

*A Sociolinguistic Study on Tamil English Code-Mixing among Urban Bilingual
- A Study on Pedagogical Perspective*

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Abstract

This paper analyses the various reasons for code-mixing, and the domains where a mixed code is preferred by Tamil speakers. Sri Lanka is a multilingual country where code mixing is a communication strategy used by speakers of different indigenous languages. Mixing of Tamil and English is common speech behaviour that occurs in the discourse of educated bilinguals. There are various factors that influence the use of English in a mother tongue discourse. The research design involves qualitative approaches. The data for this study was collected by means of a questionnaire. The participants were educated urban bilinguals in the Jaffna district. The data collected from the subjects' responses were analyzed and the findings were derived. The bilinguals were required to self-report their awareness of the frequency and purposes of using code mixing in different situations in their day to day conversation. The results showed that the degree of code mixing depends on various factors such as amount of exposure to English, the medium of instruction in school and the frequency of language used in different domains, contexts and topics of discussion. This paper throws light on the fact that mixing Tamil and English facilitates communication and is performed for certain practical reasons.

Keywords: code-mixing, urban bilinguals, indigenous languages, discourse, communication strategy

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Code Mixing as a Popular Study

Code mixing has been one of the popular studies in sociolinguistics since the mid-1970s, with numerous studies on bilingual Spanish-English communities in the United States and a few studies on other bilingual and multilingual communities around the world.

In a bilingual speech community, there is a natural tendency among speakers to mix lexical items, phrases, clauses, and sentences during verbal interaction. This is an essential part of their communicative competence, the "ability to switch linguistically and appropriately according to the situational changes" (Verma 1975:35). The elements mixed belong to the "host"¹ language which, for historical and socio-economic reasons, has acquired more prestige than the "guest"² language which receives them. "Code-mixing", "code-switching", and "borrowing" are some of the labels used in linguistic literature (e.g., Bloomfield 1933, Haugen 1956, Kachru 1978, Sridhar 1978, Poplack 1980, among others) to describe various kinds of mixtures resulting from language contact.

Background of the Study

Jaffna where the present study is undertaken is a cultural and linguistic melting pot. The majority of the population is Tamils and the great majority speaks Tamil as a first language. However, a lot of local Tamils are proficient in both Tamil and English. The socio, political and economic situations form the basis for the context of code-mixing. All their formal learning takes place in Tamil. Tamil is often influenced by the super ordinate language, English.

This group of Tamil - English bilinguals often resorts to a mixed code when interacting among them, their absorbing code being Tamil and the absorbed code English. The use of the elements of English in speech is sometimes so unconscious that it seems to fit perfectly in speech. Code-mixing is usually condemned by monolinguals but users think that the employment of a word or a phrase from the other language in their speech may carry a stronger power of expression or render precision.

This research study on "A Sociolinguistic Study on Tamil English Code-Mixing among Urban Bilinguals - A Study on Pedagogical Perspective" is an exploration of code-mixing of Tamil and English in Jaffna.

Historical Background

Several languages are spoken in Sri Lanka within the Indo-Aryan, Dravidian and Austronesian families. Sri Lanka accords official status to Sinhalese and Tamil. The languages spoken on the island nation are deeply influenced by the languages of neighbouring India, the Maldives and Malaysia. Arab settlers and the colonial powers

¹. L1 is the host language.

². L2 is the guest language.

of Portugal, the Netherlands and Britain have also influenced the development of modern languages in Sri Lanka.

The Sinhala language is spoken by the Sinhalese, who constitute approximately 75% of the national population and total about 13 million. The Tamil language is spoken by Sri Lankan Tamils, as well as by Tamil migrants from the neighboring Indian state of Tamil Nadu and by most Sri Lankan Moors. Tamil speakers number around 4.7 million. There are more than 50,000 speakers of the Sri Lankan Creole Malay language, which is strongly influenced by the Malay language. There is also a large Maldivian population and they speak Dhivehi as their primary language.

