

“Amma” or “Mommy” : the role of mothers in facilitating intergenerational language transmission in the Singaporean tamil community

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NANYANG TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



***“Amma” or “Mommy”: The Role of Mothers in Facilitating
Intergenerational Language Transmission in the Singaporean Tamil
Community***

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of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in Linguistics & Multilingual
Studies**

2011

Declaration of Authorship

I declare that this assignment is my own original work, unless otherwise referenced, as defined by the NTU policy on plagiarism. I have read the NTU Honour Code and Pledge.

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Abstract

This paper aims to obtain an overview of the language use patterns and language attitudes of Singapore Tamil mothers with or in the presence of their children. The Tamil language has been observed to be rapidly losing ground in Singapore with the dominance of English and there have been efforts on the part of the government to promote use of the language. However, these efforts are focused on the domains of education and media and the home domain has not received much attention. Since the home domain is said to be the most important for the maintenance of minority language and the significance of the mothers' role, in particular, in facilitating this has been proven through past studies, this study focuses on the mother's language input and attitudes. A total of 22 respondents, aged between 25 and 44 and with children at or within the age of 6, were surveyed using a questionnaire. They were asked to rate their language use for different domains to see their language use patterns in direct and indirect language input situations. They were also asked open-ended questions that elicited their language attitudes towards Tamil. The results showed a clear dominance of English in most domains except in the interactions with parents/parents-in-law and guests. It was noted that even though they had a positive attitude towards the Tamil language and claimed to believe that their child should be fluent in his/her mother tongue, this was not reflected in their English dominated language use patterns with the child. Education level of the mothers proved to show a difference in language behavior with the non-university educated mothers using more English and lesser Tamil than the university-educated mothers. The implications of this are that covert negative attitudes towards the Tamil language that has contributed to its subordination in the home domain raises serious concerns about the future presence of the language, or the possible lack of it, in Singapore. This paper concludes that there is a need for the promotion of Tamil language use in the home and family domains.

“Amma” or “Mommy”: The Role of Mothers in Facilitating Intergenerational Language Transmission in the Singaporean Tamil Community

1 Introduction: Singapore as a multilingual hub

Singapore is a country with a rich and unique linguistic situation. The four official languages are English, Mandarin Chinese, Malay and Tamil. English is the lingua franca among the general population and the functional language in the government and public sectors while the three ethnic languages represent the three ethnic communities, with Malay as the ceremonial national language. The country has recently attracted the attention of sociolinguists with its plethora of languages and cultures. Singapore has a bilingual education system in place whereby students are taught their mother tongue (either one of the 3 official ethnic languages) as a subject on its own and all other subjects in English.

This paper focuses on the Tamil community, which has long been undergoing a gradual shift to English as a dominant home language (Riney, 1998; Gopinathan et al, 2004; Saravanan et al, 2007). The efforts on the part of the government in promoting Tamil are predominantly in the domains of media and education. There is little or no attention paid to the home domain and the language attitudes of the interlocutors in the home domain as will be proven later. This paper, therefore, aims to shed light on the importance of promoting Tamil in the home domain by highlighting the language behavior and attitudes of one of the main interlocutors in the domain, namely, the mother. There is extensive research to show the importance of mother's language input and the distinct effect their language use has on the child's language development and language behavior (Furrow, D., Nelson, K., & Benedict, H., 1979; Hoff-Ginsberg, E., 1991; Tamis-LeMonda, & Bornstein, 1997; Hoff, E. 2003; Baumwell; Hammer et al, 2011). Hence, this study chose to focus on the mother's language input as opposed to the father's or entire family domain. The following sections will discuss the Singaporean linguistic situation, the importance of language input in the home domain for a minority language such as Tamil and the role of mothers in providing the input in the home domain.

2 Sociolinguistics of Singapore and its Tamil Community

2.1 Singapore's brand of bilingualism

Types of bilingualism are often defined by differentiated scales and dichotomies of factors such as age of acquisition, domains of use, context of acquisition, degree of bilingualism/proficiency, etc (Romaine, 1989). Ng and Wigglesworth (2007) discuss some of these types of bilingualism and following is a brief summary of the discussion. If the speakers acquired both languages at the same time since childhood, they are known as simultaneous bilinguals, while, if they acquired one language at first and the second at a later stage in life, they are known as sequential bilinguals. When bilinguals acquire both languages in naturalistic settings without structured instruction it is known as natural bilingualism while if one of the languages was learnt in a structured setting such as the school it is called school bilingualism. Speakers who have near native fluency are called balanced bilinguals while those who are more

fluent in one language than the other are known as dominant bilinguals. Characteristics of many of these different types of bilingualism are evident in the Singaporean community.

Singaporeans are bilingual in English and their respective mother tongues, i.e. Mandarin, Malay or Tamil. They are exposed to these languages without any formal teaching at birth but when they start schooling, they are provided with structured instruction in English and their mother tongue. English is the lingua franca of the nation and is used as a neutral language to facilitate communication among the different ethnic groups. This bilingual language and education policy has been in place and has been emphasized since 1965 to ensure that Singaporeans learned English for instrumental reasons such as social cohesion and economic viability (Chua, 2010).

In order to counter the effects of westernization due to the emphasis on the English language, the government of Singapore believes that there should be a balanced knowledge of one's mother tongue to provide Singaporeans with a link to their traditional cultures and values (Wee, 2003). Hence the Singapore government is said to have adopted a strategy of engineering language development to targeted means such as English for its utilitarian value and the ethnic languages for their cultural value (Gopinathan, 1994).

One runs into a bit of a confusion when discussing Singapore's brand of bilingualism, especially in the way the term 'first language' and 'second language' is used in the Singaporean context. In a brief discussion by Bokhorst-Heng and Caleon (2009), they stated that English is identified as the first language even though it is the dominant household language of only 28% of the population (excluding bilingual language practices) and Mother Tongue is considered as the second language even though it might be the native tongue or even a language spoken habitually at home. This seems to be the general consensus among scholars who discuss bilingualism in Singapore (Cheah, 1997; Moyer, 2005; Liu & Hong, 2009; Tan & Low, 2010).

