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THE IMPORTANCE OF A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE IN LANGUAGE SHIFT STUDIES:

Focus on minority groups in Kuching

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ABSTRACT

When a minority community begins losing its mother tongue to a more dominant one, this can be viewed as that heritage language being potentially on the path to extinction. An earlier study to investigate reasons for language shift in Sabah and Sarawak clearly shows both macro and micro variables are significant in causing language shift (David and Dealwis,2008). In fact way back in 1952 Weinrich cited a range of ten variables as decisive factors in determining language shift. These are geography, indigenoussness, cultural or group membership, religion, sex age, social status, occupation, rural versus urban residence and race. More recently Edwards (1992) argues that "sociolinguistic forays into minority language matters-and many others too-must be interdisciplinary". Language shift therefore needs to be considered also from a historical perspective. This is by itself a pertinent aspect that needs to be addressed when conducting research among minority groups. We need to understand the history of the minority communities in order to explain the reasons for language shift. History includes when they came, where they came from, socio-economic and political situations in the country of domicile etc. In this study, the Tamil, Malayalee, Telegu and Indian Muslims communities in Kuching, Sarawak are examined in order to show how historical variables can influence language choice. The paper concludes that researchers conducting studies on language maintenance and shift among minority groups who ignore these historical variables are doing so at their own risk.

KEYWORDS: *Kuching, language shift, historical*

Introduction

This paper presents the findings of language shift among the Tamil, Tamil-Muslim, Telegu, Malayalee, and Punjabi communities in Kuching by noting how their history have actually affected language use over time. The findings indicate that some of these communities have shifted from using one language for most purposes to using a different language, and from using two distinct codes in different domains, to using different varieties of just one language for their communicative needs.

As suggested by scholars of language maintenance and language shift, one must draw on a number of variables/factors for providing adequate

explanations of a given language position. Apart from the social and linguistic factors, the history of the community is equally important if one is to offer a balanced account of language shift. Edwards' argues that 'sociolinguistic forays into minority language matters-and many others too- must be interdisciplinary' (1992:138). This means that in order to gain an adequate understanding of the causes of language shift among the minorities such as the Indian linguistic groups in the city of Kuching one needs to draw on the history of these communities for insights into the use/non-use of their heritage language. We need to understand the history of the minority communities in order to explain the reasons for language shift. History includes when they came, where they came from and socio-economic and political situations in the country of domicile.

According to Holmes (2001: 52) typically migrants are virtually monolingual in their mother tongue, their children are bilingual, and their grandchildren are often monolingual in the language of the 'host' country. Minority migrant communities such as the various Indian linguistic groups in Kuching provide an obvious example of language shift where gradually over time, the language of the wider society displaces the minority language mother tongue.

The phenomena of language shift and language maintenance was first pioneered by Joshua Fishman (1964), but relatively few studies were conducted until Gal (1979) and Dorian (1981) moved into the area by studying language shift (and death) in specific speech communities. The term language shift was coined by Fishman (1964) to describe the lack of habitual use of its heritage language by a specific speech community. This generally occurs due to competition from a regionally and socially more powerful or numerically stronger language. Fasold (1984 p 213) states that language shift occurs when "a community gives up a language completely in favour of another one". Sociolinguists have studied the causes of shift (noting the impact of political domination and economic change) and the course of shift (frequently via DOMAINS of use), noting that the home and religion domains are often the last bastions of survival for beleaguered languages (Gal, 1979).

Investigation on language shift among the minority Indian communities is quite new in Malaysia. Among the earlier studies on minority group in Peninsular Malaysia are those by David (2001) on the Malaysian Sindhi community, David's and Naji (2000) case study on the Malaysian Tamils, David and Nambiar (2002) on exogamous marriages and out-migration as factors causing language shift

among the Catholic Malayalees of Kuala Lumpur; David, Ibtisam Naji and Sheena Kaur (2003) studied on the Punjabi Sikh community in Selangor; Vijaya Sankar on the Iyer community in Peninsular Malaya (2004); Mohana Nambiar on the Malayalee community in Peninsular Malaya (2006) and David (2003) researched on the Pakistani community in Machang, Kelantan. In Kuching we have studied the Punjabi community, the Malayalee community (David et al, 2008), the Telegu community (David and Dealwis, 2007), the Indian-Muslim community (David and Dealwis, 2009). Studies on language shift among the minority Indian groups in Peninsular Malaysia have revealed that certain conditions provide the impetus for shift to occur and among these conditions are those related to immigration which encourages the use of the language/s of the new environment (see David and Nambiar, 2002).

