

Case Study

Language Choice of Malaysian Tamil Students in *Facebook*: A Case Study in a Malaysian University

Malarvizhi Sinayah^{1*}, Thanalachime Perumal¹, Elanttamil Maruthai¹, Paramasivam Muthusamy², Ponniamah Muniandy² and Rajantheran Muniandy³

¹*Department of Malaysian Languages and Applied Linguistics, Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya, 50603 UM, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*

²*Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, University Putra Malaysia, 43400 UPM, Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia*

³*Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Malaya, 50603 UM, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*

ABSTRACT

Language is a powerful identity of an ethnic group. It is with difficulty that a minority group maintains its mother tongue in a multilingual society, particularly so when other languages such as Malay, English and Chinese have economic advantages over Tamil. Even though in Malaysia Tamil language is taught in primary schools for children aged 7 to 12 and in secondary schools for the students aged 13 to 18, only a few continue to study this language in their higher education. It is a challenge for the educators in higher education institutes to encourage and attract students to study Tamil and is equally challenging to encourage them to maintain Tamil language in their daily conversations. The main aim of this study is to identify the language used in *Facebook* communication among the

Malaysian Tamil students in the university. Reasons for their language choice and some strategies to maintain the usage of Tamil language in social networking platform are also discussed in this paper. Students aged 22 to 24 from a university in the central region of Peninsular Malaysia which offers Tamil studies, are chosen as the participants of this study. The participants were interviewed for their language choice. The finding shows that the participants

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 29 August 2016

Accepted: 29 March 2017

E-mail addresses:

malarvizhisinayah@um.edu.my;

kovaimalar@yahoo.com (Malarvizhi Sinayah),

vinragu@gmail.com (Thanalachime Perumal),

elanttamil@um.edu.my (Elanttamil Maruthai),

paramasivam@upm.edu.my (Paramasivam Muthusamy),

mponni@yahoo.com (Ponniamah Muniandy),

rajanmun@um.edu.my (Rajantheran Muniandy)

*Corresponding author

with excellent Tamil language competency, used code mixing, Romanised Tamil more than Tamil or Tamil script in *Facebook* communication. This study found a way to make the participants converse solely in Tamil. An altered language behaviour in cyberspace emerging out of unknown consideration, was thwarted and normal language use was restored.

Keywords: Facebook Communication, Language choice, Language maintenance, Malaysian Tamils, Tamil Language

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is multilingual and multicultural. Most of the present Malaysian Tamil population had originally migrated from Tamil Nadu, India during the British colonial period, to work in rubber estates. Religion and Tamil education were the principle factors drawing them back to India. Therefore, the British colonial government offered the Tamils, education in their mother tongue in Malaysia in order to retain them in the immigrant land. The first formal Tamil education started in Penang Free School, Penang on 21.10.1816 (Paskaran, 2011). Since then, Tamil education in Malaysia has systematically developed at primary (for 7-12 year olds), secondary (for 13-18 year olds), tertiary (for 19-20 year olds) and university (above 20 year olds) levels. Currently, there are 523 government Tamil schools in Malaysia with more than 105 000 students and with more than 7,000 Tamil language teachers (Rajendran, 2011).

Malay is the national language of Malaysia and English exists as an important

international language. Therefore, it is compulsory for all Malaysians to learn these languages. As a result, most Malaysians, particularly the non-Malays are multilingual with competency in three or more languages. As a minority ethnic group, Malaysian Tamils realise that only their mother tongue will offer them an ethnic identity in a multilingual society. Yet, not all Malaysian Tamils agree with this idea. This is reflected in the fact that only about 52% of Malaysian Tamils send their children to Tamil schools for education (Rajendran, 2011). The number of students who enrol for standard one in Tamil schools range from 13,000 to 16,000 students per year. This number decreases in secondary schools, where only half of them sign up for Tamil language in Malaysian Certificate Examination (equal to GCE O level). Only about 2000 students continue their Tamil education to higher secondary level or pre-university level. Unfortunately, the Malaysian education allows only about 50 students to continue their studies in Tamil at tertiary level (Supramani, 2015).

