



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

**PATTERNS OF LANGUAGE CHOICE AND USE AMONG
UNDERGRADUATES OF DIFFERENT ETHNIC GROUPS IN A
MALAYSIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITY**

ABU RASHED MD. MOSTAFIZAR RAHMAN

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PUBLIC UNIVERSITY**

By

ABU RASHED MD. MOSTAFIZAR RAHMAN

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia in
Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts**

October 2007



DEDICATED
TO
MY FAMILY



Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts

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Chairman: Professor Chan Swee Heng, PhD

Faculty : Modern Languages and Communication

Language choice and use are sociolinguistic phenomena. The choice and use of language refers to selecting languages for different purposes in different contexts. In a bi-/multilingual society, these phenomena are very important issues. Fishman's (1972) domain analysis is used to investigate the choice of language in a multilingual context in this study. The analysis answers questions directed at 'who speaks what language to whom, when, where and even why'. In answering these questions, a host of variables come into play. These variables are language planning and policy, language user's social background, linguistic profile, profession, educational background, and social domains. The objectives of this study were to identify UPM undergraduates' patterns of language choice and use in the domains of family, friendship, neighborhood, transaction, education, office, religion and media; and to investigate the effect of ethnicity, gender, discipline of study and proficiency on their patterns of language choice and use.



Data for the study were collected through a questionnaire survey administered to 300 UPM undergraduates. The analysis of data was done both quantitatively and qualitatively. SPSS was used to get percentage values and frequencies through descriptive statistics and correlations between variables were obtained through Chi-square tests. The strength of relationship was measured using Contingency Coefficient and the relationship was interpreted with reference to Guilford's rule of thumb.

Findings of the study indicate that the informants chose and used different languages in different domains with consideration to the status of the domains. They were found to use ethnic languages in those domains which were more informal and intimate such as family, religion and media. Bahasa Melayu and English were chosen in more formal domains such as education and office. In the patterns of language choice among the informants, the study found the influence of ethnicity and language proficiency in all the domains investigated. The discipline of study was also found to influence language choice partially, while the influence of gender was not found. In short, this study found variation of choice of languages to be constrained and influenced by different factors.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Master Sastera

**CORAK PEMILIHAN DAN PENGGUNAAN BAHASA DI KALANGAN
PELAJAR BACELOR YANG BERBEZA KUMPULAN ETNIK DI UNIVERSITI
AWAM DI MALAYSIA**

Oleh

ABU RASHED MD. MOSTAFIZAR RAHMAN

October 2007

Pengerusi: Professor Chan Swee Heng, PhD

Fakulti : Bahasa Moden dan Komunikasi

Pemilihan dan penggunaan bahasa adalah satu fenomena sosiolinguistik yang melibatkan pemilihan bahasa untuk kegunaan tertentu dalam konteks yang berlainan. Dalam masyarakat dwi/pelbagai bahasa, fenomena ini merupakan satu isu yang sangat penting. Teori analisa domain yang diperkenalkan oleh Fishman (1972) digunakan untuk mengetahui tentang pemilihan bahasa dalam pelbagai konteks. Analisa ini menjawab soalan tentang “siapa yang menggunakan bahasa tertentu kepada siapa, bila, di mana dan juga mengapa”. Dalam usaha menjawab soalan sebegini, banyak angkubah penting perlu diambil kira; contohnya, perancangan dan polisi bahasa, latar belakang sosial pengguna bahasa, profil linguistik, pekerjaan, latar belakang pendidikan dan domain sosial. Objektif kajian ini adalah untuk mengenal pasti corak pemilihan dna penggunaan bahasa di kalangan pelajar UPM dari segi domain kekeluargaan, persahabatan, kejiranan, transaksi, pendidikan, pejabat, keagamaan, dan media; serta untuk mengetahui kesan

etnik, gender, bidang pembelajaran dan tahap kefasihan terhadap corak pemilihan dan penggunaan bahasa.

Data kajian ini diperolehi melalui soalselidik yang melibatkan 300 pelajar UPM di peringkat bachelors. Analisa data dibuat secara kuantitatif dan kualitatif. SPSS digunakan untuk mendapatkan peratus nilai dan frekuensi melalui statistik deskriptif dan korelasi antara angkuabah diperolehi melalui kajian *Chi-square*. Kemantapan hubungan diukur menggunakan *Contingency Coefficiency* dan diinterpretasikan melalui *Guildford's rule of thumb*.

