

PATTERNS OF CODE SWITCHING AMONG THE TAMIL STUDENTS OF MALAYSIA

**DR. M.Paramasivam
Universiti Putra Malaysia
Malaysia**

**And
Prof. DR .Sam Mohan Lal
Central Institute of Indian Languages
Mysore, India**

Introduction

The present paper discusses about the phenomenon of codeswitching among the Tamil mother tongue speaking students of Universiti Putra Malaysia(UPM). The basic data for the study include the interaction pattern of the respondents in different sociolinguistic settings.

Migration of Tamils to Malaysia

According to Arasarattnam, Malaya had contact with Tamil Nadu even before 500 B.C (pp.149, 191). Though in the initial stages of contact the main reason for Tamil's migration was for trade, later the Tamil's contact had spread to other areas such as, politics, education etc., As per the history there was an extensive Tamil Malay contact up to the period of Krishna Devaraya (1509-1509). However, the present day Tamils living in Malaysia are not the traditional Tamils of the past. Rather most of them are the migrants who have come to Malaysia during the later part of 18th century, especially when Malaysia's Penang Island came under the control of the British in 1786. These migrants were mainly labourers who came from South India. The British also wanted a large number of workers in order to clean the cities of Malaysia, to build roads, to lay rail tracks etc. After the initial establishment of rubber plantations during 1870s

the necessity arose to contract more plantation labourers. Subsequently, the large scale migration started in 1786 and lasted till 1938. (Nedumaran 1997, P.55)

Sociolinguistic and educational scenario of Malaysia with reference to Tamil

The education scenario of Tamil students in Malaysia may be looked into the following two ways.

- education system prior to World war II
- education system after the World war II

Education system prior to war

During this period only isolated Tamil schools were existing. There were no proper teachers in these schools and the primary objective of these schools were to teach Tamil children the basic Tamil alphabets and mathematics. No proper syllabi were followed.

Another kind of schools existing during this period was the schools run by the Christian Missionaries. There were separate Schools for Tamils, Chinese, English and Malay. This led to a sort of compartmentalization in education. Subsequently, this system did not give any opportunity for the children to expose themselves to other languages and cultures.

Post war education scenario

During this period there were educational innovations which resulted in different linguistic communities to integrate with one another both in the work places and also in the educational Institutions. This situation demanded that the Tamil speakers to become at least an incipient bilinguals by adding some basic Malay to their knowledge in Tamil language. Significant changes were made during this time in education by the then education Minister Tun Razak. He modified the curriculum which was originally designed by the colonial Government and introduced a broad based curriculum which viewed all the languages of the country equal. This paved way for a parallel growth of

all the languages spoken in the country. This system of education was aimed at to establish greater cooperation and much needed coordination among the communities come from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In order to achieve this Mr. Tun Razak created two types of schools namely,

The national schools and the national type schools

In the National schools, Malay serves as medium of instruction. It may be noted that in these schools if a non Malay student wants to learn through his/her mother tongue he/she can do so provided minimum 15 students should opt to learn through a particular language. This is to say that they would learn Tamil or Chinese together with English, the later being the compulsory subject. In the second category of schools called **the national type schools**, English is the medium of instruction and the Malay language a compulsory subject. Similar to the National schools the students can learn Tamil or Chinese if minimum 15 students sign for, it. In the secondary schools where students from different backgrounds mingled together, the medium of instruction is Malay with English as a compulsory subject. Tamil and Chinese are usually available to those who wish to upgrade their mother tongue skills. In the above system it may be noted that ample opportunities are given for the students to learn their mother tongue.

But it is interesting to note that normally Tamil students.

- Who go to National schools opt Tamil as medium and
- Those who go to National type schools opt English as medium

Overall the observation is that the Tamil students who have opted for National type schools are higher in number than who go to National schools. This option of the Tamil students make them more proficient in English and Malay. But Tamil being their mother tongue and also being used in various sociolinguistic domains and also being studied at different stages of Schools and College, one can find that the Tamil students use Tamil with various kinds of influences from other languages of the area. It is

also noted that they seem to be more comfortable in switching the Code to Malay or English. Following are some of the reasons for this situation.

- Not having confidence in retrieving proper vocabulary in Tamil.

- Frontage
- Interlocutor's attitude
- Political reasons
- Economic reason etc.

