

Language Shift within Chetti Community

Fazlinda Hamzah, Mohd Azlan Shah Sharifudin

Department of English Language and Linguistics, Academy of Language Studies,
Universiti Teknologi MARA, Melaka, Malaysia

Email: fazlinda_hamzah@uitm.edu.my, azlanshah@uitm.edu.my

Chong Shin

Institute of the Malay World and Civilization, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

Email: chongshin@ukm.edu.my

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Abstract

Chetti creole was formed hundreds of years ago from the contact between languages of travelling merchants and the locals during the heyday of Malacca Sultanate. Though the language is still spoken today, the number of its speakers is dwindling as there are only around 200 of them left. The aim of this study is to assess language shift and maintenance of Chetti creole among Chetti community, specifically regarding the choice of language to use in their daily lives, through the framework of domain developed by (Fishman, 1972). The data was gathered from a survey which was distributed both online and in-person. The findings show both young and old generations of Chetti community exhibit different inclination in terms of usage of Chetti language in the family and social domains.

Keywords: Chetti Creole, Chetti Community, Language Shift and Maintenance, Family Domains, Social Domains.

Introduction

Chetti community first came into existence primarily because of inter-marriage between Indian merchants who came from Coromandel Coast in Kalinggam, a region located in Southern India, and local women in Melaka who were the descendants of Malay, Javanese, Batak, and even Chinese ethnic groups. According to Hinduism, the females were not allowed to leave their houses, therefore the Indian merchants who travelled to Melaka at that time were all males. As these merchants settled in Melaka, they started to take locals as their wives. The families who came into existence from these inter-marriages practised Hindu religion and tradition but spoke Malay language. This is because though the family values and traditions were heavily influenced by Hinduism as imposed by the men as the household heads, their offspring were still taken care by the mothers whose native tongue was not Tamil language. Eventually, this assimilation of cultures and linguistic idiosyncrasies gave birth to a creole language called Chetti language.

A creole is not the same as pidgin as the former is more sophisticated and established, and it has its own native speakers. The discussion that follows will observe how Chetti language as a creole is different from other Malay dialects. The first difference is in terms of the pronunciation of /a/ as [a] in Chetti language. This is normally pronounced as /ə/ in other Malay dialects. Phoneme /r/ in the final word position and /h/ are also deleted in Chetti language. Therefore, /bənar/ is pronounced as /bəna/ and /buwah/ is pronounced as /buwa/.

Furthermore, the diphthong /ai/ is pronounced as /e/ as in /pəkai/ to /pəke/ and /au/ is pronounced as /o/ as in /həlau/ to /həlo/ (Mohamed, 2009). Chetti creole also contains several words that are unique as these words might have been translated from Tamil. These words are *thiam panthal* which in Malay dialect is called as *tiang khemah* (canopy's pole), *pelita duduk* (kerosene lamp), *kepala kuil* (village head), *anak-anak giling* (millstone), *pusing-pusing* (the act of giving blessing using a tray) Some words are taken directly from Tamil such *teney* (veranda).

In addition, Sankar (2013) stated that a number of Tamil words found in the language have undergone semantics and phonological changes that they do not sound like Tamil words anymore. For examples, *thambolam* has become *thombolam* in Chetti language which means tray, *parusam* becomes *parisom* (engagement), *kovalei* becomes *kaboleh* (bowl), *telpah* becomes *talapa* (headgear) and *annen* becomes *aning* (brother). The reason for the phonological changes is perhaps due to the ease of articulation. Interestingly, there are also words borrowed from the Chinese language such as *bimpo* which means handkerchief.

Objectives

The research objectives are as follows:

- i. To investigate language choice by Chetti community residing in Gajah Behrang, Melaka.
- ii. To examine the difference in language preference between the older and the younger generations in the community.

Literature Review

Fishman (1991) used the term intergenerational transfer which generally means a language can survive if it is passed down from one generation to another (as cited in David, 2005). Moreover, Fishman stated that "Vernaculars are acquired in infancy, in the family, which means in intimacy. They are handed on that way, in intimacy and in infancy" (1996, as cited in (David, 2005, p. 3). Therefore, heritage language such as Chetti language can grow through transfer of language knowledge from one generation to the next within communities and families.

This leads us to an important question, which is how to make sure that intergenerational transfer or transmission continues to happen for the sake of preserving a language? According to Campbell & Christian (2003, p. 4), "Intergenerational transmission of [heritage language] is clearly affected by language ideologies as they interact with the specific circumstances and prospects of [heritage language] acquisition, maintenance, and re-acquisition". Gupta & Yeok (1995) wrote in their research that a vital factor in maintaining a language is the desire for parents to transmit their ancestral language to their children. However, there are many factors which could become inhibition to this which are "1) low status of language, 2) negative

attitudes towards transmission of language, 3) lack of support from government and school, 4) exogamy, 5) imperfect learning by the younger generations” (Gupta & Yeok, 1995, p.302).

