

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.0 Introduction

From time immemorial, diasporas have existed all over the world. The word “diaspora” has generally been used to refer to dispersed people groups who live away from their place of origin; in search of land and work, to escape from war, famine, oppression and through forcible repatriation as slaves (Pan, 2000). Among the phenomena of diaspora is the loss of familiarity with their native language and culture and their eventual assimilation into the host country (Heilbron, cited in Wang & Wang 1998) or a tenacious adherence to the parent culture and language in a sustained effort to maintain and preserve what is familiar (Pan, 2000). Pan states that the Chinese dispersal has been part of the diasporic saga mentioned above.

Being a Malaysian of predominantly Chinese descent, the researcher in her own life experience discovered that the Malaysian Chinese who form part of the Chinese diaspora and are commonly referred to as the Overseas Chinese (Heilbron, 1998; Pan, 2000; Ke, 2002; Wang, 2001; Yow, 2006), differ from those of Mainland China. The distinctness of the Malaysian Chinese is expressed in their preferences and priorities such as in their way of thinking, speaking, feeling and living; in short, it is reflected in the Malaysian Chinese way of life. Hou (2006:46) confirms this by stating that the Malaysian Chinese culture has its own unique identity which is witnessed in “the daily phrases used in communication, food and thought” and the Malaysian Chinese today do not share their ancestor’s view of visiting China as “returning to the mother land.” The Malaysian Chinese culture is in fact a product of not only the influence of the rich and diverse surrounding cultures but is also the product of powerful socialization processes which are in force.

Asmah (1982) observed even back then that almost every non-Malay Malaysian is a bilingual or trilingual. This is a result of exposure to and participation in different language-mediated activities and socialization processes. This produces two kinds of Chinese, those for whom English is the dominant language and those for whom Chinese is the dominant language. The specific question that this raises and the focus of the thesis is: do Malaysian Chinese with different dominant languages think alike? And what is the relationship between dominant language use and culture?

As mentioned earlier, the rich and diverse cultures in Malaysia have resulted in the existence of a rich linguistic mosaic representing over a hundred languages and dialects which abound in multilingual Malaysia (David, 2006). Despite the linguistic mosaic and multilingualism, personal observation indicates that dominant language use is brought about not only by the education system but by the language medium used both in and outside the home.

Some past studies reported by Bond (1991) to investigate if Chinese are similar in various political, social and economic settings indicated distinct differences in the choice of marriage partners but greater similarities in values. Bond stated that these studies were far from conclusive and needed verification through further studies. Ye (2000) observed that there is no similarity in thinking among the Malaysian Chinese although there is to date, no study carried out specifically to indicate this. Hence, this present study focusses on the relation between two groups of Malaysian Chinese - the Chinese language dominant and the English language dominant - to find out if there appears to be any differences in the thinking of these two groups of subjects.

### **1.1 Background of the Study**

Living away from mainland China, the Malaysian Chinese have undergone various acculturation processes and are different from Chinese from mainland China.

Although a large portion of Malaysian Chinese are Chinese speaking, proficiency in the use of the Chinese language depends largely on their educational and/or dominant language background. Mandarin as well as other Chinese dialects such as Cantonese, Hokkien, Hakka, Teochiew are still spoken by the Malaysian Chinese.

For the Malaysian Chinese, it is common to find a good number of them speaking at least two or more languages. Asmah (1982) notes even back then that there were also some Malaysian Chinese who could speak four languages. This arises when they speak their mother-tongue which is a Chinese dialect, have Chinese education where Mandarin is the medium of instruction and learns English and Malay as compulsory languages at school while Chinese from urban centres who are not Chinese educated, speak Mandarin and other Chinese dialects with varying degrees of proficiency.

Although English is taught as a second language in Malaysian schools, it is learnt as a third language by many Chinese students who do not speak English at home. On the other hand, in the urban centres, a sizable portion of the Malaysian Chinese are proficient in the English language and have acquired it as a first language at home or as a dominant language when interacting with friends and family. This group of Chinese also educate and immerse their children in the English language with the consequence that most of them are unable to read or write in Chinese. Similarly, the use and level of proficiency in English also varies among the different ethnic Chinese groups. Thus, Ye (2003) and Pan (2000) attribute the cause of wide disparities in perception and world view of the Malaysian Chinese to the language of education as well as the language in dominant use among Chinese Malaysians.

