Abstract

Penang, Malaysia consists of approximately 50% of Chinese population (Department of Statistics, 1995), all of those immigrants and descendants from the Southern China continents, whom ethnicity includes Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hakka, etc. For survival and success in the vibrant sociolinguistics background of Malay, English, Indian, Mandarin and various Chinese dialects, Teochew members have to pick up more than one language competency. Thus, code-switch phenomenon during daily conversation serves as a crucial threshold in determining language maintenance and language shift (hereafter LMLS) of Teochew dialect.

This paper examines the LMLS (Fishman, 2008) of Teochew dialect across three generations of Teochews in Penang Island through the examination of daily code-switch phenomenon. Data collected includes natural exchanges of conversations recorded in different contexts which include formal events e.g. clan meeting, business exchanges, and informal events e.g. conversation among family and friends. These exchanges are generation and context-sensitive, including ample incidents of code-switch which is used as the foundation in scrutinizing the LMLS.

Conversational analysis reveals that (a) first generation Teochews are basically monolingual or multilingual with excellent command of Teochew dialect, (b) second generation descendents are multilingual with considerable command of Teochew dialect, whilst (c) third generation descendents are multilingual with poor or zero command of Teochew dialect. At the same time, code-switch phenomenon increases across generations. Considering the relationship between code-switching and LMLS, the Teochew dialect in Penang Island is believed to be undergoing tempestuous language shift, especially among the third generation.

Factors leading to LMLS are also revised. An integrated model concerning the macro-societal and micro-interactional perspectives (Grimshaw, 1987) is applied. To document the macro-societal factors, social changes and language policies are reviewed. On the other hand, for micro-interactional reasoning, interviews are conducted to address issues like language choice, language attitude, metalinguistics knowledge and such. In addition, the interviews are recorded and the audios are used for conversational analysis purposes.
Statistics presents a combination of language policies and psycholinguistics factors in driving towards the language shift of Teochew dialect in Penang Island. If the Teochews were to shift their language to accommodate to the major Hokkien population, the shift would have happened since the 19th century, when Chinese immigrants started to pour into Penang Island. However, the shift is only obvious from the 1980s. Various language policies are believed to have shaped the mindset of the second generation, altering the language education to their youngs in order to better fit into the society and the global market at large.

Nonetheless, many third generation Teochews expressed their will to pick up the dialect in the near future. This can be seen as an optimistic omen to the language maintenance (Myers-Scotton, 2006) of Teochew dialect in Penang Island.