
Title	The pattern of Tamil language use among primary school Tamil pupils in Singapore
Author(s)	K Ramiah
Source	<i>Singapore Journal of Education</i> , 11(2), 45-53
Published by	Institute of Education (Singapore)

This document may be used for private study or research purpose only. This document or any part of it may not be duplicated and/or distributed without permission of the copyright owner.

The Singapore Copyright Act applies to the use of this document.

The Pattern of Tamil Language Use among Primary School Tamil Pupils in Singapore

K Ramiah

ABSTRACT

The specific objective of this study is to identify the patterns of language use among primary school Tamil pupils in Singapore. This study examined the socio-cultural and socio-economic factors which contribute to this pattern of language use. It investigated the use of Tamil in eight domains and the patterns of maintenance and shift among the younger Tamil population in Singapore. The sample of this study was 1000 pupils randomly selected from 12 primary schools

Keywords: Language use, second language, primary education, bilingualism.

in Singapore, representing the cross section of the population. The instrument used for this study was questionnaire. Analysis of data shows that three variables, age, socio-economic level and education affect the use of Tamil language. Most of them use Tamil when they converse with their grandparents and to a certain extent with their parents. But when they interact with their siblings and friends they use English. Analysis of data clearly indicates that Tamil is losing its grip among younger generation.

Introduction

Language maintenance and language shift is one aspect of linguistics that has attracted the interest of many sociolinguists. Fishman's (1966, 424) definition of language maintenance and language shift is a useful starting point. He says:

The study of language maintenance and language shift is concerned with the relationship between change or stability in habitual language use on the one hand, and on-going psychological, social or cultural processes, on the other hand, when populations differing in language are in contact with each other. That language (or language variants) sometimes replace each other, among some speakers, particularly in certain types of domains of language behaviour, under some conditions of inter-group contact, has long aroused curiosity and comment.

Many studies show that linguistic minorities, despite their hard struggle to maintain their language, eventually find that their language is reduced in significance and use. Weinreich (1968) says that language shift should first be analysed in terms of the social functions of the languages

in the contact situation because a mother tongue group might switch to a new language in some functions but not in others. This would be a case of partial shift, not a total shift. He also says that language shift is a long process which should be studied against time with great care.

Hayden (1966) investigated language use in French in Fall River, Spanish in San Antonio and New York; and Ukrainian in Glyplant and Newark and concluded that except in the domains of 'family' and 'close relatives', English had displayed the mother tongue in almost all domains of languages.

In studying the expression of psychological preference for one language over the other Williamson and Van Eerde (1980) note that the particular attitudes and social characteristics within a given social language preference may suggest certain patterns of language maintenance.

Gumperz (1969, 248) states that: "To the extent that social factors affect language usage, it must be the speaker's perception of these factors rather than the social scientist's categorisation of them in terms of class, sex, socio-economic status, etc. which is important. This calls for a cognitive

rather than a correlative, approach to the problem. It suggests that we regard social reality as related to the speaker's perception of this reality". Very few studies have, however, been carried out in a Singapore-type situation of four official languages and in which two minority languages are also media of instruction and mass media communication.

The Position of Indians and Tamils in Singapore

According to 1988 estimates, the population of Singapore is about 2.7 million — Chinese 76.1%, Malays 15% and Indians 6.5%. Among the Indians, Tamils from Tamil Nadu form 64%. The total number of Tamils in Singapore is estimated at slightly more than 108,000, that is, about 4% of the total population of Singapore. The other Indian ethnic groups, are Malayalees, 8% of the Indian population, Punjabis, 8%, Gujeraties, 1% and other Indian ethnic groups 19%.

Although the official policy of the government is to give equal treatment to all four media of instruction, English schools are the most popular. This popularity is justified on the grounds that English is the vehicle of modernisation, indus-

trialisation and urbanisation. In view of this, enrolment in the vernacular schools — Malay, Chinese and Tamil medium schools dropped in the 1970's. Tamil medium schools suffered the most and have now ceased functioning. The closure of the only Tamil secondary school in Singapore (i.e. Umar Pulavar Tamil High School) in 1982, signalled the end of Tamil medium schools where Tamil was taught as a first language.

