
Lexical Transfer Between Languages- Enrichment or Erosion?: A Study of Some Chinese Dialects in Malaysia

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Introduction

It is generally assumed that when there is contact between two societies whose members speak different languages certain linguistic and other cultural changes result, which must be attributed directly to the fact of contact. The phenomenon of language contact, that is, the study of linguistic borrowing has been for a long time an area of great fascination to linguists. Much has been said and written about this phenomenon: the range of variability of the linguistic changes as well as theories behind the changes. Language contact and cultural contact universally result in the transfer of elements from one system to the other by a process which has been variously labelled borrowing or diffusion. This transfer of elements produces systemic change which involves a degree of merging of two separate systems. There can be no denying therefore that linguistic changes result from language contact.

Objective

It is not the intention of this study to challenge any of the verified assumptions regarding change resulting from language contact nor does the writer aspire to present any new theory on the subject. Rather, the purpose of this paper is merely to share some observations on language contact in Malaysian society. The focus of attention is on Malay borrowings in spoken Chinese which, in Malaysia is mainly the dialects – namely Cantonese, Hokkien and Hakka. In this context, Malay, which is the national language, is the dominant “upper language”, the language spoken by a majority of the people, while Chinese is the “lower language” or language of a minority ethnic group.

Linguistic Background

Malaysia provides an interesting laboratory for studying language contact. Malaysian society is a kaleidoscope of different races speaking different tongues. The various ethnic groups are the Malays, Chinese, Indians and Eurasians, not forgetting the tribal sub-groups in East Malaysia – the Ibans, Land Dayaks and Bajaus in Sarawak and the Kadazans in Sabah. Malay, known as Bahasa Kebangsaan (National Language) in the initial stages of establishing a national language policy then renamed Bahasa Malaysia, is the sole official language for administrative purposes and is spoken by the Malays who form the majority of the population. Recently there has been a clamour for Bahasa Malaysia to revert to its original name of ‘Bahasa Melayu’, that is, the Malay language. Vernacular languages like Chinese (inclusive of Mandarin and dialects), Indian languages like Tamil, Telugu and others of southern Indian origin, English and an antiquated Portuguese are spoken by other ethnic groups for whom Malay is a second language acquired through the education system. As such it can be said that an appreciable segment of the population learns Malay as a second language. It must not, however, be forgotten that Malay, now the dominant language in Malaysian society, was once a vernacular itself with a preponderance of lexical importations from English and other languages that it came into contact with earlier in its history. Malay has been strongly impregnated by alien languages, the most important of which is Arabic, through the influence of Islam, the official religion of the country. It is difficult to determine exactly the extent of Arabic-derived elements in Malay though it is quite safe to say they would be largely from the realm of Islamic worship. There are also some 50 – 60 Persian words, mainly nouns, which represent

objects and ideas new to the Malays before their contact with Europeans. It was only the awakenings of nationalism followed by independence which brought about the emancipation and upgrading of Malay so that English is now looked upon as a vestige of the colonial past and is assigned a secondary though not altogether obsolete role. English in Malaysia holds a strong second position and is the favourite departing point for explorations in the field of language contact. It has shaped and still continues to influence the development of Malay. The impact of English on Malay and their mutual influence has great possibilities as a topic for research in language contact.

Variations of Linguistic Change

Linguistic change resulting from contact between two languages such that the same individual learns elements from a linguistic system other than his native system is called borrowing or interference. However, variations to the theme exist as individual writers choose to emphasize different aspect(s) of the same phenomenon and label them differently. Some like Michael Clyne who has done extensive research on German in Australia, choose the term “transference” in preference to “interference”, which for Weinreich is “Those instances of deviation from the norms of either language which occur in the speech of bilinguals as a result of their familiarity with more than one language, that is, as a result of language contact” (Weinreich *Languages in Contact*, 1953, 1). Haugen views the impact of contact by distinguishing between 1. switching – the alternate use of two languages; 2. interference – the overlapping of two languages; 3. integration – regular use of materials from one language in another so that there is no longer either switching or overlapping. While interference points at least partly to the cause of the phenomenon, transference merely describes it, that is, the adoption of any elements or features from the other language. The impact of the adoption of features or elements from the other language may not only be viewed in terms of degree, that is, switching, interference or integration, it can also be classified according to the level of linguistic structure affected “phonic”, “grammatical” and “lexical”. The impact of language contact highlighted in this study is that of lexical transfer.

