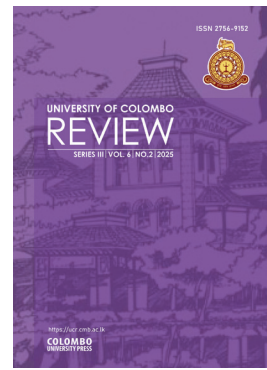


DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4038/ucr.v6i2.231>

University of Colombo Review (Series III),
Vol.6, No.2, 2025



A case study of Memoni as a lesser-known language of Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

Despite successive governments acknowledging and even celebrating the linguistic diversity of Sri Lanka, there is scant attention paid by the state to the preservation of the lesser-known languages of the country. This is hardly surprising, given the troubled history of negotiating the language rights of the two major communities – the Sinhalese and the Tamils – in the period following independence from the British in 1948. However, it is essential that the language situations of the lesser-known communities of the island be studied, so that, among other reasons, there is sufficient information when decisions about language preservation and language education are made. Therefore, using Spolsky's (2004) view of the components of language policy, this study examines the language practices, language beliefs, and language interventions of one of the small but influential lesser-known language speaking communities of Sri Lanka: the Memons. This study employed a quantitative research methodology and administered a questionnaire on language usage and beliefs among 176 members of the Memon community of Sri Lanka. The findings reveal that the language use of the Memons of Sri Lanka reflects the language and language-in-education policies of post-independence Sri Lanka. The Memons have transitioned from being a largely bilingual (Memoni* and English speaking) community to a quadrilingual one. The data also reveal that the participants are committed to the notion of 'mother tongue' and considering Memoni as their own 'mother tongue'. The article also discusses the various initiatives undertaken by the community members to preserve the Memoni language and concludes that, despite the concerns of the older members of the community, the Memoni language may not be as 'endangered' as they fear.

KEYWORDS:

Language policy, Language practices and beliefs, Language preservation, Lesser-known languages, Memons of Sri Lanka, Memoni.

** The term that is used in the general and academic literature for the language spoken by the Memon people is 'Memoni'. However, the members of the Memon community frequently refer to their language as 'Memon'. Therefore, to respect both academic convention and preference of the community, I have used both terms interchangeably to refer to the language.*

Suggested Citation: Rassool, R. (2025). A case study of Memoni as a lesser-known language of Sri Lanka. *University of Colombo Review* (New Series III), 6(1), 26-52.

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Introduction

The sociolinguistic phenomenon known as ‘language loss’ has drawn the attention of many linguists since the latter part of the 20th century (Abley 2003; Crystal 2000; Dalby 2003; Dorian, 1993; Hale et al. 1992; Krauss 1992; Nettle and Romaine 2000; Tsunoda 2005; Wurm 1996; Yamamoto et al. 2008). A common feature in these works has been the utilization of rhetoric such as “language death”, “language endangerment” and “language decline”. Other scholars have used data gathered and analyzed using quantitative metrics as a means of measuring the level of endangerment of languages (eg. Krauss’ estimate in 1992 that only 10% of the approximately 6000 languages will survive into the 21st century and Crystal’s estimate in 2000 that an average of one language may vanish every two weeks over the next 100 years). While the use of these quantitative metrics has been challenged (eg. Moore et al., 2014), what has not been denied is that there is a real need to address this issue of the decline in the number of speakers of many languages of the world.

Sri Lanka, a country of 65,510 square kilometers situated to the south of India, is home to nearly 22 million people (Department of Census and Statistics, 2022). As per the most recent census, the majority of the population (74.9%) belong to the Sinhala community whose mother tongue is Sinhala, while the largest minority community is the Tamils (15.3%)¹ who speak the Tamil language as their mother tongue. There are several other “lesser known”² languages spoken in Sri Lanka, and although successive governments of post-independence Sri Lanka have publicly declared their support for these languages and the communities that use them, there has been a mismatch between rhetoric and action. In fact, post-independence Sri Lanka “has in many instances introduced language policies which have led to strained ethno-linguistic relationships among specific ethnic, religious and linguistic groups” (Walisundara, 2019, p. 162). Infamous amongst these policies is the Official

1 In the census, the Tamil population is separated into two sub-categories: Sri Lankan Tamil (11.2%) and Indian Tamil (4.1%) (see Table 1). I have collapsed the two categories into one and totaled the two percentages.

2 Various terms are in usage to describe the “smaller” languages of a country such as “minority languages”, “endangered languages”, “lesser-used languages”, “threatened languages” etc. I have deliberately decided to use the term “lesser-known” because I wish to avoid the term “minority” as that implies a situation of relative powerlessness compared to the “majority”. Similarly, I wish to steer clear of terms such as “endangered” and “threatened” as they carry insinuations of possibly irreversible loss. Although it is acknowledged that the term “heritage languages” can be considered relevant and applicable since the term refers to “asymmetric bilingualism” where “one language often wins out over the other, owing to the shifting attention that arises from shifting sociolinguistic circumstances” (Polinsky & Scontras, 2019, p. 1), I prefer the term “lesser-known” since it allows me to draw specific attention to the macrolevel political situation of “smaller” languages such as Memoni over the term “heritage languages” which is most often used in discourses related to language acquisition.

Language Act No. 33 of 1956 (Government of Sri Lanka (Ceylon) [GOSL], 1956) which created a divide between the majority population and the other communities by declaring Sinhala “the sole official language of the country” (Coperahewa, 2009, p. 138). Although subsequent language policies sought to rectify the damage done by the 1956 “Sinhala Only” or “*Swabasha*” policy as it is popularly known and have since declared that Tamil shall also be an official and national language and English shall be the ‘link’ language, (Coperahewa, 2009, p. 138), there is no constitutional acknowledgement of any of the other languages spoken in the country.³ In a context where the tussle between the two major languages – Sinhala and Tamil – among other factors, has led to much tension that resulted in a protracted war between the two communities, members of lesser-known communities are aware that “there is no place in the official spheres for addressing and politicking for minority rights [linguistic or otherwise]” (Lim and Ansaldo 2007, p. 222).

Official recognition given to a community and the language spoken by that community plays a major role in how the language is perceived by the community, which in turn impacts how well the language is preserved (May, 2012). Since the Constitution of Sri Lanka makes no mention of the lesser-known languages and their speakers, the other authoritative government document one can turn to is the Census of a country.

