

CHAPTER 1 : INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of Study

In Malaysia, the three largest ethnic groups are the Malays, Chinese and Indians with each ethnic group having its own language for communication. Based on the Department of Statistics Malaysia, the population of Malaysia in September 2008 was estimated to be 27,728,000, which makes Malaysia the 43rd most populated country in the world (<http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal>). Among this population, 5.44 million Malaysians live in East Malaysia and 21.2 million live in Peninsular Malaysia.

The population of Malays and other Bumiputera groups make up 65% of the population, Chinese 26%, Indians 8% and other ethnic groups 1%. In terms of language, many local languages are used in Malaysia including Bahasa Malaysia as the official language, Chinese (Cantonese, Mandarin, Hokkien, Hakka, Hainan, Foochow), Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Punjabi, and other indigenous languages that include Iban and Kadazan which are most widely spoken in East Malaysia. The same diversity also exists in the religions practised by Malaysians, namely, Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism and Sikhism, among others.

Although ethnic groups tend to maintain their traditional community structures and their mother tongues, they have together created the contemporary Malaysia which is uniquely diverse in its heritage. According to Gupta (2000), the mixed ethnic groups in Malacca such as the Chitties (Indo-Malay), the Kristang (Lusito-Asian), the Straits Chinese (Sino-Malay) and the Muslim Indian group mixed with Arab or Malay, are without a doubt assorted in their inheritance and cultures. In fact, intermarriages among these groups play a vital role in diverting its linguistic structures.

In Malaysia, recent studies on language choice, language maintenance and language shift among minority communities have been conducted by local researchers such as David (1996) on the Malaysian Sindhi community, Mohamad Subakir Mohd Yasin (1998) on the minority Javanese community, David and Mohd Noor (1999) on the Portuguese community of Malacca, David and Naji (2000) on the Malaysian Tamils, and David and Nambiar (2002) on the Malayalees. From the review of studies conducted on language use among the ethnic minorities in Malaysia, it can be summed up that many factors influence the growth and survival of minority languages. According to David (1999), exogamous marriages are common among the educated ethnic minorities and this has become one of the factors leading to language shifts in Malaysia. Furthermore, in her study of language choice among the Sino-Indian minority group, she found that this group tends to shift in one of their mother tongues, especially that of the Tamil language.

On the other hand, several previous studies by Hoffmann (1985), De Jong (1986), Harding and Riley (1986), Arnberg (1987) and S. Barron-Hauwaert (2000) indicate that intermarriage seems to be an ideal background to bring up children bilingually. It is widely believed that children from a mixed parentage grow up to be bilinguals naturally and automatically. However, there is an argument raised among some scholars that many parents of mixed marriages are actually struggling to raise children in two different languages. Scholars conclude that the children are slowly being eroded by the wave of language confusion and one of the home languages tends to emerge as being more dominant. In future it is believed that home languages might lose their significance and may be taken over by a language considered to be a preferred language for them. Arnberg (1991:33) cited that “there is increasing evidence that raising children

bilingually is not as easy as it had earlier been assumed, thus many mixed-language families fall by the wayside, because of their failure to get the child to use or want to use one of the languages actively”. According to Arnberg (1991:91), “unless parents are highly motivated to raise their child bilingually, they tend to give up over time”.

These previous studies have intrigued the researcher to study on language choice among mixed-marriage families by specifically concentrating on marriages among the Malays and Chinese. Ironically, research on mixed-marriages in Malaysia is still inadequate and not well documented. Such limitations in the published literature on intercultural marriages among the Malaysian community need to be acknowledged and calls for a step-up in research in the area.

Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate the pattern of language use and analyze the language choice of Sino-Malay families living in Subang Jaya, Selangor, in a range of domains such as family and school. At the same time, this study would like to discover if there is a possibility of a shift or preference to use languages other than the mother tongues among the members of Sino-Malay mixed marriages.

