

Language Choice among Young Sarawak Malay Speakers in the Simunjan District

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine language choice among young Sarawak Malay speakers in the Simunjan district by focusing on two primary objectives: (i) to determine the most frequently used language by young Sarawak Malays in Simunjan across the domains of family, friendship, education, religion and employment; and (ii) to identify their attitudes towards the importance of using the local dialect as a marker of cultural identity and their linguistic heritage. This research employed a quantitative methodology. A total of 100 respondents completed the questionnaires distributed, and the data were analysed using Fishman's Domain Theory (1972). The findings reveal that young Sarawak Malays in Simunjan continue to demonstrate positive attitudes towards the use of the Simunjan Malay dialect in various aspects of daily life. The dialect remains dominant in the family, friendship, religious and occupational domains, indicating its significant role in preserving cultural identity and strengthening social relationships. Although there is a noticeable shift towards Standard Malay in educational and formal contexts, the use of the local dialect remains robust, particularly in informal communication and interaction within the local community. These findings confirm that the Simunjan Malay dialect remains relevant and continues to play an important role in the everyday lives of young people in Simunjan.

Keywords: language choice; youth; Sarawak Malays; Simunjan Malay dialect; social domains; social impact.

Introduction

Language serves as the primary vehicle of communication that shapes social interaction and the cultural identity of a community. In Malaysia's multicultural context, linguistic diversity and the presence of multiple dialects constitute a significant feature of its society (Tamilarasi & Khairul, 2022). Sarawak, known for its rich linguistic variation, reflects this diversity through its wide range of local dialects that not only embody cultural heritage but also reinforce ethnic identity (Abdul Wahab et al., 2020). These dialects stand as symbols of local uniqueness and form part of the community's collective memory, transmitted across generations.

The Malay community in the district of Simunjan, for instance, possesses its own distinct dialect known as Simunjan Malay, which differs from the broader Sarawak Malay dialect in terms of phonology, vocabulary and intonation (Sharhaniza, 2016). However, the vitality of this dialect is increasingly challenged, particularly among the younger generation. The dominance of Standard Malay in formal education, workplace demands requiring proficiency in the national language and English, as well as the influence of mass media, have all contributed to the declining use of the dialect in daily communication. This phenomenon raises concerns among language researchers, as such shifts may lead to the erosion of the community's linguistic identity.

Although numerous studies have examined language choice and dialect maintenance among ethnic communities in Malaysia, research focusing specifically on the Simunjan Malay dialect remains limited. Much of the existing literature either adopts a generalised approach or focuses on more dominant dialects. Hence, there is a need to address this research gap by conducting a targeted study that investigates language choice and the attitudes of young Simunjan Malays towards their heritage dialect.

In response to this need, the present study was conducted with two key objectives. First, it aims to determine the language most frequently used by young Simunjan Malays in five major social domains: family, friendship, education, religion and employment. Second, it seeks to identify the attitudes of young speakers towards the Simunjan Malay dialect as their mother tongue. These two objectives are closely interrelated, as patterns of language use across social domains are often influenced by speakers' attitudes and perceptions towards the language in question.

The findings of this study are expected to offer meaningful contributions in two main areas. Academically, the results expand current knowledge on the dynamics of minority language use in Sarawak and enrich the body of local sociolinguistic literature. Practically, this study provides a potential foundation for efforts to preserve the Simunjan Malay dialect through more inclusive language policies at both state and national levels. Such measures would ensure that minority dialects do not merely become historical artefacts but continue to thrive and remain relevant in contemporary society.

Literature Review

Language choice in multi-ethnic societies is often influenced by factors such as social domains, cultural identity, speaker attitudes and pressure from dominant languages. Fishman's Domain Theory (1972) provides a foundational framework for understanding this phenomenon, arguing that language use varies across contexts such as family, friendship, education, religion and employment. Existing studies show diverse patterns across communities and locations, yet a common trend emerges: a shift towards dominant languages in formal situations or when interacting beyond the home community.