However, with regard to the documentation of the lesser-known languages and their speakers, the Census of Sri Lanka falls short on at least two counts. Firstly, there is no separate enumeration of the languages spoken by the various populations. This is in stark contrast to neighboring countries like India where there is an official enumeration of the number of speakers of the multitude of languages which exist in the country (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, 2011). In the absence of a separate official record of the numbers of speakers/users of the various languages, scholars and community members look to the figures related to ethnic grouping, assuming a neat correlation between the number of people in an ethnic group and the number of speakers of the language associated with that ethnic group, which is problematic. Secondly, the Census may be considered to be deficient because most of the ‘smaller’ populations have been collapsed into the category labeled “Others” (Table 1).

3 See Rassool (2022) for a discussion on the several other lesser-known languages of Sri Lanka.

Table 1: Population of Sri Lanka (Department of Census and Statistics, 2012)

	Ethnicity	Number	Percentage
Breakdown of population of Sri Lanka according to ethnicity	Sinhala	15,250,081	74.9
	Sri Lanka Tamil	2,269,266	11.2
	Indian Tamil	839,504	4.1
	Sri Lanka Moors	1,892,638	9.3
	Burger	38,293	0.2
	Malay	44,130	0.2
	Sri Lanka Chetty	5,595	0.0
	Bharatha	1,717	0.0
	Others	18,215	0.1
Total population of Sri Lanka		20,359,439	100.0

As indicated in Table 1, only 8 ethnic groups are recognized by name in the Census of 2012. One of the most commonly cited reasons for this is the relatively small number of speakers of the other languages (0.1% in total). However, there is much ethnolinguistic identity-related variation that is hidden within this 0.1% and therefore it is crucial that the criteria used for enumeration be re-examined. The community that is the subject of this article, the Memons of Sri Lanka, is also enumerated under the category of “Others”. Incidentally, the oldest indigenous group in the country, the *Adivasi*, are also in the group labeled ‘Others’ and this is a travesty, given their status.

Given the above situation where (a) there is no constitutional recognition of or commitment to the protection of the lesser-known languages, (b) the number of speakers of the various languages is not enumerated separately, and (c) the numerically ‘smaller’ communities have been grouped under the term “Others”, there is a serious concern regarding the vulnerable state of the “smaller” communities and the endangerment of the languages spoken by them.

There has been little state support for the preservation of the lesser-known languages or for publications that celebrate the linguistic diversity of the country. A notable exception during recent times has been the publication of a book titled “The People of Sri Lanka” by the Ministry of National Coexistence, Dialogue and Official Languages (2017). A few academics have discussed various aspects of the linguistic diversity of the country (eg. Walisundera, 2019) but there is a need for more individual and focused studies on the state of the lesser-known languages of Sri Lanka.

This study aims to contribute to the above discourse and address the lacuna highlighted above by discussing the language usage and language beliefs of the Memon community of Sri Lanka, one of the numerically small but influential communities of the country. The study is guided by Spolsky's work (2004) which states that it is useful to distinguish among the following aspects: (a) the language practices, which he defines as "the habitual pattern of selecting among the varieties that make up" the linguistic repertoire of a community, (b) a community's beliefs or ideologies about a language and its use, and (c) any special efforts made by community members to modify or influence the use of their language through any kind of "intervention, planning or management" (p. 5).

Using Spolsky's (2004) recommendations as the broad scope of this study, I focused on the Memon community's internal language "policies" as interpreted through the three components Spolsky details. Since Spolsky's first aspect – the language practices of a community – is quite broad, and I had observed during their frequent exchanges with the community that language mixing⁴ seemed to be common among the community members, this was narrowed down to an inquiry of the language mixing practices of the community. Similarly, given the breadth of Spolsky's second aspect - a community's beliefs or ideologies about a language and its use – and the fact that the study was limited by its quantitative research design which is not conducive to an inquiry of language ideologies, I focused on the community's beliefs around the notion of Memoni as their "mother tongue". Special efforts made by the community to preserve their language was my third area of focus.

Based on the above, the study was guided by the three following research questions:

1. What is the nature of the language mixing witnessed among the Memon community of Sri Lanka?
2. What are the language beliefs of the Sri Lanka Memons regarding Memoni as their mother tongue?
3. What are the special efforts made by community members to modify or influence the use of their language?

4 As Alexiadou & Lohndal (2018, p. 1) state, "Language mixing is a ubiquitous phenomenon characterizing bilingual speakers". Based on both my lived experience as a member of the community that speaks a lesser-known language and my extensive contact with members of the Memon and other lesser-known language-speaking communities of Sri Lanka, the term "language mixing" too is ubiquitous among speakers of these languages when they discuss their views of their languages.

Background to the study

Origins of the Memon people

Seyid Yusuf-Ud-Din (or Pir Yusuf Sindhi), a descendant of Abdul Kadir Gilani, the famous Persian Sufi scholar, is regarded as the founder of the Memon community. Popular legend has it that Seyid Yusuf-Ud-Din converted 700 Hindu families to Islam sometime in the 14th-15th centuries and they were given the name Mumins (believers), the derivative of the present-day name of the community – Memons (Levin, 1974). The fact that the converts were originally from Hindu commercial castes such as Lohan in Kathiawar, Kutch, and Southern Sindh points to the commercial orientation of the present Memon community (Levin, 1974). However, a second theory is that the Memon community traces its origin to soldiers of the Arab tribe, Banu Tamim, who went to India with Muhammad Bin Qasim in the 8th century. These soldiers were known as Maymenah, right wingers in the army, and the word Memon is a derivative of this term (Muhammad & Dana, 2015).

Two aspects of the Memon community stand out: the first is that they are devout Sunni Muslims, united by a shared faith, and the second is their spirit of enterprise and trade. In fact, commercial enterprise is synonymous with the Memon people. As stated by Levin (1974), the Memons “have long been famous in India as very enterprising tradesmen” (p. 233).

There are three main groups of Memons: (i) the Kutchi Memons, who are originally from the Kutch region, (ii) the Kathiawar/Kathiawadi Memons (or Halai Memon or simply Memon), who come from the Kathiawar region, and (iii) the Sindhi Memons, who remained in the Sindh region. This grouping is based on place of origin as well as language/dialect being spoken (Muhammad & Dana, 2015). Among these three groups, the Kathiawar Memons are the only group whose main language is Memoni, whereas the Kutchi Memons speak Kutchi dialects, and the Sindhi Memons speak the Sindhi language. However, the term Memon is generally used as a generic term to identify a Muslim person born within a Memon family whose ancestry can be traced back to the descendants of the community which originated from the people who first embraced Islam in the Sindh region of present-day Pakistan.

