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**ERA Conference 24<sup>th</sup>-26<sup>th</sup> November 1997. Singapore**  
**A Study of Bilingual Singaporean Families: Social Support Networks**  
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**Introduction**

This paper reports on a 3 year project that was initiated between NICER, National Institute of Education and the Speech Department, University of Newcastle Upon Tyne Newcastle, in January 1997. The project is entitled Language and Social Support Networks: A comparative study of Chinese, Malay and Tamil speaking children in Home, Community and School contexts in Singapore (Saravanan,1997).

The project was set up as a result of several studies and surveys that have reported observing linguistic communities experiencing language shift. Saravanan (1994) looked at the relative status, the functional roles played by Tamil and the issues of language, culture and identity faced by the minority Tamil language community and concluded that language shift in the Tamil community has come about as a result of the dominant role played by the role of English, the extensive use of English in a number of domains and the resulting loss of language use in home domain. Similarly Bibi Jan (1994) examined the changes in the status, and value of the Malay language, and the language shift taking place from English to Malay in the Malay community. Chew, Xu and Chen (1997) report on a recent survey on language use and language attitudes amongst Chinese speakers and the underlying patterns in language use in various domains. They concluded that though dialects are spoken amongst grandparents, dialects experience a sharp decline in a cross-generational manner even within the family domain. They sum up and conclude that dialects are basically falling outside of the family domain. Language shift has taken place as a result of the disfavour within which dialects are viewed in a family setting. Mandarin has now been established as a public language among Chinese Singaporeans. English as a singly predominantly-used language is with a small proportion of the population. It is still the most widely used language by Chinese Singaporeans for dealings with the government despite the extensive use of Mandarin in public domains.

The current study is a bilingual research study of three generation families in Singapore, Chinese, Malay and Tamil speaking three generation families ( that is, families with children and grandparents

**Research Team:**

1<sup>st</sup> year: Members of research team from NIE:Chair A/P Gopinathan. Members of Research Team: Vanithamani Saravanan, Diana Nomanbhoy, Xu Daming, Pamela Sharpe, Kamsiah Abdullah, Linda Gan, Ramiah Kalimuthu, Agnes Chang, Eunice Tay. The collaborator from The University of Newcastle Upon Tyne is Dr Li Wei. Since then there have been some changes in the research team from NIE.

**Decisions on sample to be selected:**

The 1990 Census survey reports languages most frequently spoken at home as:  
Mandarin speakers 558,564 = 23.6% , Chinese Dialects: 933,241 = 39.4 % Hokkien 458,229 = 19.3% Teochew 202,577 = 8.6% Cantonese 189,700 = 8.0% Malay 338,647 = 14.3,% Tamil 68,269 = 2.9% and English 454,051 = 19.2%

The proposed survey will attempt to include 10 families from each Chinese ethnic group: Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hainanese, as well as 20 Malay families, and 20 Tamil-families. Though this far from a satisfactory judgemental sample, the nature of the study has made it difficult to consider a large sample. The numbers in the sample will be expanded when there is access to more families, and resources.

### **Decisions on Methodology**

As one of the most complex questions in any research study is the selection of methodology, a discussion of methodological considerations will be presented in this section. One of the questions the team had to decide upon was whether we wanted to select the sample in terms of socio-economic or SES background, which has been extensively used in studies but at the same time open to debate and discussion in the literature on the use of SES. SES is computed using educational qualifications, income, occupation, residence and life style. We had to decide whether to use other approaches to help us decide upon sample families. There were no resources for large scale random sampling. Secondly previous studies had to a large extent included SES as a factor in the choice of language use in particular domains. Furthermore a large random sampling, we decided was not the approach that should be taken for this study. Since the sociolinguistic setting is heterogeneous, amongst the various ethnic groups, we decided that it might be better not to start with preconceived labels.

