THE SARAWAK MUSEUM JOURNAL

Crossref https://doi.org/10.61507/smj22-2007-9IQA-09

The Sarawak Museum Journal
Vol. LXIV No. 85
December 2007

ISSN: 0375-3050
E-ISSN: 3036-0188

Citation: Su-Hie Ting. (2007). Influence of Ethnicity and Hierarchical Status on Language Choice in a Multilingual Organisation in Sarawak. The Sarawak Museum Journal, LXIV (85): 221-250

INFLUENCE OF ETHNICITY AND HIERARCHICAL STATUS ON LANGUAGE CHOICE IN A MULTILINGUAL ORGANISATION IN SARAWAK

Su-Hie TING

INTRODUCTION

Language choice is an intercultural issue at workplaces in multiethnic communities because interactions between employees of different ethnic groups involve the use of different languages, all of which have their respective social meanings. As Cargile, Giles, Ryan, and Bradac (1994, p. 211) have pointed out, "language is a powerful social force that does more than convey intended referential information. Our views of others- their supposed capabilities, beliefs and attributes— are determined, in part, by inferences we make from the language features they adopt." In other words, language is a social marker. Language is a vital aspect of any social group, but particularly an ethnic group's identity (Giles & Johnson, 1981).

INFLUENCE OF ETHNICITY AND HIERARCHICAL STATUS ON LANGUAGE CHOICE IN A MULTILINGUAL ORGANISATION IN SARAWAK

by
Su-Hie TING

INTRODUCTION

Language choice is an intercultural issue at workplaces in multiethnic communities because interactions between employees of different ethnic groups involve the use of different languages, all of which have their respective social meanings. As Cargile, Giles, Ryan, and Bradac (1994, p. 211) have pointed out, "language is a powerful social force that does more than convey intended referential information. Our views of others – their supposed capabilities, beliefs and attributes – are determined, in part, by inferences we make from the language features they adopt." In other words, language is a social marker. Language is a vital aspect of any social group, but particularly an ethnic group's identity (Giles & Johnson, 1981).

The Language-Ethnicity Link

Languages in multiethnic speech communities are bounded with connotative meanings derived from associations of the language with the ethnic group, attitudes towards the language, and the socio-economic and political prominence of language users, among many other factors. Thus, to use or not to use a particular language in an inter-ethnic interaction conveys social meanings.

The fundamental relationship between language and ethnicity as conceptualised by Fishman (1977, pp. 17-24) has been used in many studies investigating ethnicity and language use (e.g., Bond, 1985; Byran, 2004; Hogan-Brun & Ramoniene, 2005; Sandhu &

Manu, 1993; Thomson, 2000; Ting & Campbell, 2005; Verdery, 1978). Fishman views ethnicity as having three dimensions. In the paternity dimension, language "is not even merely an ethnic symbol in and of itself. It is flesh of the flesh and blood of the blood" (p. 19). In the patrimony dimension, language is learned behaviour used to express ethnic group membership. From the phenomenological perspective, anything can become symbolic of ethnicity such as language, cuisine, dress, and physical features.

Research has indicated that perspectives on the place of language in relation to ethnic identity vary with speech communities. Patrimony is a stronger expression of ethnic identity for Arabic communities. Language is the core of their identity, for example, an Arab is a person whose mother tongue is Arabic (see Fishman, 1972, p. 44). Thus, speaking Arabic is tantamount to having an Arab identity. In Malaysia too, a Malay is defined in the Malaysian constitution as one who speaks Malay and is a Muslim. People, such as the Arabs, who view ethnic group membership in largely cultural terms, have been historically open to the large-scale assimilation of other groups who have adopted their language and their religion (Verdery, 1978). Because of the similarity of the Malays in Malaysia to the Arabs in their emphasis on the patrimony dimension of ethnic identity, it is likely that the Malays in Malaysia would have stronger social sanctions against the use of outgroup languages, leading to higher incidence of using the shared ethnic language as an expression of their group membership.

