



Language Choices in Interracial Marriage: An Insight into Malay-Melanau Families in Sarikei, East Malaysia

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ARTICLE INFO

Cite this article in APA style as:

Peter, G., John, D.S., Abell, F.A., Yusuf, K.M. (2024). Language Choices in Interracial Marriage: An Insight into Malay-Melanau Families in Sarikei, East Malaysia. *Langkawi Journal of The Association for Arabic and English*, 10(1), 14-26

DOI:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.31332/lkw.v0i0.6500>

History:

Submitted: 2023-07-02

Revised: 2024-04-24

Accepted: 2024-05-27

Published online: 2024-06-08

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Published by:

UPT Pengembangan Bahasa IAIN Kendari.

ABSTRACT

This study aims to identify the language choices within interracial marriages, focusing specifically on Malay-Melanau families in Sarikei, Sarawak, East Malaysia. The primary objectives are (1) to investigate the language choices among Malay-Melanau families in Sarikei and (2) examine factors influencing their choices. A sample of 14 respondents, all hailing from Malay-Melanau backgrounds and married for over five years, was selected using purposive sampling methods. Employing a mixed-method approach, respondents completed a Google Form questionnaire comprising both open and close-ended queries. The findings underscore a prevailing inclination towards Malay as the preferred language within the household. This preference appears to be chiefly influenced by two key factors: parental guidance and immediate surroundings. Notably, the language predominantly spoken by the parents cohabiting with the couples significantly influences their linguistic selection. The study highlights the critical role of parental language choices and the immediate environment in shaping the language dynamics within these families. Additionally, it emphasizes the necessity of promoting awareness regarding language preservation, particularly the nurturing of less-dominant languages spoken within the home environment. Efforts in this direction are essential for fostering linguistic diversity and cultural vitality within mixed-ethnicity households. By understanding these dynamics, stakeholders can better support policies and initiatives that encourage the maintenance of linguistic heritage in multicultural contexts.

Keywords: Interracial marriage; Language choice; Language dominant; Language shift; Malay-Melanau

1. Introduction

A report by ilanguages (2018) shows that 40 percent of the world's population is monolingual, and the rest are bilingual or trilingual. Grosjean (2013) states that bilingualism includes "the knowledge and use of two or more languages, the presentation of information in two languages, the need for two languages, the recognition of two or more languages". In 2019, experts estimated that half of the world is bilingual (Mathew, 2019). These statistics underscore the prevalence and significance of multilingualism in contemporary society, highlighting its pervasive influence on global communication and cultural exchange.

Various factors contribute to bilingual competencies. One of the main factors is the education system. In schools, students are usually taught the national language

and the English language, and some schools even offer third language courses for their students to enrich their linguistic repertoire. In Malaysia, the Ministry of Education introduces the policy of *Memartabatkan Bahasa Malaysia Mengukuhkan Bahasa Inggeris (MBMMBI)*, which means Upholding the Malay Language and Strengthening the English Language (Yamat et al., 2014). It allows all Malaysian public school students to master at least two languages: Malay and English. Many Malaysians are speakers of their dialects, and the addition of two languages learned in schools makes multilingualism common among them. The incorporation of bilingual education within the Malaysian schooling system has thus fostered a culture of multilingualism among its populace, facilitating communication and cultural exchange on both domestic and international fronts.

Apart from education, another factor that leads to bilingualism is the linguistic environment in which a person lives. Urbanization has led to mass migration of people from rural areas, usually dominated by one ethnic group, to urban areas, where people of various racial backgrounds gather. According to Samat, et al (2019), the urbanization rate in Malaysia is 74%. It creates a need for a shared language for people of various linguistic and racial backgrounds to communicate. Thus, most people will communicate in the dominant language of the community, usually the national language, while retaining their mother tongue, especially when they communicate with their family members at home. For example, an Iban family who moves from Sarawak to Kuala Lumpur will have to master the Malay and English languages to communicate with other people. However, they still communicate in the Iban language among themselves. While this is a prevalent scenario nowadays, this was rather unusual back when people were still living in their villages with people of the same native language. The evolving sociolinguistic landscape, propelled by urbanization and cultural diversification, underscores the adaptive nature of language use and the enduring significance of mother tongue preservation amidst linguistic assimilation processes.

Migration also happens on a larger scale, where people move to another country, acquiring the host country's dominant language and keeping their native language. They need competency in the host country's language for survival. However, many still keep their native language within the domestic sphere. However, it is found that proficiency in the native language decreases in the latter generation of immigrants as they grow up in the host country (Bezcioglu-Goktolga & Yagmur, 2022). While external factors are essential in promoting multilingualism, home factors also contribute to developing one's multilinguistic competence. One of them is mixed marriages, where couples of different ethnicities get married and bring their first language into the family they build together. The number of mixed marriages had increased from 3 percent in 1967 to 17 percent by 2015 in the United States of America alone (Hu, 2019). A study by David (2006) states that the increase in interracial marriages worldwide reflects that people view it positively. As mentioned earlier, migration is expected in this globalized era, and this has created higher chances for people to meet partners from other ethnic backgrounds, which then led to an increase in mixed marriages. Children of mixed marriages grow up with two home languages as both parents communicate with them in their own mother tongue. This helps them to develop a native-like proficiency in both of their parents' languages. However, it