

Batek Hep' Language: The Female's Pride and Learning Exploration

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Abstract: Language is the main medium for knowledge transfer either through paternal or maternal linkages. As egalitarians, the Batek learn through both parents by means of experience or imitation. Heritage knowledge is essential yet the Batek Hep' language is endangered due to contact and economic crunch. As tourist guides to the Malaysian National Park in Pahang, the Batek male youths are code-mixing and switching, with only an average grasp of their native language. The female's language is fortunately intact as some are merely necessitated to dwell at the show villages. The present research explores six conveniently sampled Batek Hep' females' perceptions, ages varying from early twenties to late fifties on their language pride and language learning style. Method adopted are semi-structured interviews, recorded verbal discourses and participant-observation field notes over a span of a few months through several field visits to several Batek Hep' settlements along the Tembeling River, Pahang. Atlas ti. software assists the triangulated analysis. Findings offer the female Batek's perceptions and suggest that to the elders are firmly devoted to their traditional culture and lifestyle, thus ensuring great language pride. Yet unfortunately, the young are keen on evolving. The findings significantly suggest that proper language learning approach is vital where contact language could be learned without neglecting the native language.

Key words: Aslian language, learning style, language pride, heritage, traditional

INTRODUCTION

External and internal factors lead to languages demise, shift or change. External factors are language policies, lack of literacy, dislocation, economic forces and social factors. A repressive language policy may cause a minority indigenous group to suppress or abandon their mother tongue and embrace the national language. A lack of literacy among native speakers of an oral language can also cause a shift especially, with exposure to a more economically and sociologically strategic language. Internal factors such as speakers' choice or attitude will also determine the fate of a language. The Navajo children, for example, despite concerns, are to-date non-native speakers as many adopt the more prestigious English language (Crawford, 1996).

Palmer (2003) hypothesized 'the language-of-work' factor exists when family-based-work shifts to institution or larger-community-based-work inducing the need for a second or third language while reducing mother tongue usages. This factor affects multiple generations and later the entire community. While preparing children for life, parents relegates mother tongue to menial chores and household related exchanges only. This attitude will deter the shelf-life of a language (Baker, 1992).

Language pride: The Malaysian Peninsular Orang Asli Batek Hep' females are regarded as the language

guardians. Not directly involved with the tourism industry, they spend the most time with their children. Most females are reserved. Although, many may refuse interaction with outsiders; some may offer insight of their perceptions towards any topic once bonding is built usually with another female (Nicolas *et al.*, 2003). This kept their language intact. Despite possibility of minimal knowledge of hunting related vocabularies, the females are the language preservers. However as egalitarians, the fathers will also expose the children to mainstream Malay loanwords.

Language learning style and learning issues: The Batek learn mainly through imitation (Lye, 1997). Experiences are their teacher. Language is passed through direct interaction where children mingle with adults, listening and giving feedback as they please. This challenges classroom-oriented learning where teacher-oriented approach will not guarantee success while poor self-esteem will disrupt student-centered learning.

A method adopted to boost the Orang Asli human capital is "to increase their awareness of early childhood education" (JAKOA, 2013). Primary schools are provided at numerous Orang Asli posts (Doris *et al.*, 2012) yet, in Kuala Tahan, Pahang, the Batek are refusing efforts to educate their children. Initial attempts had failed despite offered full boarding facilities. Several reasons

include high affective filter, sense of insecurity and weak support systems (Banai, personal communication).

Problem statement: Since, language and culture are deeply entwined, changes in cultural values affect language choice. Individualism and materialism are two values that were non-existence in the Batek of old. As many young Batek along Tembeling River have neglected their nomadic roots for preference to easy monetary gains by staying at “show” villages, conducting blowpipe and fire-starting demonstrations to tourists. They have come to embrace modern lifestyle, thus reducing the demand for hunter-gatherer related vocabularies (Tengku Intan Suzila *et al.*, 2012). The young males are already struggling to give instructions in their native language (Tengku Intan Suzila, 2011) and relating vocabularies to their hunter-gatherer past lifestyle is a task. One of the lifestyle changes among the once shy young females is visiting weekly night market.

