

The Language Ecology of the Kedayan in Sarawak: A Quantitative Survey on Language Sustainability

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ABSTRACT

The Kedayan is one of the ethnic minorities settled in Bekenu, Limbang and Lawas in the state of Sarawak (Malaysia). As an ethnic minority as well as reside in a multilingual environment, the Kedayan language encountered a language contact with other more dominant languages such as Malay, English, local Malay dialect and Iban language. This research is a language ecology study that investigated the interaction of the Kedayan community in contact with the languages that exists in their environment and this is an attempt to describe the social and psychological situation of a language. Based on previous researches, there were no significant studies on the language choice of the ethnic Kedayans in Sarawak. The domain analysis approach proposed by Fishman (1972) was adapted in this study, i.e. the domains of family, friendship, religion, education and employment. A total of 118 respondents (59 youths and 59 elders) were randomly selected in this study. This study revealed that the Kedayan are loyal to their own mother language in the family domain. Outside the circumstance of family domain, the Sarawak Malay dialect is used broadly in interethnic and intraethnic interactions. This finding has found that the Kedayan language is well maintained presently. The sustainability of this language is closely related to the positive attitude of the Kedayan speakers towards their mother tongue and it is used broadly in interlocutions, particularly in family domain.

Key word : Language ecology, Kedayan, Language choice, Domains analysis

Introduction

The terms “language ecology” was first introduced in Einar Haugen’s (1971/72) work. He defined this term as “...the study of interactions between any given language and its environment...The ecology of a language is partly psychological, partly sociological, and is determined primarily by the people who learn it, use it, and transmit it to others”. In other words, this approach is closely related to the scope of language use in society. According to Creese and Martin (2003) as cited in Blackedge, 2008, “An ecological approach to language in society requires investigation of the relationship of languages to each other, to the speakers of those lan-

guages, and to the social structures in the society in which the languages are spoken”. The notion of language ecology includes the following: (i) language evolution as the study and description of multilingual interaction, (ii) language environment as the inter relationships between the speakers, interlocutors and other factors in the environment, and (iii) counteracting language endangerment or language maintenance as the ultimate goal of discovering language choice and language policy (Christoffersen, 2013).

Indeed, Hornberger’s framework has contributed a clear guideline and broaden the scope for the studies of language ecology in contemporary times. For the case of Kedayans in Sarawak (Malaysia), like

other minority communities (e.g. Penan, Punan, Lun Bawang, Bintulu etc.), the rapid expansion of schools, communication networks and new roads in Sarawak has impacted the local communities. In addition, the dispersal area of the Kedayans' environment are affected by multi lingualism and this influenced their language in terms of vitality and language shifting. Hence, this paper attempts to diagnose empirically the degree of the sustainability of the Kedayan language by applying Fishman's (1972) domain framework.

The Backgrounds and Research Objective

In Sarawak, the Kedayans dispersal area is at the Northern part of Sarawak, particularly in Bekenu, Miri, Limbang and Lawas. This ethnic group originated from Brunei Darussalam since they form prominent ethnic group in the interior and up-country of Brunei (Sandin, 1980). In Brunei, the Kedayan are also known as *Bansa Brunei Darat*. According to oral mythology, this ethnic group originated from Jawa (Julayhi Tani, 1991). For the Kedayan community in northern Sarawak, the Sibuti and Bekenu sub-district are their main distribution areas. The settlement of the Kedayans in Sibuti district began around 90 years ago as soon as Haji Abdul Gapor was bestowed the title *Penghulu Kaum Kedayan* by the Sultan of Brunei. Since this area is a fertile agricultural land, Sibuti later became the major centre for the Kedayans (Sandin, 1980). Around 60 years ago, this tribe began to disperse to other nearby regions, for example in Nyalau, Bintulu (Sater and Hatta, 1974) and nowadays, most of the populations in the area between Miri and Bintulu are Kedayans. In 2010 *Sarawak Statistics Year Book*, the total population of the Kedayans in Sarawak are 16,478 persons. Among them, 5,334 or 32.4% of them resides in the sub-district of Sibuti.

