LANGUAGE AND SOCIAL IDENTITY AMONGST TAMIL–ENGLISH BILINGUALS IN SINGAPORE

Vanithamani Saravanan

Department of Asian Languages and Applied Linguistics, Nanyang Technological University, 469 Bukit Timah Road, Singapore 1025, Republic of Singapore

Abstract The paper examines the position of the Tamil language in Singapore. It is one of the four official languages of the country, but shows signs of decline in recent years relative to English, Chinese and Malay. The reasons for this are explored. Its low social status is the primary factor. Tamil is still associated with poverty and lack of social and political influence. But other factors, some of them more amenable to planned intervention, are also working against it. Formal varieties of the language are still dominant in the media, limiting its popular appeal to many Indians and even its comprehensibility . A prescriptive, language-centred attitude dominates in the schools also, making Tamil increasingly a 'classroom language' that has little likelihood of being used for everyday communication. The paper argues that it will be essential in the coming years to increase the out-of-school use of the language among young Singaporean and Malaysian Tamils. To achieve this it will be necessary to get them to use the language more often in the home, thus bridging the gulf between the formal varieties of the language, associated with school, media, and temple, and the informal varieties that still flourish in everyday transactions.

The study of change in habitual language use has become an area of sociolinguistic enquiry under the broader heading of language maintenance and language shift. Fishman's (1964) pioneering work on the study of language maintenance and language shift, now an established area of sociolinguistic enquiry, helps to provide a theoretical framework. It seeks to elucidate the relationship between change in habitual language use and the economic, social, cultural and psychological processes involved when languages are in contact in a dynamic social context. Some of the processes documented on languages in decline, leading to language loss and language death, for example, East Sutherland Gaelic (ESG) (Dorian, 1981), Trinidad Bhojpuri (TBh) (Mohan & Zador, 1986), Sekani (Lanoue, 1991) also provide a systematic approach for observing this phenomenon in speech communities undergoing language shift and language loss. These studies provide a starting point for mapping the relationship between language use and sociolinguistic factors.

Studies on language maintenance and shift among various speech communities show some of the following features. When English becomes widespread across communities of speakers, its status becomes enhanced. The wide acceptance of English by different communities of speakers helps to develop its status as an inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic language of communication. This is even more

so when bilinguals decide not to have restrictions in assigning one language to one set of circumstances, setting or functions, and the other language to another set. Quite often one language formerly reserved for a specific set of functions (that is, particular domains) is adapted for other functions, and strict distinctions in language functions disappear slowly (Fishman, 1972). Such changes would naturally bring about changes in attitudes toward language codes. We are thus able to observe the link between language and social identity.

Tamil in Singapore

My focus is on the Tamil community in Singapore and in particular on the following questions: Is the Tamil language amongst Tamil Singaporeans already marginalised in favour of English, the elite language? To what extent has the Tamil language ceased to be socially dominant amongst Tamil speakers when compared to English? What are some of the pedagogical implications arising out of this shift towards English?

In comparing languages in decline such as TBh, ESG, and Tamil, we note that unlike TBh and ESG, Tamil has official recognition. It is one of the four official languages of Singapore, spoken by a minority of Indians. In Singapore, bilingual education is taken to mean English and 'mother tongue'. For all 'Indians' it is Tamil, regardless of whether they are Bengali, Punjabi, Sindhi, Malayali or Sinhalese speakers. Except for Tamil–speaking Indians who take up Tamil as a second language (TL2), other Indians take Malay, Chinese or a third language.

The government's commitment to bilingual education has ensured school-based learning of Tamil not only amongst Tamils, but also speakers of other Dravidian languages, for example, Malayalis and Telugus. There is legal and institutional support for the language. Tamil is represented in the various institutions of the country and community, in most government services, in the bilingual educational policy, and in the multi-cultural media of the nation. There is institutional support for the training of teachers and publishing of language curriculum materials.

Census data

Yet despite all these measures, and the official recognition given to Tamil, surveys on language use among the Indians show that it is declining in use compared to the other official languages. English has assumed an increasing role as a medium of intra-ethnic communication and as the language of friendship and home domains (Kuo, 1979; Tay, 1983).

