Language Choice in Interracial Marriages:

The Case of Filipino-Malaysian Couples

Francisco Perlas Dumanig

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ABSTRACT

Language choice has become a common phenomenon in interracial encounters in which speakers are always faced with the challenge of choosing an appropriate language in various domains of communication. In multilingual and multiracial societies, language choice can sometimes be crucial because of its social, political, and economic impact on the speakers. Even in the smallest unit of a society which is the family, language choice plays an important role particularly in interactions between husbands and wives who come from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. It is therefore the objective of this research to examine the language choice in interracial couples' communication. More specifically, this research examines the language choice, accommodation strategies, and code switching patterns in verbal communication of Filipino-Malaysian couples in the home domain. Furthermore, this study explores the occurrence of language choice in relation to ethnicity, first language, and gender. To carry out the study, 60 spouses consisting of Filipino-Malay, Filipino-Malaysian Chinese and Filipino-Malaysian Indian couples were interviewed and given questionnaires which include the socio demographic profile, language choice and accommodation strategies used. Data were collected using the qualitative approach by interviewing and recording the conversations of Filipino-Malaysian couples. To support the qualitative findings, a quantitative approach based on the questionnaire results was also used. The findings of the study reveal that Filipino-Malaysian couples prefer English as their medium of communication at home with some switching to Bahasa Malaysia, Chinese and Filipino languages. The couples' preference of English is prevalent although none of them considered English as their first language. Their mother tongue becomes the secondary preference which is evident in the use of code switching. The findings further reveal that couples' language choice is influenced by ethnicity, first language and gender.

On the other hand, the use of accommodation strategies such as approximation, interpretability, discourse management and interpersonal control accommodation strategies occurs in many interactions. The findings of the study support Giles' & Powesland's (1978) Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) that in interracial couples' communication spouses tend to accommodate each other by using a range of accommodation strategies which include code switching.

ABSTRAK

Pilihan Bahasa telah menjadi fenomena umum dalam pertemuan antara kaum di mana penutor selalu dihadapi dengan tentangan untuk memilih bahasa yang sesuai dalam pelbagai domain komunikasi. Dalam pelbagai bahasa dan masyarakat pelbagai kaum, pilihan bahasa kadang-kadang boleh menjadi sangat penting kerana sosial, politik, dan kesan ekonomi kepada penutor. Bahkan dalam unit terkecil dari suatu masyarakat yang merupakan keluarga, pilihan bahasa memainkan peranan penting khususnya dalam interaksi antara suami dan isteri yang datang dari pelbagai latar belakang bahasa dan budaya. Oleh kerana itu tujuan dari penelitian ini untuk menyemak berlakunya pilihan bahasa di antara pasangan 'komunikasi. Lebih khusus, kajian ini meneliti pilihan bahasa, penginapan strategi, dan penukarsa pola-pola kod komunikasi verbal dari pasangan Filipina-Malaysia di domain rumah. Selanjutnya, kajian ini meneliti pilihan bahasa dalam kaitannya dengan etnik, bahasa pertama dan jantina. Untuk melaksanakan kajian ini, 60 pasangan yang terdiri daripada pasangan Filipina-Melayu, Filipina- Cina dan pasanagan Filipina-India telah diberikan soal selidik yang meliputi profil demografi sosial, bahasa pilihan dan strategi akomodasi. Data dikumpul dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan mewawancara dan merakam perbualan yang sebenarnya dari pasangan Filipina-Malaysia. Untuk menyokong penemuan kualitatif, pendekatan kuantitatif juga digunakan. Penemuan-penemuan daripada kajian menunjukkan bahawa pasangan Filipina-Malaysia lebih suka bahasa Inggeris sebagai media komunikasi mereka di rumah dengan sedikit peralihan kepada Bahasa Malaysia, Bahasa Cina dan Bahasa Filipina. Pasangan mengutamakan Bahasa Inggeris umum meskipun tidak satu pun dari mereka menganggap Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa pengataraan mereka. Bahasa ibunda mereka jeda menjadi keutamaan kedua dalam penggunaan peralihan kod. Penemuan juga mendedahkan bahawa pasangan 'pilihan

Bahasa dipengaruhi oleh etnik, bahasa pertama dan jantina. Penggunaan strategi penginapan seperti aproksimasi, interpretability, wacana kawalan pengurusan dan strategi penginapan interpersonal berlaku dalam banyak interaksi. Penemuan-penemuan daripada kajian sokongan Giles '& Powesland's (1978) Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) yang di antara pasangan' cenderung pasangan komunikasi untuk mengakomodasi satu sama lain dengan menggunakan pelbagai strategi penginapan yang merangkumi peralihan kod.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Marriage is viewed differently by couples of interracial marriages (Reed, 2003). These different perspectives on marriage may reflect the linguistic choices of couples when they communicate with their spouses in the home domain. To foreground this research some studies on language choice, accommodation strategies, and code switching will be first described so as to shed light on the complexities of verbal interactions among couples.

Language choice for multilingual speakers plays a crucial role in everyday talk because whenever they speak, they make choices. Similarly, in interracial couples' communication the challenges of choosing a language is always present because of their linguistic and cultural differences. The challenge is compounded when each spouse is multilingual leading to a wide choice of languages to choose from. According to Coulmas (2005) multilingual speakers cannot help but make choices for language is a social fact, culturally varied, group specific, and governed by convention. The choice of language in interactions can be triggered by a number of variables which include the speaker's first language, community language, (Piller 2004; Johansson, 1991) age, education, role-relationships, ethnicity, (Burhanudeen, 2003) dominant language, (Piller, 2004; Warshauer, El Said & Zohry, 2002) social status, (Tan, 1993) numeric factor, economic and political position of the linguistic group and the neutrality of language (Degefa, 2004).