According to Asmah (1988), Kedayan language is the branch of the Malayic subgroup. Overall, this language is commonly recognised as "Malay dialect" and is a reported mutual intelligible, especially with the Brunei Malay dialect speakers (Amde Sidik, 2007). However, based on Jaludin Chuchu's (2003) study, the Kedayan and Brunei Malay dialect exhibited certain phonological differences, for example in Brunei Malay dialect, the Proto Malayic phoneme *h reflects as: /ø/ in initial word position, retained as /h/ in medial and final position. In Kedayan, this proto phoneme seems retained as /h/ either in the initial, medial or final position of a

word. The glottal stop phoneme // is identified and existed at the final position of a word in Brunei Malay dialect and as /ø/ in Kedayan. In Sarawak, the Kedayan language is categorized as an unwritten indigenous language. As a result, the minority indigenous language, was documented by the *Dewan Bahasa and Pustaka* with the publication of *Daftar Kata Melayu-Kedayan* (2016). Indeed, apart from language documentation, other efforts such as sociolinguistic survey is crucially needed due to the lack of in-depth resources concerning the degree of language shift in this community.

Based on previous literatures, there are a huge area of imbalance between the sociolinguistic study of the Kedayan and other indigenous tribes in Sarawak. For example, the study of Bidayuh (Norazuna, 2010), Narom (Sa'adiah, 2011), Penan (Chong *et al.*, 2018) and Melanau (Habibu *et al.*, 2017) were carried out intensively. Meanwhile, the interaction of Kedayans with their multilingual language ecology remains unstudied. Based on this problem statement, a study has been carried out in Bekenu (See Fig. 1), Sarawak to investigate and identify the issues of language choices, language vitality and sustainability.



Fig. 1. The research site at Bekenu, Sarawak

Theoretical Framework

A domain is a socio-cultural construct abstracted from topics of communication, relationships between communicators and locales of communication in accord with the institutions of a society (Fishman, 1972). This study will apply Fishman's domain framework to study the language choices of the Kedayan speakers in Bekenu. The advantages of this approach according to Winford (2003) are: "...domain analysis has provided much insight into the

general patterns of language choice in bilingual communities. The concept provides a link between the micro-level organization of society, with its “socio-cultural norms and expectations,” and the micro-level organization of language use manifested in “individual behavior at the level of face-to-face verbal encounters”. Table 1 below is the domain proposed by Fishman and Greenfield (1970) in their study on the Puerto Rican communities in New York City. In their study, five domains were applied, namely the domain of family, friendship, religion, education and employment. Their study revealed that domains played important roles to determine the choices of Spanish and English among the Puerto Rican communities in New York. For example, Spanish was used in the family, friendship, and religion domains while English was used widely in education and at workplace.

Table 1. The domains of language choice (Fishman and Greenfield, 1970)

Domain	Participants	Location
Family	Family members	Home
Friendship	Friends	Library
Religion	Preacher	Church
Education	Teacher	School
Employment	Worker	Place of employment

In this paper, the authors applied the same framework to study the Kedayan community in Sarawak. Due to most of the Kedayans are Muslims, a slight adjustment is made on the domain of religion.

Methodology

This research is a quantitative survey on the issues of language use and choice. A set of questionnaire was constructed to investigate the attitude of the Kedayans toward their own mother tongue and the languages present at their surrounding area. Altogether, 118 respondents were interviewed and they were asked to choose the languages commonly used in daily communication, based on the domains. The identified languages in this community are: Kedayan language, Sarawak Malay dialect, Standard Malay language and Iban language. Since the Kedayans are multilingual speakers, the questionnaire also has additional columns of: “*Kedayan lan-*

guage + Sarawak Malay dialect”, “*Kedayan language + Iban language*” and “*Kedayan language + Malay language*”.