Foley argued in favor of the proposition that English is the first language as "Singapore has moved slowly but quite markedly into using the methodologies of

English as the dominant language of education and therefore uses a first language approach to teaching” (2001, p. 17). Huat (2003) pointed out the irony of the bilingual education system in Singapore whereby a child is assigned a mother tongue based on his/her ethnic identity but learns the language as a second language in schools. Saravanan (1999) noted that across the ethnic groups in Singapore, there is a positive attitude towards the bilingual policy and the ethnic languages are maintained in family interactions with older generations. However, the emphasis placed on English to be learned as a first language had resulted in the children’s preference for English over their ethnic tongues. The following section will discuss the background and factors that lead to such a phenomenon in the Tamil community in particular.

2.2 *Singaporean Tamil Community*

From the Chinese, Malay and Tamil medium schools, there was a switch to the current bilingual education policy in 1965, which is said to have resulted in a shift in home languages from vernaculars and official mother tongues to English across the ethnic communities (Dixon, 2005). In his report of the sociolinguistics of Singapore based on the Report on the census of population 1957, Anderson (1985) noted that the Indian community is the most diverse in Singapore with the Tamils, Malayalis, Punjabis, Gujaratis and speakers of other Indian languages. It was found that the Tamil community was undergoing a great language shift in the domain of the home with Tamil losing ground at an alarming rate of 5.5% per generation on average. Between 1980 and 1990, there was a 10% dip in the number of speakers using Tamil as a home language, which was also reflected as an increase in the percentage of Indians using English as a home language. (Riney, 1998). According to the most recent census of population report of 2010 on home languages, there was a drop of 6.2% over a decade among the Indians who speak Tamil as a home language which reflected an increase in the percentage of Indians using English as a home language (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2011). Such statistics, from as early as 1957, have reported a gradual and consistent shift from Tamil to English as a home language among the Tamil speaking community in Singapore. Due to this shift from

Tamil to English, scholars have stated that there is a case of *subtractive bilingualism*¹ in the Tamil community in Singapore (Gopinathan et al, 2004; Saravanan et al, 2007).

Scholars have discussed many reasons as to why Tamil has been losing ground among its own speakers. The emphasis by schools and the media on literary Tamil as opposed to the spoken variety, which is the one used in the home domain, is often cited as one of the main reasons. With the literary variety being given more importance in media and education, children are discouraged from using the spoken variety used at homes (Riney, 1988). Moreover, since mother tongue education is offered only until pre-university level, students are further alienated from the language after that. This is mainly due to the ‘hyperpuristic’² (Schiffman, 1995, p.157) and impractical level of the language which is not supported in any other domains in the country except in education and the media and, even then, for only certain categories of shows such as the news.

Secondly with the advent of globalization, the status and prestige accorded to English had undermined the value of the Tamil language. English seems to have become the lingua franca of the Indian community that also comprises of non-Tamil members. Hence interaction in Tamil among friends and the social circle saw a decrease. Wee (2003) made the observation that while the economic value of Mandarin Chinese and Malay have been propagated by the government of Singapore; this has not been the case for Tamil. Internally, it is not really required for conducting business and, externally, business with India can be easily carried out in English. Hence, given Singapore’s “pragmatic orientation towards linguistic instrumentalism...which emphasizes the economic value of a language” (Rudby et al, 2008, p. 43) speakers of the Tamil language do not see the language offering any material or instrumental gain. English is, on the other hand, seen to fulfill these necessities.

Given that the future and sustenance of the Tamil language in the Singaporean community is of concern, efforts have been initiated by some to salvage the situation

¹ The dropping of L1 in favor of a dominant L2 at a societal level (Landry et al, 1991)

² A highly literary variety that is increasingly impractical for daily usage

through steps taken towards promoting the Tamil language in public domains. The following section provides a review of some of these efforts.

2.3 *Strategies of Maintaining Tamil in Singapore*

Saravanan et al (2007) provides a succinct overview of governmental efforts that were initiated and requested by concerned organizations such as the Singapore Indian Association (SINDA) to promote Tamil. A Tamil Language Review Committee was formed and their main recommendations were to reduce the focus on the literary variety of Tamil and incorporation of a Standardized Spoken Tamil in the classrooms and the media. Ramiah (2002) suggested modernizing and modifying the teaching of Tamil language in Singapore to make it more enjoyable and interesting so that the teachers and students will develop a positive attitude towards the language.

Saravanan and Lakshmi (2009) recommended an array of strategies that could be used in the classrooms to perk students' interest in the language and make them comfortable with it. Some of these include cooking demonstrations in class by a native speaker, using movies and movie songs as teaching materials, using expatriate students as teaching materials and so on and so forth. It was also recently announced in 2011 that the Ministry of Education would be providing up to S\$1 million over the next five years to the promotion of Tamil language learning and use (Ministry of Education, Singapore, 2011). The Tamil Language Learning Promotion Committee, which is the organization that will be receiving the funds, has organized various activities in the past such as workshops on Oral Presentation and Drama, forums on Spoken Tamil, the Tamil Language Festival, Most Inspiring Tamil Teacher Award and etc. However, the question that arises here is whether it is enough to focus on the domains of education and media in the promotion and maintenance of the Tamil language? What more should be done or what other domains of language use should be taken into consideration in taking measures to promote and maintain the Tamil language in the Singaporean context?

Pauwels (2004) stated that the home domain is the most crucial domain where minority ethnic languages are known to thrive. The following section will highlight studies on language maintenance in the home domain and the role input by parents.

