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Survival of the Minority Kristang Language in Malaysia

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Abstract

Kristang, also known as the Malaccan Portuguese Creole, has a strong influence of Portuguese, together with the Malay language which is the dominant local language in Malaysia and the Malay-speaking region in Southeast Asia. This Creole is spoken by a microscopic minority of Catholic Christians who are descendants of Portuguese colonizers and Asian settlers in Malacca. Malacca was once a historically renowned state and empire which was coveted by major European powers. The Dutch followed the Portuguese and the last were the British.

Because of the very small number of Kristang community members (1200) in the present Portuguese Settlement assigned to them by the authorities, the Kristang language is clearly a language struggling to survive. Its vocabulary is largely Portuguese-based, with a substantial contribution from the Malay language. It has also borrowed from the languages of other colonial European powers. Their vocabulary also includes some loan words from Chinese and Indian languages.

This minority language may yet be maintained with the fervent effort of the few thousand remaining Kristang speakers and the Malaysian government, particularly the state government of Melaka (or Malacca). Kristang is a legacy and heritage left by the faraway Portuguese to Malaysian history. It would be tragic and unfortunate if this heritage is lost, to Malaysians in general and the tiny Portuguese community in Malaysia, in particular.

KEYWORDS: Portuguese Creole, Kristang, minority language, survival

Introduction

Much enthusiasm is now being shown among sociolinguists and academics with regard to the possible loss and death of many minority languages in use today and the ways of maintaining them (see Bradley and Bradley, 2000, Crystal, 2000, Haja Mohideen, 2007 and Nettle and Romaine, 2000).

In Malaysia there are many languages spoken by the natives such as the Orang Asli, Murut, Bajau, Bidayuh and Kedayan, who are numerically small in comparison to the majority groups of Malaysians, namely the Malays who comprise the majority group, Chinese and Indians (Tamils outnumber other Indians). Their languages are mainly oral languages.

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The languages of the abovementioned minority groups are, unfortunately, potential candidates for language extinction because of their small numbers and their close affinity towards the most influential major ethnic group, with whom they have many things in common.

Kristang – An Endangered Language

In the state of Melaka (also known as Malacca) in Malaysia, there is a unique minority group of people who are known as the Kristang. The Creole they speak is known variously as Malacca Portuguese Creole, Kristang, Papia and Cristao. Since this Creole has substantial influence of the local Malay language, Baxter, a Kristang scholar, believes that the appropriate term for this Creole is Malacca-Melayu Portuguese Creole (cited in Marbeck, 2007). The speakers themselves popularly refer to their Creole as Kristang.

In this paper the terms ‘Kristang’ and ‘Malacca Portuguese Creole’ will be used interchangeably as synonyms. This paper looks at the issue of language attrition and survival with regard to this Malaysian Creole language. According to Su Aziz (2007), the danger of this language disappearing is real because it has never been taught formally. It has only been handed down orally from one generation to another (*New Straits Times*, July 16, 2007, p. 65).

The Kristang People

The Kristangs are people of the close-knit Portuguese Eurasian community in Malaysia and elsewhere. They have been around for nearly 500 years, but sadly their number is rapidly shrinking. Fishing is a common occupation of the residents, but there are also professionals in their midst.

The Portuguese Settlement they live in is located in the state of Melaka or Malacca facing the sea, the Straits of Malacca, to be exact. (Malacca is the second smallest state behind only Perlis.) Their Roman Catholic religion unifies and keeps them together in this largely Muslim country. St. Peter is the patron saint of the community. They have assumed Portuguese proper names, for example, Martin de Rozario, Leonie De Costa and Jeremy Monteiro. They celebrate Christian religious festivals such as All Souls Day and Lent Festival. And since there are many fishermen, they also celebrate Intrudu or water festival and Fiesta San Pedro (fisherman’s festival). The latter is celebrated to honor St. Peter.

According to Fernandis, a Kristang researcher, the Kristangs are also referred to as Luso-Malay by historians to indicate the assimilation and integration of the Portuguese settlers with the indigenous Malays (2001). In the website maintained by the Malacca Portuguese Eurasian Association - MPEA (<http://www.geocities.com/TheTropics/Paradise/9221/>), Fernandis states that the Kristang people are Luso-Malay descendants, meaning that it is a minority community who had been absorbed into the majority Malay culture. Because of their lightly tanned skin they are often mistaken for Malays (De Silva, 2007a).

