

Documenting Chetty Creole: Preserving the Voice of a Minority Language

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Abstract

The Chetty, or Chetti Melaka, are a unique community of South Indian descent who settled primarily in Malacca, Malaysia, in the 16th century. Known as the "Indian Peranakans," they have blended many Malay and Chinese cultural elements into their lives while preserving their Hindu faith and heritage. Losing this heritage would be a significant loss, affecting not only the wider Malaysian society but also this small community in Malacca. The primary language spoken is Chetty Creole, considered a minority language due to the community's increasing migration from the settlement. The purpose of documenting this portion is to shed light on the limited research available on the Chetty community's language and culture. With the community facing ongoing challenges, including migration and diminishing numbers, there is a pressing concern that this language may be on the brink of extinction. Chetty Creole represents a valuable legacy and heritage left by early Indian traders, enriching Malaysian history.

Keywords: Malacca Chetty, Minority Language, Heritage

Introduction

The Chetty constitute a community primarily situated in Malacca and Singapore. Referred to variously as Chetty, Chetin, Chati, Chatin, Chettijn, or Sittya, they are also recognized as Peranakan Hindus or Hindus native to the Melaka Straits. Originating as a small group of Tamil-speaking Indian traders who migrated to Malaysia over 500 years ago, the Chetty's have since developed a distinct cultural identity that sets them apart from other Indian communities in Malaysia (Karpaya and Muthusamy, 2017). These traders mainly from from Kalingapatnam and Tamil Nadu, integrated into local society, and married local women, creating a unique cultural blend that formed the foundation of the Chetty community (Chuang & Müller, 2016).

The language of the Chetty community in Melaka is a captivating element of their distinctive cultural heritage, showcasing a blend of Tamil, Malay, and regional linguistic influences (Moorthy, 2021). Although Tamil remains a core part of their language due to the community's South Indian roots, the dialect they speak is unique from the Tamil used by other

Indian communities in Malaysia. Over the centuries, the Chetty language has evolved through intermarriage, trade, and deep social integration with the local Malay community, resulting in a hybridized form of Tamil enriched with Malay vocabulary, grammar, and expressions.

The Chetty dialect is a creolized language that preserves the structural base of Tamil while incorporating Malay vocabulary and phrases, creating a distinct rhythm and tone. Many everyday terms, particularly those related to nature, food, clothing, and local traditions, are borrowed directly from Malay (Grimes et. al;1996; Mohamad, 2009). This fusion of languages reflects the community's deep connection to Malay society and sets them apart from other Tamil-speaking groups.

In addition to vocabulary, the Chetty language also reflects a Malay influence in its sentence structure and grammar. While it retains some of the characteristic Tamil sentence patterns, the Chetty dialect incorporates Malay syntax, making it more accessible to other Malaysians who may not understand traditional Tamil. This linguistic adaptability has helped the Chetty community maintain its cultural identity while fostering close relationships with the surrounding Malay population.

The Chetty language is currently facing challenges in the face of modernization. With younger generations increasingly favouring standard Malay and English, there is a growing concern that the distinctive Chetty dialect may be at risk of diminishing over time. According to Sa'adiah Ma'alip and Rahilah Omar (2017), the use of one's mother tongue by younger generations plays a crucial role in preserving a language. Therefore, if young people begin to mix Chetty language with other languages, the use of Chetty among them appears to be at risk. To combat this, efforts to preserve this linguistic heritage are underway, with the community placing strong emphasis on teaching the dialect to younger generations and documenting it through cultural initiatives and scholarly research (Pillai,2009).In contrast, from their findings, Hamzah and Chong (2021), have pointed out that that over time, as English continues to be associated with social status and economic advancement, the children in the community may gradually prioritize it over their native language.

Today, the Chetty language remains a vibrant reflection of the community's mixed heritage, embodying centuries of cultural interaction and adaptation. It stands as a symbol of resilience, showcasing how language can transform to mirror a community's historical experiences and its connections to the wider cultural landscape of Malaysia. As a rare linguistic artifact, the Chetty dialect provides valuable insights into how diverse cultures can come together to form something entirely unique. Through this language, the Chetty community celebrates their intertwined Indian and Malay heritage, adding depth to the multicultural identity of Melaka and Malaysia overall. The Chetty language, like many minority languages, is at risk of fading away as younger generations often turn to more widely spoken languages, such as Malay and English, to aid social mobility and integration. Documenting the language establishes a record, offering resources that can support revitalization efforts if the language becomes dormant or extinct. The findings for this paper stem from larger corpus that investigates the language, culture and religion in the community.

Chetty Language as a Creole

Eberhard et al. (2020) classified the Chetty language as a creole and named it the Malacca Malay Creole Language. A creole is a pidgin language that has developed native speakers. Linguistically, a creole language combines vocabulary from one language with the grammar and syntax from another or multiple other languages, resulting in a simplified, stable form of communication (Baxter, 1990). Since contact between various linguistic communities produced a new, stable language with unique characteristics, the Chetty language is regarded as a creole (Siegel, 2008). The language of the Chetty community in Malacca, Malaysia, developed because of interactions between Malay-speaking residents and Tamil-speaking Indian immigrants, as well as influences from other languages in Southeast Asia.

