiency In			Total
	English	Malay	Tamil	
<b>Country of Birth</b>				
India	37 (37.8%)	-	61 (62.2%)	98
Malaysia	164 (85.4%)	6 (3.1%)	22 (11.5%)	192
Ceylon	-	-	1(100%)	1
Total	197	6	83	291

**Place of Birth and Language Proficiency**

A majority of the respondents (65.9%) were born in Malaysia, while about a third (33.7%) were born in India. Only one respondent was born outside of these two countries, that is in Ceylon (or modern day Sri Lanka). Interestingly, this gentleman said that his parents came to look after a temple here in Malaysia. The Malaysian Ceylon Tamils, according to him, prefer to recruit Brahmin priests from Sri Lanka rather than from India. Table 6.2 shows the place of birth of respondents and the language that they were most proficient in. The findings show that respondents who were born in India or Ceylon were proficient in Tamil while those born in Malaysia were proficient in English mainly and in Malay to a lesser extent. Language proficiency was likely to be related to the country of birth through the education systems and the languages used in the country of birth. In India, especially in Tamil Nadu, where most first generation respondents are from, Tamil would most probably

have been the language of communication while in Malaysia, a multi cultural country, several languages are used including English and Malay.

**Table 6.3**

<b>Generation</b>	<b>English</b>	<b>Tamil</b>	<b>Malay</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>G1</b>	28 (33.7%)	55 (66.2%)	-	<b>83</b>
<b>G2</b>	95 (79.8%)	23 (19.3%)	1(0.8%)	<b>119</b>
<b>G3</b>	80 (89.9%)	4 (4.5%)	5 (5.6%)	<b>89</b>
<b>Total</b>	203(69.8)	82 (28.2%)	6 (2.1%)	<b>291</b>

**Language proficiency across generations**

Maintenance of the Tamil language appeared to be the forte of the first generation respondents as more than two thirds of them (66.2%) reported that the language that they were most proficient in was Tamil. Proficiency in Tamil appeared to wane with each succeeding generation as can be seen in Table 6.3. This was evident as only about a fifth of G2 (19.3%) and an extremely small percentage (4.5%) of G3 said that the language they were most proficient in is Tamil.

**Table 6.4**

<b>Person/Place</b>	<b>G1</b>	<b>G2</b>	<b>G3</b>	<b>Count</b>
Mother	63	100	75	240 (82.5%)
Father	35	100	75	210(72.2%)
School	83 (58.0%)	50(35.0%)	14 (9.8%)	143(49.1%)
Grandmother	2	35	40	77(26.5%)
Grandfather	-	28	20	48(16.5%)
Friends	-	-	39	39(13.4%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>119</b>	<b>89</b>	-

**Table Showing Where Respondents Claimed to have Learnt Tamil**

Respondents were asked to list all the people who had taught them the Tamil language. It appeared that parents, especially mothers, were the most important source from whom respondents learnt the Tamil language while grandparents came in next. Friends came in last in the list of 'teachers'. In Table 6.4 a "Total" column has not been computed as many respondents had ticked more than one column making a tally difficult. However, the trend is very visible. Out of a total of 291 questionnaire respondents, most learnt the language from their parents, followed by grandparents and friends. About half indicated school as the place of study. What can be seen is that informal means of acquiring Tamil through relatives and friends quite prevalent among the respondents.

The data in Table 6.4 also shows that all those in G1 had learnt the language formally in schools with all of them reporting that they learnt the language in schools. Although at first glance it appeared that almost half of the respondents had learnt

Tamil from schools, it was G1 who made up most of the numbers. In fact, they make up about two thirds (58.0%) of the total number who attended schools to learn Tamil while G2 (35.0%) make up a little more than a third, G3 trail behind at less than a tenth (9.8%).

The declining numbers of people studying Tamil formally in schools may have had an impact on Tamil maintenance since the general proficiency in the language could be expected to decline further when education was through informal means rather than formal. What was evident through analysis was that there was an informal learning system through friends and relatives for those who did not choose to study Tamil in schools. In Chapter 1 it was seen that Tamil is offered in government schools only when 15 students petition for it. Furthermore, it was also seen that the Malaysian Iyers did not choose Tamil medium education for their children as they preferred the English language for the furtherance of their careers and job prospects (see 7.2.1).

### **6.3 Efforts to Maintain the Tamil Language**

The questionnaires were analyzed to examine the extent to which the Tamil language was maintained by the respondents. Different categories were investigated to examine the ways in which respondents maintained Tamil. These categories were divided into 5 areas of maintenance. Language skill areas such as speaking, listening, reading and writing and a separate category on attitude to language were examined.

