
Sindhi in Malaysia-Language Maintenance or Language Shift?

1981432

Maya Khemlani David
Faculty of Languages and Linguistics
University of Malaya

Introduction

This article will discuss whether the Sindhi community of Malaysia is experiencing language shift or maintaining the use of the ancestral language, Sindhi. The traditional questionnaire methodology based on the domain construct (cf. Fishman, 1964) was used to analyze whether the ethnic language is maintained. The results of the questionnaire approach to data collection are by themselves insufficient to present a comprehensive picture of the process of shift. Consequently, the data used in this study comprises a three-year ethnographic study of the community's choice of language choice in homes and in intra-community encounters.

Moreover, in addition to the self-reported perceptions of proficiency normally used in questionnaire studies, communicative strategies were observed and used to determine ethnic members' ability to use Sindhi. In order to determine the dominant language of the community other theories and constructs

like the accommodation theory were used to analyze the number of reciprocal and non-reciprocal turns in the transcriptions.

These methodologies and constructs disclosed information which a domain based questionnaire approach in itself was not able to capture. The phenomena of codemixing and codeswitching not only of two but also of three languages emerged. Language choices varied not only across generations but also across gender within a generation. The functions for which the ethnic language was maintained also varied across generations.

The community's choice of language/s must be seen against their personal and joint histories prior to migration and in Malaysia. This must be seen against the backdrop of national language planning policies which influenced language choice. The findings will be discussed.

Aim Of Study

This research studies the status of Sindhi for the Malaysians Sindhis for the purpose of determining whether the Sindhi language is being maintained among members of this Malaysian speech community. The main question that the study sought to investigate was — Is the community experiencing language shift, and if so what are the manifestations of such a shift?

Data And Methodology

A 73-item questionnaire (n=73) and six hours of transcripts were analyzed to determine the language choice of three generations of Malaysian Sindhis in intra and intergenerational discourse, both in private and public settings. In addition three video recordings of a five-hour annual gathering of the community in 1995, 1993 and 1990 were analysed to determine language choice of leading members of the community at such gatherings. Interviews of an informal nature were conducted with 9 older members of the community based in Penang (4), Langkawi (1) and Kuala Lumpur (4) to obtain historical insights of the community under study. In addition, the researcher over a three-year period, also observed language use at social, religious and formal gatherings of the Malaysian Sindhi community. Home visits of a social nature were made to 20 Sindhi homes in Kuala Lumpur with the aim of observing language in use among different members of a family.

The domain construct (Fishman, 1964) used in the pioneering studies on language shift was accompanied by other means of determining language shift. The calculation of the number of turns in which a dominant language is used in the transcriptions is suggested as a further means of measuring language shift. The number of times a younger community member responded to a Sindhi turn in another language was also calculated.

The use of communicative strategies like circumlocution, appeal and repair emerge in the data and are used as a measure of declining language proficiency. Declining language use and proficiency are manifestations of language shift.

Significance Of Study

The methodological thrust of this study is twofold. Unlike traditional studies on language shift where a questionnaire is distributed to a sample of the population, this study also entailed a three-year ethnographic study (see also Gal, 1979, for an ethnographic study of language shift) of the Malaysian Sindhi population. The questionnaire was statistically analyzed (see David, 1996) while more complex patterns of language use emerged from an analysis of the recordings. A macro-perspective based on questionnaire input does not always disclose the specific manifestations of language shift. The linking of the macro perspective with the micro perspective based on observation and recordings of natural discourse appears a promising avenue for research.

Additionally, while most studies on language shift look at the language use of a representative sample of a community, the Malaysian Sindhi community was small enough for a comprehensive study of their language use to be carried out. Moreover, as the Sindhi community is a relatively young migrant community to Malaysia all three generations are represented in the study and a picture of language choice and use of different generations was obtained.

Another advantage of this study is that the researcher, being a member of the community, was able to gain access to community activities and homes without being seen as an outsider. This naturally allowed for observation with minimal distortion.

The study of the Sindhi language shift is also interesting from the national perspective. The study covered a period when national language issues were undergoing fundamental changes brought about by language planning policies. As a result of independence (1957) the medium of instruction in government- run schools changed from English to Malay, the national language. This also affected the language used by the community under study.

A study of the language choices of Malaysian Sindhis may give significant insights into other minority communities, who like the Sindhis are internationally dispersed and live in the midst of majority cultures.

