Malaysian Tamils and Tamil linguistic culture

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The purpose of this paper is to examine the position of Tamil as an ethnic minority and language in Malaysia, and to make some predictions about the prognosis for survival of Tamil in the twenty-first century. Tamils are the largest of the language groups that form the ‘Indian’ minority in Malaysia, which constitutes around 9% of the population, or 1.5 million. Within this number, people classified as Tamil-speaking are about 85%.1 In a fairly recent compendium of articles on south Asian immigrants in southeast Asia (Sandhu and Mani, 1993) over half of the articles are devoted to the question of Indian communities in Malaysia—19 out of a total of 37, the rest being devoted to Brunei, Indonesia, Myanmar (Burma), the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand.

All of them see the situation of Indians in Malaysia as somehow problematical, whether it be the preferences given to Bumiputra2 Malaysians over immigrant Indians, the socio-economic conditions affecting plantation workers or the educational opportunities provided their children. I will try in this paper is to place the issue of Tamil language and language maintenance within the larger scheme of the future of the Indian community in Malaysia, and see whether we can predict a prognosis for the survival of Tamil, and indeed the survival of a Tamil-speaking minority, in Malaysia in the twenty-first century.3 In fact the future of Indians in Singapore may be more secure than the languages spoken by them; what would

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1 Later I will deal with the subject of the increasing number of Tamils who are not actually Tamil speakers.

2 The term Bumiputra ‘sons of the soil’ is used in Malaysia for all Malay speakers and other indigenous peoples who are of the Malay ‘race’ but not necessarily mother-tongue speakers of Malay. Chinese, Indians, and others (lain-lain) are by definition non-Bumiputra.

3 Contrast this with the articles on Singapore, where the future of Indians in Singapore is described as ‘not without promise’. (Sandhu, 1993, p. 787, op. cit.)
happen if all Singapore Indians were to become English speakers, and how this
would fit the wishes of the Chinese majority is another question. In a sense, this
paper will somewhat resemble a book review of that portion of the Sandhu and Mani
volume devoted to Malaysia, for it provides the most up-to-date research on the general
problems facing Tamils (and other Indian immigrant communities) in Malaysia. What
it does not do is to discuss in very great detail the fate of the Tamil language in
Malaysia, and here is where I must fill in with my own very inadequate observations.

Language policy in Malaysia is a topic that cannot be openly discussed without
fear of being charged under the Sedition Act of 1948. It is only one of those taboo
issues (the place of Islam, the special status of Malays) that may not be discussed in
Malaysia, for fear of disturbing certain ethnic sensibilities. Therefore the only writing
one finds on the topic of language policy are filiopietistic articles extolling the
virtue of the system, its natural fairness, its commitment to building up the national
culture, and so forth. It can be described, but it cannot be criticized, so criticism of it
will only be made outside the country.

Internal critics must therefore tread lightly. The government of Malaysia has itself
made some moves that violated, in some people’s views, its own policy toward
Bahasa Malaysia. Such was the proposal, made early in 1994, to allow some science
teaching to go on in English, because of the generally low level of knowledge of
English among Malaysians (code for: among Malays) which would jeopardize
Malaysia’s ability to modernize and become an industrialized nation any time soon.
The Prime Minister himself defended this proposal, but he had to immediately con-
tend with massive criticism from the association of Malay teachers, who vowed to
“not give an inch” to such a “drastic” change in the language policy.

That this should cause such a furor must be viewed in terms of the issues it covertly
raises. The problem is not that there is an inadequate knowledge of English
among Malaysian citizens, such that would jeopardize Malaysia’s ability to partici-
pate in scientific developments. That is, though Malaysians of Indian and Chinese
background do quite well in English, and often must seek higher education abroad
(though English medium) because they are denied access to Malaysian institutions
of higher learning due to the ethnic quotas, there are insufficient numbers of Malays
or Bumiputras whose knowledge of English is adequate. Thus if English-knowing
non-Bumiputras are allowed to dominate the scientific fields, even if it would help
Malaysia to modernize, this will not help the Malays, so it cannot be allowed to
happen. What apparently would be the ideal solution would be a policy to help

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4 I have examined the contrast between Malaysia’s language policy and that of Singapore as they affect

5 When I received the request to appear on the panel for which this paper was originally written, I had
hopes to be doing research on the question by means of a Fulbright grant in Malaysia and Singapore; the
research clearance for Malaysia came too late for me to do any but the most perfunctory kind of research
into this issue, but many of the observations I made in Singapore are pertinent, though one must be
careful to not overgeneralize.

