

Tamil Language in Multilingual Singapore: Key Issues in Teaching and Maintaining a Minority Language

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Abstract This chapter focuses on how Tamil, a minority language in Singapore, is being maintained by institutionalising it. As one of four official languages in Singapore, Tamil is taught from pre-primary to junior colleges as Mother Tongue, but its survival is threatened by the linguistic heterogeneity of the wider Indian community and a shift among Tamil–English bilinguals towards the link language or lingua franca of Singapore, English, even in the home domain. Tamil is now a household language to only about 37% of the Indian population. This emerging pattern of language use has been of concern to policy makers and curriculum planners, and has led to a review of pedagogical approaches that questions the functionality and relevance of the language variety being taught in schools. To survive, the Tamil language has to live beyond the boundaries of the classroom and respond to the changing needs of a younger generation of Tamil bilinguals, and the continual demographic changes of twenty first century Singapore.

Keywords Bilingualism · Language maintenance and shift · Language policy · Minority language · Tamil curriculum · Tamil language

1 Introduction

The Indian population in Singapore constitutes about 9.2% of the total resident population of 3.7 million (Singapore Department of Statistics 2011). This translates to some 348,000 ethnic Indian residents in Singapore. Of these, 188,591 are Tamils. Chinese form the majority of 74.1%, followed by Malays at 13.1%. Clearly, the Indians are a minority in multiethnic, multicultural, multilingual Singapore. However, it is important to define ‘Indians’ in the Singaporean context in order to make sense of the language situation that has evolved there. The Department of Statistics classifies Indians as people of Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi or Sri Lankan origin. This South Asian cluster is not a homogeneous entity in terms of language, religion or culture: linguistically, for instance, it includes speakers of a spectrum of South Asian

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languages that can be broadly categorised as either Dravidian (Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu) or Indo–Aryan (Hindi, Punjabi, Gujarati, Urdu). As Rai (2009) points out, the linguistic heterogeneity that exists among ethnic Indians in Singapore is a cause for concern, even of contention, with respect to language policies and language planning issues.

The 2010 census figures (Singapore Department of Statistics 2011) on household language usage among Indians indicate that about 37% of ethnic Indians aged five and over identify Tamil as the most frequently spoken language at home, while for some 42%, English is the dominant language; other Indian languages are spoken by around 13% of the population in question. While Tamil seems to have an edge over what Rai (2009) terms ‘minor South Asian languages’ (p. 145), English clearly prevails as the language of choice in Indian households.

The shift towards English is evident not only in the Indian community but also in both the Chinese and Malay communities (Saravanan 1993). This phenomenon has implications for corpus planning which include, but are not limited to, orthography, grammar and vocabulary; in the case of Tamil, this language shift poses major challenges in maintaining the Tamil language and sustaining its vibrancy beyond the classroom.

This chapter presents the discussions and arguments that focus on maintaining the Tamil language and the tensions that have surfaced in the process. It also puts forward some recommendations that may contribute to the maintenance of the Tamil language in Singapore in the twenty first century.

2 Tamil in Singapore: Its Diasporic Roots

Tamil, a Dravidian language distinct from the Indo–Aryan languages of India, found its way to Singapore with the settling of the first Indian diasporic communities from various parts of the Indian subcontinent from 1819 to the 1940s, while the colony was under British rule. Many came from Tamil Nadu in South India, where Tamil is the scheduled or official language. During this time, two significant events drove the Tamil language to the fore: the ‘politicisation of labour’ (Rai 2009, p. 147) in Singapore and the Dravidian movement in South India. The Dravidian ideology glorified the Tamil language and culture and ‘gave impetus to the development of a Tamil identity and significant meaning to the Tamil language’ (Purushotam 2000, p. 46); its spread to Singapore led to the teaching of Tamil, as opposed to the other Indian languages, in community schools there.

Although Tamil dominated in terms of its numbers of speakers, primarily because of the high numbers of forced or semi-forced migrants from Tamil Nadu under British rule (Mesthrie 2008, p. 497), its relative position was undermined by pressure from other South Asian linguistic groups, particularly of speakers of languages of North Indian origin. This included Hindi, a language that has particular

prestige both as the language of Hinduism and through its perceived link with Sanskrit (Vaish 2008), to the detriment of Tamil.

There is a need to examine the key factors that have shaped the current situation of Tamil in Singapore. One way of approaching this is to study different but inter-related perspectives. The first, sociohistorical: an examination of the status of the Tamil language in Singapore during colonial rule. This perspective will be useful in explaining the sociological and psychological elements of the language within its environment, past and present.

3 Tamil and Tamils in Colonial Singapore: A Brief Look

In a sociolinguistic sense, language is a complex entity that is intimately and inextricably linked with its speakers; the reverse also holds true. The social implications of a language marking the solidarity or identity of individuals or groups may have far-reaching effects. This can be explained in terms of the correlation that exists between attitudes towards language and the people who speak it (Preston 2002). Typically, from a non-linguistic point of view, notions of ‘prestige’ or ‘stigma’ can be attached to or withheld from whole languages or language varieties by a dominant group, who hold power on the basis of socioeconomic status. Such judgements can be harmful if the language in question is not of a dominant or prestigious variety, or if speakers of the language belong to a lower socioeconomic class. This was the case with Tamil.

