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Family Language Policy among Sri Lankan Migrant Households in Japan: Identifying Gaps through a Critical Review of the Literature

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Abstract

An important area in the growing sociolinguistic field of Family Language Policy (FLP) is that of the language decisions and practices of migrant families. There is an important choice to be made within FLP in relation to maintaining the heritage language or investing in proficiency in the language of the host nation. Sri Lanka, a country with a rich and diverse blend of culture and language, has a large diaspora spread across the globe. These migrants have varied linguistic backgrounds, with three national languages - Sinhala, Tamil, and English. A small but significant amount of these migrants have chosen to settle in Japan, a country with a unique sociolinguistic environment, stemming from a long-standing monolingual legacy.

This comprehensive literature review critically evaluates the current research on the language ideologies and practices of Sri Lankan migrants in different national contexts, as well as migrants from a variety of other backgrounds in the Japanese context. Finally, it examines the few pieces of overlapping research that focus on the linguistic environment of Sri Lankan migrants in Japan. Although existing studies do identify some of the major issues faced by these migrants, there is a distinct lack of literature examining the complex negotiations these families engage in in their complex plurilingual situation. In particular, the unique dynamic between the maintenance of one or more of the three Sri Lankan heritage languages and investment into integration through Japanese, is yet to be examined comprehensively, showing the need for an in-depth qualitative study to uncover how these language policies and practices manifest in the daily lives of Sri Lankan migrant families. The review concludes by briefly outlining the framing of this future research, including possible research questions and methods.

Keywords: Family Language Policy, Sri Lankan diaspora, Japan, Language Ideology,
Heritage Language Maintenance, Multilingualism

Introduction

This paper is the product of the researcher's observations at a local community event to discuss the needs and concerns of Sri Lankan mothers living in Sammu City, Chiba Prefecture, Japan. At this event, what became strikingly apparent was the diverse linguistic practices of the fourteen children in attendance. Most of them were conversing in their heritage languages of Tamil and Sinhala, four were conversing in Japanese, and two siblings were talking to each other in English. These multilingual interactions prompted a broader inquiry into how Sri Lankan migrant families navigate language use within the home and community. The aim of this paper is to offer a critical review of existing scholarship on family language policy (FLP) and the linguistic choices and practices of migrant families across different national contexts, with particular attention to Sri Lankan migrants in Japan. As understanding this linguistic event requires a wider exploration of the Family Language Policy of Sri Lankan migrant families, this literature review covers Sri Lankan families' experiences across an international context.

The Sri Lankan Diaspora

Sri Lanka, like many of the countries on the South Asian subcontinent has a diverse mixture of language, religion and culture. The Sinhalese came to the island of Sri Lanka in around 500 BC from northern India (Schulenkorf, 2010). The other major ethnic group in the island, the Tamils, came from southern India around 200 hundred years later (Schulenkorf, 2010). Other smaller ethnic groups consist of Muslims, Burghers (descendants of the Portuguese and Dutch mixed with Sri Lankan locals), Malays (people who came from Indonesia and Malay Peninsula), Parsis, and the indigenous inhabitants of the island, the Veddas (Ranasinghe, 2015).

The majority Sinhalese make up 74% of the population. They are predominantly Theravada Buddhists, but with a significant minority of Roman Catholic Christians, and are concentrated around South-Western and Central Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan Tamil minority, who are primarily Hindu, live mainly in the north and east of Sri Lanka, while Sri Lankan Moors, who are Muslim are located on the east coast. Sri Lanka now has three officially recognised national languages, Sinhala, Tamil, and English, but this has not always been the case. After independence in 1948, governmental language policy shifted from English as the official language, which benefitted the wealthy and educated classes, both Sinhalese and Tamil, to the Sinhala only policy in 1956. This policy, which made Sinhala the sole official language, effectively marginalised the Tamil minority and fostered some of the ethnic tension and discontent with led to the calamitous Sri Lankan Civil War from 1983 to 2009 (Biedermann and Strathern (Eds.), 2017). It was not until 2012 with the National Policy on Trilingualism, that all three languages, Sinhala, Tamil and English were elevated to equal status on a nationwide level. This policy, while not a complete

failure, fell short of achieving its goals due to poor implementation and insufficient resources (Jayasooriya, 2025).

