

Language Maintenance and Language Shift among Keralites in Oman

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Abstract

This study explores the current status of language maintenance (LM) and language shift (LS) among Keralites, popularly known as 'Malayalees,' living in Oman. It analyses the leading factors that affect language maintenance and language shift: a particular focus is given to identifying the various domains in which language maintenance is facilitated; the attitudes held by the Keralite parents and their children towards their first language (L1), the initiatives taken by parents, religious and cultural organizations; and the role of educational institutions in promoting language maintenance. Data for this study have been gathered from semi-structured interviews and participant observation of Keralites who have lived in Oman for more than ten years. Analysis of the data indicates that while parents value their mother tongue as their first language and take various measures to maintain it, second-generation children are not keenly attached to L1. Instead, their first language oracy is strikingly marked with code-switching and code shifting, and their writing skills in L1 are diminishing. Refuting the previous findings, the present study reveals that language shift is a temporary phenomenon, and it does not take place at the cost of L1. On the contrary, various factors contribute to the maintenance of their heritage language. Also, the migrant Keralites, as a result of their living abroad, acquire two or three more new languages: English, Hindi, and Arabic depending on their study and work domains, thereby making them a multilingual society. Language shift can gradually result in linguicide, which can have various effects such as alienation from and the loss of culture and cultural values. It is expected that this study will unveil if there is a language shift of a severe nature among the Keralites in Oman.

Keywords: code-mixing, code shifting, Keralites in Oman, language maintenance, language shift, the local language, multilingual, multicultural, and sociolinguistics.

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Introduction

Homo sapiens have never been content with remaining confined to a permanent place of settlement; they have always yearned for the other side that looked greener to them either for physical comfort or spiritual reasons. What is more, people of different socio-political conditions—nomads in search of new pastures, migrants in search of better opportunities and living conditions, refugees driven out of their homelands by the ravages of war or famine— have not always been keen on honoring the age-old ‘wisdom’ of not crossing the shores. History enumerates several instances of people being brutally ripped of their lands and taken to foreign lands as slaves to toil for their masters or sent in exile as people unfit to live in a ‘civilized’ society.

This transplanting and settling of people in new lands have paved the way for many socio-politico-economic and linguistic developments worldwide. When people migrate, they often carry a heavy load of things such as their cultures and languages. When these cultures and languages come into close contact with those of their newly adopted lands—either voluntarily chosen or forced upon— both the groups experience a cultural and linguistic transformation. Rubbing shoulders with each other through social interactions, they are unconsciously imbued with each other’s predominant cultural traits, which bring about attitudinal changes in both the parties. Consequently, it helps them to become global citizens, transcending their entrenched parochial attitudes.

One of the concomitants of the changes in demography is that languages and the communicative modes are considerably affected. When people of widely different linguistic and cultural backgrounds come to live together in a geographical region—sharing everyday socio-economic and political activities of the community—stable bilingual and multilingual societies are created. There can also be diglossic situations where a speech community uses two varieties of the same language for different functions. The main characteristic of a diglossic situation is the existence of two varieties – high variety and low variety.

Bilingualism/multilingualism, code-switching/code-mixing, diglossia, pidgins and creoles, language shift, and language maintenance are some of the unique sociolinguistic phenomena arising from languages coming in contact. In this regard, Graddol (2000) has made a very pertinent observation that the languages people speak exhibit two main influences: the most influential factor, in most cases, is the speech community they are born into; and the next is that the linguistic behavior of people is affected by the languages they learn throughout life. Education, employment, migration, and improved social mobility can add more languages to the linguistic repertoire of people during their lifetime, and they may find that one language becomes more used than the others, including their first language itself. But major language shift from one first language to another is usually slow, taking place across generations. When this process of moving away from one’s mother tongue to replace it with a newly adopted language is complete, there is said to be a language shift. If an individual or a community intransigently clings to using their traditional first language, despite compelling situations to renounce the same, it is known as language maintenance.

Linguistic scenarios have always been in a state of flux. Languages have come to dominate over specific periods and, conversely, they have also receded from the linguistic scene and even

become subject to linguistic either from natural or political reasons. Mismatch in power relations can force a speech community - majority or minority - to affiliate themselves with the dominant group's language. Code-switching to English from both majority and minority languages is yet another linguistic phenomenon. It is in this way the English language has percolated into all spheres of life.