There are only two universities namely University of Malaya (UM) and Sultan Ismail Education University (UPSI) that offer Tamil as a major in undergraduate. In UM, the Tamil language studies are offered in two different faculties. The department of Tamil Studies at the faculty of Arts and Social Science began in 1959 (Narayanasamy, 2011). The department of Malaysian Languages and Applied Linguistics at the faculty of Languages and Linguistics started in 1998 (Mannar Mannan, 2011). Starting from 2010 UPSI

is also offering a Bachelor Degree of Education (B.Ed.) majoring in Tamil. There are also several universities such as University Putra Malaysia (UPM), University Science Malaysia (USM), University Sabah Malaysia (UMS) and others that offer Tamil as a second language for non-native speakers (Supramani, 2015).

Tamil language has a diglossic nature. Diglossia is a sociolinguistic situation with two separate varieties of the same language. It is a linguistic phenomenon, where there is normal use of two varieties in different social situations (Al-Mahrooqi, Denman, & Sultana, 2016). Tamil is a diglossic language with separate varieties, in formal and informal social situation with spoken and written forms (Lal, 2011). The written form considered as standard Tamil is used in mass media and formal events, while the colloquial spoken form is used mainly in informal situations such as conversation among friends and family members.

In fact, there are lot of scope for Malaysian Tamils to use their mother tongue and communicate. There are several daily and weekly newspapers, fortnightly and monthly magazines published in Tamil. Additionally, there are 24-hour radio and television channels broad-casting in Tamil language. Yet, there seems to be a lag in Tamil language use among the younger generation. The younger generation tend to converse in Malay and English more than Tamil (Paramasivam & Farashaiyan, 2016).

There are a few studies conducted on minority language use in social media such as Low German (a regional language) in

Northern Germany (Reershemius, 2017), Irish in Northern Ireland (Lackaff & Moner, 2016), Yucatec Maya, an indigenous language of Mexico (Cru, 2015), and Greek in German city (Androutsopoulos, 2015). Most of these studies focused on secondary, tertiary and university students and their language choice, as the current generation is engaged more with the social media. Tamils are also a minority group in Malaysia and so far, there are no studies found on their language choice in social media especially in *Facebook*. To fill this gap this study has investigated language usage by Malaysian University Tamil students in *Facebook* the new media.

AIM OF THE STUDY

The aims of the study are to:

- i) Identify the language choice among Malaysian Tamil students in *Facebook*, a social media.
- ii) Investigate the reasons for their language choice in *Facebook*.
- iii) Evaluate the use of Tamil in a specially created closed group called மொழியியல் மொட்டுகள் (*mozhiyiyal mottuhaL*) in *Facebook*, and test remedial measures if needed.

METHOD

This study was conducted using action research method. 16 students aged 22 to 24 from a university in the central region of Peninsular Malaysia which offers Tamil studies, were chosen as the participant of this study. These students were chosen as

participants to ensure that the respondents are fluent in written and spoken Tamil language. This is to eliminate the fact that lack of knowledge in Tamil language as a reason. Communication of these students in *Facebook* was observed for three months to identify their language choice. About 240 comments posted on 15 wall posts were analysed. All the 16 participants were grouped and interviewed for 20 – 30 minutes to gather information on the reasons for their language choice. After briefing about the intention of the study and the ways to use Tamil language in *Facebook*, these students were asked to participate in a specially created closed group named மொழியியல் மொட்டுகள் (*mozhiyiyal*

mottuhaL) literally meaning linguistics buds. Thus, 15 wall posts with 270 comments of this group were gathered for a period of three months and analysed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the first three months of observation, it was found that the participants were using Malay, English and Tamil language in their conversations among their varsity friends. Usage of Tamil language was mostly in Roman scripts. The frequency of the language choice among Malaysian Tamil students in the university while communicating on *Facebook* is given in Table 1.

Table 1
Language choice of participants on Facebook

Language Text	Mix-Code			Tamil		English	Malay	Total
	Tamil	English	Malay	Roman Script	Tamil Script			
T1	5	2	1	8		3		19
T2	8	2	1	5	1			17
T3	1			6	1			8
T4	1			9				10
T5	6	2		4		1		13
T6	6	1		3				10
T7	9	2		10		1		22
T8	6	1		4		4		15
T9	5	1		3	1		1	11
T10	6	3		11		3		23
T11	13			8				21
T12	6			1		1		8
T13	10	5	1	10	1	3		30
T14	3		1	6	1	2	1	14
T15	9			8		2		19
Total	94	19	4	96	5	20	2	240

Table 1 shows that mix-code was the most frequent language choice of participants of this study. 117 out of 240 comments (48.75%) were made in mix code with Tamil as the dominant language. This was followed by 101 Tamil language comments (42.08%) but 96 out of it utilised Romanised Tamil script instead of the native script. Since all the participants were Tamil, they only used English in 20 comments and Malay in 2 comments in a whole. This

finding contradict the previous observation that the current Tamil generation use Malay and English more frequently than their mother tongue (Paramasivam & Farashaiyan, 2016). In fact, the participants choose a language in which they are fluent and most expressive.

