

Mixed Marriages, Language, and Identity: The Children of Chinese-Indian Parentage in Malaysia

ANG Lay Hoon* and SHIK Pei Yen**

Abstract

The study explores the social identity by children of Chinese-Indian parentage in Malaysia through their choice of language. The focus is on two key perspectives: firstly, verification of their spoken language and secondly, social identification based on their choice of the language in communication with family members and friends. The discussion is based on interviews of a small sample of respondents from different states in Malaysia. The evidence suggests that social identity is influenced by the choice of language by the respondents. Children of Chinese-Indian parentage tend to choose to use the English language and the ethnicity that they would like to be identified as is Chinese-Indian, but not purely Chinese or Indian.

Key words: Social identity, language choice, mixed marriage, language use

Introduction

According to Fairclough (1989: 21), “languages” are socially (re)constructed and are standardized for cultural, economic, political, religious, and other reasons. Language and identity are therefore intimately related to each other. In the search for a sense of belonging and identity, most will need to have a particular language to denote how they wish to be viewed and understood. According to Dashefsky (1972: 240), there are two modes in defining one’s identity, namely, how others define a person and how the person defines himself or herself. Mixed marriages give rise to new and uncertain changes, transformations, and additions to identities, customs and lifestyles that marriages within the same ethnic group may not be exposed to. The children of mixed marriages will acquire totally different life experience from those of their parents and others who belong to any specific ethnic group. They will face the need on how to describe themselves and to search for their “full” ethnic identity. In this regard, users of ethnic statistics have urged a review of ethnic categorization to reflect the special needs of those of mixed ethnicity (Aspinall, 2003: 270).

* Dr. ANG Lay Hoon is a Senior Lecturer at Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia.
E-mail : hlang@upm.edu.my

** SHIK Pei Yen is a candidate for the Master of Arts at Universiti Putra Malaysia.
E-mail: shikpeiye@gmail.com

In Malaysia, it has not been the practice to have additional categories for mixed ethnicities besides the commonly recognized ones known as Malays, Chinese, Indians and “Others”. Throughout the twentieth century and the first decade of the current one, the population censuses that group individuals into different ethnic communications have never attempted to devise separate categories for the children of interethnic or mixed marriages. In the multiethnic setting that is the hallmark of Malaysian society, it is indeed difficult to differentiate persons of mixed ethnicities. Hence, how to correctly identify and locate this group of persons for study will pose many practical problems to the researcher.

Language is one of the key elements in defining one’s social and ethnic identity. The Japanese demonstrate a strong sense of identity through language which is seen as a distinct social and ethnic marker. The Japanese language is spoken formally and informally as a tool of communication not only in daily life but also in education, the government, the workplace and in the society in general. It is on this shared language that the Japanese identity may be confirmed and distinguished. Similarly, the Malays in Malaysia are bonded by an ethnic solidarity that is embodied in the Malay language which also serves as the national language of the country. It is this language that expresses the symbol of the Malay social and ethnic identity.

Studies on ethnic identity tend to overlook the section of the population comprising groups of people of mixed parentage. Their very presence requires that their personal views on issues of identity be better understood and appreciated. This has policy implications as official actions may then be rendered more sensitive to the special needs of those who are not easily categorized into recognized communities. The small community of people of mixed Chinese-Indian parentage is a case in point. As their number is small and widely scattered, they are largely overlooked as a separate category in official reports.

The purpose of this study is to examine the identity of the children of inter-marriage involving the Chinese and Indians by focusing on the language or languages that they normally use. There are two perspectives in a study of this nature. The first is to verify the languages spoken by the target group and the second to examine their identity based on the choice of language or languages spoken at home and among friends. Additionally, certain considerations such as parents, classmates and friends that may influence the language choice are also examined.

Mixed Marriages: Some International Perspectives

Mixed marriage or intermarriage maybe defined as a “marriage between individuals of different racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds” (Kim and Leavitt, 2012: 135). Mixed marriages and the offspring of such marriages occupy a special position in the studies of race and ethnic relations. This is because marital assimilation is seen as signaling the final breakdown of social barriers between different ethnic groups (Lee, 1988: 255).

In the United States, the terms that refer to “inter-racial” and “multiethnic” unions have been used by persons of mixed parentage as a means of self description and in wider public usage (Aspinall, 2003: 273). Intermarriage between Asians and Whites are attributed to such variables as education and tend to involve the younger, American-born Asians with relatively high levels of education (Qian, 1997). The marriage partners are persons from comparable social classes and educational backgrounds that have inculcated similarities in social status and values (Kim and Leavitt, 2012: 146).

There is a growing volume of literature on Asian American intermarriage which focuses on the significant role that racial and gender stereotypes and discourses play in partner choice. In their study on the intermarriage among Chinese and Japanese Americans, Fong and Yung (1996) show that the choice to marry outside one’s ethnic group is informed by race-based gender stereotypes which position Asians as inferior and Whites as superior marriage partners. A study of the Chinese, Japanese and Koreans in Los Angeles and Hawaii, find that women tend to marry out of their ethnic groups more than the men (Kitano *et al.*, 1984: 179). Additionally, the third generation of Chinese, Japanese and Koreans are marrying out of their own ethnic community at a higher rate than the first generation. In Hawaii, there is no evidence of control over marital choice among the Chinese or Korean communities. Arising from these differences, a social psychological model for predicting “out-marriages” is developed based on the historical factors, the family, and personal choices (Kitano *et al.*, 1984: 189).