Background To The Setting

Malaysia is made up of Peninsular Malaysia (West Malaysia) and Sabah and Sarawak (East Malaysia). It is a multiracial, multiethnic and multilingual nation with a population of 20 million which is made up of Malays and other indigenous people (61%), Chinese (28%), Indians (8%) and various other ethnic groups (Khoo, 1991:40). These groups are not themselves homogenous and sub-ethnic and ethnolinguistic groups exist. The Sindhis constitute a sub-ethnic group of Indians and consist of only about 600 people. There are no Sindhi language schools in the country and no Sindhi language environment exists beyond the Sindhi community. In such an environment will the ethnic language survive?

Background To The Malaysian Sindhi Community

Malaysian Sindhis come from Sind, which, prior to the independence of India in 1946 was part of India. Although there were a small number of Sindhi traders in the country prior to the partitioning of India, it is only over the last fifty years that they have come to Malaysia with the object of settling down in the country. This immigration was mainly a consequence of the partitioning of India in 1947, which resulted in Sind becoming part of Pakistan. Hindu Sindhis had to literally flee from Sind leaving property behind and rebuild lives and amass fortunes elsewhere.

Since the partitioning of India and Pakistan, the migrants Sindhis have had no "home" territory in India and exist as an international trading community. The Sindhi community is dispersed throughout the urban centres of the world but Malaysian Sindhis share a common cultural and religious background

with Sindhis throughout the world and have extensive social and business networks both locally and internationally.

The Sindhis came to Malaysia (then Malaya) with a distinctive culture and language. In Malaysia they were and still are a minority community. The first immigrant Sindhis lived in urban areas like Penang and their children attended missionary schools, where the medium of instruction was English. This was during the colonial period when “English schools were built in big towns only” (Asmah, 1992:36). The status and prestige of the English language was established during the British regime. Asmah (1992:5) reports “even from early days English had already been marked by features of exclusivity” English medium schools were found in urban areas where the Sindhi trading community was concentrated. Such schools nurtured a group of Malaysians who became “more comfortable” in English than they were in any other language (Asmah, 1993:83). Although Asmah does not specify the sub-ethnic group she states that English has become the first language for certain urban Chinese and Indians.

Profile Of The Community: Linguistic Proficiency Variation Across And Within Generations

The younger of the first generation of Sindhis are today in their fifties and many are in their sixties and seventies. First generations male Sindhi immigrants (MG1) came to Malaysia in search of a livelihood and many started as small time traders or salesmen in the textile industry. The majority were bilingual and a few were multilingual (Sindhi, Hindi and English) on arrival. In contrast, most first generation women (FG1) were mainly monolingual Sindhi speakers but have acquired over time a passive understanding of English and an active knowledge of a variety of Malay locally known as “*pasar*” or pidginised Malay. FGI were mainly homemakers.

The second generation of Malaysian Sindhis (G2) who range from the late thirties and above comprise a large percentage of the working population. Most were educated in English medium schools in Malaysia, then Malaya. A number of G2s have moved away from the traditional textile industry while those who remain in the family business have diversified their products and increased the scale of their operations. Some of them are professionals like lawyers and doctors. Many of the women (FG2) have also joined the work force by taking an active role in the family business or by opening small-

home-based businesses. In short, the economic profile of G2 reflects an upwardly mobile characteristic of the community.

The third generation of Malaysian Sindhis, (G3) many of whom are in their twenties and younger were educated or are being educated in the school system with Malay as the medium of instruction. The children of the affluent G2s are registered in private schools where English is the medium of instruction. Many of the G3 including the women pursue higher education and English is the language of degree courses offered by the private sector within Malaysia.

G2 and G3 largely dominate the community and the language choices of this section of the community will impact on and affect the status of the ethnic language.

Analysis and Findings of Questionnaire Study

The findings from the questionnaire clearly indicate that the Malaysian Sindhi community is experiencing language shift. Across the generations both in the home and work domains, Sindhi is being used by fewer respondents (for details see David, 1996). The use of English in family discourse appears to have started even for G1. Sindhi is being used less by G2 and G3 for specific speech acts like singing and counting. Not only is Sindhi the first language for fewer respondents across the generations, fewer Sindhis, especially those in the second and third generations, are able to read and write Sindhi. A loss in literacy skills is bound to have long term cumulative effects on ethnic language proficiency.

As codeswitching can represent a transitory stage between the use of an ethnic language and an intrusive language, respondents were asked whether when they used Sindhi they found themselves using Sindhi and another language in the same sentence. The majority of respondents from all three generations said they used codeswitches. However, whether the intrusive language - English, or the ethnic language Sindhi is the dominant language in codeswitches is best determined by observation and recordings of such discourse.

Analysis Of Transcriptions And Observations: Language Choice In The Private Domain

The audio and video recordings and field observations revealed that a generation related language shift is taking place in the Malaysian Sindhi community. While G1 use Sindhi predominately in peer interaction, G1 Sindhi men and women revealed different profiles of language use both within and across generations. In peer interaction with their own gender, the men tend to codeswitch between English and Sindhi. The women, however, use limited and isolated English lexical items, i.e. they codemix with Sindhi being the dominant language.