6 The policy, as stated in the Constitution (Amendment) Act, 1971, is that the status of Malay as official
and other languages as tolerated, “may no longer be questioned, it being considered that such a sensitive
issue should for ever be removed from the arena of public discussion.” (Suffian bin Hashim, 1976, p. 324).
Malays learn enough English to study science, but not permit this for non-Bumiputras. Such a policy would be too blatantly unfair, and therefore impossible to implement and defend, so it cannot be formulated as such.

My goal, as originally stated for this paper, was to establish how the Tamils of Malaysia were maintaining their language in the face of a national language policy that emphasizes integration through Bahasa Malaysia and Islam. Since the Tamils are known for their intense language loyalty in India and Sri Lanka, I was expecting to find that their love of the language and intense language maintenance efforts, manifested in India and Sri Lanka with strong opposition to Hindi, Sanskrit and English\(^7\) would result in effective language maintenance within the Malaysian context. The approach taken by the Tamils is known as corpus planning or corpus treatment by sociologists of language; it is perceived by Tamils to be the most important kind of language maintenance, but in this day and age it may in fact have little relevance in contexts such as Malaysia and Singapore.

Language maintenance in Tamilnadu, and in contested Sri Lanka, also involves status management,\(^8\) and various measures have been undertaken to restrict the domains of Hindi, Sanskrit and English (in Tamilnadu, and Sinhala (in Sri Lanka) so that Tamil can recapture the domains of elementary and secondary education, the media, and so forth. This has been more successful in terms of keeping back Hindi and Sanskrit, but in the case of Sinhala, of course, the situation in Sri Lanka has turned into a civil war. In the case of English, which is perceived in some ways as a buffer against Hindi (and Sinhala) efforts are ambivalent, and many of those who decry \textit{angilakkalappu} use English and even send their children to English-medium schools. The result is that English is still the main language of higher education in Tamilnadu; in Sri Lanka the battle to replace English with Sinhala, even in higher education, has been much more intense. In India, of course, the central government has no control over local educational policies, so no attempt to impose Hindi as a medium of instruction in Tamilnadu universities and colleges has ever been, or will ever be, attempted.

In Malaysia (and in Singapore) language policy is not set by the Tamils, and Tamils are therefore in the position that Telugu speakers or Kannada speakers are in Tamilnadu: they are a tiny minority, have no say in overall policy formulation, and are suffered to maintain their languages only for elementary education, if there.\(^9\)

\(^7\) The current antipathy is strongest against Hindi and is known as Hindi \textit{etirppu}; the opposition to Sanskrit was stronger several decades ago, and the opposition to English is mainly to English loan words being borrowed into Tamil (\textit{angilakkalappu}), not to English as an instrument or as a language per se. The opposition to Sanskrit has had the effect of ridding the written language of almost all traces of loan words from that language; in the spoken language, where no overt rules are prescribed, loan words from Hindi, Sanskrit, English, Portuguese and other languages abound.

\(^8\) I prefer the terms 'corpus management' and 'status management' to 'planning' or 'treatment'.

\(^9\) One of the great deficiencies of Indian language policy is the very weak provisions for language groups who live in territories where they are in the minority. It is fine to be a Telugu speaker in Andhra Pradesh; it is not so fine to be one in Kerala, Karnataka or Tamilnadu, and the constitutional provisions to protect such groups are noticeably without teeth. Each linguistic state, having driven out the perceived oppressor and established its own linguistic regime, turns out to be an even more ferocious oppressor of its own linguistic minority groups. The only exception to this comes through bilateral agreements between various linguistic states, but the status of even smaller linguistic groups is totally unprotected.
My goal, then, is to show how Tamil ideas about language and language maintenance, which I hold are rooted in their notions of linguistic culture, when confronted with Malaysian policy (and linguistic culture) on language will be in a state of conflict, which in the end works to the detriment of Tamil language maintenance in Malaysia. I have defined linguistic culture (Schiffman, 1996) as the sum totality of ideas, values, beliefs, attitudes, prejudices, myths, religious strictures, and all the other cultural ideas that speakers bring to their dealings with language from their culture. Linguistic culture also is concerned with the transmission and codification of language and has bearing also on the culture’s notions of the value of literacy and the sanctity of texts. Language policy, I maintain, is primarily a social construct, and as such rests primarily on these other conceptual elements—the belief systems, attitudes, myths, the whole complex that we are referring to as linguistic culture.