A study by Qian and Lichter (2007: 73) in America in 2007 indicates that intermarriage between Hispanics and Asian Americans is related to their educational attainment. Intermarriage is becoming more frequent as a result of greater contact with Whites in the workplace, schools and neighbourhoods and these have multiplied opportunities for crossing the ethnic boundaries.

While mixed or intermarriages have increased and are becoming socially accepted, issues concerning the social identity of the offspring have emerged and so is the discourse on the subject. The offspring of interethnic unions are often described as occupying an “in-between” position, meaning that they are partially holding their fathers’ as well as their mothers’ ethnic identities (Wilson, 1984: 42). Submerged under the level of outward appearance of the children of mixed marriages is a pool of uncertain identity and often agony. It has been stated that “One of the more tragic aspects of the racial worldview has been the seeming dilemma of people whose parents are identifiably of different races.” For more than a century and a half, the American public was made to believe that “mixed race” people especially of black and white ancestry were “abnormal products of the unnatural mating of two species, besides being socially unacceptable in the normal scheme of things” (Smedley, 1998: 696). Until recent times, the term “black” was seen as a justification for racist discrimination. In the 1970s and 1980s census field trials, mixed race persons were placed in an “any other” category. Official statistics were concerned with the numbers of the recognized ethnic groups such as White, Black, South Asian and Chinese. A major challenge that emerged in American society then was directly related to the connection

between persons of mixed race and the rise of identity politics (Aspinall, 2003: 271). One of the consequences is that the mixed race populations have increasingly rejected their ethnic identity as simply “Black”.

Arising from the attention on mixed race populations, more and more studies have been devoted to examining issues of ethnic identities. In one of the studies in American completed by Saenz and others in 1995, it was found that the majority of the children of Asian-Anglo parentage tend to be defined by their Anglo ethnic identities. Nevertheless, a significant proportion of 38 per cent of the children preferred to be identified as Asians, and a small number as “others” or “other Asians” (i.e. non-pure Asians). Children with an “Anglo” identity “tend to be those born in the United States with a foreign-born Asian parent (second generation), who speak English at home, have mothers who are Asians, and live in areas with a relatively small Asian population but high degrees of ethnic heterogeneity” (Saenz *et al.*, 1995: 189). On the other hand, the mixed parentage children who identify themselves as Asians are considered rather complex in culture, as they “tend to be those who have the highest degree of cultural maintenance (foreign-born and speak a language other than English at home), have a Chinese or Filipino background, whose fathers are Asians, and live in areas having large Asian populations and low degrees of ethnic heterogeneity” (Saenz *et al.*, 1995: 189).

In Japan, mixed or intermarriages are referred to as *Kokusai Kekkon* or “international marriage”. According to Nitta’s study of Japan (1988: 205), marriages between Japanese and non-Japanese have accelerated in recent years. He notes that Japanese men tend to intermarry with non-Japanese women more than with Japanese women. The three main groups of non-Japanese who have been consistently intermarrying with Japanese are the Koreans, Chinese and white Americans. These marriages are attributed to social propinquity, the high socio-economic status of the Japanese, the cultural factor that allows men to enjoy greater freedom in their behaviors including marital choice.

An analysis and comparison of the documentary and oral history reports drawn from Jiashe, Yishe, and Bingshe villages in Southwestern Taiwan (Brown, 2001: 153) notes that ethnic identity can be changed in its content but the offspring are the “product of a person’s culture and/or ancestry”, which means that there it is not a simple matter of choosing one’s identity. According to interview reports and household registers in the paper, many of the villagers have mixed parentage of Han and lowland aborigines. Brown highlights four reasons why the people in the villages do not claim Han identity. Firstly, the long-term mixed parentage and also other factors had already influenced and caused cultural change towards the pre-existing Han cultural model. Secondly, only a minority of the villagers are of Han ancestry and, thirdly, “such ancestry was difficult to convincingly document, even for those with Han patrilineal ancestry” (Brown, 2001: 162). The final reason is ancestry became socially less important to them.¹

A study in Singapore by S.M.C. Lee (1988: 255-265) focuses on identifying such factors as religion, education, social status and ethnicity that might play a part in promoting mixed

marriages. The conclusion is that the Chinese in Singapore contributed the least to mixed marriages compared with the Indians and Malays. It also confirms that similar social status and religion will encourage marriages among different ethnic groups. Those in possession of tertiary education are more likely to marry outside his/her ethnic community. This finding is consistent with those of Qian *et al.* (2001: 580) which states that mixed marriages are more likely to occur for highly educated individuals. In an earlier study, Qian (1997: 263) finds breaking of the racial barrier in marriage comes more easily to those with higher levels of education because they tend to live in racially mixed communities in which increased social contacts across ethnic boundaries may promote mixed marriages. Another study in Singapore suggests that there are several reasons that encourage interethnic marriages. Three of the main ones are re-marriage, religion, and upward mobility to higher occupational groups, though the last two reasons are also relevant for first marriages (see Kuo and Hassan, 1976).

