Interface of Ethnicities in Communication: The Malaysian Sino-Indian (Chindian) Family in Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Communication, especially verbal communication, is an important medium in the formation of one's identity. It has also been widely used as a tool to inculcate the spirit of patriotism and loyalty among the people of a nation state. This paper discusses the language that the Malaysian Sino-Indians or better known locally as "Chindian" use for their communicative purposes in daily life. Careful analysis and close observation of the data obtained could serve   as important leverage points in nation building and fostering interethnic understanding. Based on qualitative data obtained from observations and in-depth interviews conducted on 31 biethnic Sino-Indian participants, this research finds that an array of languages is considered as their native language by the Malaysian Sino-Indians but a strong preference towards the English language is evident. Besides English being their main tool for communication, an array of other languages is used to fulfill their communicative needs. This causes heritage languages to be no longer considered as the native language by the majority of the biethnic Sino-Indians. This trend of communicative preference among the Malaysian Sino-Indians may contribute towards the occurrence of language shift.

Keywords: *Biethnic, Sino-Indian, Chindian, native language, communication*

INTRODUCTION: THE MALAYSIAN "CHINDIANS"

Biethnic individuals are found in many parts of the world as a result of exogamous marriages. In Malaysia the Sino-Indians are another group of biethnic individuals that are commonly found. Sino-Indians are the offspring of Chinese and Indian mixed parentage (David 2008) and they live mainly in Peninsular Malaysia. Sino-Indians are also widely found in neighbouring Singapore. These hybrid individuals are locally better known as 'Chindians' (David, 2008;

Gopan, 2011) a term coined from the words "Chinese" and "Indian"'.

Data obtained from the National Statistics Department of Malaysia, between the year 2003 and 2010 shows that a total of 6509 Sino-Indian individuals were born in Malaysia (Department of Statistics 2013). These individuals were either categorized as Indians or Chinese in accordance to the ethnicity of their father. This is due to the fact that 'Sino-Indian' is not accepted as a formal category in Malaysia. In 2003, 400 Sino-Indians were registered as Chinese while 450 Sino-Indians were categorized as Indians. In 2004, 350 Sino-Indians were categorized as Chinese while 482 Sino-Indians were categorized as Indians. This practice is observed as a yearly trend in the consecutive years. The data obtained demonstrates that between the year 2003 to 2010 a total number of 2710 Sino-Indian individuals have been officially categorized as Chinese while 3799 Sino-Indian individuals have been officially categorized as Indians by the Malaysian Registration Department.

LANGUAGE USE AMONG "CHINDIANS"

Language plays an integral role in the formation of a person's identity. Language is constructed by culture. It is a social and racial construction that "comprises structures and symbols that represents reality as it conveys cultural meaning, myths and codes" (Taylor 2004: 91). Language is not merely a communicative tool but also plays a pertinent role in shaping a person's world view (Taylor 2004).

The world today is populated by hundreds of different ethnic groups therefore there are equally as many different languages used to communicate within and across ethnic groups and nations. Due to this, various ethnic groups and communities have different perspectives about similar things and this adds to the diversity of the human race. The widening of contact zones has created the need for a common language that would enable people from different ethnic backgrounds and worldviews to communicate and interact. Languages such as French, Mandarin, Hindi, Tamil and Malay have served as common languages between the different ethnic groups of a nation.

English is a language that has long been accepted by many communities as a lingua franca. It is the language of commerce and trade and the language of knowledge across the globe. In many countries English is accepted and used as a second language adding to the wide spectrum of language options, creating bilingual and multilingual communities around the world (Mohanty & Perregaux 1996). Malaysia is a good example of a country where English is widely accepted and used as a second language. This is mainly due to its history as a British colony.

The occurrence of mix marriages and the existence of biethnic individuals are suggested to contribute towards language shift as in most cases at least one parent's mother tongue is neglected in daily discourse (David 2008; Holmes 2001). Language shift might have a direct effect on a biethnic person's ethnic identity development.

In some instances biethnic individuals are purposely not exposed to their heritage language by their parents. These parents intentionally do not pass down their heritage language, to their biethnic children, with the intention of helping their children assimilate into the host society or dominant culture better (Rocha 2010). Although the ability to speak the dominant language of the host society quickly and fluently might contribute towards quicker assimilation and acceptance by the dominant group at the same time the inability to speak

a certain heritage language might serve as a barrier that impedes ethnic group membership and acceptance. At a later stage of life, upon realizing the importance of the heritage language some adult biethnic individuals have taken initiatives to formally learn their native language, to enable them to forge stronger ties with the members of their reference group (Rocha 2010).