The respondents of this research were selected by using the method of random sampling. However, the total number of selected respondents were restricted by the age and gender variables. For the age variable, we focus on two categories of age, namely the youths between 7-39 years old and the elder respondents whose age are above 40 years old. Aside from focus on quantitative method in securing data, this study also carried out observations and interviews to collect the information about the history and background of the Kedayan community.

Results and Discussion

This section analysed and described the language choices of the Kedayans in Bekenu. The section is divided into five different sub-sections based on the studied domains.

The Family Domain

The family domain refers to the language used among the family members, especially at home. The communications in this domain includes the conversation between the parents and their children, husband and wife, grand children and grand parents and etc. Based on the sample studied, Table 2 below indicated that 68.64% of the Kedayan respondents chose Kedayan language in the family domain; the rest of the respondents chose Kedayan language + Sarawak Malay dialect (16.10%); Sarawak Malay dialect (10.17%); Kedayan language + Iban language (4.24%); and, 0.85% chose Kedayan language + Malay language.

The high percentage of Kedayan language exhibited in the family domain has indicated that the Kedayans are loyal to their own mother tongue. However, the presence of mixed marriage cases between the Kedayans and other ethnic groups, as well as the dominant Sarawak Malay dialect throughout the state has triggered 10.17 % of the use of the Sarawak Malay dialect in this community. It is observed that this dialect is broadly used by the younger generation in daily communication.

The Friendship Domain

The friendship domain in this context refers to the language used by the respondents when interacting with their friends, for example at the football field,

coffee shops and etc. In the friendship domain, the form of interactions are interethnic and intra-ethnic, among the Kedayan and between them, the other ethnic groups. Table 3 indicated that 51.59% of the respondents choose "Kedayan language + Sarawak Malay dialect" when interacting with their close friends.

From the statistics in Table 3, we notice that the Sarawak Malay dialect was used simultaneously with the Kedayan language, either by the youths or the older respondents. This proves that although Sarawak Malay dialect is dominant in the friendship domain, the Kedayans still maintains their mother tongue, and is used regularly with their friends from the same ethnic group.

The Religion Domain

In religion domain, the analysis focused on the language use and choice at the *Makan Tahun* annual feast. In Table 4, we noticed that 40.86% of the respondents use Kedayan language + Sarawak Malay dialect in this traditional feast. Among them, 35.59% of the respondents chose Kedayan language; 20.34 of respondents chose Kedayan language + Malay language; 1.69% of the respondents chose Sarawak Malay dialect and the use of Standard Malay and Iban language is not significant in this context.

Based on the researcher's observation in this ritual, the Kedayans speak Kedayan language during the preparation of the *Makan Tahun* ritual. On the day of the feast, Sarawak Malay dialect and Kedayan language is commonly used especially to guests from different ethnic backgrounds.

The Education Domain

In Malaysia, Standard Malay language is the national language and the policy of national language is implemented in all sectors, e.g. in formal education, government agencies, private sectors etc. At the same time, English also plays an important role in the Malaysia society. In this study, the education domain refers to the uses of language in school classroom, among the students, and between the student and their teachers. Table 5 indicated 41.53% of the respondents in school choose "Kedayan language + Sarawak Malay dialect" when they interact with their friends. 23.73% of them choose Standard Malay language, 18.64% of the respondents choose Kedayan language, 9.32% used Kedayan language + Malay language, and 6.78% choose Sarawak Malay dialect.

