

Amsterdam University Press

Chapter Title: The Impact of Language Policy on Language Shifts in Minority Communities: Focus on the Malayalee Community in Malaysia

Chapter Author(s): Mohana Nambiar

Book Title: National Language Planning and Language Shifts in Malaysian Minority Communities

Book Subtitle: Speaking in Many Tongues

Book Editor(s): Dipika Mukherjee and Maya Khemlani David

Published by: Amsterdam University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt46mvhg.12>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



This content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.



Amsterdam University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *National Language Planning and Language Shifts in Malaysian Minority Communities*

JSTOR

7 The Impact of Language Policy on Language Shifts in Minority Communities

Focus on the Malayalee Community in Malaysia

Mohana Nambiar

Introduction

Research has shown that language shift, eventually leading to language loss, is not limited to any one society; it occurs all over the world, especially in immigrant communities. For a multitude of reasons, communities, especially immigrant minorities, after a period of time, stop using their mother tongues in domains where they had previously used them in favour of other languages, usually those of the dominant communities. Studies on language shift/maintenance in multilingual and multiracial settings such as Malaysia (Nambiar 2007; Sankar 2004; Ramachandran 2000; Mohamad 1998; David 1996; and Lasimbang et al., 1992) have also indicated that minority immigrant communities are shifting away from their mother tongues. These findings are not unexpected, as Fishman (1989: 206) points out that the shift away from the mother tongue is inevitable: "What begins as the language of social and economic stability ends, within three generations or so, as the language of the crib as well..." This chapter examines the language use in the Malayalee community in Malaysia in the light of these findings.

In most studies of language shift and loss, the language policy of the land in one form or another is often mentioned as a causal factor. This chapter intends to examine to what extent language policies affect or cause language shifts by studying the role of language policy on the language shift of a minority immigrant community, the Malayalees, in multilingual, multiethnic Malaysia.

Language shift and language policy

Language shift can simply be defined as the end result of individuals, consciously or otherwise, gravitating towards a new language or one

already within their repertoire to perform the functions usually reserved for their mother tongues. According to Fasold (1984: 213), "Language shift simply means that a community gives up a language completely in favour of another one. The members of the community, when the shift has taken place, have collectively chosen a new language where an old one used to be used." In the last half-century, there have been substantial efforts to capture the essential variables that bring about language maintenance or language shift. What has to be noted is that there is obviously no magic formula for guaranteeing language maintenance or for predicting a shift, as "different factors combine in different ways in each social context, and the results are rarely predictable" (Holmes 2001: 67). Kloss (1966) was one of the first to present a list of factors contributing towards the maintenance of a language, including ethnolinguistic enclaves, religious insulation, and the economic value and status of languages. He notes that exogamy is frequently a clear-cut factor for promoting a shift. One of the strongest determinants for language shift is economic, i.e. upward mobility (Holmes 2001; Dorian 1981; and Gal 1979). Fasold (1984: 217) gives a summary of factors that cause a shift based on many different studies: he cites among others migration, industrialization and other economic changes, the higher prestige of the language being shifted to, urbanization, and a smaller population of speakers of the language being shifted from. Janik (1996) states that language shift or maintenance is determined by a combination of factors such as cultural core values, the extent of inter-marriage, the degree of cultural similarity with the dominant group, local recognition and institutional support.

In addition to the above-mentioned causes, there is yet another important factor promoting language shift: language policy. Briefly, language policy is an outcome of language planning whereby the government makes conscious efforts to affect the structure or function of language varieties. In the case of multilingual societies, the government allocates functions to particular languages within the society (Tollefson 1991). A country's language policy is usually manifested in its choice of the national language, the official language, the media of education and so forth. One of the conditions for language shift to occur is that the spreading language must allow access to power and resources, and this is basically achieved through the educational process. Paulston (1994: 17) declares that the "major social institution which favours language shift is without doubt public schooling." School language and other government pressures are also among the factors cited by Dressler and Wodak-Leodolter (1977) and Gal (1979). Besides the educational field, the language used in other government agencies is also of importance in that institutional (governmental) support of a language can be essential in spreading or maintaining a language (Fasold 1984; Dressler

