

Language Choice of Melanau Community in DARO District, Sarawak

Habibu Morsili, Karim Harun (PhD) and Azrizan Abu Bakar

Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, National University of Malaysia,
43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

DOI Link: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v7-i10/3373>

Published Date: 12 October 2017

Abstract

The Melanau community in Sarawak is an ethnic minority that covers 5% of Sarawakians. The Melanau ethnic population dominates the central part of Sarawak. The Melanau ethnic group speaks in Melanau because Sarawak has more than 27 ethnic groups so these multi ethnicities cause them to communicate with each other in a shared language. The current study in the Daro area of Sarawak analyzes language selection patterns, describes aspects of code conversion in the communication process and describes the factors that influence the choice of Melanau society language during the communication process. Sociolinguistic approaches and qualitative methods are applied to this study. The data were collected using interview recording techniques, observation and recording interviews. The underlying theory of the study was Fishman's Domain Theory (1972).

Keywords: Melanau Community, Sociolinguistic, Language Choice, Qualitative Approach, Domain

Introduction

One of the important aspects of sociolinguistic study is language choice. Language selection studies show signs of occurrence as a result of community-based multilingual and dialectic attitudes. Through the study of such language choices can explain the use of language in the community (Asmah 2008). The clashes of ethnic diversity during daily activities led them to choose the language they mastered and understood together to communicate. The language that is the preferred choice of communicating is quite varied due to different situations and situations.

Problem Statement

Language extinction can occur when the language is no longer spoken in a community. Any language cannot be preserved for the new generation if there is nobody in the community who knows the language. Within the last 500 years, almost half of languages around the world are at the brink of extinction while ancient languages such as Liruscan and Egyptian are completely vanished (Nettle D. & Romaine S. 2000)

...A language is not a self-sustaining entity. It can only exist where there is a community to speak and transmit it. A community of people can exist only when there is a viable environment for them to live in, and a means of making a living. Where communities cannot thrive, their languages are in danger. When languages lose their speakers, they die..” (2000: 2)

The above statement by Nettle & Romaine (2000) shows that a language is unable to sustain without any community who masters the language. The existence of the community however depends on the environment. Changes in the environment, development and migration will affect the community's lifestyle. If the community is unable to survive throughout the changes, it will cause their language to not grow and resulting the language to be threatened.

Melanau ethnic group speak Melanau language. Melanau language is one of the Austronesian languages. The data from ethnologue website (www.ethnologue.com 26 November 2014) listed down five variations of Melanau language. They are called Melanau Sentral, Melanau Kanowit-Tanjong, Melanau Daro-Matu, Melanau Sibul and Melanau Seru. Three of these five variations have been categorised as threatened language which are Melanau Sentral, Melanau Kanowit-Tanjong and Melanau Daro-Matu. These three variations faced a common problem which is having less speaker of the language. While Melanau Sibul is given transition status to Melanau Sentral. On the other hand, Melanau Seru is considered as extinct.

Melanau Sentral mentioned in www.ethnologue.com (26 November 2014) is the one which has dialects such as Balingian, Bruit, Dalat, Oya, Sarikei, Segahan, Segalang, Sileng and Igan. The population for the speaker of the language is in Mukah, delta coastal area from Sungai Rajang to Sungai Balingian. The dialect for Melanau Daro-Matu includes Melanau Daro and Matu, the speaker of these dialects lives in the area of Sungai Matu from the north branch of Sungai Rajang up until the estuary of Matu and Daro. Whereas the Kanowit-Tanjong dialect is called Melanau Kanowit and Tanjong. The population of the language's speaker covers Melanau ethnic living at the centre of Sungai Rajang until the town of Kanowit.

The majority of people living in Sarawak is from Than ethnicity, thus the main language spoken there is Than. Besides that, Malay language in Sarawak dialect also dominates the choice of the diverse community in Sarawak. Moreover, dominant languages such as Malay and Iban are the main choice in their daily communication. In contrast, other minority languages become marginalized due to the lack of speakers. Minority languages often succumb to the dominant majority language especially in regions dominated by majority language speakers. Sarawak has a large number of ethnic groups and their daily routine made them to interact with each other. Having an environment with people from multiple ethnicity and languages, the community has to make the decision of which language to be used while communicating as they are not only interacting with people who use the same language. Indeed, language is an important medium for them in communicating with people from other ethnicity. The need to understand a mutual language is the reason for language choice to happen. This research is done to find out more about this phenomenon.

Methodology

This Melanau community language selection study is a qualitative research that applies library research methods and field research using data collection techniques such as recording of conversations, observations and interviews. The literature review is to cite early data on Melanau ethnic groups, identify relevant theories and other information such as population demographics, economic activities, socio-cultural, and so on. This study is aimed

at analyzing the language selection pattern among the Melanau community, describing the aspects of code conversion in the communication process and elaborating the factors that influence the choice of Melanau society. Data analysis is done qualitatively. The conversation data recorded by the domain that the researcher has set up will be made a phonetic transcription using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). Observation and interview data are triangulated and support data to the main data.