Preference towards the English language has been observed within the educated class of the biethnic Baba Nyonya community in Malaysia (Lee 2011). Besides preference towards the English language the biethnic Baba and Nyonya society developed forms of pidgin and creole to fulfill their communicative needs. They spoke a Malay creole called the Baba Malay which contained many words from the Hokkien dialect (Lee 2011; Tan 1993). This form of Malay Creole was learned by the Baby Nyonyas as their native tongue. It is a result of language negotiation, compromise and assimilation (Khoo, 1996). Unlike the Baba and Nyonya community, studies on the language preference among the Malaysian Sino-Indian individuals has not found any form of pidgin or creole usage among the Sino-Indians. Instead they are found to prefer code switching between English and their native languages which are usually either Tamil or Chinese (Mac & Ainun 2009).

Research findings demonstrate that the English language is often used as common language between the Chinese and Indian couples that inter-marry in Malaysia. As a result to this, their Sino-Indian off springs often consider English as their native language (David 2008; Mac & Ainun n.d.). This is perhaps due to the fact that Sino-Indians do not live collectively together as a secluded community as they usually live among the other main ethnic groups found in Malaysia (Holmes 2001). Another factor that has influenced the preference of English over the use of other native languages in this scenario is the higher education attainment of the Sino-Indian individuals and their parents (Mac & Ainun 2009)

Although Sino-Indian individuals have demonstrated a preference towards the English language, studies by Arumugam (1990), David (2008) and Nadarajan (1994) have pointed out that most Sino-Indians have a tendency to be multilingual as most of them are able to at least communicate in one of their mother tongue which is either a Chinese dialect or an Indian language, Malay which is the Malaysian National Language and/or English which is the second language in Malaysia.

Generally, the literature review on the language ability and preference of biethnic individuals demonstrate a wide array of possibilities influenced by various internal and external factors. Biethnic individuals are usually exposed to more than one language and in most cases are at least bilingual but their preference varies. The growth of the biethnic population might greatly contribute towards phenomena such as language shift, language loss and eventually over the generations even the death of native languages which can only be avoided by conscious efforts towards language maintenance (Holmes 2001). The study of the language ability and preference of the Sino-Indian individuals will help provide an insight into the development of their ethnic identity.

METHODS

This research adopted a qualitative research design. Data was obtained through in-depth interviews and observational study of Chindian participants, conducted over a period of nine months, from February to October 2013. While observation of the interaction between participants and their families took place at their homes, usually during festivities, interviews were largely conducted in public spaces away from family members where participants were

able to speak more freely.

A total of 31 Chindian participants participated in this research. 15 male participants and 16 female participants. 20 of the participants had Indian fathers and Chinese mothers while 11 participants had Chinese fathers and Indian mothers. A series of 29 semi-structured questions pertaining to language was administered. The interviews also heavily relied on further probes instigated by the information shared by the participants (Morse & Richards 2002). The participants were selected based on six stipulated criteria. The criteria are (1) individuals with one Indian and one Chinese parent, (2) aged above 18 years old, (3) parents not divorced before the participant is 18 years old, (4) participant was raised by his/her own biological parents, (5) parents of participants not adopted, and (6) had attained a minimal academic qualification of SPM. The participants' age was set at 18 years old and above due to the justification that a person attains a stable form of identity at the end of adolescence (Erickson 1968). Besides relying on in-depth interviews observation was also used to supplement the main interview data. The data collected was coded and analyzed using NVivo 10 software, commonly used for the management of qualitative data. Although it is conventional acceptance that qualitative research do not use quantitative data, this paper presents quasi-statistical data for better understanding and to increase internal generalizability. The use of the NVivo data analysis software has aided in such data presentation.

In addition to qualitative analysis of interviews, this study also reports percentages of participants who speak particular languages. The use of percentages is admittedly not common in qualitative research, and similarly uncommon for social research involving small numbers of research subjects. However, reporting the percentages in this study is useful to highlight the pervasiveness of particular language practices among this study's 31 Chindian participants.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
Language fluency
All the 31 Sino-Indian participants in this study were fluent in both Malay and English. This finding is expected in the Malaysian context as Malay is the National Language of the country and English is taught as a second language in schools. Although, it would have been expected that the Sino-Indian participants would be fluent it at least one of the native languages of their parents, which is either Chinese or Tamil, two female participants and four male participants, who make up a total number of six participants (19%), were only fluent in English and Malay. A total of 15 participants (48%); 11 female participants and four male participants, were fluent in three languages, namely English, Malay and Chinese. Only three participants (10%), who could be further divided into one female and two male participants, were fluent in English, Malay and Tamil. Out of the 31 participants, 7 participants which is equivalent to 23% were fluent in all four languages which are English, Malay, Chinese and Tamil. The findings are demonstrated in Table 1.