1982; Beer & Jacob 1985; Lewis 1982; Fishman 1991). As Fasold (1984: 253) rightly points out, “The language that governments use for legislative debate and the language in which laws are written and government documents are issued, are also means that can be used to promote a selected language or language variety”. Prabhakaran (1998) attributes the main causes for language shift in the Indian Andhra community in South Africa to the dominant official status of English as well as the government’s language policy. There can be no doubt that lack of government support is a significant contributory factor for language shift eventually leading to language endangerment, and that it is more marked in some societies than in others. In discussing the endangered status of the Amazigh language in Morocco, Yamina (2008) argues that government support would go a long way toward ensuring the survival of Amazigh. She states:

If Amazigh could be recognised as an official language, the state would be compelled to promote its usage and to accept it as a legitimate language for all social activities. Successful language revitalization efforts would require a change in educational policy (Yamina 2008: 179).

Closer to home, David (2008b: 82) declares that “language policy, and speakers’ attitudes regarding the pragmatic importance of learning some languages given their political and economic importance” have contributed to language shift in Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines. The findings of Sankar’s (2004: iii) study of the Malaysian Iyers, an immigrant minority in Malaysia, also show that language shift is largely due to “external pressures such as government language policies and the influence of English as the language of business”. Hence it appears that language policy, as manifested in the language that a government chooses for its schools and for communication with its people, is a significant contributory factor for language shift.

Yet there are dissenting voices about the impact of language policy on language shift and language endangerment. Romaine’s comments (2002:1) on endangered languages deserve closer scrutiny:

Evaluation of the potential and actual impact of language policy on endangered languages is complicated by lack of straightforward causal connections between types of policy and language maintenance and shift. Language policy is not an autonomous factor and what appears to be ostensibly the “same” policy may lead to different outcomes, depending on the situation in which it operates.

In addition, she points out that language policies may have little impact on home use, which is essential for intergenerational transmission, the foundation of language survival. However, she concedes that though language survival cannot be dependent on ‘legislation as its main support, legal provisions may allow speakers of endangered languages to claim some public space for their languages and cultures’ (Romaine

2002: 22). Fishman (1997: 194), cited in Romaine (2002: 22), is of the same opinion. He says that languages become endangered because they lack intergenerational transmission and daily use, not because they are not being taught in schools or lack official status.

In the light of these two apparently differing perspectives on the impact of language policy on language shift, the writer wishes to explore these viewpoints by scrutinizing the role of language policy in the case of the language shift in the Malayalee community within its multilingual setting. Before that, however, some background information on Malaysia, its language policy and the Malayalee community would be useful.

The Malaysian setting and language policy

Malaysia is made up of two geographical areas: West or Peninsular Malaysia and East Malaysia. The latter consists of the two states of Sabah and Sarawak on the island of Borneo. Malaysia is a pluralistic society whose plurality is manifested in multiple facets – racially, religiously and linguistically. The population of West Malaysia is 65.1% Malays and other indigenous groups, 26% Chinese, 7.7% Indians and 1.2% other minorities (*Census Malaysia 2000*). The Malays, who form the majority, are considered indigenous, and the non-Malays (i.e., the Chinese and Indians) are seen as immigrant communities, as the bulk of their ancestors were encouraged to migrate to the country by the British colonial regime. In terms of religious beliefs, the Malays espouse Islam, while the majority of the Chinese are Buddhist, Taoist and Christian. The Indians are mainly Hindu, Christian, Muslim and Sikh. The distribution tapestry is further accentuated by the fact that each racial/ethnic group has a variety of languages and dialects. It is believed that no fewer than 80 languages are spoken in the country (Omar 1992).