Hasil kajian menunjukkan responden memilih serta menggunakan bahasa yang berlainan dalam domain yang berlainan dengan mengambilkira status domain berkenaan. Responden didapati menggunakan bahasa etnik dalam domain yang kurang formal serta berkaitan faktor etnik seperti keluarga, agama, dan media; manakala bahasa Melayu dan bahasa Inggeris pula digunakan untuk domain yang lebih formal seperti pendidikan dan pejabat. Dari aspek corak pemilihan bahasa pula, pengaruh etnik dan kefasihan berbahasa dalam semua domain telah dikaji. Bidang pembelajaran didapati mempengaruhi pemilihan bahasa walaupun tidak sepenuhnya, manakala pengaruh gender tidak dapat dikesan. Pada keseluruhannya, hasil kajian ini menunjukkan variasi pemilihan bahasa dikekang faktor pengaruh yang berbeza-beza.

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I certify that an Examination Committee met on 10 October 2007 to conduct the final examination of Abu Rashed Md. Mostafizar Rahman on his Master of Arts thesis entitled “Patterns of Language Choice and Use among Undergraduates of Different Ethnic Groups in A Malaysian Public University” in accordance with Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Act 1980 and Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Regulation 1981. The Committee recommends that the candidate be awarded the relevant degree. Members of the Examination Committee are as follows:

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis is based on my original work except for quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted for any other degree at UPM or other institutions.

ABU RASHED MD. MOSTAFIZAR RAHMAN

Date: 5 November 2007



TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
DEDICATION	ii
ABSTRACT	iii
ABSTRAK	v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vii
APPROVAL	viii
DECLARATION	x
LIST OF TABLES	xiii
LIST OF FIGURES	xviii
GLOSSARY OF TERMS	xix
 CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION	1.1
1.1 Overview	1.1
1.2 Background of the Study	1.1
1.3 The Linguistic Situation in Malaysia	1.3
1.4 Statement of the Problem	1.6
1.5 Conceptual Framework	1.7
1.6 Purpose of the Study	1.9
1.7 Research Questions	1.9
1.8 Significance of the Study	1.9
1.9 Delimitations and Limitations of the Study	1.10
1.10 Summary of the Chapter	1.11
 2 LITERATURE REVIEW	 2.1
2.1 Introduction	2.1
2.2 Language Choice and Its Contexts	2.1
2.3 Determinants of Language Choice	2.7
2.4 Review of Methodological Concerns in Related Studies	2.22
2.5 Summary of the Chapter	2.25
 3 METHODOLOGY	 3.1
3.1 Introduction	3.1
3.2 Location of the Study	3.1
3.3 Sampling Procedures	3.1
3.4 Profile of the Informants	3.3
3.5 Instrumentation	3.4
3.6 Pilot Survey	3.8
3.7 Data Collection Procedures	3.8
3.8 Data Analysis Procedures	3.9
3.9 Summary of the Chapter	3.9



4	RESULTS AND DISCUSSION	4.1
4.1	Introduction	4.1
4.2	Demographic Profile of Informants	4.2
4.2.1	Gender of Informants	4.2
4.2.2	Ethnicity of Informants	4.2
4.2.3	Discipline of Study of Informants	4.3
4.2.4	Cross Distribution of Informants as per Gender, Ethnicity and Discipline of Study	4.3
4.3	Informants' Proficiency in Languages	4.5
4.3.1	Informants' Level of Proficiency in Languages as per Ethnicity	4.6
4.3.2	Informants' Level of Proficiency in Languages as per Discipline of Study	4.8
4.4	Patterns of Language Choice and Use in Different Domains	4.9
4.4.1	Patterns of Language Choice and Use in Family	4.10
4.4.2	Patterns of Language Choice and Use in Friendship	4.26
4.4.3	Patterns of Language Choice and Use in Neighborhood	4.37
4.4.4	Patterns of Language Choice and Use in Education	4.44
4.4.5	Patterns of Language Choice and Use in Transaction	4.61
4.4.6	Patterns of Language Choice and Use in Religion	4.76
4.4.7	Patterns of Language Choice and Use in Office	4.89
4.4.8	Patterns of Language Choice and Use in Media	4.102
4.4.9	Summary of the Chapter	4.120
5	CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS	5.1
5.1	Conclusion	5.1
5.2	Implications and Recommendations	5.5
	REFERENCES	R.1
	APPENDICES	A.1
	BIODATA OF THE AUTHOR	B.1



