



PERGAMON

Language & Communication () -

 LANGUAGE
&
COMMUNICATION

www.elsevier.com/locate/langcom

Malaysian Tamils and Tamil linguistic culture

Harold F. Schiffman*

*South Asia Regional Studies, 805 Williams Hall #6305, University of Pennsylvania,
Philadelphia, PA 19104-6305, USA*

The purpose of this paper is to examine the position of Tamil as an ethnic minority and language in Malaysia, and to make some predictions about the prognosis for survival of Tamil in the twenty-first century. Tamils are the largest of the language groups that form the 'Indian' minority in Malaysia, which constitutes around 9% of the population, or 1.5 million. Within this number, people classified as Tamil-speaking are about 85%.¹ In a fairly recent compendium of articles on south Asian immigrants in southeast Asia (Sandhu and Mani, 1993) over half of the articles are devoted to the question of Indian communities in Malaysia—19 out of a total of 37, the rest being devoted to Brunei, Indonesia, Myanmar (Burma), the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand.

All of them see the situation of Indians in Malaysia as somehow problematical, whether it be the preferences given to *Bumiputra*² Malaysians over immigrant Indians, the socio-economic conditions affecting plantation workers or the educational opportunities provided their children. I will try in this paper to place the issue of Tamil language and language maintenance within the larger scheme of the future of the Indian community in Malaysia, and see whether we can predict a prognosis for the survival of Tamil, and indeed the survival of a Tamil-speaking minority, in Malaysia in the twenty-first century.³ In fact the future of Indians in Singapore may be more secure than the languages spoken by them; what would

* Tel.: +1-215-898-5825; fax: +1-215-573-2139.

E-mail address: haroldfs@ccat.sas.upenn.edu (H.F. Schiffman).

¹ Later I will deal with the subject of the increasing number of Tamils who are not actually Tamil speakers.

² The term *Bumiputra* 'sons of the soil' is used in Malaysia for all Malay speakers and other indigenous peoples who are of the Malay 'race' but not necessarily mother-tongue speakers of Malay. Chinese, Indians, and others (*lain-lain*) are by definition non-*Bumiputra*.

³ Contrast this with the articles on Singapore, where the future of Indians in Singapore is described as 'not without promise'. (Sandhu, 1993, p. 787, op. cit.)

1 happen if all Singapore Indians were to become English speakers, and how this
2 would fit the wishes of the Chinese majority is another question.⁴ In a sense, this
3 paper will somewhat resemble a book review of that portion of the Sandhu and Mani
4 volume devoted to Malaysia, for it provides the most up-to-date research on the general
5 problems facing Tamils (and other Indian immigrant communities) in Malaysia. What
6 it does *not* do is to discuss in very great detail the fate of the Tamil language in
7 Malaysia, and here is where I must fill in with my own very inadequate observations.⁵

8 Language policy in Malaysia is a topic that cannot be openly discussed without
9 fear of being charged under the Sedition Act of 1948.⁶ It is only one of those taboo
10 issues (the place of Islam, the special status of Malays) that may not be discussed in
11 Malaysia, for fear of disturbing certain ethnic sensibilities. Therefore the only writ-
12 ing one finds on the topic of language policy are filiopietistic articles extolling the
13 virtue of the system, its natural fairness, its commitment to building up the national
14 culture, and so forth. It can be described, but it cannot be criticized, so criticism of it
15 will only be made outside the country.

16 Internal critics must therefore tread lightly. The government of Malaysia has itself
17 made some moves that violated, in some people's views, its own policy toward
18 Bahasa Malaysia. Such was the proposal, made early in 1994, to allow some science
19 teaching to go on in English, because of the generally low level of knowledge of
20 English among Malaysians (code for: *among Malays*) which would jeopardize
21 Malaysia's ability to modernize and become an industrialized nation any time soon.
22 The Prime Minister himself defended this proposal, but he had to immediately con-
23 tend with massive criticism from the association of Malay teachers, who vowed to
24 "not give an inch" to such a "drastic" change in the language policy.

