The paper will provide a brief description of domains of language use and attitudes on the Mah Meri language which is one of the many indigenous languages of Malaysia. This is part of a larger study done by members of the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya, on the Mah Meri language. It is estimated that there are, in total, approximately 3,000 speakers of Mah Meri in the country. The majority of these people live in the periphery of Kuala Lumpur city. It is this close vicinity to the city that serves as the motivation for this study to look at how the language is maintained or otherwise. The domains under investigation are cultural and religious, workplace, school and family. Interviews and questionnaires are used as the instruments of study. It is found that despite the community’s close proximity to the city and keen awareness of the importance of education for a higher economic status, the Mah Meri language is still fiercely maintained among its people.

1. Introduction

A great number of minor communities in the world are facing economic, social, political, and educational pressures, which result in the impending loss of their native language. It is inevitable that they utilize the more dominant standard language of whichever nation they live in order to advance economically.

The Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project (2004) reports that there are currently an estimated 6,500 languages in the world. Unfortunately, up to fifty percent of these languages face extinction within the next 50-100 years. Hale writes “…(language) endangerment and progressive extinction amount to a catastrophe for human intellectual and cultural diversity…” (Hale 1998:192).

This paper is part of a larger project undertaken by a group of researchers at the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya, to study the Mah Meri language (Bahasa Mah Meri, 2004 (in press)). The Mah Meri are one of the indigenous peoples in Malaysia. The faculty research project in its application of ‘upstream research methodology’ (see Samarin 1967, Asmah 2001) attempts to document and describe the Mah Meri language with an objective to archive the language for posterity. This paper, on the other hand, applies ‘downstream research methodology’ to study the domains and patterns of language use and attitudes of the Mah Meri people. As common for studies of this kind, data was gathered through interviews and a prescribed questionnaire.
1.1 Related literature

Asmah (1992:8) provides a vivid description of what she terms the “layers of multilinguality” in Malaysia. She likens the multilingual situation in Malaysia to a “batik pattern”. She says,

The batik has a basic motif which is surrounded by secondary ones. In batik printing, the first to appear on the white cloth is the basic motif; then come the secondary ones. Batik patterns get modified over the ages, certain motifs get bigger, and others smaller. Certain motifs run through the space provided by the cloth, while others are confined to certain corners only. (Asmah, 1992:9)

This description of the linguistic scenario in Malaysia is apt, as it not only provides a backdrop to the population of speakers for each language but also the language status and contact vis-à-vis intermingling of “colors”. As the national language, Malay serves as the basic motif. As the number of Malay speakers progressively increases, so does the area in which the motif covers the piece of cloth. As the other indigenous languages come into contact with Malay, the pattern of the motif changes. The motif may shrink, indicative of a significant decrease in the number of speakers. Or it may change in pattern, indicative of language change as a result of contact.

A complete description of the linguistic scenery in Malaysia is beyond the limitations of this paper. Suffice it to say that not only would one have to provide an illustration of the indigenous population, who belong to the Austronesian and Austroasiatic language families, but also the non-indigenous population, consisting mainly of immigrants from China and India (see Asmah 1993:80-86).

Whether or not a minority group maintains its mother tongue may be determined by its aspirations to advance economically and socially (Edwards 1985, Trudgill 1991). However, instrumental reasons may not be the only motivation for preference for the dominant language. Another major factor is attributed to the speakers’ attitude towards their native language. Some people feel their own language is of lower status and are ashamed to use it, or that the dominant language has higher value (Trudgill 1991).

A gauge used by many studies in this field of study is the domains in which the language is used or maintained. Romaine defines domain as “an abstraction which refers to a sphere of activity representing a combination of specific times, settings and role relationships” (Romaine 1995:30). Examples of domains are the workplace setting where communication takes place with peer or employers; the school setting in speaking with friends or teachers; the home situation with family members, and religious occasions with God or other devotees.

1.2 Why Mah Meri?

According to the Department of Orang Asli (Indigenous People) Affairs, as of 31 December 2003, there are 2,896 Mah Meri people left in the country (Hal Ehwal Orang Asli 2004). According to De Swaan, all the languages of the world belong to one single system which he terms a “global constellation of languages” (de Swaan 2002:2). The Mah Meri language, in terms of his system of constellation, belongs to the first level, which has an oral tradition without a writing system. First level languages hover like satellites around what he calls the planet of the central language. A cluster of the first level languages is connected to a central language, in this
case Malay, through community members who are conversant in both the first level language and the central language. First level languages are mostly ignored by government administrations and remain in their spoken form only. The central language, which belongs to the second level in the language constellation, is assured of its status as the official or national language. It is the language of administration, education, media, and law (de Swaan 2002:3-4).

