

## **Can One be Hakka without Speaking Hakka? The Conflicts between Language and Identity in a Hakka Community in Sabah**

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Sabah is one of the 13 states of Malaysia. Hakka has been the major spoken language in Sabah's Chinese communities since 1920. This study investigated Hakka individuals' language choices and their identities in Sandakan, Sabah. Fifty-two Hakka individuals across three generations were interviewed and observed. The data revealed that the Hakka language faces several challenges, and its survival is threatened. Hakka was neither the primary language nor the preferred choice of many of the participants; however, they claimed to have an unwavering Hakka identity. This paper draws from studies on language maintenance and shifts in sociolinguistics fields and examined ethnic identity, which appears to be the counterforce affecting Hakka language loss. The conflicts between the Hakka language shift and Hakka identity maintenance are discussed.

Keywords: Hakka, Sabah, Sandakan, Language Maintenance and Language Shift, Ethnic Identity

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## 不說客家話可以成為客家人嗎？ 論沙巴客語流失和族群意識發展

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沙巴是馬來西亞十三州之一，據統計 2015 年沙巴總人口數為 3,543,500，華人佔人口總數百分之 8.7。1920 至 1960 年，大批華人移民至沙巴，其中三分之一居住在兩大城市：山打根和哥打基納巴魯（舊稱亞庇）。沙巴的華人社區由五大語族組成：客家、廣東、福建、潮州和海南，各自發展其特色行業並與在地文化融合。自 1920 年以來，客家人一直是沙巴華人中最大的族群，客家話也成為沙巴華人社區的通用語。即使環境惡劣，客家人仍視沙巴為家園，客家移民以農業為生並善待土地。

本研究呈現老、中、青三代共 52 位受訪人的語言使用情形，運用社會語言學和民族語言學理論討論客語流失和客家意識兩者存在的衝突。

關鍵詞：客家、沙巴、山打根、語言維持和語言轉移、族群意識

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## Introduction

Sabah is located on the north of Borneo Island, one of thirteen states of Malaysia where there is a significant Chinese Malaysian population. At the beginning of the 1920s, the Chinese immigrants in Sabah numbered about 30,000, making up one-fifth of the territory's population (Wong 2005). According to previous Chinese immigrant research, most immigration to Sabah was from China or Hong Kong. Migrants came either to settle down with relatives or work for a labour force. The Chinese population in Sabah grew from 39,256 in 1921 to 104,542 in 1960, the percentage of the total population increasing by 8% (from 15% to 23%) during the first forty years (Jones 2007; Lee 1965). Hakkas have become the majority group in Sabah since the 1950s, the data show that the Hakka population in 1951 and 1960 made up 59.9% and 54.8% of the Chinese community respectively in Sabah (Lee, 1965). Hakka language was the lingua franca in Chinese communities. In 1991, the five major Chinese ethnic groups in Sabah were Hakka (57.0%), Cantonese (14.4%), Hokkien (13.2%), Teochew (5.2%) and Hainanese (3.4%). The various Chinese associations attempted to maintain the language, cultures and ceremonies; they also provided welfare services to their members.

Table 1 Percentages of Chinese population in Sabah 1921-1960

| Year                  | 1921  | 1931  | 1951  | 1960  |
|-----------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Chinese speech groups |       |       |       |       |
| Hakka                 | 46.2% | 54.8% | 59.9% | 54.8% |
| Cantonese             | 31.3% | 25.6% | 16.0% | 14.6% |
| Hokkien               | 10.2% | 9.3%  | 9.8%  | 11.4% |
| Teochew               | 6.3%  | 5.0%  | 5.3%  | 5.7%  |
| Hailam                | 3.3%  | 3.2%  | 4.8%  | 5.0%  |
| Other Chinese         | 2.7%  | 2.1%  | 4.2%  | 8.5%  |
| All groups            | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |

Source: Han (1971)

Since Malaysia's independence from Britain in 1963, the emergence of Malaysian nationalism has caused Chinese Malaysians to question their sense of belonging. Affected by mass media and other networks, the current linguistic issues amongst Chinese Malaysians are code-switching and lexicon borrowing. Speech is being enriched by thousands of loan words and with each passing generation more traditional words are lost. Wang (2010) predicted that Chinese ethnic languages in Malaysia are declining and will finally disappear, while Mandarin is now the most common language in Malaysian Chinese communities. Mandarin will become the only Chinese language used by Chinese Malaysians; speaking Mandarin is the symbol of Chinese identity. Hakka and Hokkien are at a medium level of language maintenance: they are still alive in the home domain but the situation is not optimistic. Hakka and Hokkien in Kuala Lumpur are under threat; both languages will go the way of other minor languages in the near future (Wang and Chong 2011). In terms of Sabah, Hakka is the majority group, so it should have better conditions to survive. However, lack of language revitalisation plans and organised courses in

Malaysian Chinese communities is one of the significant factors to deplete the Chinese languages (Sim 2012). Although the awareness of Hakka identities is increasing in southeast Asia (Hsiao and Lim 2007), there is little detailed planning, such as no cultural or language maintenance strategies.