Oman is a multilingual country with Arabic as the dominant language and Balushi and Swahili as the minority languages. English is ubiquitous in Omani society in an unprecedented way. The presence of expatriates in the country has paved the way for spreading other languages such as Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, Tagalog, Sinhala, etc. The expatriates from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal use Hindi as a link language among them, especially in labor camps and local markets, whereas people engaged in white-collar jobs speak mostly English and Arabic. As Arab News (2020) reports, Indians are the largest expatriate community in Oman, and most of them who are employed in various fields such as education, health, engineering, IT, business, trade, industries, media, and some unskilled areas as well are from Kerala. They are forced to speak English, Arabic, or Hindi as a link language while interacting with other speech communities as part of their job requirements. Some people, in the absence of proficiency in a link language, speak in a mixture of two or more languages.

This study probes into one of the oft-occurring linguistic phenomena of language maintenance and language shift among the Keralite expatriate workers, and their families in the Sultanate of Oman. Furthermore, it is an attempt to find out whether a linguistic succumbing has taken place among them. If the traditional speech communities, despite their prolonged stay in the Sultanate, have succeeded in language maintenance by retaining their languages, it is interesting to know what factors have helped them. And if they have failed, what has been responsible for the language shift?

Literature Review

Several studies have been carried out on how language maintenance or language shift occurs through language contact conflicting situations in various communities across the globe. The Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics (2013) defines language maintenance as the degree to which an individual or group continues to use their language, particularly, in a bilingual or multilingual context or among immigrant groups. While not refuting the above definition of language shift, it is also a process by which a new language is acquired by a community, usually leading to the loss of the community's first language. Both language maintenance and language shift occur as a result of contact with other dominant languages. In the opinion of Habtoor (2012), Language maintenance is the product of language contact wherein a linguistic minority, or a marginalized ethnolinguistic group is successful in keeping its original language despite the pressure exerted on it by the dominant linguistic group. In essence, a language shift takes place when the members of a linguistic community gradually abandon their first language and use another one (Trudgill, 2000). However, this being a maiden study on the prevailing linguistic scenario in Oman, there is a shortage of literature on the topic in the Omani context to corroborate my conclusions from the studies conducted by others. The researchers were, thus, compelled to draw on similar studies done outside Oman to explore the why and how of language maintenance and shift.

Not very long ago, one very notable study was done in Europe to investigate 48 minority languages within the European Union, and a report named Euromosaic—the production and reproduction of the minority language groups in the European Union—was published in 1996. The objective of the study, as mentioned in the title of the report, was to ascertain the status of the minority language groups through an inquiry into their potential for production and reproduction of their languages and the difficulties they confront while doing so. The survey investigated various areas such as the use of minority languages within families, in education, and among the members of the linguistic groups. The results of the study showed that the prestige attributed to languages or the role of a language in social mobility and cultural reproduction plays a vital role in language shift or maintenance. Also, the results index the value of linguistic tradition in language maintenance. If linguistic skills and values are not transferred from one generation to another, this phenomenon will naturally lead to linguistic attrition.

Wolck (2004) has discussed the imperatives for language maintenance. Maintaining a language implies using it, and that is possible only if one knows the language; one is loyal to that language and cherishes positive attitudes towards it. Wolck identifies a set of nine factors, which he calls the universals, relevant to language maintenance and language shift. According to Wolck, the most influential factor is generational continuity and language transfer from parents to children. In case of intergenerational dislocation wherein grandparents use their language to communicate with their grandchildren and parents use the same language to communicate with their parents but not with their children, there is all the possibility of language decay. If a language is to be maintained, there should be generational continuity and language transfer from parents to children.

Linguistic unification and standardization are other factors contributing to language maintenance. Wolck (2004) identifies this as the decisive factor that saved Bolivian Quechua from linguistic extinction. Diversification and dialectal fragmentation are catalytic to language shift. A minority language has better chances of survival if it is not fragmented.

Sharing domains of usage with the majority language can also help in language maintenance. When using a minority language is restricted to selected domains, it can be stigmatized as fit only for those fields. However, the presence of a minority language, and the majority language in the same domains, strengthens the minority language. Wolck (2004) seems to be very close to the truth when he observes that this kind of co-existent bilingualism is more protective of minority languages than functional separatism and complementation.

Factors Affecting Language Maintenance and Language Shift

The family or home is the most crucial domain that can enhance language maintenance. Pauwels (2008) argues that the ultimate survival of a language depends on intergenerational transfer. The role of parents is crucial in laying the foundations for language maintenance. If the use of L1 diminishes at home, it will negatively affect other domains, too. Clyne and Kipp (1999) believe that the family plays a crucial role in language maintenance. If a language is not used in the home domain, then it cannot be maintained elsewhere. As most Keralites in Oman live with their family, they get ample opportunities to preserve their first language. Studies show that the number of people living in a family can affect language maintenance. Hence, it is only logical that children living in extended families have better language maintenance chances than someone

living alone or in a nuclear family (Pauwels, A. 2005). If the number of L1 users is significantly less in the household, the chances of language shift to the dominant language are likely to become high.