Seen from de Swaan’s point of view, the first level language’s survival depends in part on the satellite resource needs from the central planet. In other words, the greater the need to be proficient in the central language, the faster the language shifts away from the first level language. Another reason for threat of extinction is the physical geographical location of its people. The community under study is located only 103 kilometers away from the city.

There is awareness of the importance of education among the Mah Meri people. Therefore, children are sent to school and are literate in Malay. They are getting closer and closer to assimilation with the dominant Malays. Or are they? As far as studies done on minority languages in Malaysia are concerned (Ramachandran 2000 on Portuguese descendents (Kristang), Mohamad Subakir 1998 on Javanese descendents, David 2001 on the Sindhi community), a situation such as Mah Meri is predictable in terms of a language shift away from and/or a less than positive attitude towards the native language. This study is a brief investigation to discover if this is true or otherwise.

1.3 Social background

This study takes place in Bukit Bangkong, Selangor, a state on the west coast of peninsular Malaysia. The Mah Meri community generally belongs to the lower income bracket. The working population comprises mostly lower income wage earners working as laborers, cleaners, factory workers, and fishermen. The sea is very much a part of their lives. Even though they may be employed and earn wages, many supplement their family meals by going out to sea. As the informant of this study relates, like many other men, he goes fishing to literally “put food on the table” or to sell for additional income. After their day job, they go almost every night as the tide permits. Apart from that, some are small time farmers and eke out a living from their own small farms.

According to the Department of Indigenous People Affairs (JHEOA), about 30% of the population are Muslims, 5% are Christians, while the rest, 65%, are animists. As a people, they are originally animists. While a portion have converted to the Muslim or Christian faith as a result of marriage, some convert by personal choice while their own families may remain animistic (Choi, et al., in press).

As mentioned above, there is awareness of the importance of education among Mah Meri parents. Therefore, all children are sent to school at least up till the primary level. In recent years, there is greater occurrence of children being sent to school up till the secondary level. A few manage to reach tertiary level; however, the number is insignificant. In the year 2001, the primary school in this village achieved the best primary level results among all Orang Asli villages (Choi, et al., in press).
1.4 Educational background

Above 45 years old (21 respondents)

Out of 21 respondents in this age group, there are four respondents who are above 60 years old. All four did not go to school. However, among the younger ones in this group, that is, between 45 and 60 years old, the proportion of those who did not go to school is smaller. To illustrate, 30% of those above 50 years old did not go to school, whereas only 14% of those above 45 years old did not go to school. In total, 62% of those in the above 45 years old age group went to school up to various levels of primary education.

Only one 66-year-old female respondent in the group does not understand Malay. Others are able to communicate in Malay and Mah Meri. Among these, those who went to school up till at least year 5 can also read and write in Malay. Those who stopped going to school earlier than year 5 can understand and speak the language but do not know how to read or write.

Between 21 – 45 years old (25 respondents)

There are 25 respondents in the category between 21 and 45 years of age. All respondents in this category speak Mah Meri and Malay. All received formal education up to different levels. Only one male respondent received education until year three and indicates inability to read and write, while 17/25, or more than 50%, received at least six years of primary education. The rest (7/25 or 28%) went up to various levels of secondary education. All except the one who went to year 3 only are proficient in all four skills in Malay – reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

Between 12 – 20 years (21 respondents)

All 21 respondents in this age group are either school-going children or are not in school anymore but have received education up to a certain level. One female respondent in this age group has Malay as her first language. She understands Mah Meri but is not as proficient in the language as she is in Malay. When interviewed, she indicated that she uses Malay and Mah Meri with family members but is more comfortable using Malay. The rest in this group indicate Mah Meri as their mother tongue.

Two respondents (9.5%) indicate inability to read and write in Malay even though they can speak and listen in Malay. Both received education up till year 6 at the primary level. The rest in this age group (19/21 – 90.5%) are proficient in all skills in Malay.

Fourteen out of 21 respondents, or 66.6%, also indicate an understanding of English. Out of this, 4/14 or 28.6% indicate ability to read, write, speak and listen in English, while the rest (10/14 or 71.4%) indicate ability to read, write, and listen in English. They omit speaking ability in English.