The Kristangs could not avoid the influence of the majority native community, just like the early Portuguese who first set foot in Malacca, in their way of life. For instance, some of their women wear *sarong kebaya* which is 'a type of clothing worn from the waist to the ankle' by many Malay women. A Kristang dance, the *branyo* is a flirty dance similar to the Malay *joget*. Some of the Kristangs eat with their hands like most Malays and Indians do, rather than with the fork and spoon like most Europeans do. There are also those who use chopsticks like the Chinese do when they eat. They observe Malay social customs for engagements and weddings.

A very small number of Kristangs have converted to Islam and other religions. It has been estimated that the community numbers about 20,000 in Malaysia (KOSMO, 8 January, 2008, p.24). As such, the community is one of the smallest minority groups in Malaysia, a country with a population of 27 million.

MPEA has affiliates in the following cities in the country: Alor Setar, Penang, Ipoh, Kuala Lumpur, Seremban and Johore Bharu, besides Melaka. According to a newspaper report, there are only 5000 people who can speak the language fluently (Su Aziz, 2007).

The Portuguese Settlement

The Portuguese Settlement in Ujong Pasir, Malacca, which resembles a 'little Lisbon' with its Portuguese Square, covers an area of 11 hectares with only approximately 118 homes and a Kristang population of about 1200 people (KOSMO, January 8, 2008, p.24). In an earlier report their population was put at 900 (De Silva, 2007a).

The regedor or headman of the Settlement is Peter Gomez, 49 years old, and a fisherman by occupation. The majority of the descendants of the Malaccan Portuguese community live here.

The term 'Portuguese' may be confusing here because the community is not exactly Portuguese, but they are rather people of mixed Portuguese and Asian (Malay, Chinese, Indian and others) descent. The Settlement was created in 1930, mainly with the help of two Jesuit missionaries, Rev Father A. M. Corado and Rev Father J. P. Francois (Tan 2007) to preserve the Portuguese way of life. There is even a street named after D'Albuquerque, a very well-known Portuguese explorer.

In an interview given to KOSMO, a Malay tabloid, Gomez revealed that many young people have left the place. According to Shadan (2006), the journalist who produced the investigative report on the community, only senior citizens and children were visible when the staff from KOSMO visited the Settlement. Since Melaka is a very small state in the country, with a land area of only 1,638 square meters, many youths have migrated to bigger cities such as Kuala Lumpur, the country's capital city, and Johore Bharu, a Malaysian city near the island-state of Singapore to seek employment. Many of the younger generation have left the Settlement and settled in Singapore and Australia in search of greener pastures. There is even a small Kristang community in Perth in

Australia. Those who have done so have intermarried with the local people there and obtained permanent residence status.

It is obvious that in intermarriages between majority and minority group members, the children will almost always shift to the majority group for linguistic, identity and security purposes. Consequently, the Kristangs are becoming numerically much weaker and a vanishing breed in those countries. The prospect of Kristang surviving in a place like Perth is very slim indeed. What more in places like the United States where some of them have settled? Some of the community's Diaspora, however, try to return annually to partake in the merrymaking of their prominent annual festivals - Fiesta San Juan and Fiesta San Pedro (Tan, 2007).

Gomez candidly admitted to the fact that in Malaysia, the Kristangs were really a disappearing group. However, he was positive that they would continue to be a unique group because of their history, culture and religion.

In reality however, the Malaccan Portuguese Creole may unfortunately join the list of endangered languages due to the geopolitical situation in Southeast Asia. Bahasa Melayu or Malay is variously spoken in Brunei, Malaysia and Singapore in the region. English is very influential in this region due to historical, social, educational reasons and globalization. The Portuguese language or creoles related to Portuguese have no place in this part of the world, except for Timor Leste (formerly known as East Timor, while it was a part of Indonesia), the poorest country in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Portuguese is not an influential European language in this region. What more, Kristang - a Portuguese based Creole spoken by a few thousand people throughout Malaysia and Singapore, and only a few households (Yong Tiam Kui, 2004) in the nostalgic Portuguese Settlement itself, who are striving to preserve their identity in a vast region where we have two economically and socially dominant languages, namely Malay and English.

Bahasa Indonesia or the Indonesian language has many similarities with the Malay spoken in Malaysia (BM). Malay is the national language in Malaysia and a regional lingua franca. It is also one of the official languages of Singapore. As such it is used as the medium of instruction in schools and extensively used in public tertiary institutions, alongside English. English is taught as a strong second language in the country and is used with varying degrees of proficiency by Malaysians from all walks of life and ethnic backgrounds. Proficiency in both languages is needed for employment purposes, upward mobility and social interaction among the well-educated and those who are ambitious.

