



MALAYSIAN IDENTITY REFLECTED IN LANGUAGE USE OF TRANSACTIONS

The transactions domain is a public domain where people of various language and ethnic backgrounds interact for the exchange of goods and services. The vendors and customers usually do not know one another, with the exception of regular customers. Research was conducted in various transactional settings to examine the common language choices and the sociocultural considerations for the language choices. Observations of naturally occurring interactions between vendors and customers in open-air fruit stall, computer shop, photo shop, cake shop, shopping complex and hotels were recorded for analysis. The results showed a dichotomy of language choices along ethnic lines. For interethnic communication, the use of Bahasa Melayu by those who had formally learnt the language reflects the envisioned role for the national language as a common language of communication in Malaysia. In other instances, Bazaar Malay is the lingua franca in the market place. For transactions between Chinese vendors and customers, Mandarin Chinese is the default choice with the language of the Chinese subgroups (Foochow, Hokkien, Hakka) coming to the fore when both parties find out about their shared language background. In the Malaysian setting, ethnicity is a consideration in the language choice even when the vendor and customers do not know one another. When the vendors make a language switch, at times it is to take account of the customer's ethnicity rather than communicative efficiency alone, and customers have been found to dictate the language choice of the encounter because of their higher status in the transactional relationship. Non-verbal communication is another characteristic of Malaysian transactions observed.

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