Language	Gender		Total
	Female	Male	
English & Malay	2	4	6
English, Malay & Chinese	11	4	15
English, Malay & Tamil	1	2	3
English, Malay, Chinese & Tamil	1	6	7

Table 1: Language fluency according to gender

A closer look at the data above shows that 22 out of the 31 participants (71%) were fluent in Chinese while only ten out of the 31 participants (32%) were fluent in Tamil. This finding is interesting as 20 Sino-Indian participants in this study have Indian fathers and are officially registered as Indian individuals while only ten participants have Chinese fathers and are officially registered as Chinese. Data collected on the language fluency of Sino-Indian participants in this study demonstrate that six of them are bilingual while 25 of them are multilingual. Six out of the 31 participants, (19%)report not being fluent in either Tamil or Chinese. They report fluency only in Malay and English.

Native language

Most of the Sino-Indian individuals with Chinese fathers consider neither Chinese nor Tamil as their native language. They instead considered English to be their native language. The similar scenario is witnessed among the Sino-Indian participants with Indian fathers. To be precise, ten out of the 20 Sino-Indian individuals with Indian fathers (50%) and seven out of 11 individuals with Chinese fathers (64%) considered English as their native language.

Interestingly, none of the Sino-Indian individuals with Indian fathers considered Tamil as their native language, instead two individuals with Chinese fathers (18%) considered Tamil as their native language. Chinese was not considered as their native language by any of the Sino-Indians with Chinese fathers but the language was considered as their native language by seven individuals with Indian fathers (35%).

A few participants considered dual languages as their native language. One participant with a Chinese father (9%) considered both Tamil and English as his native languages and two of the Sino-Indian participants with Indian fathers (10%) mentioned that they considered both English and Chinese as their native languages while one participant with an Indian father (5%) considered English and Tamil to be his native languages. Interview data obtained, offer us more detailed explanation regarding this finding. Lim Vinod who has a Chinese father and an Indian mother stated that he considers Tamil as his native language because;

> …most of the time my father spends his time outside. So after school I'm with my mother and with my relatives on my mother's side, so most of my time I spend with my mother.

Among reasons given for choosing English as their native language instead of the native languages of their parents was because it was the language used in the home domain among

family members and because the participant was good at the language. Khang Nithya, a participant with a Chinese father and an Indian mother, who considered English as her native language states:

> English because we speak English at home and I'm good at it.

The similar reason was stated by Zack Raj Narayanan who considered Chinese as his native language which is the native language of his Chinese mother. Zack states:

> I think Mandarin because I'm good at it.

Diviya Ananda who has an Indian father and a Chinese mother explained that she considers Cantonese as her native language because:

> That was the first language that I learned, I only picked up Tamil later.

The data obtained lucidly demonstrates that the majority of the Chindian participants considered English as their native language as shown in the Figure 2 below.
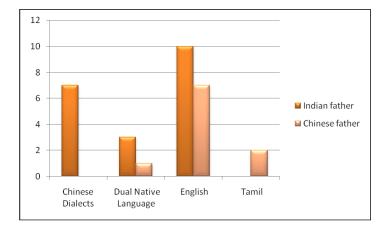
Figure 1: Native languages of Sino-Indians

Communication with fathers

74% of the Sino-Indian participants in this research used the English language to communicate with their fathers. Out of the 11 participants who had Chinese fathers, eight participants (73%) communicated to their fathers in English while 15 out of the 20 (75%) participants with Indian fathers spoke to their fathers in English.

The second most common language used by the Sino-Indian participants to communicate with their fathers was Malay but this scenario was only observed among Sino-Indian participants with Indian fathers. None of the Sino-Indian participants with Chinese fathers spoke in Malay to their fathers. Participants with Chinese fathers also used Chinese, a

combination of Chinese and English and even Tamil to communicate with their fathers. Only 2 participants with Chinese fathers (18%) used their father's native language to communicate with their fathers. It was very insightful to learn that none of the participants communicated in Tamil to their Indian fathers. In other words none of the Sino-Indian participants with Indian fathers used their father's native language to communicate with their fathers. Kashini Pandian who spoke to her Indian father in Malay stated that:

> … he doesn't speak English to us; since we were small he spoke to us in Malay. Maybe my dad spoke in Bahasa [Malay] to us so that my mum could understand as well.

Kashini Pandian further explained that her father spoke to her and her siblings in Malay instead of English or Tamil to enable her mother to understand and participate in the communications they had. Her mother could not speak in either English or Tamil leaving them with only Malay as a common language between them.