1. Educational policy

A word of background is in order here on what languages may be used in education in Malaysia. In “National Schools” Malay is the medium of elementary education; Tamil and/or Chinese may be taught if there are 15 students who petition for it. Otherwise, Tamil and Chinese medium “National-type” Schools may exist, and they receive varying degrees of government support; Chinese schools tend to reject total subvention, in order to maintain more control. At the secondary level, Malay medium is the only publicly supported schooling available. Privately supported Chinese schools do exist, but there are none for Tamil, since the Tamil community cannot afford the expense that such a system would entail. Again, at the secondary level, Tamil and Chinese may be taught as a subject if 15 students request it. The Malaysian constitution provides guarantees for the use of these languages in the above “unofficial contexts”, i.e. they are officially tolerated (also some use in broadcasting, the Department of Indian Studies at the U Malaya, and support for teacher training) but this official tolerance is thought of as unofficial since only Malay may be official.

The German sociologist of language Heinz Kloss provides a list of language-maintenance strategies that enhance or hinder language maintenance by minority groups in immigrant societies like the United States (Kloss 1966). One of the factors that enhances language maintenance is “pre-immigration experience with language maintenance”, particularly in dealing with linguistic suppression in the form of underground resistance to education in another language medium, self-help language schools, etc. Groups that were already ready to cope with language maintenance in their home country because of suppression there, such as the Poles under Czarist Russian rule, were more able to “hit the ground running”, as it were, perhaps because the notions that widespread community involvement was important, everyone had to participate in order to make it work, everyone had to be eternally vigilant, etc., were accepted.

Tamils who came to Malaysia and other parts of southeast Asia brought strategies with them that were developed in their home country, and at first these strategies seemed to work. Essentially these strategies were:
All schooling through elementary levels should be in Tamil only. The kind of Tamil needed was whatever was being developed in India and no adaptations or compromises to local conditions were necessary, or even permissible. English could be admitted at the higher levels and would in fact be quite useful in the new environment. Any other local languages that were useful or necessary (e.g. Malay) could also be acquired for auxiliary use, but should not be given first or even second priority.

In the plantation economy of nineteenth century Malaya and the Straits Settlements, these strategies worked quite well. Most Tamils of the period came with the intention of returning to India at some point; British education favored Malay only, and no schools in other languages were supported by the colonial power. Tamils of the more educated classes (actually many were from Sri Lanka) worked as clerks and supervisors and their knowledge of English was an advantage to them in this situation, since neither the Malays nor Chinese seemed to want to require English education. Plantation Tamils did learn some Malay, enough to get around and do their work, but in few cases if any did it actually supplant Tamil. A great cultural barrier for most Tamils, though not all, was Islam, which served to isolate and contain them. Again a strategy brought from India (avoid contact with Muslims and Islam) helped maintain the linguistic isolation. Knowledge of Tamil was necessary to be a good Hindu; it would not constitute a path to Islam. The few Tamil Muslims that came at this period were indeed in a different kind of situation, and assimilation through intermarriage of Indian Muslims and Malays did occur, but mostly with North Indian Muslims and Malays, not Tamils (later this would change). For better or worse, Tamil Muslims tended to remain solidary with Tamil Hindus and Christians, and cooperated with them in language maintenance.

Though Tamils seemed to think that the strategies delineated above would serve them well in Malaya, these strategies have become increasingly problematical after independence and under the threat of Malaysia’s very stringent language policy. I hypothesize that the strategies brought from India have not been adapted, in fact may not be adaptable, to the current environment, and are not serving the cause of Tamil language maintenance.

But this is not the whole story. Another all-pervasive and inescapable fact about Indians in Southeast Asia, and especially in Malaya, is the fragmentary and disunited nature of the community. This is manifested in different ways:

- Indians come from a number of different parts of the subcontinent, and do not all speak the same language.
- Indians are settled in many different localities, often separated from and in isolation from others of their own kind.