Reported use of the Tamil language was then compared to actual efforts made by respondents to attempt to keep the language alive in Malaysia.

### **6.3.1 Efforts Made to Study Tamil Outside of School**

It was seen earlier that very few respondents studied Tamil formally in schools. This may be attributed to the system of education (of Tamil) in Malaysia where a transition was required from Tamil medium primary education to Malay and English medium secondary education. This lack of continuity could be a possible reason for respondents' lack of willingness to choose Tamil medium education. In order to examine the commitment and willingness of respondents to maintain the Tamil language, it was decided to seek information on the number of respondents who sought Tamil language classes outside of the school system. The findings can be seen in Table 6.5. It can be seen that about a third of the respondents did in fact pursue such education. However two thirds were from G2 (29.4%) while only about a fifth (18.0%) were from G3. For continued maintenance of the language it would be heartening if more were from the younger generation such as G3 rather than G2.

Table 6.5

Generation	Yes	Sometimes	Seldom	No	No Response	Total
G1	0	0	0	75 (90.4%)	8 (9.6%)	83
G2	35 (29.4%)	7 (5.9%)	5 (4.2%)	56 (47.1%)	7 (5.9%)	119
G3	16 (18.0%)	7 (7.9%)	2 (2.2%)	41 (46.1%)	13 (14.6%)	89
<b>Total</b>	<b>94 (32.3%)</b>	<b>22 (7.6%)</b>	<b>9 (3.1%)</b>	<b>137 (47.1%)</b>	<b>29 (10.0%)</b>	<b>291</b>

**Respondents Who Attended Tamil Classes Outside of School**

**6.3.2 Involvement in Reading, Listening, Writing and Speaking Tamil**

The findings from the questionnaire and the ATC were examined to see the extent to which the language was used for speaking, reading, listening and writing the language.

**6.3.2.1 Reading in Tamil**

The questionnaires were examined for maintenance of the Tamil language through reading. It was evident that it was G1 who did most of the reading in Tamil as is evident in Table 6.9. G2 also involved themselves in some reading activities but it was mainly for reading prayer materials (79.6%). About half of them (49.6%) read daily newspapers but only a third read letters and magazines while about a tenth of them (10.9%) read the almanac. For G2, maintenance behaviour in the area of reading was good in some reading areas while it deteriorated in others. It appeared that the respondents read more Tamil in areas where they 'had to' (such as prayer books) and read less in areas that they didn't 'have to' (stories, magazines, letters). A



shocking finding is that not even one of G3 actually read anything in Tamil. This finding does not bode well for the future of reading in Tamil.

**Table 6.6**

<b>Materials</b>	<b>G1</b>	<b>G2</b>	<b>G3</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Prayer materials</b>	83(100%)	71(59.7%)	-	154
<b>Newspaper</b>	83(100%)	59(49.6%)	-	142
<b>Letters</b>	83(100%)	33(27.7%)	-	116
<b>Magazines</b>	80(96.4%)	36(30.3%)	-	116
<b>Almanac</b>	83(100%)	13(10.9%)	-	98
<b>Stories</b>	80(96.4%)	16(13.4%)	-	96
<b>Total Respondents</b>				<b>291</b>

**Type of materials read in Tamil**

A generational analysis shows that all of G1 read most of the materials stated in the questionnaire except for letters and almanacs. G2 was also involved in reading activities but G3 was not involved in any type of reading in Tamil. The highest percentage for reading in Tamil among G2 was for reading prayer materials. The percentage went down for all other materials such as letters and magazines, making religion a very important part of Tamil language maintenance for G1 and G2.

### 6.3.2.2 Listening in Tamil

Respondents were asked to report if they listened to the Tamil news or watched Tamil TV shows. Only about a fifth of the respondents (21.7%) watched Tamil news on television while about half (52.9%) of respondents said that they watched Tamil TV shows. G1 and G2 continued the trend seen in earlier sections with both the generations making up a little than half of the respondents who watched news or Tamil TV shows. In the listening category more of G3 were involved with them making up slightly more than a tenth of those who indulged in these activities. Since listening was much more passive than reading or speaking, it could be a reason why more of G3 were involved in this type of activity. Although the percentages were not very encouraging among G3, listening could be a good form of absorbing the language if carried out over a period of time.