25 That this should cause such a furor must be viewed in terms of the issues it cov-
26 ertly raises. The problem is not that there is an inadequate knowledge of English
27 among Malaysian citizens, such that would jeopardize Malaysia's ability to partici-
28 pate in scientific developments. That is, though Malaysians of Indian and Chinese
29 background do quite well in English, and often must seek higher education abroad
30 (though English medium) because they are denied access to Malaysian institutions
31 of higher learning due to the ethnic quotas, there are insufficient numbers of Malays
32 or *Bumiputras* whose knowledge of English is adequate. Thus if English-knowing
33 non-*Bumiputras* are allowed to dominate the scientific fields, even if it would help
34 Malaysia to modernize, this will not help the Malays, so it cannot be allowed to
35 happen. What apparently would be the ideal solution would be a policy to help

36
37 ⁴ I have examined the contrast between Malaysia's language policy and that of Singapore as they affect
38 the Tamil language in Schiffman (1995).

39 ⁵ When I received the request to appear on the panel for which this paper was originally written, I had
40 hopes to be doing research on the question by means of a Fulbright grant in Malaysia and Singapore; the
41 research clearance for Malaysia came too late for me to do any but the most perfunctory kind of research
42 into this issue, but many of the observations I made in Singapore are pertinent, though one must be
43 careful to not overgeneralize.

44 ⁶ The policy, as stated in the Constitution (Amendment) Act, 1971, is that the status of Malay as offi-
45 cial and other languages as tolerated, "may no longer be questioned, it being considered that such a sen-
46 sitive issue should for ever be removed from the arena of public discussion." (Suffian bin Hashim, 1976, p.
47 324).

1 Malays learn enough English to study science, but not permit this for non-*Bumiputras*.
2 Such a policy would be too blatantly unfair, and therefore impossible to
3 implement and defend, so it cannot be formulated as such.

4 My goal, as originally stated for this paper, was to establish how the Tamils of
5 Malaysia were maintaining their language in the face of a national language policy
6 that emphasizes integration through Bahasa Malaysia and Islam. Since the Tamils
7 are known for their intense language loyalty in India and Sri Lanka, I was expecting
8 to find that their love of the language and intense language maintenance efforts,
9 manifested in India and Sri Lanka with strong opposition to Hindi, Sanskrit and
10 English⁷ would result in effective language maintenance within the Malaysian con-
11 text. The approach taken by the Tamils is known as corpus planning or corpus
12 treatment by sociologists of language; it is perceived by Tamils to be the most
13 important kind of language maintenance, but in this day and age it may in fact have
14 little relevance in contexts such as Malaysia and Singapore.

15 Language maintenance in Tamilnadu, and in contested Sri Lanka, also involves
16 status management,⁸ and various measures have been undertaken to restrict the
17 domains of Hindi, Sanskrit and English (in Tamilnadu, and Sinhala (in Sri Lanka)
18 so that Tamil can recapture the domains of elementary and secondary education, the
19 media, and so forth. This has been more successful in terms of keeping back Hindi and
20 Sanskrit, but in the case of Sinhala, of course, the situation in Sri Lanka has turned
21 into a civil war. In the case of English, which is perceived in some ways as a buffer
22 against Hindi (and Sinhala) efforts are ambivalent, and many of those who decry *angi-*
23 *lak kalappu* use English and even send their children to English-medium schools. The
24 result is that English is still the main language of higher education in Tamilnadu; in
25 Sri Lanka the battle to replace English with Sinhala, even in higher education, has been
26 much more intense. In India, of course, the central government has no control over
27 local educational policies, so no attempt to impose Hindi as a medium of instruction in
28 Tamilnadu universities and colleges has ever been, or will ever be, attempted.

29 In Malaysia (and in Singapore) language policy is not set by the Tamils, and
30 Tamils are therefore in the position that Telugu speakers or Kannada speakers are
31 in Tamilnadu: they are a tiny minority, have no say in overall policy formulation,
32 and are suffered to maintain their languages only for elementary education, if there.⁹
33

34 ⁷ The current antipathy is strongest against Hindi and is known as Hindi *etirppu*; the opposition to
35 Sanskrit was stronger several decades ago, and the opposition to English is mainly to English loan words
36 being borrowed into Tamil (*angilak kalappu*), not to English as an instrument or as a language per se. The
37 opposition to Sanskrit has had the effect of ridding the written language of almost all traces of loan words
38 from that language; in the spoken language, where no overt rules are prescribed, loan words from Hindi,
39 Sanskrit, English, Portuguese and other languages abound.

39 ⁸ I prefer the terms 'corpus management' and 'status management' to 'planning' or 'treatment'.