Tamils , Malayalees, Punjabis and Telegus

Sarawak's early contact with Indians was due largely to trade. Gold found in the areas extending from Bau in Sarawak to Sambas and Montrado in West Kalimantan was an important metal in the ancient world that could have attracted the Indians to Sarawak. Although before the arrival of James Brooke in 1839, the only signs of Indian influence is based on archeological evidence but according to Chang (2002) there is sufficient evidence to indicate that the Sarawak River Delta was an important trading centre which was established as early as in the 7th century. However, there is no evidence to indicate that any of these traders had stayed and married local women in Sarawak.

The most significant linguistic impact due to history is seen among the early Indians who were brought to Sarawak from South India and Punjab There are no statistics of the number of Indians and Punjabis who first came to Sarawak in 1900 and those who went back to India before Sarawak became part of Malaysia in 1963.

The early Indians were generally poor and came as labourers, while the Punjabis were recruited as military personnel for the White Rajah Administration (1841-1946) and later the colonial administration (1946-1963).The early Indian settlement was located at *Gunung Serapi* (Mount Serapi) in Matang while the early Punjabis lived in areas around Palm Road and Green Road.

There were close and dense networks among the Indian and Punjabi communities and this facilitated maintenance of the heritage languages. Due to their small numbers most of them knew and visited one another frequently. When someone in both the communities passed away or got married, all the members of the respective communities felt obliged to attend even without a formal invitation. The support shown towards each other was relatively strong during the early years of migration probably because they were new to the host country and there was no association which they could rely on in times of need. Later when the Kuching Indian Association and Sikh Temple Association respectively were formed, both the Indian and Punjabi communities saw the need to come together and worked even closer with their respective associations so as to maintain their respective identities.

Most of the early Indian i.e. Tamil and Malayalees labourers worked in the same place in Gunung Serapi as tea and coffee planters and later in the public works departments in Batu Lintang thus allowing them to keep contact with one another even at the workplace. Both these two Indian groups i.e. the Tamils and Malayalees were Hindus and another focal point of gathering was the two Hindu temples in Ban Hock Road and Batu Lintang respectively where Tamil was the language used during prayers and social interactions.

In the beginning it was not common for the early Tamils and Malayalees who were Hindus to marry non-Indians because most of the marriages were arranged by the parents for their children. Due to their small numbers, the different Indian linguistic groups married among themselves and assimilated each others' cultural norms and practices without prejudice. Therefore it is quite common to see the younger generation of Malayalees in Kuching speaking Tamil at home instead of Malayalam because either one or the grandparents or parents could have been a Tamil. Many of the descendants of the early Malayalees do not even celebrate the Malayalee New Year, and instead join the Tamils to celebrate *Ponggal*. In fact it was interesting to hear them refer to themselves as Indians rather than as Malayalees or Tamils as is the case in Peninsular Malaya. As for the Punjabis, many of them seek spouses for their children in Punjab and Peninsular Malaysia and this to some extent has helped to maintain the use of Punjabi in the home domain especially in the case of those who married brides from Punjab.

The Tamil language was only able to survive in the early years largely because the Tamils form the majority of the South Indian linguistic groups who came to

Sarawak and there were not many exogamous marriages with non-Indians. In fact offspring of the Tamils who married Malayalees would learn Tamil as their first language and Malayalam was hardly used due to decreasing proficiency among the younger generation.

The contacts of the early Indians with their relatives in India or Peninsular Malaysia was very minimal due to slow communication and this eventually made them eventually become a new community with its own identity. According to T. Komurusamy, 1993 the Sarawak Indian community has a unique structure because of their separate origins and subsequent isolation compared to the larger Indian community in Peninsular Malaysia and India.

