

The Influence of Gender and Ethnicity on the Choice of Language in the Transaction Domain of Language Use: The Case of Undergraduates

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Abstract

Multilingual individuals, consciously or unconsciously, are often confronted with having to select one linguistic code over another from within their linguistic repertoires. The choice of a proper linguistic code enables effective communication and could also lead to the promotion of solidarity among interlocutors. The focus of this study was to examine the influence of gender and ethnicity on the choices of languages of Malaysian youths in the transaction domain of language use. In sociolinguistic studies, Domain as a theoretical concept can be employed to explain how language choices and some individual factors—in case of this study gender and ethnicity—related to language choices of multilinguals. Based on a random proportional stratified sampling strategy, a total of 498 undergraduate local students in a Malaysian public university were selected as respondents of the study. The male and female respondents mostly belonged to the three main ethnic groups, i.e. the Malays, Chinese, and Indians. Also some other ethnic minority groups' members were included in the study. Data about the demographic profiles of the respondents and the choices of languages in the transaction domain of language use was collected through a self administrated questionnaire survey. SPSS software was used to run analyses such as determining the respondents' most used languages and Chi-Square Test to find out the relationships between variables. According to the results, the linguistic situation in Malaysia is similar to a diglossic situation. Besides, the factor of ethnicity was found to be influential in the choice and use of linguistic codes among the Malaysian youths. But gender was not found to be a determinant of language choice in the transaction domain of language use.

Key Words: multilinguals, transaction domain of language use, choices of languages, ethnicity, gender

1. Background

In multilingual contexts of language use, multilingual individuals have a natural tendency to choose one language over another from within their linguistic repertoires. In such linguistic ecologies, research (for example, Wong, Lee, S. K., Lee K. S., & Azizah Yaacob, 2012; Kemp, 2009; Yeh, Chan, & Cheng, 2004) has shown that the choice of a linguistic code is not a haphazard phenomenon. Language choices of multilinguals, consciously or unconsciously, are influenced by some individual/social factors such as ethnicity and gender (Rahman, Chan, & Ain Nadzimah Abdullah, 2008). The social context of practicing (a) language/languages, namely domain of language use, is found to be a determinant of language use as well (Rahman et al. 2008). As such, a domain of language use is definable in terms of an institutional context in which an interaction takes place and can influence the multilinguals' choices of language (David, 2008; Fishman, 1972; 1968a). Domain, as a theoretical concept, can be employed in sociolinguistic studies to explain how language choices and some individual factors—in case of this study gender and ethnicity— related to current and accepted socio-cultural norms and social expectations.

Language policies of multilingual countries may affect the choice of a code in a domain of language use as well (Ferguson, 2006; Ridge, 2004; Cooper, 1989). In a political entity such as Malaysia that different ethnic groups comprise a nation, the ethnic members of any ethnic group may enjoy using a local indigenous language for communication purposes in their speech community. Furthermore, a gained status language may function as the governmental/formal language as well as the medium of instruction (Asmah Hj. Omar, 1994). After independence in Malaysia the Malay language or Bahasa Malaysia (henceforth BM) was promoted as the formal language as well as the medium of instruction (Hafriza Burhanudeen, 2006). Consequently, in a heterogeneous context of language use such as Malaysia domain of language use may influence an individual's choice of a language as well.

A language is not only an individual's possession, but it also belongs to the whole speech community that practices it. According to Hudson (1996, p. 10) a determining factor of belonging to a speech community is the use of its language. Hudson maintained that language is an important factor that assists individuals to express their memberships in social units such as tribes and ethnic groups. Moreover, Hudson (p. 232) added that solidarity among the members of a speech community is mostly achieved by the use of their common language. Thus, members of ethnic groups have a natural tendency towards the use of their ethnic language in their inter-communal relationships. In defining ethnicity as a determinant of language use, Yeh, et al. (2004, p. 81) highlighted three components of ethnicity, i.e. "Being, knowing and doing". According to Yeh, et al., language functions as a determining factor in all the three components of ethnicity. In other words, language is not only a reflection of ethnic members' self-perceptions but also it is a medium through which social life is performed.

Multilingual individuals' identities, such as their genders, are also significant in their choices of language (Wong et al. 2012; Mensah, Emmanuel, & Nyarko, 2012; Ho & Lin, 2011; Mee, 2011). However in a study of language choices of Malaysian youths, Rahman et al. (2008) reported that gender was not an influential factor in the multilinguals' choices of language. In line with Rahman et al. in a study of language choice in Taiwan, Chan (1994) did not find gender an influential factor in language choice among the subjects of her study. In contrast to Rahman et al. (2008) and Chan's (1994) results, Lu (1988) reported that differences in gender among Taiwanese respondents resulted in different attitudes towards language use. Thus, among the variety of variables that may affect the choices of language of a multilingual individual, the present study examined the effects of ethnicity and gender on the choice of language of multilingual Malaysian youths in the transaction domain of language use. Specifically, the study decided to answer the following research question:

How are the linguistic practices of Malaysian youths related to individual factors of gender and ethnicity in the transaction domain of language use?