40 ⁹ One of the great deficiencies of Indian language policy is the very weak provisions for language
41 groups who live in territories where they are in the minority. It is fine to be a Telugu speaker in Andhra
42 Pradesh; it is not so fine to be one in Kerala, Karnataka or Tamilnadu, and the constitutional provisions
43 to protect such groups are noticeably without teeth. Each linguistic state, having driven out the perceived
44 oppressor and established its own linguistic regime, turns out to be an even more ferocious oppressor of
45 its own linguistic minority groups. The only exception to this comes through bilateral agreements between
46 various linguistic states, but the status of even smaller linguistic groups is totally unprotected.

1 My goal, then, is to show how Tamil ideas about language and language main-
2 tenance, which I hold are rooted in their notions of *linguistic culture*, when con-
3 fronted with Malaysian policy (and linguistic culture) on language will be in a state
4 of conflict, which in the end works to the detriment of Tamil language maintenance
5 in Malaysia. I have defined linguistic culture (Schiffman, 1996) as the sum totality of
6 ideas, values, beliefs, attitudes, prejudices, myths, religious strictures, and all the
7 other cultural ideas that speakers bring to their dealings with language from their
8 culture. Linguistic culture also is concerned with the transmission and codification
9 of language and has bearing also on the culture's notions of the value of literacy and
10 the sanctity of texts. Language policy, I maintain, is primarily a social construct, and
11 as such rests primarily on these other conceptual elements—the belief systems, atti-
12 tudes, myths, the whole complex that we are referring to as linguistic culture.

15 1. Educational policy

17 A word of background is in order here on what languages may be used in educa-
18 tion in Malaysia. In “National Schools” Malay is the medium of elementary educa-
19 tion; Tamil and/or Chinese may be taught if there are 15 students who petition for it.
20 Otherwise, Tamil and Chinese medium “National-type” Schools may exist, and they
21 receive varying degrees of government support; Chinese schools tend to reject total
22 subvention, in order to maintain more control. At the secondary level, Malay med-
23 ium is the only publicly supported schooling available. Privately supported Chinese
24 schools do exist, but there are none for Tamil, since the Tamil community cannot afford
25 the expense that such a system would entail. Again, at the secondary level, Tamil and
26 Chinese may be taught as a subject if 15 students request it. The Malaysian con-
27 stitution provides guarantees for the use of these languages in the above “unofficial
28 contexts”, i.e. they are officially tolerated (also some use in broadcasting, the
29 Department of Indian Studies at the U Malaya, and support for teacher training)
30 but this official tolerance is thought of as unofficial since only Malay may be official.

31 The German sociologist of language Heinz Kloss provides a list of language-
32 maintenance strategies that enhance or hinder language maintenance by minority
33 groups in immigrant societies like the United States (Kloss 1966). One of the factors
34 that enhances language maintenance is “pre-immigration experience with language
35 maintenance”, particularly in dealing with linguistic suppression in the form of
36 underground resistance to education in another language medium, self-help lan-
37 guage schools, etc. Groups that were already ready to cope with language main-
38 tenance in their home country because of suppression there, such as the Poles under
39 Czarist Russian rule, were more able to “hit the ground running”, as it were, per-
40 haps because the notions that widespread community involvement was important,
41 everyone had to participate in order to make it work, everyone had to be eternally
42 vigilant, etc., were accepted.

43 Tamils who came to Malaysia and other parts of southeast Asia brought strategies
44 with them that were developed in their home country, and at first these strategies
45 seemed to work. Essentially these strategies were:

- 1 ● All schooling through elementary levels should be in Tamil only.
- 2 ● The kind of Tamil needed was whatever was being developed in India and no
- 3 adaptations or compromises to local conditions were necessary, or even per-
- 4 missible.
- 5 ● English could be admitted at the higher levels and would in fact be quite
- 6 useful in the new environment.
- 7 ● Any other local languages that were useful or necessary (e.g. Malay) could
- 8 also be acquired for auxiliary use, but should not be given first or even sec-
- 9 ond priority.

