

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 9 : 6 June 2009

ISSN 1930-2940

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A Review of

***Language Choices and Discourse of Malaysian Families:
Case Studies of Families in Kuala Lumpur,***

edited by Maya Khemlani David

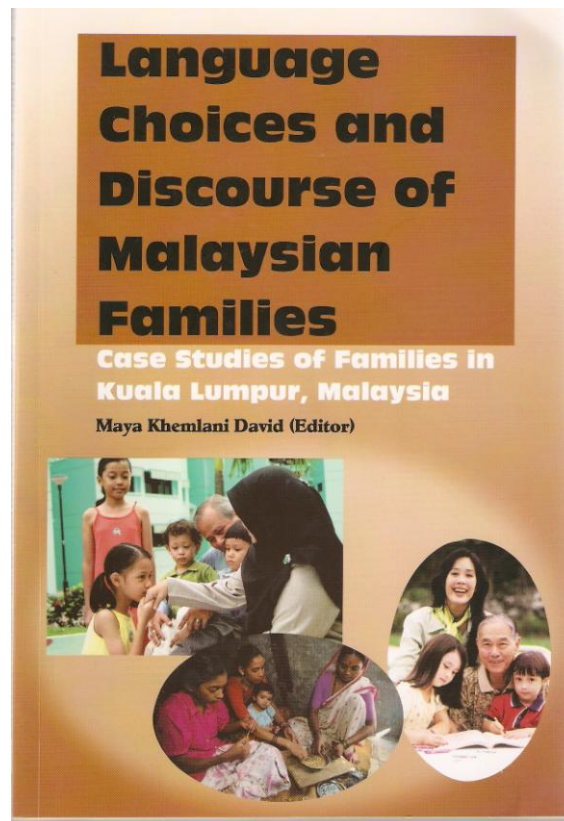
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Maya Khemlani David, ed. *Language Choices and Discourse of Malaysian Families: Case Studies of Families in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*. SIRD, Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia, 2006.



Structure of This Book

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D. and Sam Mohanlal, Ph.D.

Review of *Language Choices and Discourse of Malaysian Families: Case Studies of Families in Kuala Lumpur*, edited by Maya Khemlani David

This book is divided into two parts. The first part deals with language choices and the second part deals with discourse norms in Malaysian homes. In total, there are nine chapters, besides a very interesting preface-cum-survey on the themes dealt with by the editor Maya Khemlani David.

Each of these chapters is written by a different scholar, clearly well versed in the subject dealt with by them. There is also a very encouraging Foreword by Dr. Azirah Hashim, Dean of the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, herself a leading scholar in Malay literature and linguistics.

A Fascinating Book from a Pluralistic Nation

This is a fascinating book, which focuses on family and communication in a pluralistic nation with a dominant Muslim majority. Importance of the study of family communication processes cannot be exaggerated in any society. Language choices adopted by the members of a family help unite the family and give it a distinct identity even as it helps the family to integrate itself into the mainstream of the larger community. Discourse norms within the family establish spheres of influence, ranking, and decision-making processes.

Islam has specific code of requirements relating to family issues, including marriage, child rearing, communication among the members of a family and across families. While such written codes are not consciously pursued in the Hindu and Chinese societies, these societies have longstanding traditions that command obedience to the conventions and traditional wisdom. Christianity offers grace as an important basis on which all relations between members of a household and members across households are expected to be followed, patterned after the Creator's abiding grace for all His creation.

Immense Possibilities for Practical Applications

Study of language choices in these communities helps also business corporations, especially those who are involved in the production and distribution of consumer products. Governmental and non-governmental agencies also benefit by such empirical studies in developing their policies and programs. For example, in India, the utter failure of the sterilization part of the family planning programmes in the early period of its implementation was largely due to the failure of these programs to gauge adequately the validity of their suggestions for Hindu and Muslim families.

Visual designs for a product to be launched in any market will benefit by an understanding of the family communication issues. The way a product is described and presented following family

norms of choices will help easy acceptance of the product in the market. As age and educational level of targeted consumers become very important for expanding the consumer market, understanding the communication processes in various groups is very helpful for the success of any product. Often, marketing agencies may go by their so-called intuitive feelings which may not be necessarily identical to the current market of consumers. Descriptive profiles of families and networks of communications always help in every kind of planning.

In other words, books such as the one under review have many practical applications. Both the authors and the editor have done a very competent work through their description and explanation of the processes involved. They build up a picture of the home domain in a number of important communities in multilingual, multiethnic and multireligious Malaysian society so that a comprehensive picture of the public domain may be drawn for application purposes.

