

REVITALIZING THE INDIGENOUS SEMAI ORANG ASLI LANGUAGE IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract

Much attention has been focused on the survival of indigenous language in recent years. Many experts on the area anticipate the demise of the majority of indigenous languages worldwide and have called on the need to address the loss of indigenous language. According to Reyhner, R (2007) many indigenous peoples of the world, lack what may be termed the *effective* right to save their languages and cultures i.e. access to the knowledge, strategies, and resources necessary to resist destruction of languages and cultures. This paper presents the findings of the initiatives made by the Semai Orang Asli community and the Ethnic Language Division, Curriculum Development Centre (CDC), Ministry of Education Malaysia in revitalizing the language through documentation and native language teaching in Semai schools throughout Malaysia. This is part of the proactive efforts made by the community by engaging themselves with relevant educational authority in safeguarding their language form endangerment.

Keywords: Aslian language, indigenous minority (Orang Asli), language revitalization.

1.0 Introduction

In the words of Rehyner (2007), language is irreplaceable cultural knowledge. It contains a significant part of the world's knowledge and wisdom. When a language is lost, much of the knowledge that language represents is also gone. According to Krauss (2007) there are approximately six thousand languages still spoken by mankind, between twenty and fifty percent of the 6,000 are no longer spoken by children or will no longer be spoken by children by the end of this century. Of the six thousand or so languages spoken on earth, three hundred to five hundred can still be considered "safe" i.e. will continue to be learned by children in the traditional way for the foreseeable future. This has prompted a need to stabilization, revival, and maintenance of minority indigenous languages worldwide.

2.0 Research Problem

According to Wazir Jahan Karim, (2001) many indigenous (Orang Asli) languages and cultural traditions in Malaysia are in danger of facing extinction. Some have suffered physical and cultural extinction (Blagden and Skeat (1966), Wazir Jahan Karim, (2001)) while others experienced demographic crisis and die out or disperse into smaller groups and finally assimilated with Malay or other Orang Asli communities. In the words of Wazir Jahan Karim (2001) cultural extinction refers to the total loss of a spoken language (language death) or practice of a particular culture while physical extinction has to do with the actual disappearance of a particular ethnic or sub-ethnic grouping in terms of numbers brought by genocide or physical assimilation into a more dominant group where the minority group losses its original source of ethnic reference or identity. Among the Orang Asli groups which suffer the fate of physical extinction include the Kenaboi of Gunung kenaboi and Sungai Ujong, a

mixed group of Semang-Senoic ancestry, the Labu of Sungai Ujong, the Udai (Semang-Pangan) sub-group occupying the Belum forest and Berembun of Gunung Berembun. Another group, the Sahimba of the South Jakun were reported to be captured by the Malays and brought into Johor from Batam. Some of the Orang Asli groups have undergone extensive cultural and religious assimilation with more dominant communities. The Kenaboi and Mantra of Negeri Sembilan have become islamised and over the centuries came to be known as Malay due to their assimilation with Temuan Malay community and lost their ethnic distinctiveness. During the interview with the Bateq of Sungai Berua, Terengganu, the author discovered that the Bateq at the Orang Asli resettlement area predominantly made up of the Semoq Beri community were rather reluctant to identify themselves as the Bateq. Many of them preferred to be identified as the Semoq Beri. Some who were married to the Semoq Beri had assimilated with the community and consequently abandoned their cultural and ethnic identity.

The situation is made worse due to the fact that many indigenous Orang Asli languages of Peninsular Malaysia are not documented and the problem has been highlighted by many scholars on Orang Asli studies in Malaysia (Wazir Jahan Karim (2001), Benjamin (1976, 2012) just to name a few). As part of safeguarding the indigenous minority languages from facing endangerment, efforts to revitalize the indigenous language have been undertaken on Semai language in Peninsular Malaysia.

3.0 Review of Relevant Literature

3.1 Language Revitalisation

Language revitalisation is a sociolinguistic term which also refers to as language revival. It is an attempt to reverse the decline of a language or to revive an extinct language. Language revitalisation programmes requires collaborative effort among community groups, linguists and various government agencies.

United Nations Draft Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 1993 states that:

Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons.

Fishman (1991) proposes a conceptual model for language vitality known as the Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS) which becomes a foundational model for assessing the status of language vitality. Following this, effort at language maintenance and language revitalization has doubled. Subsequent to the publication of Fishman's GIDS, other metrics for assessing the factors contributing to endangerment and vitality have been proposed (Brenzinger *et al.* 2003; Lewis 2008) and subsequent alternative approach to evaluation of endangerment developed by UNESCO in 2009 i.e. UNESCO Language Endangerment Framework which establishes six categories in a scale of language vitality. In addition, a variety of innovative approaches, including community-based language development and maintenance projects, have been implemented in an effort to stem the tide of language loss.

3.2 Background of Indigenous Minority Peoples (Orang Asli) in Malaysia

In Peninsular Malaysia, the indigenous minority peoples are commonly known as the Orang Asli. They make up about 10.5 percent of the total national population. The term 'Orang Asli' literally means the original or first peoples of the peninsular Malaysia. They are about 18 subgroups of Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia and they are broadly classified by the Malaysian Department of Orang Asli Progress (JAKOA) under three main groups. They are a) The Senoi b) The Aboriginal Malay (Proto-Malay) c) The Negrito.

