



Language Shift and Maintenance among the Telugu Community in Klang Valley, Malaysia

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Abstract

Telugu is an Indian language commonly spoken in the Indian states of Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Yanam. It is listed as the 15th largest language in the world and is known as the third most widely spoken language after Hindi and Bengali in India. Despite the substantial number of speakers worldwide, in Malaysia the Telugu speakers are a sub-minority Indian group which comprises only about 2.4 % of the total Indian population. This study investigates if the Telugu community in Klang Valley is still maintaining or has shifted/is shifting away to another language. The objectives of this research are to find out the language choice of the community in domains such as home, social, entertainment, official and religious; to investigate if there are any differences in language choice between the younger and older generation and finally to examine the main reasons for language maintenance or shift. Questionnaires were distributed to 100 Telugu participants who reside in Klang Valley and interviews focusing on the reasons behind language maintenance and shift were carried out with 10 participants. The findings show that Telugu language is slowly shifting away mainly to English among the younger generation as English is viewed to be very important for educational, economical and career advancement. However, language revival steps have been taken by Telugu Association of Malaysia (TAM) and it's slowly being revived among the younger generation. As for the older generation, the language and the culture are still strongly embedded in their lives. In general the majority of Telugus in Klang Valley still have a high regard towards their mother tongue and culture.

Keywords: *Minority language, Telugu language, Malaysian Telugu community, language shift, language maintenance, language situation, domain analysis*

1. Introduction

The Telugu language is commonly spoken by the Telugu community from the Indian states of Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Yanam. It is listed as the 15th largest language in the world and known as the third most widely spoken language after Hindi and Bengali in India. "About 70 million people in Andhra Pradesh and another 20 million people in other parts of India speak Telugu. There are many Telugu migrant communities in different parts of the world, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, South Africa, Mauritius, Malaysia, Singapore and Fiji" (Kuncha & Bathula, 2004).

Despite having a substantial number of speakers worldwide, in Malaysia the Telugu community who speaks this language is a sub-minority group of Indians. Other sub-minority groups of Indians found in Malaysia are the Malayalee, Sindhi and Punjabi communities. Malaysian Indians make up about 7.7% of the total population in which the majority are the Tamils (85.9%) followed by the Malayalees (3.2%), Telugus (2.4%), Sri Lankan Tamils (1.6%), Pakistanis (0.91%) and other Indians (6.77%) (Khoo, 1991; Population Census, 1980).

Malaysian Telugus have migrated from Andhra Pradesh during the colonial period in the 19th century to Tanah Melayu. Most of them migrated to Tanah Melayu as labourers, traders and some as skilled workers. Most of the Telugus that can be seen today are in their 4th or 5th generation. It has been estimated that there are more than 300,000 Telugus nationwide in Malaysia based on the Telugu Association of Malaysia (TAM Foundation, 2010). This study will focus on the Urban Malaysian Telugu community in Klang Valley.

So far, there have been studies conducted on other sub-minority Indian groups such as the Punjabi Sikh (David, Naji & Kaur, 2003), the Sindhi (David, 2006), the Malayalees (Nambiar, 2007), the Ceylonese (Navaneethachandran, 2011); but no study has been conducted on language maintenance or shift among the urban Telugu community in Klang Valley. Thus, this study may help to fill the gap. Recent source by



Gavarasana (2003) claims that the Telugu language is well and striving in Malaysia but a study on language attrition and maintenance in the Telugu community in Perak, Kedah and Johor shows a rapid decline (Shanmuganathan, 2010). This study will thus try to shed light on the language situation among the urban Telugu community in Klang Valley.

Furthermore, according to Fishman (1964), he stated that when languages are in contact, the powerful language has a high tendency to either dominate and replace the other languages or coexist with the other languages and are used side by side in a diglossic relationship (Fishman, 1989). On the other hand, Sridhar (1992) says that "speakers of Indian languages tend to maintain their languages over generations and countries, even when they live away from the region where it is spoken" (Sridhar, 1992, p. 56-57). Thus, this study investigates whether Fishman's or Sridhar's statements apply to the Telugu language within the Telugu community in Klang Valley, since it is constantly in contact with various other languages.

Finally, this study would also investigate the reasons for language shift or maintenance based on 6 factors listed by Sercombe (2001) which are bilingualism or multilingualism, economic power of language, impact of education and migration.

2. Objectives

1. To investigate language choice of the Telugu community in Klang Valley.
2. To investigate the difference/s in language choice between the younger and the older generation.
3. To identify some of the main reasons for language maintenance or shift.

3. Materials and Methods

This study used both quantitative and qualitative approach to obtain data. A quantitative approach was used to obtain statistical information through the use of questionnaires. Thus, the section first will discuss the questionnaire, the selected domains and the community profile. The second part of this chapter, discusses the qualitative approach used in this study which is the recorded interviews. This was done to further strengthen the findings. Finally, it will discuss the procedure of data collection and data analysis employed in this study.