According to my experiences in Sabah, the Chinese clan Associations (Hokkien Associations, Hakka Associations and other Chinese associations) spare no pains and efforts to preserve conventional cultures and languages. Fifteen Hakka Associations in Sabah are well-organised and they play important roles in the social and political status in Chinese communities. The well operated Sandakan Hakka Association serves as a mental and physical shelter. On one hand, through the regular interaction among members, the involvement with social support creates friendships. On the other hand, members of the Sandakan Hakka Association are allowed to share welfare, such as scholarships and seniors' grants. Up to 2015, there were 5711 members of the Sandakan Hakka Association, the active organisation which has played a leading role in all Chinese communities in Sabah. The success of the Sandakan Hakka Association makes thousands of members highly value their culture and language, and enhances the reputation of Hakka identity.

With the considerations of language behaviour changes in Hakka communities in Sabah, this study is informed by two major levels of sociolinguistic inquiry. First of all, Hakka participants' language choices are expected to provide patterns of language shift among three generations. Secondly, according to the participants' language behaviours, the factors of language change are described and the ethnic identity should be discussed.

## **Sandakan**

Sandakan is the former capital city of British North Borneo. Sandakan Harbour is located on the east coast of Borneo Island: it used to be one of the busiest ports of Borneo for trading and transportation. The earliest Chinese immigrants who arrived in Sandakan around 1860 were Taiping Rebellion followers; they were the first of the Chinese immigration in Sabah. It was twenty years before the first Chinese labourers were introduced by the Chartered Company in 1881 (Niew 1993). Sandakan was chosen to be the field site in this research for historical and practical reasons. Sandakan has a good location for earlier immigrants before the Second World War. Furthermore, as the former capital city, Sandakan offered Chinese traders a business network platform. Sandakan is the second biggest city in Sabah now; it has not been well-developed like Kota Kinabalu (the capital city of Sabah) nor interfered with by other languages. Sandakan preserves a rich Chinese culture and Chinese population for data collection.

Sandakan is called 'little Hong Kong' due to the flourishing business along the port and the lighting of the sails are an image of Hong Kong. Although Lee and Tan (2000) pointed out that Sandakan is a Cantonese speaking city, I believe that the name of 'little Hong Kong' comes from the trade between Sandakan and South of China and Hong Kong; and many Chinese immigrated to Sandakan through Hong Kong as Hong Kong was a major port of the south of China. There is little evidence to show that Cantonese speakers were the majority of Sandakan. Instead, it was confirmed that the Hakka population contributed more than half of the Chinese population in Sabah.

As a capital city, Sandakan should comprise the great number of Hakkas. The name of ‘little Hong Kong’ is because most of Sandakan’s business was operated by Cantonese speakers and it has made other Chinese groups speak Cantonese. Cantonese has become a superior and more common language and overshadowed the Hakkas.

## **Research Methodology**

This research focused on Hakkas’ language choices and explored their understandings, attitudes and identity construction. Sociolinguistic and ethnolinguistic methods are the theoretical framework for this research. Sociolinguistic researchers seek the possible relationships between language and the society. In multicultural communities, the ethnic identity and the socio-economic competition among each ethnic groups are often involved. The theory of ethnolinguistic identity in this research supports the exploration of a wide variety of factors of Hakka language use in Sabah.

### **Data Collection**

The Sandakan Hakka Association is the largest Chinese association in Sandakan, with 131 years’ history and almost 6000 members. I had initial contact with the Sandakan Hakka Association in 2014 before visiting Sabah. They accepted my invitation and welcomed me to undertake my research. Linguistics, anthropology, ethnography of communication and sociolinguistics offer various methods to guide participant-observers in identifying from

whom, what and how to collect data in order to ensure well-rounded ethnographic understanding. As a researcher and as a participant in community activities I take both “-emic” and “-etic” positions and perspectives in the research. Well-constructed sociolinguistic research using interviews begins with informed questioning and includes expert interpretation from an insider perspective and local meanings (Schilling 2013). For each site of language use and social engagement, I have included a description based on my fieldwork observation. Fifty-two participants were interviewed in 2015 in Sandakan, Sabah. Participants were divided into three groups: older generation (Group A), middle-aged generation (Group B) and younger generation (Group C).

