

**LANGUAGE ATTITUDES TOWARDS HOKKIEN AND MANDARIN  
AMONG STUDENTS IN UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SARAWAK (UNIMAS)**

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## ABSTRACT

It was reported that half of the world languages were dying due to language shift and language death. It was estimated that approximately six hundred languages would still be used by the year 2010. Hokkien, as a vernacular language in Malaysia, had showed symptoms of language shift. Thus, this study was carried out to examine the language attitudes towards Mandarin and Hokkien. It was conducted among the students in Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS). The two objectives of this study were to uncover these students' attitudes towards the two languages, the speakers of these two languages as well as the level of pride of the participants towards their own Hokkien identity. This study had used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods which were matched-guise technique, questionnaire and interview. A total of 50 participants took part in this study with 25 males and 25 females. All of them were involved in matched-guise technique and questionnaire but only ten participants with strong Hokkien identity were interviewed. The statistical analysis from matched-guise technique showed that these participants had conformed to the expected situation where Mandarin, a standard language, was ranked higher than Hokkien, a vernacular language. The same results were found when analysis of questionnaires and interviews were conducted, that is, Hokkien was ranked socially lower because the domains it covered were restricted. In contrast, Mandarin was perceived as a language that was widely used in both formal and informal situations. Thus, the assumption of such results in the findings was due to the increasing used of Mandarin in Malaysia society. Even though a majority of the participants self-reported that they were proud of their own Hokkien identity, language shift was seen in the participants' attitudes towards the language where Mandarin was slowly taking over the role of Hokkien.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

This chapter provides a brief view of the research to the readers and the background of the study followed by the aim and objectives of the study, contributions of the study to the particular field, definitions of some of the terms used as well as the scope of the study.

#### **1.1 Introduction**

Krauss (1992) and Wurm (1996) estimated that there are approximately 6000 languages spoken in the world and of all these languages, half of them are dying (cited in Choi, 2003, p. 81). Based on Krauss's (1992) prediction, only around 600 spoken languages would still be used by 2100. Thus, in order to find out the reasons that lead to language shift and language death, language attitudes studies are carried out.

Generally, language attitudes are the “the feelings people have about their own language or the languages of other” (Crystal, 1992). It is a study on investigating people in a particular group perceiving a certain language. It is mentioned in Fishman's (1964) work that studies of language attitudes are vital in multilingual societies as “attitudes have decisive influence on processes of linguistic variation and change, language planning, and the maintenance or loss of languages in a community” (cited in Choi, 2003, pp. 81-82). In other words, it means that these

individuals have undergone the “process of socialization” and “developed positive, negative or mixed attitudes towards” a language or languages (Singh, 2006, p. 2).

In most of the language attitudes studies, two languages were involved. For example, in Yum’s (2007) study, the languages involved were Mandarin (standard language) and Cantonese (one of the Chinese dialects) while in the study by Adegbija (1994), the researcher compared a European language with the native African language. The results of both studies showed that standard languages were replacing the functions of the dialects. So, in Malaysia context, the same phenomenon was happening where the standard languages, such as English and Mandarin, were slowly replacing the Hokkien dialect.

In this study, the researcher would like to find out how the Hokkien speakers viewed their mother tongue through a few methods (i.e. matched-guise technique, questionnaire and interview) that would be further elaborated in the next few chapters.

## **1.2 Socio-cultural background of Malaysia**

A general view of Malaysia’s population as well as the distribution of ethnicity at Kuching, Sarawak, was shown before looking at the language attitudes towards Hokkien among the citizens.

According to Sarawak State Unit Planning (2008), the whole population in Malaysia was around 27.7 million. In Sarawak state itself, it was estimated that a total of 2,452,800 people were registered. Among these people, 606,500 of them stayed at Kuching and 197,955 of them were Chinese. Hokkien speakers had contributed around 35% to the total number of Chinese. In other words, almost 68,935 Hokkien speakers were staying at Kuching. Even though the statistic showed that the Hokkien



speakers were not the majority in Kuching, yet, Hokkien dialect was one of the most commonly used language in Kuching for example, among the hawkers.