English in Sri Lanka is fluently spoken by approximately 10%³ of the population, and widely used for official and commercial purposes, it is the native language of approximately 74,000 people, mainly in urban areas. A handful of the 3,400 people of Portuguese descent speak Sri Lankan Portuguese creole.⁴ The Muslim community in Sri Lanka widely uses Arabic for religious purposes. Seldom used nowadays is Arwi, a written register of Tamil that uses the Arabic script and has extensive lexical influences from Arabic.

In order to provide a comprehensive sociolinguistic and linguistic analysis of CM in a multilingual society such as Sri Lanka⁵, it is important that the reader should be informed not only about the sociofunctional status of the languages involved in the study of CM, but also about how those languages came into being in contact. So it is worth discussing the sociolinguistic profile of Sri Lanka at this juncture.

A Sociolinguistic Profile of Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is a multilingual and multicultural nation like some other countries in the world. There are mainly four languages spoken in Sri Lanka. They are Sinhala, Tamil, Malay and English. The Department of Census and Statistics (2001) lists the ethnic groups in Sri Lanka as Sinhalese, Sri Lanka Tamil, Indian Tamil, Sri Lanka Moor, Europeans, Burgher and Eurasian, Malay, Veddhas and others respectively. Of these four languages mentioned above, two have been recognized legally as national languages:

1. Sinhala, one of the legislated official national languages, is spoken by majority of the population in Sri Lanka. It is the medium of instruction in education and the language of the administration of the government.
2. Tamil, one of the legislated official national languages, is spoken by minority of Sri Lanka living mostly in the Northern, Eastern, up countries and some

³ "Sri Lanka - language". Retrieved 20 June 2014.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Languages_of_Sri_Lanka

⁴ Indo-Portuguese (Sri Lanka) at *Ethnologue* (18th ed., 2015)
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Languages_of_Sri_Lanka

⁵ It was called Ceylon formerly and it became the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka in 1972, marking the end of British rule.

other parts of the country. It is also the medium of instruction in education and the language of the administration of the government.

3. English legislated as a link language which has coexisted with the national languages of the country. It holds the key to upward social mobility and is a symbol of power and prestige.

Sociolinguistically, the two national languages are mainly used for communication within the ethnic groups. They also serve each in the regions in which they are spoken, as the medium of instruction. Sociofunctionally, English serves as the link language spoken between the ethnic groups in Sri Lanka. It is used as the medium of instruction in the universities. It is also used as the language of administration, media, diplomacy, social mobility, interethnic communication and international business transactions.

Tamil in the Sri Lankan Setting

The word “Tamil” refers both to the language and its speakers, and when it refers to the speakers, it does not denote them as speakers of a language, but refers to them as also an “ethnic” group, with an identifiable culture, and a consciousness among them that they belong to one group. In Sri Lanka, Sinhala, Tamil and English are the major languages. Of these, Sinhala is the language of the majority, Tamil the language of the largest minority, while English is the language used by the English educated among all Communities in Sri Lanka, in addition to its being the mother tongue of the Burger community.

The Tamil speaking population in Sri Lanka consists of the Sri Lanka moors and the Indian moors. They thus constitute more than a quarter of the total population of the Republic of Sri Lanka. The Sri Lanka Tamils though found all over the island in scattered settlements; predominate in the Northern and Eastern Provinces that have been considered their traditional homelands from olden times. There is also a bulk of the Tamil population in the greater Colombo areas. Jaffna, Vavuniya and Mannar are the major towns in the Northern Province and Batticaloa and Trincomalee in the Eastern Province. The Indian Tamils are mostly employed in the plantations in and around the hilly districts in the central part of the island.

On the social scale, it is possible to speak of Sri Lankans' Tamil dialect (Non-Muslim), Sri Lanka Muslim dialect, and Indian Tamil dialect in Sri Lanka. There are Indian Muslims in Sri Lanka whose differs from the Sri Lanka Muslim Tamil. It is interesting to note that in Sri Lanka there are no caste dialects with marked differences like the caste dialects in India such as the Brahmin dialect and Non-Brahmin dialect. The Muslims are from the second minority in Sri Lanka. One third of the total Muslim population is in the Northern and Eastern provinces and they are mostly monolinguals speaking Tamil only. The rest of the Muslims are found scattered in the other seven provinces where they are mostly bilinguals speaking Tamil and Sinhala. English educated Muslims in the island are not many.