3. Language Maintenance and the Role of Input

3.1 Language Maintenance

In general agreement, a language is said to be dead when there are no more speakers of that language (Crystal, 2000). This, of course, does not just mean the death of the speakers themselves. Nor do languages disappear to leave a linguistic vacuum; they are replaced by another language (Fase, Jaspaert, & Kroon, 1992). In situations of language contact, some languages tend to dominate causing a decrease in the domains of use of the subordinate language and a gradual shift from the subordinate language to a dominant language among its speakers (Campbell, 1994). Hence this mortal linguistic threat is more real to minority communities whose mother tongue is being dominated by another language that is of more functional use at a larger scale.

Wurm (2003) points out that the gradual disappearance of a language usually begins with children. He further explains that a language can be said to be *potentially endangered* when a section of the younger population starts giving preference to another language, which would gradually and ultimately lead to them forgetting their own. Tsunoda (2005) also places stress on lack of language transmission to children in an educational or domestic setting as one of the vital factors for language death.

3.2 Language acquisition and Parental language input

Raising a bilingual child is said to be no easy task. There are many factors that contribute to children who grow up in a bilingual setting being proficient or fluent in only one of them. Some of the factors outlined by scholars are parental language input, the community and environment in which the child is raised and parents' beliefs about language development (Hammer, Miccio and Rodriguez, 2004).

De Houwer (1995) makes the point that early bilingual development is not different from monolingual development and that the language input received is just as important in both cases. In other words simultaneous bilingualism is treated as multiple first language acquisition. In such a case, incomplete acquisition in one of the languages that the child is exposed to since birth indicates that acquisition of the linguistic data “must not only happen during the appropriate developmental phases but it must also reach a certain threshold” (Meisel, 2007, p. 296). Hence the quantity and quality of language input becomes paramount in predicting simultaneous bilingual children’s bilingual proficiency.

Schlyter (1993) makes the proposition that in the case of simultaneous bilinguals, the acquisition of the stronger language resembles that of L1 acquisition in sequential bilingualism while the acquisition of the weaker language resembles that of L2 acquisition. The dominance of the stronger language would result in increased exposure to it and a higher preference for that language, which in turn also affects the quality and quantity of input in the given language. Hulk and Cornips (2006) noted in their study of French-Dutch simultaneous bilingual children brought up in the Netherlands, that they were more like L2 (sequential bilingual) learners than like 2L1 (simultaneous bilingual) learners due to the quantity and quality of input characteristic of the bilingual situation in ethnic minority communities.

De Houwer (2007) found that parental language input patterns are of high significance in successfully raising bilingual children and that such input patterns can be planned ahead of time by parents in the case of minority language transmission. Frequency of input of a minority language by the parents was also identified as one of the factors that would affect the child’s acquisition of the given language. Mishina (1999) observed that parental mixing of languages and their response strategies influenced the language choice of the children and their language mixing patterns.

With regard to parental language input in the home domain, many studies have highlighted the difference between the input provided by the mother as and input provided by the father. The following section will review some of such studies and justify why this study chose to focus on the language input from the mother in specific.

4. Role of Mothers in Language Transmission

4.1 *Women and Language Maintenance*

Studies done on women being on the forefront of sociolinguistic changes have shed much light on the pattern of women's language attitudes and the influence that women seem to have in the language choice of their families. One of the earliest and significant studies done in this direction was by Susan Gal (1978). She had observed that young women spearheaded the language shift from German-Hungarian bilingualism to the exclusive use of German through their language choices and through their preference to marry men out of the group of Hungarian monolinguals. Gal further went to conclude that these language choices of women were a way of expressing their greater role in social change and that this should be understood by taking into account the social meanings of the available languages. Maya K. David who studied the Telugu community in Kuching, Serawak (David and Dealwis, 2006) and the Pakistani Community in Machang, Kelantan (David, 2003) noted that women determined the choice of language in the home domain in inter-community marriages. Mukherjee's (2003) study brought out the deep-rooted language allegiance that was evident in women of the Malaysian-Bengali community and efforts on the part of some of these women to ensure that the Bengali language does not die out in this community. Lakoff (2004) also claimed that children are socialized by their mothers to use 'women's language'. In other words, she acknowledges the fact that the central role that a mother plays in a child's daily life in his/her early days influences the child's language use. As such, women are regarded as 'guardians of a language' (Burton, 1994, p.11) whereby they are expected to maintain a language not just by speaking it themselves but more importantly, by passing it on to their children.

4.2 *Mother's language input and child's language development*

Hammer et al (2011) had very clear results that mother's language use influences children's language use, especially when they are well below the critical age³.

³ The critical age of language acquisition is the window of period in a child's first few years that is considered to be the most conducive for language attainment (Lenneberg, 1967).

Hammer's longitudinal study uncovered that pre-school children's language use pattern changed according to the mother's when mothers altered their linguistic behavior, leaning towards the more dominant English language. Once the children entered school, as was discussed by Hammer et al, these mothers started to incorporate practices that support their children's educational outcome. Hence the values attached to the native language and the dominant language that influenced the language choice of the mothers had an effect on the language use of the children as well.

The interaction between mothers and children tends to be different than that between the fathers and children. Gottman (1998) noted that mothers are the ones who are more verbal and directing in their interaction with their children while fathers engage in more physical interaction such as play activities and games. Leaper, Anderson and Sanders (1998) found that mothers tended to talk more to the children than did fathers and that they used more supportive and negative speech than fathers. Malone and Guy (1982) found that mothers' interaction with their children tended to be more child centered while the fathers' were more control centered. Moreover, mothers also asked questions and initiated response from children more than did the fathers who were more directive or instructional in their interactions. Similar observations were made by Hladik and Edwards that mothers played the role of initiators of communication to keep the child talking and, more significantly, produced structurally complete forms when talking to the child "which may serve to influence the internalization of the linguistic system" (1984, p.330). This character of mother-child interaction is to be noted as this suggests not only that mother's input generates output from the child more than the father's but also that the child's output reflects or is influenced by the mother's input more than the father's. Hence, it is not just the quantity of interaction between mothers and children that is significant but also the nature of the interaction itself which allows mothers to have more of an influence on the language development of the child as opposed to the nature of interaction between father and children.