Another Malacca Creole community, albeit much smaller, which has been provided with its own settlement is the tiny Chitty community in Gajah Berang, which has about only 60 families (De Silva, 2007c).

Creoles

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A Creole is a language which has evolved from a pidgin. The latter is a very basic language that developed as a medium of communication among people who did not share a common language (Holmes, 2001). While many pidgins, with the exception of a few such as Tok Pisin spoken in Papua New Guinea, do not have native speakers, a Creole is spoken as the first language and used in the private domains of family, friendship and religion.

Most creoles exist alongside their main lexical input language and the official languages in the region (see Migge, 2007).

A Creole has a more elaborate structure, vocabulary and phonology compared to pidgins which are very simple and basic for communication purposes between people of different language backgrounds. Creoles are mostly used in island states and coastal areas which had once been occupied by Europeans, for example, Seychelles, Mauritius, Macau, Cameroon, Timor Leste (formerly known as Portuguese Timor before it was made a part of Indonesia) and Sri Lanka.

Most creoles are normally based on the linguistic system of erstwhile colonial powers, for example, Haitian Creole is French-based while Jamaican Creole is English-based (Wardaugh, 1992). Creoles have been recognized as “languages in their own right with an independent structure” (Romaine, 1994, p.164).

Some creoles, however, are based on an influential regional lingua franca. The Baba-Nyonya Malay and Chitty Malay are spoken by the Baba-Nyonya (or Peranakan) and Chitty (not to be confused with the Chetty or Chettiar community in Tamilnadu, India) communities respectively, in Malaysia. They have a substantial Malay influence. These creoles also originated from Malacca which was once a prosperous country and had a port which served as a magnet for traders from different parts of the world.

The ancestors of the Baba- Nyonya were early Chinese traders who had married local Malay women and adopted the latter’s cultural customs (D’Oliviero, 2007). The Malay they speak is a mixture of colloquial Malay and mostly Hokkien (De Silva, 2007b). Between 1899 and the 1940s, they even had a vast repertoire of pantuns, syairs and dondang saying using Romanized Malay (Choo Ming, 2004). Most of them are not Muslim unlike the majority Malay-speaking people.

Similarly the Chitty community which comprises the descendants of early Hindu immigrants to Melaka (who had married native Malay women and adopted the latter’s way of life) continues to use Chitty Malay which is Malay with a strong Tamil influence in terms of its syntax. Unfortunately the Chitty community is poorly documented (Ramachandran, 2007) and their Creole has not been studied with much enthusiasm. The two Creole communities do not practice Islam as Malays do. But there is a common language bond.

History of Malacca

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Malacca, though small in size, is big in history and rich in culture. It is the state which can boast of a unique community speaking 16th century Portuguese (Ramachandran, 2007). It was founded by a fleeing Hindu prince from Sumatra (in Indonesia) sometime in 1402/03 (Preston, 1972). The small settlement that he founded and named after the *melaka* tree that he rested under, went on to become a very busy port attracting traders from all over the globe, including traders from China, India, Italy and France. To the Europeans it was even known as the Venice of the East (Lee, 2007). It established itself as an empire and a centre of Islam.

The Portuguese, a colonial superpower at the time wanted to covet Malacca, primarily for two reasons: for trade expansion and combating Islamic influence so that they could proselytize the local populace to their Christian faith.

The first Portuguese arrived in Malacca in 1509 when Sultan Mahmud Shah was the king. The Portuguese succeeded in capturing Malacca in 1511 due to a combination of several factors: their naval superiority, the sneaking out of vital defense information and complicity from disgruntled non-Muslim traders (Preston, 1972).

Following the colonization of Malacca by Portugal, beginning in 1511, the European Portuguese men were provided with incentives to encourage them to marry native women. This created what was known as the *casado* class, i.e. European Portuguese legally married to local women (Baxter and de Silva, 2004).

According to a policy introduced by the first governor of Portuguese territories in India, Alfonso de Albuquerque, the *casado* enjoyed a range of privileges. Intermarriage was promoted to increase the Portuguese population and the number of Christians residing in Malacca. The governor of Malacca too officially encouraged his men to marry women of Asian descent. This gave rise to an indigenous Eurasian community (Preston, 1972). When the Dutch captured Malacca from the Portuguese in 1641, the new European colonizers allowed the Portuguese prisoners who wanted to continue living in Malacca to continue doing so.

The Portuguese occupation of Malacca continued for about 130 years. It came to an end through the dominance of the more powerful Dutch. The Dutch ruled Malacca from 1641 until 1795, a rule lasting more than 150 years.

