

Bilingualism : A Study of the Dominant Language
of Chinese Undergraduates
Through Their Internal Uses.

by

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PREFACE

There has been increasing reference to language in the sociological literature in the last couples of decades. The treatment of most of these books has usually been in connection with the examination of social interaction and communication. Such analyses, of course, differ widely in approach, content and purpose. These treatments by sociologists indicate a growing awareness of the sociological importance of the subject.

This exercise, too presents a sociology aspect of language. An array of special disciplines has been developing with time, such as innovations, knowledge, value, the family, politics, occupations and so forth. Sociolinguists have been concentrating on these human experiences extensively and externally, so much so that the internal field of it has been neglected. Linguists seem to be more concerned with the relationship between languages and social phenomena as well as factors in the society and culture, than with language and its relation to the inner functions of man, specially bilinguals. Solely conducting studies of language in its multiple social context is incomplete if much emphasis are paid to the studies of language structure, function, and process in relation to societal structure and function, all externally concentrated. Attention needs to be paid to the internal functions of human beings too. Therefore, this paper will take to task, the study

of the internal functions of bilinguals and the languages used for their inner expressions.

As indicated, 'bilingualism' is the main topic to be discussed in this exercise. As bilingualism is an extremely wide field of study, I will pay emphasis on the language usage in the bilinguals non-communicative functions like reckoning. The objective here is to find out the dominant language of Chinese undergraduates and the various factors which affect the languages used internally.

However, as the term 'bilingualism' bears an endless list of definitions, I shall explain what it is generally. This explanation will be provided in Chapter 1. After much reading, I have decided that bilingualism refers to a person's ability to speak and understand two or more languages, which need not necessarily be of equal proficiency. In this paper, therefore, bilingualism has the similar meanings as 'multilingualism' and 'plural lingualism'.

As postulated earlier, numerous definitions of bilingualism have been introduced. An overview of literature in Chapter 2 will make some of those definitions available in order to give the readers a more vivid picture of what bilingualism is to different people, especially linguists in the past and present.

As my purpose of this study is to determine the bilinguals' dominant language through their internal uses, Chapter 4 will describe the methods used. Before that, a detailed account of both the internal functions and external functions of language have been given in Chapter 3. As each chapter stands as a different but related analytical assignment itself, this chapter is by no means, any less important than the others. It will for instance, feature what some of the external functions and internal functions of language are.

Take note that stress is placed upon the uses of language by samples of students for their inner expressions in order to identify the dominant language in this case. Thus, the analysis of the results obtained through questionnaires will be revealed in Chapter 5, with observations and comments on the collected data, appearing in Chapter 6. As this undertaken field of study is relatively new and uncommon, it would be interesting for us to find out the conclusion in the concluding chapter.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Since the end of the eighteenth century, language has come to be copiously and comprehensively studied by philosophers, linguists, semanticists and literary critics. Psychologists have been concerned with how a child acquires his first language and with the stages of speech development in human beings. Some political scientists and historians have been interested in language as related to national origins and ethnic boundaries, the relationship between language and nationalism, and other aspects of political manipulation and control. While these linguistic studies made reference to language in its different context respectively, other social scientists have sought explanation of language in its social context especially in terms of its social and societal relationships, implications, functions and effects. Social interaction and communication through the use of language can be analysed in different approach, context and purpose.

For this paper, I will be concentrating on bilingualism, a topic extracted from the sociology of language or in other words, sociolinguistics. With the necessity of using more than one language in daily intra-and inter-community social intercourse rapidly increasing within Malaysia at the present time, the ability to use more than one language is becoming an increasingly an important aspect of the linguistic situation in the country too.

Although bilingualism would be the main topic of my discussion, the objective of this exercise is to determine the dominant language of Chinese undergraduates from Universiti Sains Malaysia through their internal uses such as thinking, dreaming, counting, cursing, praying, note-taking and diary-writing.

The standard term in linguistics for the use of more than one language is bilingualism. Bilingualism is generally known as the use of two languages by the individual. It has been loosely used and referred to, by most of us as a situation in which a person knows or speaks two languages, 'bi' meaning two, and 'lingual' meaning language. Times's Webster dictionary described bilingual as "using or able to use two languages."¹

However, through further reading, I found that there is more to bilingualism than just "using or able to use two languages". Bilingualism, which has been so simply defined by the dictionary had been the chief concern of many language specialist in the past and present, so much so that the Canadian National Commission² for UNESCO organised a major International Seminar on Bilingual.

In Malaysia, a multi-racial country, it is not surprising that bilingualism exists in the society and speech community, where most of the people have the ability to use more than one language. Therefore, bilingualism in this context, would mean the ability to use, that is, read, write and speak in two or

more languages. As bilingualism is the property of the individual, it does not suppose the existence of a bilingual community, but, an individual's use of two languages supposes the existence of two different language communities instead. How did such a situation arise in Malaysia? To account for that we have to briefly trace back to her history, where colonization took place in the sixteenth century, which later led to the emigration of the Chinese and Indian population. As a result of colonization, English language has a place in our education system. Besides, there are schools which use Chinese, Malay or Tamil languages as their medium of instruction and our education system requires all students to learn a second language. For example, a Chinese student attending a Malay medium school would be likely to know Malay language, English language as well as her first language, that is, Chinese language. That is why the ability to use more than one language is on the rise. Thus, two obvious reasons which contribute to Malaysia's many bilinguals are, firstly, the desire to communicate among different races and secondly, the influence by the British during the colonial rule which explains the popular usage of English language.