**Table 6.7**

	<b>G1</b>	<b>G2</b>	<b>G3</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Watch Tamil News</b>	71 (43.6%)	74 (45.4%)	18 (11.0%)	163 (21.7%)
<b>Watch Tamil T.V. Shows</b>	66 (42.9%)	69 (44.8%)	19 (12.3%)	154 (52.9%)
<b>Total respondents</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>119</b>	<b>89</b>	<b>291</b>

**Respondents Who Listen to and Watch Tamil Programmes On Television**

### 6.3.2.3 Writing In Tamil

A glance at Table 6.8 is sufficient to show that there were very few people who actually write professionally for newspapers, magazines and so on. This is understandable since writing professionally is not a common activity. A surprising finding was that more of G2 than even G1 were involved in writing. This was noteworthy since earlier findings showed that G1 were the chief respondents who had shown greater proficiency in the language. However this ability had not been tapped or used further in the maintenance of the language. It was possible that as first migrants, G1's priorities were directed at settling down in the new environment, earning a living, making a new life and so on. However, with G2, the urgency of settlement was not there, as they were mostly born in Malaysia and this could have spurred some interest in pursuing Tamil more than was possible for G1. It is also interesting to note that one G3 respondent has reported writing in Tamil. G3 had not reported much maintenance in the other skill areas of language use such as reading.

Table 6.8

	G1	G2	G3	Total
Newspapers	1	5	1	7
Magazines	1	5	1	7
Religious material	3	2	-	5
Total Respondents	83	119	89	291

Respondents who write in Tamil

#### 6.3.2.4 Speaking in Tamil

In the area of speaking, questionnaire respondents were asked to say if they spoke in Tamil to those who speak Tamil. In total, about a third of the respondents reported speaking Tamil to other Malaysian Indians who speak Tamil. However, in this category too it could be seen in Table 6.9 that the bulk was made up of G1(72.3%) while G2 made up about a quarter (26.9%), G3, as usual, trailed behind at only 4.5%. Here, too, it can be seen that Malay had made a small but significant inroad with 2.1% of respondents reporting that they spoke Malay to Tamils.

When we compare this finding with actual language spoken during the audio taped conversations (see Table 6.10) the picture is quite different with only a little more than a tenth of the respondents (13.0%) having used Tamil. The dominant language of communication was English with half of even G1 using English to communicate. Although nearly a quarter of G2 (in questionnaire) said they spoke Tamil with other Tamils, only 6.1% (in ATC) actually spoke Tamil. Not even one G3 respondent spoke in Tamil dominantly. It can be seen that a greater number claim to speak Tamil than they actually did.

Table 6.9

Generation	English	Tamil	Malay	Total
G1	22 (26.5%)	61 (72.3%)	-	83
G2	86 (72.3%)	32 (26.9%)	1 (0.8%)	119
G3	80 (89.9%)	4 (4.5%)	5 (5.6%)	89
<b>Total</b>	188 (64.6%)	97 (33.3%)	6 (2.1%)	291

**Languages used for Speaking With Tamil Speaking Malaysian Indians**

Table 6.10

Generation	Tamil	English	Total
G1	12 (50%)	12 (50%)	24
G2	3 (6.1%)	46 (93.9%)	49
G3	0 (0%)	42 (100%)	42
<b>Total</b>	15(13.0%)	100 (87%)	115

**Languages Used by Speakers in ATC**

**6.3.3 Functions Performed In the Tamil Language**

An analysis of the ATC (audio taped conversations) showed that although many of the respondents had shifted to the English language, there were several functions, which the Tamil language has retained. Table 6.12 shows an overview of the type of switches made in Tamil and the functions that they serve. The reasons for switching to Tamil were to address someone respectfully, to use a relationship term for politeness, to name a food item or express a religious term, for quoting someone verbatim, accommodating speakers who cannot understand English and when no equivalent word could be found in English.

**Table 6.12**  
**Type of Tamil Language Functions**

Conversation Number	Speaker	Generation	Functions							
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	4	G2	1	1		1	1	1		
	1	G2	1	1			1			2
	2	G2	2			1				2
	3	G2	1							
2	5	G2						1		2
	7	G3					1			2
3	9	G3				2				
	10	G3				1				
5	15	G3	1							
7	26	G3	1					1		
8	28	G2	3		15					
	31	G2			2			1		
9	35	G2		2						
10	36	G1				1				
	37	G3		1						
	38	G1								1
11	43	G3				1				
	42	G3					2		1	
12	48	G2		4		2		1	1	1
	45	G1		1		1	1			4
	44	G2						1		4
14	52	G2		3						1
	56	G2			1					
	54	G2		2					1	1
15	57	G2		2					1	
	59	G1							2	
	56	G2							1	
16	64	G2		1				1	1	
17	59	G1							2	
18	67	G1				1				
	56	G2		2		7				
	50	G1				1				
19	70	G3								1
	72	G3	2							
20	81	G3	2							
	78	G1	3	2				1	2	
	80	G3	2							
	79	G2			1				1	
	75	G1								1
	77	G2								1