It should however be noted that the above studies were done roughly two decades ago and in the current context of increased dual earning families, where the mothers work as well, one might argue that the interaction between mothers and children today is

different and might have even lessened. However studies done recently in the past decade have shown similar results that mother's language input plays a more significant role in minority language transmission. Luo and Wiseman (2000) found in their study of ethnic language maintenance among Chinese immigrant children in the United States, that mothers' language attitudes towards the ethnic language was important in predicting that of the children and that they played a more important role in shaping their children's language behavior as opposed to fathers language attitudes. Pancsofar and Vernon-Feagans (2006) showed that while it is true that fathers also make important contributions to a child's early language development, mothers still produced more verbal output than fathers during playtime. They also found that fathers' language input was less than mothers' language input in terms of verbal output, turn length, different word roots, and wh-questions. The linguistic environment provided by the mother in the family domain in terms of the quality and quantity of each language she uses with the child and in the presence of the child clearly proves to be different and more influential on the child's language use.

With regard to Singapore, Saravanan back in 1999 had already made the observation that mothers used mainly English in the domains of reading, shopping, playing and doing homework with their children. Other than that, in the domains of worship and interaction with relatives, they used Tamil (Saravanan, 1999). There, however, hasn't been any exploration into the language attitudes of the mothers and the motivating factors of mothers' language behavior.

5. Methodology

Given that Singapore's efforts in promoting and maintaining Tamil only deals with the domains of education and media, this study aims to highlight the language use patterns and the language attitudes behind such patterns by mothers in the home domain in the Tamil community. This is done in the hope of bringing attention to the importance of the language attitudes prevalent in the home domain and the need for the education of parents on the value of speaking to their children in Tamil. This study was explorative in nature and the aim was to obtain a general overview of the language use patterns of Singaporean Tamil mothers with or in the presence of their children and their language attitudes with regard to the aforementioned.

5.1. *Participants*

Participants were a group of 22 Singaporean mothers who have children at or below the age of 6. This age cap of the children was chosen as it was suggested by some scholars as being the end of critical age for language development (Hoff, 2005; Flynn & Manuel, 1991). It was also observed that mothers' language input has the most effect in younger children (Gleitman, Newport, & Gleitman, 1984). Moreover, with older children, there is the possibility that language use patterns with their parents are more influenced by the language behavior picked up from school. Hence, the age of the children were capped at the stage when they have not begun full time schooling. The respondents were aged between 25 to 44. The largest age group composed of those in the 31-40 range (15 respondents), followed by 4 respondents in the range of 25-29 and 3 respondents in the range of 41-44.

The mothers were all working adults, a couple of whom worked part-time jobs as tutors. 9 were degree holders, 11 were diploma holders and the remaining two have pre-university education certificates. The women claimed to be equally proficient in both English and Tamil or claimed higher proficiency in English than in Tamil. None claimed higher proficiency in Tamil than in English. All the women were born in Singapore with the exception of two who were born in other countries but had settled down in Singapore and have been living here for 15 years and more.

5.2. *Questionnaires*

A questionnaire was handed out to each participant to elicit information about their language use patterns with and in the presence of the child, and also contained open-ended questions to draw out the mothers' language attitudes when it comes to the language choice with their children.

The given questionnaire contained 4 parts with a total of 15 questions. Part A, consisting of 5 questions, tested the direct language input from mother to child where they had to rate their language use with the child, in various domains such as in

conversation, reading, storytelling and watching television. A Likert scale of 5 was used for the ratings, with 5 for the highest usage and 1 for the least usage. Part B, also consisting of 5 questions, looks at indirect language input in the form of language use with other people in the presence of the child, also using a Likert scale of 5. Part C required them to state and justify the language they would use instinctively and spontaneously in 3 different situations such as when the child is about to fall or touch something hot, or when the child has done something wrong, or when the child has done well in school. Part D contains a couple of open-ended questions asking about the value they accord to the Tamil language in the lives of their children and whether they make a conscious effort in speaking in Tamil to them. Apart from this the questionnaire also had a section on demographic details and language proficiency at the beginning. (Refer to Annex A for sample questionnaire.)

5.3. *Limitations*

While this study does use ratings and numerical data to make certain conclusions, it must be noted that the methodology cannot be claimed to be quantitative. The number of participants who responded to the survey is only 22 (despite approaching close to 50 mothers) and this sample size cannot qualify as a quantitative study with statistical data backing. However, some significant patterns were observed even within the small sample size and have been presented and accounted for in the following sections.

Secondly, it must be noted that the aim of Part B was to get an insight into the indirect language input and linguistic environment provided by the mother to the child. Hence, the questions were about the mother's language use with other interlocutors in the presence of the child. However, we don't have evidence as to whether the mothers are aware of the child's presence when in conversation with the given interlocutors or whether the presence of the child influences the language choice of the mother with other interlocutors. The lack of a section that questions the mother's language use with the given interlocutors in the absence of the child might, then, be seen as a limitation.

6. Results

As mentioned earlier, the aim of this study was to examine the language use patterns of the mother with and in the presence of the child in different domains and their language attitudes. The mean ratings for each domain in Part A and Part B were tabulated and the answers to the open ended questions were summarised. In line with studies highlighted in the literature review, there is a dominance of English usage in most domains.

To begin with, the mean values of the Likert Scale ratings for each domain in Part A was calculated and the findings have been presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Part A: Language use patterns in direct input

Instances	English	Tamil
Direct Conversation at home	4.04	3.36
Direct Conversation outside home	4.5	3.13
Reading	4.68	2.68
Television	4.63	3.86
Storytelling	4.55	3.13

English takes precedence in every given situation, in some instances the difference being minimal such as in direct conversations at home and, in others, rather stark such as in reading. In their direct conversations with their children, mothers have indicated their use of English to be higher when they are outside, in public, as opposed to when they are within the confines of their home. The domain of reading had the lowest ratings for Tamil and highest ratings for English, which goes to say that the children get very low Tamil literary input. Children get lesser exposure to Tamil in the story telling domain than in the television domain.