The theoretical framework selected for the study had to offer other factors which could offer an equal or better explanation of the differentiation in language use patterns. The approach of segmenting people into upper, middle and lower classes (SES) does not always reflect social reality. Rather small scale, more concrete categories are available to researchers. An alternative to social class in identifying speaker groups is the application of the concept of social network analysis. The application of the social network concept to the study of the social mechanism underlying language maintenance and shift in dialectal and bilingual communities has been researched by Milroy (1987) and Li Wei (1994). It has been suggested that the social network concept is capable of accounting more convincingly and economically than other variables such as social class, gender, educational level and ethnicity for patterns of language use in different communities and groups of speakers.

The research into speech communities in Britain conducted by Li Wei (1994), Milroy (1987) using the principle of Social Network Analysis offered an alternative framework from an SES based study. The theoretical framework of social network analysis has been used by Li Wei, (1994) and is supported by a number of other researchers. Bott (1957 : 60) quoted by Li Wei (1994) states that "When many of the people a person knows interact with one another, that is, when the person's network is close-knit, the members of his network tend to reach consensus on norms and they exert consistent informal pressure to one another to conform to the norms... But when most people a person knows do not interact with one another, that is when his network is close knit, more variation of norms is likely to develop in the network". Milroy 1987 in her study of inner city Belfast communities used the social network framework to analyse the use of linguistic variables. Milroy concluded that when networks were less dense, role relationships were usually multiplex, that is, individuals interacted with each other in more than one capacity. The analysis includes density, anchorage, and multiplexity which pertain to the structure and content of the networks respectively.

Li Wei (1994:12) states that in the 1980s and 1990s the social network perspective has gained popularity among sociolinguists who have felt a need for a more dynamic and coherent

model of linguistic variation and change. In his study of Chinese communities, he looked at the density and multiplexity pertaining to the structure and context of the network respectively.

Milroy (1987) and Li Wei (1994) argue that various analytic techniques for data analysis are available, ranging from basic mathematical graphs and sociograms to more sophisticated matrix algebra and multivariate data reduction methods such as cluster analysis and block modelling. These techniques tend to minimise the content of the network which defines the meaning of interpersonal relationships. In network analysis one is analysing strong and weak network ties, strong would be dense in terms of structure, but the degree of intensity and frequency of contact involved would be also high.. They reflect that there are social units within which people feel a sense of belonging, that is, the social networks within which they interact. Milroy (1987) developed a network strength scale -using Anova and Spearman Rank Order to look at networks, those networks that encourage maintenance and stability and those that encourage change or divergence in language use. It was found that weak networks exist in socially mobile communities, speakers tend to contract large numbers which are open networks.

### **This study**

In the current study it was decided that the justification for the use of social network theoretical approach was the preferred approach. Instead of referring to social class, network approach is more feasible with groups who are economically marginal, or powerless and resident in homogeneous neighbourhoods. Li Wei (1994: 32) states that approaching the target community through personal network contacts not only helps to facilitate fieldwork process but also enables the investigator to observe communicative behaviours of members. In this study the selection of sample families have been through approaching kindergartens as we decided that children to be included in this study should be from K2 classes, as children in these classes were moving on soon to primary one .

It was decided that essentially data collection was to be through a questionnaire plus interview schedule. Data collection includes language use patterns of three generations: on child, at home, in school and at play, including language use patterns in the family - and in family activities. Language use patterns will include the use of dialects, English, Mandarin and the use of mixed code (eg English-Mandarin, dialect-Mandarin, dialect-English etc )

### **The Questionnaire**

There are three parts to the questionnaire, each of it dealing with data on the child, data on the parents, data on language use patterns of grandparents. One of the problems in constructing the questionnaire was whether we should specify the use of mixed code and the analysis of mixed language code. We decided not to give too much emphasis as an earlier study ( Chew, Daming, and Chen,1997) had analysed mixed code language use. eg Hokkien-Mandarin, Cantonese-Mandarin, Teochew-Mandarin, Hakka-Mandarin.

The other question was whether we needed to translate these questionnaires into Chinese, Malay and Tamil, especially for the grandparents' generation? We decided to try it out , without translating, and now have decided to train bilingual research assistants who will collect all the data rather than use a self report approach for data collection. We decided not to use self-report data, where questionnaires are left behind to fill up .There were areas in the

questionnaire which would be open to different interpretations and we have decided that for the sake of consistency it was better to train research assistants and monitor data collection.

