

LANGUAGE-ETHNIC IDENTITY LINK FOR CHINESE SPEAKERS IN SARAWAK



Ethnicity has been viewed as inherited characteristic, expressed through speaking the ethnic language or through other symbols, such as cuisine and physical appearance (Fishman, 1977). In the literature on language shift and maintenance, ethnic identity has been cited as one of the main forces maintaining the use of the ethnic language in the speech community. This study examined the internal criteria for ethnic group membership in the Foochow, Hokkien and Hakka speech communities, focusing on the link between language and ethnic identity. Data on their language attitudes and language use in various domains were collected using questionnaires, interviews and observations. The study involved 280 Foochow speakers in the Sibuh and Kuching region, and so far 50 Hokkien and 31 Hakka speakers in Kuching have been included in the study. The results indicated that while the older generation (aged 50 and above) may view the ethnic language as an integral component of their ethnic identity, it is not shared by the younger generation. The expression “a Foochow who cannot speak Foochow” exemplifies the view that membership in the Chinese sub-group is inherited and does not have to be earned through proficiency in the language. Signs of a supra-Chinese identity are emerging among the younger members of the Chinese speech community brought up with Mandarin as the first language. Whether the blurred dialectal distinctions among the younger Chinese could lead to greater cohesion in the sociocultural and political sense remains to be investigated.

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