LIST OF TABLES

Table		Page
4.1	Distribution of Informants as per Gender	4.2
4.2	Distribution of Informants as per Ethnicity	4.3
4.3	Distribution of Informants as per Discipline of Study	4.3
4.4	Gender Distribution of Informants as per Ethnicity	4.4
4.5	Distribution of Informants as per Discipline of Study and Gender	4.5
4.6	Ethnic Distribution of Informants as per Discipline of Study	4.5
4.7	Informants' Level of Proficiency in Languages as per Ethnicity	4.8
4.8	Informants' Level of Proficiency in Languages as per Discipline	4.9
4.9	Sub-domains of Family	4.10
4.10	Patterns of Language Choice and Use with Grandparents	4.12
4.11	Patterns of Language Choice and Use with Parents	4.15
4.12	Patterns of Language Choice and Use with Siblings	4.17
4.13	Patterns of Language Choice and Use in Discussion at Dinner	4.18
4.14	Patterns of Language Choice and Use in Discussing Personal Matters	4.20
4.15	Patterns of Language Choice and Use in Talking to Relative/Guest	4.22
4.16	Relationship and Strength of Relationship between Patterns of Language Choice and Use in Family, and Gender, Ethnicity, Discipline of Study and Proficiency	4.26
4.17	Sub-domains of Friendship	4.27
4.18	Patterns of Language Choice and Use in Conversing with Friends on a General Topic	4.28



4.19	Patterns of Language Choice and Use in Discussing with Friends on Personal Matters	4.30
4.20	Patterns of Language Choice and Use in Introducing Friends to Others	4.32
4.21	Patterns of Language Choice and Use in Writing Personal Letters to Friends	4.34
4.22	Relationship and Strength of Relationship between Patterns of Language Choice and Use in Friendship, and Gender, Ethnicity, Discipline of Study and Proficiency	4.37
4.23	Sub-domains of Neighbourhood	4.38
4.24	Patterns of Language Choice and Use in Talking to Neighbours whose Mother Tongues are the Same as Mine	4.39
4.25	Patterns of Language Choice and Use in Talking to Neighbours whose Mother Tongues are Different from Mine	4.41
4.26	Relationship and Strength of Relationship between Patterns of Language Choice and Use in Neighbourhood, and Gender, Ethnicity, Discipline of Study and Proficiency	4.44
4.27	Sub-domains of Education	4.45
4.28	Patterns of Language Choice and Use in Talking to Teachers in Primary School	4.46
4.29	Patterns of Language Choice and Use in Talking to Teachers in Secondary School	4.48
4.30	Patterns of Language Choice and Use in Talking to Lecturers	4.50

4.31	Patterns of Language Choice and Use in Participating in Classroom Peer Discussion	4.51
4.32	Patterns of Language Choice and Use in Talking to Classmates of the Same Mother Tongues	4.53
4.33	Patterns of Language Choice and Use in Talking to Classmates of Different Mother Tongues	4.54
4.34	Patterns of Language Choice and Use in Writing Assignments for Tertiary Studies	4.55
4.35	Patterns of Language Choice and Use in Reading up for Tertiary Studies	4.57
4.36	Relationship and Strength of Relationship between Patterns of Language Choice and Use in Education, and Gender, Ethnicity, Discipline of Study and Proficiency	4.61
4.37	Sub-domains of Transaction	4.62
4.38	Patterns of Language Choice and Use at Market places	4.63
4.39	Patterns of Language Choice and Use at Bazaars and Shops	4.65
4.40	Patterns of Language Choice and Use at Restaurants	4.66
4.41	Patterns of Language Choice and Use at Bus Stops and Railway Stations	4.68
4.42	Patterns of Language Choice and Use at Banks	4.69
4.43	Patterns of Language Choice and Use at Medical Centres	4.71
4.44	Patterns of Language Choice and Use at Post-Offices	4.72
4.45	Relationship and Strength of Relationship between Patterns of Language Choice and Use in Transaction, and Gender, Ethnicity, Discipline of Study and Proficiency	4.75