Factors Contributing to Status of Tamil Language

When Sri Lanka gained its independence from British colonial rule in 1948, the momentum against the inherited place of English as the medium of public administration and government also grew. Following that, there were several factors which influenced in the status and functions of Tamil Language⁶.

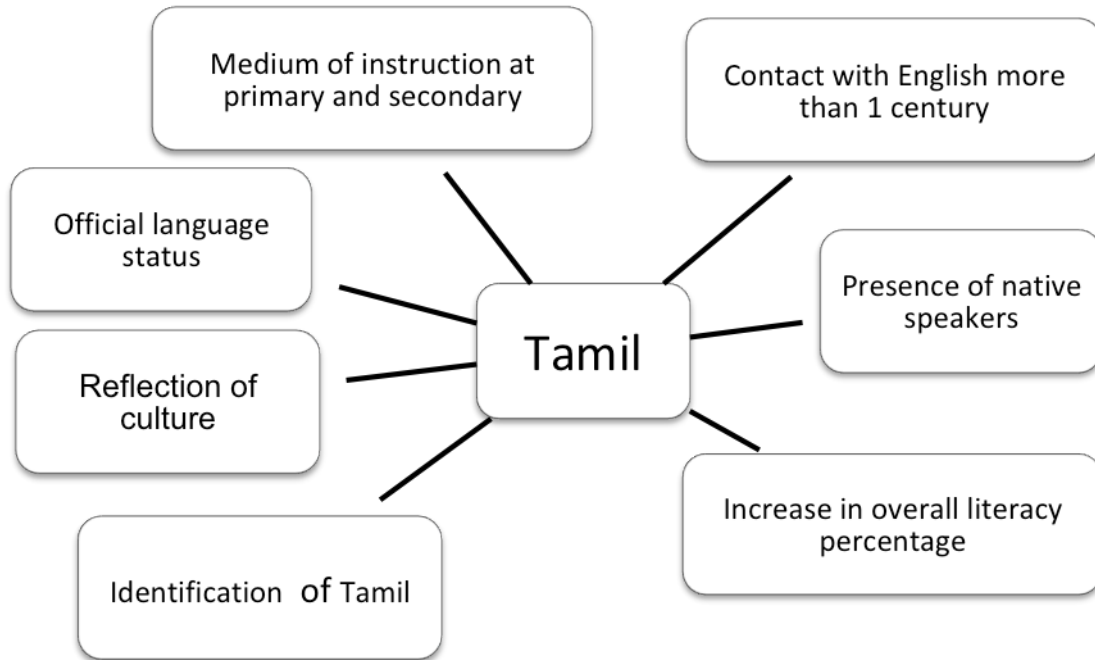


Figure.1. Status of Tamil language

English in Sri Lanka

Colonialism played a pivotal role in the development and promotion of English in South Asia, and Sri Lanka is no exception in this regard. The British Empire ruled the Indian Subcontinent for almost 200 years from 1757 to 1947. The origin of the impact of English on Sri Lankan languages can be traced back to the advent of British colonialism in the Indian subcontinent that brought English with it. With the passage of time, and as a result of their prolonged stay in the subcontinent, gradually the use of English extended in public domains and in a short time influenced the other languages in use in those domains.

The impact of English on Sinhala and Tamil started during the colonial period and this hegemony of English over these languages became evident in all the spheres of social life. The other impact of English was the result of its contact with these languages. As a result, the use of two languages almost inevitably affects the forms of

⁶Article 22 (1), Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka as amended by section 3, Sixteenth Amendment to the Constitution 1988

the languages so used. The use of English by Sinhala/Tamil speakers has led to the functional elaboration of both English and Sinhala/Tamil. In turn; bilinguals show varying degrees of proficiency in the languages they use. Such disparities in performance have led to differing patterns of bilingualism manifested in different phonological, grammatical and lexical features.