Our focus was to look at family based language use patterns, where we could generalise and draw conclusions and observations on community language behaviour. What social characteristics families displayed in terms of linguistic behaviour, was one aspect to analyse both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Part of the survey initially included an attempt to record children in interaction with their grandparents, parents, siblings during family activities, meal time and play time. The question that arose was again, how we could collect data efficiently? Preliminary attempts were made and a number of Tamil and Chinese speaking families were contacted to record interactions with family members. There were a number of methodological problems such as difficulty in getting into households and arranging for data collection. We needed extensive co-operation from all members of family. We needed resources to transcribe these extensive recordings. We might have to look at this aspect of data collection later if time permits.

### **Social Networks**

A number of field work procedures are available, for example, self report data that can give a large amount of data in a short time compared with family based observation of social interaction. The criteria for selecting friends in networks may pose a problem.

The use of tactful interview questions, was one way to begin, for example, by presenting interviewees with a set of social settings, and observing language data, for example, in the domains of home, work, and school setting.

The spirit of the network approach is to establish network patterns within families. The use of ethnographic interview procedures where informal conversation replaces a clinical mode of question-answer exchanges were found to be more appropriate. Some sample questions to establish network patterns were for example:

“Is there anyone you talk to about your work or problems related to your work”?

What language do you choose to communicate in?

The social network framework was decided upon for the Singapore study using Li Wei's (1994) approach. Li Wei worked out two sets of networks, exchange types and interactive types. Exchange types (where the speaker depends on moral /material support from his networks. Interactive types are where there is frequent contact with friends but one does not turn to them for material/moral attachment, or consult them for emotional support. Sample question set up to elicit responses are , for example,

Is there anyone you would talk to about your family, or family related problems, for example, your children's education?

Who would you consult if your children are not doing /managing well at school?

Who would you consult if you had problems of looking after elderly parents?

Who would you consult in getting a maid or caregiver for your family?

Who are your friends with whom you speak/share your spiritual life/needs, your religious life?

One aspect of the social network contacts was the question: Should we include kith and kin as part of the social network? The first decision was to include kith and kin contacts. As there is a lot of emphasis on family/ community relationships in our societies it might be odd to leave

out kith and kin. On the other hand listing down kith and kin might be too narrow, as in a sense that is the given, ie. one's kith and kin. It does not capture one's social network contacts and in a sense one's involvement in the community. As Li Wei observed families with a larger number of members tend to provide a larger number of relatives, of kith and kin compared with those with fewer siblings.

The current study faced the following methodological problems in collecting data on networks. A set of questions relating to prompting the interviewee to provide the names of 10 friends in their network was seen as a problematic question. Very often interviewees could not name ten friends, mostly not more than three friends from their network was named. In some cases they could name more friends who come under the non-emotional network. Some interviewees questioned as to why we were interested in their friends, why they had to name friends. Some remarked that this was personal. Other remarked that they had few friends or that they only interacted and consulted with their spouses on all matters, or their sisters and brothers or their kith and kin. A great deal of prompting had to take place in order to elicit responses. Unfortunately, sometimes the research assistants ended up asking insensitive questions as is illustrated below.

On questions on the nature of network - friendship patterns two research assistants (RA) asked the following questions: RA asked "Who would you consult if you had problems with your marriage?" The interviewee was surprised and turned to the husband who was equally surprised. Her reply "even if I had problems with my marriage I would not tell you which friends I consulted in front of my husband and the interviewer. On a second question the RA asked the following question, "Who would you consult if you had money problems?" Again the respondent turned to the husband and looked surprised and said "of course my husband. Even if I had money problems or with my marriage, I would not tell you names in front of my husband. These questions were therefore considered insensitive as the RAs did not take into consideration the appropriateness of such questions.

### **Cultural Components: culture and heritage**

Part of the objective of the survey is to include observations on language, culture and identity. This is a complex area to get into. The following sample questions were generated in order to survey the sense of identity amongst the Chinese participants:

What is it that makes you a Chinese or gives you a sense of Chinese identity?