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

In a multicultural, multiethnic and multilingual country such as Malaysia, the need to communicate effectively and amicably is of great importance. Communicative encounters

that are marred by cultural interference, may result in cultural conflict as culture produces expectations, assumptions and attitudes peculiar to each culture. A majority of the Chinese who came to Malaysia as immigrants at the turn of twentieth century have adapted well to their adopted homeland and adopted the traits and customs of the locals. Many straits-born Chinese known as the “Babas and Nonyas” possess cultural traits which in many ways are similar to the local Malays. The Malaysian Chinese are Chinese by ethnicity but are a very diversified group in terms of culture possession. The researcher proposes that this is due to the varying degrees of exposure to the Chinese culture as well as to the rich cultures inherent in the ambient multiracial country.

Among the Malaysian Chinese, it is common to hear of Chinese speakers referring to another Chinese as Chinese-educated or English-educated and drawing preliminary conclusions about the person even before meeting the person mentioned. For example, if one is said to be Chinese-educated, one may expect the person to be more traditional in their way of thinking. It is also not uncommon to hear of Chinese who are Chinese-educated referring to a Chinese who is English-educated as a “banana person” to indicate that the person is Chinese on the outside but white or Caucasian on the inside.

Ye (2003) wrote that the products of Chinese schools have a tendency to disdain English educated Chinese as they were viewed to have distanced themselves from the Chinese cultural heritage. Therefore, the English-educated Chinese Malaysians are disparaged by the Chinese-educated Malaysians as “er maozi” which means a second-class people. Viewed in this context, the Malaysian Chinese should be accorded closer scrutiny.

### **1.3 Purpose of Study**

The Chinese diaspora can be found all over the world. Briefly, diaspora is used to refer to people who have migrated from their original land (cf chapter 2, section 2.1.2). The

Malaysian Chinese who are part of the larger group of people known as the Overseas Chinese (Wang, 2001: Yow, 2006), display a vibrant and unique mixture of cultural retention and adaptation to their place of stay. As stated by Johnson (2000), cultural retention and adaptation is dependent on their core world view. Furthermore, pervasiveness of main stream culture, intermarriage, increase in educational and workplace interaction have exerted influence on the cultural identities and discourse practices that have evolved.

Therefore, the study uses the Malaysian Chinese diaspora to examine if Malaysian Chinese think alike and to discover if the Sapir Whorfian Hypothesis is manifested to a limited extent in the ethnically same but linguistically different Chinese in Malaysia. This study seeks to discover if there is any linguistic evidence that seems to suggest what kinds of differences (if any) exist between Chinese language dominant and English language dominant Malaysian Chinese.

Since languages are said to encode cultures (Swiderski, 1993: Johnson, 2000) which in turn possess their unique discourse patterns to convey differing world views, it is hoped that the analysis of the patterns of communication utilized by subjects would provide insights that help towards answering the questions posed in this research. Johnson (2000) is of the view that discourse patterns which constitute the heart of the pragmatics of language, play a crucial role when cultural backgrounds are considered. Similarly, Holmes (2001) states that research on patterns of interaction have evidently shown the intertwining between language, culture and perception.

Specifically this study investigates:

- i. whether there are differences in the patterns of communication among Chinese language dominant Chinese Malaysians and English language dominant Chinese Malaysians. This would be done by finding out whether differences exist in the

world views of Malaysian Chinese with differing first languages or dominant language background (dominant language used while communicating with friends and family).

- ii. Whether and in what ways the cultural and/or psychological aspects of framing affect respondents' discourse.
- iii. How and to what extent do the frames reflect the world view of the respondents.

These research questions are discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

#### **1.4 Significance of Study**

This study is essentially about the relationship between language, culture, context and the world view a particular language and culture affords as a result of the social cultural practices undergone by the respondents. Thus, it is hoped that this study will provide a better understanding of the role a dominant culture plays in intercultural communication as a result of the socialization process.

Investigating the world views of the different groupings of respondents may provide some insight into the Malaysian Chinese diaspora experience and observe its influence on the Malaysian Chinese balance of cultural and language retention and world view as a result of the enculturation.

The findings will provide a deeper understanding of what language can do and what it represents to enable us to better use it to achieve our varied purposes. Recognizing the influence of language and culture on thought and behaviour then is of critical importance.

To investigate if the study will also provide some data needed to explore the language-world view relations that was raised by Sapir-Whorf which till today remains a subject of controversy. Additionally, Fantini (1991) strongly believes that individuals exposed to a second language develop an expanded vision of the world as knowledge of more than one language enables the individual to participate with others from different cultural

groups. A study such as this may help to throw light on disquieting questions about one's own perceived values and assumptions. As Fantini (1991:115) points out, studying the differences in language dominance among two groups both coming from the same culture of origin is an "excellent way to understand language and culture as mediators of our 'knowing'."