3.1 Questionnaire

The questionnaires were adapted from Sankar (2004). There are three parts in the questionnaire. Part 1 investigates the demographic background of Klang Valley Telugus and variables which may influence language choice. In part 2 language choices across home, social, religious, entertainment and official domains were investigated. Part 3 investigates the perception of the Telugus mother tongue.

3.2 Selected Domains

In this study, 5 domains have been selected which are home, social, religion and culture, entertainment and official. In the home domain questions were aimed to obtain information on their first language spoken, language/s spoken with their family members during a normal interaction, discussion and even arguments. Next, in the social domain the questions focused on the language fluency in a conversation with friends and acquaintances that are from other linguistic background.

The religion domain aimed to find out the preferred language in religious practices such as during listening to sermon, saying prayers, singing religious songs, communicating with fellow Telugus in places of worship and reading religious books.

In the entertainment domain, participants were asked on their preferred language when engaging themselves in mass media. They were asked on their preferred language in which they listen to songs, watch movie programmes, and watch/listen to news and read books or magazines. Finally the official domain was to gauge respondents preferred language when dealing in an official setting such as with the public officers, doctors, police, and teachers.



3.3 Community Profile

This section provides information such as age, gender, religion, highest education qualification, medium of instruction in schools and Telugu language proficiency.

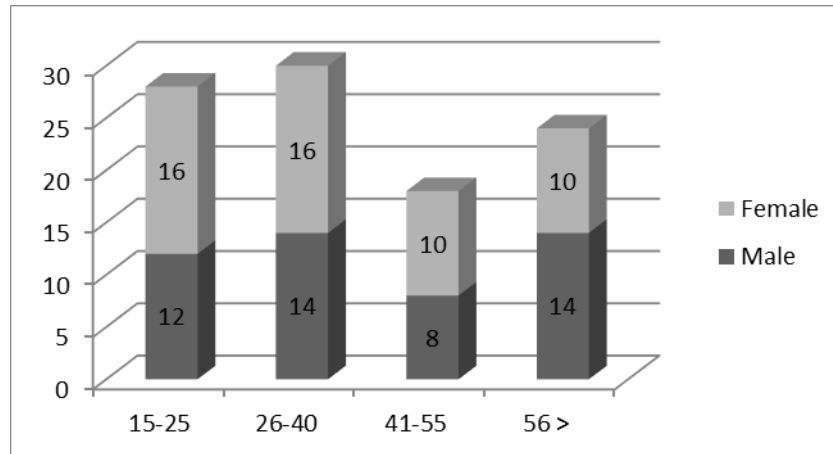


Figure 1 Distribution of respondents according to the age group

The total sample of respondents was comprised of 100 respondents (48 males and 52 females) who were categorized into four age groups, i.e. 15-25, 26-40, 41-55 and 56 and above. Figure 1 show respondents categorized into age groups. Categorizing into age groups is better than categorizing into generations as it is difficult to define the term generation accurately (Ismail, 2009).

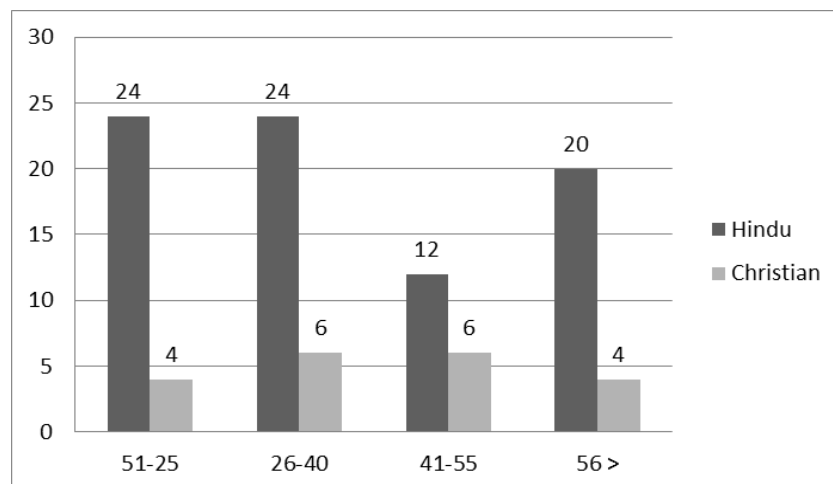


Figure 2 Distribution of respondents according to religion

A profile on the religion was made to show that the community can actually be further divided into smaller minorities and this might influence language choice as the languages available in Malaysia for Hinduism and Christianity are different. The majority of the community reported to be Hindus and a minority of them are Christians.

