

LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE OF THE TIONGHUA SPEAKERS TOWARDS THEIR HERITAGE LANGUAGE IN ACEH

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ABSTRACT

The Khek tribe is one of the dominant Chinese or Tionghua tribes settling in Aceh. The language they use is one of the common ways of identifying themselves. The main aim of this study is to investigate the language use, efforts, and challenges of these speakers in maintaining their heritage language, in this case, Khek. The respondents were four Tionghua adults and two children residing in the Peunayong area, Banda Aceh. A qualitative approach was used, and interviews were conducted to collect the data. The questions asked were to explore the language use of the Tionghua towards their heritage language, their efforts to keep the language alive in their community, and the challenges they face in maintaining the language. The results indicate that the respondents still strongly maintain Khek in the home and among close friends. Khek is also regarded as an important part of their Tionghua identity, so a way of preserving the language is by still using it among family members in the home. Challenges faced in preserving their language are from the environment of a majority of Acehnese and Indonesian speakers, and the educational school system that prioritizes Indonesian and English in the curriculum, among others. Thus, the need for using Khek is restricted only in the home domain. The paper further describes the efforts made by the adults in preserving Khek to their generations. Nonetheless, the respondents agree that a more serious support from their own community and the local government is needed for the maintenance of their heritage language for generations to come.

Keywords: Language maintenance, efforts, challenges, Khek Chinese, Aceh.

INTRODUCTION

Aceh is one of a good representative of multi-ethnic and multilingual community in Indonesia. The population of Aceh consists of various ethnic and language diversity, and it is made up of Acehnese (90% of the population), Gayonese, Alas, Tamiang, Ulu Singkil, Kluet, Aneuk Jamee, Simeulu and some other small ethnic groups (McCulloch, 2005). Each of this ethnic generally has its own language. Therefore, the multi-ethnic region potentially raises a multilingual speech community in which people from various ethnics live in one region and speak various languages to each other.

Among other ten ethnics in Aceh mentioned above, Chinese ethnic group is one of the minority groups in Aceh. This group is considered as a minority community since this group has a small population, representing about 0.34 % of the local population (Ananta, Arifin & Bachtiar, 2008). This ethnic group is formed of the people migrating from China periodically a long time ago. The reasons of their migration were caused by several factors, including the difficulty of housing, political and economy factors (Lim & Mead, 2011). They settled in Aceh and a majority of them become traders in certain regions. Generally, based on the empirical studies, the standardized language of this ethnic is Mandarin, and the spoken language in their intra-ethnics is varied in different sub-groups.

Peunayong is known as the Chinatown of Banda Aceh because most of Chinese community live in the area more than others in the capital of Aceh Province. As a minority community, Chinese in Peunayong live in a multilingual society in which many people use Indonesian and Acehnese as languages of daily communication. The Chinese language is only used when the Tionghua community communicate among their ethnic group. From this minority group, Khek Chinese tribe is regarded as quite the large population of Tionghua in Banda Aceh.

The minority language parents may have come across many obstacles in bringing up their children using Khek. This is a common phenomenon that exists in every minority groups living among a majority group (Yusuf, Pillai & Ali, 2013). Investigating what the Tionghua parents have done to support their children in maintaining Chinese is an interesting issue. To determine minority language status, one should look at the tendency between generations and the relative proportion of the people who speak the language as their mother tongue to the people who speak it as foreign language or a second language in terms of the overall population of the minority group.

Language maintenance is the solution to keep their language to always exist. Language maintenance is the degree to which an individual or groups continue to use their language, particularly in bilingual or multilingual area or among immigrant group. In language maintenance, the languages in contact may have a co-existence of stable relationship. Fishman (1989, p. 77) defines language maintenance as "the process and pursuit of intergenerational linguistic continuity". Fase, Jaspert and Kroon (1992) define language maintenance as the retention, use and proficiency in the language. Here, in this regard, language maintenance in this study refers to the situation where the Khek speech community continues to use this mother tongue in their daily life among a multilingual society.

One common issue in a multilingual community is language use. When people need to utter a message, they make choice of what language would be used to different interlocutor, setting, and topic. Similarly, Agam, Matu and Ongorora (2012) affirm that the individual language use depends on whom the speaker is talking to, about what he/she is talking, and where the talk is taken place. Quite similarly, Holmes (2001) describes that the social network of a community creates the pattern of language use of the people.