Therefore, where Tamil is considered an important symbol of a minority group's identity, the language is likely to be maintained longer compared to Malayalam or Telegu. The Tamil language continues to survive because the Tamil families whose parents ceased working as tea and coffee planters in Matang moved and settled in Green Road where they lived near each other and see each other daily. However, in the late 1980's the Tamils in Green road sold their lands and stayed in various parts of Kuching city.

Second wave of Malayalees immigrants

Beginning 1956, Malayalee teachers and other professionals were recruited to work in the civil service. Although most of them returned to India after they had retired a number of families still remained in Kuching. Being an educated group who came later, it was observed that English was the main home language and not Malayalam. This choice according to the respondents was largely due to the economic value of mastering the English language. Most of the children of these Malayalee professionals in time became professionals themselves and some married non- Malayalees and English has become the main language used with family members.

There was not much contact between the Malayalees who came as labourers and those who came much later as professionals (see Nambiar 2007). The Malayalees who came later had close and dense networks among themselves but this too did not lead to maintenance of the heritage language as they had shifted to English. As for the earlier group of Malayalees they tended to work with Indians who were Tamils. Most of the children from these families have married non-Malayalees.

Telegus

The Telegus who came in 1900 comprised only two families one of which eventually chose to stay and settled down in *Batu Satu* which became a settlement for the next two generations of Telegus before they too moved out and stayed elsewhere.

Being Christians the contacts with the other Indians who were Hindus were limited to mere social visits. Unlike the Malayalees, most of the descendants of the Telegus could not speak Tamil even though a few contacted marriages with Tamil men. This is largely because the Tamil men converted to Christianity and moved in to stay with their Telegu spouses in *Batu Satu*.

Although Sarapa and his wife who came from Mysore in India in 1900 spoke Telegu to their 14 children, eventually due to the pressures of more dominant languages such as Malay and Hokkien, these children used pidgin Malay among themselves. This pidgin Malay developed as means of communication between the Telegu siblings who were not proficient in Telegu largely because Sarapa's wife who passed away in 1955 left the children with no one to learn the language from besides Sarapa himself who was out working most of the time as a labourer for the Brooke government. Moreover, before the family moved to *Batu Satu*, they had lived among Malays in *Pendam* and this influenced the language used among the children at home.

In *Batu Satu*, their immediate neighbours were Hokkien Chinese and thus the pidgin Malay used by the early Telegus also included Hokkien pronouns and expressions. The later generation of Telegus have a predictable reaction to the pidgin Malay used by their parents. They find it amusing and their parents do not speak to them using that variety.

Instead English is the dominant choice of the younger generation of Telegus and it has become the home language too. The fact that it is a global language and it is less embarrassing to be used in public makes the second generation of Telegus shift to English even among themselves once they have started working.

Indian Muslims

The Indian Muslims men came first in 1900's as merchants from South India via Singapore and many of them married local Malay women. Indian Muslim women arrived later as wives but there were less in number compared to the men. This group of Indian Muslims maintained their Indian identity by speaking

Tamil at home and had other markers of Indian identity such as the women wore the *saree* (Indian women dress), the men used the *dhoti* (sarong) and they ate Indian food.

The bachelors among the early immigrants married local Malay women and lived in Malay dominated areas in *Jalan Masjid*. This led to linguistic change with Sarawak Malay being used at home. Generally, all the early immigrants learnt the local Malay dialect when doing business with local Malays. Since they shared the same religion of Islam with the Malays, the early immigrants were well accepted into the Malay community. There has always been greater affinity with the Malays right from the early days of their arrival rather than with other Indians who were non-Muslims even though they came from South India.

Although there seems a real desire for wanting to be part of the Malay community, the Indian Muslims realize that there are economic benefits as well (see also David 2003 and Nambiar, 2007). To be part of the Malay community would be more economic advantageous than being part of the smaller Indian community. The Malays being the indigenous community in Malaysia are given benefits that include economic, social and educational benefits to improve their social-economic status under the National Economic Policy which was launched in 1970.

The Indian Muslims' real desire for wanting to assimilate with the more dominant Malays is clearly seen in the fact that their stay among the Malays in Matang and Petra Jaya areas and they also practice the Malay culture in their daily lives. However, it should be noted that the desire to become Malays is more apparent among Tamil Muslims of mixed parentage (i.e. offspring of Indian Muslims married to local Malays). However, in homes where both parents are Indian Muslims, Tamil is the most dominant language spoken by family members.

