

A Study of the Role of the Malay Language and the Influence of Extra-Linguistic Factors in Language Usage in Sri Lanka

Abstract

The Sri Lankan Malay language (SLM) has undergone numerous changes in its lexicon and syntax as a result of prolonged contact with the two dominant languages of the country, Sinhala and Tamil as well as English. Therefore it has evolved into a distinct language from the Malay used in the South East Asiatic countries like Malaysia and Indonesia. Along with such linguistic changes SLM has also experienced socio-linguistic changes in terms of its use, role and functions.

Since the users of SLM belong to a minority ethnic group in Sri Lanka all of them are bi- or multi-lingual. Numerous language combinations can be traced among the Sri Lankan Malays and this result in complex code switching and mixing which take place among the speakers as well as the dynamic decisions of language choice they make. These language choices and the role and function of SLM are influenced by factors such as local and national ideologies, social and economic class, education, employment, environment, religious fervor and personal beliefs.

It is therefore worthwhile to study to what extent extra-linguistic factors influence the language choice(s) of Sri Lankan Malays and how the same factors influence the use of SLM in particular. This study is an attempt to understand this situation and determine how conscious the speech community is about these choices and the changes that occur in the language.

The study was conducted through questionnaires and interviews of several families from different socio-economic classes and different geographic locations. Though it is difficult to have clearly defined boundaries for class, the findings provide a substantial understanding of the role and function given to SLM by its users in each group and what factors influence their language decisions.

In the face of many challenges posed to the Sri Lankan Malay community, especially in terms of its language, a study of this kind would help to understand the position of SLM in its community and subsequently help in re-defining its role to its users.