

Language Use and Identity of Foochow Chinese in Malaysia

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Abstract

The study examined the language use and identity of Foochow respondents in Sarawak, Malaysia. Analysis of questionnaire data from 376 respondents (188 parents, 188 children) showed that more parents could speak Foochow whereas more children could speak Mandarin. The younger Foochow has lower self-reported Foochow proficiency than their parents. They use Foochow in fewer domains (family, friendship, religious, transactions) compared to their parents who speak Foochow in all domains of language use. There are significant differences between the strength of Foochow identity for parents and children. The strength of Chinese ethnic identity for parents and children are also significantly different. The Foochow identity is positively associated with Foochow usage and negatively associated with Mandarin usage, but no inverse relationship was found between Foochow identity and Chinese identity. The younger Foochow is more detached from their Foochow identity, and this generational change is engendered by the rise of Mandarin.

Keywords: Foochow; Chinese; ethnicity; identity; Malaysia

Introduction

Malaysia has a multiethnic 32.58 million population, comprising 62.51% Bumiputera (comprising Malay and Indigenous), 20.55% Chinese, 6.18% Indian, 0.92% others, and 9.84% non-citizens (Malaysia Department of Statistics, 2020). In many studies conducted on language maintenance and shift in Malaysia, the Chinese are treated as a singular group (David, Yee, Ngeow, & Gan, 2009). Chinese dialects are only given attention in qualitative studies showing a shift towards Mandarin from Hakka (Ding, 2016; Ting, 2018; Ting & Chang, 2008; Wang, 2017), Hokkien (Low, Nicholas, & Wales, 2010), Cantonese (Kuang, 2002), Hainan (Kow, 2003), and Foochow (Ting & Hung, 2008). The Chinese dialect groups have their own culture and language, although they share the standard Chinese language (Mandarin), and Chinese values like filial piety. "The continuous use of Chinese dialects is linked to showing appreciation to their ancestors, because knowing family roots, such as surnames, language groups, and origin of ancestors, is essential in Chinese society and will prevent the family umbilical cord from breaking" (Ong, 2020, p. 2).

Awareness of Chinese dialect groups is growing. Later research on the Chinese in Thailand (Lee, 2014) sub-divided the Sino-Siamese population into Chinese dialect groups, unlike earlier research (Morita, 2005). At this point in time, it becomes even more crucial to study the ethnicity of Chinese dialect groups because studies have indicated a shift away from Chinese dialect usage. Research should be conducted before further weakening of Chinese dialect ethnicities happens.

The study examined the language use and identity of Foochow respondents living in Sibul, Sarawak, Malaysia. The specific aspects studied were: (1) proficiency in Foochow and other languages; (2) language use; (3) strength of Foochow identity; (4) strength of Chinese ethnic identity; and (5) relation-