Divisions and differences between these different cultures were heightened by divisive policies from both colonial and post-colonial administrations. While the colonial period of Sri Lankan history from 1505 to 1948, during which Sri Lanka was dominated by foreign powers, was characterised by the ruling foreign powers' strategic use of caste and ethnic divisions to divide and rule, the post-colonial period from 1948 has seen a continuation of those ethnic tensions, leading to a long civil war from 1983 to 2009 (Holt, 2011). As a result of these growing tensions, and the economic downturn caused by the civil war, there has been mass emigration from Sri Lanka (Jayasuriya and Karunanayake, 2025). This diaspora has settled in a wide range of countries from Europe, Australia, and the Middle East. The largest proportion of these emigrants are Sri Lankan Tamils, who have been disproportionately affected by Sinhalese dominated government policies since Sri Lankan independence, and events that ultimately arose from the escalating ethnic tension resulting from these policies, such as the anti-Tamil pogroms, and cumulating with the afore mentioned Sri Lankan civil war (Subramanian, 2014). There was also a significant level of Sinhalese emigration due to political and economic instability that arose from ethnic and civil unrest. These migrants were a mix of both unskilled labourers, who mainly settled in Saudi Arabia, Qatar and United Arab Emirates, and professionals who commonly chose English speaking countries such as Australia, the UK, Canada and the US. These emigrants were later followed by a large number of refugees from all ethnic backgrounds, who were fleeing the violence of the civil war (Jayasuriya and McAuliffe, 2017).

More recently there has been a small but significant number of Sri Lankan migrants settling in Japan (Adilgazinova et al., 2024). The reasons behind this migration seem to be mainly economic, due to the serious effects of the COVID-19 epidemic on Sri Lanka's economy. Some migrants have also arrived seeking better educational opportunities than they feel are provided by the Sri Lankan education system. As of 2024, there were 63,427 Sri Lankans living in Japan (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, 2025). In Chiba, which is the prefecture in which the research will be conducted, foreign residents have more than doubled over a period of 20 years to 2.66% of the population (Sasaki et al., 2022), with Chiba now home to 18% of all Sri Lankans residing in Japan, the highest figure in the country for Sri Lankans (Fukuda, 2020: 194).

Family Language Policy

Family language policy (FLP) has been defined as “a deliberate attempt at practicing a particular language use pattern and particular literacy practices within home domains and among family members”

(Curdt-Christiansen, 2009: 351). It refers to the “explicit and overt planning of language use among family members” (King et al., 2008). FLP is still a relatively recent area of study within the field of Language Acquisition, becoming codified in the early 2000’s. FLP has been an increasingly popular field of research since the late 2000’s, arising from globalisation and an increase in the number of transnational families. One of the early scholars involved in FLP research, Bernard Spolsky (2004), proposed three interrelated pillars for language policy. These pillars were then adapted and applied to a framework for the family by King et al. (2008). These “three pillars of FLP” are; Language Ideology, Language Management, and Language Practices. Language Ideology refers to the beliefs families hold about language, in particular regarding its importance or status in society. Language Management is about the planning, decisions and strategies of language use within the family. Language Practices are what the family actually does, in terms of language use, in order to implement their family language policy. There is often a discrepancy between declared language ideology and actual language practices (Schwartz, 2010), which can lead to a failure or limited success for the family in achieving the desired outcome of their FLP. Research has shown that language policies and practices can be in conflict with each other (Pennycook, 2017). While Reichmuth (2024) found that language ideologies among multilingual family members vary due to the influence of local language ideologies and individual language experiences. She argued that this can lead to a disconnect between language practices and language ideologies within families.