Table 2 shows some of the comments posted by the Malaysian Tamil students in Facebook wall posts. *Italic* refers to Tamil words and Malay words are underlined.

Table 2
Comments by participants on Facebook

No.	Comments posted in Facebook	Meaning / standard version
1	Wat 2 do dehy??? So cold n so sleepy... tatz y!!!	What to do? So cold and sleepy, that is why...
2	<i>elangovai pol kambanai pol neeyum pulaviyaage varuvaayaagee...</i>	You will become a poet like <i>Elango</i> and <i>Kamban</i> .
3	யாருபெத்த புள்ளையோ நாம மனசுல நெனச்சத அப்படியே பேசுது (<i>yaaru peththa piLLayoo naame manasule nenachchathe appadiyee peesuthu</i>)	I wonder who is that, who speaks my mind.
4	<u>SABAR-SABAR KITA BINCANG</u>	Be calm, we shall discuss it.
5	hehehehe.....make up <i>oda pesarangge...</i> <i>seyatha latihanuku</i> revision <i>vera</i>wat a comedy	She is teaching with full make-up. Revising an exercise which has never been done. What a comedy.

These examples show that participants in the study communicate in Facebook using Tamil (in Roman or Tamil scripts), English, and Malay or mixed of Tamil, English, and Malay languages. The first comment in Table 1 is written in English with some variations like nonstandard spelling (wat = what, tatz = that's) and using one letter representing a word (n=and, y=why). The second comment is in Romanised Tamil,

whereas the third comment is in Tamil with Tamil scripts.

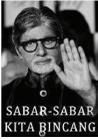
There were only two comments found to be in Malay language solely. The last comment is structured with a mix code of English, Tamil and Malay. The participants try to communicate in Facebook as in face to face communication. This can be seen in the third comment clearly. As Tamil is a diglossic language with spoken and written

variations (Lal, 2011), even though the comments are given in written form but they are in spoken variation. In the comments with mix code, Tamil is used as the dominant language. As in the last comment, English and Malay words are added with Tamil suffix (make-upode, latihanukku) and follow the Tamil sentence structure.

Malay is the national language and it is compulsory for all students to learn. Yet, this study shows that only two comments out of

240 comments were solely made in Malay language. Both these comments were in the format of *meme* as shown in Table 3. *Meme* is an image, piece of text, video, etcetera typically humorous in nature, which is copied and spread rapidly by internet users, often with slight variations. The term *meme*, derived from Richard Dawkins's biologist account of how genetic and non-genetic data spread, like viruses, through their corporeal transmitters (Sanchez, 2013).

Table 3
Malay comments by participants on Facebook

No.	Comments posted in Facebook	Meaning/standard version
1		Be calm, we shall discuss it
2		Yeah, give an applause

The participants in the study use English language more than Malay language, with the frequency 20 out of 240 comments as a whole. The findings showed that these students use some variations in their English comments. Dawaghreh (2016) states that, Facebook language does not need to be learned, and any form of intended nonstandard spelling (abbreviated strangely) can be easily understood by the users (both recipient and sender). This statement matches the nonstandard spelling such as

wat = what, tatz = that's, Thx = thanks, tok = talk, and eu = you used intently by the students. Using one letter representing a word such as n = and, y = why, r = are and c = see are also common in their communication. Omission of vowel as in thnk = think, knw=know, and hw = how are also found in their posts. Moreover, most of their English comments have Tamil addressing words such as *dehy*, *dei*, and *da*. Few examples of English comments posted by Tamil students are given in Table 4.

Table 4
English comments by participants on Facebook

No.	Comments posted in Facebook	Meaning/standard version
1	Wat 2 do <i>dehy</i> ??? So cold n so sleepy... tatz y!!!	What to do? So cold and sleepy, that is why
2	Thx a lot da...	Thanks a lot dear.
3	i thnk c tok British English!!!	I think she talks in British English
4	Hahahaxx...eu guyzz r damn funny <i>dei</i> ... dun knw hw to discribe...lol...:-) :-)	You guys are damn funny. Don't know how to describe.
5	nw itz my turn... c ur wall !!!	Now it's my turn. See your wall!
6		You funny kid. You tell funny joke.

