



# TOWARDS HOMOGENEITY IN HOME LANGUAGES

## MALAY, CHINESE FOOCHOW AND INDIAN TAMIL FAMILIES IN KUCHING, SARAWAK, MALAYSIA

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This preliminary study examines the languages used by parents with their children in Malay, Chinese Foochow and Indian Tamil families to find out how the similarity or dissimilarity in parents' ethnic language influenced the choice of language transmitted to children and how far standard languages have permeated the family domain in Kuching City in the Malaysian state of Sarawak. Standard languages refer to the three main written languages taught in the school system, namely, English, Bahasa Malaysia (Malay language) and Chinese Mandarin. Interviews were conducted with 17 families (6 Malay, 6 Chinese Foochow, 5 Indian Tamil). The results showed that the ethnic language is mostly still retained in the Malay and Indian Tamil families but has been pushed out by English and Mandarin Chinese in Chinese Foochow families. English has emerged in parental communication with children to different extents across ethnic group. Bahasa Malaysia, on the other hand, is spoken in Malay families with parents from West Malaysia. Factors found to be influencing the parental decision on language to use with their children include similarity/dissimilarity of the couple's ethnic languages, their educational background, family and social linguistic environment, instrumental value of languages and ethnic identity.

## INTRODUCTION

This preliminary study examines the dominant language used for family communication in the Malay, Chinese Foochow and Indian Tamil speech communities in the Malaysian plural society in the East Malaysian state of Sarawak. The specific objectives of the study

are to: (1) determine whether similarity or dissimilarity in parents' ethnic language influenced the choice of language transmitted to children; and (2) to analyse how far standard languages have permeated the family domain. The study is situated in the broader context of a plural society where the immigrant population is almost as large as the so-called indigenous majority (Hassan, 2005) and where national language policies elevate the language of the indigenous majority but also support the teaching of standardised language of immigrant groups. Considering that standardised languages have wider usage and usefulness in public domains such as education and employment, how far have these languages permeated the private domains? As the family domain is the last bastion of survival for beleaguered languages (Gal, 1978), we investigate the languages that are used for family communication in the dominant Malay, the large Chinese immigrant and the minority Indian immigrant groups. Our findings show that the three ethnic groups gravitate towards homogeneity in the languages used for family communication, suggesting a likelihood of reduced diversity in linguistic repertoire of the younger generation.

## **MALAYSIAN SOCIOLINGUISTIC SETTING**

Furnivall (1939), who laid the foundations of the theory of plural societies, describes the existence of separate communities in the same political unit as the main feature of plural societies:

It is the strict sense a medley for they mix but do not combine. Each group holds by its own religion, its own culture, its own ideas and ways. As individuals they meet but only in the market place in buying and selling. (Furnivall, 1956, p. 304.)

Examples of plural societies are Indonesia (Furnivall, 1939), British West Indies (Smith, 1965) and Malaysia (Freedman, 1960; Nagata, 1974).

Malaysia comprises 12 states in West Malaysia and the two East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak on Borneo Island. Malaysia is populated by three major ethnic groups (Malay, Chinese and Indian) who interact with one another and still maintain their cultural and linguistic distinctiveness half a century after Malaysia gained independence from British rule in 1957. According to the Census 2000 report of the Malaysian population, the Malay is the majority group (65.1%), followed by Chinese (26.0%) and Indians (7.7%) (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2008). In raising the questions of power, integration and governability, Fenton (2003) states that “[i]n Malaysia, the

problem of political authority is ‘solved’ by the symbolic dominance of the Malays, partnered by Chinese and Indian elites” (p. 136). Positive discrimination policies endow the Malay with privileges in education and employment opportunities in government departments as well as customary land rights. In addition, the standardised form of their language, Bahasa Malaysia, is also the national and official language of Malaysia. Besides being promoted as the language for integrating the diverse ethnic groups in Malaysia, Bahasa Malaysia has to be used for official purposes of communication in governmental business (e.g. driving licence and passport applications) and as the medium of education. To appreciate ethnic diversity, nation-building policies provided for the teaching of major ethnic languages (Malay, Mandarin Chinese, Tamil) and free cultural expression, with major ethnic festivals instituted as national public holidays (e.g. *Hari Raya Aidilfitri* for the Malay, *Chinese New Year* for the Chinese, *Deepavali* and *Thaipusam* for the Indian, *Hari Gawai* for the Iban and Bidayuh in Sarawak).

The selection of the language of the majority Malay as the national and official language, as well as special privileges instituted in the Malaysian Constitution such as customary land rights (Malaysia Legal Research Board, 1997) was viewed as having a racial bias. The tensions between the Malays and Chinese erupted into a racial riot in 1969 (see Ongkili, 1985, pp. 193–209; Turnbull, 1989, pp. 265–269). Lee (1986) noted that following this racial riot, there was an implicit understanding between the Malays and non-Malays to avoid publicly discussing sensitive issues dealing with power relations between ethnic groups (pp. 33–34). In the same year, the Malaysian government instituted a name change for the national language from *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay language) to *Bahasa Malaysia* (Malaysian language) so that the non-Malays would not regard this language as having a Malay identity (Omar, 1987, p. 17). Malaysian policy makers believed that establishing Bahasa Malaysia as the national language and creating a national system of education would promote a unified culture, as well as the social and political development as a nation (Chiu, 2000).