FLP can vary greatly depending on a number of factors. For a monolingual family, FLP is usually implicit and straightforward, as their language use aligns with the language used by the society they live in. For multilingual families, and migrant families, there are several factors not usually contemplated by native monolingual families. The issue of the level of integration into the host society and how that affects heritage language maintenance is a major factor (Melo-Pfeifer, 2015). Which languages are used, when and how they are used, and who uses them and the frequency they are used are all important decisions here. The family’s future settlement plans also need to be considered when residing in a country you are not a native in. The native language(s) and your heritage language(s) will have different status, depending on whether the family plans to stay in that country, or move back to their home country at a future date. External factors also have a significant impact on FLP (Curdt-Christiansen & Huang, 2020), for example, the influence of school and the local community, in particular the pressure on children from peers and teachers to communicate in the national language, and the implications that has on their language use at home. In my own earlier research (Reay, 2020) on Family Language Policy in dual language English/Chinese families, both children and wider family members were seen to play a pivotal role in language practices. Siblings and grandparents, in particular, can be a influential positive factor in maintaining the heritage language.

A wide diversity of methods have been used to research FLP (Swartz, 2010). These span both

qualitative and quantitative methods, and include large scale language use surveys, online questionnaires, diaries, interviews, focus group conversations, ethnography, and interactional analyses of video recordings. But the most common method is in-depth, semi-structured interviewing. This approach has enabled rich understandings of the language processes taking place within families (Schalley and Eisenchlas, 2020).

Language use in Sri Lankan Immigrant Families Globally

Existing research on the Sri Lankan diaspora in English speaking countries point to loss of the mother tongue. Canagarajah's (2008) research into Sri Lankan Tamil migrants to the US, UK and Canada, and Gamage's (2002) study of Sri Lankan immigrants' family language policy in Australia found a tendency to move away from the Tamil language and a prioritising of English acquisition. This is linked to the status of English in Sri Lanka as a "Valuable Commodity" (Phillipson, 1992; 2013). The colonial legacy of English usually confers an advantage economically on those who have high English language proficiency. This means that English fluency is profitable both as a migrant in an English-speaking country, and back home in Sri Lanka where it adds significant cultural capital.

This connects well to the next area of research, the final settlement intentions of the migrant family. Fuentes (2020) found that Sinhalese language maintenance was a higher priority in families intending to eventually return to Sri Lanka. While those choosing to remain indefinitely in the country they had settled in, prioritised the language of that country instead. Fuentes (2020:484) highlighted the importance of 'flexible citizenship' for FLP, whereby families who did not see themselves as one-way migrants establishing firm roots in their host country had a different approach to language maintenance than those committed to remaining in the host country.

However, the extent to which migrant families prioritise their mother tongue and home culture is also influenced by levels of religiosity (Mills, 2004; Yazan and Ali, 2018). While levels of religiosity play a significant role in the FLP of immigrant Sri Lankan families, there appears to be no notable difference in priorities between Muslim Tamil speakers and Buddhist or Christian Sinhala speakers. Studies such as Perera's 2015 study on the maintenance of Sri Lankan languages in Australia highlight the importance of religion. The research found no significant differences among Sinhalese and Tamil migrants, while showing that the more religiously devout had higher levels of language maintenance across both ethnic groups.

The issue of language alienation of Sri Lankans living and studying abroad has also been examined in studies, such as Pabodha and Abeywickrama's 2021 paper. This paper found that 90% of Sri Lankan students studying abroad in Canada and Australia faced language alienation soon after arriving in their host country. The anxiety arising from this could manifest in several ways, including difficulty making

friends and integrating into the society of the host country, as well as increasing the student's affective filter and thus hindering acquisition of English. The findings linked this alienation and difficulty integrating into the host country with the student's social class and educational background in Sri Lanka, observing that an inadequate level of English proficiency was the main cause, specifically a focus on Reading and Writing, to the detriment of more practical Speaking and Listening skills. These findings are important in showing how FLP languages can be influenced by the results of governmental language policy back in Sri Lanka. In this case the priorities of poorer, less well funded schools to focus on measures to improve English language exam results, over the teaching of more useful, communicative aspects of English.

