

Markers of ethnic identity: focus on the Malaysian Tamil community

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Abstract

If members of a community feel that their ethnic language is threatened, would they resort to other markers of ethnic identity like clothing, food, celebration of religious and cultural festivals, etc.? This paper examines the use of other markers of identity among the Malaysian Tamil community. As women were the catalysts of language shift (David and Naji 2000) a secondary aim of the paper was to determine if they were more inclined to use these other markers of ethnic identity.

Background and aim of the study

The issue of the link between language and ethnicity is controversial. While sociolinguists like Omar, in a study on Kuala Lumpurians (1991: 98) who have shifted to English, demonstrate that there is no extrinsic correlation between language and ethnicity, others like Fishman (1989: 5) assert that there is.

Views of the language ethnicity connection therefore appear to vary. While for some communities ethnic identity and language maintenance are closely connected, for others the ethnic language may not form an important part of their identity. David (1998) explains how the Sindhi language is no longer a marker of ethnic identity for the Malaysian Sindhi community and discusses other markers of identity.

This research attempts to investigate whether imminent language shift has prompted the generation of Malaysian Tamils who are initiating the move away from the ethnic language, Tamil, to move to other markers of ethnic identity.