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Citation	The International Conference on Language, Education and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Bangkok, Thailand, 9-11 November 2010.
Issued Date	2010
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10722/138146
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Sustainable Preservation: Language Choice in Complex Multilingual Settings

By Umberto Ansaldo

This paper examines language choices in multilingual contexts from the perspective of language revitalization and sustainable preservation of ethno-linguistic minorities. By comparing top-down approaches to language preservation with grassroots solutions at the community level, I discuss the tension between modern and vernacular languages and the values they embed. Through the case study of language choices over the past decade in the Malay diaspora of Sri Lanka, which are characterized by a unique vernacular contact variety (Sri Lanka Malay) in competition with dominant languages such as Sinhala, Tamil, English and Standard Malay, we are able to reflect on the different rationales behind language choice in complex multilingual settings where issues of identity, religion, modernity and diversity offer different, at times contrasting choices. For example, while from an educational perspective it seems to make sense to encourage a shift from the vernacular to Standard Malay, in the periphery the maintenance of the vernacular is instrumental for sustaining bilingualism in Sinhala and Tamil which is vital for ethnic and economic survival. In this paper, I highlight the different outcomes that bottom-up versus top-down approaches may lead to, and their implications for education, preservation and empowerment of marginalized cultures.