Malay-Chinese Impact

The appendix presents a list of loanwords from Malay into spoken Chinese. These loanwords consist of words from different domains of human interaction. They range from single lexical units to phrases as well as grammatical categories. In usage these terms are often intermingled with other lexical items in Chinese within the span of an utterance in Chinese creating the linguistic phenomenon which is often described under various headings as code mixing, code switching, lexical borrowing and lexical hybridization (depending on the level of interaction). The minority speech community adjusts to the dominant cultural environment not by complete switching to Malay but by lexicalization, that is, adopting Malay words. The recipient language throws caution to the wind, ignores the original form of the word, adopts it and adapts it to the Chinese tonal monosyllabic system with its dialectic phonological features. This is best illustrated with some examples as in the following :

Bahasa Malaysia	Chinese	
<i>Mata-mata</i> [policeman] (nominal)	<i>Ma ta</i>	[policeman] (nominal)
	<i>ma ta liu</i>	[police station] (qualifier)
<i>bicara</i> [hear/deal with in court] (verbal)	<i>mi cha la</i>	[to be tried in court] (verbal)

The borrowed term in Chinese is not reduplicated. In other words, the reduplication or doubling rule in Malay is not adhered to in the Chinese borrowing. This rule together with the use of affixes, are two fundamental features of Malay grammar. Reduplication in Malay has the double function of making changes in meaning or plurality. For example, *mata* [eye] and *mata mata* [policeman], while *rumah* [house] and *rumah-rumah* [houses]. *Mata* in *mata-mata* is borrowed by Chinese to refer to the same thing as the reduplicated form in Malay and given added grammatical function creating new terms like *ma ta choo* and *ma ta liu* (both terms referring to the same referent in Chinese except that one of them is in Cantonese and the other, in Hokkien) for what is *balai polis* [police station] in Malay.

In the case of the lexical *bicara*, a verbal, meaning 'to discuss/hear or deal in court', the recipient community has taken the liberty of assigning the meaning of the whole word *bicara* to just one syllable *mi* so that it is not uncommon to hear statements like the ones below

a) *Tung hoei mi koh* [take him to court]

WITH HIM DEBATE

b) *Mi mud yeah cha la ?* [There's no case]

DEBATE WHAT CASE

Or even,

c) *Yau hou cheong ke cha la lei mi* [It will be a long drawn-out case]

HAS VERY LONG (**particle**) CASE TO DEBATE

Here the borrowed term *bicara* is conveniently split up in Chinese into two elements, *mi* and *cha la*, seemingly a verbal and a nominal, one of which, that is, *mi* can exist quite independently of the other, that is, *cha la*.

There are two factors relevant to a discussion of the place of transferred items within the system of the recipient language – type of integration (phonological, morphological, semantic etc...) and degree of integration, whether a transfer is employed interchangeably with the corresponding Chinese term or whether it is integrated consistently in the same way and to the same degree. As far as the Malay transferred items are concerned, it is obvious that they have been thoroughly integrated into the recipient language for they form part of the vocabulary of every naturalized and Malaysia-born Chinese. Transferred morphemes combine easily with the 'native' ones to form compound nouns and qualifiers and are less 'foreign' than the native terms themselves in spoken Malaysian Chinese. The imported non-native words are such a natural part of the everyday vocabulary of the ordinary Malaysian Chinese it would require a special effort on the part of the speaker to keep them out in preference for the synonymous native form. Take for instance the local integrated Malay-derived term *ma ta liu* and synonymous native Chinese equal *ken chak sore* or *chai quun*. Competition between the native form and the borrowed form leads to marked fluctuation in frequency in occurrence of the competing form, with the non-native form often making inroads in frequency of occurrence sufficient to push the native form into obsolescence or into highly specialized environments.

In the speech of contemporary Malaysian Chinese, there is evidence of the loss or weakening of various Chinese dialect features. These features tend to weaken among younger speakers though certain features, phonological, for example, display a strong resilience to change. To determine the extent of the loss or interference, it is necessary to distinguish between English educated Chinese and non-English educated Chinese. The English educated Chinese speak Chinese in the dialect form with their linguistic peers when appropriate. They resort to code mixing or they switch languages (generally to English in which they are more comfortable because of their educational background) if their Chinese fails them and cannot efficiently fulfil the communication function at hand. Such instances may be indicative of a precursor stage for gradual language loss as the English educated Chinese bilingual increasingly loses control of the conditions that constrain mixing.