When the efforts to maintain a language fail, language shift will happen. Language shift is an unavoidable phenomenon that could happen to any language, especially if the speakers of the language come from a minority group in a multicultural society. According to Mufwene (2020), Fishman used the term language shift to refer to a situation where “a population gives up their heritage language for another which from thereon functions as their vernacular” (p. 1). The community will experience fewer and fewer opportunities or motivation to speak the language (Mufwene, 2020). It is common in a multicultural society that when there are two or more languages competing, the one that is the most functional for daily usage will thrive. The language will slowly creep into the domains of the speakers and eventually will replace the original language of the speakers. These domains include, as listed by Fishman (1964), family, acquaintances, street, mass media, religion, and occupation.

Methodology

This paper employed three different methods to obtain data, namely questionnaire, interview, and observation (Ma'alip, 2014). The first method was distribution of questionnaire both online and offline. The questionnaire, which was adopted from Coluzzi et al (2018), was distributed to gain a picture of language choice which could reflect language shift phenomenon among the community members. The second and third methods used were casual interviews and direct observations, respectively. The observation was completed during the direct distribution of questionnaire and the interview. This was done to add more information to the data gathered via the questionnaire and the interview.

In this research, there were 36 respondents involved, 16 of which were female and the other 20 were male. Table 1 shows gender distribution of the respondents.

Table 1

Gender

Gender	No.	Percentage
Male	20	55.6
Female	16	44.4

The respondents were then divided according to the age. Table 2 shows the age of the respondents.

Table 2

Age

Age	No.	Percentage
14-36	28	77.7
50-76	8	22.2

Data Analysis

The purpose of the study is to explore the topic of language shift and maintenance of mother tongue of the Chetti community. Starting with the knowledge of the languages in the respondents' repertoire (Table 3), whereas Chetti language is the only language which the older generations speak most fluently, (100%), the same cannot be said of the younger

generations as around 14.2% and 10.7% of them claimed that the languages in which they are fluent are English and Malay, respectively. The rest of them speak Chetti language more fluently (75%).

Table 3

Language knowledge

You speak more fluently	No	Percentage	No	Percentage
	14-36		50-76	
Chetti language	21	75	8	100
Standard Malay	3	10.7	0	0
English	4	14.2	0	0
What is your first language / mother tongue?	14-36		50-76	
Chetti language	23	82.1	8	100
Standard Malay	3	10.7	0	0
English	1	3.57	0	0
Tamil	1	3.57	0	0

When the respondents were asked about their sense of belongingness (Table 4), all the older generations answered that it is important to speak Chetti language to be part of the Chetti community. For younger generations, though the majority seconded the opinion of their elders, a small percentage of them, at 17.5%, answered that it is not important

Furthermore, when they were asked if they had ever been discriminated for speaking Chetti language, 75% of the older generations older generations answered no while the other 25% said yes. For the younger generations, 82.1% said no, while 14.2% said yes, occasionally and 3.57% said yes, often. For the question regarding Indian community's attitude towards Chetti people who speak Chetti language, 75% of the older generations older generations said the attitude was indifferent while 25% said the attitude was rather positive. As for the younger generations, 46.4% said the Indian community displayed positive attitude, while 14.2% said they were indifferent. However, 38.2% said that the India community did expect them to speak Tamil.

Table 4

Sense of belongingness

To be part of the Chetti community, is it important to speak Chetti language?	No	Percentage	No	Percentage
		14-36		50-76
Yes	23	82.1	8	100
No	5	17.5	0	0
Have you ever been discriminated for speaking Chetti language?	14-36		50-76	
Yes, often	1	3.57	2	25
Yes, occasionally	4	14.2	0	0
No	23	82.1	6	75
Overall, what is the Indian community's attitude towards Chetti community who speak Chetti language?	14-36		50-76	
Indifferent	4	14.2	6	75
Positive	13	46.4	2	25
Negative-They expect us to speak Tamil	11	39.2	0	0

For family domains (Table 5), the elders in the community all agreed that they normally used Chetti language within family. On the other hand, the younger generations did not all speak Chetti with their family members as 17.8% of them claimed that they used English, 14.2% used standard Malay, 3.27% used Tamil, and that leaves 64.2% who said the opposite. When asked about language that they normally used with their parents, 87.5% older generations said they used Chetti language while 12.5% said they used English. For younger generations, 67.8% said they used Chetti language while 17.8% used English. 10.7% said they used standard Malay while 3.57% said they used Tamil.

