

# **The Process of Assimilation: A Sociolinguistic Approach to the Study of the Peranakan Chinese in Kelantan, Malaysia (A Preliminary Study)\***

Kok Seong Teo  
Graduate Student/Lecturer  
University of California at Berkeley/ UKM Malaysia

Department of Linguistics  
2337 Dwinelle Hall  
University of California at Berkeley  
Berkeley, CA 94720, USA

## **1.0 Introduction**

This paper is the result of an initial sociolinguistic observation of how the Peranakan Chinese in Kelantan became assimilated to the rural Kelantan Malays by examining the former's speech during their interaction with the latter. Speech in this paper is viewed as a kind of social behaviour.

The observation was carried out in May 1989 in Salor, Pasir Mas for a short period of four weeks.

Before I address the topic, I would like to give you an insight on the Chinese population in Malaysia. The population of Malaysia which is 18 million presently, is approximately 53% Malay, the indigenous group, 37% Chinese and 10% Indian and other South Asian, the immigrant groups, the three main ethnic groups, so to speak.

It is unfortunate that there is a tendency for some students and scholars of Chinese in South-east Asia or Oversea Chinese to consider them as a homogenous group.

## **2.0 The Malaysian Chinese**

I categorize the Malaysian Chinese into four groups based on the intensity of their acculturation and assimilation to the Malay ethnic group, the dominant group. The four groups are as follows:

- a. Pure Chinese
- b. Mixed Chinese
- c. Baba Chinese
- d. Peranakan Chinese

However, these groups are still considered as an ethnic group - Chinese. This is due to the fact that these groups (a word of caution on the Mixed Chinese) show they have the same ancestry, with roots that trace back to China. They also have the same cultural focus on symbolic elements, such as kinship patterns, language with its various varieties, and a common religious belief.

## 2.1 Pure Chinese

Generally, this group is centred in the urban areas of the country. However, they are also found in considerable numbers in rural areas. Pure Chinese are mostly engaged in business activities. An important criterion in my categorization of the Chinese in Malaysia into this group is not so much the geographical factor, whether they are found in the urban or rural areas, as to the fact that they are part of the later migration from China, or the descendents of these immigrants.

These immigrants were brought to Malaysia by the British to help develop the colonial economy. They came in search of greener pastures since China was going through a difficult period at the later part of the 18th and earlier part of the 19th Centuries. Initially, these immigrants had no intention of settling down in this country. But, in the 20th Century, however, a large number of them together with their descendents decided to consider Malaysia their domicile. They later went on to demand citizenship and their involvement in the administration of the country.

On the whole, these Pure Chinese do not interact with the Malays on levels other than business. Hence their level of acculturation and assimilation to the Malay ethnic group is low, and they remain oriented towards China culturally.

Most of the Chinese in this group do not realize that they need to make adjustments or compromise with the plural society of Malaysia regarding matters on traditions and customs inherited from China.

## 2.2 Mixed Chinese

This group comprises offsprings of mixed marriages between Chinese men and women of other ethnic groups or nationalities, except Muslims. In other words, they have Chinese fathers and non Chinese mothers. Their number is small, and hence they are not a coherent social force at the moment.

## 2.3 Baba Chinese

Much have been written on the Baba Chinese tradition. It cannot be denied that their level of acculturation and assimilation to the Malay ethnic group is high. This is evident from their language, Baba Malay which is a dialect of the Malay language. Thus their command of the Malay language is almost as good as the native speakers. They also show an appreciation for Malay pantuns (poetry) in "Dondang Sayang" - a typical Baba cultural performance.

Unlike the Pure Chinese, the Baba Chinese were not part of the emigrants from China to help develop the British economy. The Baba Chinese came to Malaysia long before the British arrived in the region. They were believed to have arrived in Malacca by the 15th Century. Baba Chinese are found in large numbers in Malacca and other former Straits Settlements, especially Penang and Singapore.

## 2.4 Peranakan Chinese

They are found only in the east coast of Peninsula Malaysia, mainly in the rural areas of Kelantan and Terengganu. Generally, these Peranakan Chinese are engaged in small scale agricultural activities. These Peranakan Chinese and their descendents are part of the earlier Chinese emigrants. There is no available information on their early existence in the area.

Unlike the Pure Chinese who come from the various dialect groups, namely Hokkien, Cantonese, Hakka, Hainanese, Kwongsai, Hokchew, and Henghua, all Peranakan Chinese are from the Hokkien dialect group. The same goes for the Baba Chinese who are also from the Hokkien dialect group.

The Peranakan Chinese have accepted most of the aspects of the social and cultural values of the Kelantan and Terengganu rural Malays in their daily life. The Peranakan Chinese are therefore considered as part of the Malay peasants rather than the mainstream Chinese.

The Peranakan Chinese's level of acculturation and assimilation to the Malay culture and values is the highest in comparison to the other groups.

The Pure Chinese is the dominant group as far as the Chinese population in Malaysia is concerned. They are not only the largest in number but are also more advanced in almost every aspect of life when compared to the other two groups, i.e., Baba Chinese and Peranakan Chinese. Mixed Chinese are excluded in the discussion because they are insignificant in number and have not yet become a distinctive coherent social force amongst the Malaysian Chinese.