Tamil as a Second Language in English Schools

The teaching of Tamil as a Second Language (TL2) in English schools was introduced only after 1951. As most of the English educated middle class Tamil parents sent their children to English schools, the number of children who took Tamil as a second language increased considerably. Further, with the introduction of a compulsory second language at the primary level in 1966, and at the secondary level in 1969, the numbers of Indian pupils taking Tamil as a second language (TL2) have also increased. As a consequence of these policies, some 15,000 pupils offered Tamil as a second language in 1989. Tables 1, 2 and 3 provide further data on the teaching of TL2 in Singapore schools.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF SCHOOLS AND JUNIOR COLLEGES OFFERING TL2 (1989)

Level	No. of Schools	No. of Centres	No. of Junior Colleges	Total
Primary	118	1	—	119
Secondary	35	9	—	44
Junior College	—	1	14	15
Total	153	11	14	178

TABLE 2: NUMBER OF STUDENTS LEARNING TL2 (1989)

Level	No. of Pupils in Schools	No. of Pupils in Centres	Total
Primary	9,925	75	10,000
Secondary	2,800	2,200	5,000
Junior College & Pre-U Centre	320	300	620
Total	13,045	2,575	15,620

TABLE 3: NUMBER OF TAMIL TEACHERS TEACHING TL2 (1989)

Level	No. of Teachers
Primary	320
Secondary	85
Junior College & Pre-U Centre	15
Total	420

Shift from Tamil to Other Languages

About 23% of Tamil pupils do not offer Tamil as a second language; instead, they learn Malay or Chinese as their second language (Ramiah, 1987, 8). Tamil, being a minority language, is always in danger of losing its place in society. Some English-educated and middle-class parents argue that Chinese is the second most important language in Singapore and is therefore useful economically and politically while Malay, being a regional language, is useful in Singapore and also in the Asean region. These Indians do not perceive Tamil having a significant political or economic strength in the wider Singapore society.

Yet other Indians think that the social status of Tamils is not high in Singapore society and thus do not want to be identified with Tamil-speaking persons. Further, due to interethnic marriages, some Indians find that they are unable to provide a Tamil-speaking environment at home and their children opt to learn Malay or Chinese.

These are some of the factors which hinder the Indians in getting their children to learn Tamil. Unless the attitude of Tamil parents changes in favour of Tamil, the decline in the use of Tamil language in Singapore will continue.

Research into the Status of Tamil

Research conducted by Mani (1979, 93-105) on the socio-economic status of Tamils reveals that for his sample, only 67% of the mothers and 53% of the fathers were educated up to primary level while 12% of the parents did not have formal education. Most of the parents were engaged in employment which did not require any educational or technical knowledge and about 65% of them earned \$450 or less per month. The situation, though slightly improved now, remains very much the same.

Sobrielo (1985) studied maintenance and shift in Tamil language usage in Singapore. Her study

reveals that if the Tamils fail to maintain their loyalty to their mother tongue then they will lose it as the shift towards English and the other languages is very great. In her findings Sobrielo reveals that there is a noticeable shift among the younger generation of Tamils towards English. While Tamil appears to be maintained in the domains of prayer, family and kin, in the domains of work/school and official business, English was dominant.

Mani & Gopinathan (1983) studied changing literacy trends in the Indian population using the population census of 1957, 1970 and 1980. They reported that in 1957, 4.8% were literate in Tamil but by 1970, the literacy rate in Tamil had declined to 2.8%. However, this rate was checked in 1980 when the rate of literacy rose to 3.4%, but was still well below the literacy rate of 1957. According to Kuo (1979, 331) Tamil is the only language showing a decline in usage at the national level. Tay (1983) notes that only 3% of the Singapore population speak Tamil which, according to her, indicates "that it is not an important language at the national level". Furthermore, she says that with the exception of Tamil, the number of speakers for the other three official languages, namely English, Chinese and Malay has increased, especially among students, and those below 30 years of age.

Mani (1979) conducted a study among 233 primary six pupils who were taking Tamil as a second language. His findings reveal that 81% of them converse with their parents and grandparents in Tamil but only 73% and 32% of them use it among siblings and friends, respectively. Since most of the parents and grandparents are unable to converse in English, they have no choice but to speak in Tamil.

Eleven years have passed since Mani (1979) conducted his study, and it is necessary to examine contemporary patterns of Tamil

language use among primary school pupils in Singapore. Has it remained the same as in 1979 or has a greater shift taken place towards English? This study, it is hoped, will throw some light on this issue.

Objectives of the Study

This study using a sample of Singapore primary school Tamil pupils aims to find out the socio-cultural, economic and other factors which contribute to patterns of language use. It investigated the use of Tamil in the domains of family, kin, neighbour, school, friends, entertainment, reading and prayer.

The specific objectives of this study are:

- (1) to identify the pattern of maintenance and shift of Tamil language use among primary school Tamil pupils in Singapore and the extent of the shift towards English; and
- (2) to identify the socio-cultural, economic, educational and other factors contributing to this pattern of Tamil language use.