In the 1970s and 1980s, the national language policy was dubbed as the ‘One-Language-One-Culture’ Policy due to its assimilationist overtone. The pathway by which the linguistic assimilation could occur begins with the learning of Bahasa Malaysia in school, followed by the use of Bahasa Malaysia as a means of inter-ethnic communication, and progressing to intra-ethnic communication, and possibly to cultural and religious assimilation. However, the fears of the non-Malays at being forced to assimilate into the Malay language and culture dissipated in the 1990s with government support for the teaching of standardised ethnic languages as a school subject (Lim, 2000). Standardised ethnic languages refer to Mandarin Chinese for the Chinese, and Tamil for the Indian

in this paper. As part of this policy, Kadazan was offered as an optional subject starting from primary one in Sabah schools in the year 2000 (Lasimbang & Kinajil, 2000). In Sarawak, Iban had been taught in primary schools for a number of years but it was only in 2008 that Iban was included as an elective subject tested at Malaysian Certificate of Education (equivalent of “O” level) (Information Department Malaysia, 2008). However, it needs to be noted that Mandarin Chinese, the standardised Chinese language, has been taught as a subject in public schools and is also the medium of instruction for privately established Chinese schools for a long time. At this point in time, there are no Tamil schools in Sarawak (David & Dealwis, 2008) although Tamil may be taught if there are 15 students who petition for it.

Competing with Bahasa Malaysia in the domain of official communication is English which had the status of official language during the British rule – used for government business and as the language of instruction in public schools. English was replaced by Bahasa Malaysia as the official language in various stages in different parts of Malaysia. In West Malaysia, the change in medium of education to Bahasa Malaysia up to form five level was completed in 1980. In Sarawak, English was retained as the official language for a longer time. When Sarawak joined the Federation of Malaysia in 1963, the state government adopted Bahasa Malaysia as the national language but delayed its implementation as the official language as there were not enough schools to raise literacy in Bahasa Malaysia (Porritt, 1997). Leigh (1974) also described the Sarawak political leaders as not wanting to lose their elite status which was based in part on their mastery of English. In addition, Leigh noted that the indigenous people did not want to be excluded from the benefits of English medium education (e.g. overseas scholarships and career advancements) because English was seen as a language of progress. Since the indigenous groups were the largest group in Sarawak, their language needs could not be ignored. As a result, it was only in 1987 that Bahasa Malaysia completely replaced English as the language of instruction at form five level in Sarawak. This means that those born after 1969 (below the age of 40 in the year 2009) in Sarawak are Malay-educated, with the exception of a handful who attend exclusive English-medium private schools.

English is now taught as the second language in the Malaysian education system and Bahasa Malaysia as the first language. The terms “first language” and “second language” are not reflective of the usage in the field of first and second language acquisition, but they reflect the hierarchy of importance for these two languages (Ministry of Education of Malaysia, 2003). In 2003, the former Malaysian Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir Mohamad, considered reintroducing English as a medium of education in order to redress the situation of declining proficiency in English and to keep up with scientific and knowledge

advancement. However, due to nationalistic sentiments stemming from the fear of Bahasa Malaysia losing its ground, English was eventually simultaneously implemented for teaching Science and Mathematics only at primary one, form one and lower sixth form levels to hasten the process of producing school leavers who are more proficient in English.

Despite losing the government-accorded status of an official language in Malaysia, English is the *de facto* official language in many private companies. English functions as the language of business and international trade especially for corporations with international linkages. English is also the language of higher education as it is the medium by which latest advances in knowledge and science are disseminated through print and non-print media. In fact, there is a movement towards conducting lectures in English in public universities in Malaysia to attract and to cater to an international student population. Thus, while Bahasa Malaysia is a language of wider usage in the Malay Archipelago comprising countries such as Brunei Darussalam and Indonesia, English is a global language of communication.

### **SOCIOLINGUISTIC PROFILE OF MALAY, CHINESE FOOCHOW AND INDIAN TAMIL IN SARAWAK**

In Sarawak, the Iban is the largest ethnic group (29.1%), followed by the Chinese (25.9%) and Malay (22.3%) with the Indian numbering only 3,851 or 0.2% of 2.07 million (Department of Statistics Malaysia, Sarawak, 2009). Besides the Iban, Sarawak has numerous indigenous people groups including the Bidayuh, Kayan, Kenyah, Melanau and Penan. The language use of these indigenous people groups have yet to be studied in-depth but this study focuses on ethnic groups that are also found in West Malaysia, that is, the majority Malay community and the largest sub-group of two immigrant groups: the Chinese Foochow, and Indian Tamil. Table 1 shows that the ethnic composition of Sarawak differs from the national pattern in that the Malay which is the largest ethnic group in Malaysia is actually third in numerical strength in Sarawak – after the Iban and Chinese.

