Language Choice Between Younger and Older Generations of The Narum Community

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Abstract

The Narum people live in Baram – an area in the Marudi district of Sarawak in East Malaysia. They are an indigenous ethnic minority group who live mostly in villages and Narum language is spoken only among this community. As a minority ethnic group, they are influenced by the dominant majority language. Study of minority languages is important to make sure that the languages of the cultural minorities will not be undervalued and ignored. This paper is concerned with the sociolinguistic situation of this community, which deals with the language choice among the two generations in connection with the family and social domains. The respondents' self-evaluation of language proficiency is also touched upon. The data used to compile it were drawn from the fieldwork, interviews and questionnaires. The data reveal that assimilation is apparently the result of a broader phenomenon. The main language spoken in the communities and their cultural adaptation to the values to gain a better opportunity seems to be the cause of the language choice and language use. The finding shows when it comes to intergeneration and intergroup communication, the Narum community choose to use more Sarawak Malay language and Narum language.

Keywords: language maintenance and language shift, minority language, endangered language, language attitudes, language choice and language use

Introduction

The Narum people of Sarawak are a minority community whose use of their own language is declining. It is a common fate of minority languages that faced with a strong majority language; the weaker language will become endangered. And Sociolinguists have paid a great deal of attention to this phenomenon. However, until now, very little in-depth sociolinguistics study of the Narum Language has taken place. Therefore the main purpose of this paper will be to investigate the ways in which the Narum language of the Marudi area has been affected by exposure to pressure from the majority languages. This will be pursued via an analysis of language preferences in communication and speech interaction among members of this community.

Focus will be on variations of language choice between the older and younger generations in the family and social domains. First it will be necessary to identify basic patterns of language choice in the speech community. Variations in language choice will be examined with a view to highlighting differences between older and younger members of the community with respect to their language practices. This will be supported by a quantitative analysis of the age variable which is linked to language use.

Setting

Sarawak is located on the northwest side of Borneo, and is one of the two states that make up East Malaysia. Sarawak and Sabah area separated from West Malaysia, Peninsula Malaysia by the South China Sea. Since 1963, Sarawak has been a state of the Federal of Malaysia. The 124,449.51 square kilometres area of the state is still about three-fourths tropical rain forest and is sparely populated. It is also the largest state in Malaysia, making up some 37.5% of the country's total area.[1][3]

Sarawak is home to 27 ethnic groups; people each with their own distinct language, culture and lifestyle. Cities and larger towns are populated predominantly by Malays, Melanaus, Chinese, and a smaller percentage of Ibans and Bidayuhs who have migrated from their home-villages for work. Sarawak is rather distinctive from the rest of Malaysia in that there is only a small community of Indians living in the state.

In Sarawak, the Narum language of the Narum community is one of those minority languages, which are facing the problem of extinction. The pattern is a familiar one. The people of the Narum community are faced with choices in the matter of language use. But their choices with respect to which language they adopt are not really free choices. They are driven by social and economic expedience. Because the dominant ethnic group of their region speak Sarawak Malay the Narum must adapt and speak it also.

The Narum Community

The research for this study took place in the kampong Narum and nearby villages. The Narum community is one of the ethnic groups of Sarawak. The Narum people are located mainly in a village named Kampong Narum. The village lies alongside the

[1] Source: http://www.sarawak.gov.my

Baram River and is not far from the town of Marudi. Between the Kampong Narum and Marudi town is another kampong called Kampong Dagang. These villages are the home of most of the Sarawak Malays.

The way of life of the Narum community has undergone many changes. For example: the people no longer live as their ancestors did in the traditional Sarawak "longhouses"' but have a separate home for each family. They no longer need to go to the river for their daily needs because the village is now supplied with electricity and running water. Communications with neighbouring villages have improved. There is now a road from Marudi to Kampong Narum so visitors can reach Kampong Narum, by using the new road and they no longer need to depend on water transport.

This community traditionally celebrates certain festivals together, thus facilitating the development and maintenance of friendships and other social relationships among the community members. Most individuals in this community marry someone from their own village rather than someone from outside the community or from a different ethnic group.

The Research Respondents

The respondents were chosen from the existing group of the community. As Milroy points out, the homogeneous social group provides a particularly valuable basis for sociolinguistic studies. The group dynamic influences speech patterns and leads to a larger volume of spontaneous speech than may occur when separate individuals are studied (1987:35) This method also allows an outsider researcher to do research in a natural way. Thus my status of 'anak angkat' provided a natural basis for my introduction to others in the community, and as a result the research proceeded smoothly.