Since all the students involved in this research had gone through Tamil primary education they have between good and excellent competency in Tamil. Tamil seems to be their first choice as in Facebook. These students had posted 101 comments in communicative language out of which 96 were made using Roman scripts as shown in

Table 4. These Tamil comments were posted as text and also *meme*. They tried to use Roman scripts to resemble Tamil phonetic. But there was no uniformity in their spelling.

Table 5 shows the Tamil comments with Roman scripts made by participants on Facebook.

Table 5
Tamil comments with Roman scripts by participants on Facebook

No.	Comments posted in Facebook	Meaning/standard version
1	<i>Ipdi ellaam yosikka unakku solli kudukkirathu yaaru daa?</i>	Who taught you to think like this dear?
2	<i>Appadi ellam pesa kudathu! Rombe thappu.</i>	Shouldn't talk like that. It's very wrong.
3		Come on! Don't act too much. Even Sivaji, the super actor will feel shy.
4		Better get lost. If not, I will kill you.

Ellaam in the first comment is spelled as *ellam* in second comment and *YELLAM* in the third comment. These students do not differentiate the long vowel except the first comment where a double *a* resembling long vowel has been used. Unlike English or Malay language, Tamil has long and short

vowels which will change the meaning of a word.

Even though all the students are able to read and write in Tamil, only 5 comments were posted using Tamil scripts. Table 6 shows the Tamil comments found in this study. The fourth comment was used in two conversations.

Table 6
Tamil comments by participants on Facebook

No.	Comments posted in Facebook	Meaning/standard version
1	எப்படி இப்படிலாம்.... (<i>eppadi ippadiyellaam</i>)	How is these
2	தத்துவம் பாப்பா ☺ (<i>thaththuvam paappaa</i>) 	Philosophy! Girl! ☺
3	(<i>yaaru peththa piLLayoo naame manasale nenachchathe appadiyee peesuthu</i>)	I wonder who is that, who speaks my mind.
4	 (<i>pudingga saar avanai pudichchu jeyille poodungga</i>)	Catch him and place him in jail, sir!

Mixed codes were used most frequently in their communication. 117 out of 240 comments which make up 49% of their total comments were in mixed mode of Tamil, English and Malay. Most of the mixed mode comments used Tamil and English as the dominant language. Only four comments were found to contain Malay words. The findings show that Tamil is the most used

communicative language among the Tamils in the university. Yet, these comments were not typed in Tamil but in Roman scripts.

The participants who posted the comments were interviewed to gather the reasons for their language choice. The five reasons given by the participants are listed in Table 7.

Table 7
Reasons for the language choice of participants on Facebook

No.	Reasons	Frequency	%
1	Common known language	16	100
2	Worried that their friends will not be able to read	16	100
3	Do not know how to write Tamil in computer aided devices	6	37.5
4	No Tamil fonts in the device	5	31.25
5	Tamil encoding problem	5	31.25

As stated earlier Tamil language is the main communicative language of the participants of this study. They use Tamil among their friends because it is a commonly known language to them. According to the participants, it is easier and faster for them to express their ideas or thoughts in their mother tongue or first language compare to second or other languages.

Yet, they use Roman scripts instead of Tamil script because Tamil scripts are not enabled in their devices. Since Tamil writing uses varied keyboards the participants have not mastered that art. Many of them use Roman scripts intently just to make sure all their contacts can read their comments. They are worried whether their friends' devices

are Tamil enabled. Technically Standard Tamil Keyboard layouts in unicode is still on its way in modern devices.

After discussing the reasons for their language choice, and technical competency in Tamil unicode was restored, the participants were requested to participate in a specially created closed group called *மொழியியல் மொட்டுகள் (mozhiyiyal mottuhaL)* for cyber communication. Their conversations were observed for three months and about 270 comments from 15 wall posts were gathered. The finding showed all the 270 comments were posted in Tamil language solely using Tamil scripts. Some of the examples are shown in Table 8.