Changing patterns of language use among young people have been highlighted in several recent studies. Mahali (2022), for example, found that among the Murut youth in Keningau, Sabah, the mother tongue and Sabah Malay dialect remained widely used in family domains, while the Sabah Malay dialect was more dominant in friendship and educational settings. This shift demonstrates the young speakers' ability to adapt their language to context, yet their positive attitudes towards their mother tongue indicate that the language remains vibrant.

Similarly, Batjo and Mis (2022), in their study on the Melanau community in Mukah, emphasised the crucial role of social domains such as family and religion in preserving ethnic languages. This aligns with the findings of Ma’alip and Wahab (2024), who reported that the family domain significantly influences intergenerational language transmission within the Narum community. The family thus acts as the most effective agent of linguistic socialisation, especially when the mother tongue is consistently used in daily communication.

Prasetyo and Sulistiayrini (2023), examining Javanese dialect speakers, found that language shift is shaped by a combination of social domains, language proficiency and social networks. Their study highlights that language choice is no solely a practical decision but also reflects social relationships and varying levels of multilingual competence. Furthermore, Tuah et al. (2020) emphasised that the sustainability of minority languages such as Kedayan in Sarawak depends heavily on the attitudes of young speakers; those with positive attitudes tend to continue using their mother tongue despite the influence of major languages.

At the international level, Dinata (2021), studying the Arab-speaking community at Universitas Islam Negeri Imam Bonjol, Padang, found that while Arabic was used in formal contexts such as classrooms, its use outside the classroom was limited. Instead, Minang and Bahasa Indonesia were more dominant. Code-mixing and code-switching were also common, illustrating the multilingual nature of the community. Meanwhile, Gabriel’s (2024) research on the Sangu language in Tanzania demonstrates how ethnic languages become endangered when national languages such as Swahili begin to dominate nearly all domains—even intimate ones such as the family. When dominant languages permeate close-knit interactions, intergenerational transmission weakens, putting the ethnic language at risk.

In the context of Sarawak, Tuah et al. (2020) found that while language shift among Kedayan speakers in Bekenu occurred in several domains, the Kedayan language continued to thrive in others. The language remains relatively safe because it is still used across all generations despite the influence of dominant languages such as Sarawak Malay, Iban and English. Similarly, Renddan et al. (2020), in their study of three generations of Bajau Sama speakers in Kota Belud, Sabah, found that younger generations had shifted to Malay in both family and public domains, unlike older generations who used the mother tongue more consistently. The findings underscore the pivotal role of younger speakers in driving language shift, providing a warning about declining intergenerational transmission.

Among the Jakun Orang Asli community in Bukit Ibam, Pahang, Hussin and Suhaimi (2023) observed that children of mixed marriages primarily use Malay in daily communication, while the Jakun language is used only in limited contexts. Mixed marriages accelerate the process of language shift, even though some segments of the community continue efforts to preserve the language.