An interesting observation arises though in the case of the younger Chinese generations that are educated in schools where Malay is the medium of instruction. The switch is to English and not Malay when they are caught in a linguistic tight spot as far as their own native tongue is concerned. The explanation for this is that to many a third and fourth generation Chinese child, Malay ranks not as a second but a third language, and English, more than Chinese, dialect or otherwise, is the everyday language at home so that those who are caught in a tight spot when speaking would be those from homes where exposure to Chinese is minimal. In other words, those who need to resort to code switching or code mixing would be those for whom Chinese no longer represents the first acquired language though it is the mother tongue.

However, the intrusion of elements from a secondary language into a primary language is not necessarily indicative of language loss or weakening; it could simply be a case of bilingual code mixing or switching. Under normal conditions of bilingual language mixing, relative autonomy is maintained for both language grammars and the bilingual speaker is able to switch to one or the other of the two languages being mixed, depending on such stimuli as topic or interlocutor. That is, while code mixing is a common phenomenon of bilingualism, it occurs within predictable and describable conditions of language variation and can be controlled by the speaker. Within the languages being mixed, autonomy is maintained so that each language is served by its own independent grammar. Mixing may thus remain an additional communication technique or strategy for the bilingual when in the company of other

bilinguals with similar linguistic repertoires though it could also be the signal of the beginning of a decline in linguistic performance.

It is generally understood that one will lose facility even in one's first language if it's not used for a long enough period. This is even more marked if the adult subject has been uprooted from his natural mother tongue context and transferred to a new language environment as is the case with most English speaking Chinese adults in Malaysia. From their point of view a second language (once upon a time English, now Malay) is now the dominant language in the new context while the first language has become a restricted mode of communication. The rapidity with which the individual in question loses competence in his first language depends largely on the degree of such restriction, the prestige of the first language in the new environment, the level of social distance between the immigrant community and the host community and the individual degree of acculturation into the new speech community. In younger Chinese children, the facility in the use of the mother tongue may deteriorate for other reasons. The explanation lies sometimes on how the mother tongue or (L1) is acquired in the multicultural setting. Intergenerational language change in bilingual communities may be seen in terms of inadequate exposure to the language for later generation children. While these children are exposed to a second language or (L2) and learn it easily, exposure to L1 diminishes.

In most immigrant communities the immigrant language gradually falls into disuse as communicative functions once fulfilled by immigrant languages are being met by the dominant language. Subsequent generations attain only a faulty mastery of the rules of the native immigrant language, if they learn it at all. There are, in fact, isolated pockets of Chinese communities in Malaysia, where a creole form of Malay (known as Baba Malay) has replaced the Chinese language so that younger generations of Chinese from these areas speak no Chinese at all. They have never ever had any exposure to it during the process of growing up and acquiring their language habits. These are the Chinese who have settled mainly in the former Straits Settlements of Penang and Malacca. The Chinese in the other areas refer to them as *nyonyas* and *babas*. There is also a small community of these Chinese in Singapore where they are known as *peranakan*. Thus, in intimate contact with the dominant language, minority languages often exhibit changes which indicate an erosion in spite of their maintenance but the example of the *nyonyas* and *babas*, is an instance of

not just erosion of a lower primary language but its total annihilation by a dominant one.

For any purist, massive interference by another language is regarded as a sign of language decay but this is not true. Borrowing through loanwords for example, is a means of language enrichment. English, the universally accepted, most dominant language of today, for example, even now freely borrows from other languages.

In the context of spoken Chinese in Malaysia, it is a case of a lower / minority language which borrows predominantly from the upper or dominant language. It was only after 1786 when the British began to make settlements in the Malay Peninsula that the Chinese arrived in large numbers as migrant workers. Since then the spoken language of the Chinese community, in the different dialectal forms, has undergone various influences and survived though it bears the marks of a struggle in the shape of copious borrowings.

Conclusion

Malaysian Chinese sounds different to foreign Chinese ears because of the presence of strange sounding Malay words. But the same can be said of the Chinese spoken in Hong Kong with its many intrusions from the language of the British administrators. Should the Chinese language in Hong Kong be considered a victim or a beneficiary of language contact? Doesn't the mixing of native with non-native elements create a more interesting language from the point of view of sound and colour? Has it not emerged reinforced by the event of contact with another/other linguistic systems, to perform its function of communication or is it poorer off than before because of the changes it has undergone?