### **Questionnaire and the Semi-structured Interviews**

A questionnaire has been added in my data collection fieldwork. This research is a qualitative case study, the prepared questions can avoid over sensitive questions and bring out participants’ statements.

My questionnaire had four sections. The first section of the questionnaire elicited participants’ backgrounds and the languages they are able to speak. The next section asked about their self-perceived level of proficiency in speaking, reading and writing languages. Based on the research of Gal (1979) in Oberwart, Austria and the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) scale<sup>1</sup>, the knowledge of languages is on a scale of one to five. In this questionnaire,

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<sup>1</sup> The Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) scale is a standard grading scale for language proficiency in the United States Federal-level service. Language proficiency is on the scale of 0-5, it can also be 0+, 1+, 2+, 3+, or 4+, 11 possible grades in total. I designed my scale by modifying ILR and the method of Gal (1979). There are five levels of language proficiency in this research.



the participants were required to self-rate their proficiency in each language at five levels, from one, meaning weak, to five, showing excellent in languages. The third section of the questionnaire is domains which help us to understand participants' language choice and topic. Five domains proposed by Fishman (1972) were involved in the questionnaire in this study: family, friendship, religion, education and employment. The participants responded with the language choice in each domain. The last part of the questionnaire was an open discussion: there were seven questions which were asked by the researcher and the participants could talk freely.

The interview questions covered a range of topics:

1. Background: Birthplace, education, parents' birthplace, places lived for more than one year
2. Languages (to people): Languages spoken to family members, friends, non-Hakka friends, colleagues, teachers, neighbours
3. Languages (in places): Languages spoken at home, in religious domains, workplaces, school, traditional market, department store
4. Other questions: The dominant language, the feeling about using a specific language, the importance of being and speaking Hakka

## **Language for Interviews**

I expected to speak Hakka during my fieldwork in Sabah. I planned to interview my participants in Hakka, but it did not work out that way. Although all participants were familiar with my Taiwanese Hakka background, they chose Mandarin to speak to me. One reason given was that most Hakka

people I met in Malaysia claimed that my Hakka speech was very different from theirs and they found it challenging to communicate in Hakka. Although I could understand around 90 per cent of their speech and tried to use a more local accent, they still preferred Mandarin. They also believed that Mandarin is a 'civilised' language and a researcher like me deserved great respect. After I had stayed in Sabah for four months, the local people, including my participants and other residents, treated me like a member of the community. Most Hakkas continued to feel awkward speaking Hakka to me while some of them started to add more Hakka phrases in our conversations. Language attitudes among my participants will be presented in the latter section.

My first participant was B1 who was not able to speak Hakka; instead she chose to speak Mandarin. I had more than 60 interviews but 52 questionnaires were collected; in most of which the conversations were in Mandarin. My participants claimed that they felt more comfortable speaking Mandarin to me. For them, speaking Mandarin showed their respect to a researcher. Although those participants spoke mainly Mandarin during the interviews, they naturally switched among Hakka, Cantonese and Mandarin at some points. There were a few interviews that were undertaken in Hakka and English; A7 stressed his Hakka identity by speaking Hakka and C10, C11 and C16 had limited Mandarin proficiencies.

## **Participants**

This study began in March, 2015 and was undertaken by one researcher. Fifty-two qualified participants including 30 males and 22 females were inter-

viewed: seven were from the older generation (age 50 or over age 50), twenty-one were middle-aged (31 to 50) and twenty-four were younger (age 10 or age 10 to 30). Table 2 below shows the participants' background. Group A is the oldest Hakka generation, Group B is the middle-aged Hakkas and Group C is the youngest generation.

