

Bifurcated Language Shift: A study of the Malayalee diaspora in Malaysia

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Bifurcated language shift/ Intra-Community Variations

- ❖ The Malayalee community in Malaysia is facing language shift but it is not manifested in an identical manner among the 3 sub-communities
- ❖ The shift is bifurcated: the Hindus and Christians are moving towards English while the Muslims are shifting towards the Malay language.
- ❖ Given the same ancestral language & common place of origin, why does a community that has migrated to the same country exhibit different patterns of language shift?

Defining LANGUAGE SHIFT(LS):

- ❖ The end result of a community of speakers, consciously or unintentionally, gravitating towards a new language or one already within their repertoire to perform the functions usually reserved for their mother tongue or heritage language.

Malaysian Setting

- ❖ Malaysia – multiracial, multi-linguistic & multi-religious
- ❖ Majority communities – Malays (Muslims; natives; "bumiputras"), Chinese and Indians
- ❖ National/official language/main medium of instruction – Malay
- ❖ Official second language – English
- ❖ Education via Chinese & Tamil also available at primary school level

MALAYALEE DIASPORA IN MALAYSIA

- ❖ Migrated from Kerala in South India
- ❖ Minority community
- ❖ Current population :35,244
- ❖ Less than 1% of Malaysian population
- ❖ Comprising 3 sub-communities based on religious affiliations:
 1. Hindus 74%
 2. Christians 16%
 3. Muslims 6%

OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

1. Is there a shift of the mother tongue of the Malayalee community in Malaysia as evidenced through:
 - ❖ The community's level of proficiency in Malayalam vis a vis the other commonly-used languages such as English, Malay and Tamil?
 - ❖ The community's use of language for intra-ethnic communication in different domains such as family/home, friendship, religion, transaction, entertainment and inner speech?

OBJECTIVES OF STUDY(cont)

- Hypothesizing that the community is facing language shift, is this language behaviour manifested in a similar manner among the three sub-communities, that is, the Hindu Malayalees, Christian Malayalees, and Muslim Malayalees?

OBJECTIVES OF STUDY(cont)

- What are the factors that have contributed to the shift of the Malayalam language (if in fact there is a shift) and are they the same for all the three sub-communities? In the event that they are not, what are the reasons for such intra-group variations?

Research Tools & Sample

Instrument	Sample size
Questionnaire	341
Interview (structured)	13
Interview (semi-structured)	172
Observation of social events(eg cultural shows)	18
Recording of conversations	30
Examination of documents	53

Measures of Shift

- ❖ Extent of self-rated proficiency in Malayalam
- ❖ Extent of bilingualism
- ❖ Predominant language in different domains esp. family/home and religion
- ❖ Predominant language for inner speech
- ❖ Extent of code-switching, code-mixing
- ❖ Extent of inter-generational shift

FINDINGS

- The Malayalee community is experiencing language shift; 20% cant speak M at all; 80% cant read & write.
- The shift is not manifested in similar manner among the 3 groups; it is **bifurcated**. The Christians and Hindus are shifting towards English while the Muslims towards Malay.

Reasons for Shifting Away from Malayalam(general)

- ❖ No single factor can account for LS
- ❖ Act of migration: minority and immigrant status of community
- ❖ Societal bilingualism – prerequisite for language shift
- ❖ Very little functional differentiation of language
- ❖ Lack of status of Malayalam

Reasons(cont)

- ❖ Government policies – education system; no scope for Malayalam in school

- ❖ Role of parents: discouraging Malayalam/encouraging other languages/accommodating younger generations:

When we were young, our parents felt that speaking in Malayalam would disrupt our English. Father felt we're better off with English. We had to listen to BBC news. Everything around us was western-centred, including table-manners. We had an affinity for all things English. We thought we were the royal family! My mother wore Western clothes and we even wore hats to church. R220 G2 51CF

What are the reasons for the bifurcated pattern in LS?