The census data from 1970, 1980 and 1990 (Table 1) show that between 1980 and 1990 literacy in English increased by 12%, reversing the trend seen between 1970 and 1980 where there was a loss of 7.6% literacy in English. When the Tamil and English categories are compared, there was a 10.4% increase in Tamil–English bilinguals from 1970 to 1980, a 15.6% increase comparing 1980 and 1990 and a 26% increase when comparing 1970 and 1990. With Tamil monolinguals,

Table 1 Language survey amongst Tamil–English bilinguals

	1970	1980	1990
Tamil	27.1%	17.8%	18.3%
Tamil and English	19.1%	29.5%	45.1%
English	28.6%	21.0%	33.0%
Malay	2.6%	1.8%	3.8%
English and Malay	9.4%	16.0%	27.0%

Source: Census of Population 1970, 1980, 1990

there is a slight increase of 0.5% from 1980 to 1990 and with Malay-speaking mono- linguals amongst Indians, there is a slight increase of 2%. There is a growing increase in the use of English and Malay (13.5%) replacing Tamil in Indian Moslem households as more Indian Moslems intermarry Malays and are assimilated to Malay culture. The 1990 census shows that the increase in literacy was most significant for the Chinese, from 82% in 1980 to 90% in 1990. The literacy rate for the Malays was 92% and Indians 93%. The Malays had the highest proportion who were multi-lingual: 70% compared with 41% of Chinese and 59% of Indians.

Table 2 shows literacy rates for specific age groups and these are used to predict general trends in the future. (Figures were available only for 1970 and 1980.) In 1970, of those literate in Tamil, 23.5% were found in the age group 40–49 and 39.5% in the group below 20. By 1980, the rate for those below 30 had increased to 49.7% but those above 40 had decreased (after discounting the effect of change in the age distribution). Thus the trend should show a younger age group becoming more literate in Tamil as second language learning in Tamil has become compulsory for Tamil-speaking children. Therefore there should be more Indian school-going children acquiring Tamil. It may be argued that the 'loss' arising from the lack of opportunities to learn Tamil as a second language until ` 1975 reported in Mani & Gopinathan (1983: 114) has been reduced with the

Table 2 Age-specific literacy in Tamil or Tamil and English among literate Indian Singaporeans in 1970 and 1980 (%)

	1970	1980
Age	N=42,876	N=56,041
10-19	21.5	26.3
20-29	18.0	23.4
30-39	20.0	15.3
40-49	23.5	14.2
50-59	12.6	13.8
60 and over	4.4	7.0
Total	100	100

Computed from Census 1970 and 1980, Singapore. *Source*: Mani & Gopinathan (1983:108).

Table 3 Predominant household language

	1980	1990
English	24.3%	34.8%
Malay	8.6%	13.5%
Tamil	52.6%	43.7%

Source: Census of Population 1980, 1990.

encouragement of TL2 for all Tamil-speaking children. Yet it is difficult to assert that Tamil literacy is on the increase without studying the community in detail.

Between 1980 and 1990, the following patterns (Table 3) emerge for the predominant household language in Indian households. Tamil as a principal family language constituted only 43.7% though 64% of the Indians are of Tamil-speaking origin. The rest of the Indian population are Hindi, Gujurati, Malayalam and Punjabi speakers. When we compare the 1980 and 1990 data, the following patterns emerge for the predominant household language in Indian households: English 24.3% in 1980 and 34.8% in 1990, Malay 8.6% in 1980 and 13.5% in 1990 and Tamil 52.2% in 1980 and 43.7% in 1990.

The 1990 census report notes a shift amongst all groups towards English as the predominant household language, at the expense of Chinese dialects, Malay and Tamil. The shift was largest amongst the Chinese (10% to 21%) and Indians (24.3% to 34.8%) but much smaller for the Malays (2% to 6%). Does the increase in TL2 students after 1975 mean an increase in the functional use of Tamil? The increase reported in those literate in English and Tamil from 29.5% in 1980 to 45.1% in 1990 is contradicted by figures that show an increase in the use of English in the home domain by 10.5%.