Like other creoles, the Chetty language does not strictly follow the grammatical rules of either Tamil or Malay but instead has its own unique grammar. For example, while it retains a significant number of Tamil words, it also incorporates Malay grammar and sentence structures. This combination makes it distinct from both parent languages (Eberhard et al., 2020; Siegel, 2008). This allows the language to be accessible for speakers with different linguistics background, which is the hallmark for Creole languages (Hancock, 1977). The blending of vocabulary and adaptation to the local setting illustrate how the Chetty language evolved through daily interactions and the multicultural heritage of the Chetty community (Sandhu & Mani, 1993). Creole languages often exemplify this kind of lexical hybridity, as they grow from pidgins initially basic trade languages into fully developed, functional languages within their communities.

The vocabulary in Chetty reflects the rich multicultural influences on the community. While Tamil serves as the language's lexical foundation, numerous loanwords from Malay, Chinese, and even Portuguese and Dutch (stemming from Malacca's colonial history) are woven into it. This blending of vocabulary and adaptation to the local context demonstrates how Chetty evolved through the daily interactions and mixed heritage of the Chetty community. Creole languages often exhibit this kind of lexical diversity, as they emerge from pidgins—initially basic trade languages—and develop into fully functional languages within a community. In summary, Chetty is recognized as a Creole language due to its development through a process of linguistic and cultural blending, characterized by simplified grammar, diverse vocabulary, and a unique identity separate from its parent languages. This evolution mirrors the typical formation of Creole languages, making Chetty an exemplary product of a multicultural, colonial history. The language serves as a testament to the historical fusion of Tamil, Malay, and other influences within the Peranakan Chetty community, encapsulating their distinct heritage.

Chetty Language

The following tables showcases a selection of the Chetty lexicon, carefully preserved by the Chetty community to prevent language loss. These words and phrases were gathered through an interview with the Village Chairperson and Secretary. The Chetty vocabulary shares a close resemblance with the commonly spoken Bahasa Melayu in Malaysia. Reflecting the multicultural heritage of the Chetty community, their Malay dialect blends various cultural influences. Grimes (1996) identifies this language as a type of creole, specifically termed Chetty Creole Malay or Malacca Malay Creole. To categorize the table, we can separate it based on the type or theme of each word.

Table 1

Objects

ACTIONS	
Chetty Language	English Translation
Berlehgeng	Naked
Mentendarah/Cekik	To Eat
Mengaru	Disturbance
Kaco	To Disturb
Auta	To Lie
Tunggu Tangga	To Wait
Semonyok	To Hide

Table 2

Actions

DESCRIPTIONS	
Chetty Language	English Translation
Hawar	Silly/Stupid
Behja	Frugal
Kecik	Small
Kalaserah	Messy
Seraim	Free
Pokak	Ugly
Semonyok	To Hide

Table 3

Descriptions

OBJECTS	
Chetty Language	English Translation
Kepok	Box
Menjela	Window
Tukeri	Watermelon
Terenan	Cutting Board
Chiwan	Toilet
Kirap	Fan
Bimpo	Small Towel

Table 4

Miscellaneous

MISCELLANEOUS	
Chetty Language	English Language
Hahmis	Burnt
Bekanjah	Playing
Jerki	Blessing

As noted by Mohamed (2009), the Chetty language is classified as a creole because it functions as a mother tongue and possesses greater complexity than a pidgin language. This language distinguishes itself from other Malay dialects through several unique linguistic characteristics. Since the Chetty community lived in close contact with Malay speakers, they adopted a significant amount of Malay vocabulary. Everyday terms, local expressions, and even names for foods, plants, and animals often derive from Malay.

For instance, Malay often follows a Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) order, which has influenced the structure of Chetty sentences. This shift reflects the influence of Malay as the dominant language in the region. For example, words like "*rumah*" (house) or "*makan*" (eat) come directly from Malay. This documentation serves as a preservation effort for a language at risk of disappearing. Rather than focusing on technical analysis of syntax or grammar, the goal is to capture the language's unique characteristics, cultural relevance, and patterns of usage as authentically as possible. Documenting it now ensures that future generations can understand and access a valuable part of cultural heritage that might otherwise be lost. By recording vocabulary, idioms, expressions, and nuances, the findings provide a resource for linguists, historians, and communities seeking to connect with their linguistic roots, maintaining a link to a language that could soon become obsolete.

Summary of Finding

The assimilation of the Chetty language in Melaka is a nuanced and intricate process shaped by historical, social, and cultural dynamics. Influences from Malay, Tamil, and Chinese are evident in the language, as shown in Table 1- 4, illustrating a blending of linguistic elements that enhance communication within the community. The language is commonly used among the community in their own space - with each other and during social gatherings. This language integration reflects the community's multicultural interactions, allowing for a unique linguistic diversity. However, it is important to clarify that the terms listed in Table 1- 4 represent only a subset of the Chetty language, as they are drawn solely from words gathered during the data-collection phase.

Conclusion

The purpose of documenting this portion of the research is to shed light on the limited research available on the Chetty community's language and culture. The findings enriches previous findings on the Chetty community on language, culture and religion. With the community facing ongoing challenges, including migration and diminishing numbers, there is a pressing concern that this language may be on the brink of extinction. Focusing on minority language research elevates the visibility of the Chetty community and affirms their cultural and religion significance. As Rita Mae Brown aptly stated, "*Language is the map of a culture. It tells you where its people come from and where they are going*" This phrase underscores the broader significance of preserving a language that embodies the identity, traditions, and

shared experiences of a people. By capturing these linguistic nuances, we aim to provide future generations with insights into a cultural legacy that may otherwise be lost. This documentation, therefore, serves as a bridge to the past, preserving a community's heritage while recognizing the urgent need for continued research and conservation efforts.

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