The global Memon community

According to Muhammad and Dana (2015, p. 9) who cite “available data as per *jamaat khana*”, there are “about 1.6 to 1.8 million Memons in Pakistan” and about 1 to 1.5 million Memons outside Pakistan. After the partition of India in 1947, many of the Memon people moved to other countries, mostly Pakistan. Although the majority of Memon people currently reside in Pakistan and India, a considerable

amount of people also migrated to other countries such as Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Malawi, Kenya, Botswana, Tanzania, and some western countries such as the United Kingdom (UK), the United States of America (USA), Canada, and Australia (see Table 2).

Table 2: Memon population in the world (Muhammad and Dana, 2015)⁵

Name	Number of Memons
Pakistan	1,600,000 - 1,800,000
India (Bharat)	700,000
USA	13,000
UK	25,000

Levin (1974) points out that from the end of the 18th century and the early 19th century, Memons began to settle in areas throughout India and later emigrated to other countries in the Indian Ocean basin. He states that “by the end of the 19th century, rich communities of Memons were appearing in the ports of the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, in Ceylon and Burma, and in East and South Africa” (p. 233).

The concerns of the Memon community regarding the history of their people, their language, their culture, and perceived decline/loss of their language have been documented by several community members of whom Abdur Razzaq Thaplawala (2005, 2009) has been the most ardent and insistent. He has called for the adoption of the Roman alphabet for the development of Memoni poetry. Various other members of the Memon community too have been active in calling for renewed interest in preserving the Memoni language (Motewala, 2019, for instance).

The commercial interests and entrepreneurial spirit of the Memon community has been discussed by several academics such as Levin (1974) and Muhammad and Dana (2015). Discussing the upper bourgeoisie of the Muslim commercial communities, Levin (1974, p. 231) states that the Memons are “the most powerful of such caste groups”. Muhammad and Dana (2015) have discussed the collective efficacy of the Memon network. The study discusses the manner in which the entrepreneurial spirit is nurtured by the social structures that are upheld by the Memon people.

The Memon community of Sri Lanka

The situation of the Sri Lankan Memon community and their language has been documented in one state publication (Ministry of National Coexistence, Dialogue and Official Languages, 2017) and a few other publications (eg. Hussein,

5 In addition to the figures provided in the table above, the authors state that there are “a few thousands in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), South Africa, Burma and other countries” (p. 9).

2007; Hussein, 2009). In addition, there have been a few works exclusively on the Memon community, funded or commissioned by community members themselves (eg. Hussein & Bhoja, 2006).

The arrival of Abdul Rahman in 1870 is recorded as the first Memon arrival to Sri Lanka (Hussein & Bhoja, 2006). Initially the Memons arrived in Sri Lanka for the sole purpose of trade, but later, with the partition of India, many Memons crossed their national boundaries and entered Sri Lanka for the purpose of settlement. Only males had arrived prior to the partition, but after 1947, they started to settle in Sri Lanka with their families. After Sri Lanka gained independence from Britain in 1948, the Memons received their citizenship through the India-Pakistan Citizenship Act (Hussein & Bhoja, 2006).

Initially, Memon families were scattered around Colombo 12 but later they moved towards areas in Colombo South such as Kollupitiya, Bambalapitiya, and Wellawatta. Some of the Memon families also resided in Matale Town and Jaffna. At present they have settled in areas such as Galle, Matara, Jaffna, Matale, Kandy and Hambantota while the majority still live in Colombo. Some of the prominent families who arrived in Sri Lanka are the Admanis, Bhailas, Bhojas, Chanas, Dangras, Gadars, Hingoras, Magooras, and Nagariyas (Hussein & Bhoja, 2006).

Memons in Sri Lanka have two mosques of their own - the Memon Hanafi Mosque in Pettah (Hussein & Bhoja, 2006) and a newer mosque in Wellawatte (S. Sangani, personal communication, December 11, 2025). They also have their own Madrasa (college for Islamic instruction) to fulfill the religious needs in their community. Further, the Memon community has its own Quasi (Judge) appointed by the Judicial Service Commission under the MMDA (S. Sangani, personal communication, December 11, 2025).

In 1956, some of the prominent Memon personalities laid the foundation for the Memon Association of Sri Lanka, which was formerly known as the Memon Association of Ceylon (Hussein and Bhoja, 2006). Citing a 1981 estimate which stated that there were 3000 Memons in Sri Lanka, Hussein and Bhoja (2006, p. 16) assume that there were 6000-7000 Memons in Sri Lanka in 2006. At present, it is estimated that the number of Memons in Sri Lanka is 8000-10000 (S. Sangani, personal communication, December 11, 2025).

The Language of the Memons

The Memoni or Memon language is an Indo-Aryan language that belongs to the Western Indo-Aryan group (Hussein, 2009). Hussein further states that the Memoni language can be regarded as “a dialect of Sindhi, though enriched considerably by Urdu and Gujarati” (p. 405).

Thaplawala (2005) states that Memoni is an unwritten language. The language does not have its own script and cannot claim to have its own literature. It

is the language spoken by the Memon people as their mother tongue and transmitted orally intergenerationally. Although there are variations among the different varieties of Memon spoken around the world, they are mutually intelligible.

The above section provided a brief introduction to the Memons of Sri Lanka: theories about their origin, their status in the world, their arrival in Sri Lanka, their present situation in the country, and their language.

The methodology employed in this study is outlined below.

Methodology

The impetus for this study was provided by a prominent member of the Memon community of Sri Lanka who approached me and requested that I help the community to preserve the language, since many Memons were concerned about its future. After many conversations with him and members of his immediate family, and a meeting with several of their community members, a proposal was drawn up for a project aimed at preserving the Memoni language used in Sri Lanka. Although the project could not be launched due to various constraints, including the social and economic upheaval faced by all Sri Lankans in the last few years, the link established between the community and myself was maintained over the years.

In 2021, I was approached once more and asked to design a quantitative survey to inquire into the language usage and ideologies of the Sri Lanka Memon community. This was done by adapting the questionnaire that I had developed and administered to the Sri Lanka Malay community. The adaptations were done in close consultation with the primary contact and members of his family. Part of the findings were incorporated into the annual report of the Memon Association of Sri Lanka (2021). This paper is based on the findings of that questionnaire.