Eurasian Dutch?

One might be curious to know if there is a Malaccan Dutch community similar to the Portuguese community in Malacca and other parts of Malaysia. Surprisingly, there is no Dutch settlement akin to the Portuguese Settlement despite one-and-a-half centuries of occupation. But there are a few hundred Eurasians of Dutch origin in the country and they are recognized by their Dutch surnames such as Westerhout, Van Huizen and Janz (De Silva, 2007). According to Anis Ramli (2007), there are a few Malaysian Eurasian descendants of the Dutch living in Malacca.

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The Dutch belonged to the Protestant denomination of Christianity. Unlike the Portuguese, the Dutch were not too keen about converting the locals and therefore did not interfere with the people's freedom to practice their own religions (Preston, 1972). While the Portuguese did not tolerate non-Christian establishments, the Dutch practiced a multi-religious policy (*New Straits Times*, July 25, 2007, p.7). This is reminiscent of present Dutch tolerance and accommodation of people from various backgrounds and denominations. The Dutch have left their mark in the form of the Dutch Square which houses famous buildings such as the Stadhuys town hall and Christ Church.

Kristang (Portuguese Creole)

The Malaccan Portuguese Creole or Kristang, as the Creole has come to be widely known is a significantly minority Creole. According to a 77- year old Kristang elder, the language is a combination of Old Portuguese and local languages (De Silva 2007). It has a substantial Malay syntax and vocabulary. The vocabulary is also derived from Malay, Chinese and Indian languages to varying degrees.

This Creole is spoken chiefly in Malacca, the second smallest state in multicultural Malaysia, by a very small Catholic community comprising people of mixed Portuguese and Asian ancestry in Malaysia and neighboring Singapore.

This community has been allocated their own settlement in Malacca to live in, so as to be able to preserve their unique traditions and way of life. The Creole is also spoken by the descendants of the Malaccan Portuguese community elsewhere in several cities in Malaysia, where a very small number of Kristang users live.

Outside this region, some Malacca Portuguese Creole is spoken by the Diaspora in the United Kingdom and Australia. The language is chiefly spoken. There are very few publications in the language to help non-Kristangs who wish to be familiar with the language. There is, however, an invaluable Kristang-English dictionary which had been compiled by Baxter and de Silva (2004). There is also a very helpful phrasebook by Marbeck (2004). She has also come out with *Lingu Mai*, a collection of prose, songs and poems.

Haayatul Izzah (2007) reports that the Kristang language is not the language of choice of the young people in the Portuguese Settlement. It is not a school language, unlike Bahasa Malaysia (BM) and English. The younger generation of Kristangs does not see much benefit in using Kristang, compared to the aforementioned influential languages in Malaysia. One has the status of the national language of the country and the language of wider contact in the ASEAN region. The other is the window to the world.

At home, the younger Kristangs are not able to understand what the older ones say. So the latter find it necessary to code switch between Kristang and BM/English. In the religious domain, the Creole is used in church services to maintain their Christian Catholic identity and heritage.

Lexical Items

This Malaccan Portuguese Creole is a language which has evolved from contacts between speakers of Portuguese and speakers of local and non-local languages (Baxter and de Silva, 2004). There are numerous lexical items of Portuguese origin and varieties of Portuguese Creole as spoken in some parts of India which were under Portuguese rule, for instance, Goa and Cochin along the Malabar Coast in Kerala, southern India. There are also many vocabulary items from the languages the Portuguese colonialists came into contact with. Kristang has borrowed not only words from older varieties of Portuguese, Malay, the dominant language of the region, but also loan words from English, Dutch, Persian, Hindi and Tamil. Please refer to Shamimah (2006) for a good discussion on loan words.

Grammar and Phonology

The grammar and phonology of Kristang show identical Malay structure and influence, besides some influence of the major Asian languages used at the time in Malacca during its glorious days as an empire. For example, the noun phrase word order is the same as that in Malay: *achar chili* ‘pickles + chilli’ and *cha tal* ‘tea + plain’. In the Malay noun phrase structure, the noun precedes the adjective, unlike in English where the adjective comes before the noun, for example: ‘chilli pickles’ and ‘plain tea’.

Description of Kristang

Spelling and Pronunciation

Marbeck (2004, p.15) describes the pronunciation system of Kristang briefly as follows:

1. The < c > represents the sound < ch > as in ‘chapel’ and ‘campur’ in BM.
2. The < sy > represents the sound < sh > as in ‘ship’ and ‘syariah’ in BM and Arabic.
3. The < ng > represents the same sound as in ‘bring’, ‘mangga’ in BM and ‘mangai’ in Tamil.
4. The < h > following all verbs and final stressed syllables, brings about a difference in pronunciation and meaning, e.g. *kaza* is ‘house’, while *kazah* is ‘to marry’.