Factors Contributing to Status of English Language

English was introduced to the island with the arrival of the British in 1796. In the course of time, the English language was firmly planted in Sri Lanka in a systematic manner. The use of English became supreme and pervasive in several domains of language use. Under British rule, English was the language of administration. It was the language of higher education and the most popular language of school education. The social value placed on the English language in contemporary Sri Lanka is largely related to the British education system which for the first time introduced a European language to a minority of Sri Lankans.

Post-independent politicians of Sri Lanka introduced several changes to the British education system which had class and linguistic discrepancies. Their intention was to create an equitable system of education which would cater to all segments of society. After independence from the British in the year 1948, English was given the status of secondary official language in the Sri Lankan constitution and it has since become the major language of administration, law and education. English spoken among Sri Lankan upper and middle class were primarily for social and economic purposes, but over time it has become associated with a certain prestige.

English is taught as a complementary language to ensure Sri Lankans benefit from globalization and other 21st century issues. The government hopes to make up for the drawbacks of general education that is provided in the mother tongue, through English, an additional language. English is meant to compensate for the limited background provided by the indigenous languages.

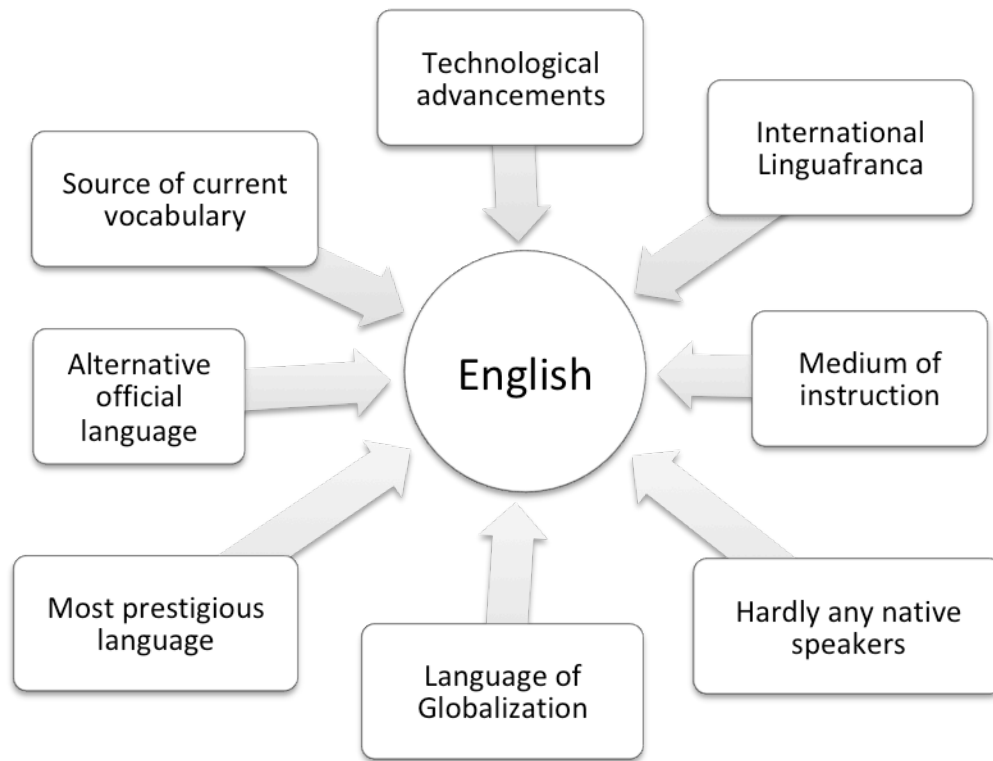


Figure. 2. Status of English language

Bilingualism in Jaffna Tamil Society

The Jaffna Tamil society in Sri Lanka comprises both bilinguals in Tamil and English and Tamil monolinguals. It is a common feature that these bilinguals and monolinguals in Jaffna use a number of English words in their day- to -day speech and writing in Tamil at home, in social interaction, in education, for religious purpose etc. In case of the bilinguals the use of English words may be through language contact situations like code switching, code mixing, borrowing etc.

