Discussion Note

Why bother maintaining languages?
A discussion based on diminishing Chinese dialects in Malaysia

Teresa Wai See Ong, Griffith University

Language maintenance and language shift are vital subfields in sociolinguistics. In Malaysia, past studies have observed a shift from Chinese dialects to Mandarin Chinese in the language use of many young generation Chinese, which has led to the endangerment of some dialects. This situation draws attention to the role and survival of Chinese dialects in Malaysian society, and thereby creates a need to discuss the reasons for maintaining them. However, this is not merely a question of continuing to speak Chinese dialects. More deeply, we need to have conversations about who we are, where our ancestors originated from, and how we can make Chinese dialects more worthwhile for maintenance. This article seeks to elicit support for the language maintenance of small language groups across the globe.

Keywords: language maintenance, Chinese dialects, Malaysia

1 Introduction

Each language spoken across the world represents the unique culture of its users. The loss of a language symbolises the loss of culture. In the present day, children from smaller communities are increasingly speaking dominant languages rather than their own community dialects. UNESCO (2003) estimates that by the end of the 21st century, approximately 90% of the world's languages will be endangered, leading to their disappearance. This is a horrifying situation, which necessitates the serious consideration of issues around language maintenance.

Malaysia is a multilingual, multiethnic, and multicultural country situated in Southeast Asia (Asmah, 1992). Within a population of 32.6 million (Department of Statistics, 2019), there are three major ethnic groups living together. The major ethnic groups are Malays, Indigenous people, and natives of Sabah and Sarawak (69.3%), Chinese (22.8%), and Indians (6.9%), while the remaining 1% are comprised of other ethnic groups. In terms of its linguistic diversity, it is estimated approximately 134 languages are spoken in Malaysia (Simons & Fennig, 2018). Despite Malaysia's dark pre-independence history and past racial riots, its greatest achievement today is demonstrated through different ethnic groups harmoniously living together in a politically stable country with a steadily growing economy.

The Federal Constitution of Malaysia and the National Language Acts 1963/1967 state that every Malaysian is allowed to teach, learn, and speak any languages other than the country's sole national and official language, Bahasa Melayu. This means that language rights are given to all ethnic groups, including the Chinese, to speak their own dialects and mother tongues. Mandarin Chinese has been used as the language of instruction in Chinese-medium primary schools since the early 20th century and was offered as a subject in secondary schools in the 1960s, which reflects the status of Mandarin Chinese as the Chinese community's lingua franca (Albury, 2017; Wang, 2017). In recent years, the enrolment rate of Chinese and non-Chinese students in Chinese-medium primary schools has also steadily climbed (Gill, 2014; "Government to present Chinese schools", 2013), which indicates that Chinese-medium education is gaining popularity in Malaysia. Consequently, many of the young generation Chinese are moving towards speaking Mandarin Chinese rather than Chinese dialects, such as Hokkien, Cantonese, Hakka, Teochew, Hainan, and Taishan (Ting, 2006; Wang, 2016, 2017). This situation is primarily due to influences of globalisation, job opportunities, and the rise of China in the world's economy. Resulting from such a shift is a decline in the use of dialects in many Chinese families (Ding, 2016; Wang, 2017) – the traditional domain in which they are spoken – which raises questions about the role and survival of Chinese dialects in Malaysian society. This situation calls for a discussion regarding the reasons to maintain these dialects.

2 Understanding a community's historical and family roots

According to Fishman (1999), language and ethnicity are closely connected because language is the most vital key to defining ethnicity. A language symbolises a community's culture, history, kinship, and patrimony. Fishman (1999) adds that in the era of modernisation, only the continuous use of languages can evoke a sense of belonging to the community. Aligning with Fishman's statement, Wright (2018) also states that only linguistic communication can reflect a community's identity and contributes to creating it.

In the case of the Chinese community in Malaysia, it is necessary for the young generation to continue speaking the Chinese dialects that were brought by their Chinese ancestors when they came to Malaya (Malaysia after independence in 1957), because these dialects symbolise their ethnolinguistic identity, such as Hokkiens, Cantonese, Teochews, Hakkas, Hainanese, and Taishanese. Hence, it is important for the young generation to know and understand their family history, such as the province their ancestors came from in China and the ethnolinguistic group their ancestors belonged to, rather than following the global trend of speaking Mandarin Chinese, which only claims their origin as broadly Chinese. In addition, 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. As Chinese growing up in a multilingual country, the young generation holds the responsibility to pass their family history on to future generations, as pointed out by Fishman (1989, p. 2), "as much realisation as possible that 'truth' is an elusive handmaiden and is rarely to be found completely in one camp or another".