The Malays in Sarawak speak a regional variety of the Malay language, referred to as Sarawak Malay in this paper. The Malay speakers refer to it as *Bahasa Melayu Sarawak*, Malay and even *Local Malay*. There are syntactic and lexical variations in Sarawak Malay and Bahasa Malaysia (see also Aman & Mustaffa, 2009). For example, ‘I’ and ‘you’ are referred to as “saya” and “awak/anda” in Bahasa Malaysia and “kamek” and “kitak” in Sarawak Malay respectively. Malay speakers from West Malaysia would be confused by the use of “kamek” and “kitak” because they sound like “kami” and “kita” both of which means “we” in Bahasa Malaysia, the former excluding the listener and the latter including the listener. In contrast, Bahasa Malaysia is more similar to Johore

Malay because the latter became the basis for standardised Malay language<sup>1</sup> (Omar, 1992). Sarawak Malay is not only spoken by the Malay community but also by the indigenous groups in informal settings such as the neighbourhood and market place (Mahadhir, 2006). In fact, Sarawak Malay is the first language for children of some families with parents from different indigenous groups (Ting & Campbell, 2007). This regional Malay variety also has a place in formal workplace communication, surfacing as asides in meetings and in email messages written for work-related purposes (Ting, 2002) where the spelling reflects the pronunciation. In informal interactions in the workplace, Sarawak Malay prevails but a switch to Bahasa Malaysia may be made to accommodate those who do not speak Sarawak Malay. Because of its association with informal usage, Sarawak Malay is a better choice than Bahasa Malaysia for forging friendship bonds among and with Sarawak Malay speakers.

Malaysia		Sarawak	
Malay	50.2%	Malay	22.3%
Chinese	24.5%	Chinese	25.9%
Indigenous	11.0%	Iban	29.1%
		Bidayuh	8.1%
		Melanau	5.3%
		Other indigenous groups	5.5%
Indian	7.2%	Indian	0.2%
Non-Malaysian citizens & Others	7.1%	Non-Malaysian citizens & Others	2.9%

**Table 1** Comparison of ethnic composition of Sarawak *versus* Malaysia.  
Source: UNHCR Malaysia, 2009; Monthly Statistical Bulletin Sarawak, April 2009.

The Chinese appears to be a homogenous group as they have a standardised Mandarin Chinese language but the languages of the Chinese sub-groups (colloquially referred to as Chinese dialects) vary in pronunciation and lexis with similar syntax. For example, in Mandarin “face” is pronounced as /lǐjǎn/ but in Foochow it is /min/. Among the Chinese, Foochow is the largest sub-group constituting 34.8% of the Sarawak Chinese population (Department of Statistics Malaysia, Sarawak, 2009). Historically, the Chinese Foochow migrants from south-east China settled in the towns of Sibü, Bintangor and Sarikei, and had their own network of schools, churches and shops (Leigh, 1964). From their beginnings as rubber tappers and pepper planters (Chew, 1990), the Foochows have since moved upward into professional jobs and the timber industry, and many are

known for their high social standing. The early Chinese Foochow migrants were mainly monolingual, but now many use other languages rather extensively in their daily life (Ting & Sussex, 2001). With an increase in Mandarin Chinese literacy resulting from Chinese medium education, formal usage of Foochow has decreased over the years and may only be used in rural churches for preaching and reading of religious texts. Financial support for Chinese primary schools usually comes from Chinese associations and individuals concerned with this symbol of Chinese ethnic identity, and this is an issue used to gather support during elections by Chinese-based parties. In fact, Malaysia has been more liberal than her neighbouring country, Brunei, in terms of Chinese education because of the presence of Chinese political and economic influence:

The Malaysian constitution guarantees the cultural rights of the Chinese, and Chinese schools have so far been allowed to operate. ... To my view, these are the indirect institutional support factors which have encouraged or allowed the distinctiveness of ethnic identity to be maintained for the immigrant groups in Sarawak, and Malaysia at large. (Suryadinata, 1997, p. 13.)

However, the Chinese insistence of publicly speaking Chinese languages has created a stereotype of Chinese separatism and clannishness (Guinee, 2005).