As for the highest education qualification, it increased as per the age group. Respondents of the younger generation mostly have obtained tertiary education qualification compared to the older generation. The medium of instructions in school is very much influenced by the education policy of the government of



the current times. The older generation had the opportunity to have formal Telugu education compared with the younger generation who mostly went through education with English/Malay being the medium of instruction.

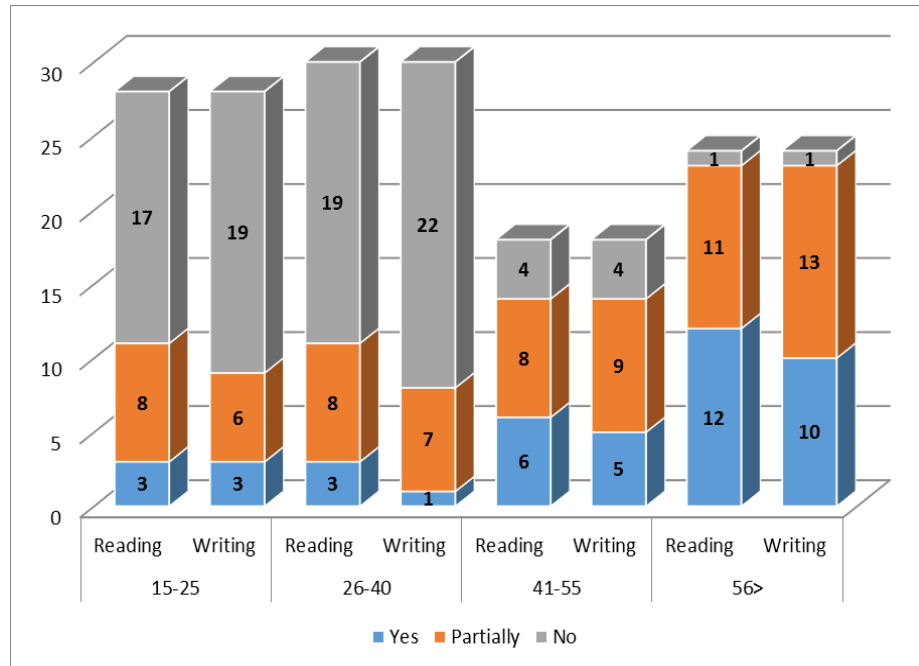


Figure 3 Telugu language proficiency

Figure 3 above clearly shows that Telugu language proficiency has deteriorated over the years as the younger age groups 15-25 and 26-40 are reported to be less proficient compared to the older ones. However, an interesting point to note is that there seems to be a slight increment in the proficiency of the respondents aged 15-25 compared to the respondents aged 26-40 probably due the TAM's effort in holding the language classes.

As for Telugu language proficiency, this research only looked into reading and writing and not speaking and listening as the majority of the respondents have answered they could speak and understand the language fairly well.

3.4 Interviews

The interviews were carried out with 10 respondents, 4 of whom aged 56 and above, 2 aged 41-55 and 4 aged 26-40. Interviews with people from different age groups give a wider range of insights on the language choice of the community from the perspective of both the older and the younger generation.

The interviewees were asked 5 main questions and some other relevant questions when necessary for clarification. The main objective of this interview was to gain information on the factors for language shift or maintenance among the community and at the same time to strengthen some of the findings obtained from questionnaire. Below is the list of questions:



Questions:

1. What is the current situation of Telugu language in Klang Valley -Can most Telugus read, write and speak Telugu fluently?
2. Is there any difference in terms of the language used now? If yes, in what way is it different?- slang, accent, proficiency level, etc.
3. Explain why the differences occur? Are there any contributing factors which have caused the differences?
4. Which of the factors listed above is the greatest challenge and why?
5. How is TAM doing in creating awareness among the younger generation in preserving the Telugu Language and how is the community responding to the campaign?

3.5 Data Collection

This study was conducted on 100 Telugu participants who reside in Klang Valley. Snowball sampling method was used to obtain participants for the study. However, few Telugu participants were identified first - since the researcher is part of the community, the researcher already knew a few participants. Next, sociolinguistic data was collected to establish a general profile of the Klang Valley Telugu Community. This was done by distributing pilot questionnaires to a sample of 20 participants.

Based on the community profile, the main questionnaires and the interview questions were edited where necessary and then the questionnaires were distributed to 100 participants. The participants were categorized according to gender and age to get a balanced response.

To further strengthen the findings, a qualitative approach was used by interviewing selected participants. The researcher used the snowballing method to obtain participants for this part of the research. The interviewees were recommended by other interviewees to the researcher. In total there were 10 participants who partook in the interview. The researcher visited each of the participants in person and clearly explained about the research and about the interview questions before the interview session. In average the interview lasted for about 15 to 20 minutes for each session with each interviewee.

