

Capturing Bilingual Practices of the Bidayuh

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Abstract

This paper discusses an anthropological framework to examine language shift among the Bidayuh, a polyglossic community located in the south-western part of Sarawak, Borneo. The framework captures speakers' variations in language choice patterns and their bilingual-/multilingual practices. Language choice data was collected through interviews with 61 respondents, and participant observation of language choice of the respondents in various settings.

The results of the study indicate that language shift is primarily a consequence of subtractive bilingual practices. Taking the Bidayuh language situation as an example, the paper contends that speakers' bi-/multilingual practices are central in the assessment and prediction of language shift in communities. Considered in this light, the macro-view of language choice patterns of a community as primary evidence of the progression of language shift in communities should then be considered with caution.

Keywords: *Bilingualism, Borneo, polyglossic communities, language shift, anthropology*

Introduction

Societal bilingualism provides a macro-view of language choice patterns of a community, whereas speakers' bilingual practices suggest ways in which they utilise languages at the micro-level. Through a macro-perspective, language choice patterns are dictated by norms of language use in high and low domains. Language choice patterns of communities are characterised as having one of these conditions: Both diglossia and bilingualism, bilingualism without diglossia, diglossia without bilingualism, neither bilingualism nor diglossia (Fishman 2000, 1967). A condition of bilingualism without diglossia is said to indicate the existence of an on-going language shift in a community. Nevertheless, the macro-perspective does not provide a description of the process of language shift. Investigation of bilingual practices at the micro-level can provide greater insights into the process of language shift. However, this does not imply that a description of societal bilingualism in a community is less useful for studying language shift. Rather, the process of language shift, initiators of shift, and their motivations for shift, are better understood through investigation of speakers' bi-/multilingual practices.

Language shift phenomena continue to attract researchers, despite an abundance of literature on the subject. One factor motivating this interest is the fact that language shift varies across communities, and thus, factors for language shift remain elusive. This can be overcome by employing a micro-anthropological construct. Within such an approach, we acknowledge the existence of various criteria through which to assess the survival of a language; the language choice patterns of a community constitute one main criterion (c.f. Edwards' typology of minority situations, 1992; Fishman's GIDS, 1991; Himmelmann's language endangerment scenario, 2010; Lewis and Simmons' EGIDS, 2010; The UNESCO language endangerment and vitality framework, 2003).

This paper offers a qualitative framework, to capture societal and speakers' bilingual practices in communities undergoing language shift. In this paper, I will demonstrate that language shift is primarily a consequence of subtractive bilingual practices, and that speakers' bi-/multilingual practices sit centrally in the assessment of language shift and in the survival of language in communities. As I demonstrate, individuals who share similar motivation for language shift initiate the occurrence of such a shift. To this, I also discuss the interaction between macro- and micro- factors in processes of language shift.

The paper is structured as follows: The second subsection describes the sociolinguistic underpinnings of the study. Here, I will not provide an exhaustive account of the functional allocation of languages and varieties in Sarawak. Rather, I highlight some influencing factors that have affected and will affect the Bidayuhs' selection of codes and subcodes. In the third section, I will discuss the methodological framework of the paper, and the ways in which I collected data to effect a use of this framework. In the fourth section, I discuss the data and the analysis of this

data. In the fifth section, the conclusion, I conclude the paper, and discuss the implication of my work for both scholarship and for society at large.

The Sociolinguistic Setting

Sarawak, a territory in Borneo, is populated by 2.6 million people. There are more than 51 languages consisting of the three largest groups; the Iban, the Malay, and the Chinese, each language totaling more than 500,000 speakers, followed by the Bidayuh and the Melanau communities with 140,000 and 220,000 speakers respectively. The other smaller ethnolinguistic groups are subsumed under the category of 'Orang Ulu' (People of the hinterland) with a population ranging from a few hundred to 30,000 speakers. The Sarawak sociolinguistic situation is similar to the description provided by Platt (1977, p. 362). Here, communities are characterised by multilingualism and polyglossia, with subcodes within each of the separate codes, and interaction between the bi-(and often multi-)lingualism of the individual. The functioning of this multilingualism in communicative events is heavily predicated on ethnic and educational background and the correlation of codes (and subcodes) with particular spheres of social activity and particular social attitudes.

The two major languages that can influence the language choice of the Bidayuh (and other communities in the territory) are thus Malay and English. Malay is the most widespread language in this territory, primarily owing to its role as the national language of Malaysia, and its long tradition as a lingua franca in the region. English is the second most important language under the Malaysian constitution by virtue of its role as a global language for international communication, where the dominance of English in Malaysia is associated with its perceived status. English also carries some weight in terms of social identity, and its prestige in the economic and social sense. The choice between English or Malay in social situations in the contexts of Sarawak is determined by the interlocutor's background, i.e., level of education, competency in the languages, and ethnicity.

Both languages are employed in all types of domains (formal, semi-formal, informal). Standard Malay and standard Malaysian English are the (H) varieties in multilingual Sarawak, where these codes are appropriated in formal settings i.e., the workplace, education, and church, and in official public events. In informal and semi-formal settings, community members choose a combination of these inter-group codes – colloquial English, Sarawak Malay dialects, and Iban. The mother tongues and other native languages in the territory are spoken within their respective communities.

The Bidayuh is the fourth largest ethnic group in Sarawak, Borneo, with a population of approximately 220,000. Bidayuh speakers mainly reside in the capital city, Kuching, and its peripheries – Serian, Bau, and Lundu. The latest subgrouping study on the Bidayuhic languages in Sarawak by the Summer Institute of Linguistic (SIL) identifies four regional dialects; Bau-Jagoi,