Out of the 3,851 Indians in Sarawak, 62.7% are Indian Tamils (Department of Statistics Malaysia, Sarawak, 2009), and they are concentrated in Kuching City (Singh, 1993). According to Singh, the peak of the Indian immigration was during the rule of the second Rajah Charles Brooke (1868–1917), with the earlier batches comprising mainly plantation workers and the last batch in the 1950s consisting of teachers, health and military personnel prior to immigration control with the independence of Malaysia in 1963. Despite present day job diversification, the Indians are still associated with these professions. Language-wise, the Indians are also known to be conversant in English and Malay. One and a half decades ago, Singh (1993, p. 569) noted that “the older generation as a rule can speak and write Tamil, while the majority of the younger generation can at least converse in their mother tongue”. However, there is empirical evidence of a shift away from the ethnic languages among the Telugu (David & Dealwis, 2006) and Malayalee (David & Norahim, 2006) in Kuching, similar to what is happening in the bigger Indian Tamil group in West Malaysia (see Naji & David, 2000; Naji & David, 2003). Institutional support for the use of Tamil in Sarawak comes from the Hindu religious network (Singh, 1993) and not from schools as it is still not taught as a subject in

school (David & Dealwis, 2008). Schiffman (2002) stated that privately-supported Tamil schools do not exist since the Tamil community cannot afford this luxury. In fact, Indian festivals such as Deepavali and Thaipusam are public holidays only in West Malaysia, not in Sarawak.

In the past it could be assumed that the linguistic repertoire of the Malay, Chinese Foochow and Indian Tamil comprised their ethnic language, Bahasa Malaysia and English learnt in school, and other languages acquired through frequent contact with speakers of other languages. However, some research in the Sarawak setting has shown that some Indian (David & Dealwis, 2006; David & Dealwis, 2008; David & Norahim, 2006) and Chinese (Ting, 2006; Ting & Chang, 2008; Ting & Hung, 2008) families are choosing not to transmit their ethnic language to their children in favour of standard languages. This study examines whether the language chosen for communication with children is influenced by whether the parents have the same or different first languages, and the extent to which standard languages have permeated the family domain.

## THE STUDY

The study involved 17 families living in Kuching: 6 Malay families; 6 Chinese families with Foochow fathers; and 5 Indian families with Tamil fathers (see Table 2). Because of the patriarchial orientation of the community in terms of ancestry and lineage, the emphasis was on selecting families with Foochow and Tamil fathers. The families in each ethnic group were divided into two groups: (1) parents who share the same ethnic language as their first language; and (2) parents with different ethnic languages as their first language.

For the Malay families, all the parents spoke the Malay language but sometimes different regional dialects. Out of the six Malay families, three were marriages between Sarawak Malays whereas the other three involved marriages between Malays from Sarawak and West Malaysia (two from Johore and one from Penang). We were interested to find out which Malay dialect dominated in the family when the Malay parents were from different Malay dialect groups, and whether they accommodated by opting for Bahasa Malaysia. Unlike the case of the Malay families, the geographical origin of the Chinese and Tamil parents as to whether they were from Sarawak or West Malaysia was not as important as the ethnic language because of the unintelligibility of the languages. For example, Foochow, Hainan, Hakka and Teochew are regional dialects of the Chinese language in China, but they are mutually incomprehensible. Thus, for a comparison of languages used in Chinese Foochow families, three families involved Foochow-Foochow



marriages. However, in the other three families, only the father was a Foochow speaker and the mother came from another Chinese sub-group (Hainan, Hakka and Teochew). For the five Indian Tamil families, three families had parents who were both Tamil. For the other two families, only the father was Indian Tamil but their wives were from the indigenous groups of Sarawak (Kayan and Bidayuh). In this study, the intermarriages in the Indian Tamil families were across ethnic boundaries unlike the Malay and Chinese Foochow families where the spouse was from a sub-group within the same ethnic group. A compromise had to be made in the participant selection due to the smaller Indian population in Sarawak compared to West Malaysia.

Family			Geographical origin	Ethnic sub-group	Age	Occupation	Educational Background
Malay	M1	Father	Sarawak	Sarawak Malay	30s	Technical Officer	Bahasa Malaysia
		Mother	Sarawak	Sarawak Malay	30s	Secretary	Bahasa Malaysia
	M2	Father	Sarawak	Sarawak Malay	30s	Administrator	Bahasa Malaysia
		Mother	Sarawak	Sarawak Malay	30s	Administrator	Bahasa Malaysia
	M3	Father	Sarawak	Sarawak Malay	30s	Lecturer	Bahasa Malaysia
		Mother	Sarawak	Sarawak Malay	30s	Lecturer	Bahasa Malaysia
	M4	Father	West Malaysia	Penang Malay	40s	Teacher	Bahasa Malaysia
		Mother	Sarawak	Sarawak Malay	30s	Sales assistant	Bahasa Malaysia
	M5	Father	West Malaysia	Johore Malay	30s	Lecturer	Bahasa Malaysia
		Mother	Sarawak	Sarawak Malay	30s	Lecturer	Bahasa Malaysia
	M6	Father	West Malaysia	Johore Malay	30s	Administrator	Bahasa Malaysia
		Mother	Sarawak	Sarawak Malay	30s	Lecturer	Bahasa Malaysia
Chinese	F1	Father	Sarawak	Foochow	30s	Engineer	Mandarin Chinese
		Mother	Sarawak	Foochow	30s	Accounts executive	Mandarin Chinese
	F2	Father	Sarawak	Foochow	40s	Architect	Mandarin Chinese
		Mother	Sarawak	Foochow	40s	Accountant	Mandarin Chinese
	F3	Father	Sarawak	Foochow	40s	Business manager	Mandarin Chinese
		Mother	Sarawak	Foochow	40s	Bank officer	Mandarin Chinese

