A Language Maintenance Project in Malaysia: Efforts to Use Chinese Community Languages in Everyday Life

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Abstract

This project report focuses on the efforts made by three groups of participants to maintain the use of Chinese community languages in everyday life in Penang, Malaysia. Semistructured interviews acted as a data source. Analysis of the data revealed various efforts made by the participants, including everyday interactions and language teaching, which indicate that the Chinese community in Penang is keen to maintain their community languages to pass on to future generations.

Keywords: *language maintenance; Chinese community languages; Malaysia*

1. Introduction

Language maintenance and language shift is a complex area in the field of sociolinguistics that is deeply connected to the socio-cultural identity of an ethnic group. In Malaysia, the largest minority ethnic group is the Chinese. The Malaysian Federal Government explicitly encourages the Chinese community's use of Mandarin Chinese as the main language of instruction in Chinese-medium primary schools, and it is taught as a subject in secondary schools because of the economic value it offers. This provision accords with the Federal Constitution of Malaysia and the National Language Acts 1963/1967, which state that all Malaysians are allowed to speak, learn, and teach any languages other than Malaysia's national and official language, Bahasa Melayu. At present, more than 90% of Malaysian-Chinese parents are sending their children to Chinese-medium primary schools (Gill 2014) and the enrolment of non-Chinese students has increased by 15% in recent years ("Government to present Chinese schools" 2013). These figures reflect the popularity of Chinese-medium education in Malaysia. Further, the Malaysian mass media strongly recognises and supports learning Mandarin Chinese (Wang 2016). The promotion of Mandarin Chinese in schools and

the support given to learning the language have encouraged the younger generation to use Mandarin Chinese more frequently at home (Ting 2006; Wang 2017). Ultimately, this situation has caused a decline in the use of their own variety of Chinese language, including Penang Hokkien, Cantonese, Hakka, Teochew, Hainan, and Taishan (henceforth referred to as 'Chinese community languages'),[1] in many private and public spaces. This shift has disrupted the patterns of community language use in many Malaysian-Chinese families, as many are experiencing sociolinguistic realignment in the home domain (Ding 2016; Wang 2017). This raises questions about the ultimate survival of Chinese community languages in Malaysian society and calls for an investigation into efforts to maintain these languages.

2. Context of the project

The aims of this project were to explore (i) the official planning efforts related to Chinese community language maintenance, and (ii) the extent to which these efforts are supported by local Chinese communities. Based on these aims, this project sought to answer the following research question:

How does the Chinese community maintain Chinese community languages in everyday life in Penang?

Haugen's (1972) notion of language ecology was employed as an overarching conceptual framework to investigate the relationship between national language policy and the situation of the Chinese community in Penang. The decision to employ Haugen's notion is supported by Wendel's (2005, p. 51) argument that an ecological approach to language takes into consideration "the complex web of relationships that exist between the environment, languages, and their speakers". By using an ecological perspective, the project was able to critically explore interactions between the Chinese community in Penang and their use of community languages.

Penang served as an ideal research site given its long history as a Chinese settlement and the extent to which Penang's cultural character is shaped by the presence of the Chinese

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[1] The term 'community languages', which will be used throughout this report, is defined as "immigrant languages used…to emphasise the legitimacy of their continuing existence" (Clyne 1991, p. 215). It is adopted in preference to other terms, such as 'mother tongues' or 'ethnic/minority/immigrant languages'.

community. As a multilingual, multiethnic, and multicultural state situated in Peninsular Malaysia, Penang is made up of two parts: Penang Island and Seberang Perai, with George Town as its capital. It has a population of 1.76 million (Department of Statistics 2018), which is made up of Malays (42.3%), Chinese (39.4%), Indians (9.4%), and other ethnicities (8.9%). As the sole national and official language of Malaysia, Bahasa Melayu is the sanctioned language of administration, education, and the legal system in Penang. Although English is not an official language in Malaysia, it plays a vital role in Penang (Wang 2017). It is taught in schools and used in many domains, including business, entertainment, and religion. Within the Chinese ethnic group, approximately 64% of the Chinese population in Penang originate from the Hokkien ethnolinguistic group (Department of Statistics 2010). While Penang Hokkien is their main language of communication, other Chinese community languages including Mandarin Chinese are also widely spoken (Macalister & Ong 2019).

The establishment of a prosperous Chinese community in Penang originated in China (Wong 2015). During the 17th century, the Chinese arrived in Penang after escaping the Manchu invasion of Fujian Province, China. When Sir Francis Light founded Penang in 1786, he established a free trading port in George Town (Andaya & Andaya 2017), which attracted many Chinese merchants because it allowed them to trade with European merchants and expand their trading activities. The flourishing trade led the Chinese to settle and establish shopfronts in George Town. During the 18th century, the establishment of the tin mining industry in Taiping, Perak attracted more Chinese migrants who worked as labourers (Wong 2015). Subsequently, they moved to bigger cities such as Penang in search of better job opportunities and settled there. Their families continued to live in Penang for generations, up to the present day.

3. Participants and methods

This research project involved 46 participants, aged 30 and above, who speak Chinese community languages. They were selected from three groups: (1) official actors, (2) community actors, and (3) grassroots actors. The official actors are policymakers and researchers from government think-tanks. As representatives of the Penang Government, they are involved in managing legislation. The community actors are representatives from

Chinese clan associations,[2] and language promoters, who play a role in supporting and promoting language-related activities within the local community. The grassroots actors are individuals selected to represent the five domains of family, friendship, religion, education, and employment. These individuals play important roles in understanding and interpreting the laws enforced by the government.