Teachers and language planners also need to be aware of the significant role which culture plays in the English Language classroom and guide students to be aware of the culture inherent in language as well as the different cultures among Malaysians as language represents the deepest manifestation of a culture and value system. By so doing, education will provide the necessary tools for students to be able to function outside the classroom situation and be both culturally and communicatively competent in today's multilingual, multiethnic and multicultural society.

Current world events have affirmed that despite the diversities and differences displayed by various groups of people the world over, our lives are inextricably interconnected. The world today is a global village as it has been "shrunk" by the telecommunication and communication revolution and distances and boundaries between countries are no longer barriers to disagreements, cooperation or communication. Thus, the beliefs, world views and actions of any people have great impact on the entire world be it desirable or undesirable. Therefore, the need for understanding, tolerance and harmony is all the more pressing at this point of time than ever before. Thus, it is hoped that the study would help to promote among Malaysians and others, a better understanding of cultural themes and discourse practices of the differing groups of Chinese. In sum, the researcher hopes that the study would be able to contribute in a small way, towards promoting inter and intra racial harmony in Malaysia and provide useful insights into language use and its role in influencing the culture of different groups within multilingual societies.

## **1.5 The Structure of the Thesis**

Chapter One provides an outline of the relevant aspects of the study such as the existence of diaspora in the world with the Malaysian Chinese community being part of this world wide Chinese diaspora, the influence of the Malaysian Education Policy on the Malaysian Chinese and language use. It also discusses briefly about the Malaysian Chinese who are ethnically similar but are dissimilar in their perception and orientation which make them relevant subjects for the study. To provide an outline for the thesis, the chapter ends with a summary of each chapter in the thesis.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the language situation in Malaysia, discusses aspects of bilingualism relevant to the Malaysian context as well as the five core concepts in language which are integral to this study: knowing more than one language, culture, world views, thought and context.

Chapter 3 begins by providing a brief overview of Chinese culture and development. Included is a discussion of the Chinese family, the ten sub-domains or aspects subsumed under the domain of family, the Chinese mindset and collective wisdom, harmony. It concludes with a brief discussion of the current trends and the rise of China in the world today.

Chapter 4 is about the research design and methodology of the study. It discusses about the various context represented in the study, the stimulus, sampling, the various research instruments used as well as the data collection procedure.

Chapter 5 presents the analysis of the Social attitude survey and the various patterns of communication utilized by subjects for Interview 1 or Narrative Interview. The chapter discusses about the main patterns of communication utilized by both groups of subjects. It suggests that there is a difference in its usage as a result of the different cultural



orientations which also represents the world views of subjects. Discrepancies in the responses of some subjects from both groups suggest the utilization of the combination frame where subjects were able to move within two cultural schemas.

Chapter 6 presents the analysis of the various patterns of communication utilized by subjects for Interview 2 or Structured interview. It compares the main patterns of communication utilized by both groups of subjects and discusses the similarities and differences inherent in both groups of subjects. Utilization of the patterns of communication by both groups of subjects suggest that convergence of views were likely in aspects which are highly popular among Chinese such as achievement in education and the practice of face. However, in aspects such as centrality of family and filial piety, differences between both groups were observable as subjects were divided along lines with regard to the concept of self. Even where similarities exist in the use of patterns of communication, the focus on self was not overshadowed by collective agency. In both interviews, discrepancies in responses occur in both groups of subjects which again suggest the existence of superimposed frames.

Chapter 7 deals primarily with the analysis of frames for the Narrative and Structured interviews. The analysis presented in this chapter demonstrates the existence of different types and levels of frames utilized by subjects. Analysis of surface linguistic elements indicate the existence of differing structures of expectations. Chapter 7 also confirms the existence of the superimposed frame in the verbalization of a few but recurrent subjects from both groups. Findings strongly suggest that these subjects were utilizing the superimposed frame as a result of possible cultural adaptation and enculturation.

Chapter 8 summarizes the findings of the study. It describes the differences and similarities in communicative patterns and frames utilized by subjects from the two different grouping in relation to the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. Although there were

similarities, the differences were observable and are possibly a result of different dominant language use. Knowledge of another language may not provide knowledge of the culture encapsulated in the language. Rather, access to the language and culture probably is a better indicator to biculturalism. The chapter also discusses about the question of identity among Malaysian Chinese and its manifestation through the choice of language patterns and frames used. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the relevance of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and the influence of context on the language situation among Malaysian Chinese today.