

# Critical Analysis of Language Shift: A Case Study of Young Learners in Teochew Chinese Community in Singapore

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## Abstract

This study critically explores the phenomenon of language shift among young learners in the Teochew Chinese community in Singapore during the 1990s. Using the framework of ethnolinguistic vitality (EV), it examines the factors contributing to the decline of the Teochew dialect and its replacement by a combination of Mandarin and English. The research identifies key drivers of this language shift, including the low social status of the Teochew dialect and limited institutional support, both formal (government policies and educational systems) and informal (family and cultural practices). The analysis reveals that the reduced use of Teochew among younger generations is closely tied to language policies promoting Mandarin and the prioritization of English in formal education. The findings highlight the necessity of revitalizing Teochew through targeted strategies, including reforming language policies to support multilingualism, integrating indigenous language education in schools, and encouraging greater use of Teochew within families. These interventions are essential for maintaining the linguistic and cultural identity of the Teochew community.

**Keywords:** language shift, ethnolinguistic vitality, Teochew community, multilingual education, language maintenance

## 1. Introduction

This paper endeavors to provide a critical examination of the phenomenon of language shift among multilingual children, drawing on the seminal case study by Li et al. (1997). The study in question delved into the various factors precipitating language shift within the Teochew Chinese community in Singapore during the 1990s, employing methods such as interviews and observations to gather data. The ensuing discussion in this paper is structured as follows: initially, it critically evaluates the concept of

language shift, with a specific focus on its causative factors from diverse theoretical perspectives. Subsequently, the paper will dissect the case above study through the lens of the ethnolinguistic vitality of young learners. Finally, the discussion culminates with an exploration of the implications of these findings for language education.

## 2. Literature Review

To define language shift (LS), it refers to the change of languages when moving to another

community in order to adapt to the local environment (Pauwels, 2016). Pauwels (2016) describes LS as a gradual process where a community diminishes the use of one language in favor of another across generations, potentially leading to the loss of the original language. Conversely, Schiffman (1990) posits that LS transpires across various domains, culminating in the complete abandonment of the language. Building upon these definitions, language shift can occur both temporally and spatially, potentially culminating in the disappearance of a language. Pauwels (2016) underscores from a sociolinguistic standpoint that this shift often transitions from a first language (L1) to a second language (L2). For example, an illustrative case is observed in particular indigenous communities in Malaysia, where a shift to the official language, Malay, or the foreign language, English, has been noted, influenced by various factors, including education levels and language policies (David, 2017).

Several models have been proposed to elucidate the myriad causes of language shift (e.g., Kloss, 1966; Fishman, 1972; Giles et al., 1977). Kloss (1966) categorises the factors influencing language maintenance (LM) and LS into two types: clear-out factors that promote LM, and ambivalent factors that impact both LM and LS. Derived from his study (1966) on German maintenance in American immigrant contexts, clear-out factors are typically linked to immigration and religion, encompassing aspects like separation from religion and society, the early immigration stages of minority groups, and affiliation with religious educational institutions. Ambivalent factors, on the other hand, focus on the interplay between LM/LS and cultural, linguistic, and ethnic group dynamics (Kloss, 1966). Furthermore, Conklin and Lourie (1983) expanded upon Kloss's framework, introducing three main factors—political, social, and demographic—that influence LS and LM, especially in modern contexts as noted by Clyne (2003). These factors include sub-factors whose varying levels can significantly influence LS and LM, offering a more nuanced understanding of the causality involved.

Fishman's (1972) domain analysis offers a pivotal framework for examining language use patterns in multilingual settings. He conceptualises domains as socio-ecological co-occurrences, categorising them into five