10 Only the very anciently settled and assimilated Chitty Tamil community in Melaka had become Malay speakers; more recently arrived Tamils did not.
Within any given language group, there are the usual splits involving caste, religion, and class. Even if all Tamils were concentrated in one area, there would be differences that are perceived as unbridgeable. The gulf between Sri Lanka Tamils (Rajakrishnan, 1993), who acted as overseers and clerks, and laborer Tamils (from India) was vast.

This fragmentation and segmentation has remained until the present time, and underlies many of the current problems facing the Indian community in Malaysia. As far as Tamils are concerned, it works against language maintenance in a number of important ways, and combined with the inadequate and inappropriate language maintenance strategies brought from India, is now taking its toll on the Tamil language.

2. Language shift

If language maintenance does not occur, there can be several results. One is language death; speakers become bilingual, younger speakers become dominant in another language, and the language is said to die. The speakers or the community does not die, of course, they just become a subset of speakers of another language. The end result is language shift for the population, and if the language isn’t spoken elsewhere, it dies. In the case of Tamil in Malaysia, we do not speak of death because Tamil continues to live on in Tamilnadu, but the effect is the same. For the speakers who go to their death as Tamils still, it is a kind of death to see their children shift to another language.

In Malaysia, if Tamils shift languages, there are two possible outcomes. One is that they will become Malay speakers; the other is to become English speakers. (Chinese is not a practical outcome.) In fact, few Tamils are becoming Malay speakers, except for individual Tamil Muslims who intermarry with Malays and whose offspring grow up speaking Malay. The more general outcome is that many Tamils, especially well-educated Tamils, are becoming English speakers. Less-educated Tamils, however, especially those still living in plantation communities, continue to speak Tamil, and the prognosis for their language maintenance is for the time being favorable.

There are a number of reasons why English-educated Tamils are in fact switching to English as a dominant language, and there is no one reason that is more important than others. There is a tendency in the Tamil community to lay the blame for this shift at someone else’s door, but neither the government’s language policy, nor the Tamil community itself, nor the difficulty of maintaining a Tamil-maintenance infrastructure, nor any other reason is sufficient alone. In fact Tamil is doing fine when the conditions that enhance language maintenance pertain, and these are precisely those enumerated by Kloss for German immigrants in the USA:11

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11 Note that Kloss’s 15 factors contain six positive factors, and nine ambivalent factors; in the current case, factor 1 is unambiguously positive, while 2–4 later are ambivalent, i.e. they can work either way. In the Malaysian case, combined with factor 1, they are positive in terms of maintenance.
Isolation and linguistic islands:
- Low educational background and aspirations
- Small size
- Great cultural difference (including religion) between group and majority.

The plantation economy, where most of the work in rubber and palm oil tapping is performed by Tamil and other Indian workers, provides a perfect cocoon in which Tamil can be maintained. Tamil is admissible as a medium of education for elementary education in Malaysia, and this is provided to the children of the communities. Because of the segmented nature of Indian society and its perpetuation in emigration, the kind of workers who came to do this kind of work tend to have not much cultural capital, education, and/or aspirations for anything more. Unlike the educated (Sri Lanka) Tamils who worked as clerks and teachers, knew English, and rose to become a professional urbanized elite, these Tamils never had educational opportunities, and despite being able theoretically to go on to secondary education and higher education, do not aspire to do so. Their elementary education in Tamil suffices them, and since these small pockets of Tamil speakers have been (until recently) always located in isolated rural areas, are perceived as no threat to Malaysian society, unlike the other ethnic minority, which has congregated in urban areas. Given the religious differences (Hinduism vs. Islam), plantation Tamils other than Muslim Tamils are unlikely to ever “merge” with Malay society, either linguistically or culturally. In the article by Marimuttu (1993), the claim is made that the educational system provided to the plantation Tamils does not raise them out of the cultural dead-end they are stuck in, and is not designed to do so. This system, according to Marimuttu, preserves and perpetuates the plantation system in a kind of neocolonial atmosphere. As such we can imagine that the Tamil language will be maintained in this environment for the foreseeable future; as long as their is rubber tapping and palm-oil cultivation, the same population is bound to continue to do that work, since Malays do not perform this work, and Chinese are primarily urbanized and in business. The situation of the urbanized educated Tamil, however, is a different one. Here we see in operation a number of other factors that work against language maintenance. One is the pervasive

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12 Malay is the medium of “National Schools” and Chinese and Tamil are tolerated as the medium of “National-type Schools”, but English is not tolerated for state-supported education. Private schools using English do exist, and private Chinese medium secondary-schools also exist, but they do not receive any state support.