3.6 Data Analysis

The questionnaire's data were coded, analysed and interpreted using an Excel summary sheet. An illustration of percentages and frequencies of the figures were presented in table form followed by explanations and descriptions. On the other hand, information obtained from the interview was transcribed, analysed, explained and summarized where necessary.

4. Results and Discussion

This section will be divided into 3 parts, i.e. language choice in selected domains, language attitudes and finally factors for language maintenance or shift. Each of this part aims to answer each research question.

4.1 Language use in selected Domains

4.1.1 General

When the respondents were asked to list the languages they know according to proficiency level with 1 being the most proficient and 4 being the least proficient:

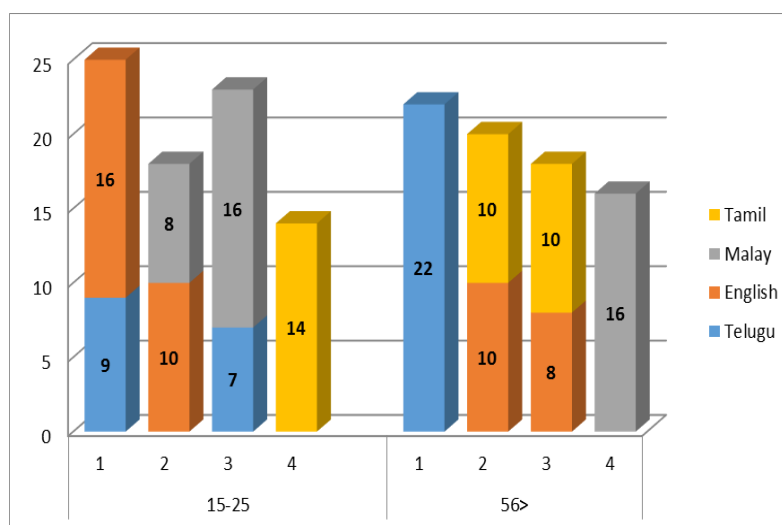


Figure 4 Languages in order of proficiency

In the age group 15-25, the first and second most proficient language is English with the majority of 16 and 10 respondents respectively followed by 16 respondents stating Malay and 14 respondents stating Tamil being the least proficient languages.

In contrast, the majority of 22 respondents from the age group 56 > stated to be most proficient in Telugu followed by English and Tamil with only 10 respondents. The third most proficient language is Tamil with 10 respondents and the least proficient language is Malay with 16 respondents. When asked if the respondents use Telugu and another language in the same sentence:

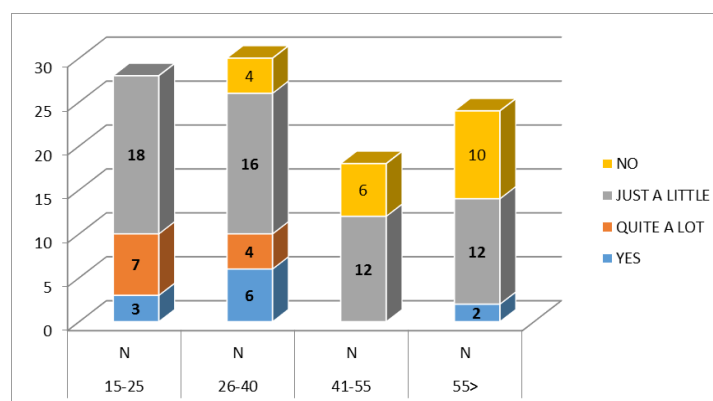


Figure 5 Mixture of other languages

Based on Figure 5, there is a significant rise in language mixing among the younger ones compared to the older ones. Languages frequently used with Telugu are English and Tamil but English was stated to be the most used.

Based on the data collected from the interview's first 2 questions, the majority answered that most Telugus in the current generation are not fluent in Telugu especially in reading and writing. Although many can speak the language, they often mix with other languages. Their understanding/listening skills of the language are fairly good.



4.1.2 Home

The majority of the respondents have stated that they first spoke Telugu with their parents across all age groups except 3 from the age group 15-25 who stated to English, 2 from age group 26-40 each stated Tamil and English respectively and 1 from age group 41-55 who stated Tamil.

When asked if they normally speak Telugu at home, the majority answered yes except 6 from the age group 15-25, 4 from 26-40 and 1 from 41-55 who said No and explained that they speak English or Tamil at home.

