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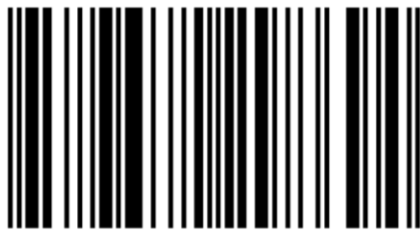
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SOCIAL NETWORK AND LANGUAGE ABILITY OF THE KEJAMAN COMMUNITY FROM BELAGA, SARAWAK, MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

The Kejaman are a small indigenous group living in the interior of Belaga, along the Balui River, in the Kapit Division of Sarawak, Malaysia. The study examined the role of social network on the language ability of the Kejaman speakers from Belaga, Sarawak, Malaysia. Using questionnaires, data were collected from 123 participants from three generations of the Kejaman speakers from two longhouses (Rumah Kejaman Neh Long Litten and Rumah Kejaman Ba Segaham) in Belaga, Sarawak. The study employed Milroy's (1987) framework for social network analysis. The results for language ability showed a marked difference between the older generation and the younger generation. The first and second generations were able to interact fluently and spontaneously using their mother tongue. The second generation was more versatile in terms of language ability as they were fluent speakers of many languages. The ability to use the Kejaman language declined significantly among the third generation. In terms of social networks, the findings showed that exchange networks played an important role in the lives of the Kejaman community. The results revealed a negative significant correlation between the density of the participants' social network and language ability.

Keywords: exchange networks; interactive networks; uniplex; density; multiplexity

Introduction

A number of studies found that the choice between indigenous and standard languages is influenced by speakers' language ability or language competency (Omar, 1982; Platt & Weber, 1980; Ting & Ling 2012; Ting & Rose 2014). Li (1994) and Mah (2005) used self-report for language ability because they agreed that only the speakers know the actual knowledge they have of a language. According to Li (1994) and Milroy (1987) social network acts as norm enforcement or agent of change for an individual, in terms of language use, language ability, and also pronunciation. Investigating the influence of social network on language ability would provide a more holistic understanding of factors determining language shift.