**Key for Table 6.12**

1. Relationship term
2. Respectful term
3. Food item
4. Religious/Cultural term
5. Quotes
6. No Equivalent
7. Accommodation
8. For emphasis

21	82 86	G2 G3	1 1						1 1	
22	90	G3					1			
23	93	G3	1							
25	98 103 101	G3 G1 G2	1 2			1				
26	104 105 53 106	G3 G3 G3 G3	2 2 1 1							
27	108 109 110 107	G2 G2 G3 G2	1		3			1 2 1	2	
28	111 112 113	G2 G1 G3	2 1 8			1		1 3	2 2	
29	52	G2				1			1	
31	115	G1				2				
32	50	G1						1		
33	59 66	G1 G1				1 2		1 1	2 1	
34	54	G2						1		
TOTAL			43	22	22	27	6	20	15	34

Table 6.12

### 6.3.3.1 To Express Relationships Better

There were several examples of speakers referring to some of the people with whom they were engaged in conversation or referring to their relatives, in Tamil rather than in English. This was done to acknowledge a relationship with the addressee. The original Tamil address rather than a translated version, in English, was preferred on all occasions. For example, the term 'Uncle' or 'Aunt' in English is a generic term for paternal or maternal sibling. However, the Tamil language has several terms for 'Uncle' or 'Aunt'. For instance, a father's older brother is *Periappa* while his younger brother is *Chitappa*. A mother's brothers, whether older or younger are all called *Mama*. A father's sister, whether older or younger is *Athai* while a mother's older sister is *Periamma* while her younger sister is *Chitti*. *Chitti's* husband is called *Chitappa*. The *Athai's* husband is called *Athimber* while the *Mama's* wife is *Mami*.

Similarly one would find a wide range of terms for other relationships, as well. Speakers made several shifts in their conversations to Tamil when referring to a relative because these relationships could not be adequately expressed in English as there were no equivalents in that language. Relationship terms that were expressed in Tamil helped in establishing ties that strengthened the relationship between the two speakers. In Examples 1 and 2, English dominant speakers used *paati* for grandmother and *mamiyar* for mother in law. The retention of certain kinship terms indicates respect for ethnic customs as well as respect for elders. (see also 2.3.3.6).



### Example 1

14 A: I can't remember but I think it's something to do with *Paati* saying that  
**Grandma**  
the chicken is making noise in your stomach. All that stuff, you know. I mean Australia is probably harder to be a vegetarian, some more- I was so young.

### Tapescript 5

### Example 2

42. J: Look at my daughter- she married a man who speaks good Tamil and the constant interaction with the *mamiyar*. The Tamil  
**(Mother in Law)**  
influence..

### Tapescript 1

#### 6.3.3.2 To Show Respect for Elders<sup>1</sup>

Respect for elders was a very important tradition among Malaysian Iyers (see 2.2.5.7) and therefore all persons older to the speaker were usually addressed as 'Anna' (older brother), 'Akka' (older sister), 'Mama' (uncle) or 'Mami' (aunt). English dominant speakers made several shifts to Tamil to use a respectful term of address for an older person. This custom of showing respect to elders was fairly well entrenched in the research sample. In Example 3, one of the organizers of a trip to a seaside resort referred to an older man as *anna* rather than *mama*, as he was not that much

older than her but referred to another man who was much older than her as *mama*. Both the terms were used to show respect for an older person. Addressing one's elders using the ethnic kinship terms establishes, not only a kinship tie but a notion that the speaker displays good social etiquette as well.

### Example 3

8 P: <i>Anna</i> , come please. (Elder brother) <i>Mama</i> , on this side. (Uncle)
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### Tapescript 14

In Example 4, another organizer of a trip to Port Dickson, addressed a lady who did not quite understand the rules of a game that they were playing as *mami* even though he was speaking in English. A shift was made to Tamil to accommodate the older person, thereby showing respect for her. By specifically addressing her as *mami* he made certain that she knew that the accommodation was meant for her. Reverence and respect for elders is a highly regarded personality trait and not giving due respect, to an elder can be viewed with much disfavour. Respect for elders was seen and observed not only in functional shifts but also in other verbal and non-verbal behaviour.