10
11 In the plantation economy of nineteenth century Malaya and the Straits Settle-
12 ments, these strategies worked quite well. Most Tamils of the period came with the
13 intention of returning to India at some point; British education favored Malay only,
14 and no schools in other languages were supported by the colonial power. Tamils of
15 the more educated classes (actually many were from Sri Lanka) worked as clerks
16 and supervisors and their knowledge of English was an advantage to them in this
17 situation, since neither the Malays nor Chinese seemed to want to require English
18 education. Plantation Tamils did learn some Malay, enough to get around and do
19 their work, but in few cases if any did it actually supplant Tamil.¹⁰ A great cultural
20 barrier for most Tamils, though not all, was Islam, which served to isolate and
21 contain them. Again a strategy brought from India (avoid contact with Muslims and
22 Islam) helped maintain the linguistic isolation. Knowledge of Tamil was necessary
23 to be a good Hindu; it would not constitute a path to Islam. The few Tamil Muslims
24 that came at this period were indeed in a different kind of situation, and assimilation
25 through intermarriage of Indian Muslims and Malays did occur, but mostly with
26 North Indian Muslims and Malays, not Tamils (later this would change). For better
27 or worse, Tamil Muslims tended to remain solidary with Tamil Hindus and Chris-
28 tians, and cooperated with them in language maintenance.

29 Though Tamils seemed to think that the strategies delineated above would serve
30 them well in Malaya, these strategies have become increasingly problematical after
31 independence and under the threat of Malaysia's very stringent language policy. I
32 hypothesize that the strategies brought from India have not been adapted, in fact
33 may not be adaptable, to the current environment, and are not serving the cause of
34 Tamil language maintenance.

35 But this is not the whole story. Another all-pervasive and inescapable fact about
36 Indians in Southeast Asia, and especially in Malaya, is the fragmentary and dis-
37 united nature of the community. This is manifested in different ways:

- 38 ● Indians come from a number of different parts of the subcontinent, and do
- 39 not all speak the same language.
- 40 ● Indians are settled in many different localities, often separated from and in
- 41 isolation from others of their own kind.

42
43
44 ¹⁰ Only the very anciently settled and assimilated Chitty Tamil community in Melaka had become
45 Malay speakers; more recently arrived Tamils did not.

- Within any given language group, there are the usual splits involving caste, religion, and class. Even if all Tamils were concentrated in one area, there would be differences that are perceived as unbridgeable. The gulf between Sri Lanka Tamils (Rajakrishnan, 1993), who acted as overseers and clerks, and laborer Tamils (from India) was vast.

This fragmentation and segmentation has remained until the present time, and underlies many of the current problems facing the Indian community in Malaysia. As far as Tamils are concerned, it works against language maintenance in a number of important ways, and combined with the inadequate and inappropriate language maintenance strategies brought from India, is now taking its toll on the Tamil language.

2. Language shift

If language maintenance does not occur, there can be several results. One is language death; speakers become bilingual, younger speakers become dominant in another language, and the language is said to die. The speakers or the community does not die, of course, they just become a subset of speakers of another language. The end result is language shift for the population, and if the language isn't spoken elsewhere, it dies. In the case of Tamil in Malaysia, we do not speak of death because Tamil continues to live on in Tamilnadu, but the effect is the same. For the speakers who go to their death as Tamils still, it is a kind of death to see their children shift to another language.

In Malaysia, if Tamils shift languages, there are two possible outcomes. One is that they will become Malay speakers; the other is to become English speakers. (Chinese is not a practical outcome.) In fact, few Tamils are becoming Malay speakers, except for individual Tamil Muslims who intermarry with Malays and whose offspring grow up speaking Malay. The more general outcome is that many Tamils, especially well-educated Tamils, are becoming English speakers. Less-educated Tamils, however, especially those still living in plantation communities, continue to speak Tamil, and the prognosis for their language maintenance is for the time being favorable.

There are a number of reasons why English-educated Tamils are in fact switching to English as a dominant language, and there is no one reason that is more important than others. There is a tendency in the Tamil community to lay the blame for this shift at someone else's door, but neither the government's language policy, nor the Tamil community itself, nor the difficulty of maintaining a Tamil-maintenance infrastructure, nor any other reason is sufficient alone. In fact Tamil is doing fine when the conditions that enhance language maintenance pertain, and these are precisely those enumerated by Kloss for German immigrants in the USA:¹¹

¹¹ Note that Kloss's 15 factors contain six positive factors, and nine ambivalent factors; in the current case, factor 1 is unambiguously positive, while 2-4 later are ambivalent, i.e. they can work either way. In the Malaysian case, combined with factor 1, they are positive in terms of maintenance.

- 1 ● Isolation and linguistic islands:
- 2 ● Low educational background and aspirations
- 3 ● Small size
- 4 ● Great cultural difference (including religion) between group and majority.