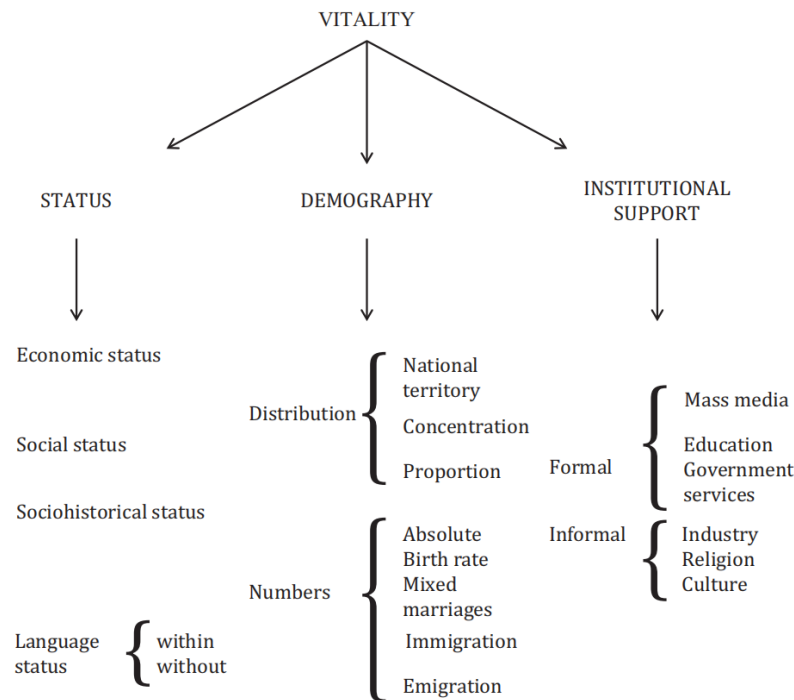
primary areas: family, employment, education, religion, and friendship. Within these domains, the language choices of individuals are influenced by various factors concerning who is involved, the timing, and the location of interactions, all of which can affect language shift (LS) and language maintenance (LM) (Karnopp, 2023). For instance, a study by Tam et al. (2016) investigated language preferences among lecturers at a Malaysian public university. This research revealed that, predominantly due to language policies, English is the primary medium of communication in both formal and informal educational contexts within this university. However, it was observed that some Chinese lecturers switched to Mandarin when teaching Chinese literature or when interacting with Chinese visitors in informal, non-educational settings. The findings of this study suggest that the content of communication, the identities of the interlocutors (who), and the nature of the domain (where) can significantly influence language choices, thereby contributing to LS. Furthermore, Sahgal's (1991) research demonstrates that these domains are not mutually exclusive, as the same language can permeate multiple domains due to influences such as media, educational policies, and school curricula. This interpenetration often results in the underutilisation of other languages. Consequently, factors such as education, politics, and media play a substantial role in LS within the context of domain analysis. This additional perspective underscores the complexity of LS, highlighting the need to consider a range of socio-ecological factors when analyzing language use patterns in multilingual communities.

Ethnolinguistic vitality (EV), akin to Kloss's taxonomies, is viewed through the lens of a structural-functional approach (Giles et al., 1977; Pauwels, 2016), positing that society consists of interconnected, functional components (Britannica, 2023). However, EV distinguishes itself by incorporating intergroup relations theory (Tajfel, 1974) and speech accommodation theory (Giles et al., 1973). Intergroup relations theory emphasises social identity and the categorisation of self and others into social groups, often leading to in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination (Tajfel, 1974). Speech accommodation theory examines how individuals modify their communication styles

to align with or differentiate from others in social interactions (Giles et al., 1973). These theories provide EV with a sociopsychological perspective (Giles et al., 1977), enriching the understanding of language shift (LS) with insights into the interplay between human psychology and societal factors.

Giles et al. (1977) define ethnolinguistic vitality as a construct to understand the dynamics between ethnic groups, intergroup relationships, and ethnic languages. It is identified through three macro variables: status, demography, and institutional support. As noted by Clyne (2003), status variables reflect psychological aspects of LS by indicating a group's perceived societal position. EV's approach to demography refines the classification of demographic variables, including the number of group members and

their geographic distribution (Giles et al., 1977), similar to but more detailed than Conklin and Lourie's taxonomies (1983). Institutional support in EV, mirroring Fishman's (1972) domains, categorises contexts as formal or informal (Giles et al., 1977). The macro variables are further broken down into several micro factors (see Figure 1). Generally, the higher the EV of an ethnic group, the lower the likelihood of experiencing LS or language death (Pauwels, 2016). For example, Landry & Bourhis's (1997) study on the linguistic landscapes in Canada, such as road signs, demonstrates that these elements can enhance a language's power within a community, thereby increasing its EV. This, in turn, influences both LM and LS and promotes the development of bilingualism.