The dialect name “Hokkien” in Malaysia was originated from the “local pronunciation of the province name” (Jordan, 2008). Even though different names were used to refer to the dialect in different geographical settings, such as “Fukienese” in China, “Taiwanese” in Taiwan and “Amoy” in XiaMen, the researcher used the word “Hokkien” instead of others in this study (Jordan, 2008). This was due to the reason that the dialect was known as Hokkien in Malaysia setting. Even though lots of research had been done on language attitudes on Hokkien in Taiwan or China, yet, there were no proper studies produced on this dialect in Malaysia, except for the two volume of *Spoken Amoy Hokkien* (Bodman, 1955; 1958, cited in Lewis, 1996), which its initial usage was for the British military officers before the independence of Malaysia. In other words, after the dependence of Malaysia, this dialect was not seen as an important language to be studied in Malaysia.

In addition, Hokkien in Penang had been warned of its dying danger (The Star Online, August 15, 2008). Hokkien which was once the mother tongue for most of the Penang people had slowly lost its identity. Even though it was reported so, yet, there was no proper statistic to show how the language was shifting. Hence, this study was to look at the attitudes towards Hokkien in a different geographical setting which was Kuching, Sarawak.

### **1.3 Aim and objectives of study**

The aim of this study was to find out the attitudes of undergraduates in University Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) towards Hokkien and Mandarin. Below were the specific objectives of this research:



1. To determine the attitude of Hokkien speakers (Hokkien as their mother tongue) towards Hokkien dialect and Mandarin in four aspects; the status of a language, the status of its speakers, the status of the form of the language and its use in certain domain.
2. To examine the significant level of pride shown by the Hokkien speakers towards their own identity and their mother tongue.

There was only one hypothesis for this study.

$H_0$ : There was no difference between language attitudes towards Hokkien and Mandarin among students in UNIMAS.

$H_A$ : There was a difference between language attitudes towards Hokkien and Mandarin among students in UNIMAS.

#### **1.4 Significance of the study**

According to Holmes (1992, p. 35), status of standard languages was usually higher compared to dialects. This was due to the reason that standard language was the language “spoken by the educated in the society, used in writing and in media as well as supported and encouraged in school” (Edwards, 1982, p. 21). This was supported by research done by Gilliland (2006) and Brubaker (2003).

Gilliland’s (2006) work was carried out in Shanghai, China where the aim of the study was to find out how the 34 participants viewed their mother tongue, Shanghai dialect, and Putonghua, a standard language (also known as Mandarin). The results for this research, which were collected using matched-guise technique and one-to-one interview, showed that Putonghua was ranked higher in terms of social status when compared with Shanghai dialect. Therefore, difference in language attitudes towards standard language and vernacular language was shown in this study.

On the other hand, Brubaker (2003) studied on language attitudes towards Mandarin, a standard language, and Southern Min, one of the vernacular languages in Taiwan, which involved 40 participants. The results of this research showed that Mandarin had a higher ranking compared to Southern Min even though the Taiwanese could relate themselves better with the vernacular language as it represented their identity. So, the difference in language attitudes towards standard language and vernacular language was once again been proven in this research.

Therefore in this research, the researcher aimed to find out how the students in UNIMAS viewed their mother tongue, Hokkien, as compared to the standard language, Mandarin. Knowing the language attitudes of this group of Hokkien people was vital as it would help the researcher to understand these people's choice in terms of language behavior over a period of time and even to predict language shift and language maintenance within the speech community (Brubaker, 1995, pp. 48-49). In addition, it was hoped that this study would provide statistical report on language attitudes to the Hokkien community as no proper research were done on Hokkien since 1958.

## **1.5 Operational definition of terms**

Some of the specific terms used in this study were defined in this section.