In the Singaporean context, the identity of ethnic Indians during colonial rule was predetermined by some of the ruling British elites. The Indians—mostly Tamil-speaking South Indians—found themselves positioned on ‘the lower rungs of the social order’ (Sandhu 1993, pp. 779–780). Only a fraction were educated (Lal 2007), perhaps because these Indians, predominantly from the south of India, were primarily labourers and convicts. As Lal explains, these convicts, including ‘untouchables’ from the lower castes, were part of the forced labour responsible for the infrastructure of Singapore, from building bridges to constructing roads; the indentured labourers were contracted to work through an exploitative system, paid low wages and expected to meet the ‘extreme demands’ of their employers. Their socioeconomic standing, not surprisingly, determined the status of the language they spoke: Tamil. The negative stereotyping of the Indians as the ‘coolies and blackmen of Singapore’ (Sandhu 1993, p. 779) not only marginalised the community but also attached a stigma to the language spoken by these labourers. Tamil was considered a ‘coolie language’ (Schiffman 2003, p. 105), which means ‘language of the labourers’. Although Schiffman’s claim reflects the complexities of Tamil language and its perceived status, it is not clear if this sentiment represents the views of a significant section of the Tamil community, particularly among the younger generation today.

4 Tamil: Post-Independence

The Tamil Language was accorded official status in 1965 following the independence of Singapore. It is one of the four official languages, the others being Mandarin, Malay and English as put forth by the Republic of Singapore Independence Act of 1965. Malay is the national language, while ‘for all practical purposes, English has become the *de facto* dominant working language’ (Kuo 1977, p. 11).

The emergence of a new political landscape following Singapore’s independence in 1965, together with a change in demographics, set in motion a complex dynamic of languages at work. Tamil, already in low standing among the other languages current in Singapore, was threatened with further weakening as the new nation invented itself: its position within the multilingual, multi-ethnic environment of Singapore was to undergo renegotiation. First, it was a minority language even among the four official languages. Second, it co-existed with other South Asian languages of Dravidian or Indo–Aryan roots and could not claim to be representative of the Indian population. Third, it was stigmatised as the language of labourers. Being situated in such a position in the process of nation-building proved to be a challenge to its survival. Kuo commented on the position of the Tamil language based on the 1970 census findings:

The only official language that is losing ground in Singapore is Tamil. This was not true only nationally, but even for the Indians. The literacy rate in Tamil among the Indians has decreased by [9.8 per cent] ... One untold fact is that there are fewer Indian youths who are literate in Tamil, probably because of its limited functions in socio-occupational mobility and in cross-ethnic communication. [This] makes it a rather insignificant language in this multilingual society. It would be interesting to observe the future trend of Tamil literacy since a bilingual program is being actively promoted in the educational structure in Singapore. There is some possibility that the literacy rate in Tamil may become stabilised if the Indian children at school are motivated to learn Tamil at least as a second language. (1980, p. 56–57)

Two issues central to Kuo’s observations with regard to the fall in Tamil literacy a few decades ago point to the seeming lack of currency of the Tamil language and its non-use in ‘cross-ethnic communication’. The latter can be explained in terms of the distinctive dissimilarities, including the use of different scripts, between the ethnic languages and particularly between the Dravidian and Indo–Aryan languages. The decline in Tamil literacy was partly the consequence of the emigration of some older Tamil-speaking Indians to India following Independence (Kuo 1980); partly because the bilingual policy was still in the early stages of incorporation into the educational system, which may have contributed to the apparent decline in literacy rates. Kuo’s classification of ‘Indian youths’, a blurred concept compared to more specific terms such as Tamil youths or Indians whose Mother Tongue is Tamil, lacks precision and aggregates different groups whose languages differ from each other under a single word.

Against the depressing Census findings reported by Kuo (1980), Gopinathan (1998) presents a positive change in literacy rates in Singapore’s official languages, based on 1980 and 1990 census data which record that literacy in Tamil increased

by 0.1%, a significant turnaround from the 1970 figure. The increase in Tamil literacy may be attributed to the implementation of the ‘interventionist’ bilingual policy (Gopinathan 1998, p. 21) whereby ethnic Indians, regardless of their mother tongues, were allocated Tamil as their ‘second language’ at school. Not surprisingly, in attempting to linguistically ‘cement’ disparate ethnic groups by prioritising Tamil and marginalising other ethnic Indian languages, the bilingual policy became fraught with tensions.

5 Studies on Tamil and Tamils in Singapore

Schiffman’s (2003) assertion that the Tamil language ‘is reduced to the domains of home and family, and then only for the uneducated’ (p. 109) appears to be a misrepresentation or even an underestimation of Tamil language use. It suggests that Tamil is exclusively used by the uneducated. Whether ‘uneducated’ in this context means ‘not English-educated’ or ‘having had little or no education’ is a distinction that is not made clear. Nor is there an indication of the ‘other domains’ where Tamil has apparently diminished in its use. In contrast, Vaish et al. (2010) pinpoint the maintenance and stability of Tamil in ‘the domains of family and friends and media’ (p. 176).

