

Knowledge and Use of Archaic Words among Sarawak Malay Dialect Speakers in Kuching

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the level of knowledge and use of archaic words among speakers of the Sarawak Malay dialect in Kuching, Sarawak. Specifically, it aims to identify the extent to which archaic lexical items are recognised, understood, and used across different generations, as well as to explain the phenomenon of lexical attrition through Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (1978). A quantitative research design was employed using a structured online questionnaire (Google Forms) administered to 111 respondents aged between 15 and 45 years. The respondents were divided into three age groups (15–25, 26–35, and 36–45 years) to facilitate generational comparison. The findings indicate that younger speakers are familiar with certain archaic words but rarely use them in daily communication, particularly in modern social and digital contexts. In contrast, respondents aged 26–35 years use archaic words selectively, mainly during family and social interactions, while older speakers demonstrate the highest levels of knowledge and the most consistent use of archaic vocabulary. The findings further suggest that language shift, urbanisation, formal education, and the increasing influence of Standard Malay and English contribute to the gradual decline of traditional lexical items. Based on the perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics, the reduction in the use of archaic words reflects changes in the social functions of language and communicative practices within the Sarawak Malay community. This study contributes to the documentation of the Sarawak Malay dialect and provides insights into efforts aimed at preserving its linguistic heritage.

Keywords: archaic words; Sarawak Malay dialect; lexical knowledge; language preservation; generational differences

INTRODUCTION

Language is a dynamic social semiotic system that continuously evolves in response to changes in society, culture, and communication. According to Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (1978), language change occurs when speakers modify their linguistic choices to fulfil changing social functions. As societies become increasingly urbanised and technologically advanced, traditional lexical items are often replaced by more widely used expressions, resulting in the gradual disappearance of culturally significant vocabulary.

The Sarawak Malay dialect is one of the major regional dialects spoken throughout Sarawak and represents an important component of the cultural identity of the Sarawak Malay community. Although the dialect remains widely spoken, many of its traditional lexical items, particularly archaic words, are becoming increasingly unfamiliar among younger generations. Archaic words are lexical items that were once commonly used but have gradually disappeared from everyday communication due to changes in lifestyle, education, technology, and language preferences. This phenomenon raises concerns regarding the preservation of the linguistic and cultural heritage embedded within the Sarawak Malay dialect.

Several factors have contributed to the decline in the use of archaic vocabulary. The widespread use of Standard Malay in formal education, the increasing influence of English in urban environments, and the rapid expansion of digital communication have encouraged younger speakers to adopt more contemporary vocabulary. The disappearance of archaic vocabulary represents not only linguistic loss but also the erosion of cultural identity and collective memory (Krauss, 2007). In addition, urbanisation and changing patterns of family interaction have reduced opportunities for intergenerational language transmission, limiting younger speakers' exposure to traditional dialectal expressions. Consequently, many archaic words are now recognised only by older speakers or are no longer actively used in daily communication.

Previous studies have examined various aspects of the Sarawak Malay dialect, including its phonology, morphology, sociolinguistic characteristics, and language attitudes. Other researchers have investigated language shift, dialect maintenance, and lexical variation in different regions of Malaysia. However, limited research has specifically examined the level of knowledge, understanding, and actual use of archaic words among Sarawak Malay dialect speakers in Kuching. Existing studies have also tended to focus on specific age groups, educational institutions, or particular lexical categories, leaving a gap in understanding generational differences in archaic vocabulary knowledge within the wider Sarawak Malay community.