Mixed Marriages in Malaysia

In the multiethnic setting of Malaysia, mixed marriages among different ethnic groups are fairly common and familiar occurrences. But the offspring of mixed marriages may be uncertain as to which one of their parents' ethnicities they belong to. In the days of British colonial domination, mixed marriages between the British and other Europeans and the local population were not infrequent. The children of such marriages become known as Eurasians and seem to enjoy a social standing that is superior to that of ordinary Asians. In past census reports, a category that appears regularly is that of "Eurasians".

Population data on ethnicity published by the Department of Statistics in Malaysia are based on self-identification. Within the legal boundaries that separate the Bumiputera and non-Bumiputera communities, a person may specify his or her ethnicity. The legal definition of Bumiputera carries with it compulsory adherence to Islam and special rights. The offspring of mixed marriages between Malays, all of whom are Muslims, and non-Malay wives, may be identified as Malay. Most Malaysians of mixed parentage would choose to identify themselves either as being Malay or Bumiputera as long as legal requirements are satisfied. In Sabah, Sino-Kadazan children are legally recognized as Bumiputera if one of the grandparents is a Kadazan. This status is granted to those who wish to retain their Chinese names. In the case of mixed marriages among non-Muslims such as the Chinese or Indians, the children are euphemistically referred to as "Chindians" or "Indianese" but both these terms have no legal standing. In American usage, these are the "biracials", or first-generation mixed-raced persons whose parents belong to two different ethnic groups (Gaskins, 1999: 12).

Of Malaysia's population of 29.2 million 2011, the Malays make up 50.4 per cent, followed by Chinese with 23.7 per cent. The non-Malay indigenous communities especially in Sabah and Sarawak account for just more than a tenth of the total, the Indians comprise 7.1 per cent, and "Others" 7.8 per cent (Malaysia Demographic Profile, 2012).

Official statistics on registered marriages among “non Muslims” are divided into three groups, namely, Chinese, Indian, and “Others”. Mixed marriages between Chinese and Indians, Chinese and indigenous people, Indians and indigenous people as well as among indigenous peoples are grouped under “Others”. It is therefore not possible to determine the exact number of registered marriages among the Chinese and Indians.

The statistics of mixed marriages are compiled by the National Registration Department of Pahang. While the number is small, it is nevertheless a clue as to the broad pattern of situations on the ground. In 2006, for example, there were 77 cases of mixed marriages under “Others” or just 5.67 per cent of the total number of registered marriages, compared with 991 cases of marriage among the Chinese or 72.9 per cent of the total and 291 cases among the Indians or 21.4 per cent. In 2007, the statistics remains at 77 cases, increasing to 83 cases in 2008 and 123 cases in 2009 (Figure 1).

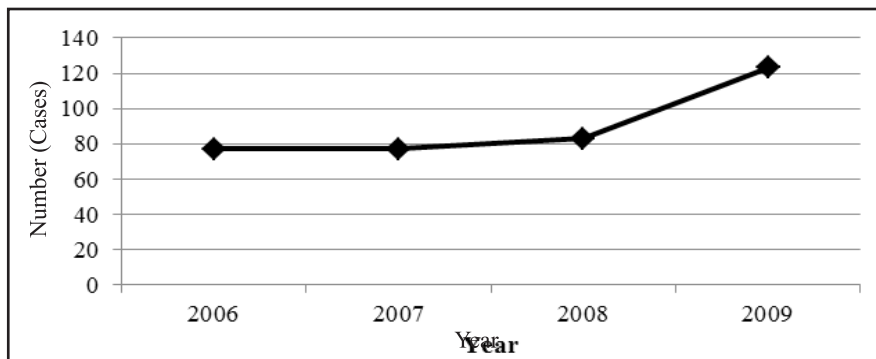


Figure 1. Marriage Percentage for “Others” Group

Source: National Registration Department of Pahang State, 2010

Despite the low rate of mixed marriages in Malaysia, it is moving upward and not as uncommon as official statistics seem to indicate (Chong, 2009: 93). Thus, the importance of examining the ethnic identity among the offspring of mixed marriages children should not be overlooked. One of the positive implications of such marriages is that of improved inter-ethnic relations. Generally, mixed marriages break down ethnic barriers as married couples accept each other as socially equal and facilitate social interactions between the immediate families. To the children of mixed marriages, ethnic boundaries lose their meanings and become less clear-cut (Qian and Lichter, 2007: 68-69).

In a study on the experiences of local undergraduates of different ethnic backgrounds, it is found that Malaysians tend to see themselves more with their ethnicity as being Malay, Chinese, Indian, or mixed, rather than being Malaysian (Chong, 2009: 93). Hence the practice of describing the ethnic groups by placing “Malaysian” before their ethnicity, such as “Malaysian Chinese” or “Malaysian Indians” persists until today. It is not surprising, then, that Malaysians of mixed parentage often feel alienated as they do not belong to or accepted by the ethnic

communities to which their parents identify with (Chong 2009: 94).