Prior to independence in 1957, education in West Malaysia consisted of four separate systems that differed from one another in terms of language medium and course content. The Malays attended Malay medium schools which were located largely in the rural areas. Tamil was the medium of the Indian schools since Tamil speakers were greater in number than any of the other Indian sub-groups, including the Malayalees. The Chinese, especially those in the rural areas, sent their children to the Chinese schools where Mandarin was the language of instruction. Then there were the English medium schools which were found mostly in urban areas. These schools were popular among the urban Chinese and Indians. Among the four systems, “the English system of education seemed to be the best system in every sense of the word”

(Omar 1982: 74). Besides receiving large subsidies from the government, the English schools had other advantages, as they groomed students for positions in the government service as well as for obtaining tertiary education in Malaysia, Singapore and abroad.

Obviously, knowledge of English was an asset under the colonial government. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the economic development of the country was in full swing,

‘... with the economic engine being driven by a small British elite and a larger group of locally recruited civil servants who were bilingual in English and their native tongue. Many of the non-Malays had by necessity to learn some Malay but it was knowledge of English that was the key to social and career advancement.’ (Ozog 1993: 64)

Besides the crucial role that English played in the education system, it also functioned as the official language of the country and the language of legislature. The language policy of the country changed after independence. In 1957, Malay became the national language as well as one of the official languages, the other being English. Ten years later it became the sole official language. Although its status as the language of government administration accorded it an exalted position (Omar 1982), it was the elevation of the Malay language as the medium of instruction, which paved the way for it to eventually replace English as the medium of instruction in all English schools and in tertiary institutions, that was the more significant step.

However, the English language was not neglected. The Education Act of 1957 also made it mandatory for English to be taught as a second language in all schools in Malaysia, thereby establishing it as the second most important language in the country, after Malay (Omar, 1982). The implications of the language policies on the communities, in particular the immigrant minorities, will be discussed following an overview of the Malayalee community and its language shift.

The Malayalee community in Malaysia

According to the Census Malaysia (2000), the Malayalees, a sub-group of Indians, number 35,244, which is 2.2% of the Indian population or less than 1% of the West Malaysian population. This small community is further fragmented by religious affiliations: 74% are Hindus, 16% Christians, 6% Muslims and 4% are classified as other. The Malayalees originate from Kerala, South India and their mother tongue is Malayalam, a Dravidian language very similar to Tamil. With the

phenomenal success of the rubber industry in the 1830s, the British had to import labour from abroad, mainly Tamils from present day Tamilnad. Soon they realised they needed supervisory staff to manage the large volume of labour. The Malayalees from Kerala were the obvious choice, as “there was already a highly evolved system of education there so that recruits to be clerks and conductors were not difficult to obtain” (*Malayalees in Malaysia*, 1990: 8). Being educated and being able to speak in English and Tamil made these early migrants an ideal bridge between the British management and the Tamil-speaking labourers. While the Malayalees who settled in the estates were mainly Hindus and Christians, the Muslims had a different migratory pattern (Arasaratnam 1979). They were part of an earlier immigrant phase to Malaysia and had already established themselves in food retailing and other small businesses by the time of the arrival of the second phase of Indian migrants – mainly Hindus and Christians. A point to be noted is that while the majority of the Hindu and Christian migrants were educated and English-speaking, the Muslims were not.

Language shift in the Malayalee community

Nambiar (2007) studied not only the existence (or otherwise) of language shift in the Malayalee community but also whether there were intra-community variations. In other words, in the event of a shift, were the sub-communities – Hindus, Christians and Muslims – moving towards the same language or different languages? Two major indices were chosen to investigate whether the community was undergoing a language shift: proficiency in Malayalam compared with other commonly used languages, and the main language used for intra-ethnic communication in five domains – family/home, friendships, religion, transactions and entertainment. The language used for inner speech was also studied. Besides religious affiliations, the other variable examined was age or generation. Data was gathered using a number of instruments: personally-administered questionnaires, interviews (both structured and semi-structured), recordings of naturally-occurring conversations, observation of language used at Malayalee social occasions and examination of community-related documents.