Thus a correlation between literacy and use cannot be assumed. One has to examine language use data. Language codes related to language choice in particular domains surveyed by Ramiah (1991) and Sobrielo (1986) show that functional uses of the language in the playground, at home, in the social and friendship domains has declined, and English has replaced Tamil. Do we therefore have a case of replacive bilingualism in the case of the Tamil-speaking community as observed by Mani & Gopinathan (1983)?

Language loyalty and language attitude

What are some of the factors that may help explain the decline of Tamil use amongst Tamil speakers? A narrow concern with the school-based curriculum and achievement levels amongst bilingual learners will not reveal a true picture of the patterns of language acquisition among bilinguals. In order to explain this decline of Tamil, we need to define bilingualism in terms of the attitudes speakers hold toward particular language codes. We need to consider for instance, the attitudinal-affective behaviour of the community, whether loyalty or antipathy is expressed toward language codes and speakers using these particular language codes. The socio-psychological aspects of language behaviour and lan-

guage attitudes will, to some extent, help to explain why particular groups maintain or shift their language loyalty. It is necessary, for instance, to consider some of the prevailing attitudes toward Tamil-speaking linguistic communities and how such attitudes have influenced other sub-groups with higher literacy or of sub-groups who speak a language which is assigned greater prestige. This will explain the direction of language maintenance and language shift amongst such speech communities.

To what extent has the socio-economic status of Tamil speech communities been involved in low income occupations, for example, in the rubber and oil palm plantations of Malaysia and more recently in factories, led such communities to be socially ostracised and their contributions to be marginalised? Has this attitude also led to their language to be marginalised? Has this in turn created antipathytowards this group of monolingual Tamil speakers in Singapore and Malaysia and, by extension, to the Tamil language?

Tamil plantation workers (mainly in Malaysia, as Singapore has moved away from plantation industry) are perhaps the largest group of monolingual Tamil speakers in this region. Ironically, it is these speech communities who show the strongest patterns of language maintenance in Tamil. These Tamil workers in the rubber and oil palm estates were stigmatised and continue to be stigmatised as 'estate workers' or as 'locals' or are crudely described as *lokal palenke'* and as 'coolies', a pejorative term used by English-educated Indians to refer to manual workers. It is said that the Jaffna Tamils from Sri Lanka perceived differences between Jaffna Tamil and Tamil spoken in Tamil Nadu. Jaffna Tamil was considered to be a 'pure' form of Tamil when compared to the variety spoken by South Indians. These differences became more apparent when more English-educated Jaffnas came to settle in Malaysia and Singapore. The Tamil spoken by South Indian plantation workers in Malaysia and Singapore was regarded as a stigmatised variety and branded as *coolikaaren TamiR*. Children of Jaffna families were usually encouraged to acquire English and speak English.

The Tamil plantation workers share little of the economic wealth accrued in the plantation industry. They have been left behind by the economic and technological progress in other sectors of the nation's economy. Their low socio-economic status is linked to their lack of English education and professional qualifications. They speak mainly Tamil and some Malay or English. Tamil is the language of the home and friendship domains. Large numbers of children of estate workers continue to attend Tamil estate schools run with community and government support. Tamil teachers, students, writers and a small publishing industry in Tamil (Tamil newspapers, books, magazines,) and the media have helped to maintain the language. In Malaysia there are two dailies, *Tamil Nesan* and *Malaysian Nanban* as well as several weeklies and monthly news broadsheets.

But Malaysian Tamils are beginning to ask whether Tamil has any economic use. It makes economic sense to acquire Malay as Malay is the national language and medium of education in Malaysia. English is studied as the second language. Trends in language choice in school indicate that fewer take Tamil as a second language or as a first language in such schools. This has led to lower standards

and achievement levels in Tamil amongst Tamil students. Inter-ethnic communication is mainly through Malay and English. This has led to a *Speak Tamil at Home* campaign started by an MP from the Malaysian Indian Congress.