13 This point may not be emphasized too strongly: Indian plantation workers, mainly Tamils, came from the most destitute, impoverished and lowest-caste, including what used to be called untouchable backgrounds. They were already socialized to be docile, servile and unquestioning of authority, and the colonial plantation capitalized on these attitudes and helped to perpetuate them. In reports from Colonial Malaya, Indian workers were praised again and again for their docility and willingness to put up with the most abject conditions, compared with the Chinese, who were “rebellious, entrepreneurial, and uncooperative” with the plantation system.

14 There is some movement out of the plantation economy into urban areas, but neither the schools nor the “profession” of rubber-tapping provide people with marketable skills in the city. Those who do leave are now being replaced by Bangladesh and Indonesian contract workers to some extent. Another reason for little social movement is that there has been no practical way to mechanize tapping, so there is no way to increase productivity and wage levels; individual workers must still approach the trees on and tap them.
segmented character of Indian culture, and Indian communities abroad. One can discern linguistic differences, caste differences, and differences of village and even “national” origin, i.e. whether Tamils came from India or Sri Lanka. Tamils (and other Indians) in the urban environment are perhaps even more segmented than are rural tapper communities, so the urge to work together on language maintenance is weak. Just like Germans of different backgrounds in the nineteenth century USA, Tamils of various backgrounds do not see themselves as having any interests in common with other Tamils, or at least not enough to lay aside these differences until it is too late.

Secondly, the aforementioned language maintenance strategies brought from India turn out, in post-colonial Malaysia, to be counterproductive. An emphasis on keeping Tamil pure of Hindi, Sanskrit and English influences is rather futile when the language of threat is Malay. But it is the emphasis on corpus work rather than status concerns that is counterproductive. It is not the corpus of Malay (or Hindi, or Sanskrit or English) that is the problem here, it is the status of Malay within the national language policy that is a problem, but the other issue is that the status of English in this equation is conflicted.

That is, this urban group had an original advantage in colonial Malaya because of their knowledge of English, and used that advantage, and still uses it, despite obstacles from the official policy, for their own benefit. But in another sense, the status of English is a danger, since this group of Tamils, and indeed Tamils everywhere, have not treated the status of English as problematical. They have embraced English, and continue to embrace it, as a barrier or buffer against Hindi, Sinhala, and Malay. The problem now is that this group has relaxed its guard against English, and too much knowledge of English now means that this group now knows too little Tamil, and is in fact not committed enough to Tamil. In fact, many of my informants, though committed to Tamil, even professionally (University teaching, Ministry of Education) declared that they would not put their children in Tamil schools because Tamil schools are a dead-end, both professionally and socially.

3. A new factor: urban squatter settlements

The previously described situation, in which Tamil communities either consisted of rural estate workers or urbanized middle-class Tamils is now complicated by a third factor, the urban squatter settlement populated by Tamils who have left the plantations and are now working in various low-paying jobs in urban areas such as Kuala Lumpur, Johore Baru, and Penang. They congregate in ‘squatter settlements’ (Rajoo, 1993) and send their children to Tamil medium schools.16 For whatever

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15 They object to mixing Tamil and English, angilakkalappu, but they do not object to anyone knowing English.