**Table 2** Demographic characteristics of parents in Malay, Chinese Foochow and Indian Tamil families.

Family			Geographical origin	Ethnic sub-group	Age	Occupation	Educational Background
Chinese (cont'd)	F4	Father	Sarawak	Foochow	40s	Architect	Mandarin Chinese
		Mother	Sarawak	Hainan	40s	Homemaker	Mandarin Chinese
	F5	Father	Sarawak	Foochow	40s	Business manager	English
		Mother	Sarawak	Hakka	40s	Pharmacist	English
	F6	Father	Sarawak	Foochow	40s	Business manager	Mandarin Chinese
		Mother	Singapore	Teochew	40s	Homemaker	English
Indian	T1	Father	West Malaysia	Tamil	30s	Lecturer	Bahasa Malaysia
		Mother	West Malaysia	Tamil	30s	Lecturer	Bahasa Malaysia
	T2	Father	West Malaysia	Tamil	40s	Air force officer	Bahasa Malaysia
		Mother	Sarawak	Tamil	30s	Teacher	Bahasa Malaysia
	T3	Father	West Malaysia	Tamil	30s	Civil engineer	Bahasa Malaysia
		Mother	West Malaysia	Tamil	30s	Lecturer	Bahasa Malaysia
	T4	Father	West Malaysia	Tamil	30s	Lecturer	Bahasa Malaysia
		Mother	Sarawak	Kayan	30s	Administrator	Bahasa Malaysia
	T5	Father	West Malaysia	Tamil	40s	Police officer	English
		Mother	Sarawak	Bidayuh	40s	Teacher	English

**Table 2 (cont'd)** Demographic characteristics of parents in Malay, Chinese Foochow and Indian Tamil families.

Table 2 shows that the parents in the study were in their thirties and forties, and most held office jobs. Their occupations placed them in the middle income group. The educational background of the parents in the Malay and Indian Tamil families was Bahasa Malaysia but the Chinese parents had Mandarin Chinese as the language of instruction with the exception of the F5 parents and F6 mother who went to English-medium schools. In referring to the educational background of the parents in this study, the emphasis is on the language of instruction used in primary school as this is the stage when the participants attended Malay, Chinese or Tamil schools and the time when their language foundation for formal learning was built. After Primary Six, they usually proceeded to government secondary schools where the medium of education was Bahasa Malaysia for those in their thirties in the year 2009, and English for those aged 40 and above who grew up in Sarawak. For participants from West Malaysia where the change in medium

of education from English to Bahasa Malaysia was completed at form five level in 1980, only those more than 46 years old had English medium education. Although there were West Malaysian participants in their forties, all of them had Bahasa Malaysia as the language of instruction.

Based on the participant selection criteria described earlier, participants were identified from the social network of the researchers and requested to participate in the study. The participants were told that the study was about parents' language use with their children. Once they had agreed to participate in the study, an appointment for the interview was made. During the interview, the participants were asked to state the languages used with their spouse and children. They were also asked to explain the reasons for the language choice. The participants were also asked to provide demographic details such as ethnic identity, age, occupation, educational background as well as their children's age and type of school they attended. The semi-structured interviews took place in the participants' home, social settings or workplace in a language preferred by the participants, which included their ethnic language, English, Mandarin Chinese and Malay (both Bahasa Malaysia and Malay dialects). The audio-taped interviews were transcribed for analysis of languages used at home and the factors leading to the choice.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Table 3 shows that English had emerged as a language for family communication in 15 out of 17 families, and it is the main language in six of the families. Patterns of home language use were also more homogenous in families where both parents are Sarawak Malay and Chinese Foochow. The rest of this section presents the results on the languages used between parents and children for the three ethnic groups.

### **MALAY FAMILIES**

Results on the six Malay families showed that the similarity or dissimilarity in parents' ethnic language influenced the choice of language transmitted to children. For the three families where both parents were Sarawak Malay (M1–M3), the norm was to speak Sarawak Malay with the children. English was a less used language in the family. However, in families with Sarawak Malay and West Malaysian Malay parents, the regional dialectal variation resulted in the parents choosing either Bahasa Malaysia (M4 and M6) or Sarawak Malay (M5) for communication with their children. Similar to the other group of Malay families, English was a less used language in the family. The different language use patterns for the families with Sarawak Malay and West Malaysian Malay

parents would be dealt with before investigating the factors for the emergence of English in the Malay families.