2. Method

2.1 Research Design and the Study's Site

The above research question, which sought descriptive profiles of respondents, their language choices in the transaction domain of language use, and the relationships between variables, was found to be more amenable to quantitative data and survey research. Quantitative data was collected through survey questionnaires. Thus, a self-administered questionnaire that was comprised of two sections was utilized. Section I of the questionnaire asked questions about respondent's age, gender and ethnicity. Section II of the questionnaire sought information about respondents' language practices in the transaction domain.

According to a random proportional stratified sampling strategy, a total number of 500 undergraduate respondents who were studying at 15 different faculties of UPM¹ were selected as the sample of the study. Ary, Razavieh, and Sorensen, (2006, p. 172) recommended a proportional stratified sampling strategy in order to extract a sample from a population with different strata. Hence, the same procedure as in random sampling was used except that the selection was from subgroups, i.e. 15 different faculties of UPM.

2.2 Validity, Reliability

The instrument of this study had some degree of validity and reliability. Firstly, external validity of the study's instrument has achieved by the study's capability in generalizing the results of the study to the outer world. Bartlett, Kotrlik, and Higgins (2001, P. 43) maintained that in a quantitative survey design, determining the sample size is directly linked with generalisability or external validity of the study. Thus, calculating sample size is an important part of any study. Since findings of a study will be evaluated as valid only if they can be generalized to the larger population. Calder, Phillips, and Tybout (1982, p. 240) defined the capability of generalizing the result of a study to the outer world as "External validity". Calder et al. added that in order to enhance the external validity of a quantitative research it is necessary to minimize the risk of errors type I and type II, i.e. to minimize the threat of finding an association which does not exist or not finding an association that does exist. This definition of external validity also has been emphasized by Cochran (1977, p. 81) as well as by Ary et al. (2006, p. 181-184). Hence, by using the Cochran's formula sample size of the present study calculated as 384. With a number of 116 extra respondents as drop out the total sample size of the study reached a number of 500. Two questionnaires were found to be incomplete; hence the number of respondents reached 498 which earlier mentioned as sample size of the study. Sample size of each faculty or strata was identified according to a proportional stratified sampling strategy. Hence in each faculty, the

¹ According to obtained information from Academic and Students Affairs' Deputy Dean Office of UPM at 26/11/2013, the total population of Malaysian undergraduates was 14343 who were studying at 15 faculties of UPM.

questionnaires distributed among respondents proportional to the sample size of that particular faculty. But, the respondents of each particular faculty were selected by using a table of random numbers.

Since there is not any numerical index to prove the content validity of an instrument (Ary et al. 2006, p. 256), content validity of this study's instrument was achieved by peer review and its logical examination by a panel of experts. Besides, as an index of reliability of the section II of the questionnaire, Cronbach's Alpha internal consistency coefficient test was computed. A reliability coefficient of 0.942 ensured the reliability of the used instrument.

2.3 Respondents' Characteristics

The study extracted its sample from the target population in the site of the study at Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). International students were not participated in the study since they were not Malaysian. The respondents' ages ranged from 19 to 23. All of them were bi-/multilingual with at least their mother tongue. There were more female (71.1%) than male (28.9%) respondents and the majority of the respondents belonged to the Malay ethnic group (71.5%). The remaining minority comprised students of Chinese ethnicity (21.7%), Indian (3%) and, lastly, other ethnic groups (3.8%).

3. Results and Discussion

In order to investigate patterns of language choice and use in the transaction domain, nine social events were identified (see Table 1). Respondents were asked in each social event how often they use the four languages of BM, Chinese², Indian³, and English based on a five point Likert scale (5=very frequently, 4=frequently, 3=sometimes, 2=rarely, and 1=never).

Table 1. Investigated Social Events in the Transaction Domain

Domain of Language Use	Social Events: What language do you use?
Transaction	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. At the restaurant 2. At the bank 3. At the post office 4. At the medical center and hospital 5. At the gas station 6. At the bus stop and railway station 7. Talk with a Malay shopkeeper 8. Talk with a Chinese shopkeeper 9. Talk with an Indian shopkeeper

3.1 The Relationships between Language Choices and Individual Factors of Gender and Ethnicity

To examine the relationships between the two factors of gender and ethnicity and language choices of the respondents, attempts were made to highlight respondents' dominant language choices in the transaction domain. In the multilingual Malaysian context of language use, there were a number of language choices available to the individual respondents in each social event of the transaction domain. These language choices might fall under a combination of two languages that are used for interaction in each social event. Thus to make the data more sensitive to this feature, the combinations were added to reveal possible uptake of two languages in the domain investigated. These options of language choice were coded as 1=BM, 2=Chinese, 3=Indian, 4=English, 5=mixed use of BM and Chinese, 6= mixed use of BM and Indian, 7= mixed use of BM and English, 8= mixed use of Indian and Chinese, 9= mixed use of English and Chinese, 10= mixed use of English and Indian.