Mixed marriages have indeed contributed to the development of ethnic plurality in Malaysia. It is found that mixed marriages are more common in the ethnically diverse states of Sabah and Sarawak and where social distances between ethnic groups are less restricting than that in Peninsular Malaysia” (Nagaraj, 2009: 75).

Language and Identity

Mixed marriages are an integral part of ethnic processes and their trend provides a clue to the development of ethnic relations. Families formed by such marriages encounter a whole range of changes and additions in their languages, lifestyles, cultures, value systems, and an awareness of new ethnic types that may become stronger in the second generation. Choosing the ethnic identity of one parent would inevitably blur that of the other parent. It is thus important to ascertain the language and identity of the offspring of mixed marriages since they are brought up in an environment in which their language, culture and customs are subjected to varying degrees of transformation. Of these, the first and most immediately affected variable is the language that is spoken by the children.

The search for identity is a social and sometimes political process by which a person seeks answers to the question of “Who am I?”. It is a complex concept involving layers of relationship between an individual and a group or a number of groups (Lowrance, 2006: 168). The term has been variously defined by different scholars. George H. Mead proposes that identity is a set of beliefs to allow a person to say who he or she is (quoted by Foreman and Whetten, 2002: 618). Hopkins and Reicher (2011: 36) argue that identity is influenced by the social group as it “is used to refer to how our sense of who we are is bound up with our membership of certain social groups”. To Tuner, identity is “a process of self-categorization and self-understanding”, whereas Brubaker and Cooper see it as a process of “identifying with others, and of commonality, connectedness, and groupness” (quoted by Aguiar and Francisco, 2009: 552).

Identity may be analysed at different levels from the individual, group, organization, institution or society (Foreman and Whetten, 2002: 619). However, according to Foreman and Whetten (2002: 619), although the identity construct holds the possibility of integrating multiple levels of analysis, virtually no research about these multilevel linkages has been done. To Tilley, identity is more an idea or discourse rather than an empirically observable social “unit” associated with such features as dress, languages, or customs (quoted by Davis, 1999: 25).

As a tool of communication of one’s thoughts and feelings, language is a crucial element of one’s “identity”. The role of language is to act as “a marker of group boundaries” by which is often employed to include or exclude membership of an ethnic group (Kharusi, 2012: 348). Language expresses “the way individuals situate themselves in relationship to others, the way they group themselves, the powers they claim for themselves and the powers they stipulate to

others”. In short, it is a powerful tool to indicate social allegiance to one group as opposed to other groups (Sterling, 2000:1). How language and identity are intertwined is therefore obvious.

Saussure’s theory of language consists of *langue* and *parole*. The idea of *langue* indicates a shared system or code that underlies language use that is uniformly applicable to everyone in a language community. This social system of language binds the people into a unitary, uniform and homogeneous community. Language use or *parole* is the way we actually speak or write. It is individualistic and differs from person to person and is subject to individual choice, which is not socially determined.

Individuals choose to communicate in a language which may help them to be categorized as members of a certain group. A person’s perceived membership of certain social groups is linked to his self concept. This implies that it is an individual-based understanding of what is exhibited for others to see and what can best define the group identity (Ige, 2010: 3049). Hence language is the very spirit of one’s culture. Indeed, “language is our being” (Schindler and Ribner, 1995: 379). The Malaysian official slogan on the national language is “*Bahasa Jiwa Bangsa*” (language is the spirit of the race). In the Malaysian context, this spiritual role of language of an ethnic entity is played especially by its own language or mother tongue. The mother tongue is strongly related to ancestry and identity and inseparable from one’s ethnic background (Schindler and Ribner, 1995: 379). In the case of the children of mixed marriages, it is important to find out the language that they choose to use in daily life.

Children of Chinese-Indian Parentage and Language Use

Despite its image as a multiethnic country, Malaysia is not an ethnic “melting-pot” through inter-ethnic marriages. Indeed such unions are infrequent and those involving the Chinese and Indians are even more so. Nevertheless, this study will be lacking if the situation on the ground is completely overlooked. An attempt is therefore made to gauge the actual situation from a limited sample of participants who are the children of Chinese and Indian parents. This sample is not meant to form this study *per se* but rather to provide some broad indications of the real-life situation in the context of a multiethnic society.

Given the practical difficulty of identifying marriages involving Chinese and Indians, a survey was carried out with a small random sample of 22 respondents of whom only ten provided satisfactory response. These are from families in the states of Johor, Kedah, Pahang, Penang, Selangor, and the Federal Capital. Eight of them are from Indian-Chinese families where the father is Indian and the other two are Chinese-Indian. They range in age from 11 to 30 and six are Hindus, two Buddhists and two Christians, all adhering to the religion of their fathers.

The feedback from the sample is collected by means of a questionnaire sent out via e-mail. This is supplemented by face-to-face interviews or by telephone. The questionnaire includes questions on the background of the respondents, such as the first language that they

learned, the type of primary school attended, and the language of communication with their parents, friends and others. Information collected also include details of the socio-demographic characteristics of the families, the parents' academic qualifications, and their preferred language of movie or music.