Parents' ethnic group	Family	Number of children	Age of children	Medium of education	Frequently used language	Less used language
Sarawak Malay	M1	3	3-7	Bahasa Malaysia	Sarawak Malay	None
	M2	2	4-6	Bahasa Malaysia	Sarawak Malay	English
	M3	3	6-7	Bahasa Malaysia	Sarawak Malay	English
Sarawak Malay and West Malaysian Malay	M4	3	15-20	Bahasa Malaysia	Bahasa Malaysia	English
	M5	3	2-7	Bahasa Malaysia	Sarawak Malay	English & Bahasa Malaysia
	M6	4	2-9	Bahasa Malaysia	Bahasa Malaysia	Sarawak Malay
Chinese Foochow	F1	1	3	None	Mandarin	English
	F2	2	12-14	Mandarin Chinese	Mandarin	English & Foochow
	F3	3	7-13	Mandarin Chinese	Mandarin	English
Chinese Foochow and other Chinese sub-groups	F4	2	9-16	Bahasa Malaysia	Mandarin	English
	F5	4	9-17	English	English	None
	F6	3	6-12	Mandarin Chinese	English	Mandarin
Indian Tamil	T1	2	2-8	English	English	Tamil
	T2	2	1-12	Bahasa Malaysia	Tamil	English
	T3	1	2	None	English	Tamil
Indian Tamil and Sarawak Indigenous	T4	3	2-9	English	English	None
	T5	2	13-21	Bahasa Malaysia	English	Tamil, Bidayuh & Bahasa Malaysia

**Table 3** Languages used by Malay, Chinese Foochow and Indian Tamil parents with children.

The choice between Sarawak Malay and Bahasa Malaysia in families with Sarawak Malay mothers and West Malaysian Malay fathers depended on the family linguistic environment. The fathers in both Families M5 and M6 originated from Johore and spoke Johore Malay as their first language, but M5 father ended up speaking Sarawak Malay with his children while the M6 father spoke Bahasa Malaysia. A closer examination of the family background revealed that the children in Family M5 were looked after by

their Sarawak Malay maternal grandparents while the parents were at work. In such circumstances, the children acquired Sarawak Malay as their first language and their father accommodated by learning to speak his wife's Malay dialect. In contrast, a full-time Indonesian domestic helper took care of the children of Family M6, and the maternal grandparents spent less time with the children. As the domestic helper and the parents spoke different regional dialects of Malay, Bahasa Malaysia became a convenient choice for family communication. Consequently, the children habitually spoke Bahasa Malaysia although they were also proficient in Sarawak Malay. The case of Family M4 was similar to Family M6, with Bahasa Malaysia being a convenient choice.

Table 3 shows that English was a less used language in four out of the six Malay families. English came into Family M2 because the two children, aged 3 and 5, were put in a child-care centre where English was used as the language of instruction. Unlike traditional Malay parents who chide their children for not speaking their own language, M2 parents encouraged their children to speak English. Their choice of an English-speaking child-care environment arose from their desire for their children to learn English. The emergence of English in Family M3 was also through the children but in Family M5, it was the mother who introduced English to her children. M5 mother was a lecturer in the English Department at the university, and was well aware of the importance of an early start in language acquisition for her children.

To sum up, the Malay parents in this study speak mainly Sarawak Malay or Bahasa Malaysia with their children, with English being a less used language at home. The inclination towards Sarawak Malay is stronger when both parents are from Sarawak but when one of the parents is from West Malaysia, Bahasa Malaysia tends to be used for ease of communication. That is when the standardised Malay language emerges as a language for family communication in a domain that is usually dominated by dialects. Whichever the case, whether it is Bahasa Malaysia or Sarawak Malay, it is still the Malay language that is used in the Malay family and the children attend Bahasa Malaysia medium schools. Shamsul (2001, p. 357) refers to the 'three pillars of Malayness' as language, ruler and nation. It is even defined in Article 152 of the Malaysian Federal Constitution that a Malay is one who speaks Malay and is a Muslim (Malaysia Legal Research Board, 1997, pp. 186–188). The ethnic identity orientation of the Muslim Malays in Malaysia can be compared to the Arabic communities, where an Arab is defined as a person whose mother tongue is Arabic (see Fishman, 1972, p. 44). Since the Malay identity is closely tied to the language, the use of Malay languages is integral in the family. Li and Milroy's (2003) comparison of the predominant household language reported in the Singapore 1980 and 1990 census showed that the Malay families retained the use of Malay (96.7%

and 94.3% respectively) with little increase in English usage (2.3 and 5.5% respectively). The maintenance of the Malay language took place despite the Malays being a minority group in Singapore, accounting for only 13.9% of the resident Singapore population in the year 2000 (Singapore Government nd). Although similar census statistics are not available for Malaysia, the results of this study has indicated the unlikelihood of other languages prevailing in family communication in Malay families, but the choice is between regional Malay dialects and Bahasa Malaysia. The strong ethnolinguistic vitality is derived from the numerical strength of the Malay population, institutional support for the language as official and national language, as well as the socioeconomic and political status of the Malay speakers.