In intergenerational discourse with ethnic members, G1 appear to accommodate to a large extent the language preferences of younger interlocutors and use English with them. Even FG1 accommodate to the language preferences of the younger generation and tend to use a mixed discourse of Sindhi/English/Malay code switches. Some FG1 even completely shift to a pidginised variety of Malay in interaction with their children and the younger generations. G3 accommodate by using the same variety of Malay although the Malay learnt in schools is the standard variety. Both the young and the old are accommodating in their respective styles: G1 by shifting to Malay and G3 by using the variety that G1 know.

G2's interaction with each other and with the younger generation is in English with the odd Sindhi code mix, i.e. the use of only one or two words in another language as in:-

Subhare DINNER ai
Tomorrow dinner there is
(There is dinner tomorrow)

rather than a codeswitch, i.e. a real mix of the respective languages as in:-

*Oho konto tha BECAUSE ma STUDENT aaye te STUDENT jo
SPECIAL aahe*
That cannot because I am a student and students' one special is
(That cannot be done because I'm a student and student's one is special).

However, with the G1 women, the G2 women tend to maintain Sindhi but it is a codeswitched variety. Such communication has at times resulted in communication breakdown, a need for repair and the use of communicative strategies like appeals, circumlocution, codemixing, codeswitching and code alternation have been noted in interactions (see example) between FG1 and FG2. In sharp contrast, G2 men and women tend to use English with the G1 men.

Example: Circumlocution

Konoko agai kasai chavandasi ne kukura kuandahua bi a ta agai hunaka kasai chavandahua?

Isn't before kasai we used to say chickens they kill also before they kasai we called?

(Isn't it last time we used to call them kasai, they used to kill chickens and others, we used to call them kasai?)

Unlike G2's peer interaction, which is in dominant English, G3's peer interaction shows a mixed discourse of English and Malay with Sindhi fading into insignificance. On the occasions when they are spoken to in Sindhi, the younger G3 interlocutors tend to respond in Malay or English as seen in the following example:

Mother - *Sonu hi gharo?* (How much?)

Daughter - I just opened a new one

Such non-reciprocal language is often used by the younger G3s and some of the G2s. It is, however, not absolute as some of the older of the G3s attempt to code mix in nominal Sindhi with dominant English and or to use the communicative strategy of short Sindhi responses.

It was clear that the use of stand alone Sindhi in interaction across generations is rare. Multilingual code use results in code mixes, code switches and code alternation in Malaysian Sindhi homes with both English and Malay playing important roles. Such extensive use of mixed discourse could only manifest itself in audio-recordings of real interaction.

Use Of English in the Public Domain-

Language at the annual general meetings (AGM) of the Sindhi Association of Malaysia (SAM) and language at religious functions were observed to determine language in the public domain.. Observation of the AGMS disclosed that the language used at openings, discussion phases and closings varied. Similarly, although the question on language used when praying was limited to silent prayer, observations indicated that the language at wedding ceremonies, funeral rites, lay-initiated prayer sessions, sermons by visiting sages and local priests varied. Such a wealth of details only emerges with an ethnographic study.

It was found that English is the language used at official and social gatherings. It is used by the leaders of the community for public speeches at ethnic social gatherings and meetings of SAM. When community leaders like the President of SAM and elected committee members of SAM, (generally G2s), who constitute the successful businessmen of the community elect to use English at four successive annual gatherings, (where about half of the Sindhi population of Malaysia gathers to celebrate Deepavali, the Hindu festival of Lights to commemorate the conquest of good over evil), it is only natural that English is seen as the language of upward mobility.

The religious domain is traditionally the mainstay of ethnic language use. However, since the Malaysian Sindhi community is too small to maintain its own temples, public worship is at the North Indian temples and Gurdwaras where Hindhi and Punjabi are used respectively. Sindhi has a limited role in such venues. Even when religious ceremonies were conducted in Sindhi homes due to the varying levels of proficiency in Sindhi across generations, it was not unusual to hear the Hindhi or Punjabi speaking priests' discourses directed at younger community members being translated in English by G1s, (generally MG1s) so that it could be understood by younger community members.

Function Of Sindhi - Variation Across Generations

In the shift from one language to another, some of the functions of the ancestral language are retained even as its communicative role is replaced by the new language. Examination of the conversation of Sindhis across the generations disclosed that in the process of language shift, the ethnic language has varying roles across the generations.