### 3.0 The Chinese in Kelantan

The ethnic composition of Kelantan is largely Malay. Kelantan has a Malay population of about 95%.

Generally, the Chinese in Kelantan form two distinct groups, i.e., the Pure Chinese and the Peranakan Chinese. In Kelantan, these two groups are commonly identified as "Cina Bandar" (Town/Urban Chinese) and "Cina Kampung" (Village/Rural Chinese). But elsewhere in the country, the Chinese are distinguished by their dialect group, unlike that in Kelantan.

My main concern here is the Peranakan Chinese. They are found to have genetic and cultural ties with the Southern Thais.

The result of the cultural mingling of the Peranakan Chinese with the rural Malays is evident from the former's behaviour and practice, speech, body movement, and mode of interaction.

However, the acculturation and assimilation to the Malay pattern of life-style have been selective. Peranakan men and women do not dress in "baju Melayu" and "baju kurung" (Malay traditional garments) respectively. Unlike the Baba Chinese who have lost their mother tongue and have it replaced by a dialect of

Malay, the Peranakan Chinese have not entirely lost the use of Chinese. They are bilingual, speaking Kelantanese Malay and the Hokkien dialect, or even a dialect of the Thai language.

The Peranakan Chinese's mother tongue is a modified dialect of Hokkien where Kelantanese Malay and the local Thai dialect are incorporated grammatically, lexically, and stylistically.

There is a growing trend of using Kelantanese Malay as an intra-group language, especially by the Peranakan youths. This speech behaviour is strongly rejected and disapproved of by the Pure Chinese as they consider it a disgrace to the Chinese community.

The Peranakan Chinese identify themselves as having been long time residents of Kelantan in particular and Malaysia in general. They still consider themselves Chinese despite the great degree of acculturation and assimilation to the Malay customs and values, and having the genetic and cultural ties with the Thais

#### 4.0 The Linguistic Communication

The sociolinguistic observation on the Peranakan Chinese in the context of the process of assimilation with the Kelantan rural Malays, will be examined within the framework of inter-ethnic linguistic communication.

Within such a framework, some salient observations on the patterns of communication which facilitated the strong inter-ethnic link, will be discussed.

In this paper, communication is viewed as a process of inter-related elements (verbal and non verbal aspects of language) working together to achieve the strong social link between the Peranakan Chinese and the Kelantan rural Malays.

#### 4.1 The Success of Inter-group/ethnic Communication

Due to the high level of acculturation and assimilation to the Malay rural community, the Peranakan Chinese have overlapping fields of experience, i.e., homophily. This can develop accurate shared perceptions upon which their communication is based. It is homophily that makes the communication happen which later builds up the strong link.

What attracts the two groups to one another? This attraction centers around, among other things, similarities in attitudes, background, values, and appearance.

A positive attitude (e.g. an integrative one towards each other) can lead the inter-group/ethnic interaction to progress into topics that involve self-disclosure, more intimacy, and greater depth in discussion.

The Peranakan Chinese and rural Kelantan Malays belong to the same social class, share a common economic background, status, and the conditions in which they grew up. In other words, these two groups share a common heritage - the rural heritage.

Since they grew up under the same conditions and experienced the same rural heritage, these two groups share the same values on a range of matters, such as morals, and conservativeness in clothing styles.

The Peranakan Chinese have looks and skin colour similar to that of the Malays. This is due to the biological heritage as a result of Peranakan men marrying Thai women in the early part of their ethnic history. This similarity in appearance and skin complexion motivates the notion of 'co-membership'. Hence, the positive acceptance of the appearance of the Peranakan Chinese by the Malays tend to generate more homophily towards the former.

It is without doubt that a shared system of belief and inferences are operating in this inter-group communication, acting effectively as communicative strategies in building the strong link.

#### 4.2 Language and Discourse Organization

Kelantanese Malay in which the Peranakan Chinese are very competent, is the medium of communication used when interacting with the local Malays. Their fluency in the local Malay dialect oftentimes makes it difficult to tell the difference in their accent from that of the native speakers. With this linguistic skill on the part of the Peranakan Chinese, they can explore deeper into those fields of experience shared by both.

Not only do the Peranakan Chinese observe the Malay styles of speech, kinesics, and mode of interaction, but they also have an extensive vocabulary of the local Malay dialect. With this linguistic asset, they can be more exact and refined in their disclosures, questions, and answers. Direct questions and comments are considered rude and insulting by the Malays as do the Peranakan Chinese. To divert from this directness, they resort to the various linguistic techniques of indirectness in the local Malay dialect so as to be unoffensive and polite. They use with great care and precision words like "jahat" and "nakal", both meaning 'mischievous.'

Their competence in the local Malay dialect, especially in using 'localised' words (e.g. "bok te" instead of "sebab", both meaning 'because') enable them to adapt their speech, i.e., acquiring specific words for specific settings, so as to gain credibility or approval from the rural Malay community or in other words, to be included in the community.