Schiffman (2003) also points to demography as a factor that has reduced the use of Tamil in Singapore: that is, to the numerical strength of the ethnic group and its distribution within national boundaries (Harwood et al. 1994). In particular, Schiffman blames the inflexible housing policy in Singapore, which he asserts has led to the dispersion of the Tamil-speaking community to such an extent that there is no opportunity for Tamil to be used as an intra-ethnic language. Schiffman’s argument can be justified on the grounds that the sporadic contact between Tamils is likely to reduce use of the language, although the importance of racial integration and racial mix explains the Singaporean government’s move away from forming ethnic enclaves or ‘ghettoisation’ on sociopolitical grounds.

As pointed out by Sim et al. (2003) in a study of public housing and ethnic integration, the government introduced a revised housing allocation policy in 1989 ‘to attain a racial distribution in the new towns and estates that was in line with the racial profile of the nation’ (p. 297). It introduced the Neighbourhood Racial Limits policy that specified the ethnic proportion to be maintained in each neighbourhood in response to the re-emergence of ethnic enclaves (Sim et al. 2003). The tension between creating racial harmony and promoting linguistic homogeneity within defined spaces is one that is hard to reconcile.

Despite the housing policy scattering the Tamil community, it has access to a unique ethnic heritage enclave known as Little India, a designated area comprising shops and restaurants that represent the Tamil culture and language. This is also the venue for cultural shows and fairs to mark cultural and religious celebrations such as the Tamil New Year, the Tamil Harvest Festival and Deepavali. This unique space provides opportunities for Tamils to congregate and speak Tamil in intra-ethnic communication, although this may not be sufficient to propagate the language.

In a sociolinguistic study of the use of Mother Tongue in Tamil families, Saravanan (2001) reports a preference for English over Tamil, particularly among parents who are educated and whose socioeconomic status is high. This phenomenon is reiterated in Schiffman's (2003) study, which observes that the language is not being maintained by the educated section of the Indian population. These observations seem to crystallise the general perception that Tamil is not an economically viable language, thus the switch to a more dominant language, in this case English. In another study, Saravanan (1993) reports that the Tamil language is now associated with low socioeconomic status by young Tamils themselves, in part due to the few career opportunities that it offers; Saravanan gives three reasons that explain Mani and Gopinathan's (1983) claim that the status of Tamil is lower than the other official languages in Singapore: the international status of English; the numerical dominance of Chinese speakers; and the currency of Malay as a regional language. Tamil language seems to be in a precarious position.

This is a dismal picture of the Tamil language in terms of its status, value, usage and functionality, despite government initiatives in institutionalising Tamil from pre-primary to pre-tertiary levels. It may be too late to reverse the trend, given the number of factors have led to its decline. Schiffman (2003, p. 119) claims that the Tamils themselves point to the Tamil teachers, parents, the young people, the Ministry of Education and the curriculum developers as forces that have worked against the growth of Tamil. For example, Tamil teachers generally emphasise the speaking of formal Tamil rather than conversational forms, and the younger generation is drifting towards English, the dominant and prestigious language, in conversations. Ramiah (1991) and Sobrielo (1986) argue that the decline in the use of the language in the home and friendship domains can be attributed to the Tamil-English shift. The findings of a study on language use patterns carried out by Ramiah, based on a sample of 1600 primary school students, highlights a preference for English over Tamil, particularly among the younger children. The reasons given again point to the relatively low social status of Tamil speakers on one hand and the low economic value attached to the language on the other. Sobrielo's findings mirror those of Ramiah in terms of the correlation between age and language choice: her study included respondents between the ages of 12 and 70, and observed that the older respondents maintained the language while the younger respondents demonstrated a shift from Tamil to English (Sobrielo 1986). This pattern is reflected in the 2010 census report on home language use in which only about 41% of ethnic Indians aged between 25 and 44 predominantly used Tamil while around 83% aged between 60 and 69 spoke Tamil in the home (Singapore Department of Statistics 2011).

This trend leads to the argument that the maintenance of a language is closely tied to the home domain, via intergenerational transmission of the language. Spolsky (2012), like others, argues that the lack of this critical transmission in the home may lead to language loss. He considers that the influences from external domains such as schools can create conflict between the standard form of language that is taught and the varieties that are spoken in homes, especially of immigrant families. This predicament of intergenerational transmission in immigrant Japanese families in Perth, Western Australia has been highlighted by Kawasaki (Chapter, "A Place

for Second Generation Japanese Speaking Children in Perth: Can they Maintain Japanese as a Community Language” of this volume) who cites exogamous marriages and ‘elite multilingualism’ as factors that work against language transmission. While reiterating the importance of the family unit in maintaining the immigrant or community language among second generation immigrants in a largely monolingual setting such as Australia, Kawasaki also highlights the significance and impact that state or national policy can have on the survival of minority languages.

Based on the 1990 and 2000 census data and the Sociolinguistic Survey of Singapore 2006, Vaish et al. (2010) observe that ‘there are clear signs of language shift from Tamil to English’ (p. 176) in schools. This means that there is a need for schools, which typically teach the standard variety of the language, to engage their students in the variety that they are exposed to in the home so that they do not lose their heritage language. Fishman (1980, p. 169) stresses that ‘the flow of language maintenance influence is much greater from *home-and-community into school* than from the school into the home’ [emphasis in original]. This same tension, which has implications for corpus planning and pedagogical approaches, is already apparent in Singapore with respect to the teaching of Tamil.