4.46	Sub-domains of Religion	4.76
4.47	Patterns of Language Choice and Use in Silent Prayers	4.78
4.48	Patterns of Language Choice and Use in Discussing Religious Matters	4.80
4.49	Patterns of Language Choice and Use in Talking to Religious Leaders such as Imam and Priest	4.82
4.50	Patterns of Language Choice and Use in Writing on Religious Issues	4.84
4.51	Patterns of Language Choice and Use in Religious Ceremonies	4.85
4.52	Relationship and Strength of Relationship between Patterns of Language Choice and Use in Religion, and Gender, Ethnicity, Discipline of Study and Proficiency	4.88
4.53	Sub-domains of Office	4.89
4.54	Patterns of Language Choice and Use in Writing Official Letters	4.91
4.55	Patterns of Language Choice and Use in talking to Government Officials whose Mother Tongues are the Same as Mine	4.93
4.56	Patterns of Language Choice and Use in talking to Government Officials whose Mother Tongues are Different from Mine	4.95
4.57	Patterns of Language Choice and Use in talking to University Officials whose Mother Tongues are the Same as Mine	4.96
4.58	Patterns of Language Choice and Use in talking to University Officials whose Mother Tongues are Different from Mine	4.98
4.59	Relationship and Strength of Relationship between Patterns of Language Choice and Use in Office, and Gender, Ethnicity, Discipline of Study and Proficiency	4.102
4.60	Sub-domains of Media	4.103



4.61	Patterns of Language Choice and Use in Reading Newspapers and Magazines	4.104
4.62	Patterns of Language Choice and Use in Listening to Radio News	4.106
4.63	Patterns of Language Choice and Use in Listening to Radio Entertainment Programmes	4.107
4.64	Patterns of Language Choice and Use in Watching TV News	4.109
4.65	Patterns of Language Choice and Use in Watching TV Programmes	4.110
4.66	Patterns of Language Choice and Use when Chatting on Internet	4.112
4.67	Patterns of Language Choice and Use in Browsing Internet for Academic Purposes	4.114
4.68	Patterns of Language Choice and Use in sending SMS	4.115
4.69	Relationship and Strength of Relationship between Patterns of Language Choice and Use in Media, and Gender, Ethnicity, Discipline of Study and Proficiency	4.120



LIST OF FIGURES

Figure		Page
3.1	Sampling Procedure	3.3



GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Bazaars and shops	Bazaars and shops refer to pasarmalam and shops such as kedai dobi, kedai kek on the street or in a small market
Domain	Context of language use
Government official	Official in government offices other than those in university
Language choice	Selection of language(s) between or among languages in context(s)/ preference for language(s) between or among languages in context(s)
Language use	Use of language(s) between or among languages in context(s)
Market place	A big market like shopping mall
Other	Minor ethnic groups other than Malay, Chinese, and Indian such as Kadazan and Bidayu
Radio entertainment programmes	Radio programmes that entertain audiences such as songs and jokes
Silent prayer	Prayer that involves not making sounds audible to others but use language silently
Sub-domain	Specific context within a bigger domain
TV programmes	Programmes on TV other than news such as songs, drama serials, and movies



CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Overview

This chapter provides the introduction to the study. The chapter begins with the background of the study followed by a description of the linguistic situation in Malaysia, statement of the problem, conceptual framework of the study, purposes of the study, research questions, significance of the study and delimitations and limitations of the study. Finally, the chapter concludes with a summary.

1.2 Background of the Study

A state of multilingualism allows people to grow up with access to two or more languages resulting in them being able to exercise a choice in using languages for different purposes in different contexts. Some people perceive this exercise of choice as an advantage since it provides opportunities for choosing suitable languages for communication from their linguistic repertoire whereas others view it as a problem since it causes hindrance and difficulties in communication because exercising choice of languages in different contexts is a complex task. As Edwards (2005:46) says, however proficient we become in a multilingual setting, communicative difficulties would remain.



Language choice and use may be constrained by several factors which include language policy, language proficiency, ethnicity, gender, attitude, profession, socio-cultural background and in particular, the domain in which language is used. Domain, in its simplest terms, refers to the context of language use, for instance, that of family, friendship, education, and transaction. As Fishman states,

“Domains are defined in terms of institutional contexts or socio-ecological co-occurrences. They attempt to designate the major clusters of interaction situations that occur in particular multilingual settings. Domains enable us to understand that language choice and topic...are...related to widespread socio-cultural norms and expectations” (see Dil, 1972:248).

Languages are chosen with consideration to formality and informality of contexts of language use. Formal context refers to high domain (e.g. education, court and office) and informal context refers to low domain (e.g. family, friendship and neighborhood). It is the standard or prestigious variety which is chosen in the high domains whereas vernacular or colloquial variety is chosen in the low domains. Quoting Chatterjee, Coulmas (2005: 126) says “ridiculous or sometimes comical will be the effect if the norms of situational selection between the two are violated”.