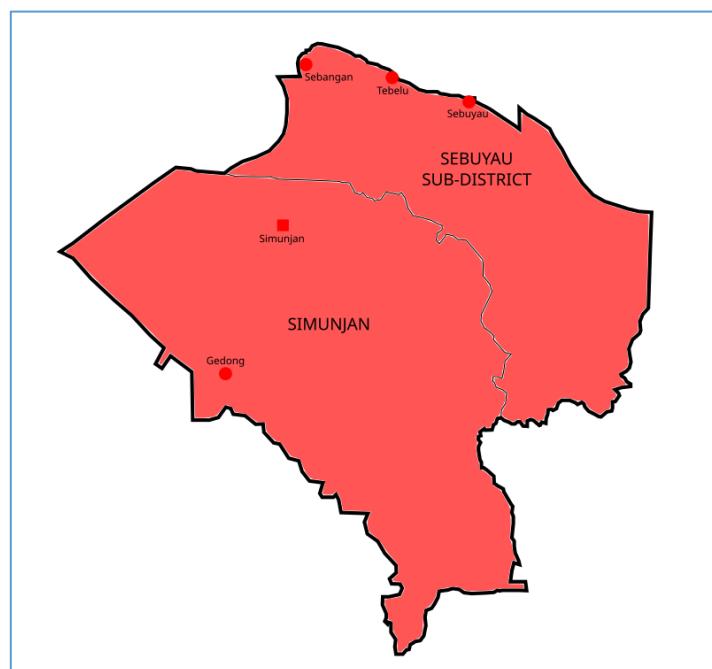
Overall, the literature indicates that although positive attitudes towards the mother tongue are frequently reported, language shift towards dominant languages remains evident, particularly in formal domains such as education and employment. These changes are often influenced by national language policies, globalisation and social mobility. Therefore, examining language choice among young Simunjan Malays is crucial to understanding whether similar patterns occur and to what extent positive attitudes may contribute to the maintenance of the Simunjan Malay dialect as the community’s cultural identity.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study is grounded in Fishman's Domain Theory (1972), which posits that language choice is shaped by specific social domains such as family, friendship, education, religion and employment. Each domain carries social expectations that influence speakers' linguistic decisions. In this study, the choice between the Simunjan Malay dialect, Standard Malay and other languages is analysed according to these five domains. The framework is further supported by Giles' Communication Accommodation Theory (1973), which explains how speakers adjust their language according to social context, interlocutor identity and relational factors. It also draws on sociolinguistic perspectives that highlight the interplay between language, cultural identity and the sustainability of heritage languages (Holmes, 2001).

Methodology

This study employs a quantitative research design to obtain objective and measurable empirical data. A structured questionnaire was developed as the primary instrument of data collection and distributed to 100 Malay respondents aged between 15 and 30 years residing in the Simunjan district of Sarawak. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that participants were genuinely representative of the younger generation who actively use the Simunjan Malay dialect in their daily lives.



Map of the Simunjan District, Sarawak

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simunjan_District

The questionnaire comprises two main sections. The first section focuses on language choice across the five social domains identified in Fishman's Domain Theory (1972): family, friendship, education, religion and employment. Respondents were asked to indicate the

language they used most frequently in each domain, whether Simunjan Malay, Standard Malay or other languages such as Sarawak Malay, English or mixed varieties.

The second section measures respondents' attitudes towards the use and significance of the Simunjan Malay dialect. This section employs a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) to assess levels of pride, perceived importance, desire for preservation and perceptions of the dialect's future. The data collected were analysed descriptively using Microsoft Excel, involving the calculation of percentages, frequencies and response distributions for each domain and attitude item. This analytical approach enables researchers to identify patterns of language choice across social contexts and assess the degree of acceptance and appreciation of the Simunjan Malay dialect among young speakers. A quantitative method was chosen because it is suitable for capturing broad trends in language behaviour and allows for meaningful comparisons across domains as well as among individuals within the study population.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the study based on questionnaire data collected from 100 young Malay respondents in Simunjan. The results are organised according to the five social domains identified in Fishman's (1972) Domain Theory: family, friendship, education, religion and employment. Each domain is analysed to identify patterns of language choice, particularly the extent to which the Simunjan Malay dialect is used in comparison with Standard Malay and other languages, and how these patterns relate to social factors and contexts of use.

In addition, this section discusses the attitudes of young people towards the use of the Simunjan Malay dialect in daily life. This aspect is crucial, as speaker attitudes are widely recognised as a key determinant of the long-term vitality of a mother tongue (Holmes, 2001; Giles, 1973). The analysis is conducted comprehensively with reference to relevant theories and previous studies, thereby linking the findings to broader issues concerning the maintenance of minority languages in the context of globalisation and the dominance of official languages.

a) Patterns of Language Choice in the Family Domain

In the family domain, the findings indicate that the Simunjan Malay dialect remains dominant in intra-family communication, particularly with close family members such as grandfathers (82%), grandmothers (81%), parents (78%) and siblings (77%). This is consistent with Fishman's (1972) Domain Theory, which posits that language choice is strongly influenced by social relationships and the degree of intimacy. In this context, the close-knit nature of family ties encourages the use of the local dialect as a symbol of identity and intimacy.