To address this gap, the present study investigates the knowledge and use of archaic words among Sarawak Malay dialect speakers in Kuching across three generational groups. Specifically, the study aims to identify archaic lexical items that are becoming obsolete, examine respondents' levels of knowledge, understanding, and usage of these words, and explain the phenomenon of lexical attrition through Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (1978). By combining empirical evidence with a functional linguistic perspective, this study contributes to the documentation of the Sarawak Malay dialect and provides insights that may support future efforts to preserve Sarawak's linguistic heritage.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The decline of traditional vocabulary has become an important area of research in sociolinguistics, particularly in relation to language shift, language maintenance, and the preservation of cultural identity. Lexical attrition refers to the gradual disappearance of words from active use within a speech community, often resulting from social, cultural, and technological changes. According to Crystal (2000), lexical loss is frequently an early indicator of language endangerment, as vocabulary is generally more susceptible to

change than other linguistic components. As communities adopt new lifestyles and communication practices, traditional lexical items are increasingly replaced by more widely used or modern expressions.

Fishman (1991) argues that lexical loss commonly begins in specific cultural domains such as agriculture, traditional occupations, rituals, and local customs. When these domains become less relevant to contemporary life, the vocabulary associated with them gradually loses its communicative function. Similarly, Campbell and Muntzel (1989) observe that urbanisation, migration, and socioeconomic development accelerate the replacement of traditional vocabulary with more dominant languages. Grenoble and Whaley (2006) further suggest that younger generations tend to favour modern or borrowed lexical items, particularly those influenced by technology and global communication, leading to a gradual decline in the use of traditional vocabulary.

Recent studies have further demonstrated that lexical change is influenced by patterns of language use and language learning. Li and Siew (2022) argue that semantic change occurs gradually as speakers repeatedly adopt newer lexical forms while older lexical items become increasingly unfamiliar across generations. The relationship between lexical attrition and cultural identity has also received considerable attention. Krauss (2007) emphasises that the disappearance of traditional vocabulary represents not only linguistic loss but also the erosion of cultural knowledge, values, and collective memory. Likewise, Bradley and Bradley (2019) highlight that increased exposure to dominant languages through education, mass media, and digital communication encourages code-switching and lexical borrowing, reducing the frequency of traditional lexical usage. These findings demonstrate that lexical attrition is closely associated with changing communicative needs and the growing influence of dominant languages in multilingual societies.

Within the Malaysian context, previous studies have similarly reported evidence of lexical change and dialect shift. Salit et al. (2024), in their study of the Baling dialect in Kedah, found that younger speakers increasingly preferred Standard Malay over local dialectal forms, while older speakers continued to preserve traditional vocabulary. Abdul Malek and Mohamad (2015) likewise reported that Malaysian adolescents demonstrated limited mastery of traditional Malay lexical items, reflecting declining exposure to indigenous vocabulary. These findings suggest that intergenerational differences play a significant role in determining the survival of traditional lexical resources.

Research focusing specifically on the Sarawak Malay dialect has primarily examined language attitudes, dialect variation, and sociolinguistic characteristics rather than lexical attrition. Awang Sihat et al. (2024) reported that younger Sarawakians possess lower levels of traditional vocabulary knowledge than older speakers, largely because of reduced interaction with elderly family members. Mustafa et al. (2024) investigated language attitudes among university students and found generally positive perceptions towards the Sarawak Malay dialect, although the study did not examine actual lexical knowledge or language use. Earlier studies by Meor Osman (2013), Sarbini Zin et al. (2012), and Mis (2012) documented lexical variation and language change among Sarawak speakers but focused on specific lexical categories, informal observations, or general language use rather than systematically measuring knowledge and usage of archaic words across generations.

Overall, previous studies consistently demonstrate that language shift,

urbanisation, formal education, technological development, and reduced intergenerational communication contribute to the gradual disappearance of traditional vocabulary. Nevertheless, empirical research examining the knowledge, understanding, and use of archaic words among Sarawak Malay dialect speakers in Kuching remains limited. Most existing studies focus on language attitudes, dialect variation, or restricted respondent groups without comprehensively investigating generational differences in archaic lexical knowledge. Therefore, the present study addresses this research gap by examining the level of knowledge and use of archaic words among Sarawak Malay dialect speakers in Kuching through the theoretical perspective of Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (1978). The findings are expected to contribute to the documentation and preservation of the Sarawak Malay dialect while providing a clearer understanding of ongoing lexical change within the community.