With Malaysia being a multilingual, multicultural and multiracial country, it is not surprising that everyone in Malaysia speaks at least two or more languages. Such a multilingual situation leads people to choose and use different languages for different purposes in different domains. Even within a single domain, the choice of language may vary depending on context, topic and participant involved. This study investigated the patterns of language choice and use in selected domains along with an examination of the influence of different factors that constrain the choice in a particular multilingual

ecology. This multilingual ecology is peculiar to the setting of Malaysia which had come about due to the history of the country. The next section situates the study by explaining the linguistic situation of the country.

1.3 The Linguistic Situation in Malaysia

Historically, the first European language that came to Malaysia was Portuguese, and this was followed by Dutch and then English, with the British colonization. During this period, Chinese and Indian languages also set foot with the migration of Chinese and Indians to Malaysia. This, in fact, contributed in no small measure to Malaysia's growth as a multilingual country. As a British colony, the use of English occupied several formal and informal domains; it was the official language and used in court and education to a large extent. The use of English spread rapidly moulding an elite group of local users among the Malays, Chinese and Indians. As English was the language of the 'ruler', people with knowledge of English were given privileges. This helped increase the number of English speakers leading to an increase in the corresponding number of English medium schools in Malaysia. This increase of English medium schools was linked likely to the increasing popularity of the language. English became very influential and was used in so many domains so much so it remained the official language even after ten years from gaining independence in 1957 (Ain Nadzimah and Chan, 2003). However, after independence, the English language gradually diminished in importance as the language of education since the medium of instruction was changed to Bahasa Melayu.



With its independence, Malaysia experienced a lot of changes that affected language choice and use. Like any other newly born state, Malaysia (Malaya then) strongly felt the need to have a unique national and official language in order to get a national identity; to forget the linguistic influences of the past colonial periods and to unite different races through the use of a common language for the development of the country. Accordingly in 1963, Bahasa Melayu (BM) was declared the national and official language of Malaysia with the passing of the National Language Act. To declare BM as the national and official language of Malaysia was a deliberate effort when the state had Malays (about half of the total population), Chinese (just over a third of the total population) and Indians (10% of the total population) (Gill, 2005). BM was chosen over other languages on several grounds but one of the most important was that “To the Malays and bumiputera people, that the choice fell on Malay was the most natural thing. It is the language of the soil. Of all the bumiputera or indigenous languages, Malay is the most advanced in terms of its function as language of administration, high culture, literary knowledge and religion” (Asmah, 1987:65). In order to achieve the goal of the declaration of BM as the national and official language, BM was made the only medium of instruction to be used in national schools and an exclusively BM medium first public university called National University of Malaysia (Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia) was established in 1970. By 1983, all subjects irrespective of disciplines were taught and learnt through BM. The implementation of the BM policy was accelerated through declaring that all government appointees must have competence in the national language, BM, and that entrance to government secondary schools also depended on competence in BM (Ridge, 2004). However, other minority and indigenous languages continued to be used obviating issues of language conflict. The Chinese and Tamil



vernacular primary schools were constitutionally allowed to continue with the respective ethnic languages as the medium of instruction. Amidst these changes, the status of English decreased to such a level that it became simply a subject of study like other subjects such as history, geography and physics. The consequence of such a policy promoted bilingualism especially among the non-Malay children in independent Malaysia.

By the mid 1990s, tremendous changes impacted education. The government of Malaysia felt it necessary to give new emphasis on the learning of English which was and still is increasingly seen as crucial in the advancement of trade and commerce as well as giving the country a competitive edge. A milestone change is the green light given by the government to start teaching scientific and technical subjects in English at tertiary education (Ridge, 2004). In addition, the then Prime Minister Tun Dr. Mohathir Mohamad made it public in 2002 that mathematics and sciences will henceforth be taught in English from the first year of primary school. This unexpected announcement brought a drastic change in attitude among the people towards languages and the linguistic situation in Malaysia.

The preceding discussion reveals that bilingualism and multilingualism in Malaysia did not happen overnight. Rather it took place through several phases with the changes of language planning and policy in the passage of time. Generally, it set the direction towards a greater emphasis on Malays becoming bilingual (with BM and English) and non-Malays to be trilingual or multilingual (with BM, English and their respective ethnic language or languages).