The antipathy that is expressed amongst English-educated Tamils towards these Tamil monolinguals is reflected in terms such as *mattam [having no prestige]*. These attitudes are ironically prevalent in Tamil Nadu too where those without English education are regarded as *paTikaata muTTaaL [illiterate]*. This prestige assigned to English by many speech communities is the globalisation process that is taking place in many parts of the world, the internationalism associated with the English language and the belief that an English education combined with the hard and applied sciences opens up international career prospects. Tamil monolingualism, on the other hand, is linked to a low occupational status. A Tamil monolingual speaker whether in Singapore or Malaysia tends to be employed in low status jobs in the plantations, or as cleaners, gardeners, construction workers or factory workers. Thus a familiar pattern emerges. The social identity of the English-educated is one who belongs to the middle class, one with social mobility and who shares in the economic wealth of the nation. The social identity of the Tamil-educated engaged in low income jobs is one with low prestige, little economic wealth and little social mobility.

Language and Identity

A community's solidarity may be expressed through the language code it chooses to use. To what extent do Indians express their social bonding through the value of linguistic unity? To what extent is the Tamil language a symbol of in-group loyalty and solidarity amongst Indian Singaporeans?

The literature on attitude and social identity describes speech as a social dimension of one's identity. Its socio-psychological feature is an expression of the need to belong to or to identify with different groups (see Tajfel, 1978). One could argue that the Indian community is divided into two groups: Tamil-educated and English-educated Indians (*Straits Times*, 28 Dec 1992). The English educated recognise that the English language has higher status and therefore choosing this language code is an expression of identity of not only belonging to the English-educated community of Singaporeans, but also in a sense of belonging to the larger, wider English-speaking world, linked by education, literature, and the media — press, radio and television.

Ethnicity and nationality

The identity of English-educated Indian in Singapore, I would argue, is based not so much on ethnicity, sex, religion or occupational background but rather on socio-economic and educational background. Such categorisation often leads to the formation of dynamic social groups whose common attributes are socio-economic status and greater social mobility. The choice of language code, Tamil or English, is strongly correlated with socio-economic classification and the distinctive life styles that go with it. The 1980 census survey (Tay, 1983) notes that

the higher the income, the smaller the number of persons using Tamil as principal household language. English-educated Tamils would argue that their identity is not ethnic but national and linguistic. They are Singaporean and their chosen language is English. To opt to identify with a Tamil-educated group would be to belong to a smaller community, with less power economically, politically and socially.

Tamil does not have the status and significance that English, Chinese and Malay have in Singapore (Mani & Gopinathan, 1983). English has international status, Chinese is the language of 75% of the total population, and Malay is an important regional language. The conflict that the Tamil-speaking community faces is expressed in several ways. Social pressure is put upon the community by English-educated Tamils with questions such as *tamiR soru potuma? [Will Tamil feed you? Can you make a living out of Tamil?]* This question implies that there are inadequate career opportunities for even those who have advanced level qualifications in Tamil. There are also signs that Indians face an identity crisis. *Tamiranaaka irutukitu tamiR peeseterila. [You call yourself a Tamil but you don't know how to speak Tamil. When you meet a Tamil speaker initiate the conversation in Tamil, don't switch to English].*

The Tamil community would like to see more opportunities for the public use of Tamil, for instance, in parliament and during cultural celebrations. It is felt that this would help to show a sense of solidarity. But although two senior Indian MPs attempted to speak Tamil during the election campaign in 1989, they failed to capture the affections of the Indians because of their minimal command of the language. While not all the Indians in Singapore have displayed a sense of language loyalty towards Tamil, there has nevertheless been community support for Tamil-medium education. The value of mother tongue maintenance is seen as a living link to ethnic culture that would provide the norms that would prevent 'deculturation' (Mani & Gopinathan, 1983). Some regard the loss of mother tongue as loss of Indian culture. Bilinguals who maintain Tamil and English are those who recognise the rich, cultural heritage that one can have access to through Tamil culture. There are members of the Tamil community who have shown a keenness to revive mother tongue maintenance. There are also second generation parents who have children in school and have begun to make a conscious effort to use Tamil as a home language. How adequate is this support for mother tongue maintenance?