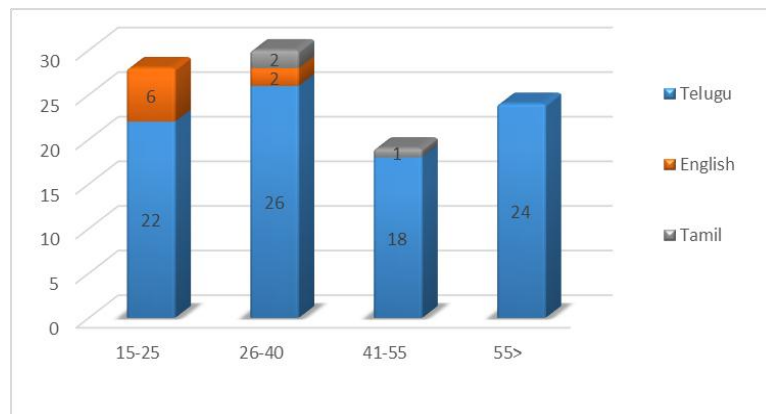


Figure 6 Language normally spoken at home

4.1.3 Social

Figure 7 and Figure 8 show the data when the respondents were asked which language(s) they tend to use in a conversation with friends and acquaintances according to the proficiency level.

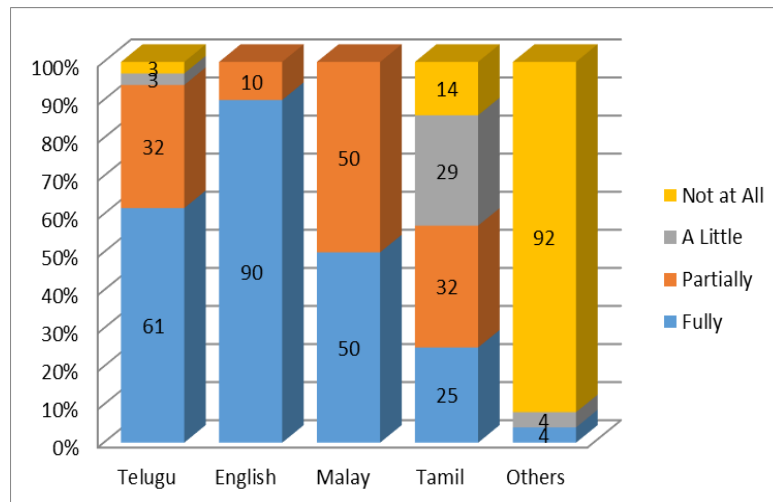


Figure 7 Language(s) use in a conversation with friends and acquaintances (age group 15-25)

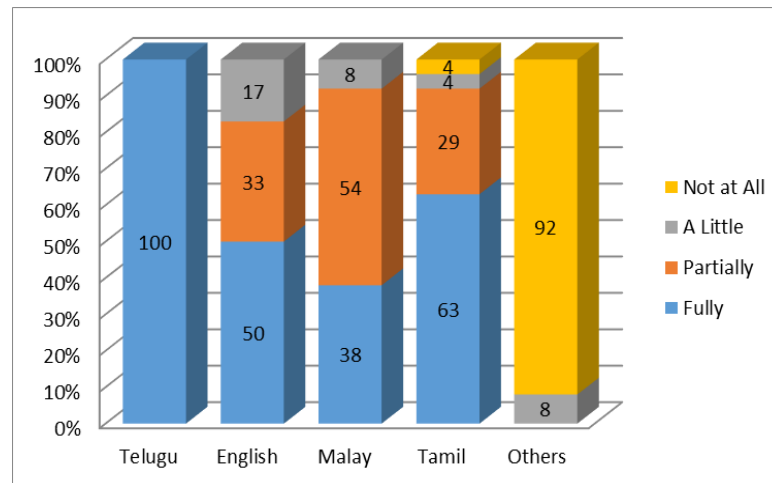


Figure 8 Language(s) use in a conversation with friends and acquaintances (age group 56 >)

Based on the 2 figures above, it can be seen that respondents from both age groups are able to converse in Telugu fairly well although there is a decline in the proficiency among the younger ones. It is interesting to note that English proficiency has increased over the years among the younger respondents.

4.1.4 Religion

It is important to take note of religious demographic of the community as it affects the language choice of the respondents. This is due to the language medium used in Hinduism and Christianity in Malaysia differs and their choices are very much dependent on the language(s) available.