This phenomenon was observed by the researcher David (2000) who acknowledged in her article that there is a language shift among the Malaysian Tamils, which according to her may be the excessive code switching factors practiced by them in various domains. According to her, Malaysian Tamils, at the beginning stages, shift away from their ethnic language Tamil and seek other markers of ethnic identity. In her study, she has shown that Tamil was the dominant language for most of the older group respondents, whereas, for more than 25% of the younger subjects English, Tamil and Malay were preferred in their regular conversations. Both male and female respondents among younger folks stated that they use more English and Tamil but always have the tendency to use a mixture of all the three languages. But the present author's observation after analyzing the data and after having exclusive discussions with the respondents is that an exclusive variety of Malaysian Tamil is evolving but very slowly and it is going to get the root in the future Malaysian linguistic scenario.

Mostly, one could observe in Mayer Scotton's (2001) terminology, the phenomenon of classical code switching among the Tamils of Malaysia. Scotton refers to the concept of classical code switching which involves the existence of two basic hierarchies within the language frame, namely, the Matrix Language (ML) and Embedded language (EL). The matrix language is the participating language variety of the speaker that functions as the source for an abstract grammatical frame of constituents. The matrix language is, thus, the language of the speaker which controls the morpheme or word order of the frame, whereas, the embedded language is the guest language and only contributes material limited to permissible content morphemes within the larger constituent. In other words, in a classical code switching context the language which supplies the core morph-syntactic frame for the bilingual constituent is the matrix language and the other which supplies a limited number of content morphemes (words) is the embedded language.

While analyzing the data by keeping in mind the model propounded by Mayer Scotton we could observe that the Tamils often select Tamil as the matrix language and in the next sentence one can observe English or Malay being used as the embedded language. Similarly it is possible to observe these language codes alternate as embedded languages also in the same conversation. Having analyzed more than 1600 sentences in the natural speech we could identify the following **eight** different kinds of code switched utterances involving both matrix and embedded languages in the speech of Tamils. All the utterances are often observed in the natural speech of the Malaysian Tamils while they are interacting in different domains. Following are some of the sentences with different combinations of Matrix and embedded languages.

English matrix – initial Tamil embedding

- (1) **that means, they got married to discover** --la eennaa
ippoodaane **meet they do**

The above utterance is a single sentence which was initiated with English matrix.

that means they got married to discover

followed by Tamil embedded form which has a further mixing with English. As opposed to this above the following sentence

- (2) paNNiKKalaam **but each other prefer – lah to marry** ungaLa anda
payyanukkum teriyum. **Don't you think so?**

English matrix – mid/end Tamil embedding

‘**but each other prefer -lah to marry you** has the English as the matrix language that starts in the middle Further, in the next sentence again English comes as the matrix language, **Don’t you think to?** It may be noted that in most of the utterances where interrogative sentences come at the end, English is the language preferred by the interlocutors. In this sentence the interrogative form **Don’t you think so** is in English after Tamil embedded form,

‘ungaLa anda paiyanukkum terium’ **that boy also knows you**

English matrix – initial Tamil embedding mid/end

(3) **then suddenly** (vandu)

let us say (EML) maRunaaL (vandu) pariica kaNDippa iruKKum (TEL)

In the above sentence the gap filler **vandu** may be the indicator for the speaker to shift the code because these are the places where the speaker has difficulty in getting the needed vocabulary.

English matrix – mid/end English embedding

(4) **no-no we are learning you know** naaNga **language** inge Malaysiyale **while there** kaNDippaa paDikkuRoom

Since in the above sentence there are lot of irregular shifts the sentence has lost its grammaticality also. But, the context of the speech situation makes the interlocutors comprehend one another without difficulty. This seems to be an interesting code switch involving both English as a matrix as well as the embedded language. It may be noted that in the second half of the sentence Tamil could get the matrix language status because of the content word ‘kaNDippa paDikkuRoom’ whereas, English because the embedded language because of the presence of only insignificant lexical forms such as **language, while these**, etc.

Tamil matrix – initial English embedding

The fifth category of sentence has Tamil as the matrix language in the initial level and English comes as an embedded language followed by again Tamil core content.

(5) 1. appoo andamaadiri irundiccina child yaarenu – **lah**

1. love pannura then that **child** – kku –lah (vandu)

2. viiTtule SollamuDiyaade

In case the child falls in love with somebody he/she cannot inform the parents.