Methodology

The Sample

One thousand primary school pupils were randomly selected from twelve primary schools (10 government, 2 aided) representing a cross section of the Tamil population of Singapore. The sample was one-tenth of the total primary school Tamil population, and thus formed a representative population. The educational levels, ranged from primary one to eight extended and ages ranged from 7 to 14. The ratio of boys to girls was about equal.

Instrumentation

A questionnaire was developed to find out the personal particulars of the pupils as well as the use of Tamil in the domains of family, kin, neighbour, school, friendship, entertainment, reading and prayer. The questionnaire was also used to discover their attitudes towards learning Tamil.

The questionnaire was designed in English. The lower primary pupils, especially those in primary one and two, were guided by the teachers on how to respond to the questionnaire. The pupils were also advised to find out from their parents before answering certain questions such

as those dealing with the monthly income and educational qualifications of their parents. The questionnaire has 33 questions and a copy is available from the researcher.

Data Analysis

Two kinds of analysis was used with the data. First, a frequency count was made of the data for each question and analysed in percentages. Secondly, all the relevant questions were grouped under eight domains to find out the pattern of language use in each domain. They were calculated and tabulated under the use of Tamil and English languages in percentages.

Analysis of Data

The first question was designed to find out about pupils' mother tongue. 888 pupils or 88.8% responded that their mother tongue was Tamil, while 8.5% and 1.4% responded that their mother tongue was Malayalam and Telugu respectively. Kannadam and other languages make up the 1.3%. This result clearly reflects the Tamil language learning situation at the national level.

To the question 'What language are you fluent in?' more than 61% responded that they were fluent in English while 56% responded that their fluency was in Tamil. A number of them responded that they were fluent in both Tamil and English.

The question on attitude asked whether they thought the learning of Tamil was useful and to specify their reasons. It is interesting to note that 952 respondents or 95.2% responded positively while 48 respondents or 4.8% responded negatively.

The following are a few examples of those who responded positively:

- (i) 'Tamil is my mother tongue; I must learn it.'
- (ii) 'It is very shameful for one not to learn one's mother tongue.'
- (iii) 'My parents used to tell me Tamil is a beautiful and rich language. So I want to learn Tamil.'
- (iv) 'If I don't learn Tamil, when I grow up I wouldn't be able to speak Tamil. Then the Tamil people will laugh at me and look down upon me.'

The following are a few examples from respondents who gave negative responses for

learning Tamil:

- (i) 'When I go to work, I will speak English not Tamil. So why waste time learning Tamil?'
- (ii) 'My parents say that if I learn Tamil, I cannot get a good job.'
- (iii) 'Learning Tamil is difficult and not interesting.'

family was 72% against 42% for English, the data clearly shows that Tamil is losing its grip among the younger generation of Tamil pupils. Will this trend continue or will it be arrested? It is likely that this trend may continue unless the Tamil community takes steps to arrest the situation.

TABLE 4: LANGUAGE USE IN THE FAMILY DOMAIN

Language Use	Grandparents %	Mother %	Father %	Siblings %	Frequency %
Tamil	87	71	55	51	72
English	12	38	51	63	42
Others	4	2	1	2	2

From the examples cited above, we note that parents and Tamil teachers play an important role in motivating pupils towards learning Tamil.

Let us now look at the use of Tamil and English in each of the domains specified earlier.

Family

The questions examined the respondents' pattern of language use when talking to their immediate family.

The differences in the use of Tamil and English among older and younger pupils are clearly displayed in Table 4. The use of Tamil gradually declines from grandparents to siblings

Kin

Questions in this domain examined the subjects' pattern of language use when talking to older and younger relatives.

Table 5 indicates that when the pupils converse with their older relatives they use Tamil 70% of the time and English 34%. On the other hand, when they talk to their younger relatives they use Tamil 65% and English 59% of the time. This too shows that among younger relatives the use of Tamil is declining while the use of English is steadily increasing.

TABLE 5: LANGUAGE USE IN THE KINSHIP DOMAIN

Language Use	Older Relatives %	Younger Relatives %
Tamil	70	65
English	34	59
Others	2	1

from 87% (to grandparents) to 71% to mother, 55% to father and 51% to siblings. In the case of English, only 12% used English to converse with grandparents but this steadily increased to 38% with mother, 51% with father and 63% with siblings. Although frequent use of Tamil in the

Friends

The respondents' answers to questions on this domain might best reflect their language preference.