Is it being Chinese - being Taoist? or a Buddhist?

Is it carrying out certain practices -what are they?

Is it being a Confucianist? Is it following Confucianist philosophy?

If you are a Christian - how does that make you a Chinese?

eg Is it by following church sermons in Mandarin, Hokkien etc

Is it different if you follow the sermon in English?

Does speaking Chinese- dialect or Mandarin make you more of a Chinese?

Is it following certain customs, traditions, for example, observing Chinese New Year, Moon Cake Festival ,the Hungry Ghosts festival, Chap Goh Mei, etc.?

A similar set of appropriate questions was drawn up for Indians and Malays in the sample. Some of these open-ended questions have been incorporated into the questionnaire.

### **Data on the role of the community**

Other objectives of the survey is to include qualitative data on the role of the community.

- ξ The role of clan associations, eg. membership in clan associations
- ξ investigation on the nature of the shift that has taken place, from a linguistic and cultural role to a more narrower role of largely cultural activities -
- ξ the role of clans, Chinese Cultural Heritage Centre , etc
- ξ the role assigned by government agencies
- recent changes that have taken place in the community, changes since the elections of 1997, as town councils are being set up to co-ordinate community activities
- ξ the range of community based activities for all the 3 generations
- ξ what is the language of cultural activities organised by the community centres of pre-school classes as well as art, dance, drama classes , the language speech and drama classes

### **What influences people/ communities?**

Other aspects we hope to survey is the nature of community activities and the nature of influence of community organisations.

- ξ the nature of any advice, help in their choice of language codes for their children -
- ξ the roles, identity of particular agencies, institutions, organisations?
- ξ the nature of strong, influential institutional agencies: input via government agencies and community organisations, involvement of schools, media, in awareness raising activities eg Speak Mandarin campaigns.

### **Statistical Analysis**

One consideration is the Use of Principal Components Analysis(see Li Wei, 1994 ) the use of both Social Network Analysis and the Principal Components Analysis to study the Chinese community ( Li Wei,1994). The PCA is a quantitative measure. It uses statistical techniques which allow the investigator to examine a large number of linguistic variants , to compare speakers with similar linguistic characteristics ( displayed on graphs in clusters) and, only as a last step, to determine what social similarities are shared by these linguistically categorised groups of speakers. A particular ' Principal Component' is a set of variables (eg phonological ) which can be shown statistically to give the best account of the data. Groups of people who share particular linguistic features are categorised in terms of sets of linguistic features rather than with respect to preconceived sociological features.

What is different in this approach is the lack of a priori assumptions about the relevance of particular social categories. This will be used to help sort the following types of families and children:

- ξ in order to sort out whether they are Chinese-educated or English -educated, ie whether family uses dominant English, Chinese, or bilingual patterns and
- ξ in order to sort out whether the child is dominant in English, Chinese or is equally bilingual

eg some children grow up speaking mixed code eg Hokkien at home, and some with or without Mandarin till this is introduced in nursery, and in kindergarten (cf Li Wei's study on Newcastle).

Calculation of indices (see, Li Wei, 1994, pg121)

One other consideration is the calculation of the types of exchange networks that people contract. This is calculated under several categories:

- 1) those who give advice, emotional relationship, support

- 2) those who belong to the non-emotional set of friends, ie. everyday transactions eg people at work, shopkeepers etc
- 3) to calculate exchange networks: the following was calculated
- 4)
  - 1) ethnic index: : no. of people with similar ethnic background
  - 2) peer index: no. from same generation

to calculate interactive networks: the following was calculated.

- 1) ethnic index
- 2) peer index

### **Comparative studies between Newcastle and Singapore?**

While some parts of the Newcastle study on 3 generational families and bilingualism have been completed - other aspects of child and individual bilingualism are being studied - the key findings of the Newcastle studies will be compared to the current study in Singapore in order to draw conclusions on the nature of

- 1) societal bilingualism
- 2) child bilingualism and multilingualism and
- 3) individual bilingualism

Other studies on ethnic and peer interaction patterns available : Zareena Kamraj's study (1996) on Singaporean Malay families.

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