

ABSTRACT - ISMIL 15

Economic factors that drive language maintenance/ shift: the case of Sri Lanka Malay

The Sri Lanka Malays are a minority community who form 0.3% of the total population of Sri Lanka. At present there are approximately 60,000 Malays in Sri Lanka and they are spread mostly in the Western, Central, and Southern provinces of the country. They trace their origins to the Malays who migrated to Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) primarily during the period of the Dutch colonization of the east. Their language, Sri Lanka Malay, is a distinct variety of the Malay language which has elements of the Malay spoken in contemporary Malaysia and Indonesia as well as considerable influence from Sinhala and Tamil, the major languages of Sri Lanka. Generally believed to be facing a degree of endangerment, especially in urban areas, the SLM language has received a fair amount of study in recent years.

My paper is an examination of how the maintenance of the Sri Lanka Malay language is being influenced by economic factors. Using qualitative data gathered as part of the fieldwork conducted for my doctoral thesis, I investigate the language ideologies of the SLM community and examine the perceived economic value of specific languages that drives issues of language maintenance. Informed by Bourdieu's (1991) notion of language as symbolic capital, convertible into economic and social capital, and distributed unequally within any given speech community, I will be focusing specifically on the following three issues:

- (1) The perceived economic benefits of studying languages other than Malay in Sri Lanka
- (2) Economic reasons influencing marriage practices and thus, potentially, the vitality of the SLM language in the long run
- (3) The perceived economic benefits of learning Malaysian Malay as a means of communicating with the larger Malay population.

References:

Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power* (G. Raymond & M. Adamson, Trans.)
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