Conceptual Framework

This study is underpinned by Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) theory (1978), which views language as a social semiotic system in which linguistic choices are influenced by the social contexts and communicative functions of language. According to Halliday, language performs three metafunctions: the ideational function, which represents experience and meaning; the interpersonal function, which establishes relationships among speakers; and the textual function, which organises messages into coherent discourse.

Within the context of this study, the decline in the use of archaic words in the Sarawak Malay dialect is interpreted as a consequence of changes in language functions resulting from urbanisation, formal education, technological advancement, and increasing exposure to Standard Malay and English. As speakers adapt their linguistic choices to contemporary communicative needs, traditional lexical items gradually lose their functional relevance and become less frequently used, particularly among younger generations.

Therefore, Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics provides an appropriate theoretical perspective for explaining how social changes influence lexical choice and contribute to the gradual attrition of archaic vocabulary among Sarawak Malay dialect speakers in Kuching. The theory also supports the interpretation of respondents' knowledge, understanding, and use of archaic words across different generations.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative research design to examine the knowledge and use of archaic words among Sarawak Malay dialect speakers in Kuching, Sarawak. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire distributed through Google Forms. The study involved 111 respondents residing in Kuching, who were selected using purposive sampling. To facilitate generational comparison, respondents were divided into three age groups: 15–25 years, 26–35 years, and 36–45 years.

The questionnaire consisted of five sections covering respondents' demographic information, knowledge of archaic words, understanding of word meanings, frequency of usage, and attitudes towards archaic words. Most items employed multiple-choice and Likert-scale responses to enable quantitative analysis.

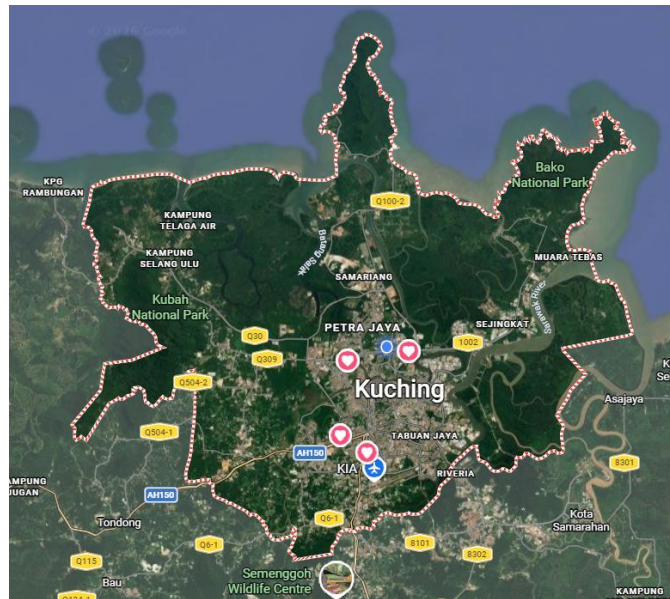


Figure 1.
Study area: Kuching District, Sarawak.

The collected data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, to identify patterns of lexical knowledge, understanding, usage, and attitudes across the three age groups. The findings were subsequently interpreted based on Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (1978), which explains lexical attrition as a result of changes in language functions and speakers' linguistic choices within evolving social contexts.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and discusses the findings obtained from the questionnaire administered to 111 respondents in Kuching, Sarawak. The findings are organised according to the study objectives, namely respondents' demographic profile, knowledge and understanding of archaic words, usage of archaic words, and attitudes towards archaic words. The results are interpreted using Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (1978) to explain how changes in social context and communicative functions contribute to the gradual attrition of archaic vocabulary among Sarawak Malay dialect speakers.

Respondents' Demographic Profile

A total of 111 respondents participated in this study. The respondents were categorised into three age groups, namely 15–25 years, 26–35 years, and 36–45 years. Demographic information collected included gender, marital status, and duration of residence in Kuching. The distribution of respondents across these demographic categories provided a suitable basis for examining generational differences in the knowledge, understanding, usage, and attitudes towards archaic words in the Sarawak Malay dialect.