Thirteen of the 21 respondents in this group are still in school. Two are not in school anymore and are unemployed. Six respondents are not in school anymore and are employed as blue collar workers. They work as laborers, cleaners, and factory workers. All in the working group (6/21 or 28.6%) received only up till primary education.
1.5 Summary

To summarize, there is a trend that can be seen in the area of education. There seems to be a higher tendency for the younger generation to be sent to school. There is an increasing trend for education in the younger set. More get sent to school in the younger set than in the older generation. On top of that, in the younger age group, there is also a pattern of an increasing level of education. In the oldest generation, even if they went to school, it is only up to a certain level of primary education. In the middle age group, most of them finished primary education and some went on to different levels of secondary school. When interviewed, one respondent stated he was in a college for one year but did not manage to complete the program as he could not cope with the rigor of the academics. According to JHEOA, there are currently two Mah Meri students in university (Choi, et al., in press).

In the youngest set of respondents, between 12 and 20 years old, not only is there a trend to go to school, but there are even some who indicate proficiency in a third language, English. Therefore, it can be said that the Mah Meri people have progressed in terms of being concerned about the educational standards of the younger generation.

2. Method

Apart from observations and interviews, a twenty-five item questionnaire was administered to a total of 67 respondents. This total number is slightly less than 20% of the total population in the village. Observations and interviews were conducted as part of the larger study as mentioned earlier over a two year period (2001-2003). The questionnaire was targeted at three different age groups to indicate three generations of speakers. The age groups were (a) between 12-20 years old (b) between 21-45 years old (c) above 45 years old.

The questionnaire was designed to establish three areas of investigation. Firstly, questions 1-10 aimed to inquire about their personal background, i.e. age, religion, occupation, marital status. Apart from that, this section also addressed language proficiency through a self report process. This is discussed in section 1.4. Secondly, questions 11-18 aimed to find out about language domains and language used in speaking to different people in the family and community. Thirdly, questions 19-25 aimed to discover the attitude of the Mah Meri people towards their own language.

Three main domains were identified. The religious and cultural were considered as one domain. The first question in this domain determined the language used in cultural celebrations. The second asked about the language used in religious ceremonies. The third established the language choice in one’s own prayers.

The workplace and school were considered as one domain. The respondents responded to the questions which pertained to them as students or workers. Questions asked in this second domain were in relation to role relationships. In other words, the intent was to identify the language used with colleagues, employers and/or teachers. Finally, the third domain was the home front.

Apart from direct interviews conducted over a wide span of time, this investigation also employed the assistance of a language consultant or informant to act as intermediary between the researcher and the respondents. This was necessary especially in gathering data from the older generation in the community who are mostly illiterate.
3. Findings and discussion

3.1 Domains

The domains investigated were the cultural and religious domains, workplace, school, and family. Respondents were asked which language or languages they used in cultural rituals, religious occasions, and when praying on their own.

**Cultural and religious domains**

According to statistics provided by JHEOA (Choi et al. 2004 (in press)), among the Mah Meri community in Bukit Bangkung, approximately 30% are Muslims, 5% are Christians, and the rest are animists.

**Above 45 years old**

Among the 21 respondents studied in this age group, 2/21 (9.5%) are Muslims. The rest (19/21 – 90.5%) are animists. As can be seen from the table below, the majority used only Mah Meri for cultural and religious purposes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language use</th>
<th>Malay</th>
<th>Mah Meri</th>
<th>Malay &amp; Mah Meri</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cultural rites</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>20 (95%)</td>
<td>1 (5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious rites</td>
<td>1 (5%)</td>
<td>19 (90%)</td>
<td>1 (5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own prayers</td>
<td>2 (10%)</td>
<td>19 (90%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Between 21 – 45 years old**

In the 21-45 year-old age group, 3/25 or 12% are Muslims. 22/25 or 88% belong to the Mah Meri system of belief. In other words, they are animists. In the domain of religion and cultural celebrations, all except four of the respondents in this age group use only Mah Meri in all cultural and religious celebrations, as well as their own individual prayers. Three Muslims and one animist in the group differ. Two of the Muslim men use Malay in cultural and religious celebrations as well as in their own individual prayers. One Muslim female indicates the use of both Mah Meri and Malay in cultural celebrations. She uses Malay in carrying out religious rites. She also uses Malay in her own prayers. The other respondent who differs from the group is an animist and he uses both Malay and Mah Meri in cultural celebrations and his own prayers. He uses only Mah Meri in religious rites. This is illustrated in Table 2.
Table 2. Language used in cultural and religious domains: 21 to 45 years old

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language use</th>
<th>Malay</th>
<th>Mah Meri</th>
<th>Malay &amp; Mah Meri</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cultural rites</td>
<td>2 (8%)</td>
<td>21 (84%)</td>
<td>2 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious rites</td>
<td>3 (12%)</td>
<td>22 (88%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own prayers</td>
<td>3 (12%)</td>
<td>21 (84%)</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Between 12 – 20 years

Among the 12-20 year-old age group, 4/21 (19%) are Muslims and 17/21 (81%) are animists. In this age group, additional variations are present, that is, the use of Arabic and Malay and Arabic as seen in the table below.