Table 2 The background of participants

| Number | Age | Gender | Number | Age | Gender |
|--------|-----|--------|--------|-----|--------|
| A1     | 76  | F      | C1     | 14  | F      |
| A2     | 58  | F      | C2     | 16  | M      |
| A3     | 64  | F      | C3     | 24  | F      |
| A4     | 88  | F      | C4     | 23  | M      |
| A5     | 71  | F      | C5     | 21  | M      |
| A6     | 63  | M      | C6     | 16  | F      |
| A7     | 67  | M      | C7     | 15  | F      |
| B1     | 49  | F      | C8     | 29  | M      |
| B2     | 45  | M      | C9     | 28  | M      |
| B3     | 40  | M      | C10    | 11  | F      |
| B4     | 41  | M      | C11    | 11  | F      |
| B5     | 35  | F      | C12    | 10  | M      |
| B6     | 40  | M      | C13    | 23  | F      |
| B7     | 35  | M      | C14    | 23  | M      |
| B8     | 48  | F      | C15    | 17  | M      |
| B9     | 30  | M      | C16    | 26  | M      |
| B10    | 30  | F      | C17    | 29  | M      |
| B11    | 32  | M      | C18    | 23  | M      |
| B12    | 43  | M      | C19    | 24  | M      |
| B13    | 39  | F      | C20    | 19  | F      |
| B14    | 41  | M      | C21    | 19  | M      |
| B15    | 43  | M      | C22    | 23  | F      |
| B16    | 31  | M      | C23    | 17  | M      |
| B17    | 34  | M      | C24    | 13  | F      |
| B18    | 36  | M      |        |     |        |
| B19    | 34  | F      |        |     |        |
| B20    | 42  | M      |        |     |        |
| B21    | 42  | F      |        |     |        |

Source: Data collected by researcher in Sandakan, Sabah 2015

## **Language Shift in Sabah**

Language maintenance and language shift are concepts to explain how a language gradually replaces another as the dominant language in a community. The definition of language maintenance and language shift are based on the general principles. Language shift is understood as some demonstrable change which has occurred in the pattern of habitual use (Fishman 1972). The definition of language shift by Winford (2008) was “the partial or total abandonment of a group’s native language in favour of another.” Once the language is no longer used by members of a group, although it was the medium for communication, thus, the language shift has been completed. Another definition of language shift is that “ if a language contact situation results in one or more languages being abandoned by speakers, the terms ‘language shift’ ‘language loss’ ‘language obsolescence’ and ‘language death’ can be applied (Pauwels, 2016, p. 18). Potowski (2013) emphasised the ‘replacement’, when a language is replaced by another as the primary means of communication or socialisation within in a community, language shift is a possibility. The studies of language shift are focusing on a language which is not being used by a group for various reasons, and another language is preferred.

In groups A and B (aged 31 to 88), 26 of 28 participants claimed that Hakka is either their first language or one of their first languages. Speaking Hakka as the first language means those participants have been exposed to a Hakka environment from birth. Participants who grew up during the 1930s to 1980s are now in Groups A and B. Their report of first language proved that

Hakka was the choice in most Chinese families and Hakka was the dominant language in Sandakan.

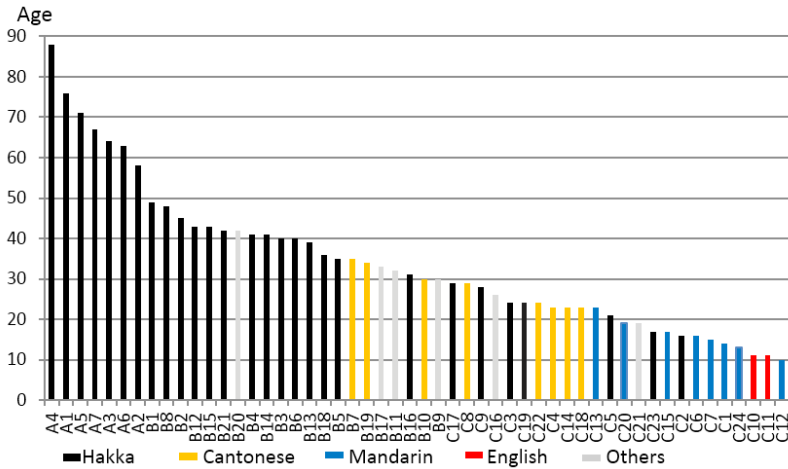


Figure 1. The dominant language of participants

Source: Data collected by researcher in Sandakan, Sabah, 2015

Figure 1 shows 52 participants' dominant languages by their ages. The black bars show participants who preferred and were more confident in speaking Hakka. Yellow bars are Cantonese, blues are Mandarin, reds are English and grey are others. This figure demonstrates the language choices among Hakka generations: black indicates that Hakka is a preferred language by old and middle-aged Hakkas. Cantonese appears to be chosen by participants who are aged between 20 and 40; Cantonese is indeed the most popular language used by middle-aged Hakkas. Compared with Hakka and Cantonese, Man-

darin and English are ‘young’ languages. Participants who are dominated by Mandarin and English are much younger. The blue and red bars in Figure 1 are lower and similar. The youngest Hakka generation has selected or is being affected by external factors to speak more Mandarin or English that makes them identify themselves as Hakka-Mandarin or Hakka-English speakers.