Moreover, 75% of the older generations said they used Chetti language when talking to their children while 25% used English. For younger generations, 71.4% said it was irrelevant, while 14.2% said they used Chetti language. 10.7% of them used English and 3.57% used standard Malay. When asked about language that they normally used with their siblings, respondents of older generations (100%) said they used Chetti language. For younger generations, 57.1% said they used Chetti language, 17.8% said they used English, 10.7% said they used standard Malay and lastly 3.57% said they used Tamil.

Next, for language use with wife/girlfriend and husband/boyfriend, the older generations scored 75% for Chetti language and 25% for English. The younger generations on the hand, scored 78.5% for English, and 7.14% respectively for Chetti, standard Malay, and not relevant. For language that they used with grandparents, the older generations scored 87.5% for Chetti language and 12.5% for standard Malay. The younger generations scored 82.1% for Chetti language, 10.7% for Tamil, 3.57% respectively for standard Malay and Tamil. Lastly, when they were asked about language that they used with their grandchildren, the older generations

scored 50% for Chetti language and 50% for English. The younger generations scored 78.5% for not relevant, 17.8% for Chetti language and 3.57% for standard Malay.

Table 5

Language use within family

Which language do you normally use within the family?	No		Percentage	
	No	Percentage	No	Percentage
	14-36		50-76	
Chetti language	18	64.2	8	100
Standard Malay	4	14.2	0	0
English	5	17.8	0	0
Tamil	1	3.57	0	0
Which language do/did you normally use with your parents?	14-36		50-76	
Chetti language	19	67.8	7	87.5
Standard Malay	3	10.7	0	0
English	5	17.8	1	12.5
Tamil	1	3.57	0	0
Which language do you normally use with your children?	14-36		50-76	
Chetti language	4	14.2	6	75
Standard Malay	1	3.57	0	0
English	3	10.7	2	25
Not relevant	20	71.4	0	0
Which language do you normally use with your siblings?	14-36		50-76	
Chetti language	16	57.1	8	100
Standard Malay	2	7.14	0	0
English	9	32.1	0	0
Not relevant	1	3.57	0	0
Which language do you normally use with your wife/girlfriend/husband/boyfriend?	14-36		50-76	
Chetti language	2	7.14	6	75
Standard Malay	2	7.14	0	0
English	22	78.5	2	25
Not relevant	2	7.14	0	0
Which language do/did you normally use with your grandparents?	14-36		50-76	
Chetti language	23	82.1	7	87.5
Standard Malay	1	3.57	1	12.5

English	1	3.57	0	0
Tamil	3	10.7	0	0
Which language do you normally use with your grandchildren?	14-36		50-76	
Chetti language	5	17.8	4	50
Standard Malay	1	3.57	0	0
English	0	0	4	50
Not relevant	22	78.5	0	0

The next part of the questionnaire investigates language use in social domains, ones which are outside of family domains (Table 6). When they are asked about the language that they normally used with their friends, 62.5% of older generations said they used Chetti language, 25% said they used standard Malay and 12.5% said they used English. For younger generations, only 7.14% used Chetti language and 17.8% used standard Malay. The majority 75% used English.

For language they normally used with their neighbours, almost all (87.5%) of the older generations used Chetti language. Only 12.5% used standard Malay. For younger generations, 46.4% of them used Chetti language while 32.1% used English. The rest normally used standard Malay (17.8%) and Tamil (3.57%). They were also asked about the language they normally used when they go shopping locally. 50% of the older generations used standard Malay and 27.5% used Chetti language. 12.5% of the older generations used English. For younger generations, 75% of them used English while 17.8% used standard Malay. Only 7.14% used Chetti language.

They were then asked which language that they normally used with their doctors. For older generations, 50% of them used English, 37.5% used Malay and 12.5% used Chetti language. On the other hand, 89.2% of the younger generations used English, 7.14% used Chetti language and 3.57% used standard Malay. Lastly, they were asked about language that they normally used with their classmates/workmates. For older generations, 37.5% used standard Malay, 12.5% used English, 12.5% used Chetti language, while 37.5% said irrelevant. For younger generations, 85.7% used English, 10.7% used standard Malay and only 3.57% used Chetti language.