The data for this study were gathered by administering the questionnaire among 176 participants from the Memon community and analyzing their responses. The survey was conducted entirely in the English language, as per the requests of community members. Although the sample of 176 is not a significant percentage of the total population, Given that there is a degree of homogeneity within the Memon community with regard to education, avenues of employment, income and other factors, I considered 176 a sufficient sample of the community. The data were gathered using the convenience sampling method through a Google form which was circulated among members of the community through the Memon Association of Sri Lanka. The participants were informed beforehand that the information gathered would be used solely for the purposes of this study and that I would ensure that the data is stored securely in my computer, thus ensuring the confidentiality of the participants. The participants were also informed that by filling in the questionnaire, they would be granting their consent for their data to be used in the study.

A limitation of this study is that it did not involve a qualitative aspect. Some of

the responses to the questionnaire would benefit from more in-depth inquiry through interviews or focus group discussions. A follow-up investigation using qualitative research instruments would be able to provide a more nuanced understanding of some of the broad findings of this study.

Findings and analysis

Demographic details

The sample consisted of 97 males and 77 females, as well as 2 respondents who did not wish to disclose their gender: 176 respondents in total. All except 10 of the participants were residing in Sri Lanka at the time the questionnaire was administered. Of those who were overseas, 5 were in the Middle East, 3 in Asia (Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Malaysia), and 2 in the UK.

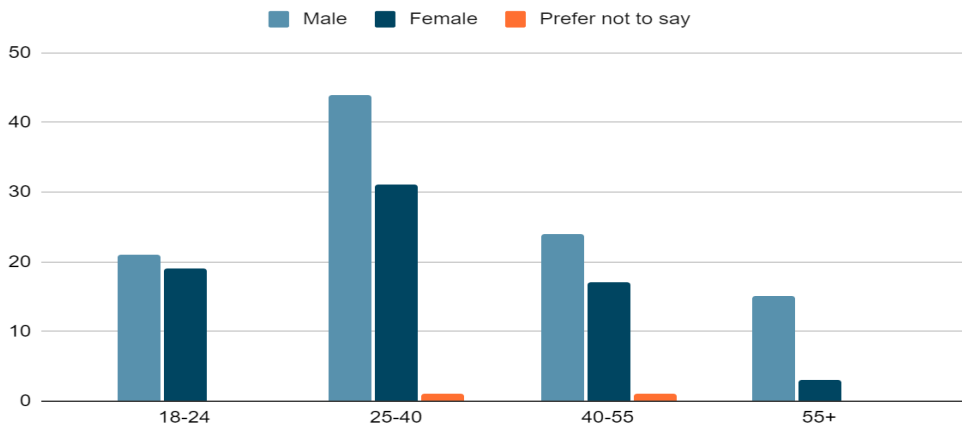


Figure 1: Age of participants

Figure 1 shows the sample population in terms of age and gender. The largest segment of the population belonged to the 25-40 age bracket (44 males, 31 females, 1 undisclosed, 76 in total) and the smallest number were from the 55+ age bracket (15 males, 3 females, 18 in total). The closest number of males and females was seen in the 18-24 age group (21 males, 19 females, 40 in total). In the 40-55 age group, there were 42 participants (17 males, 24 females, 1 undisclosed).

In terms of occupation, 79% of the males responded to the questions about their profession as ‘businessman’ or some other form of formal employment, ranging from ‘clerical’ to digital marketer to mercantile executive. 9% stated that they were students, 10% stated that they were self-employed, and the remaining respondents were retired. None of the respondents stated they were unemployed.

Of the female respondents, 65% responded with “housewife”, 13% responded

with some form of formal employment (largely teaching), 12% were students, and 6% were self-employed. The remaining 4% stated their profession as ‘unemployed’.

The above details regarding employment confirm the general view that the Memon community largely consists of businessmen (which aligns with what the data indicates regarding the Memon community worldwide), with most of the business enterprises appearing to be male fronted as the majority of the females (65%) state that they are homemakers. Further, the sample indicates that unemployment does not seem to be an issue to members of this community, as none of the males have stated that they were unemployed and only 4% of the females have stated that they were unemployed. It needs to be pointed out that the questionnaire did not ask for the reasons for unemployment (whether it was inability to find employment or personal choice to not be employed).

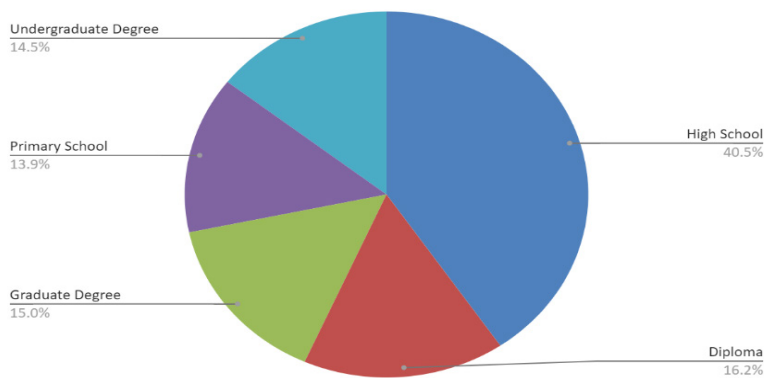


Figure 2: Highest educational qualifications of participants

On the whole, unsegregated by gender, it can be seen that the community possesses a high level of education (See figure 2). Nearly half of the sample have completed their high school education, with nearly 30% completing an undergraduate and/or postgraduate degree; it is only 13% who possess only primary school-level education.