### **1.5.1 Language attitudes**

Language attitudes studies had captured many scholars' attention, especially in the field of sociolinguistic (Obiols, 2002, p. 1). It was defined as "the feelings people have about their own language or the languages of other" (Crystal, 1992). Therefore, some of the researchers defined language attitudes literally, which was attitudes towards the particular language or dialect itself. However, a broader definition of language attitudes would consider the speakers of the language and dialect (Fasold, 1984, p. 148). Even though language attitudes had no linguistics basic

and could not be measured, they represented the language life in the real world (Trudgill, 1992, p. 44). For example, an individual who used a certain language in his/her whole life would feel more comfortable talking to another individual who used the same language. This was not only because of the solidarity among the two speakers, yet, it was because of the self-identity that is reflected through the language.

The language attitudes in this study referred to the attitudes of Hokkien students in UNIMAS where it reflected the participants' view on the status of the language, their own identity, the pride of the participants as well as the domains involved for the language which would be discussed in details in the following chapters.

### **1.5.2 Standard language**

Holmes (1994, p. 83) described standard language as a language “which is written, has gone through some degree of regularization and codification such as a dictionary, is recognized as a prestigious variety or code by a community”. Wilson (1993) agreed with the statement above by saying that standard language in “its written forms, especially its edited, printed form, it is conservative in that it preserves as much as it can of the lexicon and the grammar that will serve all these speakers and writers, listeners and readers, and, because of its familiar ring and appearance, win immediate comprehension and approval of what are, finally, familiar and therefore comfortable and proper manners”. Hence, the examples given were Standard English used in court, documents, education, social, economy and so on in England. It was a language that is “acceptable and normative among reputable people in reputable circumstances” (Wilson, 1993).

Peterson (n.d.) once said that “Standard English, the god of all languages, is merely a variation of another language”. This was said because the standard language was used in education and politic. Thus, indirectly, standard language was said to



have higher status than vernacular language or dialect. In this study, standard language referred to Mandarin (or known as Putonghua in China) where it fulfilled the criteria mentioned by Holmes (1994) and Wilson (1993). Standard Mandarin was an official language used in China and Taiwan and it was one of the six official languages used in United Nations. It had its own regularization as well as codification and it was also used in court and even in the education field in Malaysia.

### **1.5.3 Vernacular language / dialect**

According to Holmes (1994, p. 80), vernacular language or dialect could be defined in a few ways and one of them referred vernacular language as a language which was not standardized and did not have any official status in the society. In other words, it meant that a vernacular language was a language where it was not put in written form and was usually used as mother tongue in multilingual speech community. For example, Modern Korea had six dialects; Central, Northwest, Northeast, Southeast, Southwest and Cheju where these dialects were similar to each other and speakers from these various dialects were able to communicate with each other (AsianInfo, 2000). The difference between standard language and dialect was that standard language was usually determined by the “political and cultural center of a nation” (AsianInfo, 2000) or “geopolitics” (Reuther, 1999)

Another definition of a vernacular language indicated that it was the language used in the daily communication with others in informal domains, such as family, friends and so on. Thus, if Mandarin was said to be an example of standard language in Chinese, then, Hokkien was one of the examples of Chinese dialects. In this study, there were two vernacular languages; Foo Chow and Hokkien. Foo Chow was used for the recordings during the pilot test while Hokkien was used for the recordings of this study.

#### 1.5.4 Hokkien

Hokkien was one of the dialects not only spoken in China and Taiwan, but it was also a dialect used in other South East Asia countries and one of the examples was Malaysia. This dialect, Hokkien, was named differently according to the geographical area where it was spoken. A distinct example was the Hokkien spoken in Taiwan where it was known as “*Taiyu*”, that equaled to the meaning of “Taiwan’s language”. It was a language used by the politicians in Taiwan to “present their credentials as ‘true believers’ in the island’s independence” (Taylor, 2007, p. 3). In addition, the dialect also involved in the entertainment industry where films and songs were directed in order to produce the “Taiwanese’ identity” (Taylor, 2007, p. 3). Therefore, in other words, Hokkien in Taiwan not only played a vital role in politics and economy, but it had also become part of the Taiwanese’ identity for 86 percent of the Taiwanese were Hokkien (Barnett, 1971, p. 62).