## **Language Attitudes**

Given the fact that a language is the vehicle through which individuals encode their speech, it becomes intimately connected to a sense of belonging. The way of people’s speaking and their language choice reflect levels of individual cognition and lead to certain behaviours. Language choice shows peoples’ preferences for speaking and language attitudes represent thoughts and emotions. Attitudes towards language require observation of both an individual’s internal mental state and the effects of the social experience on them.

Language attitudes can be loosely divided into positive and negative. Positive feelings refer to a language which is often encouraged by the role it plays as a marker of a desired group. Negative language attitudes mean having rejected identity (Saville-Troike 2003). Chinese Malaysians are used to switching languages when they are involved in any conversation. Their language use patterns reflect the conscious choice among languages. Most of my participants have clear attitudes toward each language, including any of the Chinese languages, Bahasa Malaysia and English.

Most participants in this research could identify their dominant language and describe the experiences of using languages while a few participants were struggling with selecting the preferred/ first/ dominant language because of their multilingual skills. Feelings about a language are not easy to assess, and language attitude is not a dichotomy of positive or negative thoughts. For example, Hakka language in Sandakan is used daily by participants who are over age 20. They claimed that Hakka language should be preserved and passed down to following generations, but some of them as parents did not take such actions in life. Data show positive language attitudes are not always followed by support; the not passing down situation does not mean they had negative attitudes to Hakka. Giving attitudes to languages should consider the external perspectives such as social networks, children's education, politics and the internal perspectives like identity.

### **Mandarin is Elegant, Hakka is Rude**

During the interviews of my fieldwork, my participants often described languages with four terms. The four terms were “elegant” (斯文), “rude” (粗魯), “polite” (有禮貌) and “common”(通用). All participants showed positive attitudes toward Mandarin; they confirmed that Mandarin is a language used for education and for a formal occasion. They chose elegant and polite to express their feeling about Mandarin. In contrast, Hakka was felt to be rude but friendly.

我跟我朋友打球，我們男孩子都講客家話，感覺 ... 比較親。  
可是女生喜歡講華語，我常聽他們講華語，我就跟他們講華  
語。(C2)

[My friend and I speak Hakka. We boys play basketball, Hakka  
makes me feel closer to them like a team. Girls, they prefer speak-  
ing Mandarin. I have noticed that they always speak Mandarin. I  
speak Mandarin when I need to talk to girls.]

我平時大多講廣東話，但我跟我女朋友講華語，華語比較斯文  
浪漫，客家話怎麼講我愛你嘛，我愛你 (in Hakka) ? 不好聽嘛！  
(C14)

[I usually speak Cantonese in my life, but I use Mandarin to talk  
to my girlfriend. Mandarin is more polite and romantic. How can  
we say” I love you” in Hakka? Ngai Oy Ngi? It’s vulgar, it doesn’t  
sound right!]

Speaking Mandarin is mostly at schools where Hakka is not acceptable  
or Mandarin is used in some formal occasions in Chinese communities. The  
function of Mandarin is conveying knowledge or talking to people who are  
highly educated. Therefore, Mandarin has been labelled as an elegant and  
polite language by my Hakka participants. Hakka language is opposite to the  
elegant label, it is rude and impolite. Because Mandarin is being seen as an  
elegant language, some male participants described their female friends as



preferring Mandarin, thus they chose Mandarin to speak to ladies. As quoted earlier participant C2 likes speaking Hakka due to its friendliness and cheekiness, which makes him more popular. When boys play sport they always speak Hakka; he believed that the way of speaking this language showed his manhood. Interestingly, many participants showed gender stereotype in languages. They thought that Hakka language is rude, speaking Hakka represented masculinity; and Mandarin is a female's language. This also proved that Mandarin is the chosen language in the interviews in this research.

C14 was not the only young male participant who chose non-Hakka language to speak to his girlfriend. C9, C19, C21, B9 and B7 all have Hakka speaker girlfriends (or wives), but they all chose Mandarin or Cantonese to communicate. The reasons for this choice were all similar, Hakka was too rude to be spoken in a romantic relationship. As the young Hakka couple decide not to use Hakka to communicate, continuing the situation of "difficult to change," it terminates Hakka language transmission.