6 Tamil in Schools: A Chronological Perspective

Since its implementation as a second language in some 90 schools in 1976 (Souza 1980), there have been concerns about Tamil Language (TL). As early as 1978, the Tamils’ Representative Council (TRC), established in 1951, pointed out that ‘fewer Indian students [were] opting for Tamil’ (p. 228). One reason for this could be that no aided mission schools offered Tamil as a second language, many government schools also did not, and those that did were not evenly distributed across the nation. One significant initiative taken by the TRC was to lobby for the teaching of Tamil in all schools at primary, secondary and junior college (the equivalent of Year 11 and Year 12 in Australia) levels. To encourage more students to learn TL, the TRC undertook a campaign that included mailing appeal letters to Indian parents and approaching the press to publish the list of schools that offered Tamil as a second language (Arasumani 1987). Although no data are available with respect to the outcome of the campaign, the actions taken by the TRC highlight the extent of challenges faced in offering Tamil in schools in the early years of the bilingual policy, and the likely repercussions of having no access to TL in schools: learning another mother tongue instead, for instance.

Currently, 93 secondary schools provide TL within curriculum time, including some academically prestigious schools; secondary students whose schools do not offer Tamil have the option of learning it at Umar Pulavar Tamil Language Centre (UPTLC) once or twice a week or at 11 other school-based centres after school in the afternoons (Ministry of Education 2012). This is a significant increase over the 1999 figures where only 81 secondary schools, apart from UPTLC, and five school-based centres offered Tamil as Mother Tongue (Ministry of Education 2000). With

Table 1 Resident population aged 5 years and over by language most frequently spoken at home. (Singapore Department of Statistics 2011)

Ethnic group/language	2000	2010
Chinese	100.0	100.00
English	23.9	32.6
Mandarin	45.1	47.7
Chinese dialects	30.7	19.2
Others	0.4	0.4
Malays	100.0	100.00
English	7.9	17.0
Malay	91.6	82.7
Others	0.5	0.3
Indians	100.0	100.00
English	35.6	41.6
Malay	11.6	7.9
Tamil	42.6	36.7
Others ^a	9.9	13.8

Figures are in percentages

^a It is not clear exactly what languages constitute 'others', particularly for the Indians; it may not necessarily illustrate an increase in other non-official Indian languages

more secondary schools and school-based centres offering Tamil, the Ministry of Education's initiative to support the teaching and learning of Tamil not only reflects the demand for TL learning in schools by stakeholders, particularly parents, but also suggests a growth in resources. The number of students learning Tamil in secondary schools and centres in 2010 was 10,300. Some 70% primary schools now offer Tamil as Mother Tongue (Ministry of Education 2010, quoted in Kadakara 2011).

7 Census Figures

One way of gauging Tamil in terms of language choice is by comparing the 2000 and 2010 census figures for the languages spoken at home among the Indian community. These are represented in Table 1.

There was a 6% increase in the number of Indians who spoke English at home in 2010 compared with the year 2000. In contrast, there was a 6% decrease in the use of Tamil as a household language. The increase in the use of English in the home domain is also seen in the Chinese and Malay ethnic groups; there is an emerging pattern of a shift towards English in all three groups, although to varying degrees. In the case of ethnic mother tongues, there was an increase of 2.6% in the use of Mandarin among the Chinese; the biggest drop, of 8.9%, was seen in Malay, among ethnic Malays. Based on the 2010 census figures, Malay and Tamil use in the home domain, compared to Mandarin, seems to be on the decline.

Notwithstanding inherent problems such as instances of codeswitching and of perception versus reality, in using census data one can roughly gauge the Tamil

usage profile. Although statistics point to a decline in its use as a household language, this should not be interpreted as a definitive representation of the language losing its ground because of the shift towards English. As can be seen in Table 1, *all* ethnic groups showed varying degrees of increase in the use of English. Furthermore, a relatively smaller percentage of decline is seen in the use of Tamil compared to the dip in the use of Malay.

A pertinent point is the increase of about 4% in the use of ‘other languages’—which may not exclusively refer to the other Dravidian and Indo–Aryan languages but may include other non-Indian languages spoken in the Indian community. While the terminology ‘others’ is blurred, the overall increase suggests a rise in the use of other, non-official Indian languages. This may be the consequence of the settling of the new Indian diasporic community since the 1990s, which according to Rai (2009) has been an impetus for the development of other South Asian languages, particularly Indo–Aryan languages.

This emerging pattern has been a cause for concern among Tamil Singaporeans who fear that the influx of non-Tamil speakers from South Asia, who currently outnumber the Tamil-speaking population, may jeopardise the position of Tamil. This issue was raised at Parliament recently by Nominated Member of Parliament Mr. R. Dhinakaran, who called for government support to maintain the official status of Tamil in Singapore (Peravai February 2013). The growing popularity of Bollywood among the non-Indians in Singapore (Ng 2010; Rubdy et al. 2008) may also position Hindi as a significant minor South Asian language. However, it can be argued that it is unlikely that these non-Tamil speakers all belong to a particular exclusive dialect group. Even if there were to be increased support for some other South Asian languages in response to the numerical growth of their speakers, they would not automatically supersede Tamil or be officially recognised. Tamil is intimately linked with the history of Singapore and has already secured the position of an official language, with institutional support ensuring that it is maintained; and Tamil leaders, including politicians, have been pivotal in situating Tamil as an important language in Singapore, especially from the early 2000s.