For this paper the research respondents consisted of 90 males and 90 females. Individuals were randomly selected to provide a mix of gender and age. The age ranges were from 14 years old to 56 years and above. The respondents' age range was then divided into two groups to represent the younger and the older generations: 13-17 years old, 18-25 years old and 26-35 years old were considered as the younger generation and those in the age range of 36-45 years old, 46-55 years old and 56 years old and above were considered as the older generation. They were selected from the Narum

community and were living in the Kampong Narum and Kampong Pemindahan. The majority of the respondents were from the Kampong Narum. Language choice among the members of the Narum community

Language choice among the Narum community

In order to examine the language choices made by members of the Narum speech community, a descriptive statistic of frequencies was used. This method also applies to identifying the differences in self-reported language proficiency, which led to language choice between domains such as the family and in a social setting.

Previous studies such as Gal, 1979[1] and Li Wei, 1994[2] offer proof of the emergence of age as a determinant of language choice. This study will use age grading to examine whether language choice does in fact correlate with age variation. In general, age is one of salient factors governing language choice in the Narum speech community Terms of address, for example, are not only determined by relative position but also by age.

Discussion

Prior to examining the distribution of language use and choice, the level of language proficiency in Narum, Sarawak Malay and Malay language was examined. Self-reported proficiency in the Narum language shows that there is considerable difference between the younger and older generations. Table1, 2 and 3 present the self-reported Narum, Sarawak Malay and Malay language proficiency of the younger and older Narum generations.

Table 1 shows the percentages of self-reported Narum language proficiency. The majority of the respondents aged 36 to 56 years and above describe their own level of proficiency in the Narum Language as Very Good and Good. None of the respondents aged 46 to 56 years and above said that their Narum language was Poor. On the other hand some of the younger generation did claim that their Narum Language proficiency level was Poor and Very Poor. This was particularly so in the case of those respondents in the age range of 13-25 years. the self-reported level of proficiency in the Narum language of the younger generation therefore presents as being lower than that of the older generation**.**

Table 1: Proficiency in Narum language

Table 1: I can speak Narum language

			I can speak Narum language.					
			Very good	Good	Satisfactory	Poor	Very poor	Total
age	13-17 years old	Count	2		8	10	7	27
		% within I can speak Narum language.	2.8%		21.6%	43.5%	26.9%	15.0%
	18-25 years old	Count	6	3	8	7	8	32
		% within I can speak Narum language.	8.5%	13.0%	21.6%	30.4%	30.8%	17.8%
	26-35 years old	Count	5	5	3	2	8	23
		% within I can speak Narum language.	7.0%	21.7%	8.1%	8.7%	30.8%	12.8%
	36-45 years old	Count	9	7	7	2	3	28
		% within I can speak Narum language.	12.7%	30.4%	18.9%	8.7%	11.5%	15.6%
	46-55 years old	Count	16	7	6	1		30
		% within I can speak Narum language.	22.5%	30.4%	16.2%	4.3%		16.7%
	56 years and above	Count	33	1	5	1		40
		% within I can speak Narum language.	46.5%	4.3%	13.5%	4.3%		22.2%
Total		Count	71	23	37	23	26	180
		% within I can speak Narum language.	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

However there are large differences in the self reported proficiency in Sarawak Malay language. Table 2 shows that both older and younger generation of the Narum speech community could speak Sarawak Malay very well. In terms of the degree of multilingualism, it should be noted that Sarawak Malay language is a main language in Sarawak.

Table 2 : Proficiency in Sarawak Malay language

Table 2: I can speak Sarawak Malay language

			I can speak Sarawak Malay language.			
			Very good	Good	Satisfactory	Total
age	13-17 years old	Count	24	1	2	27
		% within I can speak Sarawak Malay language.	16.0%	4.0%	40.0%	15.0%
	18-25 years old	Count	29	3		32
		% within I can speak Sarawak Malay language.	19.3%	12.0%		17.8%
	26-35 years old	Count	22	1		23
		% within I can speak Sarawak Malay language.	14.7%	4.0%		12.8%
	36-45 years old	Count	22	6		28
		% within I can speak Sarawak Malay language.	14.7%	24.0%		15.6%
	46-55 years old	Count	23	5	2	30
		% within I can speak Sarawak Malay language.	15.3%	20.0%	40.0%	16.7%
	56 years and above	Count	30	9	1	40
		% within I can speak Sarawak Malay language.	20.0%	36.0%	20.0%	22.2%
Total		Count	150	25	5	180
		% within I can speak Sarawak Malay language.	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

As presented in table 3, where the younger generation is compared with the older generation, the level of proficiency in Malay of the older generation is lower. In Malay language, self-reported proficiency is high among the younger generation.. Malay is the formal and National language and as such is the language medium of education The high level of proficiency claimed in Malay by the younger generation reflects the emphasis on communicative skills and academic and literacy oriented subjects young people would naturally experience in the course of their education.

