

THE MAINTENANCE OF MALAYSIA'S MINORITY LANGUAGES

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Abstract

Malaysia, especially the states of Sabah and Sarawak are home to numerous indigenous languages. According to the Ethnologue Report for Malaysia (2009), Sabah is said to have 52 and Sarawak 46 languages. But among these many languages, many are spoken by a small population. These are in danger of facing extinction due to migration, attitudinal, social, educational and economic factors, mainly. This situation is similar to the many languages which are dying today worldwide. Since the Malay language (Bahasa Malaysia) is a potent force in bringing together the various Bumiputra and Muslim groups, the fate of native languages of these disparate groups is uncertain or worse doomed to die. However, measures by speakers of indigenous languages who comprise a sizeable number, for example, in the case of Sabah, Kadazan, Bajau, Bisaya and Murut languages may still be saved if they are maintained through concerted efforts by the affected communities and if government agencies help to play their part. This paper will discuss the various practical steps that may be undertaken by concerned individuals, the elders and leaders of the target minority communities themselves, language scholars and the state and federal governments to help maintain the minority indigenous languages, with particular emphasis on those from Sabah and Sarawak.

Key words- minority language, identity, linguistic diversity, survival, loss

Introduction

Multilingualism and multiculturalism are indeed assets for a country and its people. The two contribute to the versatility and heterogeneity of a country's human landscape. Today, besides the most powerful or influential languages, there are numerous languages which are rarely given due or any recognition, because those who speak these languages are numerically inferior and they have no clout, politically, economically and socially. Therefore the languages which are

part of their heritage and identity walk the road to extinction, never to be retrieved later. They are forever lost. According to Skutnabb-Kangas, “Languages are today being killed and linguistic is disappearing at a much faster pace than ever before in human history” (1999, p.188). Should this happen in today’s world of the internet, print and electronic media? Although many indigenous languages which have become minority languages face an uphill task to remain relevant and viable, there is still hope to maintain territorially-based minority languages whose speakers exceed a certain critical number in a limited, but hopefully lasting, way confined to the areas where the speakers are concentrated. According to the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, a minority language is one which is traditionally used within a given region of a state by citizens of that state who comprise a group numerically smaller than the rest of the population of the state (2010).

Globalization is unfortunately a threat to languages and cultures which are already vulnerable. It tends to favor certain languages which are more advantageous from the perspectives of education, occupation, socialization, urbanization and economics. In the case of Malaysia, Bahasa Malaysia- the national language, and English which is officially considered a strong second language for education are two dominant languages, Malaysians cannot afford to be not proficient, in varying degrees, in these languages. Even so, the cultural systems together with the minority languages of the linguistic minorities need not fade into oblivion. They can coexist without becoming a threat to the national language or majority groups.

Speakers of indigenous languages in Malaysia feel strongly about the preservation of their languages. Datuk Amar Leonard Linggi Jugah, a prominent Sarawak leader, asserts that every Malaysian has the duty “to preserve, protect and promote the cultural heritage of the 26 indigenous communities in Sarawak so as to enrich the cultural heritage of our nation and to promote national unity,” in a plenary paper he delivered at the Borneo International Conference on Language and Literature: Unity in Diversity 2010. By extension we may include the various indigenous languages of Sabah, as being worthy of our attention to safeguard them. This perspective is indubitably in sync with the increasingly popular 1Malaysia concept introduced by the Prime Minister. A language whether it is considered a majority or minority language is, according to the above Sarawakian leader, a window through which we are able to understand the mind of each community.

Empirical Case Studies

Efforts by the Kristang Community of Malacca

Let us be familiar with how a few minority communities in Malaysia strive to keep its language and heritage alive. In the historical state of Malacca, there is the Portuguese-Eurasian community who are also known as the Kristangs. Their language is Kristang. This community which is largely Christian (Roman Catholic) has been taking many proactive measures to preserve their language. Their task may have been made easier since the small community have

been given their own settlement to live in. This Portuguese settlement affords the opportunity to practice their culture, religion and way of life. This settlement is often used to promote tourism, especially during their religious festivals related to the sea and fishermen. The Settlement also has a museum and a souvenir shop which sells books on their history and related items.