15 A: You can see, but don't  
show. *Cholla pdathu. Mami*  
**(Don't say, Aunty)**  
– *cholla pdathu.*  
**(You can't say)**

#### Tapescript 14

##### 6.3.3.3 For Better and More Authentic Expression Of Food Items

The third reason why those who conversed in English used Tamil words was to refer to food items that were Tamil or Indian in nature, such as *Chappati* (Indian bread), *jelebees* (Indian sweet), *kurma* (a mixed vegetable dish), *dhal* or *paruppu* (lentils). Speakers who were discussing food referred to them by their Tamil names rather than come up with an English equivalent as they sounded better and more authentic than when using a translation. Example 5 provides an example of such a function retained in Tamil. Such expressions of food items show, on the surface of it, just a functional use of Tamil expressions. However, food and kinship terms are all part of a community's identity and therefore switching from English to Tamil for these expressions can be seen as an expression of one's identity as well.

A point worth noting, although it is not within the scope of this study, is the use of Tamil lexical terms which are subjected to English grammatical structure as can be seen in Example 5 below. The word *thali* means 'to season' such as 'to season with salt, pepper and so on'. Speaker 'G', in line 112, adds an English suffix to the Tamil word *thali* to make a new word *thalikkaren*. Similarly Tamil nouns are

routinely used with an 's' ending to signify plural as in *mamis* (see Example 10) to mean 'aunties' rather than apply Tamil grammar to it by saying '*mamikal*'. In Example 9 there is yet another example of applying the grammar of the Tamil language to an English lexical item. In this example, the speaker uses the Tamil suffix 'la' to the English term 'bus' to make a new word 'bus-la' which is taken to mean 'by bus'.

### Example 5

- 10 G: Curries lah. *Rasam*, *Sambar*.  
(South Indian curries)
- 26 G: My family.....my grandfather, my father , all my uncles, somehow or other.....I don't know if they were trained . They can make *jelebees*.  
(Indian sweet)
- 37 G: Say we are having *Sambar*, *Rasam* and *Beans Curry*. Then I'll cut it according to how it should be cut. But if you are cutting for pasta, then I'll cut it the Italian way and cook it without *kaduku*.  
(sesame seeds)
- 112 G: Onions, garlic, tomatoes. Compulsory ingredients are *kathirikai*. That's the one that gives the flavour and you dump the dhal inside. You must use *Tuvaram paruppu* and *Pasiparuppu* and all the spices, chilli powder and all that stuff. Salt and coconut oil. And then close the pressure cooker and cook. Then you open it up and you can *thalikkaran* it.  
(eggplant)  
(lentils )  
(cinnamon )  
(season )

### Tapescript 8

#### 6.3.3.4 For Words That Have Religious or Cultural Significance

In conversations where a religious or cultural practice was referred to, the original Tamil name was used rather than an English translation. This was because the conversation was held among a homogenous group who knew and understood the significance of these practices and therefore the ethnic terms were retained. It is also possible that there were no equivalents in English or Malay. Example 6 shows how words such as *Deepa Aradhanai* (holy flame) were retained in a conversation conducted in English as the significance of such a word would only be felt if it was said in the ethnic language. In Example 7 the word *Poonal* (sacred thread worn by Brahmin men) was retained in conversation as the word had significance to community members and a translation would dilute its significance. In this example 7 a young G3 boy discussed the significance of the holy thread which he felt had lost its meaning since 'non-Brahmins' could also wear it. He went on to discuss the behaviour that was required of a temple priest in addition to wearing the *poonal* such as being a teetotaler and a vegetarian.

#### Example 6

109. P: So when you go to the Temple, you feel you are different. When they do the *Deepa Aarahana*, I do this  
**(Devotional Flame)**  
(touches her cheek) but they do this (knocks her temples with knuckles).

#### Tapescript 1

### Example 7

47 P: Non Brahmins also become priests. You go to any temple, you don't know if they are true Brahmins or not. They just wear a *Poonal*, they're not Brahmins. There's no real emphasis on **(holy thread)** Brahmins becoming priests.