It is not unexpected that many mixed marriage families are bonded by a common language that is identified with neither of the parents. In this case, it is English that is widely spoken especially by those of the pre-independence and immediate post-independence generations. Eight of the respondents claim English as their first language, in sharp contrast with one each for Mandarin and Tamil. In terms of language proficiency, nine are proficient in English and seven in the Malay language which is the medium of instruction in national schools. Other than these languages, few are proficient in Tamil or Mandarin (Figure 2). The English language rather than the languages of the parents are clearly the language of choice among this sample of children of Chinese-Indian parentage. The Malay language, being the national language and the major medium of instruction in schools, is learned for expediency rather than for social purposes.

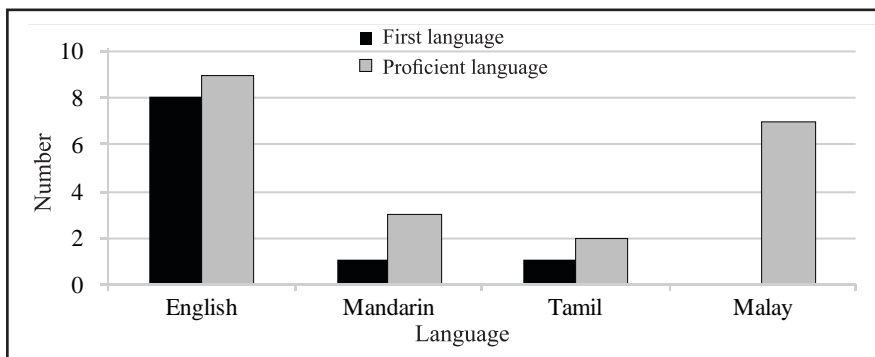


Figure 2. Language Proficiency

The use of languages by the respondents is examined under two headings, namely, the family language and social language.

Family Languages

Malaysian families typically speak more than one language at home. Among the Chinese, Mandarin and the dialects are used in conversation among different members of a family. Very often, there is not one but several “family languages” in the average family.

This plural language setting is even more prevalent in mixed marriage families. The “family language” is that which is generally spoken at home, including specifically the language(s) spoken by the father and mother. While eight respondents prefer to use English, only seven do so when speaking with the father and five with the mother (Figure 3).

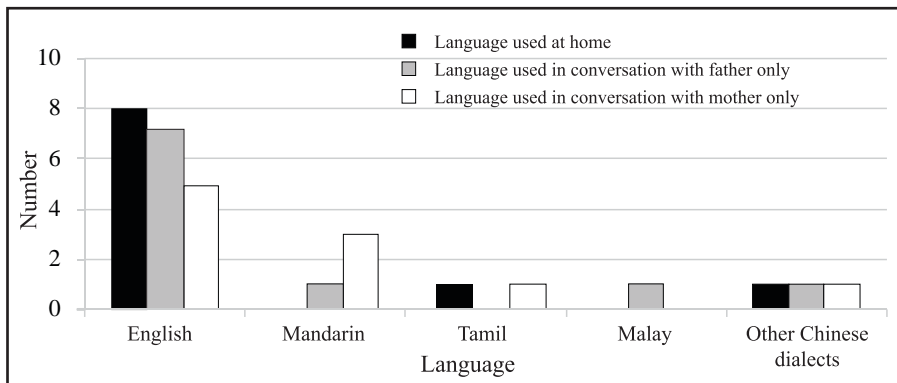


Figure 3. Family Languages

While English is seen as the common language in families of Chinese-Indian parentage, the subordinate role of the ethnic languages or mother tongues of the parents is also revealing. Only one of the respondents relies on Mandarin to speak with his father, and three with their mothers, but Mandarin is totally absent as a general language at home. The Chinese dialects too are rarely spoken by the respondents either with the father or mother. The position of the Tamil language is even more subdued than that of Mandarin.

The family languages are also the languages of the extended family of both the parents. Seven of the respondents use English to communicate with their father's relatives while three use English and Mandarin to communicate with their mother's relatives. On the other hand Tamil is used by just one of the respondents with relatives of the parents. Additionally, two of the respondents speak with their father's relatives in Malay and three use Chinese dialects with their mother's relatives (Figure 4). It is clear that the respondents live in a multi-lingual environment and are able to switch from English to their mother tongues when communicating with different members of their extended families.