Two main trends were discernible in the findings. Firstly, the community was indeed shifting away from its mother tongue. There was a marked decline in Malayalam proficiency from the older to the younger members of the community, with a corresponding increase in English and Malay proficiency. In terms of language use, Malayalam was not the dominant language used for interaction with other Malayalees in any of the domains surveyed, including family, religion and inner

speech, often considered as the bastions of language maintenance. In addition, there was a well-defined decrease in the use of Malayalam from the older to the younger members, another clear indicator of a community undergoing shift. Secondly, intra-community variations were obvious – i.e., the shift was bifurcated where the replacive language was concerned. The majority of the Christians and Hindus were moving towards English while the Muslims were shifting to Malay.

Nambiar (2007) cites a number of factors that have contributed to the shift away from Malayalam, such as socioeconomic mobility, the role of parents, the lack of status for Malayalam in Malaysia and the lack of institutional support. Clearly the last two are related to the language policy practiced in Malaysia. The contributory role of these two factors to the shift in the community will be discussed in greater length before examining the extent to which Romaine's contentions (2002) are applicable.

Language policy and language shift in the Malayalee community

Given the status of the two foremost languages in the country, Malay and English, what is the status of the languages of the immigrant communities that Omar (1982) refers to as “immigrant languages”? Officially it has been claimed that while the position of the Malay language has been elevated after the nation acquired independence, it has not been at the expense of other communities' languages. Omar (1979: 40) points out that the Malaysian Constitution, while setting forth the position of Malay, also grants that “no person shall be prohibited or prevented from using (otherwise than for official purposes) or from teaching or learning any other language”. In other words, there is no official barrier against the various communities maintaining their respective languages.

In addition to Tamil and Mandarin having official status as a medium of education, there is also provision for other languages like Malayalam to be taught in schools as Pupils' Own Language (POL). The 1961 Education Act states that instruction will be provided in a pupil's own mother tongue, provided the parents of 15 or more students request it. In practice, this has applied mainly to Mandarin and Tamil being taught as a single subject in some of the national (Malay) medium primary schools (Gaudart 1987). These POL classes have not been very popular, as they have to be conducted outside regular school hours. Furthermore, in the case of minority communities like the Malayalees, the chances of having 15 or more Malayalee students of a similar age group studying in the same school are slim.

As the Malaysian language policy only emphasises Malay and English, and to a lesser extent Tamil and Mandarin, it appears that "... no serious attempt has been made to incorporate other minority languages" (Mohamad 1998: xiii). As Lasimbang et al. (1992: 335) rightly point out, in Malaysia, "Maintenance of the mother tongue is seen as a right, but still perhaps more of a problem than a resource in a nation trying to achieve unity within the context of multilingualism". The reality of the situation is that without official support, minority language maintenance requires great effort and commitment on the part of the different communities.

In the case of Malayalam, it has no official status in the country, and it is not the language of the government, the school, the media or the business world. Being an immigrant and a minority community, the Malayalee community has to accommodate where inter-ethnic communication is concerned. In order to interact with non-Malayalees, it has to use other languages such as English, Malay or Tamil, depending on the interlocutors and the setting. Hence the scope to use the language is basically restricted to within its own small community.

This reality is well captured in Nambiar's study (2007). Queried about the importance of studying Malayalam in Malaysia, about one-third of the sample (107 out of 341 respondents) stated that it was not important. The main reasons provided were that the language was not useful for educational purposes or for furthering one's career, as English was more useful. These reasons point to the community's awareness of the lack of utilitarian value for its language. Furthermore, while more than half of the subjects felt that the main reason for the decline in the use of Malayalam was due to the Malayalees themselves not using the language, a fifth claimed it was due to lack of official support for the language, a clear reference to the government's language policy. A number of parents claimed that once children started schooling, the language learning and language use of their children slipped beyond their control. Typical complaints heard were:

When my children were small, we used Malayalam at home. When they went to school, they started using English. We did not force them to speak in Malayalam. My children all speak Malay because in school, everything is in Malay. (Nambiar 2007: 424)