Tamil diglossia: High and low varieties

The Tamil that evolved into a literary and prestigious language in Tamil Nadu and the Tamil spoken by peasant workers that evolved into village dialects may be regarded as diglossic (Ferguson, 1959). The range of Tamil varieties spoken reflect the educational backgrounds of such speakers. The emergence of high and low varieties in Tamil and the acceptance or rejection of such varieties may help to provide an explanation for language shift amongst school going children. There are pedagogical implications arising out of these attitudes for such attitudes may either encourage or discourage the use of Tamil.

While institutional support for the use of Tamil in official documents, the media and school has increased, such support alone is inadequate in gaining wide spread support for the functional use of the language. The literary variety is confined to a small group educated in Tamil: teachers, writers and those engaged in the media. It is spoken widely by an older (45+) generation of speakers who had formal education in Tamil in India or in Tamil medium schools in the plantations in Malaysia. It is also spoken by the younger generation who are mainly literate in Tamil. The low variety is used far more widely by those with little or no education in Tamil in their everyday interaction with their family and friends. Tamil plantation workers, factory workers, construction workers, for instance, speak a low colloquial variety with easily identifiable pronunciation with a great deal of borrowing and code-mixing. Teachers from the region observe that over the years, as more students study Tamil as a second language level, standards of attainment and proficiency levels are lower than twenty years ago. Those who studied in Tamil medium schools in the fifties and sixties have a better command of the language than those in the national schools.

There is conflict amongst Tamil educationists on the variety of Tamil that should be recommended for learners, whether a high variety or a Spoken Tamil variety for spoken communication. The debate is similar to the debate amongst English, Chinese and Malay language educators over the setting of norms and standards, whether it should be endonormative or exonormative. There are teachers and writers who claim that only literary Tamil is appropriate for all school learners. These groups do not accept a Spoken Tamil variety and emphasise literary Tamil registers for all occasions. Harold Shiffman from the University of Washington, author of *A Grammar of Spoken Tamil*, in a talk given recently at NIE in February 1993, observed that Tamil literary pundits in India reject the notion of Spoken Tamil and of varieties of Tamil.

In the Tamil language curriculum, Tamil textbooks place too heavy an emphasis on the learning of literary forms, for instance, the learning of *tirukural*, a literary text of 1,700 stanzas of wise sayings, and *mooturai*, a set of classical verses. All pupils are required tomemorise these stanzas. Few understand them or find functional use for them. There is heavy dependence on translations from English to Tamil for reading comprehension texts. Tamil teachers write these translations using English language encyclopedias. Purists who are supporters of literary registers accept only *tooye tamiR* — 'pure Tamil' or *tanittamiR*. They reject any form of borrowing from other languages. This may be traced back to the nationalistic movement in India in the 1940s gave rise to the *tani tamiR iyakam* in Tamil Nadu. The main objective of the movement was to 'purify' Tamil language, that is, to remove all forms of linguistic borrowings from other languages, especially Sanskrit. Interference and transfer from English is considered undesirable and as imperfections in speakers. There is failure to understand that this is a natural phenomenon when languages are in contact, and this interlanguage phase will give way to greater mastery at advanced levels of learning the language.

Pedagogic implications

What are some of the pedagogic implications arising out of these attitudes? Many teachers unfortunately insist upon a formal register during spoken communication in the classroom. This leads to excessive emphasis on grammar drills, memory work, written exercises and less emphasis on spoken and interactive activities amongst young learners. The usual spoken language activities in the classroom emphasise formal registers and oratorical styles. Few classroom activities tend to emphasise situational or contextual language learning activities. There is therefore a need to develop language activities that emphasise the functional use of language in the spoken medium (Saravanan, 1990).

Local Singapore dialectal varieties which have distinctive phonological features are rejected as 'incorrect' and 'corrupt'. A young primary school learner, for instance, is discouraged from using English words such as *bus, car, or ice-cream* — common lexical words that the young pupils would code-mix with English in a conversation conducted in Tamil with his peers. Pupils who say *naan pasil vanteen [I came by bus]* are corrected to say *naan peeruntiyil vantee*; if they say *naan ais kriim sapiTukireen [I am eating ice-cream]* they are corrected to say *naan panikooR sapiTukireen*.