Couples who are linguistically and culturally diverse sometimes apply certain strategies when communicating. One common strategy is to accommodate other speakers

by modifying the speech style. This concept can be explained by the Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT). Giles, Bourhis & Taylor (1977) argued that Communication Accommodation Theory can be applied in interracial encounters because both interlocutors may possibly converge or diverge by choosing an appropriate language available in their linguistic repertoire. In interracial encounters, the choice of any linguistic code may reflect a speaker's approval or disapproval (Coulmas, 2005). When a speaker approves another interlocutor and uses a similar language and manner of speaking, the speaker is converging. However a speaker may sometimes diverge in communication to show difference from other interlocutors.

Giles (1979) proposed three paradigms in interracial communication, i.e. language choice situation, accommodation situation, and assimilation situation. Language choice situation happens in multi-ethnic and multicultural societies where many languages exist. As a result, speakers choose a language that is appropriate in a specific context. However, the choice of a certain language may vary in different domains of communication.

Such choice may lead to solidarity of speakers who are involved in conversations. Solidarity is manifested when speakers converge by accommodating other interlocutors. When members of a minority group emerge into a dominant culture and learn the dominant language but retain their ethnic language this can be classified as accommodation. Consequently, speakers become bilingual by using two languages such as the community language and ethnic language (Giles, 1979). In a continuum, when speakers frequently accommodate other speakers with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, assimilation is most likely to happen. Assimilation usually happens when immigrants assimilate to the language used in the new place they live in (Giles, 1979).

In a speech encounter, Giles (1979) explains that speakers adjust their speech style to accommodate another speaker. The adjustment can be downward convergence or upward convergence depending on the intention of the speaker. The occurrence of downward and upward convergence is discussed in detailed in Chapter 2, Section 2.2.1. On the other hand, divergence takes place in communication when a speaker does not conform to the language choice and speech patterns of other interlocutors. Instead, the speaker uses a different linguistic code to emphasize the differences. However, Miller (2005) argued that there are instances when a speaker is particularly looking for differences in other speakers.

The concept of Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) was expanded and applied to family communication including communication between husbands and wives. Harwood, Soliz, & Lin (2006) proposed that there are different strategies in family communication, i.e. approximation accommodation strategies, interpretability accommodation strategies, discourse management accommodation strategies, and interpersonal control accommodation strategies. Harwood, Soliz, & Lin (2006) described these four strategies when analyzing different aspects of accommodation in communication. A brief overview on accommodation strategies is explained below but a detailed explanation is provided in Chapter 2, Section 2.2.1.

Approximation accommodation strategy is a form of accommodation to the interlocutor's productive performance which focuses on the partner's speech style. Such accommodative practice focuses more on the adjustment of the speech style. In Communication Accommodation Theory, the adjustment is done by moving towards other speaker's speech style (convergence) or moving away from the other's speech style (divergence) (Harwood, Soliz, & Lin, 2006: 23). For example in interracial couples'

communication, this strategy is used when a spouse uses his or her partner's language to converge when communicating.

Interpretability accommodation strategies involve accommodation of the partner's perceived interpretive abilities, which refer to the ability to understand (Harwood, Soliz, & Lin, 2006: 24). This strategy is used when there is an age difference between the two speakers. For example in interactions between a mother and a child, the mother sometimes over accommodate by speaking like a child. This downward convergence is used so that the child can understand the mother's message.

Discourse management accommodation strategies focus on the person's conversational needs and are often discussed in terms of topic selection, face management, and the like (Harwood, Soliz, & Lin, 2006: 26). This occurs when a speaker tailors the conversation so that it will fit the intellectual capability and interest of other speakers. For example when a patient talks to a doctor, he or she may discuss topics related to health issues.

Interpersonal control accommodation strategies attempt to direct the course of a particular conversation or more generally a relationship by strategies such as interruption or even direct power claims (Harwood, Soliz, & Lin, 2006: 27). This is common when two speakers have different role relationships. For example in student-teacher interaction, the teacher may show authority over the student to show professional advantage and maturity.

One evident feature of accommodation can be through code switching. The occurrence of code switching in couples' interaction can be explained and analyzed clearly

by employing the Conversation Analysis approach. Examination of the turn-taking and sequential order of talk may also help in obtaining a more comprehensive analysis of code switching in interactions. (See Chapter 2, Section 2.5 and Chapter 3).

Many studies about code switching have proven that in multilingual societies like Malaysia, code alternation occurs in various domains of communication. David (2001), Jawakhir (2006), Jariah Mohd. Jan (2006), and Kuang (2002) found that code switching in Malaysia occurs in the home domain regardless of families' ethnic background be they Malay, Chinese, or Indians. Code switching occurs in the home domain when referring to food items, signaling group solidarity, accommodating to a speaker's lack of proficiency and for the purpose of rapport, teasing, distancing, expressing annoyance, and admonishing (David, et al., 2009).

The occurrence of language choice, accommodation strategies, and code switching can be important features to examine inter-ethnic and interracial encounters. It is therefore the objective of this research to explore the occurrence of language choice, accommodation strategies, and code switching in interracial marriages of Filipino-Malaysian couples in verbal communication in the home domain.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

This research examines the language choice of Filipino and Malaysian couples. More specifically, this research aims to:

1. Examine the Filipino-Malaysian couples' language choice in the home domain;
2. Examine the occurrence of language choice in relation to ethnicity, first language, and gender;