Despite what appears to be strong resistance to external influences (Zuriatunfadziah *et al.*, 2009), the Batek Aslian language is an endangered language attributable to language contact and trade. With language that are already infused with Malay loanwords and as tourist guides or boatmen the young Batek men are now fairly competent English speakers. Since, the youths are generally from the same or nearby Batek settlements, they have taken to code-mixing and switching with mediocre grasp of their native tongue. Even the elders are frowning at the younger generations’ use of loanwords and ignorance of Batek lexicons.

Objectives: The present study delves into the Batek Hep females’ language pride, language learning style and problems. The purpose is to unfold the nature of their problems, their learning preferences and to what extent are they willing to secure their native language.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Triangulated Method is adopted where semi-structured interviews in a group setting of six females age ranging from late 50-20s, recorded verbal discourses and participant-observation field notes over a span of a few months through several field visits to several Batek Hep’ settlements along the Tembeling River, Pahang are analysed. As the Batek are generally illiterate, interview is an appropriate method. However, trust issues is a hurdle, thus recorded personal discourses at other various occasions and field notes are also used to harvest substantial data. The Atlas ti. software assists the triangulated analysis (Fig. 1a).

Using ATLAS ti: ATLAS ti. is a qualitative data analysis research software. It enables any form of pdf,

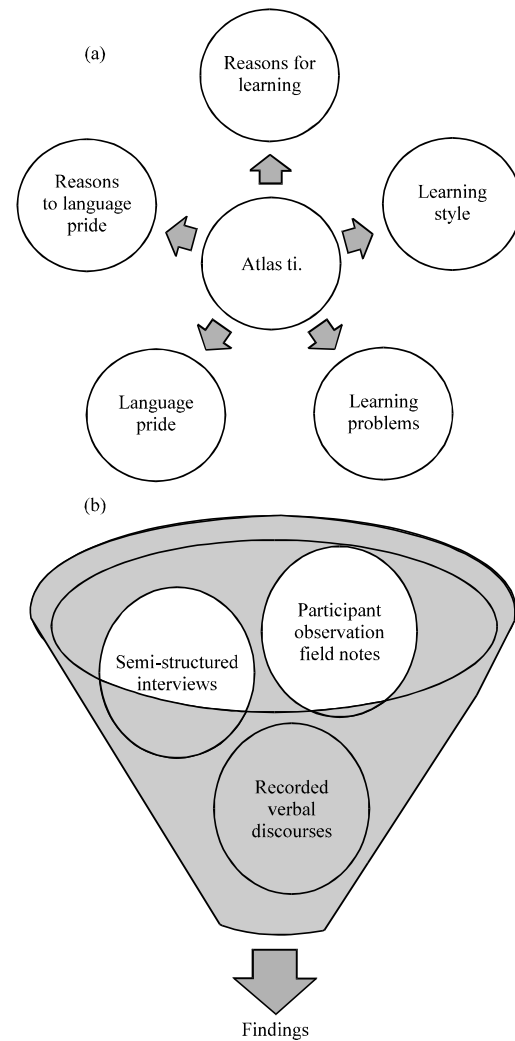


Fig. 1: a) Triangulated methods adopted; b) Codes for Atlas ti.

audio and video files to be analyzed by coding items and presentation of relationship is therefore made possible. Figure 1b shows five codes were created namely language pride identification, reasons to language pride, language learning style and the reasons for such preferences. Lastly, problems faced in preserving the language as well as learning. Age variable were also noted separately using memo function.

Semi-structured interview questions: A set of questionnaire (Saadiah and Teo, 2012) were adapted for the semi-structured interview questions which consisted of 4 sections, i.e., personal data, awareness, pride and loyalty to the mother tongue. These attitudes are important factors that can affect the lifespan of a language, particularly an oral language without any form of documentation and preservation (Appendix A).