Table 3 : Proficiency in Malay language

Table 3: I can speak Malay language

			I can speak Malay language.					
			Very good	Good	Satisfactory	Poor	Very poor	Total
age	13-17 years old	Count	21	3	3			27
		% within I can speak Malay language.	37.5%	5.7%	7.9%			15.0%
	18-25 years old	Count	19	10	1	1	1	32
		% within I can speak Malay language.	33.9%	18.9%	2.6%	5.9%	6.3%	17.8%
	26-35 years old	Count	6	11	4	1	1	23
		% within I can speak Malay language.	10.7%	20.8%	10.5%	5.9%	6.3%	12.8%
	36-45 years old	Count	5	10	9	3	1	28
		% within I can speak Malay language.	8.9%	18.9%	23.7%	17.6%	6.3%	15.6%
	46-55 years old	Count	2	12	6	7	3	30
		% within I can speak Malay language.	3.6%	22.6%	15.8%	41.2%	18.8%	16.7%
	56 years and above	Count	3	7	15	5	10	40
		% within I can speak Malay language.	5.4%	13.2%	39.5%	29.4%	62.5%	22.2%
Total		Count	56	53	38	17	16	180
		% within I can speak Malay language.	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

To assess language choice, questions were based on which languages the respondents used with various parties including parents, siblings and friends in their social domains. The findings show that the Narum language continues to be maintained in the speech community because the language is still being used in family and social domains.

Table 4 : Language my mother speaks to me

			age						
			13-17 years old	18-25 years old	26-35 years old	36-45 years old	46-55 years old	56 years and above	Total
Language my mother speaks to me.	1.Narum language(NL)	Count	1	4	7	12	24	34	82
		% within age	3.7%	12.5%	30.4%	42.9%	80.0%	85.0%	45.6%
	2.Malay language(ML)	Count	2	3		1			6
		% within age	7.4%	9.4%		3.6%			3.3%
	3.Sarawak Malay language(SML)	Count	22	18	8	13	4	2	67
		% within age	81.5%	56.3%	34.8%	46.4%	13.3%	5.0%	37.2%
	4.Narum language+SML	Count	1	3	4	1	2		11
		% within age	3.7%	9.4%	17.4%	3.6%	6.7%		6.1%
	5.Other languages included the mixed	Count				1		3	4
		% within age				3.6%		7.5%	2.2%
	6.NL, SML	Count			2			1	3
		% within age			8.7%			2.5%	1.7%
	7.ML,SML	Count		1					1
		% within age		3.1%					.6%
	12.NL, ML, SML,NL+SML	Count	1	3	1				5
		% within age	3.7%	9.4%	4.3%				2.8%
	15.NL,SML,NL+SML	Count			1				1
		% within age			4.3%				.6%
Total		Count	27	32	23	28	30	40	180
		% within age	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 4, 5, 6 and 7 showing the pattern for older-generation language choice suggests that low proficiency in the Narum language of the younger generation can be traced to the language practices of the older generation. Indeed it could be said that proficiency in the languages is plotted as a function of the language choice of adults in the home. It is evident that older-generation language practice maps directly onto the Sarawak Malay language proficiency of the younger generation.

Table 5 : Language my father speaks to me

			age						
			13-17 years old	18-25 years old	26-35 years old	36-45 years old	46-55 years old	56 years and above	Total
Language my father speaks to me.	1.Narum language(NL)	Count		5	6	12	24	32	79
		% within age		15.6%	26.1%	42.9%	80.0%	80.0%	43.9%
	2.Malay language(ML)	Count	2	2	1	1			6
		% within age	7.4%	6.3%	4.3%	3.6%			3.3%
	3.Sarawak Malay language(SML)	Count	19	21	10	9	2	6	67
		% within age	70.4%	65.6%	43.5%	32.1%	6.7%	15.0%	37.2%
	4.Narum language+SML	Count	2	2	2	4	3		13
		% within age	7.4%	6.3%	8.7%	14.3%	10.0%		7.2%
	5.Other languages included the mixed	Count	1			1		1	3
		% within age	3.7%			3.6%		2.5%	1.7%
	6.NL, SML	Count			2			1	3
		% within age			8.7%			2.5%	1.7%
	12.NL, ML, SML,NL+SML	Count	3	2	1	1	1		8
		% within age	11.1%	6.3%	4.3%	3.6%	3.3%		4.4%
	15.NL,SML,NL+SML	Count			1				1
		% within age			4.3%				.6%
Total		Count	27	32	23	28	30	40	180
		% within age	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 6 : Language my sisters and brothers speak to me