As above mentioned, respondents were asked to indicate their choice(s) of language(s) (for four languages of BM, Chinese, Indian, and English) according to a five-point Likert scale with 5=very frequently, 4=frequently, 3=sometimes, 2=rarely, and 1=never in each nine social event. Accordingly, a respondents' choice of any of the four examined languages in each social event could get a total score on a scale ranging from a minimum of 9 to a maximum of 45 with a median value of 27. Since for categorizing qualitative data median of a scale can be used as a cut-off point (Palmer, 2014; Linneman, 2011), the median (=27)—and higher than the median—of each social event's scale was considered as a cut-off point indicative of the choice and use of one or two particular language(s) in that particular social event. This procedure determined the dominant languages in the transaction domain of language use (see Table 2). The used syntax for determining dominant languages is presented in Appendix A.

² The Chinese language in this study includes: Mandarin, Cantonese, Teochew, Hokkien, Hakka

³ The Indian language in this study includes: Tamil, Punjabi, Telegu, Malaylees

Table 2. Respondents' Language Choices in the Transaction Domains of language use

Domain of Language Use	Choice of Language(s)	N (%)
Transaction	1= BM	247 (49.6)
	2=Chinese	3 (0.6)*
	4=English	42 (8.4)
	5= Mixed use of BM and Chinese	1 (0.2)*
	7= Mixed use of BM and English	200 (40.2)
	9= Mixed use of Chinese and English	5 (1)*

Note: N indicates frequency of respondents. Figures in parentheses indicate percentage of N.

* Due to low frequencies of use, figures marked with asterisks were excluded from the analysis.

According to the provided information in Table 2, six options of language choice were used by the respondents in the transaction domain. Due to low frequency of use, nine respondents in the transaction domain were excluded from the analysis. BM with a percentage of 49.6% was the most used language, but a considerable percentage of the respondents of the study (40.2%) showed tendency towards mixed use of BM and English. English with a percent of 8.4% was the third used language in this domain of language use. The fact that majority of the respondents preferred to use BM is in harmony with Ferguson (2006) and Cooper (1989) that both researchers pointed out that as the result of a language policy in multilingual states an indigenous language can be selected and promoted as the main medium of interaction in the independent country. Furthermore, the mixed use of BM and English as well as the use of English is in line with the notion of Malaysian diglossic context of language use that was proposed by Asmah Hj. Omar (1994, p. 69) and later supported by Ridge (2004, p.416). Ridge discussed that competencies in BM and English in Malaysia may result a new bi-lingual linguistic ecology. Ridge addressed this linguistic situation as Malaysian diglossic pattern. The findings of the present study supported the Ridge's discussion.

To find out if there were any relationships between respondents' gender and ethnicity from one side and their language choices from the other, the respondents' gender and ethnicity were selected as independent variables and the dominant language choices were considered as dependant variables. Inferential statistics was carried out to investigate the relationships between variables. Due to qualitative nature of the data of the study, a non-parametric test was used (Bahaman & Suandi, 1999, p. 19). Thus, the relationships between variables were examined by utilizing Chi-Square Test Mont Carlo Method. The results of the test did not support the hypothesis that the factor of gender can be a determinant of language choice in the under investigation domain of language use (see Table 3). Although there are researchers such as Lu (1988) and Yeh et al. (2004) who reported that differences in gender among Taiwanese respondents resulted in different attitudes towards language choice, the results of the present study are in tandem with Rahman et al. (2008). Rahman et al. conducted a similar study in the Malaysian context of language use and did not find any relationships between gender and language choice in domains of language use. Hence, it seems that the gender differences in the Malaysian and Taiwanese contexts of language use have different influences on the choices of language.

Table 3. Gender and Language Choice in the Transaction Domains of Language Use

Domains of Language Use	Used languages	Male	Female	χ^2	P Value
Transaction	1=BM	66(47.48)	181(51.71)	1.108	0.581 >0.05
	4=English	11(7.91)	31(8.86)		
	7= mixed use of BM and English	62(44.60)	138(39.43)		

Note: N indicates frequency of respondents. Figures in parentheses indicate percentage of N.