8 Tamil and Media

The maintenance and promotion of Tamil language in Singapore via the three main media platforms—radio, television and newspaper—have undergone notable changes in response to the demands of a fast-changing world and a modernised Singapore. Not until October 2008 could a local Indian audience enjoy a television channel dedicated to Indian programs, predominantly in Tamil. Previously, Tamil programs constituted only a segment of a channel that offered other programs in English (xinMSN Entertainment 2013). The extension of air time was a milestone that paved the way for a proliferation of locally produced Tamil programs, bolstering the language and at the same time making it as prolific as the Malay channel in terms of air time (the Chinese channel has 24 h broadcast). Not only do Indians have

access to a local Tamil channel now, but they also can tune in to Tamil programs produced in South India via cable television.

The current Tamil radio station, *Oli* 96.8 FM, is a 24 h broadcast service that has played a pivotal role in promoting the Tamil language. Tamil radio had humble beginnings in 1936 with a 4 h allocated time-slot; in August 2001 it became a non-stop Tamil channel that earned accolades internationally for its charity work (xinMSN Entertainment 2013), gaining recognition for Tamil language and the Tamil community in Singapore and beyond. It has worked collaboratively with organisers of the month-long annual Tamil Language Festival in promoting the use of spoken Tamil, particularly targeting younger generations. A notable achievement of *Oli* 96.8 was its collaboration with primary schools in providing an hour-long weekend program, *Ilam mottugal*, where students interact with popular radio deejays in Tamil and showcase their talents. Other initiatives of *Oli* 96.8 in promoting the use of Tamil as an intra-ethnic language include staging cultural shows and events for the Tamil community.

Singapore has only one Tamil newspaper, *Tamil Murasu*, one of the oldest in the world, established by Govindasamy Sarangapany, a Tamil language activist, in 1935. Since then it has transformed in terms of layout and content in response to the changing needs of the Singaporean Tamil population as well as of the ‘new’ Tamil diaspora from South Asia (AsiaOne News September 4 2010). The daily paper also serves ‘as a study guide to Tamil language students’ (Singapore Press Holdings 2013, p. 5). A significant effort in promoting the language was the introduction of the e-paper version of *Tamil Murasu*. Murugaian Nirmala, the former editor of *Tamil Murasu*, summed up one of its primary objectives as ‘to preserve the Tamil Language, especially among the younger generation’ (AsiaOne News September 4 2010).

An overview of the role of media in maintaining and promoting the use of Tamil language among the current Tamil community has been encouraging. Tamil media in Singapore have embraced the shift from traditional media platforms to digitised forms which make access to the language ‘anytime, anywhere’ possible. It is evident that opportunities exist for Tamils of different generations to be engaged with the language either actively or passively through the Tamil media, and to use it as a link language.

Insofar as maintenance of a minority language is concerned, it becomes apparent that the ‘convergent efforts of enough speakers, cultural grass-roots associations [and] linguists... supported... by national or international institutions’ are crucial in realising their common goals (Breton 2003, p. 214). Although the Tamils are numerically disadvantaged and the language they speak bears little economic value, the support that the Tamil language has received, especially since the 2000s, attests to the effective leadership that has in some ways been the cornerstone of the survivability of the language so far. The onus is on each Tamil individual to be engaged with the language in order to maintain it in the foreseeable future.

9 Language Policy in Singapore

9.1 *Language Policy and Language Planning in the Wider Context*

In the twenty first century, language diversity faces a range of challenges across multilingual settings, each with a unique history and social dynamic. There is ongoing tension between supporting multilingualism for its rich ‘resources’ and for the maintenance of traditions and cultures on one hand, and unifying people of different linguistic backgrounds via a common language on the other. This dichotomy gives rise to schools of thought that view language, and hence language policies, from different perspectives, political, economical or social. This is evident in several language policies and planning in polities characterised as ‘multilingual or plurilingual (Edwards 1997; Spolsky 1978, 2012) in which one language typically dominates. In the case of Singapore, language groups have been treated as homogeneous and static entities, particularly in the treatment of ethnic mother languages.

9.2 *Situating English in Singapore’s Language Policy*

One important factor that has weighed heavily on the survival of the Tamil language is the nationalistic language planning policy of Singapore. Considering the heterogeneity of the population and the political ideology that was in part rooted in meritocracy, it became necessary on the grounds of pragmatism that English, a ‘world language and the language of science and technology’ (Gopinathan 1977, p. 55), be given official status. As Sharpe and Gopinathan (2002) note, when it gained self governance in 1959 Singapore saw the potential of the English language to act as a springboard for success in life in terms of more job opportunities and better living standards. This political decision, part of the nation-building process, translated into a bilingual policy which was implemented in the 1970s. An important speech in 1986 by then Deputy Prime Minister and Education Minister of Singapore Tony Tan underscores the intent, rationale and the so-called benefits of the bilingual policy:

that each child should learn English and his mother tongue I regard as a fundamental feature of our education system... Children must learn English so that they will have a window to the knowledge, technology and expertise of the modern world. They must know their mother tongues to enable them to know what makes us what we are. (Kwong et al. 1997, p. 11; emphasis added)

The ideological concept that shaped the bilingual policy, also referred to (perhaps a little ironically) as ‘English-knowing bilingualism’, seemed to possess desirable qualities that would be bestowed upon the people through the passage of education and effected a shift towards English in all ethnic groups (Kuo 1977; Gupta and Yeok 1995; Saravanan and Hoon 1997; Saravanan et al. 2007). English became synonymous with prestige, and took root as the de facto, de jure and working language. As ‘the implementation took hold’ (Gopinathan 1998, p. 20) language policies were

refined in such a way that a divide was created between the now dominant language, English, and the ethnic mother tongues that were to be heritage languages for students.