Archaic Words Investigated in the Study

This study investigated ten archaic words of the Sarawak Malay dialect to examine respondents' knowledge, understanding, usage, and attitudes across different age groups.

Table 1 presents the lexical items analysed in this study together with their meanings and the overall percentage of respondents who recognised each word. Presenting these lexical items provides readers with a clearer understanding of the linguistic evidence supporting the subsequent findings and discussion.

No.	Archaic Words	Meaning (English)	Meaning (Standard Malay)	Respondents Who Recognised the Word (%)	Status
1.	Ladin	knife; machete	pisau; parang	85.6	Yes
2.	Bandin	wedding ceremony	persandingan	18.0	Rarely
3.	Buyan	likes to annoy or disturb	suka mengganggu	53.2	Situational
4.	Enjok	lifting and extending the hand upwards or forwards	mengangkat serta menghulurkan tangan ke atas, ke hadapan	60.9	Yes
5.	Ibun	awake/ to wake up	jaga	27.2	Rarely
6.	Jaber	a place for washing dishes; bathing etc. inside the house, bathroom, toilet	tempat membasuh pinggan mangkuk; mandi dll di dalam rumah, bilik mandi, tandas	21.7	Yes
7.	Kakan	excessive/ extreme	melampau	64.1	Rarely
8.	Ngayang	pacing back and forth	mundar-mandir	29.7	Rarely
9.	Sambak	steal; pickpocket	curi; copet	44.1	Rarely
10.	Ugap	to pull out or pluck completely	cabut habis-habisan	36.0	Rarely

Table 1.
Archaic Words Investigated in the Study

As shown in Table 1, the level of recognition varied across the ten archaic words. Some lexical items remained widely recognised among respondents, indicating that they continue to be maintained within the Sarawak Malay speech community. In contrast, other words recorded considerably lower recognition rates, suggesting that they are gradually becoming obsolete as younger generations increasingly adopt more commonly used lexical forms. These findings provide the lexical evidence for the analyses presented in the

following sections.

Knowledge of Archaic Words

The findings indicate that respondents aged 36–45 years demonstrated the highest level of knowledge of archaic words, followed by those aged 26–35 years, while respondents aged 15–25 years recorded the lowest level of familiarity. This pattern suggests that knowledge of traditional vocabulary decreases across younger generations.

The decline in lexical knowledge may be attributed to reduced exposure to the Sarawak Malay dialect within family and community interactions, as younger speakers increasingly communicate using Standard Malay and English in educational, professional, and digital settings. Similar findings were reported by Awang Sihat et al. (2024), who found that younger Sarawak Malays possess lower levels of traditional vocabulary due to limited interaction with older generations. Likewise, Crystal (2000) explains that vocabulary is often the first linguistic component to be affected by language shift because lexical items are highly responsive to social and cultural change. Fishman (1991) further argues that reduced intergenerational language transmission accelerates lexical attrition within minority language communities.

These findings are also consistent with Rajik (2024), who reported that lexical attrition is particularly evident among younger speakers of minority languages because traditional vocabulary is gradually replaced by more dominant linguistic forms. From the perspective of Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (1978), these findings indicate that younger speakers have adapted their lexical choices to contemporary communicative needs, resulting in the gradual replacement of archaic vocabulary with more widely used linguistic forms.

Understanding of Archaic Words

The results reveal that respondents' understanding of the meanings of archaic words followed a pattern similar to their level of lexical knowledge. Older respondents demonstrated greater ability to recognise and accurately interpret traditional lexical items, whereas younger respondents experienced greater difficulty in identifying their meanings.

This finding indicates that declining lexical knowledge is accompanied by reduced semantic understanding, particularly among younger speakers who have limited exposure to traditional vocabulary in everyday communication. Meor Osman (2013) similarly reported that younger Sarawak Malays frequently misunderstood or failed to recognise traditional lexical items because such words were rarely encountered in daily interactions. Grenoble and Whaley (2006) likewise suggest that younger generations tend to replace traditional vocabulary with modern or borrowed lexical forms, resulting in the gradual erosion of lexical knowledge.

