

Language shift and language maintenance in mixed marriages: a case study of a Malaysian-Chinese family

KAREN KOW YIP CHENG

Abstract

Language choice is determined by linguistic considerations as well as by external and internal factors. Location, community structure, situation, topic, and participants are some of the factors that have been mentioned. Harrison and Piete (1980) point out that in bilingual families language choice is determined by the mothers. The mother's choice is in turn determined by socioeconomic considerations, etc. This paper sets out to study the issue of language choice and ultimately language shift and maintenance in a mixed marriage. This study is a case study of the author's family, where mixed marriages have occurred over different generations. The methodology employed is one of observation and oral interview. The premise presented by Harrison and Piete (1980) is used as a framework.

Introduction

Language choice is determined by a number of variables such as location, community structure, situation, topic, and interlocutors (see Hoffmann 1994). In order to study the catalysts for language shift and maintenance (LSLM), this paper sets out to examine the determinants of language choice in a Malaysian family. While the majority of studies on LSLM have focused on a particular ethnic group or a community, this study is a case study of one family. David and Nambiar (2002) examine the reasons for the language shift of two extended families of Catholic Malayalees in Malaysia. The push factor for language shift for this community was found to be “the high incidence of exogamous marriages and the many numbers relocating elsewhere . . .” (David and Nambiar 2002).

This paper examines LSLM at a micro-level. There are few studies at this level in Malaysia (see, however, David 1996). This paper constitutes a case study of the researcher's family over five generations. Through this