Vocabulary

Baxter and de Silva (2004) acknowledge that the large majority of the Malacca Portuguese Creole vocabulary originates from older varieties of Portuguese together with contributions from Malay and other languages. The language description that follows and the examples are largely from Baxter and de Silva:

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Malay-derived Items

The following are some of the Kristang words which are attributed to the Malay language and their meaning in English. Many of them are unique to the local situation or conditions. The Kristang word is followed by the Malay word as it is used today: *ampas-hampas*, ‘dregs of coconut’, *amis – hamis*, ‘fishy smell’, *anyutu- hanyut*, ‘adrift (of boats)’, *blacan- belacan*, ‘shrimp paste’, *bokras- buah keras*, ‘a kind of nut’, *chaching - cacing*, ‘worm (used for fishing)’, *changkol - cangkul*, ‘hoe’, *chicha-cicak*, ‘house lizard’, *chinchau- cincau*, *kacak- kacak* ‘handsome’ ‘black jelly’, *kerang - kerang*, ‘cockle’, *kuachi- kuaci*, ‘dried watermelon seed’, *labalaba- laba-laba*, ‘spider’, *laoh- lauk*, ‘any food to go with rice’, *memang- memang*, ‘certainly’, *pagar-pagar*, ‘fence’, *prau – perahu*, ‘boat’, *pun –pun*, ‘also’, *rebang- reban*, ‘enclosure for animals’, *sengaja- sengaja*, ‘purposely’, *suku – suku*, ‘a quarter’, *tongkah- tongkat*, ‘walking stick’, *bambu- bambu*, ‘bamboo’, *dodol- dodol*, ‘glutinous rice’, *jambu- jambu*, ‘guava’, *kaladi- keladi*, ‘yam’, *goni- guni*, ‘jute sack’, *bangsal- bangsal*, ‘shelter comprising posts and roof’, *jarring bawal- jarring bawal*, ‘deep-sea fishing net’ and *ampeh- ampai*, ‘jellyfish’. It can be observed that there is also some orthographic and phonological similarity between Malay and Kristang.

Contribution of Indian Languages

The following are some Kristang words which are believed to be from some Indian languages. The words in the Indian languages and their meaning in English follow those of the Kristang words: *kari- kari* (Tamil) ‘curry’, *kondeh- kondey* (Tamil), ‘hair-bun’, *kanji- kanji* (Tamil), ‘porridge’, *mangga- mankay* (Tamil), ‘mango’, *saguati- saughat* (Hindi), ‘gift’, *surami- xrambi* (Malayalam), ‘verandah’, *tata- thatha* (Tamil) ‘grandfather’, *vindalu- vindaloo* (Hindi), ‘a type of curry dish’, *baruah- barua* (Hindi), ‘pimp’, *bazaar- bazaar* (Hindi), ‘market’, *cha- chai* (Hindi), ‘tea’, *chunamu- chunambu* (Tamil), ‘lime’, *churutu- surutu* (Tamil), ‘cigar’, *kuli- koolie* (Tamil), ‘laborer’, and *kachu- katchu* (Tamil), ‘piece of loincloth’.

Contribution of Chinese Languages

The following are some Kristang words which may be traced to certain Chinese languages. The Kristang words are followed by the Chinese words and their meaning in English: *aloleng- leng tsu* (Hokkien), ‘lantern’, *fachi-fai chi* (Cantonese), ‘chopsticks’, *kolau- kou lau* (Cantonese), ‘open air restaurant’, *munggu- mung* (Hokkien), ‘a type of bean’ *supu- sup* (Cantonese), ‘a tray made of bamboo strips’, *chakiah- khiak* (Hakka), ‘wooden clogs’, *chengsi- chien si* (Hokkien), ‘spatula’ and *epiah- a pia* (Hokkien), ‘a kind of Chinese cake’.

Dutch Contribution

Kristang has also borrowed from Dutch and English, two naval colonial powers. The following are some loan words believed to be from Dutch. The Dutch words and their

English meaning follow the Kristang words: *kakus- kakhuis*, ‘toilet’ (incidentally the word *kakus* is also found in colloquial Tamil), *kelda- kelder*, ‘ tombstone’, *klompu-klomp*, ‘clogs’, *kofi- koffie*, ‘coffee’, *lachi- laajtje*, ‘drawer’, *loi- lui*, ‘lazy’, *striki- strijk*, ‘iron for ironing clothes’, *stroi- strooien*, ‘confetti’, *floi- fluit*, ‘flute’, *ploi- plooi*, ‘wrinkles’, *loi- lui*, ‘lazy’, *niches- netjes*, ‘pretty’, *stal-stal*, ‘stable’ and *tanta- tante*, ‘auntie’.