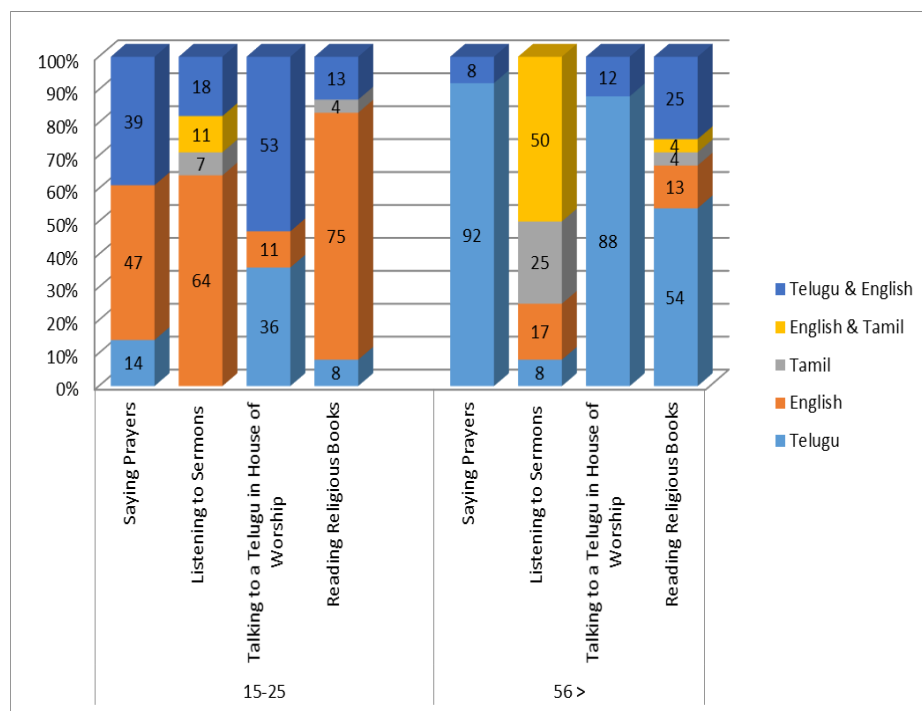


Figure 9 Language(s) use in religion & culture



Based on Figure 9 there is a significant difference in the choice of language between the younger and older ones in all four aspects of religious domain. English and the mixture of English & Telugu are predominant among the younger ones when saying prayers in contrast with older ones who used predominantly Telugu.

4.1.5 Entertainment

In the entertainment part, respondents were asked about their preferred language when engaging with mass media. It is important to know that the use of Telugu in mass media is limited in Malaysia in spite of the improvement in provision of printed, audio and video media in Telugu over the years. The world of internet has sped up the process, too.

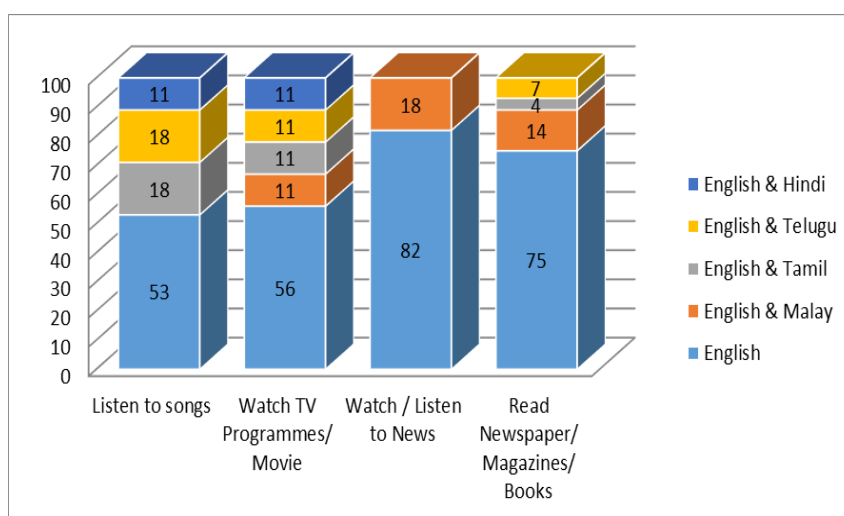


Figure 10 Language use for entertainment (age group 15-25)