Table 6 shows that the respondents use more

**TABLE 6:
LANGUAGE USE IN THE FRIENDSHIP DOMAIN**

Language Use	Frequency %	Easier to Speak %
Tamil	40	46
English	79	69

English and less Tamil when they talk to their friends. When they speak to their friends they use Tamil 40% of the time and English 79%. Of course, there might be some code switching from Tamil to English and vice versa when they speak to their friends. 69% of the subjects found it easier to communicate in English against 46% Tamil.

English class to talk to their classmates. However, in Tamil language class Tamil was used 86% of the time with English used 20% of the time. English was spoken by those who found difficulty in expressing their thoughts in Tamil. They were unable to speak in Tamil due to various reasons, that is, they might have come from non-Tamil speaking backgrounds. Outside the school, the

TABLE 7: LANGUAGE USE IN THE SCHOOL DOMAIN

Language Use	English Class %	Tamil Class %	Outside the School %
Tamil	27	86	59
English	87	20	46

School

Questions for this domain were meant to find out what language they use to talk with their Tamil classmates in English class, Tamil class and outside the school.

In Singapore most schools encourage their students to speak English. They conduct 'Speak English Campaigns' to ensure that their students do not speak dialects or mother tongues and speak only English. In view of this, it is understandable that 87% of the pupils use English in

pupils used both Tamil (59%) and English (46%) more or less equally.

Neighbours

Being a minority, Tamils are scattered all over the island. In view of this fact, most of their neighbours are non-Tamils. Questions on this domain were intended to find out language use with their Tamil neighbours.

According to Table 8, Tamil is used 69% of the time as against 31% English when the subjects

**TABLE 8: LANGUAGE USE IN
THE NEIGHBOURHOOD DOMAIN**

Language Use	Frequency %
Tamil	69
English	31

converse with their neighbours. This means that more than two-thirds of Tamil was used against one-third of English. This might look healthy but as more and more people are being educated in English this trend may change in the future.

Tamil books from, 52% responded that they obtained their Tamil books from school libraries.

Entertainment

The entertainment domain was surveyed to

TABLE 9: LANGUAGE USE IN THE READING DOMAIN

Language Use	Frequency %
Tamil	33
English	83

Reading

The purpose of the question was to find out how much use was made of the language learned as second language (i.e. Tamil) in school.

This domain reflects the fact that English books are commonly read. As the main medium of instruction is English, it is natural that more English books are read than Tamil Books. Even though each school has a library and the pupils have easy access to Tamil books, the data indicates that very few Tamil books are read. Records

examine language preference for television viewing and radio listening.

Table 10 shows that 70% preferred to listen to Tamil songs against 43% for English. It is a well-known fact that younger Tamils, to a certain extent older Tamils too, are attracted by modern Tamil cinema songs which in some cases have been influenced by Western popular music.

With TV watching English programmes are more popular than Tamil programmes (49%).

TABLE 10: LANGUAGE USE IN THE ENTERTAINMENT DOMAIN

Language Use	Radio Programme	TV Programme
Tamil	70	49
English	43	72

in the National Library and other branch libraries show that very few Tamil books are borrowed. This study reinforces the above perception.

A question was asked to find out what types of Tamil books pupils would like to read most. 54% responded that they preferred to read fiction against 21% non-fiction.

On the question of where they obtained their

Prayers

The Tamil language is an important unifying force for the Tamils. They are divided by religion, caste and other attributes. Questions in this domain were meant to find out what language they used in personal prayers.

Table 11 indirectly reflects the various

TABLE 11: LANGUAGE USE IN THE PRAYERS DOMAIN

Language Use	Frequency %
Tamil	71
English	17
Sanskrit	3
Arabic	11

religions practised by Tamils. Since most of the Tamils are Hindus, they pray in Tamil and Sanskrit and interestingly, some in English. Christians and Muslims mostly pray in English and in Arabic, respectively. Thus, the data reveals that Tamil (71%) is maintained in the prayers domain.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusion

The study reveals that language use with grandparents was predominantly in Tamil but among siblings and friends language use was pre-

TABLE 12: MONTHLY INCOME OF PARENTS

Amount	Frequency
Less than \$750	192
\$750 to \$1,000	259
\$1,000 to \$1,500	194
\$1,500 to \$2,000	107
\$2,000 to \$2,500	47
\$2,500 to \$3,000	54
\$3,000 and above	58

Socio-economic Status

The socio-economic level plays an important role in determining the pattern of language use. Table 12 gives the income bracket of the Tamils in the sample.

In terms of Singapore's living standards, more than half of the Tamils are considered to be in the lower income group. Out of 911 respondents, 451 people or 49.5% earn less than \$1,000 per month. Only 112 parents or 12.2% of the respondents' parents were earning above \$2,500 per month. So it is clear that the socio-economic status of the Tamils is not high.