Table 6

Language use outside family

	No.	Percentage	No	Percentage
Which language do you normally use with your friends?	14-36		50-76	
Chetti language	2	7.14	5	62.5
Standard Malay	5	17.8	2	25
English	21	75	1	12.5
Tamil	0	0	0	0
Which language do you normally use with your neighbours?	14-36		50-76	
Chetti language	13	46.4	7	87.5
Standard Malay	5	17.8	1	12.5
English	9	32.1	0	0
Tamil	1	3.57	0	0
Which language do you normally use when you go shopping locally?	14-36		50-76	
Chetti language	2	7.14	3	27.5
Standard Malay	5	17.8	4	50
English	21	75	1	12.5
Tamil	0	0	0	0
Which language do you normally use with the doctor?	14-36		50-76	
Chetti language	2	7.14	1	12.5
Standard Malay	1	3.57	3	37.5
English	25	89.2	4	50
Tamil				
Which language do you normally use with your workmates / classmates?	14-36		50-76	
Chetti language	1	3.57	1	12.5
Standard Malay	3	10.7	3	37.5
English	24	85.7	1	12.5
Tamil	0	0	0	0
Not relevant	0	0	3	37.5

This section has presented quantitative research findings addressing the objective of the study. On the surface, the data demonstrates that there is a gradual shift of the language employed for communication as the young generation of the community tend to use the language of the majority more often than Chetti language, and the reverse is true for the old

generation. Interpretation of these results along with the qualitative aspects of the study will be provided in the following section.

Discussion and Conclusions

This section presents discussions based on research findings from data collected on language shift within Chetti community. Comparison of the responses between the older generations and the younger generations in the community has revealed several noteworthy findings. First, regarding the language in which they are most fluent, everyone in the older generations group responded that they command the Chetti language skills more than the languages of the majority. However, this is not the case with the younger generations as some said they were more fluent in English and standard Malay instead. The pattern repeats when they were asked about their mother tongue. Whereas the elders were of the same opinion that their mother tongue is Chetti language, the youth have again shown that they did not share the same reaction as the ones before them as some of them claimed that Chetti language was not their first language. This can be construed as a subtle shift in terms of the acquisition of Chetti language, the cause of which perhaps can be attributed to frequent and constant exposure towards languages other than Chetti language.

Next, when it comes to question of sense of belongingness, the elders in the community were adamant that it was important to be able to speak Chetti language to be part of the Chetti community. The youth, however, distanced themselves from such a view as some of them responded negatively to this question. They no longer associate the importance of speaking Chetti language as part of the Chetti identity. Furthermore, presupposing that discrimination could be a factor in determining whether one continues to speak in their mother tongue or not, respondents were also asked if they had experienced any sort of preferential treatments for speaking Chetti language. Majority of both generations said they had never been discriminated against for speaking Chetti language and the Indian community at large had always been unconcerned upon learning the language they speak was not Tamil.

Regarding language use across generation in family domain for this particular community, the old were more inclined to make use of Chetti language, whereas the reverse was true for the young. Although the younger generations still speak Chetti language, it was evident from their responses that the use of other languages has precipitously crept within the family domain. A large margin of the younger generations claimed that they used English predominantly when conversing with their life companions as well as their siblings. Considering that home functions as the main source of acquiring the native language (Abd-el-Jawad, 2006), this situation is distressing, to say the least.

Analysis of language use of the community members in interactions outside the family domain revealed that the youngsters had the tendency to prioritise English over Chetti or Malay language as their medium of communication, especially when it comes to talking with friends who are not Chettis. This inclination did not seem to stop at talking to their friends only as they claimed they would always use English when interacting with someone outside their community and this includes when going shopping, talking to their doctors, and their classmates/workmates. Researchers observed that the young ones in the community impulsively spoke to us either in English or Malay upon noticing that we were not Chettis. This pattern of language behaviour is consistent with other communities experiencing language

shift as well, as it is inevitable for them to adopt the language of the majority at the expense of their mother tongue (Abd-el-Jawad, 2006). However, they still use Chetti language regularly when communicating with their neighbours. This is probably because their neighbours are Chetti as well. For the older generations, generally they still use Chetti language outside of family domains. They use Chetti language when they talk to their friends as well as to their neighbours. When they go shopping locally, majority chooses to use standard Malay. However, they still prefer to use English when talking to their doctor. When talking to their classmates/workmates, mostly choose standard Malay.

As suggested by Holmes et al (1993), the process through which a native language disappears from a community is rather gradual and it often occurs due to the pressure of the majority language being used more widely in public. When the comparisons are made between the younger and the older generations, there are certain patterns in terms of language use between these two age groups. The younger generations still mainly use Chetti language in their family domains. However, they have started using English in family domains. The use of English is quite widespread when it comes to social domains for the younger generations. For the older generations, they are determined and have been persistent in maintaining the mother tongue at individual level as well as societal level, though for social domains, they are not left with much choice but to succumb to the pressure of majority language due to pragmatic reasons.

In conclusion, the Chetti language is evidently losing ground gradually as we speak. Despite the favourable attitude of the community towards the language, it is inevitable that the language of the majority is gaining dominance at various levels and domains within the community. The future may seem all but bleak for Chetti language, but if the whole community can come together and understand the importance of preserving their native language and stop seeing it as an individual duty only to preserve the language, then perhaps this important symbol of the history and culture of Chetti community can still be protected.

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