

Language and Dialect Use of Majorities and Minorities: A Study in Terengganu, East Coast of Malaysia

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Abstract: Malaysia is a multiracial country consisting of three ethnic groups, namely, Malay, Chinese and Indian. Being proficient in more than one language is an advantage, particularly in a multiracial and multicultural society as Malaysia. Especially at the workplace as this could help to avoid any misunderstandings particularly when dealing with colleagues of different ethnicities. This study outlines a research conducted in Terengganu, in the East Coast of Malaysia which investigated language and dialect use among personnel in a higher educational institution. This is important to integrate the three ethnic groups at the workplace so that communication is always mutual among them. The research employed a qualitative method whereby a semi-structured interview was conducted using purposive sampling. The interviews were conducted with twenty one respondents coming from three managerial levels: lower, middle and upper levels. The data was analyzed using the thematic analysis. The preliminary findings indicated that only a small number of Malay respondents are trying to learn the minority's languages. They do this to the extent of knowing only a limited range of Tamil and Chinese words and meanings. Meanwhile, their Chinese and Indian colleagues have made the extra effort to understand their surroundings in order to facilitate them in learning the local dialects. This research study concluded that the Malay personnel at this institution apparently show an initiative to learn well the majority's local dialects but not at the minority dialects such as Mandarin or Tamil.

Key words: Multicultural, communication, minority's language, language use, dialect

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia's national language is Bahasa Melayu and English is the second language. However the dialect might vary depending on the geographical and district areas that they occupy. In this study, the Terengganu dialect is taken into consideration as the language to use. The Malay dialects in Malaysia generally can be divided into 12 dialect districts and then into sub dialects (Omar, 1987). Malay dialects are based on 12 districts; nine in Peninsular Malaysia and three in Sabah and Sarawak (Collins and Bahar, 2000). The 9 districts in Peninsular Malaysia are Kedah, Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, Melaka, Johor, Pahang, Terengganu and Kelantan. Differences in context, patterns of communication and the different assumptions underpinning the use of verbal communication, can cause breakdown in communication, especially in the workplace (Lukman *et al.*, 2009). This also happens when the the majority dialect is used at the institution.

Language is the medium of communication although, the way some words are pronounced and the intonation

of the speech may be different. Take for example the term "husband which means "suami", "laki" or "orang rumah". However, the word "suami" is more formal while "laki" or "orang rumah" is informal and even annoying to hear. The other terms are "perempuan", "wanita" or "betina" which means a woman, a lady and bad attitude women respectively. The word "betina" can also refer to a female animal. These terms can leave emotional connotations depending on the social context and function of the language. Linguistic scholars describe this as semantics where the same words can have different meanings to other people from different cultural backgrounds (Spinks and Wells, 1997). Additionally, certain words can have different meanings in certain cultural contexts which can be positive or negative. Having said that, these differences should only be regarded as a part of integration especially at the work place.

However, the study is neither concerned with the grammatical structure of the language nor the linguistic approach; rather it seeks to concentrate on the verbal communication in terms of use of language and dialect use among personnel at the institution.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The primary approach of this research study is ethnography. Ethnography can be defined as “direct observation, reporting and evaluation of the customary behaviour of a culture” (Edmund, 1998). This technique requires unlimited period of residence, knowing the language of the group, participating in group activities, and using a variety of observational and recording techniques. The researcher is familiar with the local dialect and the Malay language. However, a limitation for the author is that the researcher March 29, 2017 is not fluent in Mandarin, or other dialects of Chinese such as Cantonese or Hokkien, or the language spoken by the Indian population such as Tamil.

The study will apply the key methods of ethnography. They are informal interviewing of respondents as proposed by Agar as cited in Cousin (2009) for “the purpose of learning from their ways of doing things and viewing reality”. The qualitative approach is selected in order to provide an in-depth perspective regarding the personnel experiences that cannot be measured using the straight quantitative approach. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect in-depth respondent’s experiences. The respondents were given a choice for the interviews: one-on-one semi-structured interviews and e-interviews.

Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to explore in-depth the experiences and perceptions of the individuals which also mean “the description of groups” (Cousin, 2009). E-interviews are used as an alternative method in collecting data. The e-interview will be offered because the topics may be too sensitive for religious, linguistic or cultural reasons. e-Interviews can generate feelings of comfort for interviewees and make it easier for them to discuss these issues without feeling embarrass or discomfort at the presence of the interviewer (Bampton and Cowton, 2002). Twenty one respondents were selected using purposive sampling, in order to access a particular subset of respondents based on religion, ethnicity, year of service and gender. The qualitative interviews were transcribed in verbatim and translated. During transcribing, the researcher tried to minimize and correct the grammatical error of the direct quotations to ensure that the meaning is not lost during the transcription process. This is also to preserve the respondent’s “voice” in the text. The qualitative data has been grouped into thematic concerns and pseudonyms that are used to address the respondents.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study was conducted at a higher educational institution at Kuala Terengganu in Terengganu, east

coast of Malaysia. The dialect here is uniquely different from the west coast. The Malay (Muslim) staff make up for the overwhelming majority which is indicative of their dominance at the institution. As the majority comprises Malay Muslims, it is not surprising that Malay respondents provided the highest number of responses for the interview. The other ethnic groups are very small in number at this institution. This may at first appear to be a limitation of the study. However this apparent imbalance may also be viewed as a strength of this study as it provides an opportunity for gaining insights into the intercultural communication processes occurring in Malaysian institutions, especially in the east coast of Malaysia and to some extent serves as a proxy for work-life relations in the Malaysian society.

Other than Malay and English that are used in this institution, another major language that is also used is the Terengganu dialect. This dialect is widely used by the local Malays in their daily conversations. The Chinese and Indian colleagues only use this dialect whenever they feel necessary. In total there were 21 interview respondents: 14 respondents for the one-to-one interview and 7 for the e-interview. All of the one-to-one interviews took place during a three month period. The e-Interviews continued for >3 month due to the slow response rates of the respondents. This being despite the researcher provided them with ample time to finish all the three stages of interview questions.

The non-local respondents belong to the other 12 states such as Perak, Kelantan, Selangor and etc. The majority of the respondents are Malay Muslim (n = 14) and the minority are the Chinese (n = 5) and Indian (n = 1). The majority Malay respondents in this study work at three levels of the organization, mostly at the middle level. The Chinese and Indian respondents mainly work at the middle level with only one Chinese working at the upper level and none at all at the support level. The Malays in this study can be divided into two groups, one is local Malay or Terengganian and the second group is the non-local Malay, whom the local Malays normally refer to them as “orang luar” (outsiders), hailing from the other states.

The interview findings revealed that most of the Malay respondents understand and use Bahasa Melayu and Terengganu dialect when conversing with their colleagues. Normally they will use Bahasa Melayu in the the formal setting, for example, giving a speech; over the counter interaction and communicating with students. They will switch to the Terengganu dialect during informal conversation and informal functions. As such, the non-local Malays have pulled their effort to learn the local dialect. Normally their local colleagues will converse in the Terengganu dialect.

A majority of the Malay respondents reported that the Terengganu dialect is easy to understand. The dialect is considered to be easy for the non-locals because students who come from all over Malaysia to study in this institution are able to learn and understand the Terengganu dialect within a short time. The Terengganu dialect is normally used when the staff converse with their local colleagues. Some Malay respondents admit that the dialect will spontaneously appear whenever they speak. Most of the time, the Terengganu dialect and standard Malay are used as the medium of interaction. The Malay respondents will thus use the Terengganu dialect or a combination of Terengganu dialect and the standard Malay depending on the context, situation and the people with whom they are communicating:

“It is easy to understand but if I don’t get what they mean, I will ask. Normally during a Monday morning we have a meeting and a presentation from staff. Normally I can follow the Terengganu dialect but if I don’t understand then I’ll ask (Yusuf, male, Malay, upper level professional)”

Yusuf, a non-local, does not have a problem to understand the dialect because he has been exposed to the dialect since his first year in the university where his housemates were from Kelantan and Terengganu. He found the dialect easy to understand and he likes the way the dialect being pronounced.

On the other hand, there are also the non-local Malays who find that the Terengganu dialect is difficult to acquire. A small number of non-local Malay staff feels convenient to use the standard Malay because they are not fluent in the Terengganu dialect. They also do not want to offend their local colleagues because the non-local Malays may sound as if they are mocking the Terengganese if they speak the dialect incorrectly. Amina (non-local, female, Malay, middle level academic) is one of the respondents who are reluctant to learn the Terengganu dialect. She recounted her experience where one of the local ladies said that non-locals speak the Terengganu dialect as if they were *menganjing* (mocking) the Terengganese. That incident reinforces her reluctance to learn the dialect.

However, there is a small number of non-local Malay staff (married to the locals) who is aware that they should learn the dialect and since recognize that the Terengganu dialect is unique in nature. Daud (male, Malay, support level administration), Khadijah (female, Malay, middle level academic) and Sumaiyah (female, Malay, upper level professional) all display an initiative to learn the dialect and mix with the community. For instance, Khadijah tries to use the local dialect so that she can blend in with her local colleagues.