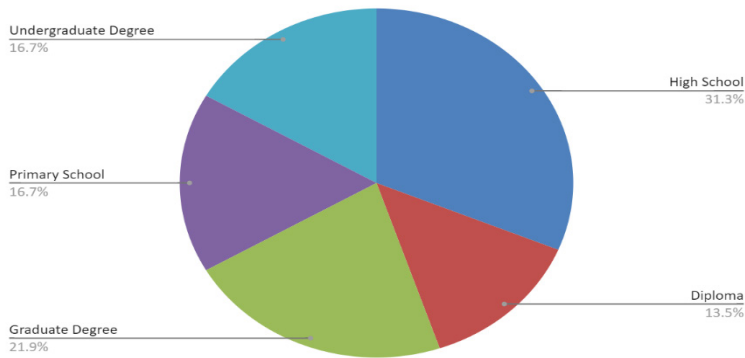


Figure 3: Highest educational qualification (male)

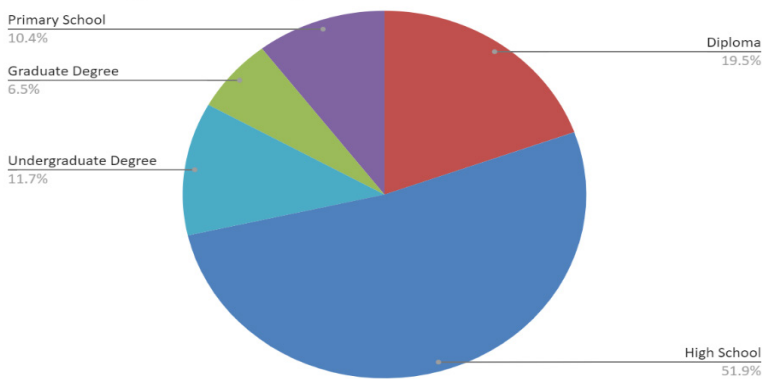


Figure 4: Highest educational qualification (female)

When segregated by gender, a divide emerges in that men are seen to be more likely to pursue postgraduate education than women (37% of males as opposed to 17% of females) (See figure 3). Broadly, high school education is the highest level of qualification that women possess, constituting nearly half the female respondents, while this is only 33% of male respondents (See figure 4).

The above details are presented in tabular form below (See table 3).

Table 3: Participants by age, country of residence, occupation and level of education

Category	Subcategory	Male (n=97)	Female (n=77)	Undisclosed (n=2)	Total (n=176)
Age Group	18–24	21 (12%)	19 (11%)	0 (0%)	40 (23%)
	25–40	44 (25%)	31 (18%)	1 (0.5%)	76 (43.5%)
	40–55	17 (10%)	24 (14%)	1 (0.5%)	42 (24.5%)
	55+	15 (8%)	3 (2%)	0 (0%)	18 (10%)
Residence	In Sri Lanka				166 (94%)
	Overseas				10 (6%)
Occupation	Business/formal employment	139 (79%)	23 (13%)		
	Self-employed	17 (10%)	11 (6%)		
	Student	16 (9%)	21 (12%)		
	Housewife	–	114 (65%)		
	Retired	4 (2%)	–		
	Unemployed	0%	7 (4%)		
Education	Primary	30 (16.7%)	18 (10.4%)		
	High school	54 (31.3%)	91 (51.9%)		
	Diploma	23 (13.5%)	34 (19.5%)		
	Undergrad	30 (16.7%)	21 (11.7%)		
	Graduate	39 (21.9%)	11 (6.5%)		

Given that the medium of instruction in school usually has an impact on language proficiency as well as language ideologies, the study next investigated the medium of instruction of the participants.

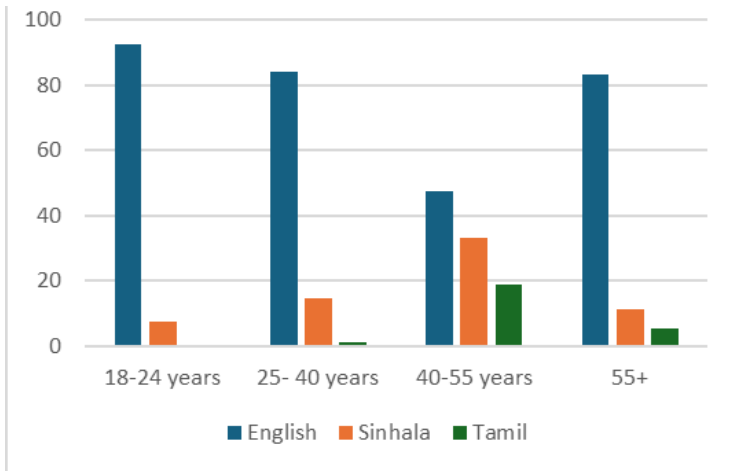


Figure 5: Percentage of respondents in each age category cross-tabulated with medium of instruction

Over 80% of the respondents aged over 55 stated that their medium of instruction was English. This would be explained by the fact that English medium instruction was available in most of the private schools around Colombo until the language policy and language-in-education policy of the country changed in the 1950s and 1960s respectively (Coperahewa, 2011).

However, the responses of the Memons between the ages of 40-55 reveal the effects of the change in language policy that took place in 1956 when the Official Language Act (better known as the “Sinhala Only” Act) was implemented and this resulted in Sinhala being declared the sole official and national language. As stated earlier, this language policy was later amended to include the Tamil language as well in 1987. In terms of language-in-education, although the Muslims were afforded the choice of education in the Sinhala or Tamil media, during this period Sinhala became more a part of the linguistic repertoire of minority communities such as the Memons of Sri Lanka. The ramifications of this change will be discussed in the next section. This change in language policy is reflected in the range of medium of instruction reported by the respondents aged between 40-55: only 47% of them state that they were educated in English, which is a significant decline from the previous generation while over 30% state that they were educated in the Sinhala medium and nearly 20% state that their medium of instruction was Tamil.

The rise in the number of participants who were educated in the English medium in the two youngest age groups (25-40 and 18-25) can be attributed, to a great extent, to the establishment of international schools in the 1980-1990s (Jenkins, Berman & Jenkins, 2005) and the re-introduction of English Medium Instruction (EMI) to the state and private school system in the early 2000s (Nanayakkara, 2017; Perera & Kularatne, 2014).

The details presented above are summarized in table 4.

Table 4: Participants by medium of instruction in school and age range

Medium	Age range			
	18-24 years	25-40 years	40-55 years	55+
English	162 (92%)	148 (84%)	84 (48%)	148 (84%)
Sinhala	14 (8%)	25 (14%)	56 (32%)	21 (12%)
Tamil	-	3 (2%)	35 (20%)	7 (4%)

Having discussed the demographic details of the participants, the next section focuses on answering the research questions that guide this study.

What is the nature of the language mixing witnessed among the members of the Memon community of Sri Lanka?

As stated earlier, initial discussions with members of the Memon community indicated that language mixing seemed to be a “habitual pattern”. This caused concern among the senior community members who perceived this trend as negatively impacting the ability to use the Memoni language. Therefore, this study investigated the level of language mixing the participants engaged in. Hence the question “How often do you mix languages at home?”

