

Language choice patterns of multilingual speakers in Sebuyau

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Objective of the study

- To examine language choice patterns in inter-ethnic interaction between Iban and Malays in Sebuyau.
- To ascertain whether Iban accommodates to the language of their Malay interlocutors (i.e. Malay language) in interaction or vice versa

Multi-ethnic set-up of Sebuyau town

- Sebuyau is a small coastal town situated at the border between Sri Aman and Simunjan, 63.4 km away from Kuching. It is inhabited mainly by Iban and Malays, and some Chinese traders.
- Population: 15,000; Malay (51.6%); Iban (43.1%); Chinese (3.8%). 15 villages; 61 long houses, and 2 Chinese settlements.
- Iban and Malay villages adjacent to one another. Iban was already in Sebuyau when the Malays came in the 1940's. When the Malays came, the Iban retreated to their respective kampongs.
- Main economic activities in Sebuyau largely fishing and farming. Chinese traders live in town centre or nearer the centre; The Chinese traders can speak Iban as well as the local Malay dialect.
- Market place: main meeting place in Sebuyau town. Economic activities normally take place in the morning.

(Map of Sebuyau town and district of Sebuyau. Scan pictures)

Variables in language choice

- In this study, two main variables are examined :
 - (i) the “interlocutor”- this factor may take precedence over other factors e.g. domain, topic etc. in determining patterns of choice, and
 - (ii) speaker variables: social background of speakers/respondents e.g. age-group, profession, social circles
- In this setting, interaction may be between monolingual and bilingual or between bilinguals, and speakers may engage in code-switching and code-mixing (c.f. Grosjean, 1982; Romaine, 1995). The options open to a bilingual when interacting with a monolingual and when interacting with another bilingual in this multilingual society may be illustrated as in [Fig.1](#) below (adapted from Grosjean,1982:129; c.f. Norazuna, 2010).

Language ability and degree of bilingualism

- 1 = is able to understand some words and isolated phrases (e.g. greetings)
- 2 = is able to understand light conversation and produce simple sentences (e.g. prices of goods in shops) but have difficulty in speaking
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- 3 = is able to partake in casual conversation with ease (usually about domestic topics among friends), and understand light radio programmes (e.g. talk shows, song requests, etc.)
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- 4 = is able to discuss subjects of general public concern (e.g. politics, religion etc.) and can understand quite well what is heard on the news, (where applicable) films and videos.
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- 5 = is able to communicate effectively and with general ease in a range of social contexts, and can understand most of what is delivered on a wide range of topics.

Language repertoire and ability in languages

- The respondents are bilingual in Malay and Iban (and English), albeit to different degrees. That is, a speaker may know one language well, but has passive competency in the other language.
- Older Malay speakers (parent or grandparent generations) are more competent in the Iban language in particular those who work in government offices, or where work brings them to Iban villages. Younger generation Malays are less competent or have passive competency in Iban.
- In contrast, most Iban are competent speakers of the Malay language. Exceptions are older generation Iban in villages particularly women.
- In view of this, Iban is at a disadvantage because they will have to accommodate the Malays in interaction because of the lack of competency in Iban.

Discussion and Preliminary Findings

General observation of language choice patterns of the Sebuyau

- A formal variety of Malay is used in public places and formal setting/social situations e.g. school, in meetings at district office.
- The Iban language and the local Malay variety is spoken in informal social situations such as conversations between friends at coffee shops, school, recreational places, between family members at home, and interactions at the market place.
- The Malay language has greater functions within the community, as the language spoken in formal and informal situations. It is also the most commonly language spoken in inter-ethnic interaction within the community.
- With Chinese interlocutors, Iban and/or a variety of Malay are spoken (by Iban and Malay speakers).
- For ease of interaction with their clients, the Chinese traders in this community also learn to speak the Iban and Malay language.
- In this community, **ease of communication** is a major factor determining language choice patterns. Hence, in inter-ethnic interaction, speakers initially will attempt to identify the ethnic group his or her interlocutors belong to and the common language at their disposal in language choice decision-making.
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Patterns of choice in inter-group interaction

Patterns of choice of Malay with Iban interlocutors from different age-groups

- Generally, competent speakers (Scale 4-5) of the Iban language prefer Iban most of time with Iban interlocutors irrespective of age-groups. The reasons given are for ease of communication, acceptance by Iban communities and job gets done. Malay respondents who are less competent in Iban employ code-switched Iban-Malay patterns or speak Malay in encounters with Iban interlocutors.

Patterns of choice of Iban with Malay interlocutors from different age-groups

- Malay is preferred with Malay interlocutors irrespective of age-groups. An Iban speaker who doesn't speak Malay well (i.e. older generation Iban in villages) speak Iban or Iban-Malay code-switched patterns with Malay interlocutors.
- The patterns of choice in inter-ethnic interaction suggest Iban-Malay multilingualism is "healthy" i.e. Malay or Iban speakers generally do not attempt to assert their language on others.
- The patterns also suggest the Iban language symbolises solidarity with group members . Some Iban respondents reiterated that they prefer the Malay language with Malay interlocutors despite the interlocutor's attempt to speak Iban .

Patterns of choice in inter-group interaction

- Competency affects comfortability in speaking. For that reason, patterns of choice in inter-ethnic interaction are largely dependent on the speakers' competency in the interlocutors' language.
- In view of that, Iban speakers are slightly at a disadvantage because they will have to accommodate to his/her Malay interlocutor's language in interaction. In addition, acquisition of Iban by Malays in this community has deteriorated. In recent times, many younger generation Malays are not competent speakers of Iban. Unlike the olden days, Iban is not critical for daily interaction with its community members because most Iban are competent speakers of the Malay language.

Speaker variable and social symbolism of language

- It is suggested that the use of Malay indicates a rather distant relationship with the interlocutor in Malay-Iban encounters. An ex-teacher informs that despite competent in Iban Iban interlocutors prefer the Malay language in their encounters. He informs he has attempted to speak Iban on several occasions, but Iban speakers spoke Iban to him.



Language attitudes

- In general, multilingualism is perceived positively by community members in Sebuyau. Iban, Malay and Chinese communities express the need to learn each other's languages for ease of communication. Nevertheless, the act of accommodating to the language of Iban interlocutors between peers among younger generation in inter-group interaction may not be perceived positively by Malay speakers.

Iban speakers' attitudes toward own language

- Generally, Iban speakers have positive attitudes toward own language (language loyalty is strong) indicated by their preference to speak Iban with Iban interlocutors. Nonetheless, this positive attitude towards own language may undergo redefinition by younger Iban speakers because of the influence of the school culture which discourages the use of Iban language during class. The argument is that the use of mother tongue may cause interferences in the learning of the national language, which in turn will affect students' performance in the subject. Although there may be some truth in this contention, nonetheless, this culture can be detrimental to mastery of the Iban language by its speakers. The dominance of Malay as a written language may affect the acquisition of writing skills in Iban.