

Language maintenance in Malaysia: a case study of the Chinese community in Penang

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In Malaysia, the Chinese constitute the second largest ethnic group and speak a variety of languages, including Chinese community languages and Mandarin Chinese. Chinese community languages are those languages brought by the Chinese when they first arrived in Malaya (the name of Malaysia before independence), namely Hokkien, Cantonese, Hakka, Teochew, Hainan, Foochow and Taishan. Standard Mandarin Chinese was not originally brought as a community language but was introduced in the early 20th century as the medium of instruction in Chinese-medium primary schools. With the present-day influences of globalisation, modernisation, sociopolitical changes and the growth of Mandarin Chinese as a language of high economic value, the use of Chinese community languages in many domains is reduced. Subsequently, there exists a widespread language shift from Chinese community languages to Mandarin Chinese, particularly among the younger generation (Low, Nicholas and Wales 2010; Puah and Ting 2015; Ting and Teng 2021; Wang 2017). The use of Mandarin Chinese is also gaining popularity due to Chinese-Malaysians' perception of it being a language of solidarity (Ting and Puah 2010) and having higher social status and wider functional value (Ting and Puah 2017). Additionally, many treat it as a symbolic language that represents the Chinese ethnic identity (Albury 2017; Wang 2007).

Resulting from broader language policies designed to encourage a shift from community languages to dominant languages, patterns of community language use in many Chinese-Malaysian families have been disrupted. Ultimately, the situation raises questions regarding the role, status and future of Chinese community languages in Malaysian society. Despite the threatening situation, to date, there is no study that captures the efforts to support Chinese community language maintenance in Malaysia, crucial in ensuring the languages' future survival. The purpose of this study is, therefore, to examine Chinese community language maintenance in Malaysia. It explores the relationship between national language policy and the situation of Chinese community languages in Penang, a north-western state of Malaysia and the research site of this study. The complex and dynamic language ecology of Penang serves to highlight tensions between dominant and community languages. The study is predicated upon two overarching research questions:

1. To what extent are official planning efforts to maintain Chinese community languages in Penang reflected in the everyday use of these languages?
2. What factors account for any discrepancies between official planning efforts and on-the-ground practices?

To conduct the exploration, I developed an ecological framework that drew together three key components (see Figure 1): language use, language perceptions and language planning and policy. A case study approach within a qualitative paradigm was employed. Semi-structured interviews, which acted as the

primary data source, were conducted in 2016 with 46 participants (33 males and 13 females), aged 30 and above, with the criteria that they were able to speak any of the listed Chinese community languages above. The participants were divided into three groups of (1) official actors, (2) community-based actors and (3) grassroots actors. The official actors were policymakers and representatives from government research institutes who played an important role in managing legislation at the macro level. The community-based actors were representatives from various Chinese associations and language promoters. Although they lacked the power to manage legislation, they played a crucial role in providing their opinions and supporting/promoting language-related activities at the meso level. The grassroots actors were individuals selected from the five domains of education, home, social, religion and work. These individuals are significant in putting enforced laws into action and managing language issues at the micro level. Photographs of Penang's linguistic landscape were used as the secondary data source. Official government language policies were also collected to deliver knowledge of existing language plans and policies. The interview data were transcribed and subsequently analysed in accordance with Haugen's (1972) ten ecological questions.

The key findings show that the three groups of participants were aware of the importance of Chinese community languages, and they acknowledged having an emotional connection with the languages. Their acknowledgment was supported by their consistent use of Chinese community languages in everyday life,

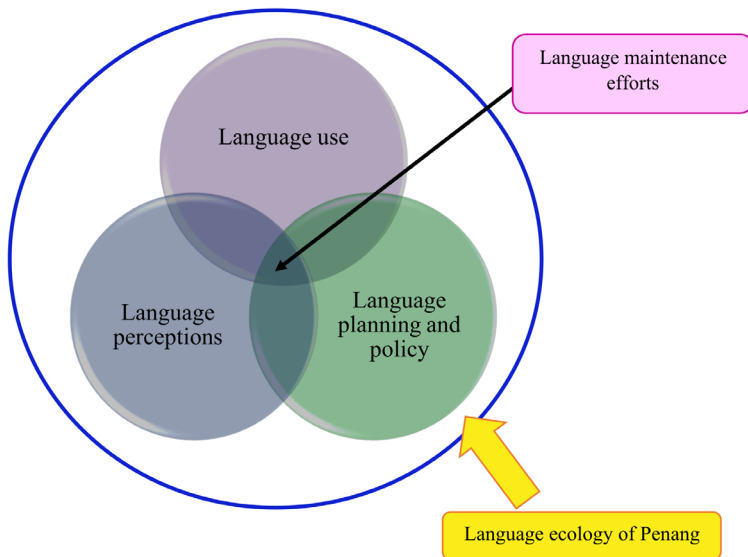


Figure 1: Conceptual framework.

particularly when interacting with friends and family members from their age group. Even though the three groups of participants, representing macro, meso and micro levels, demonstrated efforts to support the maintenance of Chinese community languages, the efforts were of different degrees due to different motivation from politics and power. The micro level's efforts were community driven but mostly functional in private domains only. Therefore, these findings show a wide discrepancy between the aspirations of the three groups of participants to maintain Chinese community languages and the present-day reality in Penang, in which the use of Chinese community languages is not reflected in the younger generation's language attitudes, as the literature review shows (Wang 2017). This discrepancy indicates the lack of a comprehensive strategy linking policy and activity at the macro, meso and micro levels, as demonstrated in the findings described below. In short, official planning efforts to maintain Chinese community languages in Penang are not fully reflected in the everyday use of these languages. The following three findings reveal factors that account for discrepancies between official planning efforts and on-the-ground practices.