Table 3. Language used in cultural and religious domains: 12 to 20 years old

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language use</th>
<th>Malay</th>
<th>Mah Meri</th>
<th>Malay &amp; Mah Meri</th>
<th>Arabic</th>
<th>Malay &amp; Arabic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cultural rites</td>
<td>2 (9.5%)</td>
<td>17 (81%)</td>
<td>2 (9.5%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious rites</td>
<td>4 (19%)</td>
<td>17 (81%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own prayers</td>
<td>2 (9.5%)</td>
<td>17 (81%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary

It is found that even though the majority of the respondents still use Mah Meri in the domains of culture and religion, the number progressively decreases as the generation is younger. Conversely, more choose to use Malay or a combination of Malay and Mah Meri. This may indicate the number of converts which increase in percentage, though very slowly, with every new generation. The emergence of Arabic as a language choice among Muslims is the result of greater understanding of the religion and the language of that religion among the younger set.

For the Mah Meri people, who are mostly animists, culture is very much a part of their religion. Therefore, the cultural rites are closely related to their belief in the spirits of their ancestors. As they convert to another religion, be it Islam, Christianity, or Buddhism, they will take part less and less in the cultural rituals of the Mah Meri.

Workplace Domain

Among the three age groups, only the youngest set, which is between 12 and 20 years old, comprises workers as well as school-going children. The other age groups comprise either non-working adults or working adults. The working adults were asked about their language choice with their employer or superior, peer, and subordinates, if any.
Above 45 years-old

Five out of 21 respondents in this age group are wage earners. Three are laborers, two are fishermen. All, except for one respondent who runs a business, have colleagues and superiors to communicate with. Only the one who runs a business has subordinates to communicate with and does not have an employer or superior. She communicates in both Malay and Mah Meri with her subordinates. The table below does not include this respondent. The rest in this age group do not work for a living.

Table 4. Language used at the workplace: Above 45 years old

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language use</th>
<th>Malay</th>
<th>Mah Meri</th>
<th>Malay &amp; Mah Meri</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employer/superior</td>
<td>5 (100%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer/colleagues</td>
<td>3 (60%)</td>
<td>2 (40%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Between 21 – 45 years old

Out of 25 in this age group, seven do not work for a living. All 18 who do work belong to the lower income bracket. Most are laborers and fishermen, none of them have subordinates. But all of them have employers or superiors. As with the first group, they all use Malay with their superiors.

Table 5. Language used at the workplace: 21 to 45 years old

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language use</th>
<th>Malay</th>
<th>Mah Meri</th>
<th>Malay &amp; Mah Meri</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employer/superior</td>
<td>18 (100%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer/colleagues</td>
<td>2 (11.1%)</td>
<td>5 (27.8%)</td>
<td>11 (61.1%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Between 12 – 20 years

In the age group of between 12 and 20 years old, three out of 21 respondents are not in school anymore and are unemployed. Six out of 21 work for a living and communicate with their superiors or employers in Malay. Two of them speak in Mah Meri with their peers or colleagues, while four use both Malay and Mah Meri.

Table 6. Language used at the workplace: 12-20 years old

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language use</th>
<th>Malay</th>
<th>Mah Meri</th>
<th>Malay &amp; Mah Meri</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employer/superior</td>
<td>6 (100%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer/colleagues</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2 (33.3%)</td>
<td>4 (66.7%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary

As can be seen in the tables above, all respondents use Malay totally with their superiors. Their employers are either of the Malay or Chinese race. As the national language of the country is Malay or Bahasa Malaysia, all races are proficient in this language and use it as the lingua franca. The majority use a combination of Malay and Mah Meri with their peers who comprise
Malays and Mah Meri. Even among Mah Meri peers, language choice involves a combination of the Malay and Mah Meri languages.