In this table, the Standard Malay variety has a high percentage of use in the education domain due to the reason that this variety is a national language

Table 2. Language choices in family domain

Choice of language	Younger generation (59)	Older generation (59)	Total (118)	
Kedayan language	35	46	81	68.64%
Sarawak Malay dialect	7	5	12	10.17%
Iban language	0	0	0	0.00%
Malay language	0	0	0	0.00%
Kedayan language + Sarawak Malay dialect	11	8	19	16.10%
Kedayan language + Iban language	5	0	5	4.24%
Kedayan language + Malay language	1	0	1	0.85%

Table 3. Language choices in friendship domain

Choice of language	Younger generation (59)	Older generation (59)	Total (118)	
Kedayan language	15	25	40	33.90%
Sarawak Malay dialect	0	0	0	0.00%
Iban language	0	0	0	0.00%
Malay language	0	0	0	0.00%
Kedayan language + Sarawak Malay dialect	30	31	61	51.69%
Kedayan language + Iban language	1	0	1	0.85%
Kedayan language + Malay language	13	3	16	13.56%

and is compulsory to be used in the formal education system in Malaysia. In addition, some of the teachers who teach in this school are from Peninsular Malaysia. Since they are not fluent in local dialects, the Standard Malay was chosen as their main interaction language with the locals.

Language Choice in Employment Domain

The domain of employment in this context refers to the language choice in employment. In general, the Kedayans in Bekenu are farmers. However, many of them also work in the government agencies and private sectors. Table 6 indicated that 40.68% of the respondents stated that they use Kedayan language + Sarawak Malay dialect at work, 24.58% of the respondents chose Kedayan language, 16.10% chose Sarawak Malay dialect, 12.71% chose Malay lan-

guage and 5.93% chose Kedayan language + Malay language for communication.

The results of this research found that the Kedayan language + Sarawak Malay dialect was used in the government and private sectors by the Kedayans. It is interesting to note that the Kedayan language is conversely used in traditional jobs, namely in farming.

Conclusion

Based on Fishman's domain analysis (1972) framework, this study has summarised that the Kedayans in Bekenu, Sarawak are still loyal to their mother tongue as the family domain gains the highest percentage of language uses. The family can be considered as the starting point for sustaining a language.

Table 4. Language choice in religion domain

Choice of language	Younger generation (59)	Older generation (59)	Total (118)	
Kedayan language	12	30	42	35.59%
Sarawak Malay dialect	2	0	2	1.69%
Iban language	0	0	0	0.00%
Malay language	1	0	1	0.85%
Kedayan language + Sarawak Malay dialect	25	23	48	40.68%
Kedayan language + Iban language	1	0	1	0.85%
Kedayan language + Malay language	18	6	24	20.34%

Table 5. Language choice in education domain

Choice of language	Younger generation (59)	Older generation (59)	Total (118)	
Kedayan language	2	20	22	18.64%
Sarawak Malay dialect	5	3	8	6.78%
Iban language	0	0	0	0.00%
Malay language	21	7	28	23.73%
Kedayan language + Sarawak Malay dialect	20	29	49	41.53%
Kedayan language + Iban language	0	0	0	0.00%
Kedayan language + Malay language	11	6	11	9.32%

Table 6. Language choice in employment domain

Choice of language	Younger generation (59)	Older generation (59)	Total (118)	
Kedayan language	2	30	29	24.58%
Sarawak Malay dialect	14	5	19	16.10%
Iban language	0	0	0	0.00%
Malay language	10	4	15	12.71%
Kedayan language + Sarawak Malay dialect	29	17	48	40.68%
Kedayan language + Iban language	0	0	0	0.00%
Kedayan language + Malay language	4	3	7	5.93%

In other words, the survival of a language largely depends on the language attitudes of family members. As Sarawak Malay dialect is the lingua franca of Sarawak, we can conclude that this dialect is widely used by the Kedayans in the friendship, religion, education and employment domains. However, the status of Kedayan language seems important for the Kedayans despite the fact that Sarawak Malay dialect is the prominent lingua franca throughout the state. Indeed, it is still far too early to conclude that the competency of younger generation in Sarawak Malay dialect is a sign of language lost in this community. In short, the finding of this study has opened a wider research opportunity for further study on the Kedayan in the future.

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