Kelantanese Malay, like other Malay dialects, have various denotations and connotations. Connotations are words with meanings which are implied or suggested. The Peranakan Chinese understand these connotations very well.

#### Question

E.g. "Bila Mamat nak bayar hutang saya?"  
 when Mamat want pay debt I  
 When will Mamat settle his debt with me?

#### Answer

E.g. "Tahu"  
 know  
 (I) know (when - the date/time)

In actual fact, the connotation of "tahu" in the above instance is the opposite of the literal meaning, i.e. "don't know when Mamat will be able to repay the debt."

The Peranakan Chinese understand local Malay dialect jokes too. Cursing, swearing, and obscenity in the local Malay dialect are not only understood but also used by them when interacting with fellow group members.

Extremely rigid social and communication norms exist in the Malay society where members are expected to address the elders (and also the ones with 'power') by family titles (and by professional titles with or without personal names) and not by the second person pronouns.

Language style differences which are related to the degree of formality and appropriateness in speech situations are well acquired by the Peranakan Chinese in their social interaction with the local Malays. The precise use of a particular style will not only draw together the other person's field of experience but will also not be perceived as "tak tahu bahasa" or "tak reti/erti bahasa". i.e., to be impolite to the addressee.

In the communication between these two groups, there is no domination of the discourse by either party. Neither the local Malays nor the Peranakan Chinese control the talk by trying to manoeuvre the other party to change their attitudes and opinions. Unlike the Peranakan Chinese, the Pure Chinese are generally found to have the upperhand during their discourse with the Malays by trying to get the latter to change their opinions with the frequent utterance of phrases like "Bukan macam ini" which means 'Not like this' and "Ini macam" meaning 'Like this'. There is no submission on the Pure Chinese's part, i.e., accepting Malay power or authority on the opinions expressed. There is also no willingness to interact with mutual respect and they attach little importance to differences in opinions expressed by the Malays.

Unlike the Pure Chinese who speak fast and loud, the Peranakan Chinese's tone of voice in terms of rate and volume has a similar note to that of the local Malays. Articulation of the language by both in the same style is undoubtedly a unifying factor for the strong inter-ethnic link.

Prohibited actions found in the local Malay customs, such as pointing with the index finger, and using of the left hand for receiving or handing over things, are well observed by Peranakan Chinese when communicating with the local Malays. This non verbal aspect of communication plays an important role in maintaining the close rapport between them.

## 5.0 Conclusion

The Peranakan Chinese learned the discourse system of the local Malay dialect early when they were children through the process of Malay socialization. In other words, the mastery of the verbal and non verbal aspect of Malay linguistic communication is not an automatic process of adulthood but rather is inculcated naturally from childhood through the process of Malay socialization. The mastery of the Kelantanese Malay discourse patterns is a clear indication of the mastery of Malay social interaction, hence accounting for the success in inter-group/ethnic communication between these two groups.

It is found that in any language, the grammatical system gives the message while the discourse system gives instruction so as to interpret the message. Grammatical knowledge can be acquired through formal learning, whereas the discourse system can only be totally internalized through acculturation and assimilation to the group mingled with. The Pure Chinese's level of acculturation and assimilation to the Malay ethnic group is low; therefore they are unable to to acquire and internalize the Malay discourse system effectively. As a result, they have difficulties in communicating successfully with the Malays.

The Pure Chinese's inability to communicate successfully with the Malays is also mainly due to the fact that there is no homophily between them to bind the inter-group/ethnic attraction.

The change of the discourse system in the Peranakan Chinese's speech behaviour, from Chinese/Hokkien in the beginning, to the Kelantanese Malay in the later part of their ethnic history, is evident from the changes observed in their personality and culture.

By changing their discourse patterns (as evident from the Hokkien dialect spoken as their mother tongue), the Peranakan Chinese identify less with their original culture (the Chinese culture) and more with the Kelantan Malay culture, and, this is the whole notion of the process of assimilation which is the theme of this paper.

## Note

\*This preliminary study is an on going research for the writer's Ph.D dissertation under the tutelage of Professors Leanne Hinton, John Gumperz, and Amin Sweeney. Further fieldwork will be done in the very near future.

## References

Edwards, John. (1985) *Language, Society and Identity*. New York: Basil Blackwell.

Fasold, Ralph. (1984) *The Sociolinguistics of Society*. New York: Basil Blackwell.

----- (1990) *The Sociolinguistics of Language*. New York: Basil Blackwell.

Giles, Howard. (Ed) (1977) *Language, Ethnicity and Intergroup Relations*. London: Academic Press.

Gumperz, John. (1982a) *Discourse Strategies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

----- (Ed) (1982b) *Language and Social Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hassan, Abdullah. (1987) *30 Tahun Perancangan Bahasa Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.

Omar, Asmah Haji. (1979) *Language Planning for Unity and Efficiency*. Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Universiti Malaya.

----- (1982) *Language and Society in Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.

----- (1987) *Malay in Its Sociocultural Context*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.

Sweeney, Amin. (1987) *A Full Hearing: Orality and Literacy in the Malay World*. Berkeley: University of California Press.