5
6 The plantation economy, where most of the work in rubber and palm oil tapping
7 is performed by Tamil and other Indian workers, provides a perfect cocoon in which
8 Tamil can be maintained. Tamil is admissible as a medium of education for ele-
9 mentary education in Malaysia,¹² and this is provided to the children of the com-
10 munities. Because of the segmented nature of Indian society and its perpetuation in
11 emigration, the kind of workers¹³ who came to do this kind of work tend to have not
12 much cultural capital, education, and/or aspirations for anything more. Unlike the
13 educated (Sri Lanka) Tamils who worked as clerks and teachers, knew English, and
14 rose to become a professional urbanized elite, these Tamils never had educational
15 opportunities, and despite being able theoretically to go on to secondary education and
16 higher education, do not aspire to do so. Their elementary education in Tamil suffices
17 them, and since these small pockets of Tamil speakers have been (until recently)
18 always located in isolated rural areas, are perceived as no threat to Malaysian society,
19 unlike the other ethnic minority, which has congregated in urban areas. Given the reli-
20 gious differences (Hinduism vs. Islam), plantation Tamils other than Muslim Tamils
21 are unlikely to ever “merge” with Malay society, either linguistically or culturally. In
22 the article by Marimuttu (1993), the claim is made that the educational system provided
23 to the plantation Tamils does not raise them out of the cultural dead-end they are stuck
24 in, and is not designed to do so. This system, according to Marimuttu, preserves and
25 perpetuates the plantation system in a kind of neocolonial atmosphere. As such we
26 can imagine that the Tamil language will be maintained in this environment for the
27 foreseeable future; as long as their is rubber tapping and palm-oil cultivation, the same
28 population is bound to continue to do that work, since Malays do not perform this
29 work, and Chinese are primarily urbanized and in business.¹⁴ The situation of the
30 urbanized educated Tamil, however, is a different one. Here we see in operation a
31 number of other factors that work against language maintenance. One is the pervasive

32 ¹² Malay is the medium of “National Schools” and Chinese and Tamil are tolerated as the medium of
33 “National-type Schools”, but English is not tolerated for state-supported education. Private schools using
34 English do exist, and private Chinese medium secondary-schools also exist, but they do not receive any
35 state support.

36 ¹³ This point may not be emphasized too strongly: Indian plantation workers, mainly Tamils, came
37 from the most destitute, impoverished and lowest-caste, including what used to be called *untouchable*,
38 backgrounds. They were already socialized to be docile, servile and unquestioning of authority, and the
39 colonial plantation capitalized on these attitudes and helped to perpetuate them. In reports from Colonial
40 Malaya, Indian workers were praised again and again for their docility and willingness to put up with the
41 most abject conditions, compared with the Chinese, who were “rebellious, entrepreneurial, and unco-
42 operative” with the plantation system.

42 ¹⁴ There is some movement out of the plantation economy into urban areas, but neither the schools nor
43 the “profession” of rubber-tapping provide people with marketable skills in the city. Those who do leave
44 are now being replaced by Bangladeshi and Indonesian contract workers to some extent. Another reason
45 for little social movement is that there has been no practical way to mechanize tapping, so there is no way
to increase productivity and wage levels; individual workers must still approach the trees on and tap them.

1 segmented character of Indian culture, and Indian communities abroad. One can dis-
 2 cern linguistic differences, caste differences, and differences of village and even
 3 “national” origin, i.e. whether Tamils came from India or Sri Lanka. Tamils (and other
 4 Indians) in the urban environment are perhaps even more segmented than are rural
 5 tapper communities, so the urge to work together on language maintenance is weak.
 6 Just like Germans of different backgrounds in the nineteenth century USA, Tamils of
 7 various backgrounds do not see themselves as having any interests in common with
 8 other Tamils, or at least not enough to lay aside these differences until it is too late.

9 Secondly, the aforementioned language maintenance strategies brought from
 10 India turn out, in post-colonial Malaysia, to be counterproductive. An emphasis on
 11 keeping Tamil pure of Hindi, Sanskrit and English influences is rather futile when
 12 the language of threat is Malay. But it is the emphasis on corpus work rather than
 13 status concerns that is counterproductive. It is not the corpus of Malay (or Hindi, or
 14 Sanskrit or English) that is the problem here, it is the *status* of Malay within the
 15 national language policy that is a problem, but the other issue is that the status of
 16 English in this equation is conflicted.