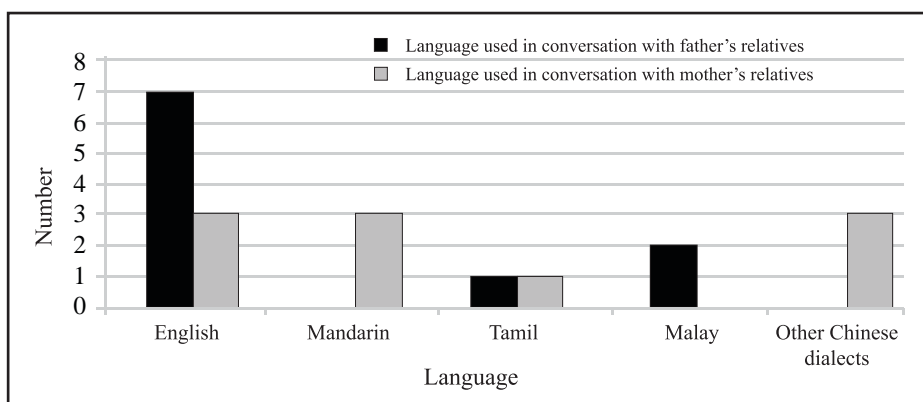


Figure 4. Family Languages with Relatives

Social Languages

Another aspect of the linguistic behaviour among the children of Chinese and Indian parentage is in the area of social interaction. This dimension relates to the language of communication with their peers; friends, and the general public or “others”. If circumstances permit, English is by far the language of choice for the nine of the respondents. More than half use English to communicate with their friends, and this is related to the fact that half of their friends too use English on a daily basis (Figure 5).

Mandarin is second to English as the language of social interaction between the respondents and their friends. Two of them speak Mandarin with their friends among whom almost 40 per cent are conversant in Mandarin. As for the Malay language, usage in social interaction is confined to one of the respondents. However, none uses Tamil or other Indian languages with their friends (Figure 5).

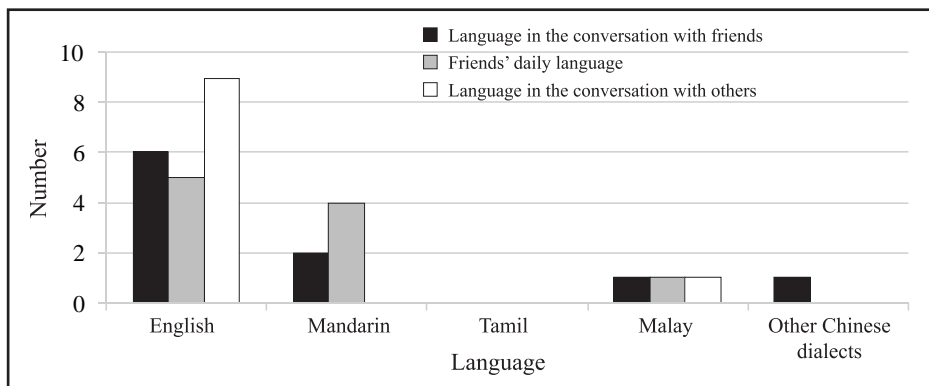


Figure 5. Social Languages

From the languages that the respondents are familiar with, there seems to be a hierarchy of preference in usage. The dominance of English in the families of Chinese and Indian parentage is undisputed, but the multi-lingual background of the families is equally obvious. Given the inter-ethnic background of mixed marriage families, the offspring may show more flair for languages than the children of single ethnic families. This strong linguistic element that characterizes the life of the respondents has tended to subdue their ethnicity in their search for social identity. In consequence, it is not surprising that seven out of the ten respondents consider themselves neither purely Chinese nor Indians but as Chinese-Indian or Indian-Chinese. Two “feel” that they are Chinese and only one as Indian. While it is clear that language and identity are closely related, it is equally obvious that, as far as the children of mixed parentage are concerned, a common language that cuts across ethnic lines may exert an influence on how the issue of identity is perceived.

Discussion and Implications

The findings of this research demonstrate that for the majority of the respondents English

is the language of choice. The languages of the parents play only a minor role in their daily life. It is English that is the first language that is learned by the majority of the respondents. Proficiency in English is common while few take the trouble to acquire proficiency in Chinese or Tamil. This is clear proof that they are less concerned with the languages spoken by their parents as a marker of their social identity.

Several factors may have led to this situation, and diversity of languages spoken by the parents is one of them. Among the fathers of the respondents, five speak Tamil as the first language, three use English, and only one uses Mandarin. Among the respondents' mothers, seven speak Mandarin or a Chinese dialect as the first language, two prefer English and only one speaks Tamil (Figure 6).

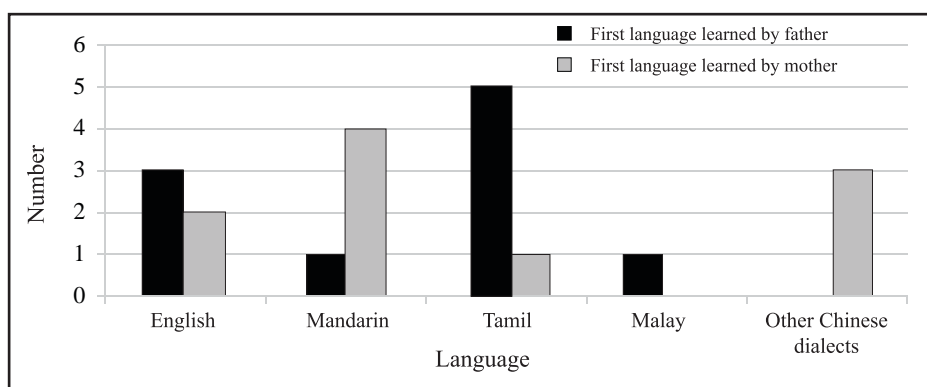


Figure 6. First Language Learned by Parents

Among the parents, half are able to speak the first language of the spouse, though not fluently. However, most of them admit that they are not proficient in either Mandarin or the Tamil language. Furthermore, they seldom communicate in the spouse's language in their family. Thus a situation has arisen in which the language of either parent is almost deliberately excluded in the family. Instead, the parents of seven of the respondents normally use English as a means of communication with their spouse. This may have a direct influence on their choice of social language. It is their familiarity with English in daily usage that this language has become the tool of communication in social interaction. Despite the ability to speak their spouse's language, they may not find it comfortable using Tamil or Chinese at home. For those who are unable to speak their spouse's first language, English offers the best way out.

