

Pride in ethnic language and numerical dominance: A case study of the Iban in Sarawak, Malaysia

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Indigenous speech communities usually experience language shift because of their smaller population in relation to other ethnic groups, who may hold more political power and whose languages may have official language status. Past research has indicated that smaller groups tend to experience hastened shift away from their ethnic languages compared to bigger groups. If the indigenous group is living in an area where they are the dominant group such as the Iban in Song, a rural town in Sarawak, Malaysia, then their language is still somewhat a *lingua franca*. Ting, Tinggang, and Metom (2021) found that Iban is still widely used in these six domains: family, friendship, transactions, religious, employment, and education (when it involves informal interactions). The Iban people have positive attitudes but are speaking more Malay than the older generation. The question is whether the Iban people living among other ethnic groups outside of their home-ground have strong positive attitudes that can motivate them to extensively speak their language. The study investigated how pride in the Iban language is influenced by the numerical dominance of the Iban community in Sarawak, Malaysia.

The Iban is the largest ethnic group in Sarawak, accounting for 28.6% of the 2.79 million population (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2017). The other major ethnic groups are Malay (22.92%), Chinese (22.36%), Bidayuh (7.81%) and Melanau (5.10%). The Iban language is distinctively different from other indigenous languages but there is little regional variation which enables Iban speakers from different areas in Sarawak to communicate in Iban with intelligibility. The Iban language has been standardised and taught as a subject in primary schools since 1968, formalised as part of national curriculum and included in lower secondary syllabus in 1988, and offered as elective subject in the Malaysian Certificate of Education (SPM) in 2008 (Ting & Tensing, 2010). Iban is now also offered as a minor subject in some universities. Outside of the Iban community, people from other ethnic groups can speak Iban only if they have extended contact with Iban speakers.

This descriptive study on Iban language attitudes was conducted in Sarawak, Malaysia. The questionnaire data were from 84 Iban respondents who reside in various parts of the state, some in areas where the Iban population is larger than other ethnic groups (24 in Iban-dominant areas) and others in areas where the percentage of Iban people is low (60 in non-Iban dominant areas). The 87-item questionnaire was developed based on the assessment tool proposed by UNESCO for measuring the vitality of languages (Brenzinger et al., 2003). In this paper, the results for the 16 items on language attitudes towards language and ethnic group membership, reasons for the importance of the Iban language, and intergenerational transmission of the Iban language are reported. Collection of data was done in October 2020, whereby potential respondents were contacted by the first researcher via phone, email, and WhatsApp messages. Percentages were computed for the results.

The results on attitudes towards language and ethnic group membership revealed that a majority of the Iban respondents believed that Iban parentage is a stronger factor than speaking the Iban language to claim membership in the ethnic community. They believed that speaking

Iban is part of being an Iban since they are born as Ibans. Nevertheless, they strongly agreed that speaking Iban is part of being an Iban because it symbolises their culture, heritage, and identity. They speak Iban to show that they belong to the Iban ethnic group, and they feel proud because they can speak Iban.

However, for the item on whether they feel superior to others when they speak Iban, there were differences in results between respondents who reside in Iban and non-Iban dominant areas. A majority of the respondents from Iban dominant areas felt superior but those from non-Iban dominant areas did not. This is probably because they live among other ethnic groups and are inclined to think of other ethnic groups as more superior due to their larger numbers.

The Iban respondents agreed that Iban is an important language because there are a lot of Iban speakers. The fact that the Iban is the largest indigenous group in Sarawak is often publicised in the mass media. However, beliefs on whether the importance of the Iban language is derived from the social status of Iban speakers differed between those who reside in Iban and non-Iban dominant areas. A majority of those residing in Iban dominant areas such as Sibu and Sri Aman believed that Iban is an important language because Iban speakers are a powerful group in politics but those living in non-Iban dominant areas like Kuching do not share this view. Historically, one of the deputy chief ministers in Sarawak has been Iban and there are many Iban politicians.

The Iban respondents valued their ethnic language, and wanted it to be transmitted to the younger generation through formal and informal means. It is the language they cherish the most. They believed that it is important for the Iban students to learn the language in school. The respondents also believed that it is important for the Iban speakers to speak the language to the young generation. To them, Iban people should speak Iban well although they acknowledged that English is the most useful language for their career and studies. While English has its instrumental value, Iban has its heritage value. The respondents believed that their future generations will still speak Iban in 20 years.

This study shows that the Iban respondents are inclined towards the paternity dimension of Fishman's (1977) model on language and ethnicity, whereby ethnicity is inherited. This is an interesting finding because other studies such as Puah and Ting (2017) have found that the Chinese are inclined to believe in the patrimony dimension of the language-ethnicity relationship. The Malay in Malaysia have been inculcated to believe in the patrimony dimension of ethnicity because the Federal Constitution (Article 160) defines a "Malay" as a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, and conforms to Malay custom. For the Iban, the patrimony beliefs are not as strong in comparison although they also believe that the Iban language is a symbol of their membership in the Iban community and want their language to be passed on to future generations. Their pride in the Iban language is derived from the numerical dominance of the Iban group in Sarawak. What is most insightful from the study is that Iban respondents who live among large numbers of people from other ethnic groups are less likely to feel superior about speaking Iban or about the high social status of Iban speakers in the political arena. The study suggests that as communities become more cosmopolitan, ethnic language pride may decrease.

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