Chapters of This Book

Here below is the list of chapters of the book:

Part I

1. Language choices in Sindhi families
2. Cultural norms that govern mother-daughter-in-law interactions among Malaysian Iyer women.
3. Sex and other taboo topics: Language shift in group interactions among older Malaysian Bengali women.
4. Malaysian English as a first language.
5. Signs of becoming bilingual: A study of a Malaysian child under two.

Part II

6. True or dare? Concretizing family relationships: A case study of an urban Tamil-Telugu family.
7. Getting *Tok* to understand: Talk management strategies in conversations troubled by hearing impairment.
8. Mother and daughter talk: Closeness, conflict and control.

9. Family discourse and the construction of the gendered self and others.

Author and subject indices follow the chapters.

Language Choices in Small Ethnic Immigrant Communities

Language choice in the small minority Sindhi group is the focus of the study by the eminent scholar and teacher of English and linguistics – Maya Khemlani David. She brings out the changing patterns of language use among the Sindhi people of Malaysia. Sindhi is a small (less than 800 people) and largely prosperous community from Sind in Pakistan. It is also primarily a Hindu community.

Sindhi is the dominant language of the Sind Province in Pakistan. Sindhis constitute a widely dispersed ethnic and linguistic group throughout India. Sindhis settled in various metropolitan cities of India even before the Partition of India. Hindu Sindhis, who were forced to leave from their homeland in Sind in present Pakistan after the Partition of India, chose to settle in urban areas and have done well culturally, socially and economically in India. Even though Sindhi is not a dominant regional language of India, it was included in the original short list of languages in the Constitution of India on par with Bengali, Telugu, Tamil, etc.

There had been controversies even in the recent past as to the script Sindhis should adopt writing Sindhi: Perso-Arabic (Urdu format) or Devanagari.

As the Sindhi community in India is largely Hindu and as the community used Hindi as a common language of communication among the traders in metropolitan areas, growing numbers use only the Devanagari script, whereas in Pakistan Perso-Arabic script is used. (For some articles relating to Sindhi and Sind, you may like to check these <http://www.languageinindia.com/sep2004/sindhiethnicslur1.html>; <http://www.languageinindia.com/april2005/languagenewsapril2005-1.html>; <http://www.languageinindia.com/june2005/sindhysupremecourt1.html>; <http://www.languageinindia.com/may2005/motilalnehrureport1.html>)

One is surprised to read that the trends in the Malaysian Sindhi community as to their language choice closely resemble the trend among the Sindhis in India: “English appears dominant in the Malaysian Sindhi life because of the association of the language to economic and social mobility” (p. x).

Moreover, this trend is not unique to the Sindhi community in India. It is a general trend among the educated classes in India, and this shows that the adoption of English in a community for their transactions in many situations does not necessarily depend on the small size of an ethnic community.

Mother-in-Law and Daughter-in-Law Relations

In all Indian households in India, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relations reflect power struggle among women within the family. Mothers-in-law are not mothers, and this is reflected in language use, stories and myths relating to these relationships. Rarely a mother-in-law is portrayed as someone who endears herself to the daughter-in-law and vice versa. Men usually avoid getting involved in this tussle, but the tussle is actually for the power over the men of the household in some sense.

Lokasundari Vijaya Sankar's chapter "Cultural norms that govern mother-daughter-in-law interactions among Malaysian Iyer women" identifies three processes that govern the discourse for this set:

1. Respect for elders.
2. Avoidance of open confrontation during conversations
3. Established terms of address.

There are several postural and language conventions/rituals that should and do reveal the respect that a daughter-in-law has for her mother-in-law.

Lokasundari Vijaya Sankar identifies that "a roundabout manner of showing that they (d-i-l) knew what they were talking about was employed rather than telling the m-i-l directly that they were wrong or that they had got their facts mixed up. When arguing a point with someone, who is much older, open confrontation is avoided as a face-saving device for the elder ..." (p. 37).

This is an interesting article with examples from day-to-day language. However, "downgrading" of the status and influence of mother-in-law and vice versa is not an uncommon practice in private conversations when one is provoked. Strategies used for such downgrading discourses need to be explored, along with how both respect and "disrespect" get reflected when participants choose to speak in another language such as English.