What are some of the implications of such approaches and attitudes? Teachers' attitudes towards child language, playground language and classroom language may either produce negative or positive attitudes towards language acquisition and language use. Teachers who are excessively prescriptive and punitive often put off young learners from using the language. Errors become stigmatised. Parents report that children are alienated and avoid using the language in the classroom and at home. This may accelerate further shift to the use of English. The formal register cannot become the language of the playground nor the language of the home. The language taught in school will remain a 'classroom language'. Teachers themselves are perhaps unaware of the pedagogical implications of playground language. There has been no comprehensive study of child language use or child language development amongst young Tamil learners to help to increase the awareness of teachers to child language acquisition patterns amongst Tamil–English children (Saravanan, 1992b).

The formal register is not only prevalent in the classroom and school but also in the media; in radio and television news and information programmes and in interviews and talk shows. Here again the purists seem to have taken over. The result is that formal registers and frozen styles tend sometimes to be incomprehensible and less appealing to the masses with low levels of literacy and to young learners with low levels of competency in the language. Many comment that literary registers in Tamil may be compared to literary Sanskrit or literary Telegu which is used by an educated elite, making it comparable, for example, to RP in Britain.

There is also a tendency to use formal registers on the media. The formal registers used by radio broadcasters in programmes where children and school children take part, for example, talk shows and interviews, leave the interviewees tongue-tied and silent. Many adult interviewees are apologetic that they can't

speak proper Tamil. They feel inadequate and the tendency is avoidance; partici-
pants are reluctant to speak in Tamil and in participating in such programmes
and cultural activities.

The strong argument for Spoken Tamil and a less formal register in particular
settings is that it will not only win more listeners and encourage more speakers
to speak the language but that this variety will have greater accessibility to other
Indian speakers of Malayalam, Telugu and Punjabi. There is failure to under-
stand the natural phenomenon of code-switching and code-mixing and the
interlanguage phenomenon that occurs when languages are in contact.

The Use of Tamil

A study of language maintenance in the Tamil-speaking community has to be
accompanied by observations of language use at the societal level. In order to
observe the functional use of language at societal level, the choice of language
codes by bilingual Tamil–English speakers in the domains of home and friend-
ship and language behaviour in the religious domain will be discussed briefly.
In multilingual, multicultural societies such as Singapore, speech communities
have more than one language or language variety in their speech repertoires. The
phenomenon of code-switching is seen when a speaker switches from one
language to another. Code-mixing takes place when one language is mixed with
words or phrases from another language.

The literature on code-switching and domain congruence provides a starting
point. It notes that there are socialite defined rules that determine choice of
language in particular domains. There is for instance a relationship between the
language of variety and other speech elements, such as the interlocutors, the role
relationships, and the locale or setting. Code-switching represents speech that is
congruent with the social situation. Blom & Gumperz (1972) note the use of the
standard language when talking about official matters and dialect when talking
about family and personal matters. The language code may therefore be deter-
mined by the topic, locale and the interlocutors. Thus religion and the domains
of education would be considered formal and family and friendship domains
would be considered informal.

A brief description follows now of Tamil language use in religious and cultural
activities, its function in the media and Tamil as an intra-ethnic language. It is
based on interviews with Tamil religious and community elders, a study of media
practice, and interviews with media presenters.

Tamil as a community language

The language associated with the religion of Hindu temples is Sanskrit, a high
prestigious, language confined to Brahmins and in Singapore to Brahmin priests.
The temples have tended to attract and involve a large number of Tamil house-
wives especially from low income groups. Recently community leaders have
attempted to expand religious and cultural activities in Tamil in the temples to

help a younger generation acquire religious knowledge and participate more fully in religious rituals and ceremonies.