Although there is a slight increase in the use of mixed dialects, especially in conversations with extended family members (25%), the Simunjan Malay dialect still functions as the primary code. The use of Standard Malay and the broader Sarawak Malay dialect is minimal, while the presence of Iban (around 3%) is likely attributable to intermarriage within the family. No use of English was reported in any of the family categories, further underscoring the role of the dialect as the main medium of communication in the family domain among the Simunjan Malay community.

The high percentage of dialect use demonstrates that the home remains the primary social space for the preservation of the mother tongue. These findings support Holmes' (2001) contention that the mother tongue is most frequently used in the family domain, where intimate relationships and strong emotional bonds shape linguistic behaviour. This also aligns with

Fishman's (1972) assertion that different varieties of speech are used according to specific social domains. In this case, the use of the Simunjan Malay dialect among family members indicates that the dialect remains robust in informal contexts and is closely tied to the community's cultural identity.

b) Patterns of Language Choice in the Friendship Domain

In the friendship domain, language choice among young Sarawak Malays in Simunjan is highly contextual and responsive to the social background of their interlocutors. When interacting with friends from the same locality (Simunjan), the majority of respondents (86%) reported using the Simunjan Malay dialect. This reflects a strong sense of social cohesion and collective identity within the local group, as well as the role of the dialect as a vehicle for expressing closeness and trust.

However, language choice shifts when respondents interact with friends from outside Simunjan. In such situations, the use of the Simunjan Malay dialect drops to 13%, while mixed dialects (46%) and the broader Sarawak Malay dialect (39%) become more dominant. This decline is influenced by differing ethnic and dialectal backgrounds, which give rise to code accommodation and code-switching.

According to Giles' (1973) Communication Accommodation Theory, speakers tend to adjust their speech style based on the identity and social background of their interlocutors. The shift observed here reflects an attempt at linguistic accommodation to facilitate mutual understanding between speakers from different dialect backgrounds. A more marked change emerges when respondents communicate with non-Malay Sarawakian friends, where Standard Malay becomes dominant (44%). As the national language and a lingua franca, Standard Malay serves as a neutral and inclusive medium in interethnic communication. This demonstrates that in social settings involving diverse ethnic backgrounds, language choice shifts to ensure communicative effectiveness and intercultural harmony.

In relaxed social situations, such as spending leisure time with friends or sharing personal problems, there is still substantial use of the Simunjan Malay dialect (51% and 50%, respectively). This indicates that in interactional contexts involving trust and emotional disclosure, respondents prefer to use the language that is closest to their sense of self. The use of mixed dialects is also significant (32–33%), reflecting the linguistic flexibility of respondents who are able to adapt to varied social environments.

The use of English is virtually non-existent in most friendship contexts, and Iban appears only at very low percentages in interactions with non-Malay Sarawakian friends. This suggests that the role of other ethnic languages is limited, except in more mixed or interethnic settings. Overall, in the friendship domain, the local dialect known as Simunjan Malay remains dominant in intimate and informal situations, whereas in interactions involving geographical and ethnic diversity, Standard Malay and the Sarawak Malay dialect function as key bridging codes.

c) Patterns of Language Choice in the Education Domain

In the education domain, the findings reveal a pronounced shift towards Standard Malay, particularly in formal situations such as interactions with teachers (71%), tutorial sessions (68%) and note-taking (78%). This reflects the role of Standard Malay as the official medium of instruction in the education system, in line with its status as the national language. However,

in less formal settings, such as conversations with friends outside the classroom and everyday transactions like buying food at the canteen, the Simunjan Malay dialect assumes a dominant role, at 40% and 50% respectively. This suggests that in more relaxed and familiar social spaces, respondents feel more comfortable maintaining the use of their mother tongue.