## **Can one be Hakka without speaking Hakka?**

### **Hakka Identity**

Hakka identity has been the most important factor for maintaining Hakka culture since large waves of Hakka people immigrated to Sabah in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Hakka identity demonstrates a wider perspective which involves a group of people with positive Hakka consciousness and creates the sense of

belonging internally. Externally, Hakka identity represents the pride of Hakka culture, language and the great influence in the Chinese community. The ethnic group identification of minority groups may be viewed as part of the development of the group; it can also lead to separatism and conflicts (Verkuyten 2005).

There had been many Hakka Associations in capital cities of Malaysia before Malaysia's independence. The Federation of Hakka Associations of Malaysia was founded in 1978 for stronger Hakka cohesion. The significant purposes of founding Hakka Associations are welfare and culture maintenance, thus, the 78 Hakka Associations scattered in Malaysia are the products of Hakka consciousness and Hakka identity. The rapidly growing number of members and the well operated associations during these two decades proved that Hakka identity in Malaysia was becoming mature.

In Malaysia, each Chinese group and its clan-associations represent the various socioeconomic statuses and their ideologies set them apart from each other. Many of my participants often compared themselves with other Chinese Malaysians, talking about contests in business or social status in Chinese communities in Sabah or in Malaysia. When the conversations involved the competitions among groups, the Chinese ethnicity would be emphasised.

以前坡上那裏都是香港人的天下，所以那裏都講廣東話，我們客家人就做山芭，被人家看不起，現在坡那裏也沒有了，客家人種油棕開始賺錢，他們就知道 ... (B2)

[The business near the port was operated by Chinese from Hong Kong, it was all Cantonese speech around the area. This made Hakkas start agriculture. People looked down on Hakkas. Nowadays, the port has been replaced, it was not flourishing anymore. We Hakkas turn palm oil to fortune, they are jealous ...]

所以我們客家人要團結，不要讓福建人在馬來西亞贏完！(B9)

[We Hakka must unite to beat Hokkiens]

From the data collected in 2015, I have confirmed that Hakka identity in Sandakan is solid and stable, especially in Hakka associations in each Hakka community of Sabah that are well organised and often hold the dominant influence in local Chinese communities. Fifteen Hakka associations (2016 updated) in Sabah have contributed the most important positive effect on maintaining Hakka identity. My participants included both members of the Sandakan Hakka Association and non-members, according to my interviews. Except for a few young Hakkas, most participants stressed their Hakka identity and showed their pride in being Hakka. However, the solid ethnic identity does not apply to their language behaviour. Many of the middle-aged Hakka were not willing to pass down Hakka language when posed questions about parenting or being asked opinions for Hakka cultural preservation. These participants felt the threat to Hakka language in the last years; they could tell that the power of globalisation is decreasing the use of Hakka language. They rather believed that with Hakka identity, Hakka language will not be replaced.

This attitude offers a view of Hakka cultural maintenance that the value of Hakka identity is the core principle, and the Hakka language is additional to assist the cultural maintenance. Other findings in this research indicate that speaking Hakka is not always followed by a strong sense of Hakka identity. Some young Hakka participants claimed that they speak Hakka because of their family; speaking Hakka is not their choice, but is considered as a directive from their parents. They are not convinced of keeping Hakka language while they usually passively identify themselves as Hakkas.

### **Hakka Identity in Three Hakka Generations**

Linguistic identity is not an inescapable fate imposed upon us but a social construct, a matter of choice (Coulmas 2013:173). Identity change is possible in an immigrant society; less and less sense of belonging to a group and gradual assimilation into the host country can be interpreted as the process of identity change.

Identity change can be found in the Sandakan Hakka community. The explanation of identity change is adopting a new culture or the next generation being fostered in a new language speaking environment. The identity may not disappear completely but it becomes flexible and dynamic rather than inalterably given. The oldest Hakka participants in this research are the second or third generation of Hakka immigrants in Sabah for whom displaying Hakka identity is not required: their entire life is anchored with Hakka. The middle-aged participants grew up speaking Bahasa Malaysia and other

Chinese languages (mainly Cantonese and Mandarin); their linguistic identity is variable and their Hakka ethnic identity depends on their own conceptions. The middle-aged participants' Hakka identity would be stressed when it comes to ethnic relationships. Identity is difficult to estimate; it requires description through observation. This research found that the youngest participants were the weakest in Hakka identity, not only because of their lower language proficiency in Hakka but also due to less interest in knowing Hakka. The change of Hakka identity in three generations can be argued as the cause and the result of Hakka language shift.

我沒問過我家人我們是不是客家人，不過他們都講客家話我想我們大概是吧，反正都可以。(C21)

[I never ask my family whether we are Hakka or not. They all speak Hakka, I guess so. It's OK anyway.]