Priya Ananda whose Indian father spoke to her in Malay stated the similar reason as Kashini Pandian. According to Priya Ananda her father did not speak to her in English even though he was fluent in the language:

> …because my mum can't communicate in English.

It was observed that Priya Ananda and her siblings spoke in a colloquial sub standard form of Malay to their father although she was able to speak in fluent standard Malay. She explained that she was used to speaking to her father in that manner as that was how he spoke to her Chinese mother.
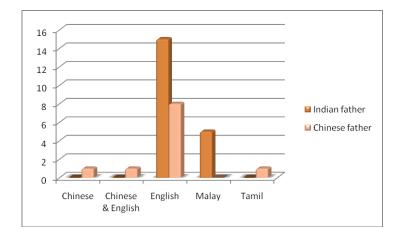
Figure 2: Language used to communicate with fathers

Communication with mothers

More language variations were used by the Sino-Indian participants to communicate with

their mothers compared to communication with their fathers. The data coded showed that there were seven variations in the language used by the Sino-Indian participants to communicate with their mothers in comparison to five variations used to communicate with their fathers.

Out of the 31 participants 20 participants had a Chinese mother while 11 participants had an Indian mother. Nine Sino-Indian participants (29%) used English to communicate with their Chinese mother while eight participants (26%) used English to communicate with their Indian mother. In total English was used as the medium of communication with their mothers by 17 participants (55%).

Six participants (19%) used Chinese to communicate with their Chinese mothers while two participants (6%) used a combination of Chinese and English to communicate with their mothers of Chinese ethnicity. One participant (3%) shared that he communicated in Malay and English to his Chinese mother. According to Lolenkumar his mother was a government servant and most of her colleagues at work spoke to her in Malay and he adapted to the environment by speaking to her in Malay. Lolenkumar added that he also spoke to his mother in English in certain occasions. He said:

> Malay but when there is an argument I will use English.

Two participants (6%) spoke to their mother purely in Tamil while two others code switched between Tamil and English while speaking to their mother. Amazingly, one of the two participants, code switched between Tamil and English while speaking to his Chinese mother.

A simple comparison between the languages used to communicate with their fathers and mothers showed that, ten Sino-Indian individuals (32%) spoke in their mother's native language to their mothers while only two participants (6%) spoke to their fathers in their father's native language. This data provides evidence to the more prominent role mothers play in imparting their native language to their biethnic children. One main observation that can be noted is that fathers did not play an active role in imparting their heritage language to their biethnic Chindian children.
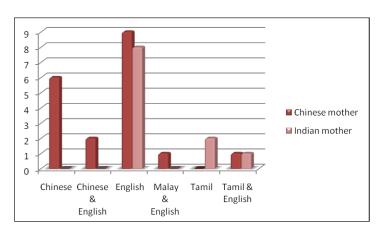
Figure 3: Language used to communicate with mothers

Communication among siblings

Generally most of the Sino-Indian participants in this research used English to communicate with their siblings irrespective of their father's ethnicity. 13 participants (42%) used solely English to communicate with their siblings; eight participants (26%) used a combination of English and Chinese in their communication with their siblings while four participants ((13%) used solely Chinese to communicate with their siblings. All of the four participants that used Chinese to communicate with their siblings had Indian fathers and Chinese mothers.

One participant (3%) used Malay to communicate with his brother although he did not communicate in Malay to either his mother or father. Andrew Kumar explained the cause of this scenario by saying:

> I'm used to it since young. Because my mum speaks to my grandma in Malay so
> we are used to it.

Andrew Kumar's statement was confirmed by the observational data collected during a Deepavali visit to his house. It was observed that he spoke to his only brother Adam, who was younger to him in fluent Malay although both of them were fluent in Tamil, Chinese and English.

Two participants (6%) communicated to their siblings in Tamil, three participants (10%) stated that they habitually code switched between three languages in their conversations with their siblings. English was still used as the main medium of conversation among the participants that code switched during conversations with their siblings. Participants were found to code switch between different combinations of English, Malay, Tamil and Chinese as shown in the Table 2 below.