The following table shows the mean ratings obtained from the participants for Part B of the questionnaire:

Table 2. Part B: Language use patterns in indirect input

Instances	English	Tamil
Conversation with spouse in the presence of the child	4.41	3.32
Conversation with parents or parents-in-law in the presence of the child	3.45	4.22
Conversation with child's Tamil speaking friends in the presence of the child	4.18	3.50
Conversation with guests at home in the presence of the child	3.50	4.36
Conversation with own friends in the presence of the child	4.09	3.77

The only two instances where Tamil takes precedence as the language of choice are when the mother is talking to her parents/parents-in-law and to guests who have come home. In all other contact situations in the presence of the child, English is the more dominant choice of language. The participants use the most English and least Tamil with their spouses in the presence of the child. They have the most balanced usage of the two languages when they are in conversation with their own friends.

In Part C which asked for their spontaneous language choice in given specific circumstances and their justification for it, the following findings in Table 3 were obtained.

Table 3. Part C: Spontaneous Language Choice in Specific Situations

Situation	English	Tamil	Both English and Tamil
When the child is about to fall or touch something hot	13	8	1
When the child has done something wrong	12	5	5
When the child has done well in school or in any given task	12	2	8

The table still shows a high preference for English in all the 3 given situations, whereby more than half the participants chose English as their spontaneous choice of language. English dominance is at its highest when praising the child where all except 2 said they would use English, at least in concurrence with Tamil. The following is a collation of the justifications that the participants gave for their choice of language in each scenario.

In the first situation whereby the child is in some sort of danger of being hurt, mothers who chose English as their spontaneous choice of language mostly cited the reason that English is the language they are more ‘comfortable in’ and, therefore, that is the language that is produced involuntarily. Of those who stated Tamil to be their choice of language, their reason was mainly that the child ‘takes the instruction seriously’ or ‘the message gets through to the child’ only when the Tamil language is used in such situations that have a sense of urgency.

With regard to the second situation which involves reprimanding or disciplining the child, the choice of English was yet again rationalized as it being the language the mothers are ‘more comfortable in’, ‘find it easier to talk in’ and that ‘it is just natural’ to use English. On the other hand, those who stated Tamil to be their choice of language said it was because it ‘gets through to the child’, the child is ‘more responsive’ and that it is a more ‘personal language’ that the parent can use with the

child. There are a significant number of participants who said they would use both languages interchangeably though they did not provide any rationalization or justification for such a preference.

Finally with regard to the last situation, which involves the parent praising the child for having done well in school or in any given task, Tamil is the least popular choice of language compared to the other two situations. Other than the usual reasons of being more comfortable in English, one said that she usually praises her son saying she is very proud that he “made use of his brains”. Hence she felt that translating this in Tamil would make it sound rude and therefore she prefers to say it in English. The two participants who had chosen Tamil mentioned that their choice was driven by the fact that the using the Tamil language made it ‘more personal’. In this situation a higher number of participants chose to use both languages than in the other two scenarios. Though most of them did not provide us with a reason for this, we had one rather distinctive answer. The participant said that she will advice her child in English and then express her happiness at his/her achievement in Tamil.

In Part D of the questionnaire, there were two open-ended questions that tested their language attitudes. When asked if they thought it was important for their child to be able to converse fluently in Tamil, an impressive 19 out of the 22 participants said yes, while 3 said no. Many who had said yes mentioned that since the language was their child’s mother tongue they felt he/she definitely had to be fluent in it and had to do their part in preserving it. They believed that their children should not lose their mother tongue under any circumstance. Many appealed to the idea of identity in saying that it was a form of ‘recognition’, that the language is a part of who their child is, to understand the rich culture and history of the Tamil community and to retain their identity. One participant distinctly said that a child who is fluent in Tamil is often deemed to be ‘well-mannered’.

While these statements appeal to abstract ideas of identity and culture, there were some who also believed that their children should be fluent in Tamil for instrumental or pragmatic purposes. Most of the participants from this group cited the requirement in schools to obtain a certain grade in mother tongue in order to pass as one of the main reasons. Hence, they felt that the language was needed to excel in school and for

academic requirements. There were also a few who felt that the language was needed to facilitate better communication with the grandparents and the extended family and friends circle.

As for those few who felt that it was not important for their child to be fluent in mother tongue, they believed that there were little benefits in keeping the language and that it most certainly is not as important as being fluent in English. They felt that English proficiency was the more important aspect due to educational demands and the relevance in daily life.

The final question of the questionnaire was whether the mothers put in a conscious effort to speak in Tamil to their children. 17 had said yes while five had said no. One participant even mentioned relating moral examples from Tamil literary classics such as Thirukkural⁴ and Aathichudi⁵ to her child in day-to-day life. Some of the participants noted that they try to remember to use Tamil with their children but they tend to naturally use English in conveying messages or instructions faster and easier to the children. A couple of the mothers cited media as one of the ways in which they ensure Tamil language input to their children by watching Tamil shows together with the child and conversing and explaining about the shows to the child in Tamil.

6.1. Education Level as a variable

Upon analyzing the data by variables such as proficiency, age and education, there was an interesting difference motivated by the educational level of the mothers while none of the other variables showed any significant pattern of difference. The table below summarizes the findings for Part A based on educational level.

⁴ Thirukkural is a set of 1330 couplets on topics varying from farming to the ruling of a country.

⁵ Aathichudi is a list of quotations in the Tamil alphabetical order and it contains teachings of good habits and discipline.

Table 4. Comparison of Mean Ratings by Education Level for Part A

	University Education		Diploma/Pre-University Education	
	English	Tamil	English	Tamil
Direct Conversation at home	4.33	4.4	4.46	2.62
Direct Conversation outside home	4.4	4.22	4.46	2.15
Reading	4.78	4.11	4.92	2
Television	4.67	4.44	4.31	3.46
Storytelling	4.78	4.1	4.38	2.46

With regard to direct language input from the mother in the given instances, it can be seen that mothers who come from a non-university education background, rated Tamil much lower than the mothers from a university education background. It should also be noted that the discrepancy between the ratings for English and Tamil is also higher among the non-university educated mothers. In other words, these mothers use much lesser Tamil with their children in general and in comparison to English. Such a pattern was, however, not evident in Part B regarding indirect language input to the child.