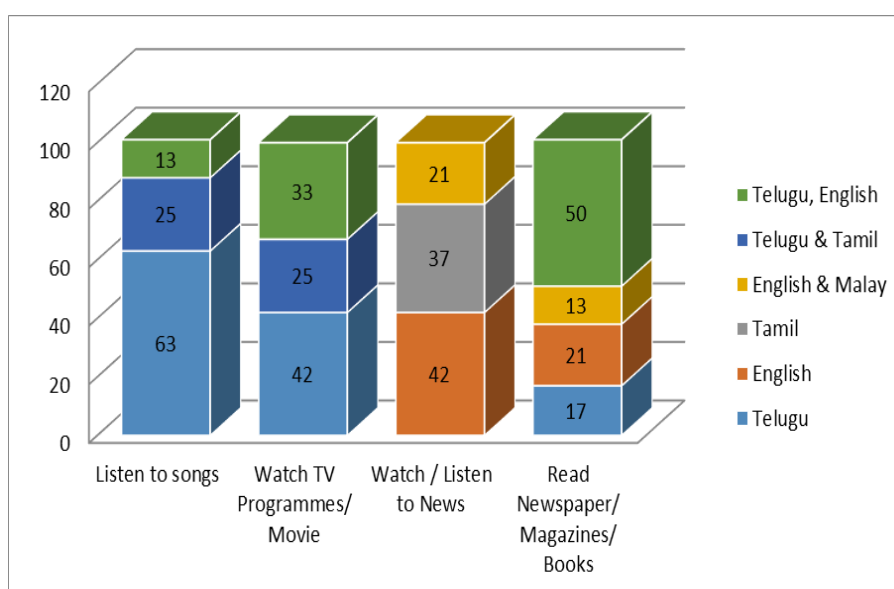


Figure 11 Language choice for entertainment (age group 56 >)



Based on both Figures 10 and 11 there is a great contrast in terms of language preference for entertainment by the younger and older age groups. Based on an overall analysis the younger age group prefers English whereas the older one prefers Telugu.

4.1.6 Official Settings

The majority of the respondents from the older age group have shown a preference of using more Malay and Tamil compared to the younger ones who prefer to use more English and Malay to communicate with public officers.

4.2 Language Attitudes

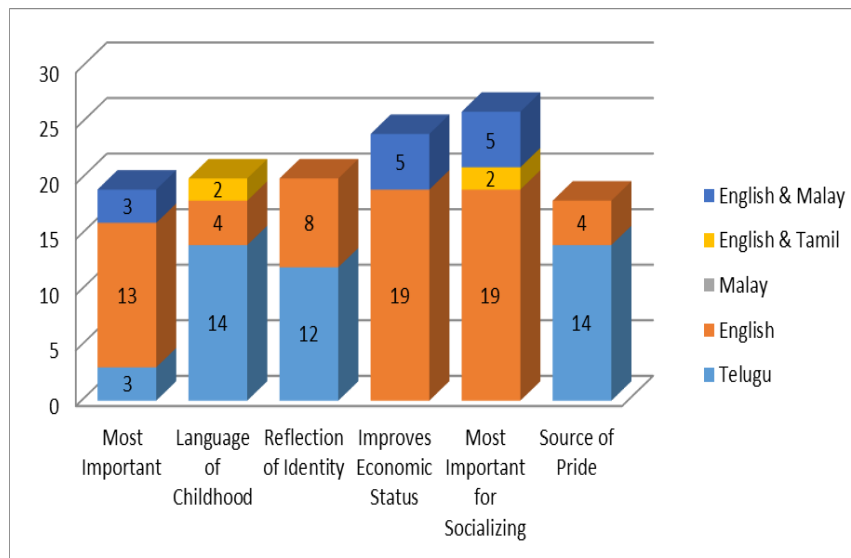


Figure 12 Language attitudes (age group 15-25)

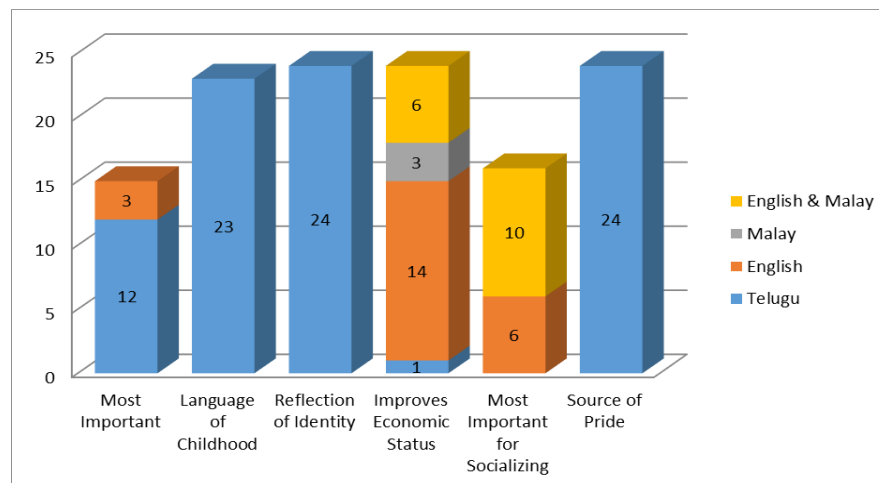


Figure 13 Language attitudes (age group 56 >)

It can be seen that both these age groups still hold a high sense of pride towards their mother tongue and are aware of the importance of English and Malay. However, the younger respondents place higher importance on English compared to the older one.



When asked if speaking Telugu gives an identity as a Telugu, the majority answered YES with an exception of 3 respondents who answered NO and gave reasons such as ‘one is considered Telugu when one practices the culture and tradition’, ‘One can be identified as a Telugu from the name and family name’ and ‘the family name and the tradition plays an important role in identifying a Telugu’

It is also interesting to notice that across all age groups, all answered YES to the question ‘Do you want your children to learn to use Telugu?’ and the reasons given are for heritage and communication with family members.