English Contribution

There are numerous English words in Kristang. Just a few examples and their English equivalents follow: *ketal-*‘kettle’, *kobra-* ‘cobra’, *konsidah-*‘ consider’, *konventu-*‘convent’, *kopral-*‘ corporal’, *limiti-*‘ limit’, *minitu-* ‘minute’ (of time), *muskitu-*‘mosquito’, *ospital-*‘ hospital’, *pailot-*‘ pilot’, *palasu-* ‘palace’ *saspan-* ‘saucepan’, *inchi-* ‘inch’, *namba-* ‘number’, *paip-* ‘pipe’, *relwe-* ‘railway’, *sen-* ‘cent’, *saportah-*‘support’, *taun-* ‘town’, and *teila-* ‘tailor’

Mutual influence between Kristang and Malay

The influence of Kristang, and indirectly Portuguese vocabulary on Malay is also present. The Malay words which follow may be traced to the former. The Kristang/Portuguese words appear first, followed by their Malay counterparts and their meaning in English: *mantega- mentega*, ‘butter’; *meza- meja*, ‘desk’ and ‘table’; *nona- nona*, ‘young woman’; *pasu- pasu*, ‘earthenware pot’; *Sabdu- Sabtu*, ‘Saturday’; *saku- saku*, ‘pocket’ and ‘pouch’; *skola- sekolah*, ‘school’; *tempu- tempuh*, ‘time’ and ‘duration’; *tuala- tuala*, towel; *marka- markah*, examination marks; *falsu- palsu*, false; *kareta- kereta*, ‘car’ and ‘cart’; *pena- pena*, ‘pen’; *rondah- ronda*, ‘to patrol’, *Natal- Natal*, ‘Christmas’ and *festa- pesta*, ‘festival’.

Homograph

There are many words in both languages which are spelt the same, but mean different things. The following illustrate the difference. The meaning in Kristang is given before the one in Malay: *pedas*: ‘a piece,’ ‘spicy’; *ratu*: ‘mouse’, ‘queen’; *rayu*: ‘wicked’, ‘appeal’; *restu*: ‘rest’, ‘approval’; *rendah*: ‘to make lace’, ‘low in height’; *siar*: ‘plank’, ‘1. to announce 2.to go for a walk’; *riba*: ‘above’, ‘financial interest’ and *rumah*: ‘to arrange’, ‘house’.

Polysemy

Some Kristang words are polysemous, for example: *koitadu*. This word can be used as an adjective to mean ‘unfortunate’. It can be also used as a transitive verb having the meaning of ‘to feel pity for’. Thirdly, it also can be used as an interjection: ‘poor fellow!’ Some words may be used as different word classes, for example: *justu* may be used as an adjective meaning ‘fair’ or as an adverb, to mean ‘just’ or ‘only’. Other examples we may add to the above are *sunyah* which has the following meanings: ‘to dream’ and ‘to plant’;

sonu: ‘a dream’ and ‘sleepy’. The word *nuibu*, for instance, surprisingly refers to all the three meanings that follow: ‘boyfriend’, ‘fiance’ and ‘bridegroom’.

Grammar

Kristang has parts of speech and tense system akin to English. For example, it has a wide range of pronouns similar to English- personal, possessive, demonstrative, relative, interrogative and indefinite pronouns. Their adverb system is also close to English. So is their adjective system which comprises the three degrees of comparison. The number of conjunctive expressions seems to be limited. The Kristang tense system is almost equivalent to English (please refer to Marbeck, 2004a, for a detailed treatment of its grammar).

Gender

Gender in Kristang is indicated by the letter <a> and <u> at the end of the relevant words, for example: *amiga* is ‘a girl friend’, while *amigu* is ‘a boy friend’; *bela* is ‘an old woman’, whereas *belu* is ‘an old man’; *prima* is ‘a female cousin’, while *primu* is ‘a male cousin’, *sogra* means mother-in-law, but *sogru* is father-in-law, *subrinya* refers to a ‘niece’ while *subrinyu* to a ‘nephew’. The gender is sometimes indicated variously as in *krensa machu* which is a ‘baby boy’, whereas *krensa femu* is a ‘baby girl’. *Asentidor* is a ‘male comedian’, but *asentidera* is a ‘female comedian’.