From a demographic perspective, the numerical strength of a linguistic community and the concentration of speakers in one area are crucial variables in promoting language maintenance (Edwards, 1995). Most Keralites in Oman prefer community living, especially in areas near Indian schools or dominated by their language community. The formation of such residential colonies often becomes like a linguistic enclave, which is a crucial factor in strengthening language maintenance.

Another critical factor in promoting language maintenance or shift is the attitude of the natives or the dominant group towards the language of the migrant community. A positive and supportive attitude of the dominant group gives the minority groups more opportunities for language maintenance (Pauwels, 2016). Omanis are very hospitable and cordial to Keralites mainly because of their social and cultural affinities. It is not rarely we come across scenes of local Omani traders using Malayalam (the language of the Keralites) while trying to sell certain goods at marketplaces. This cannot be seen just as a mere market strategy employed by a group of shrewd businessmen; instead, it is a perfect example of the positive attitude of the natives towards the migrant folk. Moreover, this cordial relationship enables the migrant group to acquire the language of the natives without affecting their heritage language. Although it doesn't lead to language shift, it often results in code-mixing. There is always a strong resistance from Malayalee communities to halt or reverse language shift. Fortunately, they enjoy generous institutional support in Oman. The latest example is a project titled 'Malayalam Mission' started by the Department of Cultural Affairs, the government of Kerala, which aims at promoting language and cultural activities among Keralites living abroad.

Studies reveal that the age of the migrants and the length of their residence are essential variables for language shift. For instance, Waas found that a small group of German teenagers who migrated to Australia almost lost their first language after two decades of living abroad (as cited in Guardado, 2012). It is challenging for young migrants to maintain their first language after a considerable length of stay in a foreign country. Empirical studies suggest that language shift does not happen abruptly but over a period (Kouritzin, 1999; Merion, 1983). Gardner-Chloros, McEntee-Atalianis, & Finnis (2005) state that the process of language shift goes through at least three generations before it becomes complete. It begins with a bilingual stage, and the signs of language shift become intense with the second generation. It may even lead to the loss of L1 by the next generation, especially if immigrants integrate well with the dominant culture. Mills (2001) found from her research that there is a negative correlation between acculturation and language maintenance (as cited in Garcia, 2003). The acculturation is likely to become strong depending on the length of residence in a foreign country.

Stoessel (2002) claims that social networks have a strong influence on language maintenance and shift. She states that most people in the initial stage of their immigration tend to interact with the same language community on social media platforms, which significantly contributes to their L1 maintenance. However, as time passes, they begin to expand the social network with other

linguistic groups, which leads to reduced use of L1. One's attitude to a language is another factor that affects language maintenance and shift. While instrumental attitude is self-oriented, integrative perceptive is social and interpersonal. Many researchers believe that integrative attitude to L1 enhances language maintenance. According to Baker (1992), an integrative perceptive to a language will create an attachment to it and encourage the speakers to identify themselves with that language group its distinct culture proudly.

Research Methodology

For this research, a qualitative method was employed to explore language maintenance and shift. Data for this study have been collected from semi-structured interviews and participant observation. The participants of this research were Keralites who have been in Oman for more than ten years. Fifteen people from different age groups and various walks of life including adolescent students, young professionals, unskilled laborers, social workers, businesspeople, and homemakers were interviewed. Besides, samples of recorded speeches from social and cultural events were analyzed to re-confirm the findings.

Research Questions

The current study was guided by the following four research questions:

1. What are the attitudes of Keralites towards their heritage language and culture?
2. Is there a sign of language shift among Keralites in Oman to any other language?
3. If yes, what are the factors affecting this language shift? If no, what factors influence their language maintenance?
4. Is code-mixing or code shifting a real threat to L1 maintenance?

Data Analysis and Discussion

The data collected from semi-structured interviews and participant observation have revealed a few important facts: Keralites' educational background; attitude to L1; domains of L1 use; factors affecting language maintenance and shift; and exposure to other languages. Most of the results agree with previous research findings on language maintenance and shift. Nevertheless, a surprising finding is the increasing number of multilingual people among the Malayalee community—especially among the second-generation students. Most Malayalee children who study in Indian schools in Oman are fluent in Malayalam, English and Hindi, and some in Arabic, too.