A qualitative study was designed using semistructured interviews to capture the participants' efforts in maintaining Chinese community languages in Penang. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes. Interviews were chosen as a data source because they allow for a more in-depth exploration of what each participant does to maintain Chinese community languages in Penang. It was felt that interview data would be more conducive to the type of exploratory analysis required for this research project (Arksey & Knight 1999; Patton 2002). Moreover, there were some participants who had limited literacy skills and interviews allowed them to express opinions which would otherwise be difficult for them in the context of a written questionnaire.

Recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim and no corrections were made to the morphosyntax in order to retain the authenticity of the participants' responses. Participants' names were removed and pseudonyms given to ensure anonymity and protect participants' confidentiality. The interviews that were conducted in Chinese community languages were translated into English for the purposes of data presentation. Data were subjected to a content analysis as it is an objective, systematic, and generalisable method of evaluation (Prasad 2008). As this project employed Haugen's (1972) notion of language ecology as an overarching conceptual framework, the transcripts were analysed according to Haugen's ten ecological questions (see Appendix).

4. Outcomes of the project

The efforts made by the three groups of participants to use Chinese community languages in everyday life in Penang are reported in five sections below.

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2 Clan association in this context refers to a Chinese ethnolinguistic group, such as Hokkien, Cantonese, or Hakka, forming their own associations to help with issues related to accommodation, food, writing letters back to China, and arrangement for funerals (Yen 1981). They usually originated from the same village or province in China and spoke the same language.

4.1. Everyday interactions

The most fundamental way Chinese community languages are maintained in Penang is through everyday interactions with family, friends, customers, colleagues, hawkers, and members in clan associations, churches, and temples. Ai Mei from the official actors group stated that as a native Penang Hokkien speaker, speaking the language is habitual. However, Jit Ting from the community actors group highlighted his wife's friend's experience of speaking Hainan is for communication purposes only because her original ethnolinguistic group is Cantonese. She also had to learn Hainan to speak with her husband's parents. Kok Loong from the official actors group uses Cantonese to deliver political speeches during election campaigns. Jit Ting from the education domain occasionally speaks Hakka to those parents at school who are not fluent in Bahasa Melayu or English to communicate effectively and ensure they understand the needs of their children.

4.2. Language teaching and learning

Many of the older participants spent time teaching community languages to their children and grandchildren in hope of passing them down. San Choon from the friendship domain mentioned that although his grandson attends the Chinese-medium school and is fluent in Mandarin Chinese, he always encourages him to speak Penang Hokkien at home. Soon Gek from the employment domain has a similar practice to ensure her teenage niece is able to speak Hainan to family members. Elizabeth from the community actors group teaches her foreign friends Penang Hokkien through regular email exchanges. Although Wee Nam from the official actors group lacked the opportunity to learn and practise Teochew when young, he self-taught by listening to instructional cassettes and is now able to conduct simple conversations in Teochew. Min Tat from the friendship domain always ensures he has a Penang Hokkien dictionary at home so he can refer to words he does not know, as the vocabulary of Penang Hokkien differs from other Hokkiens.

4.3. Literacy skills

Many participants claimed that reading and writing are essential skills for language maintenance. Tian Hin from the community actors group writes poems and articles in Penang Hokkien by using the standard orthography from Taiwan. Soon Gek from the employment domain jots down Hainan poems and rhymes using English because she is illiterate in written

Chinese. Cher Leng from the employment domain emphasised the importance of reading to understand Chinese literature and culture as part of language maintenance efforts, and in recent years she has started reading literature in Hakka. Fei Min from the religion domain mentioned that some worshippers in his church, including himself, read the Bible according to Penang Hokkien pronunciation.

4.4. Entertainment

Many participants claimed a favourite leisure activity was watching Cantonese dramas on television. Kok Loong from the official actors group learnt Cantonese through watching Cantonese movies and practising the language with his father. Similarly, Shu Min from the family domain picked up Cantonese by watching Cantonese dramas and listening to Cantonese podcasts because there was no formal Cantonese education. Conversely, Pei Ni from the education domain preferred Hokkien dramas, which originate from Taiwan, while her mother-in-law was fond of Teochew dramas. Chui Mooi from the religion domain always listens to Cantonese or Penang Hokkien radio channels when driving.

4.5. Religion

Some participants explained their use of Chinese community languages in everyday religious practices. Elizabeth from the community actors group listens to Buddhist sutra and dharma talks in Penang Hokkien so she can improve her Penang Hokkien vocabulary. Fei Ming from the religion domain worships in Penang Hokkien at church every weekend. Chui Mooi, also from the religion domain, started a weekly Penang Hokkien prayer group years ago because she was frustrated with her friends who were illiterate but wanted to pray. Meng Chong from the religion domain conducts weekly dharma talks in Penang Hokkien for the older generation in his temple.

5. Takeaways from this project report

Analysis of the results suggests the three groups of participants make significant efforts to use Chinese community languages in everyday life, which indicates that the Chinese community in Penang is keen to maintain their languages and pass them on to future generations. Employing Haugen's notion of language ecology, this project on Chinese community language maintenance contributes to understanding the relationship between

language policy and active efforts to maintain community language use in a multilingual setting, specifically in Penang, Malaysia. It can thus be used as an exemplary study for other small communities, such as those in Ireland, Australia, and Asia, that are eager to maintain their community languages.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix

Haugen's (1972) ten ecological questions:

1. What is its classification in relation to other languages?

2. Who are its users?

3. What are its domains of use?

4. What concurrent languages are employed by its users?

5. What internal varieties does the language show?

6. What is the nature of its written traditions?

7. To what degree has its written form been standardised; that is, unified and codified?

8. What kind of institutional support has it won, either in government, education, or private organisations, either to regulate its form or propagate it?

9. What are the attitudes of its users towards the language, in terms of intimacy and status, leading to personal identification?

10. Where does the language stand and where it is going in comparison with other languages of the world?