**Figure 1.** Taxonomies of Variables Influencing Ethnolinguistic Vitality (EV)

Note: From *Language, Ethnicity and Intergroup Relations* (p. 309), by H. Giles. 1977, Academic Press. Copyright 1977 by H. Giles.

In the realm of language education, the concept of ethnolinguistic vitality (EV) is increasingly being integrated with bilingual or mother tongue education approaches (e.g., Landry & Allard, 1993; Poderienė & Vaičiakauskienė, 2020). Landry and Allard (1993) conducted a study involving 1200 Anglophone and Francophone Grade 12 students in Canada, asserting that a learner's EV influences their

inclination towards integrating their first language (L1) and a second language (L2). This study particularly highlighted that students with higher vitality were better suited for L2 immersion education, whereas those with lower vitality benefited more from a combined L1 and L2 approach. Similarly, Poderienė and Vaičiakauskienė (2020) investigated EV indicators like language dominance among

students in Lithuanian-language schools. Their findings indicated a decrease in EV for the Lithuanian language as students aged, leading to recommendations for enhanced mother tongue education, especially for older students. These studies collectively suggest that learners with low EV might benefit from increased L1 or ethnic language instruction in schools, thereby mitigating language shifts and promoting language maintenance (Ehala, 2009).

Based on the above models, I propose to utilise ethnolinguistic vitality as a theoretical framework to explore the reasons for language shift in the Teochew Chinese Community in Singapore. This choice is motivated by two primary considerations: firstly, the study's focus on the language shift within the Teochew ethnic group necessitates a comparison with other language groups, aligning well with the inter-group dynamics central to EV. Hence, EV is aptly suited to this study. Secondly, from a methodological standpoint, EV encompasses a broader range of interdisciplinary factors compared to the other models discussed. This comprehensive approach is advantageous for conducting an in-depth analysis of this particular case and offering targeted recommendations for ethnic language education.

### 3. Critical Analyse the Factors Influencing Language Shift of Young Learners in the

#### Teochew Chinese Community in Singapore

Teochew, a dialect originating from the Chaoshan region in Guangdong Province, China, holds a significant place within the linguistic landscape of Singapore. As per the Singaporean census data of the 1990s, the Teochew Chinese community is identified as a significant Chinese ethnic group in the country, ranking second in population size after the Hokkien and followed by the Cantonese community. Similar to Teochew, both Hokkien and Cantonese are dialects from the southeastern regions of China (Li et al., 1997). The pivotal study by Li et al. (1997) examined language usage within family settings among 72 participants from the Teochew Chinese Community in Singapore. This investigation encompassed a combination of in-depth interviews and observations, focusing on a generational breakdown of participants, which included 2 grandparents, 26 parents, and 44 children (refer to Table 1 for details). The forthcoming discussion will delve into the causes of language shift (LS) among these children, particularly from the perspective of ethnolinguistic vitality (EV), emphasising factors such as language status and institutional support. Additionally, the discussion will offer relevant implications for ethnic language education.

**Table 1.** Variations in language selection among different generations

Speaker	Interlocutor					
	Grandparents		Parents		Children	
	Languages spoken	% of users	Languages spoken	% of users	Languages spoken	% of users
Grandparents (2 speakers)	T	100	T	100	T	100
Parents (26 speakers)	T	100	T	46	TM	31
			TM	26	T	26
			TME	8	M	19
			H	8	TME	8
			E	8	ME	8
			M	4	E	8
Children (44 speakers)	T	85	TM	27	TME	26
	H	6	T	23	ME	23
	ME	6	M	16	E	21

	TM	3	ME	11	T	9
			H	7	TE	7
			HM	7	HM	7
			E	7	HME	5
			TME	2	HE	2

T = Teochew; H = Hokkien; M = Mandarin; E = English

Note: From “Language Shift in the Teochew Community in Singapore: A Family Domain Analysis”, by W. Li, V. Saravanan, and J. L. H. Ng, 1997, *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 18(5), p. 374. (<https://doi.org/10.1080/01434639708666326>). Copyright 1997 by W. Li, V. Saravanan, and J. L. H. Ng.