*Significant at 0.05 level

But the results of Chi-square Test ($\chi^2 = 118.910$ and P Value < 0.05) supported the hypothesis that the choice of languages was influenced by the ethnicity of the respondents of the study (see Table 4). BM was the predominant language choice of the Malays (86.6%) followed by respective negligent percentages of use by the Chinese, Indians and other ethnic groups (8.9%, 1.6%, and 2.8%). But English was the language choice of the majority of Chinese (83.3%), followed by negligent percentages of use by the Malays (7.1%), Indians (7.1%), and other ethnic groups (2.4%). For the mixed use

of BM and English, it was the language choice of the majority of the Malays (69.5%) followed by the Chinese with a 21% of use, other ethnic groups (5.5%), and the Indians (4%).

Table 4. Ethnicity and Language Choice in the Transaction Domain of Language Use

Domain of Language Use	Used Languages	Ethnic Groups				χ^2	P Value
		Malay	Chinese	Indian	Others		
Transaction	1= BM	214(86.6)	22(8.9)	4(1.6)	7(2.8)	118.910*	0.000<0.05
	4=English	3(7.1)	35(83.3)	3(7.1)	1(2.4)		
	7= BM and English	139(69.5)	42(21)	8(4)	11(5.5)		

Note: N indicates frequency of respondents. Figures in parentheses indicate percentage of N.

*Significant at 0.05 level

The findings of the study about the impact of ethnicity on the choice of language are supported by literature. Fishman (1972) discussed that although ethnicity is a biological attribute that can be demonstrated via the use of language, governmental policies may encourage the use of a particular language in order to unify different ethnic groups for nation building activities. It seems in the colorful context of Malaysian language use; according to the results of the present study (Table 2) the Malaysian language policy has promoted the two languages of Malay and English, which the former functions as a symbol of nationality and assist the nation's solidarity and the latter functions for formal social events as well as for inter-ethnic communication.

4. Summary and Conclusion

Similar to any other multilingual ecology, in the Malaysian context of language use it is expected that in the domains of language use multilingual individuals choose and use different languages from within their linguistic repertoires. In order to investigate the language choices of Malaysian youths and the influence of gender and ethnicity on their choices of language the study firstly attempted to find out the most used languages of its respondents in the transaction domain of language use. According to a comparative syntax the individual respondents most used languages in the transaction domain of language use were determined as BM, mixed use of BM and English and English (see Appendix A for the used syntax). The most percentages of language use belonged to BM and followed by the mixed use of Malay and English, and English for all nine social events of the transaction domain of language use. This finding supported the diglossic situation of language use proposed by most language researchers in Malaysia (e.g., Ridge, 2004; Asmah Hj. Omar, 1994). Secondly, inferential statistics was utilized to examine the relationships between variables. Gender was not found to be a determinant of using linguistic codes in the transaction domain of language use; whereas the factor of ethnicity was found to be a determinant of language choice in the under investigation domain of language use.

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Appendix A: Syntax for Determining the Choice of Languages in the Transaction Domains of Language Use

Choice of language(s)	Syntax
1=BM	IF score of BM=median or>median, and score of Chinese< median, and score of Indian<median, and score of English< median, the choice of language was considered BM.
2=Chinese	IF score of BM<median, and score of Chinese=median or> median, and score of Indian<median, and score of English<median, the choice of language was considered the Chinese language.
3=Indian	IF score of BM<median, and score of Chinese<median, and score of Indian=median or>median score, and score of English<median, the choice of language was considered the Indian language.
4=English	IF score of BM<median, and score of Chinese<median, and score of Indian<median, and score of English=median or>median, the choice of language was considered the English language.
5=BM and Chinese	IF score of BM=median or>median and score of Chinese=median or>median, and score of Indian<median, and score of English<median, the choice of languages was considered as equal use of the BM and Chinese languages.
6=BM and Indian	IF score of BM=median or>median, and score of Indian= median or>median, and score of Chinese<median and score of English<median, the choice of languages was considered as equal use of the BM and Indian languages.
7=BM and English	IF score of Malay=median or>median, and score of Chinese<median and score of Indian<median, and score of English=median or>median, the choice of languages was considered as equal use of the BM and English languages.
8=Indian and Chinese	IF score of BM<median, and score of Chinese=median or>median, and score of Indian=median or>median, and score of English<median, the choice of languages was considered as equal use of the Indian and Chinese languages.
9=English and Chinese	IF score of BM<median, and score of Chinese=median or>median score, and score of Indian<median, and score of English=median or> median, the choice of languages was considered as equal use of the English and Chinese languages.
10=English and Indian	IF score of BM<median, and score of Chinese<median, and score of Indian= median or>median, and score of English=median or>median, the choice of languages was considered as equal use of the English and Indian languages.