Parents have important roles in maintaining their mother tongue to their children, who actually have the authority and independence to use a certain language for their communication. The language is the means of communication from one generation to the next. Fishman (1991) suggests that efforts to save language must precisely deal with the intergenerational transmission of mother tongue and this is, to a large extent, a family and community issue. For political reasons, government of Indonesia has set up Indonesian as the higher variety of language which is used in formal settings, such as in school and other formal institutions. As a result, many local languages have become minority languages including Chinese. In addition, the role of the home and family is commonly acknowledged as being central to the transmission of minority language (Jones & Morris, 2007). Luo and Wiseman (2000) found out that parents, especially mothers, serve as important language models for shaping children's language behaviour when they have good family relations.

Most often, language minority community tries to enhance a way of retaining and transmitting the language to the next generation, and use it appropriately in all domains. Holmes (2001) mentions ways how usually the speakers of non-dominant language wish to keep their minority language through living near and seeing each other frequently, keeping the degree and frequency of contact with homeland, avoiding intermarriage, studying at a particular school which uses its language, using language in setting such school or their place or worship and using and supporting for the language in the media, e.g. TV programmers, radio programmers, newspapers, magazines.

In this regard, the research question of this study is: What are the language use, efforts and challenges of the Tionghua community in Peunayong in maintaining their heritage language? The results of this study can become input to the speakers (and the government as well) because language maintenance is an important survival tool that produces a solid ethnic identity, stimulates respect, preserves cultural and linguistic heritage, and encourages healthy family ties (Farruggio, 2010; Li-Yuan & Larke, 2008). By realizing the current situation of the Khek speakers in Banda Aceh, their own community and the local government can take steps to overcome the challenges in maintaining this heritage language for the generations to come.

METHOD

This study was conducted by using qualitative approach. A qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning of individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem (Creswell, 2009). This method was chosen because the main purpose of the study was to analyse the process of language maintenance from the respondents. This study focused on the Khek

Chinese ethnic group community in Peunayong, Banda Aceh because this region is quite popular as a Chinese regional commercial centre and settlement in Aceh.

The respondents were four Tionghua adults and two children residing in the Peunayong area, Banda Aceh; they were chosen based on their availability and consent to participate in this research. The researchers used interviews to collect data from these respondents. The questions asked were adapted from the work of Ting (2011) and Yusuf, Pillai and Ali (2013) to explore the heritage language use of the Tionghua, their efforts to keep the language alive in their community, and the challenges they face in maintaining the language. The respondents were interviewed by using several semi structured format questions which were designed to elicit their language use and attitude, efforts and challenges in preserving Khek to their children.

ANALYSIS

Language Use

The Tionghua community in Peunayong migrated from China since a long time ago. According to a respondent, she and her ancestor had moved from China to Indonesia because of economic problems. Her ancestor thought that it was very hard to develop their family economy in China. She has been living in Peunayong for many years since she was born, and now she is about 33 years old. She also married a Chinese man. She can speak Khek and Indonesian fluently.

The Tionghua people in Peunayong seem to maintain their heritage language at home domain. The interviews with the respondents revealed that their dominant language use at home domain is a code-mix of Indonesian, Mandarin (the standardized language) and Khek. One of the respondents of this study said that she and her family still use Khek in daily use, as seen in Excerpt 1 (or E1) below.

E1 *"....I mostly speak Indonesian and a bit of Khek with my sisters. It is common at home that I use Mandarin, and Khek to parents, my grandparents and great grandma. Most of the time, I speak Khek and Indonesian with my neighbours. Some of my Tionghua neighbours speak Khek or Hokkian; it depends on their ethnic group. We usually speak Khek to the Tionghua candy merchant".*

Nevertheless, there was a respondent who revealed that she and her husband tend to use Indonesian with their children, but they prefer to use Chinese with their older interlocutors. She admitted that:

E2 *"I speak Khek to my mother in law and my husband. But my husband and I speak Indonesian to my children; and sometimes we also use simple Khek to them".*

She reasoned that the language code-mixing between Indonesian and Khek is because the minority language is not used much outside of the home. She shifts to the official language (i.e. Indonesian) to her children as a sign of assimilation and to survive in their social circumstances outside of the house. Furthermore, Indonesian as a national and official language seems to be as bridge in their conversation outside of the home. While in the friendship domain, the Tionghua prefer to code-mix Indonesian and Khek with their Tionghua friends.

However, the respondents claimed that they use less Mandarin and never use Khek in the school domain; as a result, the code-mixing of Mandarin with Indonesian is practiced at the education institution. One of the two young respondents of this study informed that:

E3 *"We use mostly Indonesian at school and English with my English teacher and Mandarin with my Mandarin teacher. I mix Indonesian and Mandarin; because those languages are easy. I am used to mixing both languages (in school)".*

Efforts

Another interesting thing revealed in the interview was about the respondents' views of their heritage language. Consciously or not, the respondents indirectly do maintain their heritage language by learning Mandarin at school and using it in the intra-ethnic communication. The following excerpt reveals one of the respondents' responses to show the strong ethnic identity and her appreciation towards Chinese as her heritage language.