In the above sentence it may be seen that the core content of the concept in a longer sentence at the initial level is uttered in Tamil and embedded language English is used scantily.

Tamil matrix – mid/ end Tamil – embedding

The sixth category has Tamil matrix in the middle and at the later part of the sentence Tamil became the embedded language as seen below.

That programme romba nalla irukku **-lah** but ellaarum paakkamaaTTaanga
because adu romba **time consuming** adu oru kaaraNam

No doubt that programme is very good but many people may not see because it takes lot of time that may be one of the reasons.

Tamil matrix – initial English- embedding (lexical)

The seventh category has Tamil as matrix language at the initial level and English becomes an embedded language which is restricted to only lexical inclusion.

Tamil paDikkuRadukku oru **programme** irukku anda vayasaanavaru adu
very good ennu solRaaru
there is a programme to study Tamil. That old man too tells that it is good.

It is observed that such type of sentences with only lexical level mixing of English are mostly used by the Tamil speaking people from older generation.

Tamil Matrix – mid / end English embedding

The eighth category of Code mixed sentences has Tamil matrix with English as an embedded language. Unlike the category 7 type of code mixed sentences described above this category sentences have the embedding of English has crossed lexical level of embedding.

oh appa ungalukkum sondattukkuLLe

one bridegroom is there illayaa aana **for my age** yaarum ille

So even for you among the relatives bride groom is available. But in my case I do not have anybody who can be a good match for me.

Apart from the type of code switched sentences described above there are some particles and other components borrowed from Malay and incorporated in the Tamil spoken by the Malaysian Tamils. The internalization of linguistic components have been taken place in such a way that it has become a unique feature of Malay Tamil. For instance the use of Malay particle - **lah** can be a good example. Basically the particle – **lah** in Malay is an emphatic particle. But in Tamil it has acquired two additional functions, that is, it serves as a stylistic device or perform an interrogative function. This particle is suffixed in the following combinations of code mixed sentences

-**lah** is attached to an English word when English serves as matrix language.

-**lah** is attached to a Tamil word, when English serves an matrix language.

-**lah** is attached to an English word when Tamil serves as matrix language

-**lah** is attached to a Tamil word when Tamil serves as matrix language

English as matrix language –suffixing to English word

(a) –**lah** as an emphatic particle

- Some of us – **lah** but
- not all – **lah**

Unnecessarily - **lah**

Tamil is worse – **lah**

- (b) – **lah** used as a stylistic device
- the moral value is so good -**lah**
 - so just right – **lah**
- (c) – **lah** having an interrogative function
- true – **lah**
 - the thing is parents agree – **lah**
 -

English as matrix language – lah – suffixed to Tamil words.

- (a) –**lah** as an emphatic particle
- not for learners like we all** konjam high techaa irukku - **lah**
It is rather high tech (about a composition)
- (b) – lah having interrogative function

Tamil as matrix language – lah suffixed to English word

- (a) -**lah** as an emphatic particle
- nammannaa pudu pudu skills- **lah**
If we are (in that place) new skill
- (b) -**lah** as a stylistic device
- yeenna **parents full – lah** irukkapooRadilla
because parents are not going to be with us always
- (c) -**lah** having interrogative function
- ille **no love marriage – lah** paNNa kuuDaadu
No (do you mean) love marriage?
The general observation regarding the use of –lah

is that the users select this particles according to complete the encoding of an utterance. The use of – **lah** requires that the particle be attached to a content morphase like a **noun** or an **adjective**. In other words, it is a bound morpherse. On the other hand it has flexibility is as much as it is compatible with any context . Any of the three functions attributed to – **lah** can be realized according to context. This kind of context dependency on semantic realization of this alien particle to Tamil and the flexibility of Code switching routine are unique to the trilingual situation described in this paper.

Conclusion

When we looked into the total analysis of the data of Tamil spoken by Malaysian Tamils it is possible to come to a conclusion that intense contact in Malaysia between Tamil, Malay and English which come from entirely different language families there is a compulsion toward borrowing culture specific lexical forms and in some cases certain short syntactic structures. These borrowed forms often get internalized in the Tamil language and surfaced in several utterances. A more detailed study can certainly reveal about the formation of an unique variety of Tamil in Malaysia.

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