The initial development of bilingualism in Tamil and English in Jaffna is the outcome of English education and civil administrative activities through the English medium during the British colonial rule in Sri Lanka. English is still taught as a second language in educational institutions and a considerable part of the administration is carried out in English in Sri Lanka. As a result English still continues to be in contact with Tamil and this language contact situation has an impact on learning English as a second language.

Literature Review

Canagarajah (1995) comments on code alternation activity among the Jaffna Tamils. There are now almost no L2-dominant or balanced bilinguals; grammatical competence per se in English is declining. Tamil has taken over domains previously

belonging to English; extensive use of unmixed English in conversations is reduced to a few formal contexts. However code alternation activity enables English to continue in a more widely distributed and pervasive form than ever before, with both monolinguals and bilinguals using English in conventional and unconventional contexts with complex communicative competence.

So code alternation behaviour will continue in Jaffna, gradually making Englishized Tamil a separate, independent code in its own right. This will exist parallel to unmixed Tamil and English, with sociolinguistic rules and communicative functions of its own. Although unmixed Tamil and English are becoming highly restricted in use, Englishized Tamil is widely used. It is becoming the unmarked every day code in the Jaffna Tamil society.

Grosjean (1982) states that code switching and code mixing are often used as a communicative strategy to convey linguistic and social information. He further states that code switching and codes mixing not only fill a momentary linguistic need, they are also a very useful communication resource. In addition, Greene and Walker (2004) state that code mixing is not random or meaningless. It has a role, a function, facets and characteristics. It is a linguistic tool and a sign of the participants' awareness of alternative communicative conventions. That is, in terms of the researchers who have positive points of view about code switching and code mixing, the fundamental reason why bilinguals switch or mix their languages is not because they lack language skills but because they try to make their utterance more easily understandable and meaningful.

Gunsekara (2005) provides an overview of the phonological, morphosyntactic and semantic characteristics of SLE. She focuses on the structural properties of the varieties of English spoken in the post-colonial Sri Lankan setting and reports CM as a discourse strategy among Sinhala-English bilinguals.

Kanthimathi (2007) states that code mixing is a kind of spontaneous behavior of bilinguals and used as a linguistic device in informal styles of speaking. Most of the time, the bilingual is not conscious of the way he/she mixes the two languages. The mixed code is a natural consequence of languages in contact. In her study of the Tamil English mixed language used by people in Tamilnadu, people who live in a bilingual or multilingual communication environment usually have the tendency to use two or more codes as a strategy to facilitate communication while communicating with each other. The alternate use of Tamil and English within the same discourse has a pattern.

Wettewe (2009) focuses on the sociolinguistic aspects of code-mixing in the post-colonial Sri Lankan setting and presents a comprehensive analysis of the structural properties of the mixed language that has become a linguistic reality. She concludes that a mixed variety has evolved as a result of the language contact between Sinhala and English and this variety is mostly influenced by the first language.

She also reveals the structural properties of CM from the study of Sinhala-English code-mixing. She says that the analyses propose not only account for the structural properties of Sinhala-English code-mixing, but also explain the functions of language mixing in Sri Lanka. The structural analysis provides insight into the co-existence of English with Sinhala in Sri Lanka. The analysis shows the dominant influence of Sinhala on Sinhala-English code-mixing. Most of the Sinhala elements such as nouns, complementizers, verbs, numerals, particles and plural markers facilitate the inclusion of English elements in the discourse of the Sinhala speaker.

Statement of the Problem

It is noticed that there are many English words and the grammatical features used in the day to day speech patterns of the Jaffna Tamils. English is increasingly used in spoken Tamil discourse nowadays. Through this study, it is intended to analyze that if code mixing is practiced as a strategy for effective discourse, the different language variables such as linguistic, psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic variables play a role to facilitate communication among the bilinguals of Jaffna Tamils.

Sociolinguistic Analysis

The study mainly focuses on the sociolinguistic context of Tamil English code-mixing. Of course, language mixing originates in response to social motivations, and social factors cannot be ignored in any analysis; however, the realization of mixes is subject to attitudinal and functional aspects which reflect semantic and communicational properties of discourse and is therefore the focus of the present study of Tamil/English mixture in the speech of Jaffna Tamils.