These patterns are consistent with the findings of Prasetyo and Sulistiayarini (2023), who argue that educational institutions function as agents of linguistic homogenisation in order to ensure shared understanding. At the same time, the continued use of local dialects in informal school contexts indicates that functional separation of languages according to formal and informal settings remains strong among students. In interactions between students and teachers in formal classroom environments, Standard Malay becomes the preferred choice. Conversely, in informal peer interactions, the local dialect is more salient, reflecting the influence of social relationships and intimacy in determining language choice. No use of Iban was recorded, while English appeared only marginally in learning-related contexts (10%) and note-taking (10%), highlighting the limited functional role of other languages within the educational ecosystem of the Simunjan Malay community.

Overall, language patterns in the education domain reinforce the idea that language choice is not static, but contingent upon the social roles individuals perform within specific domains, as emphasised by Fishman. Accordingly, Standard Malay functions as the formal medium of learning, while the local dialect remains vibrant in everyday social interaction, contributing to the maintenance of the community's linguistic identity.

d) Patterns of Language Choice in the Religious Domain

In the religious domain, the Simunjan Malay dialect shows strong dominance, especially in informal religious contexts such as being at the surau or mosque (73%), attending *tahlil* gatherings (41%) and discussing religious matters with family or friends (51%). This reflects the importance of social intimacy and local linguistic identity in facilitating the transmission of religious messages in a familiar and accessible way. By contrast, Standard Malay is preferred in more formal and ritual contexts, such as sermons and religious talks (48%) and daily supplications (78%). This is consistent with its role as the national language that is widely understood, and reflects the need for clarity and uniformity in more formal and ritualistic aspects of religious practice.

The use of mixed dialects, particularly combinations of Simunjan Malay and Sarawak Malay, is also evident in several contexts, such as religious discussions (35%) and sermons (12%), demonstrating linguistic flexibility and social adaptation within a multi-dialect community. English and Iban, however, are not used at all in religious contexts, indicating a tightly bounded and tradition-oriented linguistic repertoire in religious communication in the study area.

These patterns suggest that speakers select linguistic styles strategically to build social solidarity and align with community norms. In this domain, the use of the local dialect strengthens communal bonds, whereas Standard Malay ensures broader comprehensibility in more formal religious events.

e) Patterns of Language Choice in the Employment Domain

In the employment domain, the Simunjan Malay dialect continues to play a significant role, particularly in informal workplace interactions such as daily tasks and conversations with colleagues, where it is used by 33% of respondents compared with 32% who use Standard Malay. This indicates linguistic adjustment based on the level of formality and social context.

In formal transactions, such as dealings at government offices or banks, Standard Malay is clearly dominant (63%), reflecting its status as the national language. Interestingly, in more relaxed and social workplace activities, such as recreational events, most respondents prefer to use the Simunjan Malay dialect (42%) and mixed local dialects (19%). This demonstrates the strength of communal ties and the role of language in maintaining local identity within the workplace setting.

In situations involving the giving of instructions, although Standard Malay is used (34%), the Simunjan Malay dialect records a higher percentage (40%), suggesting that in less formal work contexts, the dialect is deemed more practical and effective. The use of English is minimal (around 2%), and Iban is not used at all, indicating the limited functional roles of these languages in the work environment of the Simunjan Malay community.

These findings are consistent with Fishman's (1972) Domain Theory, which emphasises that language choice is influenced by the degree of familiarity, social context and cultural background of speakers. They also underscore that language choice is closely linked to the social situation and interpersonal relationships. In the workplace, the formality of relationships and the communicative purpose determine the extent to which Standard Malay or other languages are deemed necessary.

f) Attitudes towards the Use of the Local Dialect

The second objective of this study was to examine the attitudes of Malay youth in Simunjan towards the use of the Simunjan Malay dialect in daily life and across various social domains. Overall, the findings indicate that young people hold highly positive attitudes towards the dialect, particularly in family and informal social contexts.