The Kristangs have the Malacca Portuguese Eurasian Association to handle matters related to their welfare. The Association maintains an active website which provides relevant information on the Kristang people and their language. A prominent Kristang activist, Joan Marbeck has produced three publications: *Ungu Adanza* (An Inheritance), *Linggu Mai* (Mother Tongue) and the Kristang Phrasebook. Besides, she is credited with writing probably the only play in Kristang, called *Seng Marianne* (Without Marianne). She was also instrumental in staging a musical in this language- *Kazamintu no Praiya* which translates to 'Wedding on the beach.' She has also produced a Kristang speech and song CD.

Kristang scholars had come together for a conference themed **SAVE OUR PORTUGUESE HERITAGE** which was held in 1995. The proceedings of the Conference were later published. Two Kristang scholars, A.N. Baxter and Patrick de Silva, had teamed up to come up with the invaluable *Kristang-English Dictionary* (2004). Baxter (1988) has also published *A grammar of Kristang (Malacca Creole Portuguese)*.

The small community which has made the Portuguese Settlement are doing the right things to keep their culture, traditions and language alive to stave off any foreseeable threat to the survival of their culture, identity and language (for a more detailed and an extended discussion on the Kristang community, please refer to Haja Mohideen and Shamimah Mohideen, 2008).

The Bidayuh community in Sarawak

A study undertaken by Beatrice and Lilly (2010) on language shift among the Bidayuh younger generation in Sarawak includes the language maintenance awareness and activities conducted by the Bidayuh community in Kampung Semeba in the Padawan District Municipal Council in the Kuching Division. It has a large percentage of the Bidayuh ethnic group.

The respondents of their study were in favor of the language being spoken and believed the future of their language depended on every Bidayuh individual. They wanted to have more reading materials in the language. They believed that songs in Bidayuh helped to preserve the language. In fact, a few young group bands had come up with their own song albums in CDs and VDs which play an important role in staving off language loss. Their Sunday prayers are held in Bidayuh. Community meetings are discussed in Bidayuh. Bidayuh terms were promoted through their handicrafts. The respondents were acutely aware that their language was their symbol and gave them their identity. They had a positive attitude towards their native language as they were not embarrassed to converse in Bidayuh with fellow Bidayuh speakers even in the presence of non-Bidayuh speakers.

Measures for maintenance

Every human language, be it a major language or minor, influential or lesser known, is unique. While major and economically advantageous languages do not face the problems of losing out or becoming irrelevant, the minority ones certainly face an uphill task to remain as a truly living language. Nevertheless, if we consciously choose to ignore the survival of these minority languages, we become responsible for their linguistic genocide. Let us consider the various possibilities that the speakers of these endangered languages and the authorities can do to prevent them from being lost any time soon. The present researcher has identified the following from his readings, observations and his own thoughts on the subject.

The internet is a powerful medium. The internet savvy among the minority speakers can create a website and provide all the essential information about their respective communities. An example is the website- www.kadayanuniverse.com on the Kedayan community who are spread out in both Sabah and Sarawak. Abdur-Razaq Lubis, an expert on the ethnic Mandailing community mainly found in Perak and Selangor, maintains a website [www.mandailing](http://www.mandailing.com) which includes various aspects of this community. Crystal (2000) advocates the use of technology to make the language continually visible.

A page on social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter may be created where the community's members may interact in their native language. Even code switching between their heritage language and the influential languages, for example, Bahasa Malaysia and English, in social networking sites is still a healthy development which will not hasten the demise of their first language.

The affected communities should possess basic literacy in their languages. Fishman (1980, p. 169) forcefully declares as follows: "Minority language maintenance increasingly requires literacy....., minority ethnolinguistic groups need to be literate in their mother tongue (as well as in some language of wider communication)....."