16 In at least one case I know of, the urban area has come to the plantation—the Kuala Lumpur megalopolis has sprawled out into Selangor State to engulf former plantation land, which has been converted into luxury housing, but the Tamil school and a squatter zone continue to exist, cheek by jowl with the fancy housing. Such schools persist in their substandard conditions, despite their status as “National-type schools, which should receive state subsidies, but are provided with very little other than teachers’ salaries.
reasons these communities still choose Tamil medium, the general overall economic
and cultural destitution of these groups means that Tamil medium prepares them for
nothing but the substandard conditions they have always been subjected to, i.e. it
replicates the social inequality: they work at part-time jobs, in factories at the lowest
level, as messengers and sweepers, and have the highest rate of single-parent famil-
ies, alcoholism, crime, prostitution and all the other social evils of the modern urban
underclass. One Tamil stated to me that it appeared that the Tamils are and will
always be the lumpenproletariat of Malaysia; he saw no way for these Tamils to
break out of this cycle and move up the socio-economic ladder. Those that manage
to do so, by attendance at National Schools, will leave the Tamil language behind.
In his view, Tamil will only survive in Malaysia if Tamils remain poor and at the
lowest level of society. We therefore now have two language strategies employed by
the Tamil “community” in Malaysia. One continues to prefer Tamil schooling; the
other abjures Tamil schooling and is economically motivated to prefer Malay and
English; Tamil may remain as a home language, but in many cases not even this
happens. This is not to point the finger; this strategy, of embracing English to the
detriment of Tamil, is in fact a survival mechanism engendered by the national lan-
guage policy. Several elements of that policy conspire to cause this:

- Admission to higher education is controlled by ethnic quotas, and seats are
  reserved on an ethnic basis. If certain ethnic groups do not use their seats,
  they are not relinquished to another group, they are simply not filled. The
  group that is not filling its quota is the Bumiputra group. Indians and Chinese
  who would otherwise be qualified for these seats must go abroad for higher
  education.\(^\text{17}\)

- Since it cannot be determined in advance who will be admitted and who will
  not, students must plan for the eventuality of expatriation in order to get
  higher education. Planning for expatriation means planning for high English
  proficiency.

- Students who go abroad for education often do not return, but obtain jobs
  elsewhere. The cost of this ‘brain drain’ for Malaysia is immense, since,
  whatever else anyone cares about who gets educated, a tremendous amount
  of foreign exchange is leaving the country to finance this drain, and if the
  students do not return (and why indeed should they?) the cost of their edu-
  cation is lost to Malaysia.

- Students who otherwise might want to return to Malaysia to work have other
  barriers to face. One is quotas (“glass ceilings”) for certain jobs; another is
  barriers to degree-holders from certain countries. The general atmosphere is
  one of not being wanted. In face of this, the strategy of planned expatriation
  via English is not hard to understand.

\(^\text{17}\) Consider a comparison with a transportation model: imagine an airline that assigned seats on its
flights by ethnic quota; if certain seats are not filled because not enough members of a certain ethnic group
made reservations, the flight leaves with empty seats, and members of other ethnicities are obliged to
tavel by some other mode of transportation, or wait for the next flight.
This strategy of course colludes with other strategies mentioned above, such as the predilection of (educated) Tamils to learn English, the strategy of maintaining a puristic Tamil that has no economic value, and is therefore perceived as useless, and the strategy of non-cooperation with other similar groups.

4. Summary and conclusions

The Tamil language has already survived in Malaysia into the twenty-first century, but perhaps will only continue to do so in isolated rural pockets, or as the language of a marginalized urban underclass. When all is said and done, it is less the overt language policy (as enshrined in the Malaysian constitution) that determines this outcome than the socio-economic history and present conditions of the Tamil community in Malaysia. Tamil has no economic value in Malaysia, and is therefore maintained by the socio-economically destitute as a last vestige of primordial ethnicity. Since even in the developed western countries (e.g. the USA) a similarly destitute urban underclass persists, and continues to maintain its own variety of English despite teachers’ attempts to extirpate it, the prognosis for Tamil is unlikely to be any different in Malaysia.

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References


Glossary

Angilak kalappu: The term used in Tamil for heavy use of borrowed English vocabulary; seen as a corruption of the language that must be avoided.

Bahasa Malaysia: The national language of Malaysia, based originally on dialects of Malay spoken both in the Malay peninsula and in parts of Indonesia. Mutually intelligible with Bahasa Indonesia, also based on spoken Malay, but which is more strongly influenced by Javanese. Grammar and orthography of the two have been regularized by agreement between the two governments, but lexical differences remain.

Bumiputra: The term bumiputra ‘sons of the soil’ is used in Malaysia for all Malay speakers and other indigenous peoples, who are of the Malay ‘race’ but not necessarily mother-tongue speakers of Malay. Chinese, Indians, and others (lain-lain) are by definition non-Bumiputra.

Tamilnadu: The state in southeast India, formerly known as Madras State, where Tamil is the official language.