When is English not the right choice in Sarawak?



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A discussion of language choices in a multilingual region of Malaysia

SARAWAK is a Malaysian state located on the island of Borneo. More than 20 languages are spoken there among only 1.99 million people in Sarawak (Malaysia, Department of Statistics, 1998). People who visit Sarawak for the first time are often baffled and intrigued by the diversity of languages and the ease with which Sarawakians switch between them. To add to the complexity of language choice, there is also some competition between English and Standard Malay for dominance in language use.

This paper considers the reasons for the complex language scenario in Sarawak, the social implications of language choices, and the important personal characteristics to consider in making language choices.

Language complexity

Visitors to Sarawak can get by with English, but if they want to be involved in the cultural life of the people, they have to know when to speak what language. Language choice is complex because of the language and the ethnic diversity in Sarawak, differential proficiency in shared languages, and the tension between the roles of English and Malay.

Sarawak has three major ethnic groups. The Natives consist of ten major sub-groups who speak mutually unintelligible languages, such as the Iban, Bidayuh and Melanau. The Chinese constitute ten dialect groups which are also mutually unintelligible, for example, Foochow, Hokkien and Hakka. They have a standard Chinese language, but not all Chinese know it. The third group, the Malays, speak Sarawak Malay with regional dialect variations in the state. None of these ethnic groups is overwhelmingly dominant numerically, and so none of their languages prevail as the common language of communication.

Communication in the ethnically heterogeneous state is possible because Sarawakians speak not only their own languages, but also English and Standard Malay. However, it cannot be assumed that everyone in Sarawak knows English or Standard Malay. Proficiency in these two languages depends on the language policies prevailing at the time the people were in school. Some older people did not receive any formal education because the Brooke family, which ruled Sarawak from 1841, did not pay much attention to schooling. It was only after Sarawak was ceded to the East India Company in 1946, after World War II, that the education system was streamlined.

In addition to the everyday complexities, when deciding on which language to use one must take into consideration the political implications of using English and Standard

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078401001079 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Malay. English was the official language during British rule, but Standard Malay took over this role when Sarawak joined Malaysia in 1963. Standard Malay is also the national language, a symbol of national identity. The Malaysian government wants Standard Malay to be the common language for the country's linguistically diverse people.

The implementation of the national language policy through formal education has succeeded in making the majority of Sarawakians literate in Standard Malay. However, Standard Malay has not gained popularity as the language for interethnic communication in Sarawak, and is not even the preferred choice of the Malay community there. They reserve Standard Malay for communication with West Malaysians and for official purposes, partly because its use was enforced by the Federal government based in West Malaysia. In informal interactions, there has been a clear demarcation along the lines of "Sarawak Malay is for us, but Standard Malay is for West Malaysians".

The practice of using English, as established during a century of British rule, was not easy to erase. There were the benefits of English-medium education in the form of overseas scholarships and career advancements, and Sarawakians with an English educational background did not want to lose their elite status (Leigh, 1974). Furthermore, English has significant utilitarian value as the language of international relations, tertiary education and more recently the Internet. Thus, the full adoption of Standard Malay as the official language in Sarawak did not take place until 1985, and English is still used in law courts and state parliamentary sessions. It is also the *de facto* official language in the commercial sector.

The social implications of language choice

Language choice has far-reaching implications in the maintenance of good ethnic relations. Language use plays a major role in the development of social identity in general (Eastman, 1985) and ethnic identity in particular (Giles & Johnson, 1981).

In interethnic group interactions, in an attempt to preserve racial harmony, people in Malaysia are careful not to exclude people by using languages they do not understand. Excluded people may feel that they are the objects of ridicule and criticism, thus engendering ill-feeling. At the back of the mind of every Malaysian is the hope that the May 1969 racial riots in West Malaysia will not be repeated. Mutual language convergence reduces cultural distinctiveness.

As English is not the first language of any ethnic group, it is free of ethnic bias. Thus, English is a favoured choice in interethnic communication. Standard Malay is not, because it is perceived by non-Malays more as a language of the Malays than a language of Malaysians. The Chinese, in particular, find it unthinkable to speak Malay with another Chinese.