On the other hand, looking at the scenario in Malaysia, the domains involving or using Hokkien dialect were not as broad as in Taiwan. Lewis (1996) showed that Hokkien dialect used in Malaysia, for example in Penang, was just an oral language and no proper written works had been produced on this dialect, except for the two volume of *Spoken Amoy Hokkien* (Bodman, 1955, 1958, cited in Lewis, 1996), which its initial usage was for the British military officers before the independence of Malaysia. Historically, dialects were taught in school but with the emerge of the government’s policy, these dialects had been replaced by other standard languages, such as English and Mandarin. Hence, it was said that Hokkien dialect in Malaysia was a dialect used within family members, friends, market and some part of the entertainment industry.

In this study, even though all the participants were Hokkien, yet, some of them were mix-blood Hokkien, that is, only one of the parents was Hokkien and the other was not. Therefore, in order to differentiate the participants, those with both



Hokkien parents were known as “pure-blood Hokkien” while those with only either one of the parents was Hokkien were known as “half-blood Hokkien”. The purpose for differentiating them into different categories was to make the researcher’s work easier in analyzing the data later.

### **1.5.5 Matched-guise technique**

Matched-guise technique was a technique developed by William Lambert and his associates in Canada during the 1960s. The main purpose was to find out “people’s attitudes towards social, geographical or ethnic language varieties and to the different languages spoken in bilingual communities” (Stefanowitsch, 2005, p. 1). In addition, it was to investigate people’ attitudes in an indirect way because if people were conscious in their attitudes when answering questions, the data collected might not reflect the actual attitudes.

According to Lim and Lacy (2004), the traditional matched-guise technique was carried out on the English-speaking-Canadian and French-speaking-Canadian. It was conducted in such a way that a few bilingual speakers were asked to read the same text in both languages and the readings were recorded. Then, the recordings were played randomly to the participants. Based on the recordings, the participants were to rate the speakers’ characteristics in the semantic differential scale questionnaire. Examples of traits included in the questionnaire were leadership, sense of humor, intelligence and so on. The language attitudes of the participants were then elicited from the data collected.

The design of matched-guise technique was divided into two kinds; single group judges and two groups judges (Stefanowitsch, 2005, p. 1). For the single group judges, all participants listened to the recordings presented in two languages and judged the speakers using the same traits. For the two groups judges, participants were divided into two groups. Each of the group would only listen to recordings



as Hokkien language was not only named differently according to the geographical area where it was spoken, but some of the words used might be slightly different according to different geographical area.

In addition, the standard language mentioned in this study was Mandarin instead of English. Like the variable “Hokkien” mentioned above, the Mandarin language here referred to the standard language used in Malaysia setting. Thus, the standard of the standard language here did not necessarily match with the “international” standard of Mandarin where it did not contain flawless sentence structure and it was not error-free.

This chapter covered a brief view of the socio-cultural in Malaysia, aim and objectives of the research, significant of the study, definitions of some words used throughout the research and scope of the study. In the next chapter, literature review would be provided where the definition of language attitudes from various point of views, attitudes towards standard and vernacular languages and several reviews on others’ studies were included.



## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter explained the language attitudes in general, which included the definitions of language attitudes from different perspectives, language attitudes towards different dialects, how these dialects were viewed by various societies and how researches were done on languages attitudes.