E4 *"Khek (Chinese) is important; it is our ancestor language. My mother asks me to teach it to my future daughter".*

All of the respondents, including one who mostly used Indonesian to her children as described earlier, agree that the Tionghua language should be passed on to their next generations in order to show their identity and solidarity of their community. The excerpt below shows the strong response towards their belief in the importance of maintaining their ancestor’s language.

E5 *“Chinese is our ethnic identity and heritage language. My children can use it for our closed family communication, worship activity and solidarity circumstances among our people.”*

Thus, they also regard that learning Indonesian, the majority and official language, is beneficial for their children’s education and social life. Therefore, they want their children to be able to speak both Indonesian and Khek.

To maintain Khek in the speech community, most parents use the language with their children so that it becomes their first language. They use it at home when communicating with their children and their extended family. They still communicate it with their grandparents in their daily communication, and further attend private Chinese classes held by their community for Mandarin. They watch Chinese TV programs, read Chinese books, send their children to Chinese schools in Banda Aceh, listen to Chinese songs, and visit other Tionghua families. Moreover, the adult respondents even have very strong plans to visit China to introduce their children to their home country if their economy permits.

The main religions of Tionghua communities in Peunayong are Christianity and Buddhism. One of the respondents in this study was a Buddhist, and she comes for prayer to Sakyamuni Buddhist temple every week. The language used by the respondents in the religious domain is Mandarin when they speak to other Chinese at the temple. However, they use Pāli to pray and read religious texts. Pāli is commonly used for preaching of sermons and reading of religious Buddhist texts (Chowdhury, 2010). She said:

E6 *“I speak Khek at home and Mandarin when I go to the temple because there are other Tionghua from other tribes. But we all use Pāli to pray. Pāli is not our daily spoken language, it is difficult”.*

Challenges

Nevertheless, the adult respondents admitted that they do encounter some barriers or difficulties in using Khek to their children. The family work schedule and their children school schedule have made them have little time to interact in this language. One of the respondents said that:

E7 *“The lack of time for me to communicate to them (i.e. my children) is because I have to work, and they have to study. They are busy with their school tasks. In the courses they take after school, such as Math and English, much Indonesian and English are used there”.*

All in all, the parents, or the four adult respondents of this study, share positive attitudes toward maintaining Khek even though they face some barriers and difficulties in doing so. They think it is important for their children to maintain it for some purposes; among them are as their ethnic identity, heritage language, close family communication, worship activity and solidarity circumstances among their people. However, because of pressure from the mainstream society, they all agree that it is hard for their children to maintain its proficiency. The hardship can be due to the lack of sufficient time because of being busy with regular school work, spending more time and activities outside (at school and courses) than at home, and learning English as an international language.

Another challenge in passing on Khek to their children is that they believed it is a complicated language, for example, one word of Khek has different pronunciation and meaning. These have led them to be aware of the importance of Khek for their Chinese identity. Some things they could do and defend their support in transmitting Khek for their children is by speaking it at home. Family plays a crucial role, especially parents in passing on their attitude and beliefs about their Chinese ethnicity to their children at a very young age. Extending family members such as grandparents is also helpful in providing more exposure to Khek among grandchildren, in addition to studying Mandarin at school.

CONCLUSION

In this study, the researchers investigated the language use, efforts and challenges of the Tionghua people in the area of Peunayong, Banda Aceh, in maintaining their heritage language, Khek. From the findings, it can be concluded that the use and shift from their heritage language to the official language generally occurs in public and formal situations, such as in the education domain. While in the public domain, particularly on the religion domain in which in intra-ethnic communication potentially exist, Mandarin, as the standardized Chinese language, is used. While in the private domain, such as in the home and among friends, Khek is used. The analysis of the interviews with the respondents also makes it clear that the process of Khek maintenance involves constant struggle. In addition, it reveals that the respondents have shown a strong level of commitment to its maintenance. They have done some efforts for their children to use Khek at home by extending relation with grandparents, families and friends, and also Mandarin by watching Chinese TV programs, video/films, studying at Chinese schools, reading Chinese newspapers/books, attending Mandarin classes, and planning to visit their home country, China. Thus, all these efforts play important roles in maintaining Khek and also Mandarin and the efforts are most effective when they are integrated into their lives.

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