### **CHINESE FOOCHOW FAMILIES**

Language use in the six Chinese Foochow families is characterised by an absence of the ethnic language, Foochow, in the parent-children communication, regardless of whether the parents were from the same Chinese sub-group. The non-transmission of the ethnic language to the younger generation was explained in terms of the wider usefulness of Mandarin Chinese and English compared to Foochow by most Chinese parents in the study but F1 mother candidly highlighted the “uselessness” of Foochow. F1 mother stated she had wanted to teach her 3-year old son Foochow as it was their mother tongue but her mother-in-law told her that her son would not be able to earn a living with it and asked her to speak Mandarin Chinese with him while they taught him English. However, everyone else in the family spoke Foochow with one another. On the other hand, F2 mother reported that she had begun speaking some Foochow to her children recently. Generally, the value of Foochow in symbolising Foochow identity pales in comparison to the instrumental value of standard languages, Mandarin Chinese and English, in helping the children cope with their studies and later in gaining access to opportunities for higher education and jobs.

Table 3 shows that the family communication in the six Chinese Foochow families took place in both Mandarin Chinese and English, the difference being the frequency of use. For the three families with both Chinese Foochow parents (F1–F3), Mandarin Chinese was the main language spoken with children. For the other three families in which the father was Chinese Foochow and the mother was from another Chinese sub-group, Mandarin Chinese was the frequently spoken language in one family (F4) and English in another two families (F5, F6).

The interviews pointed to the parents’ habitual language use and a deliberate language agenda as deciding factors in the choice of language to use with their children. It seemed

that when both parents were Chinese-educated, they were inclined to speak Mandarin Chinese with their children as in the case of Families F2, F3 and F4. When both parents had an English educational background (F5), they chose English as their home language. Family F6 was a different case as one of the parents was Chinese-educated while the other was English-educated. The Chinese Foochow father went to a Chinese primary school in Sibu, Sarawak and that was where his foundation in Mandarin Chinese was built but his Chinese Teochew wife from Singapore was English-educated. When they met at university in the United States, they started off by speaking English with each other and continued to do so until they had their first child. F6 father explained that as their children were growing up, both of them tried very hard to inculcate a habit of speaking Mandarin Chinese in their children since they were already proficient in English. In the interview, F6 father said:

Because now they go to Chinese primary school... they pick up Mandarin from their friends. We also encourage them to watch more Chinese TV programmes. Now they start to appreciate Mandarin. At home, we use more [Mandarin]. I find that they use more and more Mandarin. ...We hope that at least we will use Mandarin, if not Foochow.

When asked about their emphasis on Mandarin Chinese, F6 father explained that his wife's family in Singapore spoke mainly Mandarin Chinese with one another. Nevertheless, despite the deliberate attempts at immersing their children in a Mandarin Chinese home and school environment, English was still the main language spoken at home.

Besides F6, F4 parents also spoke Mandarin Chinese with their children by design. In this family, the Chinese Hainan mother did not want her children to come into contact with too many languages when they were learning to speak. Both of them kept to only English when their children were about one to two years old but when they were grounded in English, Mandarin Chinese was introduced to them. Their eldest son reported that his natural tendency was to speak English with his parents unless they initiated the use of Mandarin Chinese, which they often did. It might have been a coincidence that as many as two out of the six Chinese Foochow families had a deliberate language agenda to shift their children away from speaking English to Mandarin Chinese at some point in their children's lives. F2 mother stressed that "Chinese must study Mandarin, at least until Primary Six so that they can read Chinese newspapers". The emphasis on their children acquiring Mandarin Chinese (with the exception of F5) indicates its value as a

marker of Chinese identity and its usefulness as a language of wider communication in the Chinese community. The relative importance of these two motivations needs to be further investigated in view of Clammer's (1982) earlier observation that one is a Chinese regardless of whether or not one speaks Chinese. According to Clammer, "to a Chinese his sense of Chineseness transcends all such [language] variations, and is furthermore regarded as essentially a racial identity, rather than, for example, a religious one [...], a linguistic one [...], or a locality of origin one [...]" (Clammer 1982, pp. 128–129).

## **INDIAN TAMIL FAMILIES**

Results showed that four out of five Indian Tamil families reported using English for family communication whether one or both parents were Indian Tamil (see Table 3). We will examine the exceptional case of a family where Tamil is maintained as the main language for parent-child interaction before investigating why English was the dominant language transmitted to children in other Indian Tamil families. Family T2 was the only family where Tamil was reported as the main language for family communication. T2 father, originally from West Malaysia, was posted to serve in the air force in Sarawak. T2 mother, an Indian Tamil from Sarawak, taught English. She stressed the importance of her children speaking their mother tongue since both of them were Tamils, and also because the Hindu religion was very much associated with the Tamil language. In her words, "if you know the language, you know something about the religion". T2 mother stated that English was only used when she taught her 12-year old son English and other school subjects, and when they took him out to familiarise him with the use of English. Thus, although Tamil was maintained as the home language, T2 mother made sure that her son could communicate in English.