“I can speak the dialect but am not that fluent. I normally use the Terengganu dialect such as “sokmo” or “takmboh” in my conversations with local colleagues”

Ramlah is the only Malay respondent who describes her ability in learning a minority language. Despite that, her ability to speak the language is very limited. The other Malay respondents did not relate any experiences to their learning of a minority language:

“There is one Chinese word which can cause misunderstanding if you pronounce it wrongly, “sa-sa” and “shieh-shieh”. Where one of the word means “terima kasih” (thank you) and the other one is “gila” (crazy). I also wrongly address one of my Indian colleagues as “anne” which means “abang” (a brother). I should address him as “thamby” which is “adik lelaki” (a little brother) (Ramlah, female, Malay, upper level academic)”

The findings revealed that a small number of Malay respondents indicate that they are trying to learn the minority’s languages such as Mandarin or Tamil in an effort to understand these minorities. A few Malay respondents have practical knowledge of Japanese and Mandarin as they learnt these through formal education. Nonetheless this group is small in number.

The Chinese respondents rarely use the Terengganu dialect during conversation as they are not local. Despite that they understand the dialect. Generally they prefer to use the standard Malay. Even though they make an attempt to use the Terengganu dialect when communicating with their local colleagues they believe that the Terengganu dialect is not easy for those who are not locals. They admit that the pronunciation of the dialect is different and there are some words which have totally different meanings from what they actually know. They also admit that they have difficulty to understand the locals who speak pure Terengganu dialect. Their local colleagues, especially the support staff will communicate using the standard Malay or a mixed local dialect when talking to them. They assume that the communication issue is not a problem. However, in terms of pace they think that their local colleagues speak slightly fast that sometimes they miss what their colleagues are actually referring to. Normally they will ask for the meaning and with that they assume that their colleagues may consider them as non-local and use the language that they are familiar with most.

Lei Hua (female, Chinese, upper level academic) understands the dialect but generally she will use the standard Malay. However, she explains that the Terengganu dialect appears spontaneously when she speaks. She also indicates that normally the words will have kanG influence, so she normally adds in the letter “G” to sound like the Terengganu dialect. She prefers to use English and the formal Malay language when she converse:

“I know that here (at this institution), normally they will add “kanG” ’kanG” at the end of the words that’s all”

One Indian respondent does not use the Terengganu dialect in his daily conversation at UMT because he perceives that to be non-professional. Nevertheless, Aditya, her name, does understand the Terengganu dialect and explains that the Terengganu dialect is easy to learn and be understood.

It appears that the Chinese and Indian colleagues have attempted to understand their surroundings by trying to learn the local dialects. These respondents revealed that they are receptive towards the issue of dialect and try to blend into the Malay environment. They believe that learning the local dialect will help them to fit into the majority Malay culture. For example Steven (non-local, male, Chinese, middle level academic) uses the local form to address his local friends such as mek (Miss/Mrs.). This he believes is able to o “ambil hati” or “jaga hati” (care about other’s feeling) in Malay terms. Specifically, this local address form provides goodwill especially from the perspective of the Easterners, (i.e., the East Coast of the Peninsular of Malaysia). Ambil hati or jaga hati relates to certain actions or jobs with the intention of easing someone’s feelings. This quality intention is part of the budi structure in Malay. Examples of other qualities in the budi structure are murah hati (generosity), hormat (respect), ikhlas (sincerity), mulia (righteousness), timbang rasa (considerate), jaga hati (caring), budibicara (discretion) and many more (Dahlan, 1991). The findings showed that the non-Malay respondents exhibit Malay qualities in order to adapt to their environment. In support of this, Zawawi (2008) reports that Indian respondents adopt the value of piousness just like the Malay and the Chinese embrace the similar value of the Malay such as ambition, filial piety, honesty, knowledge and trustworthiness.

Interestingly, the Chinese and Indian respondents use a mix of languages such as Malay, English and their mother tongue. They will switch accordingly to suit their colleague’s background. They also try to learn the dialect even though they perceive the dialect as difficult to

understand and especially to pronounce. These efforts impress their Malay colleagues as indicated by Mohammad (male, Malay, middle level academic):

“G (an Indian colleague) can speak Malay fluently. He really sounds like Malay”

Even after 55 year of Independence, the Malay respondents in this study seem to be impressed whenever a non-Malay counterpart is able to speak Malay fluently, especially if they can do so without an accent. Awang (male, Malay, upper level professional) observes that some non-Malays cannot speak Malay fluently by relating to their using English more than Malay during conversations. He concludes that these non-Malays are still not fluent in Malay even though they have worked with Malays and more so they are born and raised in Malaysia whose national language is Malay. In improving this situation, he admits that he uses Malay with the non-Malay personnel at the university unless they cannot understand Malay. He is aware however of the purpose of using a language that everyone can understand and communicate with each other:

“I guess the majority of non-Malay in Malaysia understands what we said. Yet there are some places where non-Malays do not understand Malay. This is maybe from the previous generation as for the new generation, they can speak English and Malay but yet the emphasis is on English. I’m afraid this will contribute to their not speaking Malay at all. I certainly will only use English if the recipient cannot understand Malay. In actuality, the purpose of using language is to make others understand and communicate with us, isn’t it? (Awang, male, Malay, upper level professional)”

The non-Malays with their imperfect command of the Malay language usually will be praised for their attempt to at least being able to use appropriate forms of address, pronouns and lexical choices. In doing so those Malay respondents will react friendly towards non-Malay speakers who show a little genteelness in their speech. This is supported by Teo (1996). Possibly this could be the reason why Malays are impressed whenever their non-Malay colleagues can speak Malay fluently. This is because non-Malays are perceived as not being able to speak Malay fluently even though they have learnt the language at school, the medium of instruction even for most subjects. Moreover, at higher educational institutions they will still come across the language, either verbally or written and in the presence of Malays as

acquaintances or friends. Acculturation is the right word to describe what the Malay expects from their colleagues of different ethnic groups. They expect that non-Malays should be able to speak Malay assertively because they assume that the non-Malays have already assimilated within the Malay culture and obviously the Malay language.

Moreover, learning the Malay language is considered essential in order to understand the Malay culture better. To the Malays, language is not merely a language as it is also associated with religion, culture, gestures, postures, manners, norms, values, taboos, interaction and beliefs. Hence, it is essential in a Malay society that the person follows the “rules of language use” for proper interaction as ignorance of the proper use of language is interpreted as “tak tahu bahasa/tak reti bahasa” (literally “not knowing language/lacking language skill, figuratively “ill-bred”). In other words, to the Malays, language is not simply grammar but interpreted as a system consisting primarily of a socio-cultural grammar such as “appropriateness” and “etiquette” (Teo, 1996). The Malay language is highly social and cultural in context; therefore any mistake in grammar is less tolerated by Malay and consequently the person is considered impolite or ill-bred (Teo, 1996). Apparently, the Chinese and Indian respondents are seen to try to understand their Malay colleagues and their dialect and culture. Some Malays do recognize this:

“They are minorities; I can see they try to understand us better. Maybe there is not much problem on our side, maybe the real problem is on their side. (Mohammad, male, Malay, middle level academic)”

He notices that minorities may face difficulties in relation to language and culture adaptations when working in a Malay dominant culture, as Terengganu. This is because the dialect sound and meaning are very different from the standard Malay language. The Malay colleagues seem to take things for granted as they expect that this will be a problem for the minorities but not for the majorities.

In fact, this is not a one way problem but rather a 2 way problem. The minorities need to adapt in order to fit in while the Malays need also be aware that they also need to acknowledge the minorities. As this dual problem has the potential to widen ethnic gaps and create ethnic tensions, a mutual understanding needs to come from both parties so they can learn about and respect each other scultures and practices. If only the minorities know about the majority language and culture but their Malay colleagues only superficially know about the ethnic

group’s minority” language, culture and religion, this is where a gap can emerge. The majority of Malay respondents believe that they do not have any problems in relation to the language used by their colleagues of different ethnicities. They assume that there is no problem because they have never encountered any. However the minorities may see this differently as stated by Liang (male, Chinese, middle level academic), at which he explained that the Malay language does have an influence on the Chinese language. The localization of the Chinese dialect and the Malay loanwords or borrowings which are derived from other languages, have some influence on the dialect and their use of language.

In elaborating, he indicated that the Chinese dialect has been localized geographically and assimilated with the language and the local dialect. This includes some words from standard Malay such as pandai (clever) being used as panlai (clever) in Chinese language (or dialect) and suka (happy) in standard Malay had been used as words in Chinese language (or dialect) as suga (happy).

CONCLUSION

Satisfyingly, the non-local Malays have somewhat demonstrated their effort to learn the local dialect. The Malay colleagues assume that throughout their observations, the ethnic minorities in this institution are trying to blend into the Malay culture. More importantly, they are trying their level best to adapt to the language and dialect in their daily interactions. Meanwhile, the Malay respondents display an initiative to learn the local dialect but not the minority dialects such as Mandarin or Tamil. This status is identified of the Malay respondents as compared to the effort of learning other’s dialect by the minoritie’s ethnic group in this institution. In strength, knowing more than one language is an advantage especially in a multicultural society as Malaysia. Therefore, Malay personnel should be encouraged to learn minority languages such as Mandarin or Tamil as this rightful doing is more than able to close the gap between ethnic groups and assimilate into the cultures of other ethnic groups as well.

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