In contrast, in the Chinese speech community there is evidence of the phenomenological view in that the inherited ethnic identity is viewed as separate from the linguistic identity. The Chinese and Afrikaners who view group membership in terms of descent or physical characteristics have not been open to large-scale assimilation regardless of the linguistic usage of subordinate populations (Verdery, 1978). Bond (1985) examined evaluative judgements of Chinese bilingual students in Hong Kong towards an English and a Cantonese passage given by either Chinese or British males, and found that ethnic preference was independent of

outgroup language use, but dependent on shared ethnic group membership. Bond concluded that "British speakers were perceived as more likely to accept Westerners in Hong Kong than were Chinese speakers; Chinese speakers were perceived as more likely to accept Hong Kong Chinese than were British speakers" (p. 60). Bond's findings reinforced Clammer's (1982) observations that "to a Chinese his sense of Chineseness transcends all such [language] variations, and is furthermore regarded as essentially a racial identity, rather than, for example, a religious one [...], a linguistic one [...], or a locality of origin one [...]" (pp. 128-129). In other words, one is a Chinese regardless of whether or not one speaks Chinese. The concurrence of these findings (Bond, 1985; Clammer 1982; Verdery, 1978) suggests that the Chinese in Malaysia may also not perceive the necessity to speak their shared ethnic language (see Ting, 2006).

There is a constant awareness of ethnic differences in inter-ethnic interactions, particularly when ethnicity markers are distinctive. Exemplars in Malaysia are members of the Malay, Chinese and Indian communities, all of whom have distinctive cultural traditions, physiognomies and separate languages. In such multiethnic communities, ethnicity is a highly salient factor in language behaviour (see Bourhis, 1984a; 1984b for Canada; Khlief, 1980 for Wales; Stevens, 1983 for Tunisia; Bentahila, 1983 for Morocco). Due to the language-ethnicity association, there is uncertainty over language choice for public use.

Ethnic identity is a particularly salient social identity in multiethnic communities where there is intergroup tension, for example, the highly volatile intergroup conflict in Israel means that "social behaviour will generally be more dependent on ethnic group identification and less on personal characteristics" (Kraemer & Birenbaum, 1993: 440). Malaysia has been described as one of the countries with clear ingroup-outgroup divisions (see Clammer, 1982), where ethnic differences are accentuated by the official practice of categorising people along ethnic lines. According to Muzaffar (1983), the all-important indigenous/non-indigenous

(*Bumiputera/non-Bumiputera*) dichotomy is perpetuated in the life of Malaysia. Thus, in view of the salience of ethnicity in Malaysia and the distinct ethnicity markers, it is inevitable for ethnicity marked by language to be an important consideration in inter-ethnic communication.

Language Choice and Hierarchical Status in Workplace Settings

In this paper, language choice in inter-ethnic communication is examined within an organisational setting because organisations provide a natural boundary for examining the language choice phenomenon. In the context of an organisation, hierarchical status is also a salient social identity (see Bourhis, 1991). However, Bourhis ascertained that ethnicity and the proportion of an ethnic group's presence in the workplace (linguistic work environment) were stronger determinants of language choice than the participants' linguistic skills and their hierarchical status by using the Linguistic Work Environment survey (Bourhis, 1989). The 6,231 subjects in his study were bilingual Anglophones and Francophones in a Canadian civil administration in New Brunswick. Although the wider speech community was bilingual, the work environment in Bourhis's studies was multilingual in nature. In this study, the effect of ethnicity can be seen, in that Francophone employees converged more to the first language of their co-workers than their Anglophone counterparts. Bourhis also found that the likelihood of using the second language was also influenced by ethnicity. The Francophones tended to use their second language much more frequently than Anglophones, regardless of their fluency in English. However, the results showed that ethnicity took precedence over hierarchical status, since the Francophones were more inclined to converge to the language choice of Anglophones of all occupational ranks, including subordinates, whereas the Anglophones tended to maintain the use of English in the presence of Francophones of all ranks. Bourhis attributed the intense use of English at work to the strong group vitality of the Anglophone community in New Brunswick, along with the corresponding high status of English relative to French. As of 1985 there were a total of 7,467 civil servants in New Brunswick