The choice of English over other languages in the two families with Indian Tamil fathers and Kayan or Bidayuh wives (T4, T5) was for ease of communication because they could not speak or understand each other's ethnic language. T5 couple eventually learnt each other's ethnic language. The Indian Tamil father (a police officer) and the Bidayuh mother (an English teacher) made it a point to speak their ethnic languages with their children since they were young so that they were able to communicate with their grandparents and relatives who could not speak English. On the other hand, T4 father did not speak Tamil with his children although his Kayan wife tried to teach them some Kayan words. There was no necessity for their children to learn their ethnic languages as their own parents had accommodated by speaking Bahasa Malaysia to their children during their annual visits to West Malaysia and Miri, Sarawak respectively. In both of these families, the need for a common language was there but the question raised is –



why was English chosen over Bahasa Malaysia, which was also a shared language? T4 father explained the choice of English in terms of their social and religious network which was English-speaking:

If you talk about me, I come from [a] Christian background, I go to church and I don't go to [the] temple. Where is the environment for me to pick up Tamil? [If] I want to force my wife or children to pick up my language, who are they going to communicate with? We seldom go to temple and it is only when we meet [other Tamils] then we speak Tamil. Even then, when we talk about West Malaysian Indians and any Indian that we meet, they are educated and they speak in English. It is the *lingua franca*, you see.

Besides the association of language with religion (also highlighted by T2 mother), the point brought up by T4 father on the association of English usage with higher educational level was a point to note.

In Indian Tamil families where the parents are educated, it seemed that Tamil was devalued in comparison to English. T1 mother explained that it was enough for her children to know Tamil for making social conversation as Indians had adopted English as their first language. The use of Tamil was reserved for reprimanding their daughter in public. Their daughter followed their example of speaking Bahasa Malaysia with their domestic helper but she did not use it with her parents. The functional differentiation of languages was rather clear in Family T1, with English being the main language of communication in the family.

At the expense of making some generalisations, the results on the Indian Tamil families show that the ethnic language is losing its place of centrality to English as the main language for family communication (with the exception of Family T2). According to Schiffman (2002), this strategy of embracing English, although to the detriment of Tamil, is in fact a survival mechanism engendered by the national language policy as mastery of English opens up access to tertiary education opportunities in English-speaking countries if the students did not manage to enter Malaysian universities.

## CONCLUSION

The study on the language use of the Malay, Chinese Foochow and Indian Tamil families in Kuching, the capital city of the Malaysian state of Sarawak indicated that the language of family communication was becoming more homogeneous. In Malay families where

both parents are Sarawak Malay, the shared language is used with their children but in Malay families where one of the parents is from Sarawak and another from West Malaysia, the tendency is to speak Bahasa Malaysia with their children rather than the respective regional Malay dialects. In Chinese Foochow families, regardless of whether the parents are from the same Chinese sub-group, the inclination is towards English and Mandarin Chinese. In Indian Tamil families, the preference is for English over Tamil. The findings show a movement towards Bahasa Malaysia, Mandarin Chinese and English as languages for family communication in the three ethnic groups studied, indicating that standard languages have permeated the family domain – to the greatest extent in Chinese Foochow families and to a limited extent in Malay families. The factors in favour of standardised languages are the need for a common language of communication, the parents' habitual language use derived from the language of instruction in school and the instrumental value of standard languages. Spolsky (1998) stated that “some aspects of concern for language choice can be explained practically, politically, or economically” (p. 57). The cultural capital once held by ethnic languages as a marker of ethnicity is being supplanted by instrumental benefits offered by mastery of standard languages.

While the shift in allegiance away from the ethnic language to languages of wider communication in the society is common in the language shift and maintenance literature, the findings have contributed in showing that although there is a move towards homogeneity in home languages, there is a Malay *versus* non-Malay divide in the standard languages chosen for family communication. The Chinese Foochow and Indian Tamil families in this study have chosen English over Bahasa Malaysia despite government promotion of Bahasa Malaysia as a language for Malaysians. As the study did not examine the ethnic perceptions associated with this preference, it is not possible to conclude whether this affiliation is due to the association of Bahasa Malaysia with Malayness or the wider usefulness of English in a global context. However, the findings suggest the need to delve further into the issues of language and ethnic identity in the context of language planning in Malaysia to compare the process of assimilation with that of the Chinese in Indonesia (Tan, 1997) and Thailand (Callahan, 2003; Morita, 2003), Malay in Singapore (Hvitfeldt & Poedjosoedarmo, nd) and the Indian Muslims in Thailand (Forbes, 1982).

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> “The role of the press was significant in stabilising the standard variety of written Malay. As the press first entered West Malaysia through Singapore in the south, and the Malay dialect of Singapore was also that of Johor, it was this dialect that became the model for the language of printed materials. The press came earlier than the formation of the Federation of Malaya. As such, when a supraregional variety was required for the new Federation for its school education and administration, the Johor dialect became the basis for the supraregional norm” (Omar, 1992, p. 211).

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