A total of 98% of respondents reported feeling comfortable using the Simunjan Malay dialect with their families, while 94% agreed that the dialect is important for maintaining their cultural identity. This supports Holmes' (2013) view that language functions not only as a communicative tool, but also as a marker of cultural identity, a symbol of intimacy and a vehicle for transmitting values across generations. The use of the dialect in the home reflects emotional attachment and appreciation for the oral heritage passed down from parents and grandparents.

In the domains of friendship and employment, the Simunjan Malay dialect also serves as a tool for fostering unity and strengthening social relationships. Approximately 91% of respondents agreed that the use of the dialect contributes to a more positive work atmosphere, while 95% believed that it helps build rapport and trust among colleagues from the same community. This highlights the pragmatic and social functions of the dialect in constructing solidarity, consistent with Giles' (1973) Communication Accommodation Theory, which posits that speakers adjust their language according to social context to enhance compatibility and social acceptance.

However, in the education domain, attitudes towards the use of the dialect are more complex. Only 45% of respondents agreed that they find it easier to understand lessons when explained in the Simunjan Malay dialect. In contrast, 94% stated that they are more comfortable using Standard Malay in formal academic situations such as presentations, classroom discussions and written assignments. This suggests the presence of diglossic patterns, whereby the dialect is used for informal and interpersonal communication, while Standard Malay is reserved for official and formal purposes. This situation also reflects the influence of national education policy, which designates Malay as the main medium of instruction.

In the religious domain, respondents display a preference for using the Simunjan Malay dialect in relaxed interactions, for example in conversations after prayers or religious

discussions with family members. However, Malay remains the primary choice in formal religious events such as sermons and recitations of prayers. This is in line with Yaacob Harun's (2009) observation that religious discourse in Malaysia tends to employ a formal and standard variety of language to ensure that messages are conveyed effectively and understood by diverse audiences.

Overall, the findings indicate that despite increasing pressure to use the standard language, young people's attitudes towards the Simunjan Malay dialect remain strong and positive, particularly in domains involving close relationships and informal settings. This suggests that the dialect continues to occupy an important place in the community and has the potential to be maintained, provided it receives adequate support through education and cultural activities.

Conclusion

This study has examined patterns of language choice among Malay youth in Simunjan and assessed their attitudes towards the use of the Simunjan Malay dialect. The findings show that the dialect continues to play a significant role in the daily lives of young people, especially in the domains of family, friendship and informal social interaction. Language choice is strongly influenced by social context, the nature of relationships between speakers and the level of formality of interaction, in line with the principles of Fishman's (1972) Domain Theory.

Although there is a noticeable shift towards Standard Malay in formal domains such as education, religion and employment, the Simunjan Malay dialect remains a symbol of identity and a primary communicative tool in more relaxed and intimate settings. Young people's attitudes towards the dialect are largely positive, reflecting an awareness of its heritage value and its role in strengthening social relationships. Nonetheless, the continued vitality of the dialect depends on institutional support, sustained exposure among younger generations and ongoing opportunities for use. This study therefore recommends that heritage language empowerment programmes be expanded through educational curricula, cultural activities and the creative use of social media as a contemporary medium.

For future research, it is suggested that greater attention be paid to external factors that influence the level of dialect use, such as migration, technology and the role of the family in language transmission. The scope of research may also be widened to include more diverse age groups in order to obtain a more comprehensive picture of dialect use dynamics among Malay communities in Sarawak. In addition, follow-up studies employing more in-depth qualitative approaches and including other Malay communities for comparative purposes are recommended. It is evident that the preservation of local dialects requires more systematic efforts through education, documentation and community-based programmes so that the Simunjan Malay dialect continues to live, be valued and be transmitted to future generations.

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