

The Sarawak Museum Journal

Vol. LXIII No. 84

December 2007



ISSN: 0375-3050

E-ISSN: 3036-0188

Citation: Salasiah Che Lah et al. (2007). The Spatial Lexical Variation and Distribution of Melanau Language. The Sarawak Museum Journal, LXIII (84): 41-64

THE SPATIAL LEXICAL VARIATION AND DISTRIBUTION OF MELANAU LANGUAGE

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INTRODUCTION

This paper address some fundamental question about one of the most important and least understood issues in linguistics, the spatial variation and distribution of linguistic features. The Melanau language family is chosen because it is one of the main indigenous languages spoken in Sarawak, Malaysia. Most of the settlement of the speakers of Melanau language family are concentrated at the Rejang Baram Rivers and coastal areas from Daro-Matu to Sibü. Five locations have been identified through stratified sampling: Daro-Matu (from North Channel of Rejang Rivers to the sea), Kanowit (middle Rejang River), Melanau (coastal area of Rejang delta up to the Balingian River), Tanjong (Rejang River above Kanowit area) and Sibü (Rejang River). A global positioning system (GPS) is used to capture the coordinate of the sample locations and respondents in the study area. Apart from the spatial data, data from the questionnaire will be used to present the spatial pattern of language variations by using ArcView GIS. It will begin with an observation and identification of linguistic features by employing the 100-word lists by Morris Swadesh. This wordlist was given to the selected Melanau speakers.

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This paper address some fundamental question about one of the most important and least understood issues in linguistics, the spatial variation and distribution of linguistic features. The Melanau language family is chosen because it is one of the main indigenous languages spoken in Sarawak, Malaysia. Most of the settlement of the speakers of Melanau language family are concentrated at the Rejang Baram Rivers and coastal areas from Daro-Matu to Sibü. Five locations have been identified through stratified sampling: Daro-Matu (from North Channel of Rejang Rivers to the sea), Kanowit (middle Rejang River), Melanau (coastal area of Rejang delta up to the Balingian River), Tanjong (Rejang River above Kanowit area) and Sibü (Rejang River). A global positioning system (GPS) is used to capture the coordinate of the sample locations and respondents in the study area. Apart from the spatial data, data from the questionnaire will be used to present the spatial pattern of language variations by using ArcView GIS. It will begin with an observation and identification of linguistic features by employing the 100-word lists by Morris Swadesh. This wordlist was given to the selected Melanau speakers.

INTRODUCTION

Linguistic geography, also known as geolinguistics or dialectal geography, is a research method used by several linguistic disciplines (Ariel Rivero *et al.*, 2002). Geolinguistic diffusion is the process by which linguistic changes spread geographically from one dialect or language to another (Charles Boberg, 2000). It places linguistic phenomena in spatial context to analyse the possible relationship between language and the geocultural environment. On the other hand, some changes never complete their territorial or perhaps never go beyond their point of origin, thereby serving to diversify languages into dialect.

Historical linguists have long sought to understand the process of diffusion, which has given rise to several distinct yet related questions. Why do certain innovative features spread and not others? Why are certain areas or dialect more receptive than others to change from outside? (Charles Boberg, 2000). Geolinguistics represents a renewed engagement between linguistics and geography that builds upon the empirical work of many variationists from all over the world. Both geography and sociolinguistics have changed, methodologically and theoretically, since those early days. Engaging in geography means moving from the sociolinguistic description of a single speech community to a comparative sociolinguistics of a number of speech communities.

Sociolinguists particularly in the West have studied language variation from many perspectives. For example, Milroy (1992) for social class, Bell (1984) for style and Eckert (2001) for age. However, space is one of the social categories that has received the least attention. Britain (2002) asserts that space makes a difference and to map out what a geographically informed variation analysis might need to address. He goes on to say that there are remarkable parallels between the recent history of human geographic thought and the ongoing interest in language variation across space. Although space has been undertheorised in variation studies, a number of researchers, from the traditional dialectologists through