4.3 Reasons for Language Shift or Maintenance

Questions 4 and 5 of the interview asked on the reasons for the change, mentioned in interview questions 1 and 2. The reasons given by the interviewees can be categorized into 4 factors out of 6 factors outlined in the theoretical framework by Sercombe, 2001. The factors are bilingualism or multilingualism, economic power of language, impact of education and migration.

4.3.1 Impact of Education

Anna: “last time... they spoke fluently because last time they went to Telugu schools and Telugu classes but now no more.”

4.3.2 Bilingualism or Multilingualism

Annamah: “Last time..hmm they may be proficient in Telugu because they only had one language to speak but now since we are living in multicultural society where we speak more than one languages the telugu people tend to speak more than one languages and they also tend to mix other languages in while they are speaking Telugu itself.”

4.3.3 Economic Power of Language

Maraiah: “Other reason will be because in Klang Valley they think Telugu is not important. Maybe for higher education or something it’s not important and even for job vacancy they don’t require for Telugu language. They only ask for Mandarin and English.”

Siva: “Parents especially who are highly educated parents whereby they are into corporate sectors like myself working private companies not for government we know how important English is. We know that children must be able speak. English is not an easy language actually you know.”

4.3.4 Migration

VK Rao: “Mainly because of schools la.. and here in town.. the outsiders nobody really speak in Telugu. In village they all spoke in Telugu; the Chinese and even other Indians all can also speak Telugu well because they had schools but now as the new millennium they all have forgotten about it.”

Mrs Sethu: “And another thing is, those days most of them lived in estate. They stayed in one community like that. Once they have migrated to town they scattered everywhere. So mostly they talk better Tamil... maybe because of TV influence.”

4.3.5 Maintenance/ Revival

P Raj: ... the internet and all that... lately the younger generation are slowly getting more exposed to the language. Hopefully they’ll slowly catch up because it takes time. With the internet and all that the language can be improved for time to come.

Some other response given by the interviewees was that, Telugu is changing due to modernization; as the modern community in the town tend to bring a lot English words into Telugu. Besides, some said that many don’t know the importance of the language in the current context and the purpose of the language besides communication with family members and identity.

When asked about which factor poses the greatest challenge, the majority however, have stated that having no formal education is the main reason for the declining standard of Telugu proficiency among the Telugus in Klang Valley. However some interviewees have mentioned that with the current efforts taken to have Telugu classes and the internet, the younger generation will slowly pick up and revive the language back to what it used to be.

Question 5 asked on how TAM is doing in creating awareness among the younger generation in preserving the Telugu Language and how is the community responding to the campaign. Based on the responses given by the interviewees, measures have been taken by TAM to improve the language proficiency and culture awareness among the younger generation. The main focus of TAM in recent years



has been channelled towards Telugu education. However, based on some responses few challenges have been reported such as lack of parents' cooperation in sending the children to the classes, the fact that the campaign has not reached to everyone and finally the lack of awareness of the importance of learning their mother tongue.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, although there is a noticeable difference in language choice in most of the domains between the younger and the older age group, Telugu is still widely used in the home domain with the exception of the younger ones who use Telugu mixed with English. The nature of Telugu may have changed among the younger age groups due to code switching between the languages that are prevalent among the younger ones. However it is important to note that the majority of them spoke Telugu as their first language at home across all age groups.

Proficiency of Telugu Language has declined greatly over the years. However with efforts taken by the Telugu Association of Malaysia in reviving the language and the provision of internet, it is hoped the language will be revived back to how it used to be. After all, the majority of the respondents stated that being able to speak the language gives a Telugu Identity. This may be a big challenge in view of the language shift seen in comparison of the younger and the older respondents in this study. Thus, the Telugu Association of Malaysia has to take advanced measures in the effort for language revival and to curb further deterioration of the language use in the community.

6. Acknowledgements

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those who have given me support, encouragement and guidance throughout my journey of completing my Master's dissertation. First and foremost, I would like to thank the Almighty for making this possible. I also would like to thank University of Malaya for this opportunity to progress academically as well as for the financial support given under SBUM. I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to my supervisor Dr. Paolo Coluzzi for all his generous guidance, support, encouragement and above all his insightful suggestions. I also would like thank my family for their faith, understanding and support throughout my journey. I would like thank my classmates and colleagues for ideas and information they have shared during this journey. Big thanks to all those who have participated in this research - the questionnaire respondents and interviewees. Without them this research would have been impossible. This research is dedicated to my loving father who is always concerned for the Telugu community in Malaysia and to all Malaysian Telugus.

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