In essence, the language policy has been prescriptivist. To use Kaplan and Baldauf's (1997) words, it 'largely ignored... the total *ecology* of the linguistic environment' (p. 269; emphasis in original). Given the complexities of the linguistic situation in Singapore, together with the challenges in planning and implementing the education and language policy, it is no surprise that sections of the population voiced dissatisfaction, particularly concerning the compartmentalisation of mother tongues taught at schools.

9.3 Voices of the South Asian Minorities

In Singapore the term 'Indian', which refers to both ethnicity and race, is complicated as it superficially homogenises the group as a collectivity regardless of the origins of its members. The linguistic diversity is also downplayed by institutionalising Tamil as a Mother Tongue. This problematic classification was exacerbated by official educational policy that determined that one's Mother Tongue was Tamil by default if one was categorised as 'Indian', based on the father's ethnicity (García 2011). This resulted in Tamil being designated as the second language—the first being English—for student speakers of other South Asian languages, including Hindi, Punjabi and Urdu. Not surprisingly, this policy sparked criticism from the non-Tamil speaking South Asian minorities, primarily on the grounds of lack of recognition and linguistic differences (Rai 2009). One of the key problems was the strain that non-Tamil speaking students were constantly under in having to learn, and learn in, two languages that were not their mother tongues (Rai 2009). Saravanan (1993) observed the 'antipathy' (p. 287) expressed by speakers of the Indo-Aryan languages towards Tamil.

Eventually the language problems encountered by the students paved the way for a series of fundamental changes that meant more language options for them. In 1991 the Ministry of Education (MOE) recognised Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, Punjabi and Urdu, classified as Non-Tamil-mother-tongues (Vaish et al. 2010), at primary, secondary and pre-tertiary levels, in response to the poor academic performance of the students whose mother tongues these were. However, there was a sting in the tail: the teaching of these languages had to be undertaken by the communities. The national language policy which clearly recognised Tamil as an official language did not alter.

10 New Initiatives in Maintaining Tamil

10.1 Spoken Tamil in Schools

Curriculum planners and policy makers have to make informed decisions that will enhance the learning of Tamil, the teaching of which has been a constant challenge

for its teachers. The declining use of Tamil in Singapore has been correlated with its pedagogical approaches and curriculum (Saravanan 1998; Schiffman 2003; Lakshmi and Saravanan 2011). This issue has been a contentious one as it involves both corpus planning and status management. This is in part due to the insistence of Tamil purists that teaching should be of Literary Tamil (LT), a high variety that sharply contrasts with the varieties spoken in homes. Schiffman (2003) refers to the chasm that exists between the literary and spoken languages as ‘extreme diglossia’ (p. 106), and this linguistic gap is implicated in the underlying issue of which Tamil corpus should be incorporated into the curriculum.

The conflict narrows to the teaching of Tamil in the school and the variety to be taught. In Singapore, Lakshmi and Saravanan (2011) have carried out extensive research on Standard Spoken Tamil (SST). Their primary aim is to inform the need to establish an appropriate curriculum incorporating SST, aimed at developing students’ oral skills at primary and secondary levels. This proposed initiative is transformational in that it seeks to position SST as an ‘additional resource for the teaching and learning of Tamil’ (p. 3) by adapting Schiffman’s (1999) framework, which includes a reference grammar for standard spoken Tamil. They consider this the variety ‘with the widest communication currency’ (p. 15) which most students, if not all, can identify with, as opposed to LT. Their recommendation highlights the urgency and importance of establishing Tamil as a living language in Singapore in the twenty first century, and departs from the long-held notion that only the literary form of Tamil should be taught in classrooms (Saravanan 1993).

The shift to the spoken variety is largely a response to two other studies, one carried out by the Centre for Research in Pedagogy and Practice and undertaken by Lakshmi, Vaish, Gopinathan and Saravanan, and the other by the Tamil Language Curriculum and Pedagogy Review Committee (TLCPRC) in 2004 and 2005. The TLCPRC was formed by the Ministry of Education in 2004 to review the teaching and learning of the Tamil language. Important findings point to two facts: first, students are not motivated to learn Tamil because they claim the textbooks are difficult and learning the language is no more than an academic exercise required to progress to the next level; and second, the Tamil taught in schools neither corresponds with nor complements the spoken variety used outside the classroom. Therefore, students learn a variety (as stipulated by the respective authorities) that has limited or no application in their daily lives (Lakshmi and Saravanan 2011). The mismatch between ‘classroom language’ and the spoken one appears to be one of the factors discouraging students from using the language. The teaching of the spoken variety in classrooms, strongly recommended in the report by Lakshmi et al. (2006), has since been introduced in schools as ‘Spoken Tamil’ (ST), variety slightly different to SST, in an attempt to make learning the language more meaningful in current contexts, particularly in day-to-day oral communication.