### Tapescript 11

*Jathagam* (horoscope) and *Ponnu Paakal* (viewing of the bride) were used in Example 8 rather than using a translated version since a suitable equivalent expression was probably not known to the speaker. For example, the term *Ponnu Paakal* when literally translated into English means 'girl/bride viewing'. The English term could not adequately explain the significance of this custom which is viewed rather seriously. In traditionally arranged marriages, the prospective bridegroom pays the prospective bride a visit in her home so that the two may meet and decide if they were suited to each other. This was an important part of the custom of arranged marriages where the bride and groom gave their consent, if they found one another acceptable, as prospective partners in marriage. Such a custom is peculiar to not only to the Iyers but to other Indians as well and did not sound authentic when translated or may lend itself to being made fun of if translated literally. Rampton (1998) is of the view that code switching researchers should relax their commitment to discovering coherence and systematicity in code switching. This is because oftentimes single lexical items, like the examples seen above in local occasions, makes code alternation a part of the main language used.

### Example 8

23. SH: That's probably not what an arranged marriage is all about.  
*Ponnu Paakal* and such .  
**(Bride viewing)**
24. S: Yeah so.....
25. P: *Jathagam*  
**(Horoscope)**
26. SH: Horoscope must match and stuff like that - but the intentions of the parents are normally good. Just that there are other factors, family background etc.
27. P *Mana Poruttham* - most important.  
**(Matching of the hearts)**

### Tapescript 3

#### 6.3.3.5 To Accommodate a Speaker With Limited English Abilities

Switches were made several times to include and accommodate speakers whose ability to speak English was limited. For example, one of the organizers (refer Tapescript 14) of a trip to Port Dickson repeated some announcements in Tamil to accommodate first generation women who could not understand English. The communication link with the elderly would be lost if they were not included and for this reason, switches were made from English to Tamil so that the link is always maintained. Example 9 shows how accommodation was made. Observations made of the community in interaction showed that although most respondents chose to converse in English, many were, in fact, bilingual in Tamil and English, and were capable of speaking in Tamil if they had to. The language of choice, however, was English while Tamil was used mainly for accommodation.

### Example 9

1 S: *Mami* you came by bus? *Neengal ellam bus-la vanthella?*  
(Aunty) (Did you come by bus?)

### Tapescript 15

In Example 10, a bilingual speaker of English and Tamil explained that she accommodated those who did not speak English by speaking to them in Tamil. Accommodations were made by speakers out of courtesy to those who were not proficient in English, though the speaker himself may have preferred to converse in English. As most G2 and G3 respondents did not have formal education in Tamil (see 6.2.1) their proficiency in Tamil was not as good as their proficiency in English.

### Example 10

9. J: It depends on who you are talking to – if I am speaking to some *Mamis* or to Padma then I have a tendency to talk more in Tamil.  
(Aunties)  
Otherwise I find it easier to talk in English. They talk to you in Tamil and you talk back to them in Tamil, but for people like – everyone here- I find it easier to talk in English – isn't it?

### Tapescript 1



### 6.3.1.6 For Direct Quotes

Several respondents preferred to report directly what someone else said in Tamil rather than attempt a translation as can be seen in Example 11 and 12. In Example 11 the exact words said in Tamil need to be repeated in order to understand the joke that the speaker was trying to make. If she were to try and translate it the joke would not have the same effect. This example also indicates that she (P) was quite capable of speaking in Tamil but was choosing English as her medium of conversation. P further went on to say that the reason for her non-use of the Tamil language with friends was that her variety of Tamil was made fun of. That did not explain, however, why she did not use it among community members in intra ethnic conversation (refer 9.2 for reasons).

#### Example 11

8. P: But now, yes, now I can . I'll tell you a joke – what happened at the University. We had this fun fair, and I was in the kitchen. I said, ' Let me *idu* the *chappati* first'.  
(Let me roll out the wheat bread first)  
And they started laughing.  
' *Namma veetulelaam kozhi thaan muttai idum, evanga chappati iduraanga!*'.  
(In our houses, only the chickens lay eggs but she lays wheat breads!)

#### Tapescript 1

In Example 12, the speaker directly quoted someone else's words in Tamil because she wanted to say it for effect. If she had just used a translation the effect would not be quite so dramatic as she wanted it to be. In this conversation, the respondent S, said that she was often asked why she spoke Tamil in a strange

manner. She went on to say that questions like that stopped her from conversing freely in Tamil as her Brahmin variety was not always understood.