While English may be a more ethnically-neutral language than Standard Malay, it is not always the right language choice in Sarawak. Some people may not understand English, while others may regard the use of English as a rejection of their national identity. On one occasion, while on a research field trip, a Malay participant insisted on speaking Standard Malay to me. He asked me why I could master English but still could not speak Malay proficiently, implying that I was not a true Malaysian.

In addition, Sarawakians who speak English to members of their own ethnic community may be perceived as rejecting their ethnic roots, and criticised for not taking pride in their language and ethnic identity. For example, a Chinese participant having strong affiliation with China objected to his Chinese colleague speaking English to him. He chided her, asking: "How can you call yourself a Chinese when you don't know how to speak Chinese?" This participant had a Chinese-medium background. However, Sarawakians with an English educational background actually like to use English.

There are both positive and negative social implications of using English. When English is used in the right contexts, it is perceived as a language of prestige and progress, and associated with high educational attainment, status and Western ways of living. The use of English conveys respect by attributing these desired social characteristics to a person. Nevertheless, Sarawakians who speak only English may be perceived as distant, arrogant, boastful of their English-speaking skill, and betrayers of their ethnic and national identities. An awareness of the social meanings of languages is therefore needed in order to make appropriate language choices.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078401001079 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Considerations for language choice

The fundamental purpose of taking such care over language choice in Sarawak is to ensure that communication can take place in a common language. When interlocutors have more than one common language, the question of language preferences arises. To identify the interlocutors' preferred language(s), it is necessary to look at some of their personal characteristics, including ethnicity, age, educational level, job status, and rural or urban origin.

Ethnicity. Knowing the interlocutors' ethnicity enables one to gauge their language preferences and proficiency. The Chinese and Natives tend to have a better command of English than Malay. The Malays usually speak both English and Malay. The ethnic markers are: (a) place of origin, because the different ethnic groups settled in different parts of Sarawak; (b) accent and language choice; (c) physical features; (d) attire, for example, Malay women usually wear the headscarf and traditional dress; and (e) name, for example, Mohammad Annuar is a Malay, Douglas Jerukan is a Native, and Wong Chung Kee is a Chinese.

Age. Sarawakians have differing proficiency in English and Standard Malay due to the progressive implementation of Standard Malay as the medium of instruction. In Sarawak, Standard Malay was introduced as a subject in school in 1969 from Primary 1 till Form 1. Thus, Sarawakians born before 1956 do not know Standard Malay. It is better to use English with them. The next major change was the progressive replacement of English and Chinese by Standard Malay as the medium of instruction beginning from Primary 1 in 1977 and ending at Form 6 (equivalent of British A-level) in 1989. Thus, Sarawakians aged 30 and below are usually more proficient in Standard Malay than in English, unless they speak English outside the school environment.

Educational attainment. Proficiency in English tends to increase with educational attainment. Even at Malaysian universities where Standard Malay is the medium of instruction, students improve their command of English through constant exposure to books in English.

Job status. Since the supporting staff have lower educational attainment, people tend not to use English with them in order to save them the embarrassment of struggling to speak the language. English is perceived as a "language of the bosses" because executives tend to have a better command of English. Moreover, most of the older employees had an English educational background. General observations indicate that people tend to use English with clients dressed in business coats because they look like officers.

Rural or urban origin. In rural areas the older people did not receive much formal education. If one is unable to speak their ethnic language, then it may be sufficient to use colloquial Malay in interethnic communication. In urban areas, language choices are not as limited.

Conclusion

The ability to make right language choices in Sarawak is acquired through experience and familiarity. When the assessment of personal characteristics fails to suggest appropriate languages, code-switching is used to explore interlocutors' language preferences or proficiency. When there is a mismatch of language repertoires, people may speak their own languages while imitating the accent of their interlocutors. It is the thought of accommodation which counts. ■

Note

I would like to acknowledge the help of Dr Jack Li in preparing this paper.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078401001079 Published online by Cambridge University Press