10.2 Changes in the Tamil Curriculum

The TL Curriculum Framework was designed following the recommendations put forward by the TLCPRC (Ministry of Education 2005). The main aim of the revised

syllabus was to make Tamil a living language beyond the classroom (Ministry of Education 2010). A three-pronged framework addressed the pedagogical approaches needed to stimulate students' interest in learning Tamil, the need for assessments to be meaningful, and the creation of a syllabus flexible enough to address changing needs. An important shift in the focus in the Secondary School syllabus was a new emphasis on productive skills such as speaking and listening. This called for the teaching of ST in the classroom, to motivate and encourage students to converse without difficulty or reservation with their friends and the community at large.

New pedagogical approaches to making Tamil a living language (for example, with the use of multimodal materials) were other initiatives undertaken to sustain interest among students, by providing meaningful contexts in which to study Tamil. These syllabus changes were responses to the perceived needs of Indian students amid a constantly changing language use profile, and recognised that collaboration among the home, school and public domains was necessary, even vital, to achieve the objectives of the revised curriculum, including fluency in speaking the language.

Other desired outcomes, which resonate with TLCPRC's vision for Tamil language, were outlined in a press release (Ministry of Education 2005). Two in particular were that the Tamil Singaporean (as opposed to the usual generic term 'Indian') will comfortably converse with another Tamil Singaporean in Tamil, and will speak the language at home, with children. Whether or not the objectives of the revised MOE syllabus are successfully achieved over time depends on a complex network of factors, one being the motivational level of young learners with respect to using the language that they are familiar with, outside the school domain. Similarly, working towards realising the vision of the TLCPRC will necessarily situate the individual, family and society at the forefront in maintaining the language.

10.3 New Syllabus

In secondary schools, Tamil is now taught in three streams according to students' ability: Higher Tamil Language, Tamil Language and Tamil Language 'B' Syllabus (TLB). TLB was introduced in 2006, primarily to assist students who could not cope with the standard syllabus. Practical communication skills are emphasised to sustain the interest of the student in learning the language and appreciating its cultural links (Ministry of Education 2012). Although it is not an examinable subject at O Level, a pass is required if a student intends to progress to junior college. The middle stream, Tamil Language, is a core O Level subject, and a pass is required for progress to junior college (Singapore Examinations and Assessment Board 2013).

Keeping abreast with advances in technology, *MurasuAnjal*, a Tamil text input software program, was introduced to schools in 2009 by the Ministry of Education to encourage students to search the Internet using Tamil language and 'to imbue in them a lifelong love for Tamil' (Iswaran 2010). This is a laudable effort to promote the use of the language virtually, considering the relatively small number of students who learn Tamil in schools, and underscores the vision of making Tamil a living language in Singapore.

10.4 Government Support

As well as establishing Tamil as an official language, the government has been supportive of its promotion, particularly in the education domain. One noteworthy initiative is the introduction of the BA Tamil Language and Literature undergraduate program, a collaboration between Madurai-Kamaraj University in South India and SIM University, the only Singaporean university to offer a Tamil degree programme (SIM University 2012). It is hoped that this program will lead to more teachers with a degree qualification in Tamil (Balakrishnan 2007). Another initiative that caters specifically to Tamil teachers and language professionals is the Master of Education in Tamil Language offered by The National Institute of Education, where a subsidy from the Ministry of Education is available (National Institute of Education n.d.). These programs have been established fairly recently, and demonstrate the government's efforts to ensure that the teaching of Tamil meets high standards and responds adequately to the expectations of the Tamil curriculum; the initiatives also promise career opportunities in the Tamil language.

Another government initiative was the formation of The Tamil Language Council (TLC) in 2001, with the support of the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts; its primary objectives are to encourage the speaking of Tamil among the community and to link the language with youth via up-to-date technology (Tamil Language Council 2013).

10.5 Tamil Language Festival

The month-long Tamil Language Festival first took place in 2006, with the aim of promoting Tamil as a link and living language among the diverse Tamil-speaking population of Singapore, including immigrants and transitional workers from South Asia and, most importantly, Tamil language students. This festival, organised by the TLC and supported by the Ministry of Education's Tamil Language and Learning Promotion Committee, is another initiative to bolster the Tamil language by recognising it as an important heritage language. Organisers and partners of the 2013 festival (including Indian Tamil-speaking university students) hosted a range of activities to cater to different sections and age groups, inviting academics, writers and artistes from Tamil Nadu, India and Malaysia to participate. The festival showcases Tamil language and culture, and is instrumental in maintaining and encouraging the use of the language in Singapore in enjoyable and innovative ways. More importantly, it demonstrates to Singaporean Tamil speakers, especially to the younger generations, that they are part of a wider linguistic community with an international presence.

10.6 Role Models

Mr S. Iswaran, Second Minister for Home Affairs and Second Minister for Trade and Industry, leads the TLLPC in its promotion of Tamil language as a living language

in Singapore. The minister, who speaks fluent Tamil, represents an emerging group of prominent Tamil speakers from various sectors of the community including education and media. Tamil television, radio and newspapers allow the younger generation to see Tamil speakers employed as DJs, TV presenters, newsreaders and reporters. Besides being examples of successful, educated Tamil speakers, they lead in breathing life into the language among the Tamil community.