In addition to the fact that they had no opportunity to be educated in their mother tongue, there is no doubt that the prevalent medium of education paved the way or accelerated bilingualism among the younger generations of Malayalees. But bilingualism itself, while being a prerequisite for language shift, is not a cause for shift. Hence what emerges

clearly is that while the language policy did not accord the community the opportunity for a formal learning of its mother tongue or an official standing to its language, it never stopped the community from acquiring the language or passing it on to ensuing generations or using it among its own members, a point that bears out Romaine's contention (2002). The community did not take steps, either intentionally or due to a lack of awareness or due to its inability, to counter the effects of the language policy to ensure that its language was maintained.

The ambiguity of the impact of language policy on language shift among the Malayalees can also be inferred from the community's response to the change in the medium of instruction in the schools. If the medium did indeed exert a significant influence, it would be expected that once the medium of instruction changed from English to Malay, the younger Malayalees who had been taught in Malay would shift towards that language. However, Nambiar's study (2007) provides clear evidence that the Hindus and Christians who form the majority of the community (90%) are shifting towards English, while only the Muslims are moving towards Malay. This implies that there must be other factors at work besides the language policy. What is also important to note at this juncture is that this pattern of bifurcation in the language shift within a single community reflects Romaine's contention (2000:1) that 'Language policy is not an autonomous factor and what appears to be ostensibly the "same" policy may lead to different outcomes, depending on the situation in which it operates'. Despite sharing a mother tongue, place of origin and setting in the host country, including its language policy, the Malayalees are not all shifting towards the same language.

To understand the reasons for this phenomenon, one needs to examine the unique setting and the history of the community. Having had a headstart in English back in Kerala itself, the Hindus and Christians realised that knowledge of English was a tremendous asset under the British colonial regime and took great pains to ensure that their children maintained this advantage. Those in the plantations, despite the sacrifices they had to make, sent their children not to the nearest schools where the medium of education was Tamil, but to the English schools in towns far away. Greenburg (cited in Gupta & Siew 1995) notes that the single most vital factor in language maintenance is the ability and desire of parents to transmit the ancestral language to their children. Nambiar (2007: 425) cites the "parents factor" as having played a crucial role in the decline of language proficiency and use of Malayalam at the benefit of the English language. Many of the Hindu and Christian parents actively discouraged the learning and use of Malayalam because they feared that their children might not be able to handle more than one language, that they might become confused and

it was better to concentrate on one language. And in this case, the parents decided, on the grounds of economic mobility, that the one language should be English. The data from Nambiar's study (2007) are very telling. According to a second-generation Christian:

When we were young, our parents felt that speaking in Malayalam would disrupt our English. Father felt we're better off with English. We had to listen to the BBC News. Everything around us was western-centred... we had an affinity for all things English. (ibid.: 404)

Adds another respondent:

My father said not to learn or no need to learn Malayalam when I was in primary school. Just learn English and Malay. Now I can't converse with only-Malayalam speaking Malayalees. (ibid.: 404)

Many parents, even when they had an opportunity to, did not transmit their mother tongue to their children or insist that the latter use the language. In the words of a first-generation Hindu mother:

My children and I never speak in Malayalam. My husband and I did not insist that they do. As I was busy working and English was the medium of instruction, I encouraged them to use English. I truly regret it now. (ibid.: 404)

Thus, even when the medium of instruction in the national school system changed to Malay, it did not replace English for the Hindu and Christian Malayalees. As Ozog (1993) points out, the change in status of English did not automatically signal an end to English-knowing bilingualism in the country. Many English-educated parents passed on the language to their offspring. In fact, in many families from high and middle income urban homes, (and these would include many Malayalees), English is the first language or the language they are most proficient in (Gaudart 1990). The continued preference for English in the private sector, plus the emphasis on globalisation, has given the language a privileged position. Hence, to the majority of the Hindus and Christians, English was more than just another language; it was part of their social reproduction strategy (i.e., 'the strategies by which each generation endeavours to transmit to the following the advantage it holds'; Riagain 1994: 179) that had to be passed on to the subsequent generations to ensure academic, and ultimately, economic success.