#### **2.1 Language attitude(s)**

Language attitudes had been a topic for discussion in the linguistics or even psychology field. According to Trudgill (1992, p. 44), language attitudes were said to be one of the most vital studies in the social psychology of language. Crystal (1992) identified language attitudes as “the feelings people have about their own language or the languages of other”. Thus, to some researches, language attitudes were just studies on the “attitudes towards the language itself”, yet, the broader definition of language attitudes included “the attitudes towards the speakers of a particular language or dialect” and sometimes the broadening definition of language attitudes took into account of all kinds of behavior on how the language would be treated, like “attitudes towards language maintenance” (Fasold, 1984, p. 148). In other words, language attitudes were attitudes people have towards diverse languages, dialects, accents and even their speakers (Trudgill, 1992, p. 44). Holmes (1994, p. 344) described language attitudes as reflections of attitudes towards the language users and the language usages. In addition, the precision about language had made language attitudes unique or dissimilar with other attitudes.

Attitudes are crucial in language growth or decay, restoration or destruction: the status and importance of a language in society and within an individual derives largely from adopted or learnt attitudes. (Hohenthal, 1998, p. 38)

Historically, language attitudes were seen as a not important study to look at and sometimes they were equal to “dignifying stereotypes” and “unscientific ideas about language” and thus, “pseudo-egalitarianism” was given to language attitudes; “ignore it and it’ll go away” (Schiffman, 1997). Yet, the beginning of change in language attitudes occurred when matched-guise technique was introduced by Lambert in the 1960s. It was one of the most commonly used instruments in studying language attitudes. Typically, participants in the study would listen to recordings where the bilingual speakers read the text using two different languages before rating the speakers’ personalities (Krauss & Chiu, n.d, p. 45) using semantic differential scale questionnaire.

It is shown in the linguistics field that these attitudes had no linguistic basis (Trudgill, 1992, p. 44). However, even though attitudes could not be exactly measured as they were imaginary psychological construct, they reflected the language life in the real world for they were not inborn but learned. Therefore, attitude towards a certain language might be influenced by the learning experiences (Lam, 2005, p. 10). People, things or environment might effect how a person viewed a language. This was supported by (Hohenthal, 1998, p. 38-39) saying that attitude was actually originated from combined behaviors and experiences. According to Annamalai (1979, p. 37), the speakers’ attitudes were actually “determined by socio-cultural, political and historical factors which are external to the language” (cited in Balasubramanian, 2005). Edwards (1994, p. 97), on the other hand said that language attitude referred to a natural response or feedback either positively or negatively to a group of things (cited in Brubaker, 2003, p. 48). For example, using Hokkien to an



elderly person who had spoken the dialect for his/her whole life would definitely make him/her feel the solidarity among the speaker.

In Schiffman's (1997) handouts, he mentioned several definitions on language attitudes where he described language attitudes were study on people's attitudes towards language, attitudes towards motivation of learning L1 or L2, attitudes towards status of language, the speakers of the language, form of language and the domains where it was used. In Fasold's (1984, p. 148) work, he mentioned that language attitudes often is said to be the reflection of attitudes towards a variety of people from different races, culture and ethnic group. For example, it might influence how an employer hires his or her employees, how teacher perceives his or her students and so on. Sarnoff (1970) describes language attitudes as a "deposition to react favorably or unfavorably to a class of object" (cited in Edwards, 1982, p. 20). This is agreed by Lee (2007, p. 3) who further explains that the attitudes towards objects can be either concrete or abstract. Thus, language attitudes will has an important role in sociolinguistic if there is any relationship between language attitudes and social phenomenon (Fasold, 1984, p. 149).

Attitudes have a decisive influence on processes of linguistic variation and change, language planning and the maintenance or loss of languages in a community. (Choi, 2003, pp. 81-82)

Thus, it was said that language attitudes covered not only the individual's feelings towards the language, but the attitudes of speaker were included as well. It referred to the individual's direct reactions towards the language which were influenced by other external factors such as environment. In this study, language attitudes referred to how people viewed the language and the speakers that spoke the language, the status of the language as well as the identity of the language speakers.