An essential finding of this research is in line with the common belief of linguistic researchers that the family domain is very vital for language maintenance. It is generally agreed that if there is intense communication in the home domain, transferring the language from the older generation to the younger generation can run smoothly. Pauwels (2008) believes that the language practices of parents, grandparents, and other relatives are essential for the maintenance of a minority language among future generations. The study reveals that most Keralites in Oman live with their family and others live with friends in bachelor accommodations, mostly in areas dominated by members of their linguistic community. This indicates that they get enough opportunities to use L1 both at home and with their neighbors. What is more, living in the same vicinity with people of the same linguistic community facilitates the frequent family gatherings and small parties. Such socializing events are, indeed, crucial for language maintenance. In addition to this, the large size

of the Malayalee workforce and student communities in Oman gives them opportunities for much L1 use.

The most obvious result of this research is the revelation of the extent of code-mixing and code-switching among the Keralites in Oman. The speech of the first-generation migrants whose job requires active and direct interaction with the natives is marked with code-mixing. Some of the standard Arabic terms used by Keralites in their speech are *Insha Allah, Alhamdulillah, halal, haram, baladhiya, jawaz, pathaka, surtha, ijaza, furhan, rahat, zahlan, etc.* The number of Arabic words in speech increases in proportion to the length of time of an immigrant's stay in Oman. However, what is noticeable here is that this code-mixing is unlikely to lead to language shift. The reason is—as this study has revealed—that code-mixing does not occur as a result of the migrant's loss of L1 substitutes; instead, it is the result of the conscious effort taken by the migrants to manifest their affinity with the local language and culture. On repatriation, many of them carry these experiences and language traits to their home country and transfer them to the local culture. Now the influence of Gulf Malayalees is visible in many facets of life in the State, such as art, literature, language, culture, business, food habits, etc.

Code-mixing or code-switching is not limited to Arabic alone. Commonly, Keralites tend to speak Malayalam mixed with other languages such as English and Hindi, and some even alternate between languages. Holmes (2001) asserts that code-switching is associated with language shift. However, most Keralites are strong advocates of their heritage language, and they always disapprove of code-mixing and code shifting. As reactions to these linguistic phenomena are still adverse in the State, most elders condemn the young generation's speech, which is frequently mixed with English, and they call it 'Manglish' disdainfully. As most Malayalees living abroad are aware of this fact, they take maximum care to save their first language from being devoured by other languages.

Keralites usually value their heritage language and distinct culture even when they speak other languages and integrate with different cultures; it helps them maintain their first language and cultural identity. Language, identity, and culture are inextricably related (Norton, 2000). All the participants except a housewife said that they speak more than two languages. Most of them speak Malayalam, English, Hindi, and Arabic. Although most respondents agree that they are very successful at maintaining their heritage language abroad, some admit that their writing skills are diminishing due to less usage.

The results of the current study also revealed that mass media play a crucial role in language maintenance. Most respondents consider traditional media as an essential source that helps language maintenance. Keralites who live abroad are generally very curious to know about the political, economic, social, and cultural development of their home state. Hence, they frequently view Malayalam TV programs, and read online or print newspapers and articles. As men are interested in politics and literature, they often engage themselves in political debates or discussions on social media platforms of their linguistic communities. Besides, most homemakers view only Malayalam channels on TV, which confirms the general notion that women are the real preservers of heritage language and culture.

The two significant findings of this study are code-mixing and multilingualism among the Keralites in Oman. When the former one raises some concerns for the advocates of pure Malayalam, the latter is a progressive result of globalization, which does not pose any threat to the maintenance of heritage language. The literacy program organized under the Malayalam Mission banner, a government initiative, has significantly contributed to language maintenance. The role of traditional media is also equally important. The availability of Malayalam newspapers and TV channels, the social clubs named Malayalam Wing and Kerala wing, social and family gatherings, neighborhoods - all these have contributed to language maintenance. Besides, studying Malayalam as an additional language in Indian schools has saved the second generation from a potential language shift.

Conclusion

As can be seen from the data analysis, all Keralites who live with their families in Oman, except for a few second-generation children, prefer to use Malayalam in the home domain. However, those living in labor camps or shared accommodation with other nationalities or people from different states of India are forced to use Hindi, English, or Arabic for communication, which is not an obvious sign of language shift but an inevitable impact of globalization. Although they use these languages in educational and work domains or a mixture of two or more languages as the situation demands, the ultimate result is not any language shift but code-mixing and acquiring additional languages. With time, most Keralites living in Oman become fluent speakers of Malayalam, English, Hindi, and Arabic. What is most encouraging is that they also become a multilingual, multiethnic and multicultural society maintaining the heritage language and preserving the essence of their distinct culture, which can be summarized as the transformation of a local Malayalee into a global one.

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