So this section focuses on the sociolinguistic context of the research done by the researcher. A well-organized sociolinguistic questionnaire was prepared by the researcher and distributed to 50 respondents for the purpose of collecting sociolinguistic data for the analysis. The data provided the information about the sociolinguistic context of Jaffna district and about the sociolinguistic characteristics of urban Tamil English bilinguals. Consequently, how the use of Tamil and English sociolinguistically embedded. Accordingly, data collected from the questionnaire are classified in terms of different variables and the data were fed in the excel sheet and analyzed using the SPSS software.

Subjects for the Study

For the purpose of this study, 50 respondents were selected as subjects from the urban areas where the researcher identified the Tamil English bilinguals rather than the rural areas where most of the people were monolinguals in the Jaffna district. The data for this study was collected by means of a questionnaire, follow up interviews and observation. An equal number of males and females contributed to the study. The main variable for stratifying the sample was the employment sector, because of the different position and the use of languages in their day to day interaction and differences in the educational level of the bilingual speakers. The subjects were

required to self-report their awareness of the frequency and purposes of using mixed code in their daily life.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Data were collected by means of distributing a sociolinguistic questionnaire. Respondents were given a questionnaire comprising questions asking about personal information such as age, education and language use in the last few years in different domains, and attitudes towards maintaining Tamil and English over the years. The questionnaire also consisted of questions where they had to tick the reasons for which they code mixed.

There are several reasons for which respondents resort to code-mixing. Code-mixing with English words is due to the fact that English has more prestige as it is said in literature. The study reveals that other than the prestige or status of English, there are other reasons stated below by the respondents for which they code-mix.

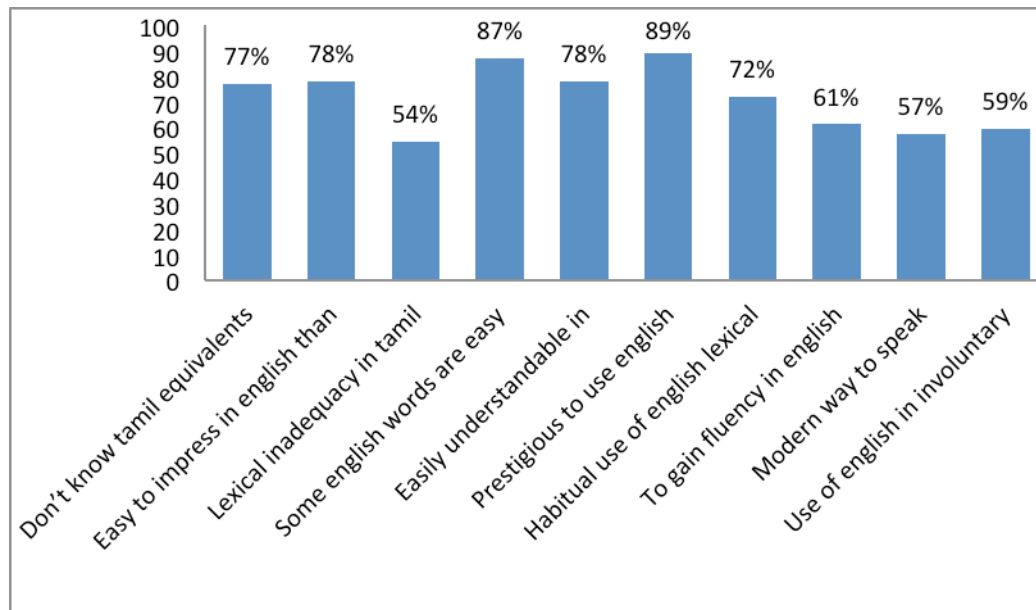


Figure 3. Reasons for code-mixing

The above chart shows that the prestigious to use English is the highest ranked. This could be because of the attitudinal functions which English has. Similarly the responses show that English is preferred because of the ease of articulation. Some Tamil words are long and cumbersome to pronounce when comparing with English words. In such contexts, respondents feel that the English equivalent of the Tamil word is mostly preferred. For example, one would prefer to say 'cycle repair panna venum' instead of saying 'mithvandi paluthupaarkka venum' (I have to repair the cycle). The responses also show that English is preferred to explain some feelings and expressions as they find easy to express in English and they are best understood in English than in Tamil.