Although Cassim et al's (2020) study of the hybrid identities and sense of belonging of Sri Lankan migrants in New Zealand does not deal directly with language acquisition and language practices, its findings focus more generally on the diversity of Sri Lankan migrants' acculturation strategies, arguing that they often engage in more than one strategy at a time. I would argue that language is a key element of acculturation strategies, and Cassim et al's research point to the need to recognise that families may have more than one FLP, and that FLPs can shift and change over time.

Japan's National Language Policy

One of the major influences on migrant families FLP is the national language policy in the country they have chosen to reside in. Therefore, it is important to examine Japan's national language identity, and the amount of recognition and support it provides for minority languages. Since the Meiji period (1869-1912), Japan has prided itself on its linguistic and cultural homogeneity. This national identity has been pervasive ever since, persisting throughout the postwar occupation, and having a profound influence on governmental education and language policy. Despite a growing number of ethnic minorities, Japanese has been the language of educational instruction, with little to no support being provided for the maintenance of minority languages (Kanno 2008). As a result, many migrant children struggle in the Japanese education system, with access to education coming through becoming fluent in Japanese, while very little value is placed on their multilingualism (Saki, 2021). Even with the introduction of the 2023 Basic Policy on Multicultural Coexistence by the Agency for Cultural Affairs, emphasis was placed upon helping foreigners assimilate through learning Japanese, not by valuing and assisting minority language maintenance (Ishimatsu, 2025).

A prominent figure of research into this area is Professor Nanette Gottlieb. Over a series of papers, written from 2005 to 2012, she critically analysed the Japanese "Myth of homogeneity" (Gottlieb, 2012) which has persisted despite the presence of long-established minorities such as the Ainu, and Zainichi Koreans. This ideology has helped shape and inform Japanese national language policy and its resistance

to acknowledge the growing multilingual needs of modern Japanese Society. This resistance has heightened the importance for immigrants to Japan to become proficient in Japanese and can help explain why provision and support for many minority languages is insufficient.

Language use in Immigrant Families in Japan of other ethnicities

There have been numerous studies on immigrant families of various nationalities in Japan that examine to differing extents their language beliefs and use. Studies such as Mueller's 2023, and Kobayashi's 2014 studies, highlight the difficulties and challenges many minority language speaking families have, due to the limited institutional support and lack of resources available for maintaining their heritage languages. As Kubota and McKay (2009:613), researching mainly Brazilian migrants to Japan, argued:

What seems to be valued is exclusive bilingualism in the sense that the valued bilingualism involves only English and one's L1 or double monolingualism in the sense that one is to be a fluent speaker of Japanese or English or both but not other languages.

Nakamura's 2016 research into hidden bilingualism, examining multilingual migrant mothers' language practices in Japan looks at the competing effects of macro and micro ideological influences on migrant family language practices. Nakamura describes a process of 'hidden bilingualism' (Nakamura, 2016: 317) to explain mothers' practice of using their mother tongue in private contexts where no Japanese husbands, in-laws, friends, teachers, or even strangers were present. Yet, despite their personal preferences, wider political and ideological influences resulted in the decision of many of the multilingual Thai mothers in the study to prioritise speaking Japanese to their children. This also shows the power and influence of the ideology of "Monolingual Japan" as reinforced by successive Japanese government policies (Nakamura, 2016).

Golovina and Mukhina (2017) looked at the effect of language proficiency in Japanese on the employment prospects for Russian speaking migrants in Japan. They found that low Japanese proficiency restricted migrants' access to professional high paying jobs, no matter if that migrant was highly educated or had a wealth of experience in that field. A lack of Japanese language provision for adults also made it difficult for Russian migrants to attend formal language courses, so instead many had to self-study or take volunteer run classes. This study calls attention to the link between language proficiency in Japanese and economic stability, and how this could be an influential factor in FLP for migrants in Japan.