### Example 12

36. S: They say, '*Nee enna Tamizh pesharai?*'. They ask me like that, you know.  
(What Tamil are you speaking?)

### Tapescript 2

#### 6.4 Analysis of Findings on Language Maintenance

Findings from both the questionnaire as well as the ATC revealed that Tamil language maintenance among Malaysian Iyers was minimal. Information regarding Tamil language proficiency of the sample indicated that about 75% understood the language. However, on further examination of the data, it was found that 62.2% of those who fully understood the language were born in India and 67.1% of those who said that the language they were most proficient in was Tamil were from the first generation. This does not bode well for the second and third generations since only about 5% of the third generation had indicated that Tamil was the language that they were most proficient in. It also appeared that most of the sample did not have had any formal training in studying Tamil. Only 10% of the third generation indicated schools as the place where they had learnt Tamil. A majority of those who learnt Tamil in schools as opposed to those who learnt the language only informally through relatives were from the first generation. All of the first generation also indicated that they learnt Tamil in India. A large number of the subsequent

generations had listed parents and grandparents as people who taught them the language informally at home. Even those of the second and third generation who studied Tamil in schools would have studied Tamil as a third language offered in Malaysian government schools on request since the medium of instruction in national schools in Malaysia is Malay today and was English under British rule.

In Chapter Five it was seen that even in the home, which is considered the bastion of the ethnic language, that English and to a small extent Malay, had intruded into conversations making language shift in that domain very real. Maintenance of Tamil or the lack of it at home did not bode well for the continued existence of a language since 33.6% of G2 and 61.8% of G3 (see 5.2.2.1) reported that Tamil was not spoken at home.

In his study of the use of Vietnamese by Vietnamese students in Australia, Ninnes (1996) found that the length of time spent in Australia influenced the use of the ethnic language. The longer they were in Australia and the younger that they were at the time of migration, the more the chances of losing their ethnic language. A similar situation probably exists in this study with the third generation's lack of competence in Tamil probably due to the fact that they were all born in Malaysia.

Formal reading and writing areas were the weakest area of language maintenance with only G1 consistently reporting reading, writing, speaking and listening in Tamil. This area clearly showed that it was only the first generation who maintained

the Tamil and had the language proficiency necessary to do so. The numbers were literally non-existent for the third generation and this showed clearly that the proficiency of the younger generations in Tamil was perhaps confined to speaking the language more casually at home rather than in the more formal reading or writing areas. 55% of the sample appeared to do some reading for 'have to' areas such as reading prayer books etc. while only 33% said that they did leisure reading. Formal writing ability was the area that the showed least proficiency with only 4% of the sample indicating that they wrote for newspaper or magazines. The lack of proficiency in the Tamil language combined with a lack of interest in writing could be a cause for this. The study sample showed a greater interest in the area of passive activity such as listening to Tamil news or watching Tamil programmes on television, as 62% of the sample said that they watched the Tamil news, 58% of the sample indicated that they watched Tamil shows on television. There was less participation from the third generation with 20% of those who indicated that they watched Tamil programmes coming from the third generation. The first and second generation respondents were more evenly distributed in this area.

Positive behaviour that could lead to language maintenance appeared to be lacking among the study sample with only 32.3% of the sample indicating that they attended Tamil classes to learn the language. There also appeared to be a lack of involvement in activities that promoted the Tamil language with only 6.9% of the sample indicating that they involved themselves in activities that promoted the

language. The majority of the respondents were not involved with any activity that could help in maintaining or promoting Tamil in Malaysia.

There was maintenance of the Tamil language in the area of watching news in Tamil though it comprised mainly the first and second generation respondents. There was positive behaviour in watching television programmes in Tamil for the maintenance of the Tamil language. However, in this area, too, it was mainly the first and the second generation who watched Tamil programmes. Ninnes (1996) reports that the relatively low status and the vitality of the Vietnamese language were the causes for the decline in its use. In the case of Tamil, it is possible that it does not enjoy the same status as English, which explained why the English language is making inroads into most domains except for the religious one. However Tamil is probably seen and heard through the mass media, in Malaysia, in a much greater way than Vietnamese in Australia. It should, logically, be easier for Tamils to maintain the language compared to a language like Vietnamese in Australia.

The survival of the ethnic language depends on the functions that it is able to perform. The Tamil language was able to perform functions associated with community solidarity which relied mainly on its customs and traditions. It was, however unable to compete outside of the home and inter community functions for purposes of employment and status (see Chapter Seven). Therefore the more prestigious English language or the national language, Malay, were shifted to as they functioned much better than Tamil in those areas. Maintenance of the Tamil

language was dependant on the functions that it was able to perform. It was observed that although the English language was the preferred language of the conversations, several respondents, especially G2 were in fact bilingual and could speak Tamil. The reasons for the preference for the English language are studied in Chapter Seven.

