

The Bidayuh language as a threatened language

By

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1.1 Introduction

The aim of this paper is to report the findings of a larger study that investigates variability of language choice patterns across generations among the Bidayuh in urban settings - Kuching-Samarahan Division, Sarawak. A major aim of the study was to ascertain the existence of an on-going language shift within the community, and to describe the process of language shift. Unlike previous studies on Language shift and Language maintenance (LSLM) that focused on small communities in the region, this study examined an ethnic minority community with a population of approximately 204,800 (Population Census, 2009). The scope of the study was restricted to educated Bidayuh as it was not feasible to conduct a language shift study that was representative of the total population. It would involve several demographic variables.

Over the last four decades, the state of Sarawak has undergone rapid socio-economic and socio-cultural transformations. Infrastructure development and agricultural projects have reached the once remote villages. With tremendous improvement in accessibility, there is hardly a community that is completely isolated from outside influences. The cultural heritage of indigenous communities which is closely linked to traditional occupation and way of life in previous environments may not be retained in the wake of the transformations. Smolicz (1992, p.288) notes that in the absence of other ethno-specific core values, the language is all the more vulnerable for the lack of significant reinforcements that could anchor it more firmly to the social structure of the group.

Researchers working on LSLM in the Borneo region (e.g. Sercombe 2002; Martin, 1991/2002) have expressed their concern on the emerging threats of these changes on the linguistic heterogeneity in the region. The increasing number of LSLM studies has shown that the concern is real. The threats to the survival of languages are not only felt by smaller communities in geographically less accessible areas but also larger communities in urban centres (e.g. the Bidayuh and the Melanau). Published works on ethnic minority communities in Sarawak have also demonstrated the detrimental effects of macro-sociological changes (e.g. urbanisation, intermarriages, language policies) on the retention of the mother tongue. A movement away from the mother tongue towards Malay was reported to have occurred among Miriek speakers (Bibi Aminah & Abang Ahmad Ridzuan, 1992); the Kelabit community in urban areas (Martin & Yen, 1992); and Punan Ba, Tatau, Lugat in Bintulu area (Asmah & Kamilla, 2008).

Principally, it is stressed that the practice of language policy of “one language for one nation” which aims to unify various ethnic groups may not be favourable towards the maintenance of minority languages. Martin (2002) has shown the effects of such policy on the language ecology of Brunei Darussalam. Indigenous minorities, i.e. Belait, Kedayan, Tutong underwent a process of cultural and linguistic assimilations towards dominant group, the Brunei Malays. It was reported that indigenous communities have languages of their own in 1929 whereas in 1953, they had become Malay-speaking. The cultural and linguistic redefinitions of the indigenous population have taken place (and continues to take place) within the framework of the country’s desire to define the nation in terms of Malay Islamic monarchy.