An important researcher into the circumstances of migrant children in the Japanese education system and its implications on Family Language Policy is Associate Professor Nilta Dias. Her research (Dias, 2017) examines the difficulties faced by migrant children, especially those of Brazilian origin, in the

Japanese education system. Although the Brazilian community is one of the largest migrant groups in Japan, they still face serious difficulties in Japanese schools. She identifies language as the biggest barrier for Brazilian children, which can cause significant delays in their learning. The cause of these difficulties again seems to be a failure of Japanese national language policy, specifically that of support for those who speak minority languages. This forces Brazilians parents to concentrate on Japanese language learning, whether or not it matches their own language ideology. Other research (Dias, 2015) looks in more detail at the actual language practices of the Brazilian migrant community. She identified and defined the term, *Dekasseguês*, which refers to the mix of Portuguese and Japanese commonly used by Brazilian immigrants in Japan. This type of code-mixing is a strategy used by these immigrants to help them navigate the complexities of their professional and social lives.

Also related to family language policy is the study by Lee and Niiya (2012) on migrant oriented Japanese language programs in Tokyo. This paper looks in detail at some of the Japanese language classes available for migrants in Japan, drawing attention to Japan's language management policy, and its suitability at covering the needs of the migrants it caters for. Its findings suggested that although there seemed to be widespread availability of such courses, there needs to be better qualification for teachers of those courses, as well as language proficiency tests that better take into account the educational background of the migrants taking them. This study also reinforces the importance of Japanese proficiency as a vital factor for migrants so that they are able to access the basic services required for life in Japan.

Language use in Sri Lankan Immigrant Families in Japan

Despite a wealth of English language articles on the previously described topics, there are relatively few English language papers on the language use of Sri Lankan migrant families in Japan. One of the very few research studies which examined Sri Lankan migrants in Japan is Lakshman's 2015 conference paper on the cultural and linguistic experiences of Sri Lankans in Tokyo. A key finding was that there were significant differences between the Sinhalese and Muslim Sri Lankan in all three pillars of Family Language Policy. The Sinhalese families prioritised cultural integration through sending their children to public schools and placing importance on Japanese language acquisition over the maintenance of Sinhalese, while the Sri Lankan Muslim families valued religion and cultural continuity. This highlights an important dichotomy within migrant FLP, that of cultural integration versus cultural retention. Another important and not sufficiently explored finding from Lakshman's research is the impact of gender, especially in the Muslim Sri Lankan families. Children's gender, and its relationship to family ideology and resulting family practices, is rarely discussed in relation to families FLPs and might be a fruitful area to explore in my own research given the importance of religion for many Sri Lankan

migrants in Japan and the influence it has on family attitudes to issues of gender and appropriate behaviour.

The other relevant study on Sri Lankans in Japan is Sasaki et al's 2022 paper on Transnational families in Chiba Prefecture. Some of the migrant families involved include those from Sri Lanka, and language is one of the areas of welfare need experienced by these families. This research draws attention to the lack of language support for migrants of nationalities from less widely spoken linguistic backgrounds, including Sinhala and Tamil speakers. It identifies that there is a fundamental issue with institutional support for less commonly spoken migrant languages in Japan. Another important finding of this study is the identification of language as one of the five primary factors causing a negative impact on the lives of these migrant families. The language barrier prevents these families from expedient access to basic services and information, leading many of them to prioritise Japanese proficiency in their FLP to improve access to these important resources.

Conclusion and Implications for Future Research

There is a dearth of grounded research on Family Language Policy of Sri Lankan immigrants which focuses on the different ways they hold on to their language and culture while being in Japan. The proposed research would address this gap by examining in depth the FLPs of four Sri Lankan families living in Japan. The intention is to research four families pursuing different Family Language Policies, with each of the families primarily using a different language as the main form of communication between parent and child. These languages are Sinhala, Tamil, English and Japanese.

