Chapter 9
Selective Language Maintenance in Multilingual Malaysia

Teresa Wai See Ong

https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6723-589X

Griffith University, Australia

Selim Ben Said

https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8940-077X

National Sun Yat-sen University, Taiwan

ABSTRACT

Aiming to understand the phenomena of language maintenance and shift in Malaysia, this chapter focuses on efforts by Penang's Chinese community to maintain Penang Hokkien alongside other Chinese community languages. The Malaysian Government has explicitly allowed the teaching of Mandarin Chinese in Chinese-medium schools, which resulted in the reduced use of Penang Hokkien and other Chinese community languages among the Malaysian Chinese community. Such a situation has caused sociolinguistic realignment in many Malaysian Chinese families, including in Penang, and raised questions about the survival of these languages in Malaysian society. Based on interviews with participants from Penang's Chinese community, the findings reveal that although past studies have demonstrated a decline in the use of Chinese community languages, the participants expressed their willingness to regularly use them in their daily life in various domains. Despite the announced desuetude of these languages, participants consistently used them and indicated their determination to pass on to the next generation.

INTRODUCTION

Recent globalisation and modernisation trends have brought wider attention to the issue of language maintenance in the field of sociolinguistics (e.g., Duff & Doherty, 2019; Hatoss, 2013; Pauwels, 2005; Sallabank, 2013). Many smaller communities are currently facing pressure to maintain their community languages. In this chapter, the term 'community languages' is defined as languages spoken within an ethnic group for existence continuation purposes. It is often the case that these community languages

are nonstandard and have no orthographic system for written development. Smaller communities usually have to rely on their own initiatives and efforts to maintain their community languages so they can be passed onto the next generation (Ben Said, 2019). The various Chinese subethnic groups in Malaysia are among the smaller communities who face such issues in their everyday life. To have a better understanding of this issue, the present chapter focuses on the efforts initiated by 46 individuals from the Chinese community in Penang, a city that has a rich Chinese history, to maintain Penang Hokkien alongside other Chinese community languages in various domains within the multilingual context of Malaysia. Penang Hokkien is one of the Chinese community languages, which is unique due to it being a variant of Hokkien and only spoken in Malaysia, mainly in Penang, Kedah, and Perlis. The chapter begins with a discussion of the concept of domain, which will be used as the conceptual framework for this study. Subsequently, a background of Malaysia, Penang, and the Chinese community is provided to characterise the competition of various languages on-the-ground. Following this, the methodological issues are presented. Finally, the findings discuss the importance of the family domain as a crucial site for community language maintenance.

The Concept of Domain

Fishman (1964) introduced the concept of domain to study patterns of language use, language attitudes, and language choices in multilingual settings. He defines a domain as:

A socio-cultural construct abstracted from topics of communication, relationships between communicators, and locales of communication in accord with the institutions of a society and the spheres of activity of a culture, in such a way that individual behaviour and social patterns can be distinguished from each other and yet related to each other (Fishman, 1972a, p. 82).

An even earlier characterisation of domain comes from Schmidt-Rohr (1933) who recognised the need of dominance configurations to study language choices in various domains. He proposed nine domains of language choice: family, playground and street, school, church, literature, press, military, courts, and the governmental bureaucracy. Subsequently, different scholars (e.g., Mak, 1935; Frey, 1945) either added or reduced the number of domains to fit into a particular setting. Regardless of the number of domains, Fishman (1972b) argues that the concept of domain is vital in helping understand language choices, because language use in any domains—particularly in family, neighbourhood, and the community—is ultimately crucial to understand the process of language maintenance.

Fishman's (1965) question of 'Who speaks what language to whom and when?' has become a reference point for many scholars to describe and analyse patterns of language use and language choices in relation to the concept of domain mentioned above. These language uses and language choices are influenced by factors such as gender, age, education, social status, and socioeconomic background. In one sense, the concept of domain acts as a tool to categorise social settings in a community (Fishman, 1972b), while in another sense, it is related to participants' role-relations. Different domains draw out different language choices, even when the settings are similar. For example, in an immigrant society, the language of the host country is dominant in the governmental domain, yet it may not be used in the family domain. Immigrants usually prefer to speak their community languages at home, regardless of their country of relocation. In brief, the concept of domain is important for language maintenance (Boxer, 2002) due to its usefulness for identifying language use and language choices in multilingual settings.

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