These indeed are mind-tickling, open-ended questions that should be of interest to all concerned with the area of language change and decay.

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Appendix I

MALAY LOANWORKS IN THE CHINESE DIALECTS

DOMAIN : LEGAL/ADMINISTRATIVE

LEXEME	GLOSS	SOURCE	DIALECT
ma ta	police/policeman	mata-mata [M]	All
ma ta liu	police station	mata-mata [M + Ch]	Cantonese
ma ta choo	police station	mata-mata [M + Ch]	Hokkien
ma ta leow	police station	mata-mata [M + Ch]	Hakka
ma ta cheah	police car	mata-mata [M + Ch]	Hokkien
ma ta cha	police car	mata-mata [M + Ch]	Hakka
ma ta chair	police car	mata-mata [M + Ch]	Cantonese
met cha la	go to court	bicara [M]	Hakka
mi cha la	go to court	bicara [M]	All
mi/bi	debate	bicara [M]	Cantonese/Hokkien
ngah lan	grant	geran [M]	All
		grant [E]	All
o kong	fine/sentence	hukum [M]	All
po lei tank	court/tribunal	police [E + Ch]	All
po lei chu	police chief/judge	police [E + Ch]	All
sa la	guilty	salah [M]	All
mo/bo sa la	not guilty	salah [Ch + M]	All
sa man	summon	saman [M]	All
tam kong	bail	tanggung [M]	All

DOMAIN : TERMS OF ADDRESS/HONORIFICS/TITLES

LEXEME	GLOSS	SOURCE	DIALECT
la tuk	title conferred by royalty	datuk/dato'/datok	All
tan sri ri	title conferred by the king	tan sri	All
tong koo	person of royal birth	tengku/tunku	All
so tan	the ruler of a state	sultan	All
tun	title conferred by the king	tun	All

DOMAIN : ITEMS OF EVERYDAY EXPERIENCE

LEXEME	GLOSS	SOURCE		DIALECT
ang mo tan	rambutan (name of a local fruit)	rambutan	[M]	Hokkien
hung mou tan	rambutan (name of a local fruit)	rambutan	[M]	Cantonese
foong mau tan	rambutan (name of a local fruit)	rambutan	[M]	Hakka
ke sien	pitiful/what a pity	kasihan	[M]	Hokkien
ko pi	coffee	kopi	[M]	All
ko pi o	black coffee	kopi o	[M + Ch]	All
		coffee	[E] ?	
lak sa	noodles in hot spicy soup	laksa	[M]	All
lang sart	langsar (name of a local fruit)	langsar	[M]	All
lai lin	durian (name of a local fruit)	durian	[M]	Cantonese
lieu lian	durian (name of a local fruit)	durian	[M]	Hakka
lieu lian	durian (name of a local fruit)	durian	[M]	Hokkien
loo koo	duku (name of a local fruit)	duku	[M]	All
mang git	manggis (name of a local fruit)	manggis	[M]	Hokkien
pan lai	clever	pandai	[M]	All
pa sak	market	pasar	[M]	All
pa sak ma lam	night market	pasar malam	[M]	All
sam ba	cold condiments served with curries	sambal	[M]	All
sam pah	rubbish	sampah	[M]	Hokkien
sam pah t'ang	trash can	tong sampah	[CH = M]	Hokkien
sa yang	love/pity	sayang	[M]	All
si tem	stamp	setem	[M]	All
soo ma	all/venture	stamp	[E]	
		semua	[M]	All
ta pi	but	tetapi	[M]	All
tee moon	cucumber	timun	[M]	Hokkien

SEMANTIC TRANSFERENCE OF IDIOMS (LITERAL OR OTHERWISE)

LEXEME	GLOSS	SOURCE		DIALECT
sik fong	eat wind (go on holiday)	makan angin	[M]	All
sik looi	eat money (accept a bribe/ corruption)	makan duit	[M]	All
yum cha looi	drink tea money bribe	duit minum kopi	[M]	All
wan sik	find eat (seek a living)	cari makan	[M]	All
sik ka lei fun	eat curry rice (go to jail)	masuk penjara	[M]	All