In Part C, only 1 participant from the university educated group mentioned that they will use English in the given situations and that she is more comfortable with English. The others had all stated that they would use Tamil for reasons such as it is more personal or gets through to their child better. On the other hand, every single participant from the non-university educated group said she would use English in all 3 given situations in Part C and the reasons cited were that it was the more comfortable language and the one they are more fluent in.

However, in Section D, which tested their language attitudes, there was a mix of answers from both groups. There were people who believed in the importance of Tamil to their children and those who didn't in both groups. Similarly, there were

those who said they try to make a conscious effort in speaking to their children in Tamil and there were those who said they did not bother to, in both groups. In other words, while education does not seem to influence their overt language attitudes, it does seem to be a variable when it comes to actual language use.

7. Result Analysis and Discussion

The difference in usage of Tamil in direct conversations with the children at home and outside home whereby lesser Tamil is used outside the home than inside, might be an indication of the status accorded to Tamil. In a study done by Arua (2002, p.459) on parental preference of language use, the author notes a particular preference for English in the domains outside the home such as the playground. This could be due to the prestige and high status accorded to the English language as opposed to vernaculars. Moreover, it has been noted that the Tamil language does not have the same level of status or significance in the Singaporean society as does English, Chinese and Malay (Saravanan, 1994). Hence, the desire on the part of parents to portray themselves as esteemed in public and to be seen as providing input to their child in the more prestigious language might be a possible explanation for using more English in the public domain than in the home domain.

There are a few possible explanations for the lack of Tamil input in the reading domain, which had the lowest ratings for Tamil and the highest for English. For one, it has been highlighted that the children's collection in the national libraries of Singapore is very small with books of very poor quality paper and binding (Illangovan and Higgins, 2003). They are also said to be very wordy with small print fonts, making them unappealing to children. Hence the lack of access to quality Tamil children's books is one possible explanation for the low rates of Tamil usage in the reading domain.

In addition, the Indian population in general is said to have the highest English literacy rate among the 3 ethnic groups in Singapore (Department of Singapore Statistics, 2000) and as of the 2010 census of language and literacy, only 39% were literate in both Tamil and English (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2010). Kuo

(1974) noted that the Singaporean Indians were more literate in English than in Tamil back in the 1970s and that despite an increase in the population, there was a decrease in the number of Indians literate in Tamil between 1957 and 1970. Furthermore, Kuo also noted that while Indians were the most bilingually literate among the 3 ethnic groups in the 1970s, they were also the ones who showed the most diverse pattern of languages literate in. There were portions of the Indian population literate in English and Tamil, English and Malay or even two ethnic languages such as Tamil and Malay. Given that majority of our participants were born and brought up during this period when Tamil literacy rates were going down, the lack of reading in Tamil to their children might be a result of their own incompetence in Tamil literacy.

The ratings for Tamil were higher in the media domain involving television as opposed to the storytelling domain. With the advent of Singapore's own fully Tamil television channel Vasantham in 2008 there have been numerous local productions for children such as Chutti's Club and a Tamil version of the Sesame Street show. Hence television might serve as more entertaining and requires less effort on the part of the mothers than storytelling in terms of entertainment in Tamil for children.

In Part B, the only two situations in which Tamil was rated higher as a choice of language by most was when conversing with parents or parents-in-law and with guests. The usage of Tamil with parents and parents-in-law can be explained by the fact that among the older generations Tamil usage is higher, as the decline in usage had been highlighted in the literature review. Moreover, Saravanan (1994) mentions that some women in the Tamil community still hold the conservative view that speaking in English to parents and elders is considered rude. However, a higher rating for Tamil usage with guests at home is harder to explain and is an interesting phenomenon. The only lead we have is the fact that many had mentioned that they felt conversing in Tamil with their children made it more personal, hence perhaps the use of the language with Tamil speaking guests is motivated by the desire to establish solidarity with the guests and make them feel more welcome by using a home language that has a personal touch to it. Moreover, Sridhar observed that even though English is slowly moving into the home domain of the Indian diasporic communities, they still tend to use their ethnic languages when they meet or get together with

people of the same language community (Sridhar, 1997). However, more research needs to be done in this area to understand this interesting and unique phenomenon.

While we might not be able to provide accounts for the language use patterns in every instance, it is important to understand that that is not the focus of the paper. A certain generic pattern has been observed which we believe will influence the child's language behavior as well. The use of the Tamil language more in some domains as opposed to others also shows the values that the mother's attach to the languages and transmit to the children. For example, Tamil language use is higher with the older generation and with guests while English usage is extremely prevailing in the domains of reading and when the child has done well in a given task. Hence the idea of Tamil being reserved for domain that require solidarity and respect and English being reserved for domains related to education and excellence are passively being transmitted to the children through the pattern of such language usage.

7.1. Mismatch between language attitudes and language behavior

One of the most significant findings of this study is the mismatch between language attitudes and actual language use by mothers with their children. The awareness exists in the mothers that Tamil is important to their children either for symbolic or pragmatic reasons. However, this positive attitude towards the language is not reflected in their language use and choice. English dominated in most instances and most of the mothers were noted to have claimed to be more comfortable speaking to their child in English.

While this observation can be approached from many angles, the first aspect of this issue to be discussed is the linguistic environment of the current generation of mothers that would have contributed greatly to their instinctive language choices and behavior. The linguistic background of the current generation of the mothers needs to be examined in order to make sense of their English dominance despite positive attitudes towards Tamil. Shift in language use and lessening of domains for Tamil was noted as early as 1985 by Sobrielo (1985) whereby there started a shift towards English in the domains of school, work and official business.