Taboo Topics

Dipika Mukherjee's chapter "Sex and other taboo topics: Language shift in group interactions among older Malaysian Bengali women" finds that language choice of Bengali women greater than 45 years old is "for long stretches, ... unadulterated Bengali" (p. 47). This certainly contrasts with the current trend in West Bengal, where more than 15 percent of speech is mixed with English words (p. 46). As most of these women come from Bangladesh or East Bengal they speak a variety called "Bengal", a term that encourages solidarity among the Bengalis of Malaysia.

A very interesting point is that “the women accommodate to younger members of the Bengali community by speaking to them in English” (p. 52). Probably the motive is not just accommodation but it may be that these women want to also show that they can be as “modern” as the younger women through the use of English.

Another interesting observation of Dipika Mukherjee is that “the taboo words ... are consistently not expressed in Bengali, but in English” (p. 53). This is a pan-Indian speech strategy, perhaps we should say, a pan-South Asian strategy, sanctioned a few thousand years ago in works such as *Natya Sastra* and several dramatic works. There is no linguistic sanctity about the choice of languages here to express sex-oriented items. For example, Sanskrit words come very handy for Tamil and other South Indian languages speakers for this purpose. In addition, use of English words has also become very current these days. In between, expressions from Hindi are also thrown in.

In all these tricky uses of expressions from another language, the sharpness of expressions is felt to be blunted, or the shame that will be heaped on the listener is reduced, etc. Soon, we all will not even know how such objects and activities could be expressed in our native languages, as we continue to increase the scope of the use of English. Paucity of equivalence, harshness of usage, constraints of convention in the mother tongue, and other social conventions that bar such expressions through speech in our own mother tongues, have initially encouraged such strategies.

Malaysian Mother Tongue English

Steffanie Pillai’s chapter on Malaysian English as a First Language focuses on the use of English as the language of early childhood experience in Malaysia. This experience is made possible mainly through mixed parentage, ongoing language shift among minority groups in Malaysia, and, as in India, anxiety of parents that their children should master English for better economic prospects.

Steffanie Pillai’s remarks are very significant: “With factors such as migration, mixed marriages, multiculturalism and language shift, the correspondence between ethnicity and language also becomes increasingly blurred. That is why many people growing in multilingual societies find it hard to state what their mother tongue or native or first language is, particularly if these terms are defined based on ethnicity or ancestral language” (p. 64).

If we go by the past reports of Census of India, such indetermination was common not with the materially advanced and educated classes, but with those poorer classes of migrant labor who mostly had only a sense of caste identity, which merged with their language identity. For example, in the Census of India Language Tables for 1961 Census, the caste name Kallar (a known Tamil caste) was recorded as a mother tongue. Similar instances were identified from throughout India by Thirumalai and others who worked for the 1961 census.

Yes, perhaps, what goes around comes around with a new vigor in a different context with a different set of *dramatis personae*!

Our experience tells us that the newly evolving declaration of English as the mother tongue is a very complex issue and it may be due also to many factors including the erosion of interest in ethnic identity.

Simultaneous Acquisition of Two Languages as Mother Tongue

Kuang Ching Hei's chapter "The signs of becoming bilingual: a study of a Malaysian child under two" reviews wide-ranging topics and focuses "on a child who has been raised in a bilingual linguistic environment of Mandarin and English from birth" (p. 77). The parents of the child are Chinese, but with different dialect backgrounds. They both speak Mandarin and English.

"Mandarin seems to be the more common and thus dominant language within the family because it is used by more speakers" (p. 89).

The results showed: "In a general sense, the utterances shown clearly suggest that the child who is under two and who has been simultaneously exposed to two languages is able to communicate in both languages. However, one of these two languages is dominant. In this study, it is obvious that the child's preference is for English "depending on context and situation" (p. 96). The reason for such a preference needs to be explored further.

In a similar study done years ago by Thirumalai and Chengappa (M. S. Thirumalai and Shyamala Chengappa 1986 *Simultaneous Acquisition of Two Languages*, Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore), the parents had different mother tongues (Kodava language spoken by the mother and Kannada language spoken by the father) and the child tended to identify each of these languages to the respective parent, and chose to slowly engage herself more with Kannada, the language spoken predominantly outside her home as well. The contexts outside the home thus contributed to emerging identities and frequency of choice and use of a language.

A Teasing Game

Thilagavathi Shanmuganathan's chapter "True or Dare? Concretizing Family Relationships: A Case Study of an Urban Tamil-Telugu Family" is an interesting essay on turn-taking in conversations. Thilagavathi Shanmuganathan investigates the use of a game "True or Dare?" which lays greater emphasis on telling the truth of a situation presented before the participants through question and answer method. The questions posed related to personal friendships especially boy-girl relationships, some family situations, themes from Tamil movies, etc.