The language environment of a mixed marriage family has a direct influence on the language choice of the children. The mother tongues of the parents will not affect this language choice unless one or the other is used as the first language of the family. Another factor is the type of primary school that the children go to. Among the respondents, half attended Chinese-medium schools and the other half went to the Malay-medium schools, but none attended Tamil-medium schools or any English-medium private schools. Chinese children

who study in Chinese-medium schools tend to speak Mandarin as they grow up immersed in a Mandarin-speaking environment. However, this is not the case with the children of Chinese-Indian parentage. Although they speak Mandarin in school, they switch to English or other languages when they interact with family members or relatives who do not speak Mandarin. The most convenient and effect way to communicate with their family is to use a language that is understood by everybody and this is the English language. Hence, although five of the respondents attended Chinese primary schools, only three are able to communicate in Mandarin.

The social environment is yet another influence on language choice as an individual interacts with friends and strangers. Inherently, one tends to mingle with friends from the same ethnic background, for the simple reason that they share a common language. The children of Chinese-Indian parentage, however, live under a different set of circumstances. Not having a specific language that they claim to be their mother tongue, they tend to mix with those with whom they partially share a similar ethnic background. Consequently, six of the respondents mingle with their Chinese schoolmates and the rest with their Indian friends.

On their ethnic identity, the respondents regard themselves neither as Chinese or Indian, but a separate intermediate group encompassing elements of the ethnicities of their parents. In their opinion, it is inaccurate if official statistics categorize them as belonging to either one of the ethnic communities. That they opt to adopt English as a tool of communication shows that they are a social phenomenon that, together with other children of mixed marriages, should be looked upon as emerging social groups with different identities from the traditionally recognized major ethnic communities. The choice of English in daily usage is an attempt to form a distinct social group with its own identity and social needs. The languages of their parents matter little to them as they seek to integrate into and comply with the social environment. As English is the language that answers their special needs, it has become the most appropriate medium that allows them to integrate the parents' cultures into which they are born and yet to provide an "escape" route to avoid the constraints of these cultures.

There are two basic components in social identity, which are categorization and identification. Categorization here refers to self-categorization, which indicates that people who wish to be categorized in a certain community, should have the general characteristics of the members in this community. In this case, the offspring of two ethnic groups not only want to be seen as more than just Chinese or Indians but also as a separate community of mixed "Chinese-Indian" ancestry.² Although they are exposed to the languages of their parents, yet they choose not to rely on them to meet their domestic or social needs. Instead, they opt for English language for its international appeal to communicate with others. Rejecting Chinese or Indian as their sole social heritage, they desire an identity that recognizes their unique heritage derived from their Chinese and Indian parents. This implies that the language or languages they are born into have little influence on their social identity.

Conclusion

Generally, one's ethnic identity is decided by the father's ethnicity. From the limited documentary evidence drawn by a special group of people of mixed parentage, the relationship between language and ethnicity on one hand and identity on the other is not a direct or lineal relationship but one that is more complex. In the case of the children of Chinese-Indian parentage, the unique interplay of languages and ethnicity in the family and society at large, together with rapid social changes and the role of languages for vocational and survival needs, have reduced the emotional association of language with race or ethnicity. As the sample size to gather documentary evidence is small, this conclusion is made with some reservations.

The use of English by Malaysians of all ethnic origins and age groups is relatively widespread in this country. It is the second language in national schools and the third language in Chinese and Tamil schools, and the language of international business and the foreign community. As a language that transcends the ethnic boundaries in this country, it enjoys a status that is accepted by all groups and cultures. These factors contributed to the making of this language as an alternative to local languages in the family of mixed parentage. The attitude of the children of Chinese-Indian parentage does seem to conform to the observation that the children of mixed parentage are more likely to develop a heightened sense of identity that is broader than the traditional ones that are influenced by ethno-sensitive conceptions.

This study suggests the existence of a small group of Malaysians whose language choice and identity are distinctly different from those of the traditional ethnic categorization of the population. There is therefore a need for more investigations on the subject to better understand and appreciate the sensitivities and special requirements of this group of Malaysians.

Notes

- 1 Identity is a sensitive issue even in an outwardly homogeneous society as in Taiwan. As a political rival of Mainland China since 1949 and whose population comprises indigenous groups, the Hokkiens (Fujian), Hakkas (Kejia), and those from other provinces of China, the issue of identity has taken on ideological significance. It is noted that in Taiwan "dialects" are equated with "ethnicity". As in Mainland China, the majority of the people belong to the Han ethnic group, commonly known as "Chinese". Hence political ideology may also be behind the choice of "ethnic" identity in Taiwan.
- 2 Tiger Woods, who became famous throughout the world as the youngest winner of the Masters golf tournament in 1997, is the son of an African-American, American Indian, and Chinese father and a Thai, Chinese, and white mother, is proud of his multiple heritages. Saying that he is more than black, he identifies himself as *Cablinasian*, an acronym for Caucasian, black, Indian, and Asian (Gaskins, 1999: 4).