India-born Nominated Member of Parliament Mr Ramasamy Dhinakaran, a fluent Tamil speaker, requested that he might deliver a speech in Tamil, before one in English, at a recent parliamentary proceeding (Channel NewsAsia 2013). Another prominent Indian Member of Parliament, Mr K. Shanmugam, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Minister for Law, has presented speeches in Tamil, including National Day Messages. By identifying with the Tamil language, these politicians and other Tamil leaders play a crucial role in raising the status of the language by speaking it with command in public and to the media. This is a marked change from Saravanan's 1993 report that the Tamil community wanted more opportunities for Tamil to be used in Parliament and at cultural events; Saravanan highlighted two senior MPs' lack of command in Tamil during the election campaign in 1989, which, as she points out, 'failed to capture the affection of the Indians' (p. 281). There has been a positive change over the last two decades in terms of Tamil use by prominent figures at public events; this should encourage younger generations of Tamils to speak the language confidently and use it as a link language.

11 Conclusion: Re-packaging Tamil in Twenty First Century Singapore

In colonial Singapore, Tamil came to be associated with the coolies or labourers of South India, attracting negative connotations to the use of 'coolie language'. Post-colonial Singapore has repositioned Tamil within a dynamic multilingual society, alongside other heritage languages—Malay and Mandarin—by according it official status, although early studies (e.g. Saravanan 1993; Schiffman 2003) that focus on various sociolinguistic aspects of Tamil in Singapore have invariably highlighted its perceived comparative lack of economic value, functionality and lower status, attributing this to its decline in use in homes and in the public sphere. The government's bilingual and housing policies have also been implicated in its decline.

Notwithstanding the seemingly dismal picture of Tamil language in Singapore in the 1990s and early 2000s, efforts at maintaining the language have been gaining momentum since the 2000s with continual institutional support. Sections of the Tamil community have stated their vision of repositioning Tamil as a link, heritage or living language. For this to gain root in industrialised and digitised Singapore, Tamil needs to be re-packaged as a language that Tamils in Singapore can identify with and use, without reservations. This could begin by burying existing notions of Tamil as having little economic value or as spoken only by the economically disadvantaged or the uneducated. That it was the language of the labourers—whose

contribution to colonial Singapore was instrumental—in the *past* has to be viewed positively rather than be seen as cause for embarrassment.

Academics and educationists have called for new pedagogical approaches, and a revised curriculum has been implemented in an effort to encourage spoken Tamil beyond the school domain. Current moves towards the inclusion of more local flavour, and a more appealing textbook layout teamed with interactive pedagogical approaches that stay abreast of changing technology, signal a positive environment in which Tamil may flourish. While schools have taken a proactive approach by incorporating Spoken Tamil into the curriculum to encourage its use in intra-ethnic communication and to inculcate an active interest in the language among young people, more needs to be done at corpus management level. The ultimate question is which variety of Tamil needs to be maintained, considering Singapore's unique multilingual setting. If the underlying intent is to make Tamil live in Singapore, it is crucial for curriculum planners to consider how teaching it can adequately and effectively respond to the changing needs of the current generation.

Some of these responses may include immersion programs for students in collaboration with academic institutions in Tamil Nadu, and working with local Tamil media to organise road shows that encourage the speaking of Tamil. Further, the examination format, including items tested, needs to be reviewed so that it runs parallel to the overarching objective of making Tamil a living language. Students will learn Tamil more readily if the classroom language is a variety that they are familiar with, rather than literary Tamil. More importantly, Tamil should not be learnt as a 'subject' for the purpose of academic advancement. To effect a change in the mindset will mean re-examining the curriculum and Mother Tongue requirements with reference to academic progression. A question to bear in mind is whether purism in corpus planning will position Tamil as a living language in Singapore.

Tamil needs to be actively used and maintained in Singapore by the Tamil community at large, regardless of socioeconomic bearing. This means a conscious effort to speak Tamil at home: not necessarily exclusively, but in such a way that it is not marginalised. The language will continue to live in Singapore despite challenges and changes if Tamils from all walks of life embrace their language with the right attitude. It is not a question of whether Tamil will 'feed you' (Saravanan 1993, p. 281) that matters: whether the language has economic value or functionality is largely irrelevant if it is primarily positioned as carrying the Tamil culture, identity and heritage. This requires disentangling Tamil from its negative stereotyping as a language of labourers, spoken by the disadvantaged; these associations drawn from the past have no relevance in a contemporary society where young, educated Tamils are actively promoting and speaking Tamil via various platforms, including the media.

Tamil is also gaining impetus with the arrival of Tamil speakers from India, whose contribution has been valuable (Lakshmi and Saravanan 2011). A remarkable growth in the number of Indians with university education over the last 10 years, the highest percentage in 2010 among all ethnic groups (Singapore Department of Statistics 2011), has added value and status to Tamil language in Singapore.

What is critical is for Tamil speakers simply to speak the language, whatever variety one has been exposed to, whenever and wherever an opportunity arises. To judge from current efforts to repackage Tamil and encourage its usage in contemporary Singapore through a wide range of activities, initiatives and platforms, it is possible that Tamil will strengthen. Most importantly, if a conscious effort is made by Tamil-speaking Singaporeans to identify with and speak the language, Tamil may even thrive.

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