Minority language speakers need to practice functional bilingualism/multilingualism. While acquiring proficiency in the languages which are more practically beneficial to them for educational and social reasons, they should continue to use their indigenous languages, at least in their places of origin and among fellow indigenous people. They may code switch between their native and the dominant languages they are familiar with. If the natives do not use them, they will lose them and they will not leave these heritage languages for their posterity. However small the number of speakers may be, they need to make it a point to use their language as the primary language for many purposes, social and religious, at home, in their villages and the surrounding areas. Even the refugees from Kampuchea residing in Malaysia are trying to preserve their customs and language on foreign soil. Indigenous communities within the country, therefore,

will certainly be able preserve theirs in a more conducive climate. Every minority linguistic community can certainly help itself at least at a microlevel.

The government, for its part can do a number of things which will directly or indirectly contribute to the maintenance and revival of the country's minority languages. The state government of Malacca has done much for the preservation of three minority, but historically significant groups: the Kristang, Baba-Nyonya and Chitty communities. These communities have their own museums which showcase their culture, traditions and language.

Specific areas of a state may have a single heritage museum or cultural center which has artifacts associated with the people living there. The museums will create an awareness of and an interest in the history, language and local customs of the residents. This will not only benefit sociologists and anthropologists, but also serve as places of attraction for visitors, both local and foreign.

The electronic media may serve as a powerful tool to halt the disintegration of minority languages. A separate television channel just for the minority languages may be considered. This channel may try to accommodate all the living languages, but otherwise struggling to survive in a sea of languages.

Similarly, a separate radio station may be set up to broadcast programs in these languages. Broadcasting songs and programs associated with their work and culture will instill interest in the people to understand and appreciate their identity and culture. It is worthwhile to note that ASTRO, a private television company has among its various channels, two radio channels- Channel 869 Radio Bayu, playing local songs and music from Sabah and Channel 870 Radio Kenyalang, playing songs in the various indigenous languages of Sarawak. This is an admirable effort by the company to provide listening entertainment to the people of these two states where we have the most number of endangered languages.

Those who are literate in minority languages should write the folklore, poetry, proverbs and stories which may then be translated into major languages for a wider readership. A dictionary of vocabulary items in the threatened languages and their translation into BM and English may be undertaken. One such dictionary is *The Bidayuh- English Dictionary* produced by William, N. (1988), as cited in Beatrice and Lilly (2010). The *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka* which is Malaysia's national language and literature agency should be able to play an increasing role in this. It has, to its credit, published *Antologi Cerpen Tuntut*, a compilation of eight short stories, related to the orang asli. The anthology was produced by Mahat China who belongs to the Semai community of the orang asli. Such a compilation, though in BM, will help to understand the various orang asli communities better. In a survey carried out by Lasimbang, Miller and Otigil (1992), there was much interest for more Kadazan literature as shown by the parents (71%). The respondents wanted to read old Kadazan stories, folk tales and Bible stories in the order mentioned here.

The corporate sector too may contribute their part to creating awareness of the endangered languages by publishing popular stories about their community. An admirable effort is that of the involvement of Exxon Mobil, together with the United Nations' Children's Fund and the Malaysian Ministry of Education in producing a written collection of children's folklore pertaining to the orang asli community, belonging to the Temuan, Semai, Mah Meri, Jakun and Semelai tribes, albeit in BM (*The Sun*, October 21, 2010, p.17).

Religious sermons in churches and mosques may be delivered in the local minority languages if the majority of the speakers come from these backgrounds. In Sabah, for example, the church uses the Kadazan language among the Kadazan communities. Lasimbang, Miller and Otigil (1992) suggest that the church expand its use of the language to include Bible stories

The numerically dominant minority indigenous languages may be used alongside the national language in street signs and public notices.

The family domain plays an instrumental role in realizing a minority language's linguistic security through "the socialization of children into the language through the child's extended family and kinship group....." (Rannut, 1999, p. 111).