In the case of the Muslim Malayalees, as mentioned earlier, the majority of the immigrants were less educated and less proficient in English than their Hindu and Christian counterparts (Al-jufri 2000: 18). This is reflected in the types of professions they took on, such as the retailing business, which required more Malay than English proficiency. Although there are many factors that have contributed to the Muslims shifting to the Malay language – including living in Malay neighbourhoods, sharing the same place of worship, and having Malay as the medium of instruction – the most significant reason for the shift to Malay is related to the question of identity of the Muslim Malayalees. A large majority wants to be assimilated into the Malay community. Technically, anyone born in the country can officially “become” Malay, since the Malaysian Constitution defines a Malay as ‘a person who habitually speaks Malay, professes the Muslim religion and conforms to Malay customs’ (Watson 1983: 139). The question then arises as to why the Muslim Malayalees would want to change their ethnicity. A very important reason is the desire to be part of the same *ummah* (Muslim community); another is the desire to acquire *bumiputra* status (accorded to indigenous people of the country such as the Malays) and the special privileges that go with it (see David 2003, who provides a similar reason for the Pakistanis in Kelantan who shifted to Malay). The Malays, being an indigenous community, are the beneficiaries of an affirmative policy, meaning they receive a variety of economic, educational and social benefits that are not accorded to the immigrant communities. Therefore, being part of the Malay community would mean more opportunities for the Muslim Malayalees to obtain economic benefits than being part of the Indian group. Hence speaking the Malay language and not Malayalam is important if one aspires to be accepted as Malay.

The Hindu, Christian and Muslim Malayalees all migrated from the same state in India, with the same mother tongue, but there were differences in their levels of education and linguistic repertoire. These in some ways influenced their livelihoods in the host country, the people they came into contact with and the languages they needed. Although they experienced the same language policy, it does not seem to have had the same effect on the three groups where language shift is concerned, one of the main reasons being that each group had its own reasons for gravitating towards a different language.

Conclusion

No single factor can account for a community shifting away from its mother tongue, as factors often feed off each other. Due to this interconnection, it is difficult to isolate the role of different factors or causes

that lead to language shift. It is particularly true in the case of language policy, as its impact takes a long time to be discerned. Despite this caveat, it is undeniable that language policy has a significant impact on the maintenance or shift of a community's language. Minority languages such as Malayalam have no public space, and this has contributed to its diminished importance in the eyes of its own community, a reason commonly cited for not knowing the language. There can be no doubt that the lack of opportunity to undergo education in one's mother tongue has led to almost no literacy skills in the language, thereby affecting the maintenance of the language.

However, it must be pointed out that while loss of proficiency in the mother tongue can lead to language shift, continued proficiency is no guarantee that the language will be maintained. A case in point is the language of the Tamil community in neighbouring Singapore. Like the Malayalees, the Tamils are a minority community. However, unlike Malayalam in Malaysia, the Tamil language has greater official recognition in Singapore. It is one of the four official languages of the multilingual country and it has legal and institutional support, as it is represented in the various institutions of the country, in most government services and in the multicultural media. More important, the government's bilingual educational policy has ensured school-based learning of the Tamil language among the younger Tamils. Yet despite the fact that more Tamil children would have acquired Tamil as a result of the implementation of the compulsory bilingual education policy, Saravanan's study (1994) shows that there was not a corresponding increase in the functional use of Tamil. In other words, though more of the younger Tamils had proficiency in Tamil, they were not using the language. Instead they use English in domains like the home because of the perceived low prestige of Tamil and the high economic value of English.

Ultimately it appears that whether a community maintains its language or shifts away from it depends on the will of that community and not on the language policy of the land. As Romaine (2002) notes, language policy has an imperceptible effect on the use of the minority language in the home or on intra-ethnic communication, domains essential for intergenerational transmission, the cornerstone of language survival.