**School domain**

**Between 12 – 20 years (21 respondents)**

The school domain is relevant only in the 12-20 year-old age group. The respondents were asked regarding their language choice with their teachers and peers.

Twelve in this age group are still school-going children. One out of 12 respondents, or 8.3%, use Malay as well as English with her teachers. Eleven out of 12, or 91.7%, use Malay with their teachers. Three out of 12, or 25%, use only Malay with their friends in school. Nine out of 12, or 75%, use Malay and Mah Meri.

**Table 7. Language used in school: 12-20 years old**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language use</th>
<th>Malay</th>
<th>Malay &amp; English</th>
<th>Mah Meri</th>
<th>Malay &amp; Mah Meri</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>11 (91.7%)</td>
<td>1 (8.3%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School friends</td>
<td>3 (25%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>9 (75%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The use of Malay can be expected especially in a formal setting such as the school and with teachers. The high percentage shown in the use of a combination of Malay and Mah Meri with peer or friends can be attributed to the location of the school which is within the community village itself. Malay is used as it is a school setting and Mah Meri language is used as most of the children are Mah Meri. The language choice, or in this case, choices, are relevant to the setting.

**Family domain**

Respondents are asked to indicate the language they use with immediate family members as well as extended family members. Immediate family members are defined as parents, children and siblings. Extended family members are defined as relatives (cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents) older or younger than the respondents.

**Above 45 years- old**

One out of 21 respondents (or 5%) in this age group uses Malay and Mah Meri to communicate with siblings, children, and extended family members. This respondent is married to a Malay man. The rest of the respondents (19/21 or 95%) use Mah Meri exclusively with all family members.

**Between 21 – 45 years old**

Out of 25 respondents, 17 (68%) use Mah Meri exclusively with all family members including extended family members. Eight (32%) indicate the use of both Malay and Mah Meri with members in the family.
Between 12 – 20 years (21 respondents)

Fifteen out of 21 respondents (or 71.4%) use Mah Meri exclusively with all family members including extended family. Six respondents (28.6%) use both Malay and Mah Meri with family members.

Summary

The data shows there is no difference among the age groups except for the oldest one. Almost all the respondents in the oldest group use Mah Meri only. In the younger two age groups, there is also strong indication of language maintenance within the family. Although there is usage of a combination of Mah Meri and Malay within the family, the percentage is very small.

3.2 Attitude

Questions 19 to 25 were designed to investigate the attitude of the Mah Meri people towards their mother tongue. Respondents were asked if they strongly agree, agree, do not agree, or strongly do not agree to the following statements:

19) It is important for the Mah Meri people to acquire the Mah Meri language.
20) My parents ensured that I learnt the Mah Meri language since I was a child.
21) My parents ensured that I learnt a language other than Mah Meri since I was a child.
22) The Mah Meri language is melodic and pleasant to use.
23) Knowledge in Mah Meri language can assist one to get a job.
24) It is necessary to learn the Mah Meri language so Mah Meri culture and beliefs are maintained.
25) The Mah Meri language has the same status as other languages.

Table 8. Responses to statements on attitude towards the Mah Meri language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q</th>
<th>12-20 (21 respondents)</th>
<th>21-45 (25 respondents)</th>
<th>Above 45 (21 respondents)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SA</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>DA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.76%</td>
<td>90.5%</td>
<td>4.76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The results show that the Mah Meri people have a very positive attitude towards their own language. This is an interesting phenomenon, given the close proximity of the community under study to the city center. Also, through interviews, it was found that there is aspiration of a better economic standing among the people. But this does not seem to affect their attitude towards their language as the data attest.

Some Mah Meri people do not see much difference between the Malay and Mah Meri languages. When eliciting linguistic data for the bigger project as mentioned above (See Introduction), some informants insisted that Mah Meri is similar to Malay. But when they actually verbalize the lexical items, structure, etc., it was found that the words and structure are different from Malay. It can be inferred that in their minds the two languages are similar, as they aspire to be similar to the Malays in terms of economic status.

Overall, the findings show that the Mah Meri people feel that it is important that they acquire their mother tongue. Comparatively, a higher percentage in the middle age group feels strongly that they need to acquire it. The respondents in this group are those who also have school-going children. So, the strong sentiment may have been influenced by the fact that they want their children to be proficient in their language apart from those they learn in school.

Only one respondent answered in the negative for Question 20. This respondent comes from mixed marriage, that is, Malay and Mah Meri. The rest of the respondents have parents who made sure they learnt the Mah Meri language as children.