Preschool provision in the minority community's language "can play a significant role in minority language revival and language maintenance" (Cummins, 1995, p.22). Surveys conducted in New Zealand during the late 1970s showed that Maori was in danger of disappearing within one generation, and so the government acted to provide preschool programs for Maori children exclusively in Maori (Cummins, 1995). Allard and Landay stress thus: "In ethnolinguistic minorities, both the family and the school have an important role to play in the formation of beliefs which will favor first language learning and maintenance" (1992, p.192). In order to promote the Kadazan language in Sabah, Lasimbang, Miller and Otigil (1992) encourage the development of Kadazan language materials for use at pre-school level.

The home languages of large ethnic minority groups numbering more than 20,000 may be taught as a single subject in elementary education if parents request native language instruction and if the authorities consider it feasible. This may be done at least from grade 1-3. The teaching of pupils' own language (POL) is widely recognized in many treaties and documents, for example, Article 5(1) of the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education and Article 14 of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (De Varennes, 1999). If officially organized lessons cannot be provided, the community must take the initiative to impart native language instruction in a surau/mosque, church or community hall outside school hours.

Public authorities, including those providing healthcare services, need to be able to use the minority language of a substantial number of speakers in an area. It is emphasized that "states have a positive obligation to provide public services, benefits and privileges in the language of a specific minority in appropriate circumstances- especially where the numbers and concentration

of the speakers of a minority language and the state's resources make this a viable option" (De Varennes, 1999, p. 127). In the case of local districts where there is a concentration of specific minority groups, local authorities ought to try to provide a number of services which may include the following: 1. Making available forms and official documents in bilingual versions- the national language and the dominant minority language of a certain area, 2. Accepting forms and enquiries in the specific minority language and responding to them in that language, and 3. Employing a small number of staff who may be able to interact with the target linguistic minority in the local government offices (De Varennes, 1999).

The speakers of the minority communities who have left their native places should maintain close network ties with members of their communities wherever they may live. They need to visit their villages and longhouses to maintain their ties.

It is essential that linguistic minorities attempt to keep their culture intact. There is a strong connection between culture maintenance and language maintenance. Culturally vibrant societies have a better chance of maintaining their languages. In the Kenyah community in Sarawak, for example, the names for their musical instruments and traditional dances are still being used in the Kenyah language. *Kancet lasan* means 'warrior dance,' *keringut* is 'flute,' *sampe bio* is 'big guitar,' and *jatung otang* is a wooden xylophone, for example. A minority community's leaders and elders need to strive to maintain both their culture and language together.

Newspapers can carry special feature articles on minority Malaysian communities so that fellow Malaysians may have a greater understanding and awareness of their languages, history and cultures. The *Berita Harian*, a newspaper in BM must be congratulated for its series of articles on lesser known communities in their Sunday edition. In their Sunday magazine section on 10 October, for example, there was an article featuring the Bisaya community in Sabah. There was very useful information about their history and examples from the Bisaya language and their translation into BM. This is a commendable effort towards national integration.

Two local daily newspapers in Sabah, namely, the *New Sabah Times* and *Daily Express* include a few pages in the Kadazan Dusun language. This has been the practice for a very long time. This effort will sustain and maintain the language in areas where it is widely used. Similarly, the newspapers which are circulated in other areas, where other communities live in sizeable numbers, may include a one-page spread of news and features concerning a particular larger linguistic minority community. For example, in the Beaufort area of Sabah, there is a large Bisaya community,

Certain universities, especially the two universities in Sabah and Sarawak which have among them 52 and 44 living languages, scattered all over the two multiethnic states, could set up a department of ethnic minority studies to conduct research, document these languages and record the speakers' history and cultural practices for future generations. Article 30 of the draft

Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights stresses that languages and cultures of all language communities must be the subject of study and research at university level (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1999). In this respect, a journal of minority languages will help to sustain academic interest in them.

