

Capturing language choice patterns of communities undergoing language shift: A qualitative inquiry

Norazuna Norahim
Centre for Language Studies
Universiti Malaysia Sarawak
Sarawak
nazuna@cls.unimas.my

Abstract

This paper discusses methodological frameworks to capture language choice patterns in communities undergoing language shift. An alternative framework employed in a study of a complex language contact situation is presented. The framework uses relevant literature in two inter-related fields: (i) the study of language choice and (ii) the study of social variation in language and linguistic change. Earlier and recent theories of language choice are adopted in data collection and analysis, i.e. the macro-sociological construct and the method of observation from the micro-interactional approach. From the study of social variation in language, the notion of *speaker variation* in language choice, and the *implicational scaling* technique are incorporated in analysis. It is also proposed that attempts to describe language choice patterns of multilingual communities should include theories of Bilingualism as a starting point of inquiry.

Keywords: speaker variables, social variables, bilingualism

INTRODUCTION

Language shift is a complex process; the causes of which are a constellation of factors. Societal language shift, first observed by Fishman in 1964 is a case where a “community collectively adopts another language at the expense of the mother tongue” (Fasold, 1984, p.213). Clyne (2003, pp. 20-21) writes language shift can be described on a continuum: it can designate a gradual or completion of a process; a change in the main or a dominant language of an individual or a group; a change in one or more domains; or even the exclusive language for one (or more) of the four language skills. Shift may refer to the language behavior of a whole community, a sub-group within it, or individual. Gal (1979) states that Bilingualism is a necessary condition for shift to take place, but its existence in communities do not always lead to language shift.

The study described in this paper examines the occurrence of language shift among members of a social category within the community, i.e. the educated Bidayuh. The Bidayuh speech community is an ethnic minority with a population of 207,000 (Population census, 2009).