

# Marriages of unequal languages: Use of Bidayuh among children from Chinese, Malay and Melanau mixed marriages

*Su-Hie Ting and Fallisca Evon Berek*

## Abstract

The study examined language choice of Bidayuh in mixed marriages with Melanau, Chinese, and Malay. A survey was conducted involving 101 respondents in mixed marriages in Kuching, Sarawak (18 Bidayuh-Melanau; 41 Bidayuh-Chinese; 42 Bidayuh-Malay). The objective ethnolinguistic vitality of the groups was assessed using structural factors in the community according to Giles, Taylor and Bourhis (1977): demographic strength, institutional support, and status variables. The results are as follows: Melanau, low; Bidayuh, medium to low; Chinese, medium; and Malay, high. The respondents' proficiency in their ethnic language showed that in Bidayuh-Melanau mixed marriages, proficiency in Bidayuh was retained but Melanau was lost because of its low vitality. Bidayuh-Chinese respondents' proficiency in both ethnic languages was adequate for casual conversations, indicating that languages of similar vitality levels have equal dominance in mixed marriages. In Bidayuh-Malay mixed marriages, only about one-quarter of the respondents could speak Bidayuh as their ethnic language whereas more than half were proficient in Sarawak Malay dialect because of the high vitality of the Malay. The domains where the ethnic languages are still frequently used were family, religion, and friendship but the Chinese and Malay could use their ethnic languages in the employment domain. The findings suggest that there is lack of agency of parents to pass on their ethnic language, thereby allowing the societal trend of prestigious languages to dominate.

KEYWORDS: minority languages, language maintenance, shift and loss, ethnolinguistic vitality, mixed marriages, Bidayuh, Melanau, Chinese, Malay, Sarawak (Malaysia)

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## Affiliation

Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Malaysia  
email: suhieting@gmail.com; shting@unimas.my