Table 8

Comments in a closed group *மொழியியல் மொட்டுகள்* (*mozhiyiyal mottuhaL*)

No.	Comments posted in <i>மொழியியல் மொட்டுகள்</i> (<i>mozhiyiyal mottuhaL</i>)	Meaning/standard version
1	பேராசையே ஒரு மனிதனை ஏழையாக்குகின்றது (<i>peeraasaiyee oru manithanai eezhaiyaakkuhinRathu</i>)	Greed makes a person poor.
2	மனிதனுக்கு எதிரியே மனிதன் தான்.. (<i>manithanukku ethiriyee manithan thaan..</i>)	Man is enemy to himself.
3	வினை விதைத்தவன் வினை அறுப்பான்.. (<i>vinai vithaiththavan vinai aRuppaan</i>)	One who seeds, reaps the harvest.
4	அப்போ, அந்த அதிக பிரசங்கி நீ தானே..... (<i>appoo, antha athiha pirasanggi nii thaanee.....</i>)	So, you are the big mouth.
5	ஆஹா... என்ன அருமையான கண்டுபிடிப்பு. அருமை அருமை அருமை. (<i>aaha... enna arumaiyaana kandupidippu. Arumai arumai arumai.</i>)	Wow... what a brilliant investigation. Superb / Bravo
6	உண்மைத்தான் அம்மா... நண்டு தன் பிள்ளைக்கு நடை கற்றுக் கொடுத்த கதையாயிற்று... (<i>uNmaithaan ammaa... naNdu than piLLaikku nadai kaRRuk koduththa kathaiyaayiRRu...</i>)	That is right madam. As if the mother crab taught the juvenile how to walk straight.

The examples in Table 8 are comments posted in Tamil language with Tamil scripts. These posts indicate some language variations in them. Tamil is a diglossic language with distinguished oral and written forms. Though these comments are posted in the form of written text but they are variation of the spoken language. For example, in Table 8, it is proper to write the word அப்போ (*appoo*) as அப்போது (*appoothu*) or அப்பொழுது (*appozhuthu*) in proper written Tamil. However, the ability to communicate using Tamil script was restored.

Native speaker of language tends to use proverbs in their daily conversation to express something indirectly (Malarvizhi, Paramasivam, Kannan, & Normaliza, 2015). Usage of proverbs also shows higher level of competency in a language. Proverbs are used globally to express emotions, to praise, to warn or to indicate failure (Omoera, 2013). Lateh and Othman (2014) explains that, proverbs are phrases used to say things orderly, beautifully, and in a subtle way. Findings of this study also proved that the participants use at least one proverb in each conversation (e.g. third post in Table 8).

There were 18 proverbs found in the entire data collected from 15 wall posts observed in the closed group. Even a Malay proverb *seperti ketam mengajar anaknya berjalan betul* has been translated and used as a Tamil proverb by the participants (sixth statement in Table 8).

CONCLUSION

Findings of this study show that the participants with excellent Tamil language competency, used code mixing (Tamil, English and Malay), Romanised Tamil more than Tamil or Tamil script in Facebook communications as their language choice. They also choose words from a language in which they are fluent and most expressive in. The participants revealed five reasons for their language choice in Facebook. Participants tend to use the language form (Tamil or Roman script) known by all their contacts or group members. They opt for Romanised script to ensure that all their Facebook contacts could read their comments. The accessibility of a particular language in the communicative media (device) also determines the language choice of the participants. Prior knowledge of using the language in new media also plays an important role in the language use of Tamil.

This study found a way to make the participants to converse solely in Tamil by creating a closed group. After briefing about the intention of the study and the ways to use Tamil language in Facebook, the participants post their comments in a more

natural way as in their face to face communication. Involvement of the participants in the specially created closed group increased the usage of Tamil to 100% (an improvement from the previous 42% usage). In the first observation only 101 out of 240 comments were in Tamil but in the second observation all the 270 comments were in Tamil. There were only 5 out of 240 comments in Tamil native scripts in the first observation but all the comments posted in மொழியியல் மொட்டுகள் (*mozhiyiyal mottuhaL*) were in Tamil scripts only.

Language teachers also should play a role in encouraging students to use their mother tongue in a new media. They also should teach or guide their students to use their mother tongue in social media. This study has proved that participants are willing and happy to use their mother tongue for communication on Facebook provided they are given the space and technical knowledge of using their mother tongue in the new media. This study has helped the participants who had altered language behaviour in cyberspace, to revert back to their normal language usage.

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