17 That is, this urban group had an original advantage in colonial Malaya because of
 18 their knowledge of English, and used that advantage, and still uses it, despite obsta-
 19 cles from the official policy, for their own benefit. But in another sense, the status of
 20 English is a danger, since this group of Tamils, and indeed Tamils everywhere, have
 21 not treated the status of English as problematical.¹⁵ They have embraced English,
 22 and continue to embrace it, as a barrier or buffer against Hindi, Sinhala, and Malay.
 23 The problem now is that this group has relaxed its guard against English, and too
 24 much knowledge of English now means that this group now knows too little Tamil,
 25 and is in fact not committed enough to Tamil. In fact, many of my informants,
 26 though committed to Tamil, even professionally (University teaching, Ministry of
 27 Education) declared that they would not put their children in Tamil schools because
 28 Tamil schools are a dead-end, both professionally and socially.

31 3. A new factor: urban squatter settlements

32
 33 The previously described situation, in which Tamil communities either consisted
 34 of rural estate workers or urbanized middle-class Tamils is now complicated by a
 35 third factor, the urban squatter settlement populated by Tamils who have left the
 36 plantations and are now working in various low-paying jobs in urban areas such as
 37 Kuala Lumpur, Johore Baru, and Penang. They congregate in ‘squatter settlements’
 38 (Rajoo, 1993) and send their children to Tamil medium schools.¹⁶ For whatever
 39

40 ¹⁵ They object to mixing Tamil and English, *angilak kalappu*, but they do not object to anyone *knowing*
 41 English.

42 ¹⁶ In at least one case I know of, the urban area has come to the plantation—the Kuala Lumpur mega-
 43 lopolis has sprawled out into Selangor State to engulf former plantation land, which has been converted into
 44 luxury housing, but the Tamil school and a squatter zone continue to exist, cheek by jowl with the fancy
 45 housing. Such schools persist in their substandard conditions, despite their status as “National-type schools,
 which should receive state subsidies, but are provided with very little other than teachers’ salaries.

1 reasons these communities still choose Tamil medium, the general overall economic
2 and cultural destitution of these groups means that Tamil medium prepares them for
3 nothing but the substandard conditions they have always been subjected to, i.e. it
4 replicates the social inequality: they work at part-time jobs, in factories at the lowest
5 level, as messengers and sweepers, and have the highest rate of single-parent families,
6 alcoholism, crime, prostitution and all the other social evils of the modern urban
7 underclass. One Tamil stated to me that it appeared that the Tamils are and will
8 always be the *lumpenproletariat* of Malaysia; he saw no way for these Tamils to
9 break out of this cycle and move up the socio-economic ladder. Those that manage
10 to do so, by attendance at National Schools, will leave the Tamil language behind.
11 In his view, Tamil will only survive in Malaysia if Tamils remain poor and at the
12 lowest level of society. We therefore now have two language strategies employed by
13 the Tamil “community” in Malaysia. One continues to prefer Tamil schooling; the
14 other abjures Tamil schooling and is economically motivated to prefer Malay and
15 English; Tamil may remain as a home language, but in many cases not even this
16 happens. This is not to point the finger; this strategy, of embracing English to the
17 detriment of Tamil, is in fact a survival mechanism engendered by the national language
18 policy. Several elements of that policy conspire to cause this:

- 19
- 20 ● Admission to higher education is controlled by ethnic quotas, and seats are
21 reserved on an ethnic basis. If certain ethnic groups do not use their seats,
22 they are not relinquished to another group, they are simply not filled. The
23 group that is not filling its quota is the *Bumiputra* group. Indians and Chinese
24 who would otherwise be qualified for these seats must go abroad for higher
25 education.¹⁷
- 26 ● Since it cannot be determined in advance who will be admitted and who will
27 not, students must plan for the eventuality of expatriation in order to get
28 higher education. Planning for expatriation means planning for high English
29 proficiency.
- 30 ● Students who go abroad for education often do not return, but obtain jobs
31 elsewhere. The cost of this ‘brain drain’ for Malaysia is immense, since,
32 whatever else anyone cares about who gets educated, a tremendous amount
33 of foreign exchange is leaving the country to finance this drain, and if the
34 students do not return (and why indeed should they?) the cost of their education
35 is lost to Malaysia.
- 36 ● Students who otherwise might want to return to Malaysia to work have other
37 barriers to face. One is quotas (‘glass ceilings’?) for certain jobs; another is
38 barriers to degree-holders from certain countries. The general atmosphere is
39 one of not being wanted. In face of this, the strategy of planned expatriation
40 via English is not hard to understand.