			age						
			13-17 years old	18-25 years old	26-35 years old	36-45 years old	46-55 years old	56 years and above	Total
Language my sisters and brothers speak to me.	Narum language(NL)	Count	1	4	1	8	18	29	61
		% within age	3.7%	12.5%	4.3%	28.6%	60.0%	72.5%	33.9%
	Malay language(ML)	Count	2	2		1		1	6
		% within age	7.4%	6.3%		3.6%		2.5%	3.3%
	Sarawak Malay language(SML)	Count	23	21	16	11	5	6	82
		% within age	85.2%	65.6%	69.6%	39.3%	16.7%	15.0%	45.6%
	Narum language+SML	Count		3	3	3	5	2	16
		% within age		9.4%	13.0%	10.7%	16.7%	5.0%	8.9%
	Other languages included the mixed	Count				1		1	2
		% within age				3.6%		2.5%	1.1%
	N language+SML	Count				1	2		3
		% within age				3.6%	6.7%		1.7%
	SML, NL+SML	Count				1			1
		% within age				3.6%			.6%
	NL, ML, SML,NL+SML	Count	1	2	1	1			5
		% within age	3.7%	6.3%	4.3%	3.6%			2.8%
	NL,ML,SML,	Count						1	1
		% within age						2.5%	.6%
	NL,SML,NL+SML	Count			2	1			3
		% within age			8.7%	3.6%			1.7%
Total		Count	27	32	23	28	30	40	180
		% within age	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 7: Language my friends at work/school

			ag						
			13-years	18-years	26-years	36-years	46-years	56 and	Tot
Language friends work/sc speak with	Narum	Cou		1		2	4	1	2
		% within		3.1		7.1	13.3	37.5	12.2
	Malay	Cou	6	4	2	4	1		1
		% within	22.2	12.5	8.7	14.3	3.3		9.4
	Sarawak language(	Cou	1	1	1	1	1	8	8
		% within	51.9	59.4	69.6	57.1	53.3	20.0	49.4
	Narum	Cou		3	1	3	3	8	1
		% within		9.4	4.3	10.7	10.0	20.0	10.0
	Other included the	Cou		1					1
		% within		3.1					.6
	N	Cou				2	3	6	1
		% within				7.1	10.0	15.0	6.1
	ML,S	Cou	4	2	2		1		9
		% within	14.8	6.3	8.7		3.3		5.0
	NL,	Cou	1				1		2
		% within	3.7				3.3		1.1
	SML,	Cou					1	1	2
		% within					3.3	2.5	1.1
	NL, ML,	Cou	1	2					3
		% within	3.7	6.3					1.7
	NL,ML,S	Cou			2			1	3
		% within			8.7			2.5	1.7
	NL,SML,NL	Cou				1			1
		% within				3.6			.6
	ML,SML,NL	Cou	1					1	2
		% within	3.7					2.5	1.1
Tot		Cou	2	3	2	2	3	4	18
		% within	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

The result from language choice among siblings suggests a linear trend towards Sarawak Malay language with earlier exposure. Notable is the discrepancy in language choice with that for adults, with stronger gravitation towards Sarawak Malay language when choosing language with siblings. The results in table 7 of language choice with peer groups show that both younger and older generations chose to use Sarawak Malay language. Malay language is the second highest percentage preferable among friends.

Conclusion

The finding with respect to the age variable was that Narum proficiency appeared to be maintained among the speech community. However proficiency in the Narum language is reducing among the younger generation. There is likely to be a substantial amount of attitudinal component in the self-reported proficiency variables. It is possible to speculate that a main source of difference might lie in the fact that language proficiency is more cognitive in nature, and thus it is bounded by maturational factors associated with first and second language acquisition. On the other hand, language choice is primarily social in nature, and may exhibit more of a dosage relationship with experience. Therefore language choice is a socially mediated variable having to do with ethnic identification, but it is constrained by the limits of proficiency in other languages.

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