我覺得隨便，反正我都講華語，跟朋友也是講華語，我也不會去問：你是不是客家人。(C20)

[I don't mind at all (given the question about feeling about Hakka). I always speak Mandarin, I speak Mandarin to friends too. I would never ask my friend: Are you a Hakka?]

Most of my participants from Group C had little understanding about language and Hakka identity, especially participants in high school, who felt

awkward about asking their friends' ethnicity. Their Hakka identities were given and dictated by their family, which they accepted. They are used to speaking Mandarin in most conversations, and have adopted the 'New Chinese Malaysian identity', which includes Malaysianness, the national identity and the greater Chinese identity. The Chinese sub-group identity is no longer the essential part to determine the sense of self in this generation.

Two of the seven participants in Group A are members of the Sandakan Hakka Association, who would put emphasis on the importance of maintaining Hakka culture. Other participants A1, A2, A4 and A5 described themselves as Hakka monolingual although they had limited proficiency in speaking Cantonese, Mandarin and Bahasa Malaysia; their responses show their single, simple but firm Hakka identity. For this generation, Hakka is nothing but life. The identity difference between Groups A and C is that the old Hakkas live in Hakka while the younger are told about Hakka. For Chinese Malaysians, the linguistic identity seems like coming from language proficiency; such as monolingual old and young Hakkas appear to have different identities. Alternatively, it can also be explained that language proficiency determines language identity; young Hakkas prefer Mandarin which leads to weak Hakka identity.

The middle-aged Hakkas had stronger but more complicated Hakka identity compared with the other two generations. Middle-aged Hakkas also showed positive motives, attitudes, perspective and ethnic group loyalty. The factors were influenced by their social experience. Most participants in

Group B were either running their own business or employed. In Sandakan, agriculture is still occupied by Hakka people and growing palm trees is one of the biggest industries in Sabah. Palm oil production contributes greatly to the Malaysian economy. Many local businesses rely on the palm oil industry, while it is an unwritten rule in Chinese Malaysian communities that members of a group prefer to recruit their own people. The success of the palm oil economics make Sabah Hakkas highly value their culture and language, and enhances the reputation of Hakka identity. Hakka identity can provide this function and it also helps to maintain the social network. Although many Hakkas claimed that speaking Cantonese promoted sociability and communal activity, none of them abandoned Hakka language. Instead, all participants of Group B are maintaining Hakka proficiency at the most fluent level.

## Discussion

The emergence of Mandarin is one of the significant factors of the Hakka language shift. When Mandarin was promoted as the national language in China in the 1920s, Chinese schools in Malaysia also changed their teaching medium from various Chinese languages to Mandarin. Mandarin as an educational language caused Chinese heritage languages to lose their importance in the education domain, and generally dominated more domains of Chinese communities (Wang and Chong 2011).

My data showed that participants who were over age 30 spoke fluent

Hakka and preserved firm Hakka identities. Although the younger Hakka generation favoured Mandarin rather than other languages, Hakka language was well-maintained until the current decade. The pressure coming from societal norms caused diglossia which raised Mandarin as a polite and elegant language and other Chinese ethnic languages are becoming valueless.

In this research, the majority of participants went to Chinese schools where they acquired Mandarin and recognised Mandarin as a formal language. Speaking non-Mandarin Chinese languages in Chinese schools was not encouraged, the policy started to influence students that, excepting Mandarin, Cantonese, Hakka or Hokkien were not appreciated. Hakka and Hokkien faded out; the emergence of Mandarin was upgraded to education language. Mandarin represents knowledge, intelligence and high socioeconomic status. Assisting children to gain a higher degree is seen as good parenting in Chinese culture. Figure 1 proved that Mandarin is preferred in Group C. When language is reduced in its use in domains or a language is gradually replaced by another dominant language, language shift occurs. The Hakka community is undergoing the process of Hakka language shift.

During the interviews, many young participants expressed little enthusiasm for speaking Hakka language because they were not encouraged to use it. An existing example shows that some languages are losing their speakers because these languages are not being used in technological devices or mass media, which all relate to the young generation. Maori language speakers in New Zealand are experiencing language attrition, because many Maori speakers believed that their language was just not good enough to be taught and it



was not keeping up with the social changes (Harlow 1998). Although this has changed over the last decades, the past outstanding aligns with the belief of younger Hakkas in Sabah. For the young Hakka generation, Hakka language is neither the medium at school nor is it used by the majority. As mentioned in the introduction to language attitudes above, function and motivation of speaking Hakka language have left negative attitudes of young participants.