Students taking sociolinguistics courses may be given assignments to conduct research on lesser known Malaysian communities to study their language and culture. This will help in national integration.

Conferences on minority languages and publishing the proceedings will help to instill scholarly interest in them.

A minority languages' week/month may be held on a yearly or biennially basis to create awareness of the numerous minority languages and the peoples in the country. In the week/month-long campaign, the arts and crafts and cultures of the speakers of these languages may be showcased, documentaries about the people and their environment shown on television and their languages explained. A photography exhibition on these lesser known communities may be held. Books published in these languages may be exhibited and the authors given due recognition.

An annual or biennial gathering of target linguistic minorities from the two states may be held, during which there could be story telling sessions, songs and poetry recitation in the target language, besides their cultural activities. Such a gathering is expected to bring together members of the community who live outside the two states and even those who live overseas. Such an event can also be included in the tourism calendar. The *Festa San Pedro* (Feast of St. Peter), for example, which is celebrated by the Malaccan Portuguese community in the Portuguese Settlement in Malacca has been capable of bringing together the community's members from far and near.

Bahasa Malaysia, the national language, can be a truly Malaysian language for all if attempts are made to include some vocabulary items from the endangered indigenous languages of Sabah and Sarawak in its lexicon. Such an accommodation of loanwords may help to maintain these marginalized languages in some minimal form.

The attitude of minority language speakers towards their own languages is critical for the languages' survival. It must be borne in mind that linguistically all languages are equal. There is no question of superiority or inferiority. A language is associated with the identity, legacy, history and culture of a people. The high instrumental value of BM and English does not justify the eclipse or demise of minority languages.

Conclusion

The suggestions outlined here will no doubt lead to an increase in cultural and linguistic diversity. But this is inevitable as diverse human communities are involved. But we can at least make serious efforts to maintain the major minority languages in the country. It is difficult to maintain oral forms of indigenous languages, except verbally. Minority language maintenance advocates need to be practical and acknowledge the serious constraints involved. The multiplicity of languages in Sabah and Sarawak and efforts to maintain the major ones there need not and should not lead to ethnic divisiveness. They contribute to the linguistic richness of Malaysia with Bahasa Malaysia at the helm

The various suggestions put forward here are not aimed at segregating or marginalizing the affected minority groups, but rather to integrate them with fellow Malaysians while not abandoning one's roots. We ought to consider each language as a resource worth preserving or supporting. There is really no need to shift from their heritage language to the dominant national language. The key to the survival of the minority language is to preserve it while striving to excel in BM and English. The temptation for indigenous communities for shifting to BM must be really strong. But at what expense? Loss of a linguistic community's heritage, identity and culture? The 1Malaysia concept, which has become the unifying slogan for all Malaysians, is inclusive of all groups, big and small. The maintenance of endangered languages is indubitably in conformity with the 1Malaysia clarion call. The concept is definitely against the assimilation of various indigenous languages and peoples towards homogenization. Just because the minority language speakers do not have a voice in a complex multilingual setting, this is no justification to let their languages and cultures fade into oblivion.

Malaysia was formed in 1963. According to a prominent sociolinguist, Asmah (1979, p. 23), the early language planners had already envisaged that there was "room for every language under the Malaysian sun" (as cited in Lasimbang, Miller and Otigh, 1992). In his message to the 61st United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the President of this dominant political party in the ruling coalition and who is also the country's prime minister emphasized that there should be respect and fairness for all communities in Malaysia (*The Star*, 20 October, 2010, p.1). This may be correctly interpreted to mean that such respect and fairness does not exclude the efforts of communities which want to preserve their identity and language.

From the Islamic perspective, there is a verse in the Holy Qur'an:

O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other).

(Surah Al-Hujarat, 49:13).

This Qur'anic verse may be interpreted as calling for recognition and tolerance of each other's language. All languages in Malaysia can exist alongside each other. There is no need for linguistic assimilation, isolation or hegemony.

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