Pronoun

The Kristang pronoun *eli* represents all the following: he, she, it, him and her. This is similar to *dia* in Malay which represents all the aforementioned pronouns. The pronoun does not differentiate the gender. There is *bos* ‘a singular you’ and *bolotodu* ‘a plural you’ similar to the French *tu* ‘singular you’ and *vous* ‘plural you’.

Plural forms

As in Malay, pluralization is done by duplication, for example: *femi*- girl, *femi-femi*-girls, and also by indicating the plural number before the noun as in *tres prau* ‘three boats’ (in Malay, *tiga perahu*).

Word Order

Baxter and de Silva (2004) state that the grammar of Kristang shows considerable Malay influence. The word order of Kristang in a sentence is similar to Malay as it is in English. It follows the subject-verb-object order, for example:

Francis teng tres prau.

Francis has three boats.

Peter gostah kleh olu ku femi-femi

Peter likes to wink at girls

Eli ta bai Jasin.

He/She (is) going to Jasin.

Maria yo sa amurazu.

Maria (is) my love.

Kristang does not seem to have a copula 'is' and 'are' which is characteristic of Malay, as exemplified in two of the sentences above.

Angela sa andasang mal.

Angela has intentions bad.

The above sentence follows Malay word order, but the following sentence differs from Malay word order, however:

Yo sa mai idadi

My +mother + (is) old.

In Malay, the sentence will have the following word order: mother + my + old, for example, *ibu saya tua*.

In Malay, the noun comes before the pronoun, for example: *ibu saya* (mother + my). So if the Kristang example were to follow Malay grammar, in this case, it would have been

Mai yo sa idadi.

Deictic behavior follows English, for example, *Akeh kaza yo sa*, translated as 'that house (is) mine'. In Malay, it would be *Rumah itu milik saya*: house + that + (is) mine. For additional treatment of Kristang grammar, please also refer to Baxter (1988).

Maintenance

Maintaining Kristang is no easy task because of the decreasing numbers of active Kristang speakers due to migration overseas, intermarriage with numerically superior and hugely influential nationalities and leaving the Portuguese Settlement to live and work in other parts of Malaysia. To maintain the language in some form, the current Malay-derived orthography could be very helpful. It could have considerable appeal because written Malay is understood by many literate people not only in Malaysia, but also in other Malay-speaking countries.

The Kristangs have undertaken some determined and sustained attempts to ensure the survival of the language and their heritage. This is being carried out at the personal as well as community level through the Internet and reading materials.

Joan Marbeck, a former teacher, has been passionately trying to revitalize Kristang. She has set up her own homepage (<http://www.joanmarbeck.net>) to convey very useful information on this Creole and its speakers. She has produced three Kristang

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publications: *Ungu Adanza* (An Inheritance) *Linggu Mai* (Mother Tongue) and the Kristang Phrasebook. She has also come out with the Kristang Speech and Song Compact Disc. She is credited with writing, probably the only play in Kristang, called *Seng Marianne* 'Without Marianne' (Su Aziz, 2007). She has also staged a Kristang musical 'Kazamintu no Praiya' which translates to 'Wedding on the Beach', in conjunction with the *Amazing Malaysians 2007* project for which she had been selected in recognition of her singular efforts to create awareness about the Kristang culture and language. The Malacca Portuguese Eurasian Association (MPEA) maintains an excellent website, providing essential information on various aspects of the community (<http://www.geocities.com/TheTropics/Paradise/9221>).

Many other websites on the Kristang people and their activities are also available. Patrick de Silva of the Portuguese Settlement has published an invaluable Kristang-English dictionary (2004) together with Baxter from the University of Macau. This dictionary has supplied the present researcher with critical information related to the language features of the Malacca Portuguese Creole. A conference themed *SAVE OUR PORTUGUESE HERITAGE* was held in 1995 in Malacca. The proceedings of the conference have been compiled and edited by Gerard Fernandis of the Portuguese Settlement.

Haja Mohideen (2007) has suggested a few measures that minority communities can do to safeguard their languages which are in danger of possible extinction. Among those the Kristang community may consider:

- 1) a change in attitude on the part of the youths in accepting the view that all languages are intrinsically and linguistically equal to one another,
- 2) practicing functional bilingualism/ multilingualism in a multilingual and multicultural country like Malaysia where every group has its space, and
- 3) promoting linguistic and cultural ties with countries which use Portuguese and with fellow Kristang speakers who live elsewhere.