**Table 2.** Linguistic preference in the family domain (N=72)

Preferred language(s) at home	Mother Tongue							
	Teochew		Hokkien		Mandarin		English	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Teochew	12	22.22	0	0	0	0	0	0
Teochew & Mandarin	10	18.52	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mandarin	14	25.93	0	0	4	36.36	0	0
Hokkien	1	1.85	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mandarin & English	9	16.67	3	75	5	45.46	0	0
English	8	14.81	1	25	2	18.18	3	100
Total	54		4		11		3	
%	75		5.55				4.17	

Note: From “Language Shift in the Teochew Community in Singapore: A Family Domain Analysis”, by W. Li, V. Saravanan, and J. L. H. Ng, 1997, *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 18(5), p. 374. (<https://doi.org/10.1080/01434639708666326>). Copyright 1997 by W. Li, V. Saravanan, and J. L. H. Ng.

### 3.1 Language Status

The concept of language status plays a crucial role in influencing the high rate of language shift (LS) observed among the children in the Teochew Chinese Community in Singapore. Language status pertains to the extent to which an ethnic language is employed both within and outside the linguistic group (Giles et al., 1977). The study by Li et al. (1997) reveals that approximately 40% of the Teochew population prefer to use the Teochew dialect within their families. Notably, the propensity to speak Teochew diminishes with each younger generation, primarily when the youngest children communicate with their peers (refer to Tables 1 & 2 for detailed data). Additionally, according to Li et al.’s study (1997), these bilingual or multilingual young speakers

generally reserve the use of Teochew for interactions with their grandparents. Contrastingly, when conversing with friends from other linguistic groups, they often employ a mix of languages, including English, Mandarin, Hokkien, and Teochew.

### 3.2 Institutional Support

The decline in the use of the Teochew dialect among young learners in the Teochew Chinese Community in Singapore can be partly attributed to the need for robust institutional support. Institutional support encompasses both formal and informal elements (Giles et al., 1977). In terms of formal institutional support, this primarily involves government and educational sectors. Li et al. (1997) report that in the early 1980s, the Singaporean Government, aiming to adapt to globalisation, designated English as the



national language and initiated the Speak Mandarin Campaign. This campaign was intended to foster ethnic solidarity and economic development. However, the promotion of Chinese dialects, including Teochew, was met with limited success. The ascendance of Mandarin led to perceptions among the Chinese population in Singapore that not speaking Mandarin equated to a lack of respect for ancestral culture. Additionally, the Government posited that Chinese dialects could fragment the Chinese Community, potentially impacting Singapore's economic engagement with mainland China. As presented in Tables 3 and 4, empirical evidence indicates a significant linguistic shift within the Singaporean Chinese community: a roughly 10% increase in English speakers and an almost 20% rise in Mandarin speakers. However, there has been a notable 30% decrease in speakers of Chinese dialects, with the decline in Teochew being particularly pronounced. This trend underscores the impact of language policy on LS.

Furthermore, educational policies have made English and Mandarin the principal languages in schools, thereby reducing opportunities for

the Teochew community's children to engage with their native dialect. Before the 1980s, Teochew clans established schools to teach the Teochew language and culture. However, subsequent policy changes led to these institutions incorporating cultural courses taught in Mandarin. Considering their children's future prospects and the promotion of English and Mandarin, parents increasingly opted for English-medium schools (Li et al., 1997). They conversed with their children in Mandarin at home, though occasionally mixing in Teochew (see Table 1). In terms of informal institutional support, its influence is primarily seen in the cultural domain. Despite efforts to promote Teochew culture, such as establishing the Teochew Culture Centre in 1995 and organising the Teochew Week Festival, these initiatives predominantly attract older members of the community. The younger generation often needs to fully identify with their Teochew heritage (Li et al., 1997). Consequently, the convergence of political, educational, and cultural factors has led to a significant LS among the younger generation, resulting in a diminished ethnolinguistic vitality.