41

42 ¹⁷ Consider a comparison with a transportation model: imagine an airline that assigned seats on its
43 flights by ethnic quota; if certain seats are not filled because not enough members of a certain ethnic group
44 made reservations, the flight leaves with empty seats, and members of other ethnicities are obliged to
45 travel by some other mode of transportation, or wait for the next flight.

- This strategy of course colludes with other strategies mentioned above, such as the predilection of (educated) Tamils to learn English, the strategy of maintaining a puristic Tamil that has no economic value, and is therefore perceived as useless, and the strategy of non-cooperation with other similar groups.

4. Summary and conclusions

The Tamil language has already survived in Malaysia into the twenty-first century, but perhaps will only continue to do so in isolated rural pockets, or as the language of a marginalized urban underclass. When all is said and done, it is less the overt language policy (as enshrined in the Malaysian constitution) that determines this outcome than the socio-economic history and present conditions of the Tamil community in Malaysia. Tamil has no economic value in Malaysia, and is therefore maintained by the socio-economically destitute as a last vestige of primordial ethnicity. Since even in the developed western countries (e.g. the USA) a similarly destitute urban underclass persists, and continues to maintain its own variety of English despite teachers' attempts to extirpate it, the prognosis for Tamil is unlikely to be any different in Malaysia.

Acknowledgements

The research performed herein was supported in part by a grant from the Fulbright Foundation for work in Singapore, 1993–1994.

References

- Kloss, H., 1966. German–American language maintenance efforts. In: Fishman, J. (Ed.), *Language Loyalty in the United States*. Mouton, The Hague.
- Marimuttu, T., 1993. The plantation school as an agent of social reproduction. In: Sandhu, K.S., Mani, A. (Eds.), *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia*. Times Academic Press and Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, pp. 465–483.
- Rajakrishnan, R., 1993. Social change and group identity among the Sri Lankan Tamils. In: Sandhu, K.S., Mani, A. (Eds.), *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia*. Times Academic Press and Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, pp. 541–557.
- Rajoo, R., 1993. Indian squatter settlers: Indian rural–urban migration in west Malaysia. In: Sandhu, K.S., Mani, A. (Eds.), *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia*. Times Academic Press and Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, pp. 484–503.
- Sandhu, K.S., 1993. Indian immigration and settlement in Singapore. In: Sandhu, K.S., Mani, A. (Eds.), *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia*. Times Academic Press and Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, pp. 774–787.
- Sandhu, K.S., Mani, A. (Eds.), 1993. *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia*. Times Academic Press and Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore.
- Schiffman, H.F., 1995. Language shift in the Tamil communities of Malaysia and Singapore: the paradox

1 of egalitarian language policy. In: Bills, G. (Ed.), Southwest Journal of Linguistics, Special Issue on
2 Language Loss and Public Policy, I (Vol. 14). pp. 151–165.

3 Schiffman, H.F., 1996. Linguistic Culture and Language Policy. Routledge, New York and London.

4 Suffian bin Hashim, T.M., 1976. An Introduction to the Constitution of Malaysia. Ibrahim bin Johari,
5 Government Printer, Kuala Lumpur.

8 Glossary

10 *Angilak kalappu*: The term used in Tamil for heavy use of borrowed English voca-
11 bulary; seen as a corruption of the language that must be avoided.

12 *Bahasa Malaysia*: The national language of Malaysia, based originally on dialects of
13 Malay spoken both in the Malay peninsula and in parts of Indonesia. Mutually
14 intelligible with *Bahasa Indonesia*, also based on spoken Malay, but which is
15 more strongly influenced by Javanese. Grammar and orthography of the two
16 have been regularized by agreement between the two governments, but lexical
17 differences remain.

18 *Bumiputra*: The term *bumiputra* ‘sons of the soil’ is used in Malaysia for all Malay
19 speakers and other indigenous peoples, who are of the Malay ‘race’ but not
20 necessarily mother-tongue speakers of Malay. Chinese, Indians, and others
21 (*lain-lain*) are by definition non-*Bumiputra*. Tamilnadu: The state in southeast
22 India, formerly known as Madras State, where Tamil is the official language.