National Language Planning and Language Shifts in Malaysian Minority Communities

Speaking in Many Tongues

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Focus on the Malayalee Community in Malaysia

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Introduction

Research has shown that language shift, eventually leading to language loss, is not limited to any one society; it occurs all over the world, especially in immigrant communities. For a multitude of reasons, communities, especially immigrant minorities, after a period of time, stop using their mother tongues in domains where they had previously used them in favour of other languages, usually those of the dominant communities. Studies on language shift/maintenance in multilingual and multiracial settings such as Malaysia (Nambiar 2007; Sankar 2004; Ramachandran 2000; Mohamad 1998; David 1996; and Lasimbang et al., 1992) have also indicated that minority immigrant communities are shifting away from their mother tongues. These findings are not unexpected, as Fishman (1985: 206) points out that the shift away from the mother tongue is inevitable: “What begins as the language of social and economic stability ends, within three generations or so, as the language of the crib as well...” This chapter examines the language use in the Malayalee community in Malaysia in the light of these findings.

In most studies of language shift and loss, the language policy of the land in one form or another is often mentioned as a causal factor. This chapter intends to examine to what extent language policies affect or cause language shifts by studying the role of language policy on the language shift of a minority immigrant community, the Malayalees, in multilingual, multiethnic Malaysia.

Language shift and language policy

Language shift can simply be defined as the end result of individuals, consciously or otherwise, gravitating towards a new language or one