Some temples conduct *dewaram*, 'religious' classes conducted by *othuvar*, 'teachers' who teach from Tamil religious and musical texts. Others have retained English for their religious activities, for example, Ramakrishnan Mission which attracts English speaking groups. The temples conduct *bajan* (hymn) singing sessions in Tamil, Hindi, English and Sanskrit. The temples have become the venue for health talks, educational activities and family counselling sessions which are held in Tamil and English. The sessions in Tamil attract a large number of Tamil and Moslem Indian housewives who are literate only in Tamil. The Hindu Centre with an active Youth Wing promotes Hinduism to English speaking groups and publishes its journal *om kara* in Tamil and English. Thus several language codes are used in the religious domain. This depends quite often on the dominant linguistic-cultural groups involved in the religious activities. The Gujurati, Sindhi groups use mainly Hindi while the Tamil–English speaking groups use mixed codes of Tamil and English.

There has been some effort by community and cultural organisations to promote Indian culture. The Indian Fine Arts society, conducts classes in South Indian classical dance (*baratha Natayam*) and karnatic music. Other community organisations, for example, Kala Mandir promotes religious, music and dance classes in Indian languages. The language codes of such cultural activities are mainly Tamil and Sanskrit. The Tamil Representative Council, and the Tamil Language Society promote linguistic and cultural activities in Tamil. The decentralisation of cultural activities (the *moommoorthigal viRa* and the annual *navaratiri* festival in the temples and at the community centres has led to greater participation from both middle class and working class children. But closer scrutiny shows that the number who will continue to participate are a small number of artists. Singapore Indians who contributed to the Indian arts scene are in their late 40s and 50s. Some have retired. There are very few in the younger age groups who ` have made music or dance a full time career.

The media

The role of the media in providing exposure to community languages is well known. There is a certain amount of passive exposure to Tamil language through the media. Compared to the publishing industry with its range of novels and magazines, it is the movie industry in India that attracts a large audience amongst the masses. More than a hundred Tamil films are produced annually. The use of folk and village dialects as opposed to literary Tamil in Tamil cinema attracts the masses, the illiterate, and the poor in India. A less literary more colloquial Tamil with its regional varieties is prevalent in the media and entertainment industry in India. Furthermore, a new generation of Indian composers who use electronic and audio technology have mass appeal. Tamil pop music has a big following amongst young Tamils in Singapore, from taxi-drivers to factory workers. The acceptance of village dialects in cinema lyrics is seen as a liberal form of expression. It is becoming common to hear lyrics with such colloquial expressions.

In contrast, Tamil Radio and Television sections of Singapore Broadcasting Corporation have an official policy not to use Spoken Tamil or *peccu tamiR* in its programmes. All programmes from news and current affairs programmes to talk shows have tended to use only one variety, that is literary Tamil. As a result of this, it is observed that more Indians listen to English programmes rather than Tamil as the formal presentation in Tamil makes it harder to comprehend and has less appeal. But recently there has been an attempt to include audience participation to attract a larger of number of listeners. The extension of air time has enabled programmes that include phone-ins, talk shows, youth club programmes, quiz and variety shows and interviews that encourage housewives and the public to participate. The use of colloquial Tamil, code-mixing in Tamil–English and Tamil–Malay amongst the interviewees in such programmes is now 'tolerated' on some occasions where literary Tamil was once the only register acceptable.

Religion

Observations were made in Sembawang between 1984–7 by Saravanan (1989) at the Sri Subramaniam temple and at the Sri Krishnan Temple. The rituals and preparations for the annual fire walking ceremony and kavadi procession were observed. Tamil was used for religious discourse and prayer meetings, announcements, notices and posters. This temple is also the venue for '*tevaram*' or religious classes. The results showed that males in all the age groups showed high maintenance of Tamil in this locale. The explanation is that particular rituals in this locale are performed largely by the males. Thus in this locale community elders encourage mother tongue maintenance in relation to religious rituals and religious discourse both amongst the older and younger males, for it is felt that loss of mother tongue will lead to the loss of Indian culture (Saravanan, 1992a).

Economic life

Language use in the employment domain was surveyed at Seagate Technology Factory and at the shipyards in Sembawang. While English is used in the management and production sectors of the shipyard, a mixed code Tamil–English is used among the semi-skilled and unskilled staff. Malay is used mainly as an inter-ethnic language among the unskilled workers. All notices, circular, forms and daily reports are in English.