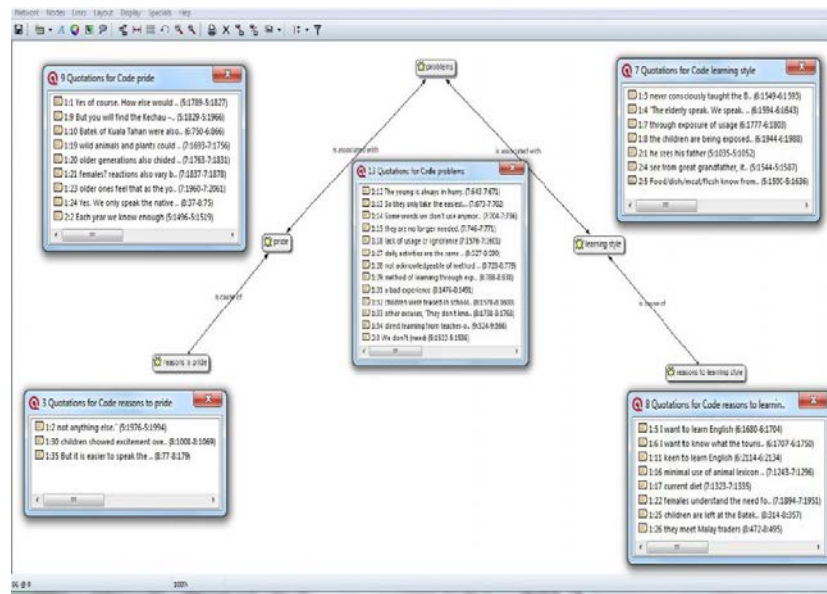


Fig. 2: Relationship between codes

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Language pride: The Batek Hep’ females are proud of their language but curiosity toward tourists’ conversations has created a desire to know the English language. As their language is abundant with Malay loanwords, they do not desire to learn Malay. Speaking most of the time in their native language, Malay language is only used with Malay traders or employers.

Language learning style and learning issues: With low self-esteem to mingle with the Malays, any form of discouragement from teachers or teasing from Malay children would result in the Batek children withdrawal from schools. Thus, despite improvement in present day school system, Batek children who are used to experience-based learning find it challenging to adapt. Batek children were excited when animal pictures from dictionaries were shown as opportunity to accompany their now infrequent hunter-gatherer parents to forest to learn is scarce. Findings also hint pre-requisite terms which include the children being educated by government school teachers at their village for physical and emotional security.

Table 1 shows, the perception fraction of younger females who contributed 7.2% of the data while older females contributed 8.8%. Occurrences of codes were forty in total. Table 1 also shows each code occurrences. Figure 2 shows the problems that may be related to native language survival is associated with changes in learning style and the young’s language pride. The fast-pace modern lifestyle is not suitable for their experience-based learning style. Tubers and jungle

Table 1: Findings summary

Codes/Ages	Young	Older	Total statement
Language pride	3	6	9
Learning style	4	3	7
Reasons for pride	1	2	3
Reasons for learning style	5	3	8
Problems	5	8	13
Total	18	22	40

fruits have been unseated by rice and canned sardines as convenient meals reduce the need to hunt and forage forest goods for consumption or sale. Yet, without them realizing, modern-lifestyle demand can be harsh thus leading to need for education to ensure secure financial standing.

CONCLUSION

Lifestyle changes have gradually affecting the Batek Hep’s language choice (Tengku Intan Suzila *et al.*, 2012). The Batek elders are firmly attached to their traditional lifestyle yet the young ones are keen on evolving. As suggested by Crawford (1996) and Palmer (2003), through observation, the Batek of Kuala Tahan is gradually embracing the demands of modern society and through which their language is susceptible to forms of language maintenance (Sankoff, 2001) and language change. The changes might take generations but if steps are not taken to encourage the elders to teach the youths, Batek Aslian language might suffer a slow demise. Proper language learning approach is vital where contact language could be learned without neglecting the native language. In conclusion if value changes caused the language shift, then to reverse the shift, the values must be reinstated (Crawford, 1996).

APPENDIX

A: Semi-structured interview questions:

- Do you and your community love your language? Are you and your community able to speak the native language well? If not, why so?
- How do you learn language? How do you teach your children language? Is it okay for your children to learn other languages?
- Do you acknowledge the difference between the elderly and the young's language use? Why do you think it happened?
- What do you do to care for your language now that your lifestyle is changing?
- Do you wish your children would be in government schools? If not, why so?
- There is also the option to include a subheading within the appendix if you wish

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