Although Hakka language is considered to be experiencing language shift in this research, members of a Hakka community emphasised their ideological position as the Hakka maintainers valued their roots, traditions and Hakkaness. Particularly, 30 to 50-year-old Hakka participants, their parents or grandparents came from China in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and had strong connections with their hometowns. As Hakka offspring overseas, they believed that returning to China to seek for their roots is a duty. Respecting and remembering the ancestors is part of Hakka culture; many of my male participants see returning to the hometown as one of the important milestones in life: they must do it and their sons have to comply with the traditions. They also believed that language was the only way to guide their descendants home. When Mandarin started to expand and occupy more and more domains in Malaysian Chinese communities, their linguistic identities are becoming slippery. Hakka people are fearful of losing their tradition and language but many of them have also adopted Mandarin at home. Their ambivalent identities and language practices develop the perspective of ‘be a Hakka without speaking Hakka’.

In terms of young Hakkas, some participants in this research were able to speak fluently or their Hakka proficiency was at level five (as native speakers) but their Hakka language proficiency is not preferred. In a Hakka community, being a Mandarin speaking Hakka is acceptable; it shows Hakka identity is given the priority of Hakkaness rather than Hakka languages.

## Conclusion

The importance of ethnolinguistic identity in the studies of language maintenance has been discussed. Language and ethnic identity are important symbols to each other but not the sole components. The increasing number of Mandarin speakers illustrates Hakka language abandonment. High ethnic identity loyalty is found in Sabah: instead of speaking Hakka, 'Chinese Malaysians' and 'Mandarin' are preferred in the modern Hakka communities. The 'Chinese Malaysian' identity seems a negotiable Hakka identity; it includes or it can be transferred to Hakka identity as Hakka is also a part of Chinese. In short, 'be Hakka without speaking Hakka' is applicable in the Hakka community in Sabah.

This research makes a modest contribution combining the fields of sociolinguistics and ethnolinguistics in Hakka. The findings support significant relevance between ethnic identity and language shift while they do not necessarily correlate with each other. Some evidence showed people hold ethnic identity to emotional connection with the ancestry or the history despite the loss of culture and language. By contrast, speaking a specific language does

not always prove the identity or express a sense of belonging; sometime it can be seen as a social skill.

Chinese Malaysians share a common historical experience and cultural codes, such as a written Chinese system, literature, Confucian philosophy and the calendar. Malaysian Hakkas are not easily recognisable by their appearance; in general, they are ‘Cina’ meaning Chinese in Bahasa Malaysia. The most distinguishing features of Malaysian Hakkas are their dominant occupation and the Hakka language. When the Hakka language is irreversibly lost, the cultural identity in Malaysian Chinese communities is expected to become homogeneous.

As Sabah is one of the overseas Hakka communities, this research hopes to enhance more understanding of Hakkas in the global dimension. Due to the long diasporic history, the particularly interesting development concerns the expansion of Hakka studies to cultural assimilation. In many cases, overseas Hakka immigrants encounter similar situations such as intermarriages, social networking, nationalism, or economical consideration and disconnect Hakka. The data from my research suggests that although a heritage language is facing various challenges, there may be some subjects to be considered to affect the patterns of language use.

The Sandakan Hakka Association is ambitious as are other Hakka Associations in Sabah. Thousands of members of the Sandakan Hakka Association prove that Hakka language and culture are of concern: this accords with the strong and positive ethnic identity whereby the firm Hakka identity maintains

Hakka language. The evidence in this research shows Hakka language shift is in progress: the future of Hakka language in Sabah seems like a gloomy one. According to the current situation, the Hakka language shift and ethnic identity maintenance are struggling with each other, which make Hakkas reconstruct their identities.

Since Hakkas have been settled in Sabah for a long time, the potential research may explore Hakka language itself. Conducting the comparative linguistic analysis in Hakka is a suggestion for the future research, as well as the language contact between Hakka and indigenous groups. Moreover, the internet language and other forms of computer-mediated communication should be considered. The data in this research also showed the media and technology devices are influential to young generations. The language preferences and ethnic identity can be directed to the predominant language in the society. My research is also limited in the aspects of language use on the social media. Including the consideration of language in technology, the studies of language practices will be more comprehensive. As Chinese Malaysians rely on kinship associations, politics is a great topic to look into Malaysian Chinese society. The research of politics leads to the development of language education; a setting of politics research allows to bring up the wider views of Chinese Malaysians' future.

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