Vaish (2007) characterizes the Singaporean Tamil community as having language shift and maintenance in different domains, and bilingualism without diglossia⁶ in some domains. She noticed Tamil language maintenance in the domains of the home (especially with grandparents), school and religion. However, language shift was noted in the domains of media and public space. Beyond this, the point significant to our current discussion is that while Tamil is maintained in some domains as observed by Vaish, usage is still very low compared to English. A quick look at the percentages of languages used in each domain in Vaish's data, shows marked discrepancies between Tamil usage and English usage. The latter is the more dominantly used language even in the domains that have been identified to maintain Tamil. For example in the home domain, 61.9% said they would use English with their fathers and 57.1% said they would use English with their mothers. 42% said they would use English to scold their siblings and 71% said they would use the language when they had to borrow something from their sibling. It must be noted that of the remaining percentage of people in the above mentioned, not all use purely Tamil but mostly a mix of Tamil and English. It was only with the grandparents that Tamil dominance was obvious in the home domain.

The same was discovered by Kwan-Terry (2000), whereby while the language is maintained in domains such as family, prayers, entertainment, neighbors and kin, the rate of shift towards English in other domains such as friends, reading and school was found to be alarming. Hence though, Tamil is still used in concurrence with English in the above mentioned domains, the rate of Tamil usage in many of these domains has decreased and the language is moving towards losing its grounding completely in these domains. This trend has continued ever since the 1970s, whereby, while the other ethnic language communities experienced *additive bilingualism*⁷, the Tamil

⁶ Diglossia refers to the use of two dialects or languages by a single community with one being considered the high variety or language and other the low variety or language. The high variety is often used in formal domains such as the government, education, literature while the low variety or language is used in informal domains such as the home and casual conversation between friends and family (Fishman, 1967).

⁷ Additive bilingualism refers to the addition of a language to the linguistic repertoire of a community without the loss of their first language (Landry et al, 1991).

community was undergoing *subtractive bilingualism*. Moreover, while the other language had specific spheres of use that could be of use to the speaker, Tamil did not (Mani and Gopinathan, 1983).

Hence the generation of mothers in this current study grew up through an era of rapidly lessening domains for the Tamil language, surrounded by more and more English. This might prove to be a possible explanation for the participants' claim of the lack of comfort and spontaneity in Tamil language usage. In other words, despite having a positive attitude towards the language, they are unable to use it as easily and comfortably as they use English.

This mismatch between language attitudes and actual language use could also be the result of a difference in the overt and covert language attitudes of the participants. While overtly, they display a positive attitude towards Tamil and the value they accord to it, covertly they might be favoring English instead. Argris and Schon (1974) differentiated between espoused theory and theory-in-use whereby the former refers to the values on which people believe their actions are based on whereas the latter refers to the values and beliefs that are implied by their actual behavior. Many are unaware that their espoused theories do not match their theory-in-use while some do not even know what their theories-in-use are.

Similarly, the Tamil mothers seem to believe in the importance of the language as a mother tongue to their children and even claimed to be putting in a conscious effort in using the language with them on a daily basis, which is their espoused theory. However, in practice, their language ratings did not reflect this in Part A, B and C, which asked about their language use in given situations, as majority stated English. Hence the language belief that is implied by their language behavior favors English more than Tamil, which is their theory-in-use.

In a study done among Chinese immigrants in New Zealand, Yu (2010) noted that this substantial gap between parental language attitudes and actual language behavior is a result of the market value of the English language in a country where English is the lingua franca or the dominant language. Hence a strong desire on the part of the

parents to ensure that their children are not linguistically disadvantaged in such an environment acts as the motivating factor in their language use behavior.

Trudgill (1972) put forth the observation that women, across age groups, education levels and social classes, are the ones who have a higher tendency to use the linguistic forms associated with prestige than do men. Moreover, Ladegaard (2000) also noted that women's language attitudes towards vernaculars or ethnic languages are not as positive as that of men. Neither are they as willing to use the vernaculars as much as men. Hence with the combination of the factors of women's tendency towards a more prestigious language or linguistic form and the added responsibility of ensuring their children's advantaged playing field in education, mothers seem to covertly favor English more than Tamil in our study.

7.2. The role of education level in mothers' language behavior

The next most significant finding of this study was the role of education level in the language use patterns of our group of participants. Mothers who had university education showed a more balanced usage of Tamil and English and all of them, with the exception of one, showed positive attitudes towards the Tamil language, believing that it is important for their children to be able to speak fluently in their mother tongue. The group of mothers who did not have university education and had either a diploma or a pre-university GCE A level certificate, showed a markedly larger gap in their usage of English and Tamil whereby they used more English and even lesser Tamil than the graduate mothers.

This is an interesting finding for past research has shown that in the Singapore Tamil society, women with higher education levels are the ones who use more English than Tamil, though this was noted back in 1985 (Sobrielo, 1985). Our finding however suggests that this might have changed in the recent years and the reverse is now in order. Statistics show that only about 25% of the Indian community in Singapore attain a university education and emerge as degree holders(Singapore Department of Statistics, Republic of Singapor, 2005). The social status attached to the better educated of any given population can be said to be concentrated on this top percentile

of the Indian community. Since it has been established in the past that the better-educated women are the ones who use more English than Tamil, a similar or, even, exaggerated pattern of language use is followed by the women who come from a non-university education background. The possible purpose for this might be to imitate the university graduates and place themselves on par with them linguistically.

This phenomenon is similar to that of overcompensation or hypercorrection. This involves the use of a linguistic feature of the standard variety of a language by speakers of a non-standard variety to the point where they might produce utterances different from those produced by the standard speakers or they might produce more of it than the standard speakers do themselves (Giles and Williams, 1992). Extending this concept to the overcompensated use of a completely different language to imitate people of a higher social class, the Tamil mothers of non-university education background can be said to be overcompensating with the use of the English language, the acquisition of which has proven to signify a social class divide in Singapore (Pakir, 1999).