3 Having multiple identities

This raises the next point of fluid identities. Similar to other scholars who consider identity as fluid, negotiated, contextually embedded, and constructed through interactions (Hall, 1997; King & Ganuza, 2005), Gee (2000) states that people have multiple identities that are constantly changing in a given context. To understand "how identity is functioning for a specific person (child or adult) in a given context or across a set of contexts" (Gee, 2000, p. 101), he develops a four-perspective approach to identity based on different sources of power: nature-identity, institution-identity, discourse-identity, and affinity-identity. Gee (2000, p. 101) emphasises that these four perspectives intertwined with and affect each other when "a given person acts within a given context".

Let's consider for a moment, who Malaysian-Chinese are when they speak Chinese dialects in Malaysian society. First, they would be considered as Malaysians due to their national identity, and second, they would be regarded as having an origin of Chinese ethnicity in the multilingual country. However, being recognised as only Malaysians and Chinese is insufficient for self-identification. As stated above, Chinese dialects represent the Chinese's history and family roots, so it is important for Malaysian-Chinese to be further identified according to their ethnolinguistic group, which is either Hokkiens, Cantonese, Hakkas, Teochews, Hainanese, or Taishanese, so that they are able to claim group membership. These multiple identities play a role in developing their personality and appreciation for the community while promoting the value of respecting different identities among all ethnic groups. In relation to Gee's (2000) theory, these multiple identities are not separated but intertwined with each other in the multilingual setting. On a broader level, these identities represent who Malaysian-Chinese are in today's globalised world.

4 It's a living culture!

In the pursuit of language maintenance in a multicultural country, cross-cultural contact often takes place. Fishman (1989) states that cultural change and language shift between ethnic groups are expected due to power differentials. Nevertheless, these happenings are natural, on-going, and common for cultural continuity. In addition, they serve to contextualise each other in the given setting. When cross-ethnic marriages or migration take place, a language is often lost, but the sense of ethnic continuity remains. For example, many native Tagalog speakers maintain their language in the Philippines while becoming Filipinos. In this case, Fishman claims that the empirical truth can be undone but it does not change the phenomenological truth. The phenomenology of change continues but it is the empirical truth that leads to revival efforts.

For the Chinese growing up in Malaysia, having opportunities to speak Chinese dialects means being part of a living culture. These dialects have cultural and symbolic values and are essential in contributing to the establishment of the Chinese community's social class and status in multilingual and multiethnic Malaysia. The continuous use of Chinese dialects within the Chinese community allow them to feel closer and more comfortable, and ultimately leading them to form a social sense of belonging to the community and close bond between one another. Aligning with Fishman's (1989) statement,

the linguistic cultural values of Chinese dialects will eventually lead the Chinese community to maintain their dialects in the Malay-dominant country so their Chinese culture can be kept alive and their sense of ethnicity retained.

5 Closing comments

Ultimately, rather than continue to discuss the reasons to maintain Chinese dialects, we need to move on to the practical aspects. That is, we need to take action to ensure the continuity of using these dialects in Malaysian society so they do not disappear. Recent studies (Albury, 2017; Ting, 2018; Wang, 2017) have demonstrated favourable attitudes towards Mandarin Chinese as the language representing the Chinese ethnic identity, despite Mandarin Chinese not being a heritage dialect brought by the Chinese when they migrated to Malaya. The question today should not be about which language (Chinese dialects or Mandarin Chinese) the Chinese should speak in Malaysia, as that is up to the individuals. The real questions are "How do we make more space for Chinese dialects to continue growing in multilingual and multiethnic Malaysia?" and "How do we ensure not losing such multilingual practice in this modernised and globalised era?" While I do not yet know the answers and am still searching for them, I have hope based on getting support from all walks of life for language maintenance of not only the Chinese dialects in Malaysia but different languages in the world. In this way, we can do our part for future generations.

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