Now that we have a general idea of what bilingualism is and a better understanding of how and why bilingualism exists in Malaysia, we shall proceed further by studying the objective of this paper. Although I shall be focussing on bilingualism in general, stress would be placed upon the internal functions.

This is because the objective of this study as earlier indicated it to determine the dominant language of Chinese undergraduates from Universiti Sains Malaysia, through their internal uses such as thinking, dreaming, counting, cursing, praying, note-taking and diary writing. In addition, from the same study, we will be able to find out the factors which influence code-switching in the students' internal uses.

Bilingualism is a relative concept which involves a question of DEGREE and FUNCTION. Many a time we wonder when can a person be considered a bilingual. How well should he or she know both the languages in order to be called a bilingual? How well does an individual know the languages he uses and what does he use them for? The degree of proficiency in each language depends on its functions, which may either be external such as speech between family members, or internal like internal speech within the individual himself. It is important to determine the uses to which the bilingual puts the language and the conditions under which he has used it because that can show the more dominant language of the bilingual's two languages.

Bilingualism is not a phenomenon of language, it is a character of its use. It is not a feature of the code but of the message. It does not belong to the domain of langue but of parole.³ Bilingualism only deals with individuals and not with society. It is recognised when a native speaker of the language makes use

of a second language, partially or imperfectly. There is no true bilingual speakers because no one can understand fully the two languages or even in their own language and bilingual speakers only make use in varying degree of a second language. Most people whom we think of as bilinguals, restrict at least one of their languages to certain uses and, in any given use, one or the other language tends to pre-dominate. For instance, many cannot discuss sport or medicine in their first language, more often than not, a certain amount of specialization takes place. A second language can never replace the first language as a way of living for the majority of people.

Therefore, an important aspect of bilingualism which would be interesting to study on is to find out the more dominant language of a bilingual. This can be done through studying the bilinguals' external uses and this has been covered by several linguists already, such as Mackey.⁴ However, bilingualism is not only related to external factors just because one of the main functions of language is for social communication. It also involves internal factors which include non-communicative uses like internal speeches as mentioned earlier. A person's bilingualism is reflected in the internal uses of each of his languages. Some bilinguals tend to use one and the same language for all kinds of inner expressions, for example, counting and thinking. If that is the case than that particular language has often been identified as the dominant language of that bilingual. But that is not applicable to all bilinguals as some use different languages

for different inner expression. A bilingual may count in one language and think in another; others may count and reckon in the language but pray in another while some may count in two languages but only able to pray in one and reckon in another. Thus, in order to determine the dominant language of a bilingual, it is also necessary to find out the factors which influence the uses of different languages for different sorts of internal expression. That would be included in this study so that the main objective may be achieved.

This paper does not expect to find all informants to have the same language as their dominant language, although they are all of the same ethnic group and assumed to more or less possess the same level of intelligence. That is due to the fact that other factors are likely to influence their aptitude in the use of their languages such as motivation and that would most certainly vary from one individual to another. Consequently, I would not expect all the students to have similar dominant language even if their motivation are of no difference (that is, if it can be measured at all) from each other's. The main issue is the importance of function because language varies as its function varies and it differs in different situations. As a result, I should expect vast differences in each informant's dominant language and to a certain extent, some may not be able to be determined as there are numerous other factors which may influence the code-switching in the students' internal uses.

On the other hand, we must bear in mind the limitations which exist in this study. Firstly, due to time constraint, I have not been able to carry out the survey on a larger sample of students, which, of course, would have provided a more accurate picture of the study. Furthermore, there was not sufficient relevant materials which I could fall back on as studies on this specific aspect has not been carried out in the past. Several linguists such as Mackey and Macnamara had mentioned briefly on how one can determine a bilingual's dominant language, and one of the ways, is through the bilingual's language usage for their internal functions. That is why most of the fact in this study is extracted from those which has been put forward by Mackey in his studies. Also as the various internal function, namely, counting, praying, cursing, dreaming, reckoning, note-taking and diary writing are all non-communicative uses.

there is no way which one can be positively sure that the informants were being completely accurate in their response since no one other than they themselves can read their minds.

To sum up, students in Malaysia can be considered as bilinguals because of the compulsory requirement to learn a second language in school. But the question here is, which is the dominant language of these bilinguals? To answer that question which is the objective of this paper, I would need to go to great depth regarding the functions of the various languages used by the undergraduates concerned. The external functions would

serve as part of the influencing factors which affect the languages used for internal expression. Since this aspect of bilingualism has not been studied in detail except for a brief view put forward by Mackey⁵ whereby he had stated that through languages used in inner expression, a bilingual's dominant language can be identified. However, no serious studies or research have been carried out concerning that issue, so we do not know whether Mackey's opinion is acceptable or not as only the results from this study will determine it and in turn, will decide if the objective of my study would be achieved.