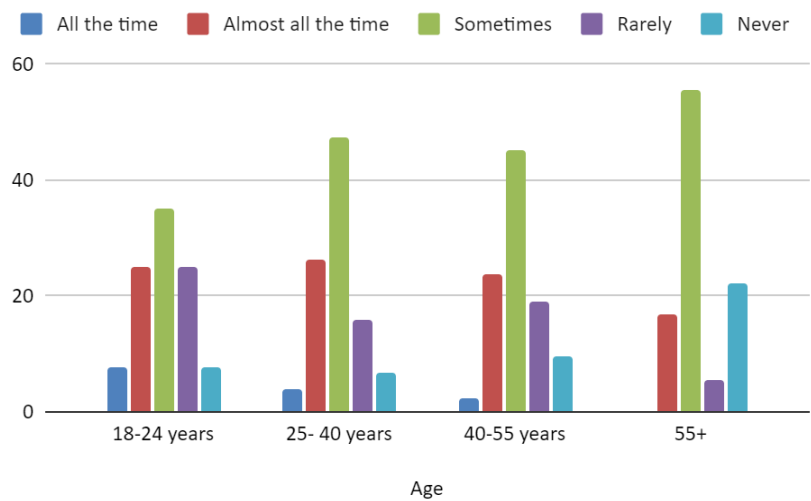


Figure 6: Percentage of responses to the question “How often do you mix languages at home?” by age

Figure 6 reveals that age emerges as a decisive factor in the level of language mixing witnessed in the Memon community. While 22% of the community members over 55 years of age state that they never mix languages, 10% among the 40–55-year age group state so and this contrasts with the fact that only 8% of the 25–40-year-olds and 18–24-year-olds state that they never mix languages. Therefore, it is evident that the younger the participant, the more likely they are to mix languages at home.

When the regularity of language mixing is investigated, the data reveal that the converse applies: the younger the participant, the more they mix languages “all the time”: 6% of the 18–24-year-olds state that they mix languages “all the time” as opposed to 4% 25–40-year-olds, 2% 40–55-year-olds, while none in the 55+ age group does so. While the views expressed by the senior members of the Memon community (personal communication) during my extensive interactions with them indicate that this trend of increased language mixing does not bode well for the future of the Memoni language, it is important to note that this view contrasts sharply with our contemporary understanding of plurilingual practices.

Plurilingualism differs from multilingualism in that it recognizes the following:

as an individual person’s experience of language in its cultural contexts expands, ... he or she does not keep these languages and cultures in strictly separated mental compartments, but rather builds up a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact. In different situations, a person can call flexibly upon different parts of this competence to achieve effective communication with a particular interlocutor (Council of Europe, 2001, p.4).

Viewed this way, the ability to be plurilingual and pluricultural is a distinct advantage and this is an advantage the younger Memons possess and utilize on a daily basis.

The increasingly common practice among the Memon community of language mixing can also be viewed from a translanguaging (Garcia, 2009) lens. Garcia states that translanguaging is “the act performed by bilinguals of accessing different linguistic features or various modes of what are described as autonomous languages, in order to maximize communicative potential” (p. 140). Viewed this way, what the Memons possess is a strength and not a threat. The challenge then becomes how to strengthen or increase the use of the Memoni language while being adept users of plurilingual or translanguaging practices.

Further, Garcia (2009, p. 147) cites Pattanayak’s (2003) example:

One of my students, an Oriya boy, married to a Tamil, speaking English at home, lives in Calcutta in Bengali surroundings, where the children are brought up by a Hindustani ayah and a Nepali Gurkha security man.

Social and linguistic practices such as the one above are the norm in plurilingual communities in Sri Lanka. Although the Memons are more likely to marry within the community, in every other aspect, they would be similar to the student in Pattanayak’s (2003) example. It is also worth pointing out that this is in stark contrast to the largely monolingual practices of the majority community, the Sinhalese, of whom, according to the Draft Recommendations for the National Policy on Medium of Instruction for Schools (National Education Commission, 2024, p. 5, citing the Socio Linguistic Survey of Sri Lanka of August 2010), nearly 90% cannot speak in Tamil [nor in any other local language].

Having established the increased trend of mixing languages at home, this study next investigated the languages that are used when mixing.

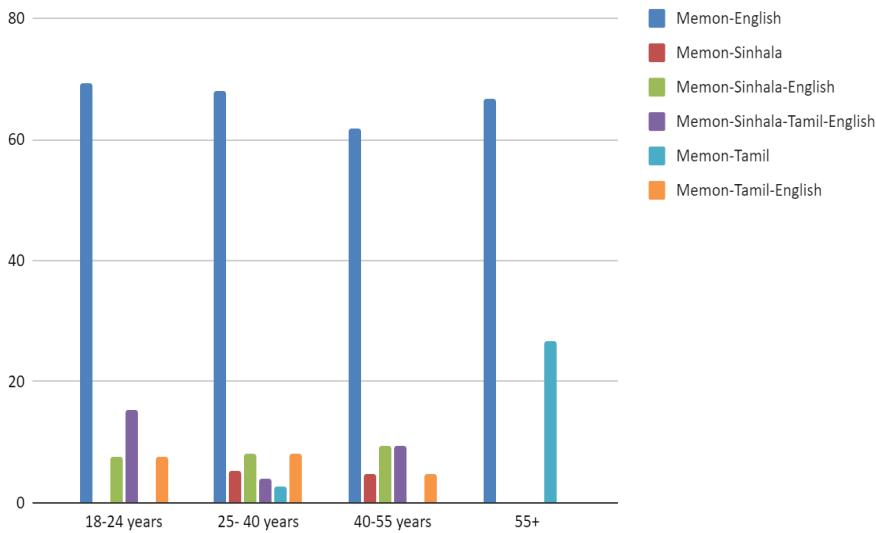


Figure 7: Percentage of responses to “What language mixes do you use at home?” tabulated by age

The responses to the question regarding the nature of the language mixing that takes place at home revealed interesting results. Overwhelmingly, across the age ranges, the languages that are most used together at home are Memoni and English. This is hardly surprising, considering the relatively westernized, urbanized lifestyle of the Memons of Sri Lanka. However, in the age group 55+, 24% of the sample have stated that they also use the Memoni-Tamil combination at home. The language which does not figure at all in this age group, significantly, is Sinhala. The reason for this absence of the dominant language in the language repertoire of the older Memons (which contrasts with the other age groups) could be related to the changes in Sri Lanka’s language policies. The youngest of the participants in this age group

(a 55-year-old in 2021 when the study was done) would have been born in 1966. This was a tumultuous time in Sri Lanka's language policy and planning history, when the roles of the various languages of the newly independent nation were the subject of much debate (Coperahewa, 2009, 2011). As stated earlier, the prominence of Sinhala followed the Official Language Act of 1956. Until then, as discussed earlier, over 80% of the participants of this age group stated that they were educated in the English medium and this could explain why English figures so prominently as the second language of the home, alongside Memoni.