The first finding is the participants' enthusiasm in maintaining Chinese community languages through their active use in numerous domains in everyday life. The usage includes interactions with family and friends, language teaching and learning, watching television, listening to the radio, cooking Chinese cuisine, chanting and worshipping, and cultural participation and transmission. Besides using Chinese community languages in everyday life, the participants, particularly those from the middle-aged generation, also use Mandarin Chinese widely. Nevertheless, they treated Mandarin Chinese more as a 'go-to' language for goal achievement and career preparation.

The second finding is that the participants' continuous use of Chinese community languages is motivated by their acknowledgment of the languages' rich value. Yet, despite this recognition, the survival of these languages remains uncertain as Mandarin Chinese becomes the language of wider communication. Most participants predict that Penang Hokkien will continue to dominate in the linguistic landscape of Penang while Hakka becomes endangered and Taishan heads towards extinction. When assessing the vitality of languages in public space, most of the grassroots actors complemented those at the official level (Penang Government), due to the Government's accommodating approach towards both dominant languages (in this case, Bahasa Melayu, English and Mandarin Chinese) and community languages. The participants indicated that they continue to practise Chinese customs and traditions in private spaces to maintain their identity and status in a Malay-dominant country.

The third finding is that efforts have been made by different organisations in Penang, from macro to meso and micro levels, to support the maintenance of

Chinese community languages. Although the Malaysian Federal Government does not promote the use of Chinese community languages, the Penang Government is more supportive with its accommodating policy. At the meso level, various Chinese clan associations and language activists have introduced substantial efforts in organising language classes and specific cultural events in addition to literacy publications. At the micro level, some parents seek to provide a balance between the use of both dominant and community languages in the home domain. All these efforts vary to different degrees according to sociopolitical pressures.

Through the investigation into language use, language perceptions and language maintenance from macro to micro levels, this study presents a holistic account of the current role, status and vitality of Chinese community languages in Penang. Given the findings, my main conclusion is that there is an urgent need to bridge the gap between macro, meso and micro level language planning in Penang, which is also an issue faced by many communities around the world. In the present globalised and modernised world, many communities face certain threats, obstacles and challenges to retain community languages, especially when macro level planning efforts are usually reserved for dominant and majority languages due to the economic benefits these languages offer. By answering the call for the gap to be bridged, those scholars interested in language planning can obtain a comprehensive understanding of language maintenance and language shift and subsequently develop an inclusive and varied approach that encompasses both top-down and bottom-up practices. Ideally, the approach should reach out into all areas and organisations, from macro to micro levels and through the conduit of local community and non-profit organisations at the meso level.

In terms of methodological contributions, the qualitative research methods used in this study have provided detailed and nuanced data and moved from a descriptive to an explanatory interpretation of the complex language situation in Penang. The inclusion of linguistic landscape methods has added value in diagnosing the visibility of Chinese community languages and the representation of Chinese identity in a multilingual and multi-ethnic context. By using such diverse data, this study has added layers of interpretation to the analysis of the language ecology of Penang, moving beyond the traditional quantitative description to explain language use, language perceptions and language maintenance efforts as voiced by the participants from Penang's Chinese community. Such research methods are relevant to many communities in Malaysia and elsewhere, especially those whose community languages are in a vulnerable state and in need of urgent support.

In terms of theoretical contributions, the use of an ecological framework, adapted from Haugen's (1972) notion of language ecology that assumes the

existence of ecological connections between language, speakers and the environment, has successfully captured the dynamic nature of interactions between the Chinese community in Penang and the use of Chinese community languages. In Haugen's framework, the term 'language ecology' draws an analogy between environmental concerns about living organisms and cultural concerns about languages. In the case of Penang, the framework has assisted in demonstrating and understanding how the participants in this study, representing the three levels of macro, meso and micro levels, dealt with the country's and state's language policies and multilingual issue while continuing to make efforts to maintain Chinese community languages. This ecological approach, therefore, provides hope to inspire future studies dealing with language maintenance and language shift issues to explore how new linguistic resources assist in negotiating the use of community languages while accommodating to constant language change.

As Mandarin Chinese is rapidly becoming the community and commercial lingua franca, the case of the Chinese community in Penang may stand as an example for many communities in multilingual and multi-ethnic countries where the cultural and artistic values of their community languages are jeopardised by the presence of dominant languages. The findings of this study conclude that current language promotion mechanisms are woefully lacking. Mechanisms that could be used at the macro, meso and micro levels are not strong enough to hold Mandarin Chinese at bay. There is a lack of clarity with regard to the will of Penang's Chinese community, a will to maintain Chinese community languages being translated into concrete measures to stimulate use among the younger generation. While such a will is present to a degree in both the community and the government, the ecological approach used in this study has highlighted the importance of treating language maintenance and language shift as a serious issue. Such an approach is therefore useful as the first step towards designing a tiered and coordinated strategy to engage with all sectors and ensure recognition of having a combined macro, meso and micro level commitment. This approach to language sustainability incorporates individuals, families, schools, communities and government. Although the design is beyond the scope of this study, the findings have provided astute and valuable insights that could inform relevant strategic planning applicable to the Chinese community in Penang and beyond.

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