Out of 1,000 respondents only 94 or 9.4% responded that their parents were graduates. This confirms that most of the Tamil parents are not highly educated, a finding that is related to low socio-economic status.

dominantly in English. This was probably due to more exposure to English in schools and public places. In spite of being a minority, less exposure to the use of Tamil, and other constraints, Tamils were however able to maintain their language in the domains of family, prayers, entertainment, neighbours and kin. On the other hand, the shift towards the use of English is alarming in the domains of friends, reading and school.

The primary school Tamil pupils in this sample used Tamil (72%) in the family domain, 71% in prayers, 70% in entertainment, 69% in neighbour and 65% in kin domains. But in the other three domains, Tamil was used among friends (40%), reading (33%) and school (27%).

We are fast approaching the end of the twentieth century. Thus far, Tamils have been able to maintain the Tamil language satisfactorily, for several reasons. Firstly, Tamil Nadu, the birth

place of Tamil is near to Singapore and quite a considerable number of Tamils still have close cultural ties with Tamil Nadu. This helps them to revive their culture and language periodically. Secondly, since parental attitudes have a direct bearing on the children's mastery of a language, most of the Tamil parents have positive attitudes towards their children learning Tamil.

Thirdly, Tamil is one of the four official languages in Singapore and it is a compulsory subject in the school curriculum. A pass in Second Language is required to proceed to tertiary education.

These few factors help the Tamils to maintain the Tamil language in Singapore. What about the twenty-first century? Will Tamil be able to withstand the onslaught of English? Tamil language and culture can be maintained in Singapore, forever, if the Tamil community takes an enthusiastic interest in the language.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study I suggest the following recommendations:

- (1) Tamil parents should not only ensure that their children learn Tamil as a second language in school but also adopt positive attitudes towards it by making an effort to speak Tamil. Parents should speak with their children in Tamil and should encourage them to use Tamil among siblings.
- (2) Tamil must be widely used during birthday parties, marriages and other home and community celebrations.
- (3) There is a fear among some Tamils that if Tamil is used quite often, the competence in English will be eroded. This fear is unfounded. In fact by learning the two languages and using them appropriately, competence in both languages will be increased.
- (4) Tamil children should be taught from young the cultural, ethical and moral values of learning Tamil. They should be cautioned that if they ignore Tamil, they will lose their identity.
- (5) The several Tamil organisations in Singapore who are working to uplift the educational level of Tamil pupils should coordinate their efforts and activities to ensure that Tamil has a secure place in Singapore's future.

REFERENCES

- Fishman, Joshua A. (1966). Language maintenance and language shift as a field of inquiry. In Joshua A. Fishman (ed.) *Language Loyalty in the United States*. pp. 424-458. The Hague: Mouton.
- Gumperz, John. (1969). How can we describe and measure the behaviour of bilingual groups? Description and measurement of bilingualism. In L. G. Kelly (ed.) *An International Seminar*. pp. 242-249. Canada: University of Toronto Press.
- Hayden, Robert G. (1966). Some community dynamics of language maintenance. In Joshua A. Fishman (ed.) *Language Loyalty in the United States*. pp. 190-205. The Hague: Mouton.
- Kuo, Eddie C.Y. (1979). Measuring community in multilingual societies: the case of Singapore and West Malaysia. *Anthropological Linguistics*, October, pp. 328-340.
- Mani, A. (1979). Learning Tamil as a second language in Singapore: The background of students. In P. N. Tamilselvan (ed.) *Proceedings of Seminar Conference on Tamil Language and Tamil Literature in Singapore*. NUS Tamil Language Society, 2, pp. 93-105.
- Mani, A. and Gopinathan, S. (1983). Changes in Tamil language acquisition and usage in Singapore: a case of subtractive bilingualism. *Southeast Asian of Social Science*, 11.1, pp. 104-117.
- Ramiah, K. (1989). *Linguistic Difficulties Encountered by Secondary Four Tamil students in their Tamil Composition*. (M Ed. Thesis) NUS.
- Sobrielo, Amy. (1985). *Language Maintenance And Shift Among Tamils in Singapore*. M A (Applied Linguistics) Thesis (Unpublished) NUS.
- Tay Wan Joo, Mary. (1983). *Trends in Language Literacy And Education in Singapore*. Singapore: Department of Statistics.
- Weinreich, Vriel. (1968). *Language in Contact: Findings And Problems*. The Hague: Mouton.
- Williamson, Robert C. and Van Eerde, John A. (1980). 'Sub-cultural' factors in the survival of secondary languages. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 25, pp. 49-83.