The data also reveal that 24% of the 55+ age group also uses Tamil at home. In the absence of interview data, one could speculate that this fluency in Tamil could be because the Memons possibly employed domestic helpers whose first language was Tamil and/or because Tamil would have operated as the *lingua franca* between the Memons and other non-English speaking Sri Lankans. Interestingly, this trend of using Memoni and Tamil at home is not seen at all among the 40–55-year-olds, which proves that, as far as the Memon community is concerned, the language policy of the 1950s seems to have resulted in the community transitioning to using Sinhala at home, instead of Tamil.

The biggest shift in language use can be seen between community members above 55 and those below 55 years of age. As stated earlier, this reflects the changes in language policy and language-in-education policies that took place in the 1950–1960 period (Coperahewa, 2009, 2011). The data presented in Figure 7 and discussed below it as well as informal discussions with the Memons of these age groups reveal that the Memon youth of this period switched to education in the Sinhala or the Tamil medium.

Given that over 30% of the participants of this age group were educated in the Sinhala medium, as per Figure 7, it appears that Sinhala entered the language repertoire of the Memons during this period. In sharp contrast to the older Memons, the 40–55-year-olds revealed that they used Sinhala in all the various combinations presented to them (Memon-Sinhala/Memon-Sinhala-English/Memon-Sinhala-Tamil-English) which indicates that the presence of the Sinhala language is seen quite strongly in this age group. It is possible that this presence of Sinhala in the linguistic repertoire could also be because of the prominence given to the Sinhala language post-independence, as discussed earlier.

Also, in sharp contrast to their seniors, the Memons of the 40–55-year age group state that they do not use the Memoni-Tamil language combination at all which reveals that this period marks the break in this trend of using the Memoni-Tamil language combination hitherto seen among the community. The participants in this age group the 40–55 year olds are the oldest to display quadrilingual tendencies, since instead of the Memon-English-Tamil mix favored by their seniors, 10% of them state that they use Sinhala as well. This quadrilingual tendency is seen among

the younger participants as well, and this makes the Memons one of the most multilingual communities in the country.⁶

The 25–40-year-old group is the one that is most linguistically diverse in that they claim to use all six language combinations presented to them, as opposed to the 40–55-year-olds (5/6 of the language combinations presented to them), the 18–24-year-olds (4/6 of the language combinations presented to them) and the 55+ group (2/6 of the language combinations presented to them). Therefore, one way of viewing the language use of the Memons is that the community is becoming increasingly plurilingual. However, the senior community members are concerned about the consequences of this plurilingualism on the preservation and ‘purity’ of their language (personal correspondence). The 18–24-year-old group displayed a similar tendency towards an English-Memon mix, but the Memon-Tamil and Memon-Sinhala mix was noticeably absent.

Based on the above discussion, it is evident that the language practices of the Memons of Sri Lanka are diverse and age dependent. Generally, the younger the participant, the more likely they are to be plurilingual and to engage in extensive language mixing at home. It can also be gleaned from the data that the language repertoire and usage has been affected by the language and language-in- education policies of the country.

What are the language beliefs of the Sri Lanka Memons regarding Memoni as their mother tongue?

The next section of this study focuses on the language beliefs of the Sri Lankan Memon community. Particular attention is paid to the beliefs surrounding the notion of the “mother tongue” since this concept emerges as a powerful reason behind the desire to preserve the Memoni language.

Calling for a critical approach to the notion of “mother tongue”, Pennycook (2002) critiques “the essentialist status of the mother tongue as the cornerstone of language policy” (p. 11). Referring to how the “mother tongue” and “mother tongue education” are viewed as “political icons like democracy, universal education, or gender equality” (p. 11). Pennycook emphasizes that they ought to be questioned because it is the duty of the linguist to question “the tools we use for our work” (p. 12). With regard to definitions of the phrase “mother tongue”, Mills (2004, p. 162) points out that they “are neither straightforward, nor unproblematic”. Further, Ricento (2002, p. 2) states that “how one defines M[other] T[ongue] can have consequences for data collection with consequences for funding for minority language programs, for measuring language attrition, for establishing territorial boundaries, and for

6 Currently, the Census of Sri Lanka states that the Sri Lanka Malays are the most multilingual community in the country. But so are the smaller communities, like the Memons. However, this is not reflected in the Census because, as stated elsewhere, the Memons are not enumerated as a separate group.

application and enforcement of international laws and covenants”. Approaching the issue of “language loss” from a raciolinguistic perspective, scholars such as Rosa and Flores (2017) question “the historical and contemporary co-naturalization of language and race” (p. 621) and point out the socially constructed nature of these categories.

However, the data from the questionnaire indicate that, for the participants of this study, the notion of mother tongue seems to be central to their identity as Memons. It is acknowledged, however, that a more qualitatively oriented study would be needed to problematize this notion in greater depth.

Figure 8 depicts the responses to the question “What would you consider to be your mother tongue?” segregated by age.

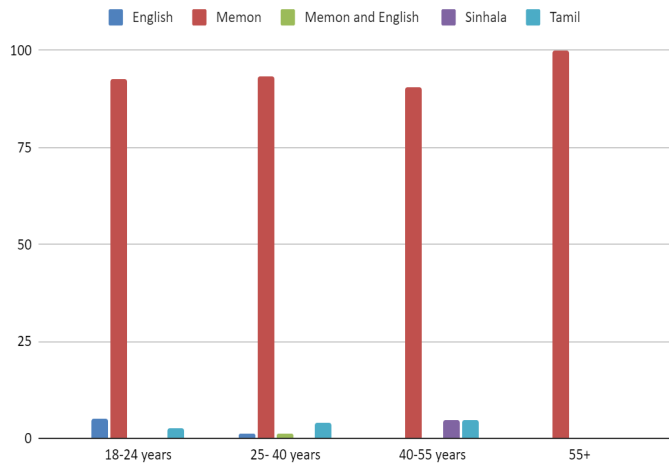


Figure 8: Percentage of responses to the question “What would you consider to be your mother tongue?” by age

The findings indicate that for the group over 55 years of age, the response seems uncontroversial as all of them have responded that their mother tongue is Memoni. However, in the age range of 40-55 years, it is evident that there are a few participants who consider Sinhala and Tamil (separately) to be their mother tongue. This ideology can be considered in the light of the language policies that came into effect during their time, which were discussed earlier.

