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# Language choices of CEOs of Chinese family business in Sarawak, Malaysia

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## **Abstract**

The study investigated the language choices of Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) of Chinese family business and the factors guiding their choices. Interviews were conducted with 17 CEOs of family businesses located in Sarawak, some of whom are the sons and grandsons of the founder of the business. The results showed that all the CEOs can speak their Chinese dialect, Mandarin and some other Chinese dialects. Their proficiency in English and Malay depends on their age. All of them can speak English, with the exception of two older CEOs in their 80s. Only one CEO in his 40s can speak Malay fluently but the Malay proficiency of the older CEOs is inadequate for transactional functions. The factors guiding the CEOs' language choices for business are: own language repertoire, accommodation to client's choice for communicative efficiency, language choice as a business strategy, relationship building, and absence of business terms in the language. The CEOs use their interlocutor's ethnicity as a proxy to determine the right language to use for communicative efficiency. The study showed that while the CEOs are accommodative in their language choices, they are aware that making the right or wrong choices can provide or restrict access to business opportunities.