Ethnolinguistic Vitality of Minority Communities in a Multilingual Society: A Comparative Study of the Chinese and Indians in Malaysia

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Abstract Chinese and Tamils are the two major minority ethnic communities living in the multi-ethnic and multi-lingual Malaysia. Though these two communities come from two different ethno-linguistic stalks, they have lot of similarities in terms of their migratory history, sub-ethnic composition, language maintenance, activities related to education, maintenance of their cultural and linguistic identities. However, they exhibit differential behavior in the present socio-political background of Malaysia. This behavioral heterogeneity with an objective of getting sociolinguistic and cultural stability is the result of the impact of the socio-political and the ideological dominance of the majority group. This paper aims at comparing these two communities in terms of ethnolinguistic vitality, which may contribute significantly to the understanding of the behavior of these two minority communities in a multilingual society.

Keywords Chinese; Tamils; ethnolinguistic vitality; Malaysia

1. Introduction

Malaysia, situated in the Southeast Asia, has the total population of 27 million. In that, 65.1% constitute ethnic Malay, 26% Chinese, 7.7% Indians and others 1.2% according to Census 2000 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2001). It is evident from the demographic details given above that the Chinese and the Indians are the two major minority ethnic communities living in the multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-cultural Malaysia. Though these two communities come from two different ethnolinguistic stalks, as far as Malaysia is concerned, they have lot of similarities in terms of their migratory history, sub-ethnic composition, language maintenance, activities related to education, maintenance of their cultural and