The many intermarriages of the first generation men with local Malay women and even more intermarriages of the second generation with local Malays have facilitated assimilation of the community to the larger Sarawak Malay community. Moving from a Tamil-speaking community for the first generation to the current Sarawak Malay speaking community has further caused the weakening of ethnic boundaries, which in turn brings with it the inseparability of Malay identity as they are also Muslims and speak the same local Malay dialect at home.

History of Host Country

The history of the host county also involves the implementation of the various language policies which have influenced the sociolinguistic norms of the minority groups for different generations. Sarawak became part of Malaysia on 16th September 1963 and since then the Malay language has been gradually replacing the use of English and Iban in both official and unofficial domains. Malay was established as the national language with the purpose of fostering national unity between both East and Peninsular. Since there is a provision for the teaching of the mother tongues of the numerous other languages, Tamil was taught in three schools in Kuching beginning January 2007. This is because the 'Pupil Own Language' (POL) can be taught in schools if there were at least 15 students to make up a class (Jernudd, 1999; Smith, 2003). Lately, the Punjabis in Kuching started their own school in the Sikh temple with the aim of maintaining their heritage language. The gurdwara since the early days has been the centre of communal activities for the Punjabis in Kuching and this is one marker of their identity.

What makes it easy for the Indian Muslims to take on a Malay identity is the fact that the definition of Malay in the Malaysian Constitution shows great flexibility. According to the Constitution, a Malay is defined as one who practices the Islamic religion, practices Malay customs and speaks the Malay language. Therefore it is possible for anyone to 'masuk Melayu' [*becoming a Malay*] (Haja, 2002) as long as they are Muslims or convert and practice Malay customs. According to Lasimbang et. al (1990) people react negatively if they feel they are being subsumed into a larger group on an unequal basis, but they may readily shed their identity for a larger group identity if it is in their best interest.

Conclusion

Although the early Tamils, Malayalee, Punjabis, Telegus and Indian Muslims have close networks, are related to each other, live nearby and in the same locality, such social networks by themselves do not result in language maintenance because other factors like exogamous marriages which have become common over time has caused a breakdown in language maintenance. Like the Catholic Malayalees of Malaysia, (David and Nambiar, 2002), exogamous marriages in minority Indian communities in Malaysia prompts language shift to occur. Since the early Indian and Punjabi communities in Sarawak are small and within their respective communities tend to be basically related to one another biologically, there are not many choices

for the later generations to choose spouses from within their ethnic group except to marry out of the ethnic group. The first generation themselves married Indians, and the second generation has spouses who are not only Indians but also Chinese and Dayaks.

The findings of the studies done on the various Indian and Punjabi communities in Kuching show that among for the first generation of Indians, the heritage languages were spoken. The pressures of Malay as a lingua franca in the linguistic environment and English as a language which has economic value, has meant that the minority Indian groups has succumbed to such pressures and hence the younger generation are more comfortable with English and Malay rather than their heritage languages in the home domain. Bahasa Melayu and English are the dominant languages used in Malaysia. Malay is used as the medium of instruction in schools and English in interethnic communication, especially among the increasingly educated Sarawak Indians. As the descendents of the early Indians and Punjabis become more educated, there is a strong tendency to speak only English at home. This is not surprising seeing that educated Bidayuh professionals have also shifted to English (Dealwis, 2008) and that many of the Indian communities in Peninsular have also shifted to English (see David 2001 on the Sindhis, Sankar 2004 on the Iyer community, Nambiar 2007 on the Malayalee community). English is an international language which gives the small minority communities both local and international mobility. In fact, Vanithamani Saravanan (1998) takes an interesting look of the Tamil community in Singapore. It is the author's opinion that the maintenance has become so bad that the community is referred to as Tamil English community and not the Tamil community.

We have seen that historical factors such as size, location, profession, religion of the community and socio, educational and political issues have had an affect on habitual language choice. The question therefore that I would like to conclude by is : " How would the Indian community in Kuching like to be referred to?"

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