Li and Siew (2022) further suggest that semantic change is closely associated with language learning and frequency of use, whereby lexical meanings gradually become less accessible when words are no longer regularly encountered. Halliday (1978) explains this phenomenon by arguing that speakers continuously modify their linguistic choices according to changing communicative functions. As archaic words become less relevant within contemporary social contexts, their meanings are gradually forgotten by younger generations.

Use of Archaic Words Across Generations

The findings indicate substantial differences in the use of archaic words across the three age groups. Respondents aged 36–45 years reported using archaic vocabulary more frequently, particularly during conversations with family members and older members of the community. Respondents aged 26–35 years reported occasional use, whereas respondents aged 15–25 years rarely incorporated archaic words into their daily communication.

The limited use of archaic vocabulary among younger respondents reflects the influence of urbanisation, formal education, multilingual communication, and digital media, all of which encourage the use of Standard Malay and English. Similar patterns were observed by Sarbini Zin et al. (2012), who reported considerable lexical change among younger Sarawak Malay speakers. Bradley and Bradley (2019) also emphasise that increased exposure to dominant languages through education and mass media promotes lexical borrowing and code-switching, reducing the frequency of traditional vocabulary. Furthermore, Mis (2012) found that multilingual communication in Sarawak encourages speakers to select vocabulary that is more widely understood across different ethnic groups.

Bolhassan (2019) similarly observed that increasing interaction through Standard Malay has influenced lexical choices among Sarawak Malay speakers, contributing to changes in dialectal vocabulary. These findings are consistent with Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (1978), which proposes that speakers modify their linguistic choices according to changing communicative purposes. As younger speakers increasingly communicate within modern educational, occupational, and digital environments, archaic lexical items gradually lose their communicative relevance.

Attitudes towards Archaic Words

The findings indicate that respondents generally expressed positive attitudes towards the preservation of archaic words in the Sarawak Malay dialect. Most respondents agreed that traditional vocabulary represents an important aspect of Sarawak's linguistic and cultural heritage and should be maintained for future generations.

Despite these positive attitudes, younger respondents reported relatively low levels of actual usage of archaic words in daily communication. This suggests that favourable perceptions alone are insufficient to ensure the continued transmission of traditional vocabulary. Mustafa et al. (2024) similarly reported that although university students expressed positive attitudes towards the Sarawak Malay dialect, its use remained limited in several communicative domains. Fishman (1991) argues that language maintenance depends not only on positive attitudes but also on sustained intergenerational language use within families and local communities.

Norazuna Norahim et al. (2022) likewise emphasise that preserving dialectal lexical features is essential for maintaining the linguistic identity of the Sarawak Malay community. From Halliday's (1978) perspective, the discrepancy between attitudes and actual language use reflects changes in communicative practices, where speakers recognise the cultural value of archaic vocabulary but increasingly select lexical items that are more functional in contemporary social contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the knowledge, understanding, usage, and attitudes towards archaic words among Sarawak Malay dialect speakers in Kuching. The findings reveal clear generational differences, with older respondents demonstrating greater familiarity and more frequent use of archaic vocabulary than younger respondents. Although respondents generally recognised the cultural importance of preserving archaic words, their actual use among younger speakers was relatively limited.

The findings suggest that urbanisation, formal education, technological advancement, and increased exposure to Standard Malay and English have contributed to the gradual decline of archaic vocabulary. These patterns support Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (1978), which explains that language change occurs as speakers adapt their linguistic choices to evolving communicative functions and social contexts.

This study contributes to the documentation of the Sarawak Malay dialect by providing empirical evidence of lexical attrition across different generations. The findings also emphasise the importance of strengthening intergenerational language transmission, promoting awareness of traditional vocabulary, and encouraging further research on language preservation in Sarawak. Future studies may extend this research by involving larger samples from other regions of Sarawak and by employing mixed-method approaches to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of lexical change.

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