1.2 Statement of Problem

According to information released by Asia Sentinel online news portal, it is found that about 150,000 mixed marriages occur in Malaysia which is cannot be considered as a small number when compared to the total population of 24 million people of Malaysia (www.asiasentinel.com). The statistics have shown it is evident that mixed marriages do occur and are increasing in Malaysia. As partners of mixed marriages have completely different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, several aspects such as socio cultural values

and ideologies will have to be negotiated in mixed marriages. However in this study, language is the prime concern regarding this mixed marriage community.

According to Dugan, (1988:84) “children of mixed marriage are exposed to more than one language, therefore the problem which arises is “What language should be taught?” Children of mixed marriages are exposed to two different mother tongues of parents and also to additional languages that are taught in the education institutions such as instance, kindergartens and schools. These children might actively use both of the parental mother tongues, while others might use either mother’s mother tongue or father’s mother tongue. Yet, some may use neither of the mother tongues at all but another language of their preference instead. Hence, what factors may influence such a variation? Under what circumstances do some children choose to use both of their parents’ languages while others choose only one or none of them at all? In such a situation, parents may need to make a decision on how to balance their mother tongues between the languages that are available among them. Therefore, it would be interesting to investigate the efforts taken by parents to maintain their mother tongue, if any.

In this study, the aim is to investigate the use of parents’ mother tongues (Malay, Mandarin and Chinese dialects) and the choice of language in selected domains of both parents and children of mixed marriages. With the exposure to the parents’ mother tongues, the medium of instruction at schools, and the exposure to English at schools and their surroundings, this study aims also to find out if there is a preference to use another language instead of their mother tongues. In addition, the study is interested to document the efforts made by parents, if any, to maintain their mother tongues (Malay or Chinese and its dialects) among family members, and the tendency to shift to another language especially among the children.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

In the present study there are three major objectives to elucidate the language environments among the families of Sino-Malay mixed marriages. The objectives of the present study are the following:

1. To identify the language choice of members of Sino-Malay mixed marriage families in selected social domains
2. To study the perception of the children towards the mother tongues of their parents
3. To investigate the parents' attitude towards maintaining their mother tongues

1.4 Research Questions

The research questions are framed based on the above-mentioned objectives. The main research questions addressed in this study are:

1. What is the language choice of Sino-Malay mixed marriage families in the selected domains?
2. What is the perception of the children of Sino-Malay parentage towards their parents' mother tongues?
3. Is there language maintenance of mother tongues or a shift among members of Sino-Malay mixed marriage families?

1.5 Significance of Study

This present study also hopes to make elders of the community realize the significance of mother tongue(s) because language is still considered by many to be a recognition and identity of one's ethnicity. This documentation will not only be beneficial to these particular Sino-Malay families but also to the Malaysian scene in general because many other ethnics do intermarry as well.

The present study also hopes to create awareness among parents and children of their linguistic behavior especially, in maintaining their mother tongues. Members of mixed marriages should be aware that knowing two or more languages may truly give them an advantage in life. Such children, who have the advantage of knowing two different cultures, are able to communicate with a variety of people, and also gain a possible economic benefit in their future path. Hopefully, the findings of the present study also would encourage various institutions to focus on the use of the language of the minority ethnic groups especially in the mass media and education sectors.

Finally, this study aims to shed some light on whether members of participating families of Sino-Malay mixed marriages are inclined to maintain the use of their mother tongues or to shift to other languages. If there is a shift, what are the factors that may influence it? It is hoped that the findings of this study are able to be channelled back to these families to create their awareness and to take stock of their language practice.

1.6 Limitations of the Study

The following are limitations of the present study:

1. This study only focuses on 16 Sino-Malay mixed marriage families. Therefore, it may not be generalizable to the whole Sino-Malay population in Malaysia.
2. The study will not carry out any gender comparison. It aims to describe the preference and choice of two generations, namely, the parents and their children, without focusing on the gender of the participating members.
3. In this study the term ‘mother tongue’ refers to the language that belongs to the parents, that is, their ethnic languages meanwhile the term first language (L1) will be considered as the language that the participants were exposed to since young.

1.7 Conclusion

The parents of mixed-marriage may wish to see the kind of effect on their children's language preferences. It is hoped that this study will be a well worth reading for the researchers and families alike.