Among a few of the younger Memons too (those under 40 years) there seems to be a trend to consider languages other than Memoni as their mother tongue. However, it is interesting to note that it is in the two age groups of under 40 years (18-24 and 25-40 years) that English is considered the mother tongue. This finding aligns with the changes that took place during the time when these participants were receiving their education as that was when the phenomenon of “international schools”

became a mainstream choice (Jenkins, Berman & Jenkins, 2005) and English medium instruction made a return to the Sri Lankan education system (Nanayakkara, 2017; Perera & Kularatne, 2014).

Overall, though, Memoni seems to be the language that is considered the mother tongue (between 80% - 100%) and this is a positive sign since, despite academics' views to the contrary, for community members, the notion of the mother tongue is generally considered an important indicator of language loyalty.

Special efforts made by community members to modify or influence the use of their language

This section focuses on the efforts made by the Memon community to preserve their language in Sri Lanka.

As stated earlier, several senior and influential members of the community have given priority to promoting the use of the Memon language and reinforced positive ideologies regarding the language. In particular, they have undertaken the initiatives laid out below during the last few years.

The initiator of the language maintenance effort and senior member of the Memon community compiled a team of young Memon women to work with myself and my assistant (also a non-Memon) on a Language Vitality Test (LVT). This test, modeled after a similar test designed to assess the vitality of the Sri Lanka Malay language, is being prepared at present. It involves a 2-stage process in which language proficiency is tested incrementally. Part 1 consists of a language comprehension task using visual aids and Part 2 is a task that asks the participants to translate sentences, arranged from simple to complex, from the language of their choice (English, Sinhala or Tamil) to Memoni. It is hoped that the results of this test will give an indication of the actual level of the vitality of the Memoni language in Sri Lanka. The results of the LVT will be used to inform the designing of various language preservation initiatives thereafter.

The process of collecting the words that were used for Part 1 of the LVT bears some mention: it involved me and my assistant accompanying 2-3 young women from the community and meeting several elders of the community, once in the headquarters of the Memon Association of Sri Lanka and once in the residence of a community member. At these meetings, the research team discussed various words that can potentially be part of the test based on the extent to which the words are familiar to the elders but not to the youth. Through a process of extended discussion, the words were carefully selected to be part of the LVT. This exercise is in itself a positive one because it results in the young participants learning several words and structures which are new to them while also strengthening the bond between the two generations.

Discussions are also underway to initiate a digital archive of the Memoni language spoken by the elders of the Memon community. Bernard (1996, p. 143) states: “I think it’s helpful to talk of archiving (or documenting) activities and vitalizing activities rather than simply preservation activities. Making dictionaries, writing grammars, and recording speakers all help to archive a language.” Unlike some of the other communities that speak smaller, lesser-known languages, the Memons are an affluent community, so access to technology would not be an issue and therefore it is highly likely that archiving and revitalizing the language using technology will be successful.

Conclusion

This article sets out with the aim of examining the feature of language mixing witnessed among the Memons of Sri Lanka, their beliefs regarding Memoni as their mother tongue, and the specific efforts made by community members to influence or modify the use of their language. This examination was done using quantitative data obtained by administering an online questionnaire to 176 participants selected from the Memon community using the convenience sampling method. The rationale for the study is that in Sri Lanka, where tensions between the two major linguistic and ethnic groups are never far from the surface, there is little genuine interest in discourses surrounding the other, lesser-known languages. However, this study proves that macro-level politics have a direct impact on individual and community-level language use and language-related beliefs. Therefore, these impacts need to be examined and documented for what they signal about the future of the lesser-known and therefore more vulnerable languages of the country.

This study has several significant findings, and they are summarized in this section. An examination of the medium of instruction of the 176 Memon participants reveals that the English language-prominent education system that existed in the community before the 1956 language policy was gradually replaced by Memons being educated more in the Sinhala and Tamil media after the change in language policy and language-in-education policy. This transition in turn led to other related changes within the community.

With regard to language mixing, this study revealed that the younger the respondent, the more likely they are to mix languages. An examination of the language mixes used across the various age groups revealed that while participants over the age of 55 did not use Sinhala at all, this trend changed dramatically with all other age groups. This finding of gradually increasing levels of Sinhala in the language repertoire of the Memons indicates the extent to which the changes in language and language-in-education policies that took place in the 1950s-1960s have affected the language repertoire of this community. The data also indicate that the Memons are increasingly quadrilingual and while this may be viewed as an advantage in that it

leads to increased plurilingualism, the elders of the community view this trend as dangerous for the future of their mother tongue.

Although the notion of ‘mother tongue’ has been critiqued by academics, it is evident from this study that it is an important concept amongst the participants. Although there are a few younger Memons who consider English to be their mother tongue, generally the majority of the participants seem to view the Memoni language as their mother tongue. This finding can be viewed as a positive sign from the community’s point of view because identifying a language unquestioningly as the mother tongue can be regarded as a measure of the loyalty of the community to that language. Judging by this yardstick of loyalty to Memoni as the mother tongue of the community, the future of the Memoni language seems to be secure. In addition, the study also discussed the positive steps being taken by the community to ensure the future of their language.

Overall, it appears that the prognosis for the future of the Memoni language is not as dire as the older community members fear. However, informal discussions with senior members of the community indicate that fears about the future of the language persist, perhaps due to the ever-increasing level of fluency in other languages and the language mixing that is witnessed, especially among the younger members of the community. It is possible that these fears are also due to the lack of acknowledgement of the lesser-known languages within the larger body politic of the country. In that respect, there is much work to be done in Sri Lanka to reassure members of small communities, such as the Memons, that there are state and civil organizations as well as academics and concerned citizens that are committed to acknowledging and safeguarding the lesser-known languages and the communities that speak them.

Acknowledgments

The author gratefully acknowledges the contribution of Mr Shahid Sangani and his family of the Sri Lanka Memon community for the support they extended throughout this study.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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