References

AGUIAR, F. and FRANCISCO, A. 2009. Rational choice, social identity, and beliefs about oneself,

- Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 39(4): 547-571.
- ASPINALL, P. J. 2003. The conceptualisation and categorisation of mixed race/ethnicity in Britain and north America: identity options and the role of the state, *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 27: 269-296.
- BROWN, M. J. 2001. Reconstructing ethnicity: recorded and remembered identity in Taiwan, *Ethnology*, 40(2): 153-164.
- CHONG, B. S. Y. 2009. A note on Malaysians of mixed parentage, *Malaysian Journal of Economic Studies*, 46(1): 93-95.
- DASHEFSKY, A. 1972. And the search goes on: the meaning of religio-ethnic identity and identification, *Sociology of Religion*, 33(4): 239-245.
- DAVIS, T. C. 1999. Revisiting group attachment: ethnic and national identity, *Political psychology*, 20(1): 25-47.
- FAIRCLOUGH, N. 1989. Discourse as social practice, *Language and Power*. Edinburgh : Longman.
- FONG, C. and YUNG, J. 1995/1996. In search of the right spouse: interracial marriage among Chinese and Japanese Americans, *Amerasia Journal*, 21(3): 77-98.
- FOREMAN, P. and WHETTEN, D. A. 2002. Members' identification with multiple-identity organizations, *Organization Science*, 13(6): 618-635.
- GASKINS, Pearl Fuyo 1999. *What Are You? Voices of Mixed-Race Young People*, New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- HOPKINS, N. and REICHER, S. 2011. Identity, culture and contestation: social identity as cross-cultural theory, *Psychological Studies*, 56(1): 36-43.
- IGE, B. 2010. Identity and language choice: 'we equals I', *Journal of Pragmatics*, 42: 3047-3054.
- KHARUSI, N. S. 2012. The ethnic label Zinjibari: Politics and language choice implications among Swahili speakers in Oman, *Ethnicities*, 12(3): 335-353.
- KIM, H. K. and LEAVITT, N. S. 2012. The newest Jews? understanding Jewish American and Asian American marriages, *Contemporary Jewry*, 32(2): 135-166.
- KITANO, H. H. L., YEUNG, W. T., CHAI, L., and HATANAKA, H. 1984. Asian-American interracial marriage, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 46(1): 179-190.
- KUO, E. C. Y., and HASSAN, R. 1976. Some social concomitants of interracial marriage in Singapore, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 38(3): 549-559.
- LEE, S. M. C. 1988. Intermarriage and ethnic relations in Singapore, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 50(1): 255-265.
- LOWRANCE, S. 2006. Identity, grievances, and political action: recent evidence from the Palestinian community in Israel, *Revue Internationale de Science Politique*, 27(2): 167-190.
- Malaysia, National Registration Department of Pahang States. 2010. Statistic for the Marriage of Non Muslim in Pahang State.
- Malaysia Demographics Profile. 2012. Retrieved from http://www.indexmundi.com/malaysia/demographics_profile.html
- NAGARAJ, S. 2009. Intermarriage in Malaysia, *Malaysian Journal Of Economic Studies*, 46(1):75-92.
- NITTA, F. 1988. *Kokusai kekkon*: trends in intercultural marriage in Japan", *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 12: 205-232.
- QIAN, Z. C. 1997. Breaking the racial barriers: variations in interracial marriage between 1980 and 1990, *Demography*, 34(2): 263-276.
- QIAN, Z. C., BLAIR, S. L. and RUF, S. D. 2001. Asian American interracial and interethnic marriages: differences by education and nativity, *International Migration Review*, 35(2): 557-586.
- QIAN, Z. C. and LICHTER, D. T. 2007. Social boundaries and Marital assimilation: interpreting trends in racial and ethnic intermarriage, *American Sociological Review*, 72(1): 68-94.
- SAENZ, R., HWANG, S. S., AGUIRRE, B. E., and ANDERSON, R. N. 1995. Persistence and change

- in Asian identity among children of intermarried couples, *Sociological Perspectives*, 38(2) : 175-194.
- SCHINDLER, R. and RIBNER, D. S. 1995. Migration and ethnic identity: the black Jews of Ethiopia and their settlement in Israel, *Community Development Journal*, 30(4): 372-383.
- SMEDLEY, A. 1998. 'Race' and the construction of human identity, *American Anthropologists*, 100(3): 690-702.
- STERLING, P. 2000. Identity in language: an exploration into the social implications of linguistic variation, *Agora Journal*, <http://www.tamu.edu/chr/agora/agora/winter2000/sterling.pdf>.
- WILSON, A. 1984. Mixed race children in British society: some theoretical considerations, *The British Journal of Sociology*, 35(1): 42-61.