There is an element of teasing to get the answer out of the participants in some interesting ways, with potential punishments that result in shame for not telling the truth. Teasing is a strategy

often indulged in between cross-cousins of a family, among the Tamils, and probably among various ethnic groups in India through assumed-cousins by marriage relationship (*saalaa* relationship). This strategy is extended also to the members of the families who are not related to one another, but, by convention and close family friendship, adopt the cousins by marriage relationship (*saalaa* relationship) with each other. There is bonding but there is also some bitterness resulting through the use such strategies in conversations.

This article presents the categorization of concepts in a clear way. Application needs further elaboration and analysis of the episodes under consideration.

Grandfather Communications Troubled by Hearing Impairment

Everyone would like to read Jawakhir Mior Jaafar's chapter "Getting *tok* to understand: Talk management strategies in conversations troubled by hearing impairment." This is about the hearing strategies adopted by grandfathers (*tok* is the Malay appellation for grandfather) who have hearing problems. Age brings in deterioration in hearing, and age also brings in extra respect from grandchildren and others.

Through a brief but very relevant review of literature, Jawakhir lists the communication strategies we adopt in normal circumstances as follows:

1. circumlocution
2. simplification
3. paraphrase
4. translation
- 5, the use of formulaic expressions
6. repetition
7. rephrasing
8. language shift
9. appeal for assistance
10. code-switching
11. gestures.

Jawakhir's "analysis focuses on the grandfather's use of talk management strategies in understanding and guessing what his grandchildren are saying and the grandchildren's strategies as they themselves make attempts to manage or maintain the flow of communication" (p. 124). The author identifies that the grandfather under study adopted several strategies: Request for repair, appeal for help and a host of strategies for repair in talk:

1. Repetition of entire utterance
2. Repetition with modification
3. Repetition with increased volume

4. Repetition with stressed syllables
5. Attention getter preceding repetition.

Once again, this article has immense potential in therapy programs for persons with differently challenged hearing.

Mother-Daughter Struggles

Jariah Mohd Jan's chapter "Mother and daughter talk: Closeness, conflict and control" takes us back to issues of tender sensibilities, those shared between mothers and their adolescent daughters. The purpose of this study is "to examine the manner in which Malay mothers and their adolescent daughters share information and attitudes and talk about job opportunities and career choices. It also examines how their conflicts are resolved through appropriate use of language which demonstrates support, submission, control and respect" (p. 152).

Adolescent daughter looks up to her successful mother for modeling. However, it is no wonder, "Within mother-daughter relationship ... there were instances when the adolescent no longer tolerates the controlling efforts of their mothers or parents. Likewise, mothers could no longer tolerate their daughter's sense of individuality and independence. When disagreements arise, disagreements arise over the legitimacy of power" (pp. 161-162).

We need another chapter to discuss how the same daughter establishes her identity vis-à-vis her husband in the Malay community.

Powerful Women, Their Husbands and Their Families

The last chapter in this interesting ethnographic and sociolinguistic investigation is by Zuraidah Mohd Don who discusses "Family discourse and the construction of the gendered self and others." Zuraidah makes an interesting comment in the beginning, in relation to women in Malay society: "Women's participation in the work force enhances agency and freedom and for women who hold powerful positions, the position relocates enhanced status from the workplace to home" (p. 171).

The focus of this paper is the analysis of a cover story in a women's magazine narrated through an interview in that magazine. The general conclusion arrived at by the author of this chapter is, "Being a successful entrepreneur in her own right fosters a sense of independence in decision making processes. Yet being a married woman she has to negotiate this powerful self within the limits of what she perceives as proper and acceptable" (p. 181).

This conclusion is an encouraging response on behalf of ever growing addition of women to corporate and government workforce in Malaysia. The way the conclusion is couched it looks as

if it were an independent decision of the woman involved. I wonder how far this could be stretched.

To conclude

All in all, the book under review is an excellent collection of ideas put together to explain the current status of language choices and communication in many parts of life in Malaysia. The book touches the life stories of minorities even as it moves forward in telling the story of women in Malay society. There is abundant review of literature. Sometimes one wonders whether such elaborate review was necessary in some articles. Articles arrive at conclusions some which are on expected lines, but most of the conclusions lead us into new directions. Methodologies adopted are good for others to emulate, and the style of presentation is easy to read.

And as we said in the beginning, ideas suggested and conclusions arrived at have many practical applications.

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