Transactions conducted during buying and selling of goods recorded in an Indian textile and food shop showed higher use of English than Tamil. In the home domain older informants and working class women reported that they speak mainly Tamil as a household language. Women are expected to speak in Tamil to their children and teach them Tamil. This was part of the societal role of women who are expected to maintain their mother tongue and culture. The pattern changes with middle-class informants, for they tend to speak more English in the home than Tamil. Older persons and women factory workers reported reading Tamil newspapers more than English newspapers. The majority reported buying the daily newspaper *The Straits Times*. They watch the daily Tamil news, weekly Tamil films, variety shows and Tamil video tapes.

Saravanan (1989) shows that the Tamil speech community in Sembawang is maintaining the language in the domains of family, friendship, and transactions with neighbours. This is especially true of working class families whose choice of language code is influenced by their low literacy in English and greater facility with Tamil. There is shift to English among middle class English educated speakers. There was more use of Tamil than English in the informal domains. The survey shows the solidarity function of Tamil amongst speakers who use it mutually for interaction.

Tamil as a Lingua Franca

Apart from a Tamil-speaking majority, the Indian community in Singapore is represented by other Indian linguistic groups such as Hindi, Punjabi, Malayalam, Telugu and Urdu speakers. What significance does Tamil have as an intra-ethnic language of communication amongst the Indians?

The Malayalees and Indian Moslem communities have shown the most support while other minority groups have shown antipathy towards Tamil. Tamil is a Dravidian language. The Sikhs, Bengalis and other linguistic minority groups from north India speak Indo-European languages which have very few common roots with the Dravidian languages of the south. The cultural diversity and religious diversity of the Indians is expressed through dress, diet, religious, cultural rituals, and marriage patterns. Recently these communities have now been given a choice of Malay, Hindi, Punjabi, Bengali, Gujurati and Urdu as second languages for their children.

Conclusion

I have argued elsewhere (Saravanan, forthcoming) that Tamil will remain very much a classroom language among the younger generation of speakers. One of the reasons is the very prescriptive approach to teaching and learning. Secondly, peer group interaction in inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic communication amongst Indians continues to be in English. Many see little significant use for Tamil in their everyday life. Despite the support for the Tamil language, middle class Indians are aware that as the Singapore educational system is based on language achievement as well as on academic achievement, Indian children should concentrate on securing places in colleges and universities (Sinda Report, 1991). There is concern that achievement levels amongst Indians have gone down at all educational levels. In 1980, though only 6.4% of the population, Indians constituted almost 6.5% of the university population. But the figures for the 1990–91 academic year indicate a dramatic fall as Indians made up only 4.3% of the students as against 7% of the population (Mani & Gopinathan, 1983). Middle class parents would therefore want their children to concentrate on academic achievement, on the sciences, mathematics and English language. It has been argued that the marginalisation of Indians is partly an indirect and unintended result of the move to make students learn their mother tongues. As the Chinese make up 77% of the population, greater resources in terms of good schools, teachers and

facilities will be allocated to Special Assistance Plan schools which teach English and Chinese at the first language level.

To what extent would state and political intervention help to maintain the language in the community? As long as social elitism and economic elitism is related to English language education, Tamil in turn will have little significance. Mani & Gopinathan (1983) point to the link between language and economics. Thus the choice of English over Tamil amongst Indians is regarded as rational decision-making. While Tamil has official status in Singapore, it is not the language of the government, the courts, the universities or the working language in the nation. The use of Tamil in the home domain then becomes crucial for the maintenance and continuity of the language. Though the majority of Tamil-speaking children study Tamil in school, it will remain very much a classroom language, especially amongst those who come from English-speaking homes. Such speakers find little functional use for the language as English is used widely in all domains. Parents from English-educated homes report an attitudinal problem with their young children who display an eagerness to communicate in English but not in Tamil. There is a need to organise Tamil language classes for pre-school children at the community level and at the national level to give early support for the acquisition of Tamil. At the present moment there are few pre-school centres run by government and private organisations that offer Tamil.

In such circumstances it becomes a case of replacive bilingualism. Tamil is replaced by English. Tamil will continue to be spoken widely by Indians on the lower rungs of the economic ladder and thus continue to have a lower status. The relative standing of the two languages in the community will determine the choice of language code.

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