Language(s)	Father's Ethnicity		Total
	Indian	Chinese	
Chinese	4	0	4
English	9	4	13
English & Chinese	3	4	7
English, Malay & Chinese	1	0	1
English, Malay & Tamil	1	0	1
English, Tamil & Chinese	0	1	1
Malay	1	0	1
Tamil	0	2	2

Table 2: Language used among siblings

Observational data collected showed that Diviya Ananda who had an Indian father and a Chinese mother preferred to speak in Chinese to her siblings over the phone and in face to face interactions in various settings. Besides that it was also observed that she code switched to English every now and then when it was easier to express the intended meaning but she never used any Tamil when conversing with her siblings. Diviya Ananda also explained that

she spoke to her siblings in Chinese because all of them regarded Chinese as their native language.
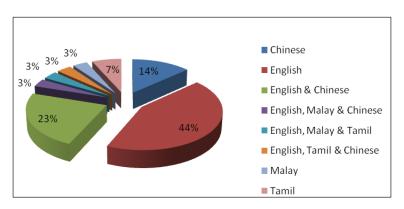
Figure 4: Language used among siblings

Based on Figure 4 it can be concluded that 44% of the Sino-Indian respondents used solely English to communicate with their siblings, followed by English and Chinese at 23%, purely Chinese at 14% and Tamil at only 7%. 12% of the respondents said that they heavily code switched in their communication with their siblings but mentioned that English was still the dominant language during their conversations. Figure 4 demonstrates the language used among the Chindian siblings.

Code switching in communication

A high percentage of the Sino-Indian participants in this research admitted to code switching in their communication, even though they had various language preferences. An analysis according to gender shows that 93% of the female respondents said that they code switched while 7% of the female respondents which stood for only one participant said that she did not code switch. All the male participants in this study said that they often code switched in their communication as demonstrated in the Figure 5 below.
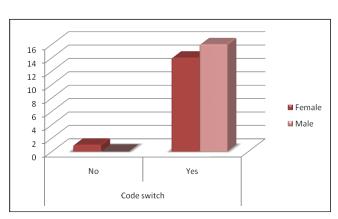
Figure 5: Code switching according to gender

This suggests that parents' ethnicity, educational attainment level, home town, age and even the gender of the participants were not factors that influenced the practice of code switching during communication among the Sino-Indian participants.

Five main reasons, as demonstrated in Figure 6, were recorded as the reasons quoted for code switching among the Sino-Indian participants with no difference according to gender. Some participants had more than one reason for code switching. The reason most quoted by the participants for code switching was the lack of vocabulary in a particular language which causes them to resort to their repertoire of other languages. This is also made possible by the fact that the interlocutors share the similar language repertoire.

23% of the participants said that they code switched because they conveyed certain messages and expressed themselves better in another language. 18% of the participants expressed that they code switched to cater to the needs of the interlocutor and due to habit respectively. This happens when the participant is conversing with someone and finds that the other person is not very fluent in the language that the conversation was initiated; the participant would then begin to code switch when it was necessary to suit the needs of the interlocutor. Adeline Shubashini Nambiar shares that she code switches when;

> … the group of people I'm with is more Tamil or Chinese influenced

Katherine Adrina Suvarmani said that she tries to adapt to the situation she finds herself in. She said that:

> …when they are speaking to me they throw in Tamil and Mandarin words so I just join them.

Participants also shared that code switching has become a habitual action and that it was common for multiethnic Malaysians to code switch. According to them code switching has become a part of the Malaysian culture.
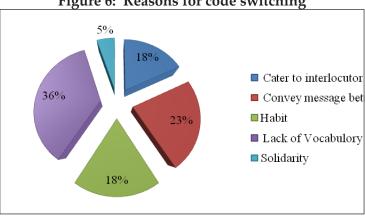
Figure 6: Reasons for code switching

Only 5% of the Sino-Indian respondents stated that they code switched for solidarity purposes. Therefore it can be said that most of the Sino-Indian participants in this research did not view language as an important solidarity tool to gain acceptance by their reference group members.

Khang Nithya, one of the few participants that code switched for solidarity reasons, explained that she code switched to gain better acceptance by the Chinese community. She said;

> I also do it for solidarity purpose when I'm around Chinese people.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the data on the language fluency of Chindians, the language regarded as the native language, language used for communication with parents and siblings and code switching during communication clearly demonstrates a strong preference towards the English language. The occurrence of language shift is prevalent among the Chindian participants of this research. The preference towards English creates a generation of biethnic Chindian individuals who have a different world view which leads to needs and demands dissimilar from their monoethnic reference group members. It is also observed that the Chinese language is given more priority in comparison to Tamil among the Chindian participants of this research. The findings of this research establishes that there is a clear preference in the choice of language among the Malaysian Chindians which could and should be used for effective communication through means of various mediums such as electronic, printed or verbal. With regards to the changing landscape of the nation, the findings are important inputs into efforts to foster greater ties among the various ethnic groups and in propagating better nation hood. Besides that the research findings also provides insights into the relevance and acceptance of Malay as the National Language among Malaysian Chindian.

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