- ❖ Historical: the Hindu and Christian migrants more educated (in English) than the Muslims; "Macaulay's Minute"
- ❖ Led to different employment patterns; traders v middle rung/supervisory staff

Why Hindus and Christians are shifting towards English:

- ❖ Head-start in English;

I use English and am most proficient in English as I come from a highly educated ancient family in Kerala. All know English – my family members and my circle of friends.

R295 G1 75 CF

Why Christians & Hindus shifting to English(cont)

- ❖ Necessary for employment, e.g. rubber estates
- ❖ Attitude towards English – language of prestige

If you can speak English, others think you are highly educated. English is a status symbol. So you stop using Malayalam.

R217 G1 65 MF

Why Christians & Hindus shifting to English(cont)

- ❖ Extent of comfort with English not only applies to younger generation

Though I can speak Malayalam well, I prefer English. When I quarrel with my husband, I use English because when I scold him in Malayalam, it doesn't sound as 'effective' as in English. Even the term "you" sounds so respectful in Malayalam. When my husband realizes I'm angry, he'll try to persuade me to speak in Malayalam.

R295 G1 75 CF

Why Christians & Hindus shifting to English(cont)

- Christians use more English than Hindus in domain of religion

The church group consists of Tamils, Chinese, Eurasians as well as Malayalees. Of course the language used is English.

R239 G2 62 CF

Why Muslims are shifting towards the Malay language

❖ Medium of education

❖ Proximity to the Malay community

The Malabar is closer to the Malays. They identify with the Malays because of religion, festivals, etc. The Malays accept us easily; they are very accommodating. Being a minority, no one champions the cause of the Malabar. We are scattered all over the place, especially in urban areas like KL/PJ. There is little opportunity to get together. If I need help, I approach my Malay neighbour. So the socialization is with the Malays, not the Indians.

R49 G2 42 MF

Why Muslims are shifting towards the Malay language

❖ Exogamy: approx. 30%; Mal males marrying Malay women

I think at least 50% of the Malabar is using Malay. They live and intermingle with the Malays. In addition, Malay girls are very sociable; there is more opportunity for Malabar boys to interact with Malay girls than with Malabar girls.

R77 G2 58 MF

Why Muslims are shifting towards the Malay language

❖ Question of identity/Desire for assimilation with Malays. Why?

• Common religion ("shafie madhab")

• Economic gain (affirmative policy: "bumiputera" privileges)

• Official change in ethnicity possible due to definition of 'Malay' in the Malaysian Constitution

Change in ethnic identity possible (but unpredictable)

❖ *On the birth certificate, two of my children are listed as "Keturunan Melayu" [of Malay descent] but the third is considered as Indian Muslim. Because of that, he is considered non-bumiputera and can't get a scholarship like his brothers.*

R80 G2 52 MM

Distancing from mainstream community

❖ *In my birth certificate, my race has been changed to Malay. That's the only choice. Otherwise I'll have to be considered an Indian. But I'm not an Indian; Indians are Tamils, I'm a Malabar. All my children are considered as Malays in their birth certificates. They all only know the Malay language.*

R63 G3 34 MM

Identity and Language

❖ Not an over-generalisation to conclude that Muslim Malayalees are facing an identity crisis and language is a crucial issue.

❖ If one doesn't wish to be considered a Malayalee but a Malay, the most logical step would be to stop using Malayalam and shift to Malay.

CONCLUSION

- ❖ Underlying reason for all three groups for shifting away from Malayalam and towards another language:
- Economic advancement but the means differ

CONCLUSION

- ❖ Shift is inevitable: What begins as the language of social and economic stability ends, within 3 generations or so, as the language of the crib as well, even in democratic and pluralism-permitting contexts. (Fishman, 1989:206)
- ❖ What is noteworthy is that despite sharing the same ancestral language, migrating from the same source country and living in the same ecological setting, the community is experiencing a bifurcated language shift, a rare occurrence indeed.

THANK YOU