The community could heed the advice of a prominent linguist for those concerned with their language's survival. Speakers of potentially endangered languages ought to try to enhance their prestige within the dominant community, increase their prosperity relative to the dominant community, expand their legitimate power in the presence of the dominant community, ensure a strong presence in the educational system and utilize technology to make the language continually visible (Crystal, 2000).

Conclusions

The Portuguese Eurasian community in Malacca is not a truly homogeneous Malaysian group because they do not only have Portuguese blood, but also the blood of the major ethnic groups in the country, namely Malay, Chinese, Indian and other Malaysians. They also somehow seem to be anachronistic in Malaysia today. One might wonder if they are more like a hangover from the colonial past. They may, unfortunately, not be able to

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maintain their unique identity for too long, given present day realities which are influenced by powerful migration, social, educational, economic and political factors. The Baba Nyonya (also known as the Straits Chinese), another Creole community of mixed descent, are also 'gradually losing their identity, as education and jobs take the young people away from their closely-knit community' (De Silva, 2007b). The Chitty Malay, another fellow Creole speaking community has found its people leaving their settlement for living elsewhere, better educational opportunities and career prospects. Some have even left the country (De Silva, 2000c).

If those concerned, among the Kristang community and relevant authorities, do not make serious efforts to strengthen, perpetuate and popularize the community's culture and way of life, the country could very well lose, forever, a priceless heritage it has had with it for hundreds of years, five hundred years no less.

Without malice, the present researchers are compelled to come to the conclusion that Kristang might become history in Malaysia if the Kristangs do not undertake additional, determined, dedicated and fervent steps to retain Kristang as their language of choice in the private domain, to be used as the home language, with the neighbors, for religious activities and community gatherings.

Unfortunately, the Kristang community is too small and scattered in various parts of the country to undertake a massive effort to sustain it for very long.

One can infer from the Regedor's (headman) response that Kristang is not a preferred language of the young people in the Settlement since only Malay and English are the school languages (Haayatul 2007). Marbeck (2007) believes that the Kristangs will continue to use English more often together with Malay, both in their personal and professional lives. She reports that "there is this growing awareness and fear that Kristang like many ethnic languages of minority speech communities is an endangered language" (Marbeck, 2004, p. vii). She fervently appeals to the Malaysian Portuguese community to be passionate about saving their native language. She herself is trying to revitalize the Creole by introducing children to the community's dance, drama and music (Chong and Aziz 2007). But the Kristangs face a painful dilemma. They are in a no-win situation. Malay is the country's dominant language. English is a language of great influence in this former British colony, and the language preferred by the elite. The languages and dialects used by the Chinese and the Tamil language are used by a substantial number of fellow Malaysians.

Endangered languages may yet be able to survive, but only in a conducive environment where the community itself is deeply enthusiastic and the state provides massive support. Kristang, realistically, is not a viable language due to its population base which is microscopic, numbering only about twenty thousand for the whole nation and about a thousand in the tiny Portuguese Settlement in Melaka. A handful of publications by a few committed individuals may not be able to secure its future. On an optimistic note, the size of a population by itself may not be a real measure of language endangerment. That is because a particular language may have a small number of users, but otherwise

demonstrate a very high level of language loyalty, whereas another language in spite of having a large number of users may not show much interest in their language. However, as Igboanusí frankly admits, a language with a fewer number of speakers is in a more precarious situation than one with a large base of speakers (2006). Language loyalty is a key factor, but not sufficient in itself to arrest the decline of a language.

Kristang is not an empowered language. The speakers are not people with clout. As Johnstone (2002) ably put it, people who do not have a voice are people without an influential role.

The purpose of the present study is not to paint a pessimistic picture of the future of the Kristang language in Malaysia, but rather to highlight the importance of saving this unique language from possible extinction, preceded by language shift and loss. Marbeck (2007), herself an ardent Kristang activist, admits that Kristang faces the prospect of attrition.

A highly concerted effort by the state government of Melaka can yet save this language and culture from possibly disappearing, by protecting, preserving and promoting their unique Portuguese Settlement which remains as the Kristang heartland and promoting extensively the many cultural activities integral to this Malaccan Portuguese community. This will provide long-term economic spin-offs to the state and country via tourism-related activities. The Kristang community itself should remain united and solve all problems they may have amicably, in the spirit of Kristang solidarity.

All the above are crucial if we Malaysians want to avert the death of the Kristang language, loss of a unique identity, loss of Portuguese flavor of the community and disappearance of a slice of Portugal we have had with us in Malaysia for five long centuries, which is truly a very long time indeed.

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