Most parents ensured that their children learn another language. The trend, however, is not the same in all age groups. A higher percentage in the oldest age group did not have parents who ensured that they learn another language. This shows that the newer generations have changed their mindset in terms of the instrumental requirement of learning language(s) other than Mah Meri.

Apart from slight differences in terms of degree of agreement, all respondents find the Mah Meri language melodic and pleasant to the ear. In an earlier study (see Introduction), one informant (not among the respondents in this study) did indicate that she thinks her language is not as melodic as Malay or English. The reason she gives is that Mah Meri is not ‘sharp’ and ‘fine’ like the other languages. When interviewed further, it was discovered she meant that there are many glottal stop endings in the Mah Meri language instead of the nasal endings as found in Malay. (Borrowings from Malay with nasal endings often become glottal stops). Also, the borrowings from Malay with /-s/ endings become /-ih/ in Mah Meri making it less ‘fine’ from her point of view. But this informant seems to be the minority among others interviewed who feel positive about their mother tongue.

It is quite obvious that knowledge in Mah Meri would not be a determining factor in getting one a job. However, the findings show that only those in the above 45-year-old age bracket totally feel that way as a group, with 95.23% disagreeing and 4.76% strongly disagreeing
that knowledge in Mah Meri will help them find a job. It can be inferred that the more matured respondents are realistic in responding to the statement.

Most in the younger groups also disagreed that knowledge in Mah Meri can assist in getting a job; nevertheless, a portion responded in the affirmative. When interviewed, they indicated that although they know it is not realistic, they still felt that they would like to indicate “agree” and “strongly agree” that knowing the language would help land them jobs.

The Mah Meri people are full of culture and tradition. As mentioned previously, much of the tradition is related to animistic beliefs. Some of them have converted to other religions, mainly Islam and Christianity, but the majority are still practicing animists. The results show that they feel strongly about keeping their traditions alive through language. The traditional rites are full of chants which are specific to particular occasions and situations. Should they lose their language, they would also lose the ability to chant these mantras, poems, and songs that they have for special situations.

In responding to Question 25, which states that Mah Meri has the same status as other languages, again, there is a difference in trend between the oldest age group and the two younger ones. Whereas most (90.5%) of the informants in the oldest age group disagreed to this statement, the responses from the younger age groups are not as clear-cut. There seems to be loyalty towards their own language as indicated in the data. At least 44% in both age groups feel that their language is of the same status as other languages.

4. Conclusion

Some factors function as catalysts for language shift or loss, and these are factors the Mah Meri people face. Examples of these factors are close proximity to the city center, aspirations of better economic status, awareness of the importance of education, assimilation to the mainstream community (in this case, Malays) in dressing and mannerisms. As previously mentioned, the community is located only 103 kilometers away from the city. There is awareness of the importance of education among the Mah Meri people, and the level of education increases with each new generation.

In terms of physical features, the Mah Meri people look like Malays. Most of them are animists, yet they would reply to the Muslim greeting (the salaam in Arabic) and some women wear the headscarf to work in order to look like “the rest.”

The results show that in the cultural and religious domains, there is a slight movement away from Mah Meri when the respondents are Muslims. This would be predictable even if they had converted to Christianity, or any other religion for that matter, as the culture is very much intertwined with their animistic beliefs. There seems to be a higher conversion rate among those in the younger generations, but the number is very low. The majority is still animistic and the shift to another language is not significant.

In the workplace, the language of the superior is Malay. The languages spoken with colleagues are Mah Meri and more often a combination of Mah Meri and Malay. It can be concluded that they still work in the company of people from the same community amongst others. Even if they work as cleaners at the airport or factory workers, they still have the opportunity to speak in their mother tongue. This trend may change in the generations to come, as observed in the results of the school domain. The results in the school domain show a much higher percentage of a combination of Malay and Mah Meri. None of the respondents use Mah Meri in toto in speaking with friends. This is peculiar as the school is located within the
community village. But since it is the school domain, a formal setting, this could be a contributing factor for the use Malay as well as Mah Meri. In the family domain, the usage of Mah Meri is maintained.

In conclusion, it can be said that against all odds, the Mah Meri people are quite steadfast in the maintenance of their language. In some cases, the respondents displayed a strong positive attitude towards the status and usage of the language. This is especially so among the younger generations. However, this feeling is not uniform throughout, possibly indicating the society’s unstable ideological construct of loyalty to the mother tongue being in conflict with a desire to advance socio-economically.

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