Although in general the communicative role of Sindhi has declined, it still has some functional uses and Sindhi lexical items are still retained in predominately English speech. Sindhi lexical items are maintained in the dominant English discourse of G2 and G3 for cultural and religious referents. (See David, 1998). Kinship referents are still maintained in the ethnic language and expressions like "How is your *chachi*?" "This is my *mama*", are commonly used even by G3s.

For both the G2s and G3s while English is the language of communication Sindhi has the role of a private language. It is resorted to when there is a need to exclude outgroup members. However, this is a limited use of the ethnic language as even when Sindhi is used for such a function it is generally used in code mixes as in, "She is *thuli* (fat)". The only item in Sindhi is the pejorative lexical item. Use of such lexical items maintain distancing and privacy roles of the language. Such use of the ethnic language is not seen as being sufficient to maintain the use of Sindhi and to stop language shift.

Conclusion

In adopting both the use of a questionnaire and observation of natural spontaneous discourse in various settings a clearer picture of language shift was established. A questionnaire in itself is likely to overlook the use of the ethnic language for specific functions. Although the domain construct played a role in determining the status of the Sindhi language it does not reveal certain features of discourse such as code mixes, codeswitches, code alternation and non-reciprocity of language use.

The international character of the community, its upper middle class profile, the increasing number of inter marriages, and the community's adaptability and flexibility to new settings and demands have a negative impact on ethnic language use. This is compounded by the growing use of English and Malay. The writer predicts that in another 20-30 years the Sindhi language as the language of communication among members of the Malaysian Sindhi speech community will die, as there will, with the demise of the present G1, be no agent to reinforce the use of the language. This is only natural given the Malaysian setting and the upwardly mobile changing nature of the community. The Malaysian environment is not conducive to the maintenance of the Sindhi language. Sindhi has no practical or utilitarian role to play in the larger Malaysian context.

Studies of language shift in America and Australia reveal that communities which shift from the use of their mother tongue move from a position of bilingualism to monolingualism. This is not true of the Malaysian Sindhis. The traditional notion of subtractive bilingualism operating as a result of language shift has not taken place in a multilingual setting like Malaysia. For younger community members, Sindhi has been replaced by two languages-English, an international language, and Malay the national language. In fact, some of the codeswitches, especially those used by the older women in interaction with younger Sindhis, disclose that such codeswitches consist of three languages and not two, as is normal in the process of language shift.

Furthermore, while most languages shift studies reveal that the minority language is displaced by the host language or the majority language, this study shows Sindhi being displaced by an international language which is neither the national language nor the majority language. Sindhis are an international upwardly mobile merchant community and Malaysians of the upper strata of society, generally, use English at social functions. There is also some transition to Malay, the national language, as the language used in responses of G3 with their peers and it is probable that with time Malay will play a bigger role in their language choice patterns.

In many communities, culture and language are intrinsically bound. However, the Malaysian Sindhis reduction in the use of the ethnic language does not appear to have affected Sindhi culture. (David, 1998). The Sindhis are a closely-knit community who are proud of their identity and maintain their customs and religious traditions. Although the Malaysian Sindhis constitute a very small part of the Malaysian population, they form part of a larger international Sindhi community closely bound by blood and marriage ties, trading links and by subscription to a common identity. Even with a decline in the use of the Sindhi language, the Sindhi culture has been maintained.

The Malaysian Sindhis, although a community fiercely proud of its ethnicity and concerned with maintaining its distinctive culture, do not appear to see language maintenance as critical for the preservation of their culture and identity. (David, 1998). They are, perhaps, helpless to prevent language shift given the reality of their minority status in Malaysia. The ultimate reality is that the Malaysian Sindhi community is simply not large enough to maintain the use of Sindhi given the competing demands of Malay and English, the two important languages in Malaysia

References

- Asmah Haji Omar (1992) *The Linguistic Scenery in Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur: (1993) Field research on languages in Malaysia: The state of the art. In J.Allwood et al (Eds.). *Proceedings of the XIVTH Scandinavian Conference of Linguistics and the VIIIth Conference of Nordic and General Linguistics* August 16-21 1993 Volume 1(pp. 1-16). Gothenburg: Department of Linguistics, Gothenburg University.
- David, M.K. 1996 Language Shift among the Sindhis of Malaysia. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Malaya
- David, M.K. 1998 Language Shift, Cultural Maintenance and Ethnic Identity: A Study of a Minority Community: the Sindhis of Malaysia. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 130:67-76
- Fishman , J. A. 1964 Language Maintenance and Language Shift as fields of inquiry. *Linguistics* 9: 32-70
- Khoo, S.G. 1991 *Population Census* Vol. 1 Kuala Lumpur: General Report of the Department of Statistics, Malaysia