While there is very little research on Sri Lankan FLPs in the Japanese context, existing international research suggests a number of fruitful areas to explore when conducting the research. First it indicates that looking at the future settlement plans of Sri Lankan migrants would enhance understandings of Sri Lankan FLPs in the Japanese context. Similarly, exploring the role of siblings, grandparents and wider family networks has been shown to have a bearing on both policy and practice. Also, investigating the importance of religion alongside parental concerns about loss of cultural identity for their children might provide more information on FLPs. Another theme to emerge from existing research is the impact of external factors, such as Japanese institutional language policy, and the level of support available for speakers of minority languages. Future research would need to examine the consequences of macro level national and local policies as well as micro-dynamics within the family.

Drawing on the insights from the wider international literature, the study would be a qualitative investigation into each family's language practices, management and ideologies, with the aim of finding out the reasons behind their choice of language use, whether their language use changes in different

contexts, and other similar questions. However, the research will be guided by the following main research questions.

- 1: What are the main factors that influence Sri Lankan migrant families' FLP?
- 2: Why do Sri Lankan migrant families prioritise linguistic and cultural integration over the maintenance of heritage language and culture?
- 3: What influence do the ethnic and religious differences of Sri Lankan migrants have on their FLP?
- 4: What influence does Japanese language policy and ideology have on the Language practices of Sri Lankan migrant families?

Similar to the research methods employed by Fuentes (2020) in his study of the family language policies of two Sri Lankan families in the US, the research methods to be utilized in the proposed study will consist of audio-recorded semi-structured interviews, followed up by email exchanges, participant observations, and data-clarification sessions. Family members will be individually and collectively interviewed using a semi-structured format in order to elicit family members' perspectives on language policies (Shohamy, 2006). Semi-structured interviews, while not necessarily following a pre-set order in covering the relevant topics the researcher is interested in, are designed to ensure that all these topics are covered (Karatsareas, 2022). However, they also allow for open-ended questions which enable the researcher to obtain further information in the form of clarifications, and further elaboration, and also importantly 'to hear the participants stories' (Rabionet, 2011: 564). As such the strength of semi-structured interviews lies in enabling the acquisition of in-depth information and evidence from participants while considering the focus of the study (Ruslin et al., 2022).

The intention is that the research will generate useful findings that enable richer, deeper understandings of how Sri Lankan families in Japan formulate and develop their language policies and practices in the new linguistic environment.

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〈その他〉

日本におけるスリランカ移民家庭の家族言語方針 —文献批判的レビューによる研究課題の抽出—

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【要旨】

家庭内言語方針 (Family Language Policy: FLP) という社会言語学の発展分野において、移民家族の言語選択と実践は重要な研究対象である。FLPにおいては、継承語の維持と、受け入れ国の言語習得への投資という重要な選択が求められる。多様な文化と言語が共存するスリランカは、世界中に広がる大規模なディアスポラを有しており、移民の言語的背景も、シンハラ語、タミル語、英語という三つの国語にまたがっている。これらの移民の中には、日本という長年にわたる単一言語的伝統を持つ独自の社会言語環境を有する国に定住する者も少数ながら存在する。

本稿では、スリランカ移民の言語イデオロギーおよび実践に関する既存研究を、他国の事例と日本国内の他の移民集団の事例を含めて批判的に検討した。さらに、日本におけるスリランカ移民の言語環境に焦点を当てた限られた研究も分析した。既存の研究では、これらの移民が直面する主要な課題の一部は明らかにされているものの、複雑な多言語状況において家族が直面するイデオロギー的交渉に関する文献は著しく不足している。三つの継承語のいずれかまたは複数の維持と、日本語を通じた統合への投資との間にある独特なダイナミクスは、未だ十分に検討されていない。本研究は、これらの言語イデオロギーと実践が移民家族の日常生活にどのように現れるのかを明らかにするための、質的研究の必要性を正当化するものである。

キーワード： 家庭内言語方針、スリランカ・ディアスポラ、日本、言語イデオロギー、
継承語維持、多言語主義