It is also important to understand the difference between the university route of tertiary education and anything that deviates from it in the Singaporean context. The binary system of higher education that Singapore has adopted comprising universities and polytechnics, with universities forming the upper tier, streams students according to their academic abilities (Lee and Gopinathan, 2008). In other words, those who are able to make it into Junior Colleges and into university form the top percentile of high scorers in Cambridge GCE O level examinations (Xuan-Shi et al, 2010). The others enter polytechnics or Institutes of Technical Education and only those few who excel in these streams have access to the opportunity of university education. It has been shown that educational wage differentials lean towards those who have gone through university education and are in professional and skilled positions in the workforce (Mukhopadhaya, 2003). Mukhopadhaya also points out that children with better-educated mothers, specifically with a university degree, do better academically regardless of the father's educational attainment. Hence the mindset created by this highly ability-driven educational system that exacerbates the social class divide could be a possible motivation for the non-university graduate mothers using more English and lesser Tamil.

Moreover, the study done by the US Department of Education called the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, state that highly educated parents bring up children who do well in school (Levitt and Dubner, 2005). It has been suggested that this is because a family with a high level of education tend to accord higher value to schooling and therefore make choices and create a familial environment that is conducive for a child's excellence in education. Hammer and Weiss (1999) had observed that mothers who had attained a higher educational level used more behaviors that were supportive of their children's education and valued in schools than did mothers with lower educational levels. Similarly, perhaps, the better-educated mothers are able to make language choices that are more conducive to the bilingual education system of Singapore that requires proficiency in both English and the mother tongue.

This observation, however, was rather unexpected and more research needs to be done to see if the same phenomenon is prevalent in the other ethnic communities as well. As was mentioned earlier, this appears to be a recent phenomenon as previous research had shown that the better-educated women are the ones who use more English and less Tamil. What about the education system of Singapore that has caused a reversal in language behavior? Hence, the role of education in language attitudes needs to be re-examined in the Singaporean context

8. Conclusion

This paper had set out to obtain an overview of the language use patterns of Tamil mothers to and in the presence of the children and draw out some of their language attitudes towards the language as well. The results had shown a dominance of English in most domains and the conflict between the mother's language use patterns and their attitudes. The implications of this go far beyond just the Tamil community studied in this paper. Would a similar study done on the Chinese, Malay or other Indian language communities in Singapore yield the same results? Educational level of the mothers seems to be a determining factor in their language choice. What does this say about the mindset that the Singaporean education system instills in its

students? Moreover, are these covert language attitudes so deep-seated in Singaporean Tamil individuals that the process of language loss cannot be helped anymore?

Home domain is the most important source of maintenance for less dominant languages, with transmission from parents and grandparents being at the core of it. Exploration into just one aspect of the home domain, the mother's language input, has shown that in the Singaporean Tamil community, the language is losing ground even in that core domain. This implies that more efforts have to be pumped into encouraging and promoting the use of the mother tongue in the home and family domain. The authorities have to promote the value of Tamil as a mother tongue and raise awareness among parents on the implications of their language choices on the linguistic abilities of their children. Singapore is known for its language related campaigns such the Speak Mandarin Campaign and the Speak Good English Movement. Perhaps, its time there were more campaigns promoting the use of the mother tongue with children and during family time.

The role that education has played in changing the language attitudes of highly educated and less educated women is also rather symbolic of the attitudes that surround education itself. The meritocratic outlook on which Singapore's education system is based on, has resulted in highly driven individuals who are constantly striving for upward social mobility with little or no regard for elements that provide them with a link to their roots and culture. Is the society moving towards linguistic and cultural homogeneity, void of the vigor and spirit of diversity? With such concerns in mind, more attention needs to be dedicated to studies on language attitudes and behavior of people in fundamental settings such as the home, school or work.

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Appendix

Annex A: Questionnaire

Age:

Occupation:

Education:

Country of Birth:

Number of years you have lived in Singapore:

Language Proficiency:

Part A

Direct language input

On a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being the least and 5 being the most), rate how much of each language is used in the following contexts:

i. When talking to your child at home

English 1-----2-----3-----4-----5

Tamil 1-----2-----3-----4-----5

ii. When talking to your child outside

English 1-----2-----3-----4-----5

Tamil 1-----2-----3-----4-----5

iii. When reading to/with your child

English 1-----2-----3-----4-----5

Tamil 1-----2-----3-----4-----5

iv. When watching television with your child (refers to the language of the shows you watch with your child)

English 1-----2-----3-----4-----5

Tamil 1-----2-----3-----4-----5

v. When telling stories to your child

English 1-----2-----3-----4-----5

Tamil 1-----2-----3-----4-----5

Part B

Indirect language input

On a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being the least and 5 being the most), rate how much of each language is used in the following contexts:

i. When talking to your spouse in the presence of your child

English 1-----2-----3-----4-----5

Tamil 1-----2-----3-----4-----5

ii. When talking to your parents or parents-in-law in the presence of your child

English 1-----2-----3-----4-----5

Tamil 1-----2-----3-----4-----5

iii. When talking to your child's Tamil friends

English 1-----2-----3-----4-----5

Tamil 1-----2-----3-----4-----5

iv. When talking to Tamil speaking guests at home in the presence of your child

English 1-----2-----3-----4-----5

Tamil 1-----2-----3-----4-----5

v. When talking to your own Tamil friends in the presence of your child

English 1-----2-----3-----4-----5

Tamil 1-----2-----3-----4-----5

Part C

Situational

What language do/would you use with your child and what would you say in that language in the given scenarios? Kindly explain your choices if possible.

- i. When your child is about to fall or touch something hot

- ii. When your child has done something wrong that had upset you greatly

- iii. When your child has been awarded or has done well in school

Part D

Overt questions

- i. Do you think it is important that your child should be able to converse fluently in Tamil? Why?

- ii. Do you make a conscious effort to converse with your child in Tamil?

Thank you so much for you co-operation