## 6.5 Conclusion

The questionnaire findings as well as the audio-taped conversations confirm the fact that the Tamil language was being taken over by English to a large extent and Malay to a lesser extent, in several areas. However, there was evidence to show that the Tamil language was still being maintained in the religious domain to a certain degree. The Malaysian Iyer community had maintained the Tamil language in the religious areas but not in the other domains such as the social or the intellectual areas. The Iyers had always placed a great deal of importance on religious affairs. Due to the fact that the religious domain demanded prayers and rituals to be conducted in either Sanskrit or Tamil, the maintenance in the religious domain appeared a little better than in other domains.

The Tamil language was used minimally at home. The language was used mainly for communication purposes with elders of the community who were not proficient in English, or for some terms which were better explained in Tamil rather than in English, such as relationship terms, food items and words with religious or cultural meanings which could not be translated adequately into English. The findings from the questionnaire suggest that Tamil was maintained to a larger degree

than was evident in the audio-taped conversations. In the ATC, the first generation appeared to be the only ones using Tamil for conversing. They also appeared to be the cause of the conversations in English shifting to Tamil. The reason for this was found in the questionnaire findings which showed that the first generation were the ones who were proficient in Tamil and who had learnt the language in India. Therefore, it followed that they would be the only ones who could and did speak Tamil whereas the second and third generation who did not appear to have formal training in Tamil used the language only to express words that could not be translated into English or to communicate with elders. The main reason for using Tamil therefore appeared to be, one of communication with elders and to use the Tamil language for certain terms that were better expressed in Tamil.

Motivation for Tamil language maintenance did exist with about 80% of the questionnaire respondents agreeing that the Tamil language should be preserved. This bodes well for the future of the community's linguistic identity. However the community did not appear to be motivated enough to translate their good intentions into actions that would help preserve the language for posterity.

The only motivating factor for using the Tamil language appeared to be communication with relatives and elders at home and in the community who could not speak any other language except Tamil. This then brings about the question of survival of the language once these elders are no more. The third generation appeared to be proficient, only at a basic level in Tamil. Therefore there appeared to be no

guarantee that efforts to maintain Tamil would continue if the only motivating factor is communication with the elders.

The role of the first generation could not be ignored. It appeared that they played the largest role in Tamil language maintenance. The first generation seemed to be responsible for maintaining the language and were also the reason why the other generations made efforts to speak in Tamil. It is possible that the first generation who came from India, had the need for maintaining their linguistic identity while subsequent generations had more ambivalent feelings about the Tamil language.

A new and interesting impetus to the future of the Tamil language in Malaysia, especially for the sample groups studied, has been brought in by cable television. A twenty-four hour Indian cable network, privately owned, has started transmission in recent times. Several respondents said that they watched Tamil programmes through cable television. This surprising source of motivation for Tamil language use and maintenance, could hold some promise for the future of the Tamil language, at least in the listening and speaking categories, even if not in the more formal reading and writing areas.

The results of the study corresponded with findings made in other countries where migrant populations existed within a larger and more influential culture. Ninnes (1996) found that the Vietnamese students in Australia used the Vietnamese



language at home for communication purposes with parents and grandparents to a larger degree than in other settings. This coincides with the findings in this study, where several respondents had indicated that the reason for speaking the Tamil language was to communicate with elders especially grandparents.

Bennett (1992) in a study on the language maintenance of the second generation Dutch in Australia found a very positive attitude towards language maintenance but there was minimal participation in activities that might promote the use of Dutch. The overall finding was that informants valued their use of Dutch and that there was no evidence of a decline to the point of a shift to English only. In this study, the attitude towards Tamil was good with about 80% of the questionnaire sample wanting the Tamil language to be maintained, but as found in Bennet's study the attitude did not translate to activities that could promote the use of Tamil.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Elder : The term 'elder' is used in two contexts: one for respect and the other for communication. While respect is shown to all those who were older in age than the speaker, term when used for communication purposes is usually directed towards first generation respondents.

- So the term 'elder' when used for communication generally refers to first generation respondents.

- When the term 'elder' is used for respect it refers to the respect shown to those who are chronologically older than the speaker. Although respectful terms implied a biological kinship, these terms were used even when the speaker was not biologically related to the addressee. A speaker addressee rule was observed that whenever addressing someone older than the speaker, respectful terms such as *mama*, *mami*, *anna* and *akka* were used.