**Table 3.** Main languages spoken in the family domain by ethnicity between 1980 and 1990

<i>Language</i>	<i>Percent</i>	
	<i>1980</i>	<i>1990</i>
<i>Chinese households</i>		
English	10.2	20.6
Mandarin	13.1	32.8
Chinese dialects	76.2	46.2
Others	0.5	0.4
<i>Malay households</i>		
English	2.3	5.5
Malay	96.7	94.3
Others	1.0	0.2
<i>Indian households</i>		
English	24.3	34.8
Malay	8.6	13.5
Tamil	52.2	43.7
Others	14.9	8.0

Note: 1990 data were grounded on 10% sample. Adapted from *Census of Population 1990: Advance Data Release* (p.18), by Department of Statistics of Singapore. 1991, SNP Publishers. Copyright 2009 by National Library Board Singapore.

**Table 4.** Language shift in the Chinese community in Singapore between 1980 and 1990

Language claimed as principal language to spouse	% of Chinese living in same household as spouse	
	1980	1990
Hokkien	34	26
Teochew	17	11
Cantonese	15	10
English	12	20
Mandarin	13	28
Other Chinese dialects	9	5

Note: Adapted from *Singapore Census of Population 1990: literacy, languages spoken and education: statistical release 3*, by K.E. Lau. 1992, SNP Publishers. Copyright 2009 by National Library Board Singapore. (Cited from "Language Shift in the Teochew Community in Singapore: A Family Domain Analysis", by W. Li, V. Saravanan, and J. L. H. Ng, 1997, *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 18(5), p. 374. (<https://doi.org/10.1080/01434639708666326>). Copyright 1997 by W. Li, V. Saravanan, and J. L. H. Ng.).

### 3.3 Implications

The detailed examination and analysis of the various factors that have led to the diminished ethnolinguistic vitality (EV) of the Teochew dialect, particularly among the younger generation in Singapore, reveals a complex interplay of linguistic, social, and cultural elements. This critical understanding paves the way for the development of a comprehensive set of strategies aimed at revitalising and enhancing the usage and overall vitality of the Teochew dialect. These strategies are multifaceted and encompass interventions across three critical domains: Government, educational institutions (schools), and the family unit.

Effective language policies by the Singaporean Government can play a pivotal role in bolstering indigenous languages like Teochew. As defined by Spolsky (2007), language policies are the choices made regarding language use. An exemplary model is the National Education Reform initiated by the Bolivian Government in 1994, which integrated indigenous languages with Spanish in bilingual education, thereby elevating the status and recognition of ethnic languages (Hornberger & King, 1996; Hornberger & Cornel-Molina, 2004). Consequently, the Singaporean Government could consider similar policies to promote indigenous languages, including Teochew and other dialects, to enhance the EV of their respective ethnic communities.

Singaporean schools can adopt flexible teaching strategies for ethnic languages, catering to

students with varying levels of EV. Teachers proficient in this dialect could incorporate it into English or Mandarin lessons for students with low EV in Teochew. Additionally, dialect societies can effectively promote various dialects and encourage students to practice their mother tongues. Thus, organising extracurricular activities focused on learning Teochew could also be beneficial.

Family involvement is crucial in language acquisition and maintenance. Ong's (2021) research indicates that children can master heritage languages if their parents consistently communicate with them in these languages from an early age. Furthermore, speaking indigenous languages at home can strengthen emotional ties to these languages. Therefore, Teochew parents in Singapore are encouraged to converse more with their children in Teochew, reinforcing their Teochew identity and promoting the preservation of the language.

### 4. Conclusion

This essay critically examined the language shift experienced by young learners within the Teochew Chinese Community in Singapore during the 1990s. The analysis focused on elucidating the factors contributing to the shift from Teochew to a hybrid of English and Mandarin, utilizing the framework of ethnolinguistic vitality (EV). It was identified that the low language status of Teochew, coupled with weak institutional support across political, educational, and cultural sectors, significantly contributed to the diminished EV

of Teochew among these young learners, leading to an observable language shift. In light of these findings, the imperative of promoting language maintenance (LM) of Teochew among the young generation in Singapore becomes evident. Several strategies have been proposed to address this issue. The Singaporean Government could play a crucial role by establishing a multilingual language policy that fosters the dissemination and use of Teochew, particularly in educational institutions. Schools have the opportunity to incorporate indigenous language education by integrating Teochew instruction alongside English and Mandarin. Moreover, families, especially Teochew-speaking parents, are encouraged to increase the use of Teochew at home, providing a practical and immersive environment for their children to learn and practice the language.

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