FISHMAN'S DOMAIN THEORY (1972)

Fishman's Domain Theory (1972) describes the situation of language choice in the language society, in particular the multilingual society by researching linguistic aspects of relationships with social categories. Domain means a family of social interactions that are typically controlled by a set of common behavioral formulas or vice versa. Fishman conveys the concept of who speaks what language to whom and when. Who speaks refers to the speakers, what language refers to the language used when speaking, to whom is the interceptor and so on when referring to the domain of the conversation in context. This method is used to obtain information on language choices in diverse societies. Research on language choices is associated with the behavior of the individual. Each individual will have the option of using a particular language in the event of a communication process with others either in his or her own community or with other societies.

Setting up a domain set depends largely on the culture of a research community and according to the needs of researchers, especially multilingual communities. The domain concept is able to elaborate the function of language choice in multilingual society and to know their preferred language when communication activity occurs. Language communities speak a lot of language variations while communicating like language in work, interest, place, time, conversation topics, social class such as economic, education and nation aspects. During the communication process, language speakers need to make the language choices they need to use to interact in certain contexts. Speakers have an alternative to choose the language to use when communicating.

Location of Reserch

The Daro district has 30,761 residents. Population distribution by ethnicity is 21,271 people (69.20%) of Melanau ethnic group, 2,360 people (7.70%) are Malays, 3,733 people (12.14%) are Iban, Bidayuh is 74 people (0.24%), 2.62% and the remaining ethnic groups represent 1.50%, which is 449 people (Daro District Office). The Daro district has eight small districts - Brait Island, Daro District, Nanga Semah, Batang Lassa, Belawai, Jerijih, Rajang and Paloh. Population placement consists of village, longhouse and small town. A total of 51 villages, 50 longhouses and three small towns in the Daro district of Daro, Belawai and Tanjung Manis towns.

The Melanau Ethnic Community

According to Jeniri (2015), not many are known of Melanau ethnic groups outside Sarawak because there are not many researches, documentation, and books on the Melanau people being published. Bonaventura in Aidan Wing (1998) states that researchers use multiple spellings to illustrate these ethnic groups: Melanaus (Hose and McDougall 1912), Milano or Lemano (Ray 1913), Millanows (Kepple 1968), Millanouwes (Low 1968), Lemanau (Clayre 1971), Milanos (Crocker 1976), A-Liko (Morris 1953;1971;1991) Zaini (1998). The name

Melanau was given by the Brunei Malays in the past and the name was recorded on the Sarawak map in 1595.

Literature Review

Studies on language selection have been conducted by scholars both locally and abroad. The studies conducted by some researchers are based on the factors and purpose of language selection. Language selection studies were able to explain the phenomenon of language preservation, elimination and extinction as reviewed by Nor Hisham (1999), Noriah et.al (2010) and Zainal Abidin (2011). Language selection studies are also used to describe the attitudes and identities of certain ethnic languages such as the study conducted by Caesar Delwis @ Dealwis (2008), Saidah (2009), Nirmeela (2011) and Rina Marnita (2013). While the language selection study was also used to explain the selection and use of languages such as study by Asmah (1982), Nor Hisham (1994), Abu Rashed (2007), Kamisah (2008), Norazuna (2010), Mohammed Azlan (2011), Remmy (2011) and Soo (2011).

Based on the literature review conducted, the researcher found that Melanau language choice among Melanau ethnicity has not been done. Although the study of language choice on various ethnicities in Sarawak was done by Muhammad Azlan (2010) but it was to explain the lingua franca phenomenon in Sarawak. Another language study involving Bidayuh, Rajang Tanjung, Sihan, Lahanan, Bhuket and others have been done by local researchers. The study of the Melanau community language selection can fill the literature review of previous language choices based on the literature review. Given the language of Melanau showing the endangered language features, it is desirable that the study of this language is to explain the real phenomenon of the language.

Conclusion

As a multi-lingual state, Sarawak is seen as an ideal state for conducting language selection studies. Sarawak has a population of 27 in total, with over 30 dialect variants demonstrating the potential of multiple language patterns to exist. Language selection phenomenon occurs as a result of language, culture and social clashes in a language society either by fellow members of society or with other language societies. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct study to identify factors influencing the selection of languages among the ethnic groups.

The researcher chose to use full qualitative research for data collection and analysis. Three data collection strategies include conversation recording, interviewing and observation conducted on domains that have been determined by researchers. The location of the study was chosen as the main settlement of the Melanau ethnic group, Daro district in Sarawak.

Corresponding Author

Habibu Morsili, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, National University of Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia.

Email: habibumorsili@gmail.com

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