The fifth highest ranked reason for code-mixing is that they do not find Tamil equivalents for certain words especially in modern scientific and technological terms. 72% of the responses involve in code-mixing because of the habitual use of English in their day to day conversation. Though they know the equivalents for certain words, they tend to mix English words. It is also found in the study that students use mixing as a strategy to learn English. This process evolves from code-mixing to code-switching to gain fluency in English. Respondents also feel that code-mixing is involuntarily done that is without being aware of mixing English words. There are other reasons for code-mixing. They say that it is trendy and stylish to speak a mixed language. It symbolizes group solidarity. Lack of terms in Tamil for some words is also one reason to involve in code-mixing. Tamil language will have to update its vocabulary to avoid the infiltration of English words in order to maintain its purity. So the lexicon of the Tamil language is updated with the use of loan words or loan translations which are difficult to pronounce and remember. For example, one would like to say train rather than saying 'pukaivanTi' in Tamil which is long and laborious to pronounce and difficult to remember.

4.14. Conclusion

It is obvious that the sociolinguistic questionnaire data comprising different variables corroborates the findings of the interviews and participant observations. It reveals that the number of respondents speaking Tamil dominates while comparing with other speakers of Language. In addition, Tamil is mostly used in both formal and informal domains, however it is prominently used in informal domains. This is due to the growing ethnic consciousness which has caused a 'prominent' language by its users in relation to identity and cultural values. However, it should be mentioned that its low status is associated with the low social mobility it offers to speakers and class distinctions associated with it. The high and low status of languages corroborates with the findings of this study. As Tamil acquires high status in most of the formal and informal contexts, it not only reveals the changing roles languages gain based on different socio-cultural contexts but also depict the diversity as found in inherent in language varieties. The diversity is exemplified in the attitudes of speakers, which assign different social statuses to languages depending on different socio-cultural contexts. It can be mentioned that Tamil is most often provides cultural identity to the speakers and is being the 'free access code' termed as one of the national language and as one of the languages of instruction based on the educational policy of the country.

According to the data in relation to interlocutors and language use, the findings reveal that the roles and functions of Tamil are mostly determined by interlocutors. As reported by respondents, Tamil dominates and assumes superiority in almost all settings. At the same time, the use of both Tamil and English in discourse too assumes similar functions and roles as it is found in Tamil. However, in most cases, the use of both Tamil and English appears to replace the use of Tamil in certain contexts. So the mix code-Tamil and English emerge as an alternate code in place of Tamil and it integrates English with Tamil successfully. This is greatly due to the positive attitudes towards English based on the higher social mobility in all settings of their career.

The sociolinguistic analyses of data in this study confirm that the use of both Tamil and English in discourse is a widespread phenomenon with urban bilinguals. It is obvious that mixing of both Tamil and English is the alternate code for Tamil and it often overlaps with the use of Tamil in certain contexts. So English is the least used code due to the integration with Tamil-English mixed code. Urban Tamils have chosen to be bilinguals in most domains with most interlocutors. The rationales for the widespread use of both Tamil and English in the media like newspaper, TV, Radio and books especially in urban areas can be categorized as both functional and symbolic in motivating the speakers to engage in mixed discourse.

Finally, The results of the study seem to reveal these facts about code-mixing among Tamil and English bilinguals: code-mixing makes for easy communication because it is speech accommodating and used as a strategy for communication among different degree of bilinguals. Code-mixing is sometimes done for the prestige associated with it. Mixing of Tamil and English in discourse is happening because of the high level exposure to English through various sources. This study has also thrown light on the functions and the various reasons for mixing Tamil and English in discourse. The study also confirms that mixing of both Tamil and English in the discourse is an inevitable phenomenon and an unconscious process without being aware of it. At the same time, it has different functions for the upward social mobility and desire for social, educational, and occupational progress in all settings of their life.

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