¹ Data Maklumat Asas JEHOA (Now JAKOA) (2008)

The Senoic (Central Aslian) are the largest group of the Orang Asli. They make up about 30 per cent of the Orang Asli population (Statistics in 2008 (JHEOA, 2008). According to JAKOA's classification, the Senoic subgroups are mainly found along the the main range in Perak, Pahang and Kelantan (Semai, Temiar), in Central Pahang (Jah Hut, Che Wong), Coastal Selangor (Mah Mari) and South-central Pahang (Semoq Beri). Some of the subgroups are dependant on the forest for their living while the others have ventured into permanent agricultural activities (e.g. managing rubber, oil palm or cocoa farms) and in the wage sector (in skilled and unskilled even professional occupations)

Benjamins (2012) classifies Semai community as belong to Central Aslian (Senoic) group of Orang Asli. Diffloth (1984) suggests that the Aslian language of Peninsular Malaysia are most closely related to Mon, the classical inscriptional language of central of southern Thailand and Southern Burma. The Aslian languages including Semai have been influenced lexically and grammatically from various languages including Mon, Khmer, Thai and Malay. According to Benjamin (2012), the Central Aslian (Senoic) includes the Semai, Lanoh, Semnam, Sabum and Temiar. According to Grimes (1996), the Semai belongs to Astro-Asiatic, Mon-Khmer, Aslian, Senoic group.

Due to its large population, the Semai language has been acknowledged by the Ministry of Information as the main language for the Orang Asli Radio broadcasting programme which is aired by Radio Television Malaysia (RTM) Asyik FM, formerly known as Radio 7. It has also been chosen as the first indigenous i.e. Orang Asli language to be taught in schools in Peninsular Malaysia with predominantly Semai pupils. This is the result of the initiatives made by the Semai Orang Asli community and the Ethnic Language Division, Curriculum Development Centre (CDC), Ministry of Education Malaysia in revitalising the language through documentation and native language teaching in Semai schools throughout Malaysia.

4.0 Methods

The present study is based on the interview technique and fieldwork observation. Data were gathered from various sources including the Semai speakers, the teachers involved with Semai language teaching and officials at the Ethnic (Semai) and Foreign Language Unit, Curriculum Development Division (CDD), Ministry of Education, Malaysia (MoE). Statistics on Semai Language Revitalisation programme (teaching) and various teaching materials were obtained from the CDD, MoE. The author also conducted a fieldwork observation at one of a pioneer schools participated in the Semai teaching programme i.e. Sekolah Kebangsaan Kampung Senta, Bidor, Perak with the assistance of Alang Sabak, a former Semai high school Headmaster in Bidor town.

5.0 Data Analysis

The data obtained in the study were tabulated and presented in the forms of diagrams and tables and are presented as follows.

5.1. Early Efforts at Revitalizing the Indigenous Semai Orang Asli Language through Semai Language Teaching Programme in Peninsular Malaysia

The effort to revitalize and include Semai language as part of Ethnic Minority Education Programme was first made as a result of the initiative made between the representatives of the Semai population and the Ethnic Language Unit, Curriculum Development Division (CDD), Ministry of Education, Malaysia (MoE). The first meeting was held in 1996 by a special committee to decide the first Orang Asli language to be taught in Malaysian primary schools with a significant proportion of indigenous students. The Committee comprises of representatives from the Curriculum Development Centre, Ministry of Education Malaysia, Department of Orang Asli Affairs (JHEOA), Persatuan Orang Asli Semanjung Malaysia (POASM – the Association of Orang Asli in Peninsula Malaysia), Radio Television Malaysia (RTM 7, now known as Asyik FM), the Orang Asli Headmen (*Tok Batin*) and the Semai teachers. The consensus was reached and Semai language was chosen to be the first Orang Asli language to be taught in Primary schools in Peninsular Malaysia. The choice was made on the basis of the number of population in the community in relation to all the Orang Asli subgroups in Malaysia. Under the programme, the Semai language lessons are to be taught by trained teachers in addition to the teaching of Malay and English.

In 1998, The Central Curriculum Committee of the CDC had approved the implementation of Semai Language programme in the national curriculum. Following that, in 1998, six primary schools in the state of Perak participated in the pilot project for Level I (Year 3 & 4), while in 1999 six schools in the state of Perak participated in the pilot project for Level II (Year 5 & 6). The full implementation of the teaching of Semai language in Peninsula Malaysia began in 1999 beginning with the First Phase (Year 3 and 4) with the time allocation for the Semai language classes of 120 minutes per week with each period consisting of 30 minutes for four times a week

One of the most important aspects of language revitalization programme is the documentation of the language concerned. Since Semai had no written language, the committee made up of local Semai teachers and personnel from the Ethnic and Foreign Languages Unit, CDD had documented the language and developed a spelling system (orthography) based on the Roman letters in keeping with Malay which is the national language. The Semai spelling system is based on principles adopted in Malay phonetics and spelling rules. Due to some inconsistencies in the existing spelling system, an attempt was made by the Ministry of Education to standardize the orthography of the language involving the Curriculum Development Centre (CDC), Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) and the local Semai teachers.

The Semai language revitalization programme in the state of Perak has been very successful. It has been well received by the Semai Community in general. The number of schools participated in the programmed in 2001 was 10. Following the success in Perak, the programme was later extended to the state of Pahang the same year beginning with Level I (Year 3 & 4) while Level II (Year 5 & 6) was later introduced in 2002. In Pahang alone, there were 14 schools participating in Semai language Programme. Table 2 below summarizes the number of schools involved in the Teaching of Semai Language Programme in Peninsular Malaysia in 2001.

Table 2: The Teaching of Semai Language in Primary Schools in 2001 in Peninsular Malaysia
 (Source: CDC, Ministry of Education Malaysia (MoE))

	Perak	Pahang	Total
No of Schools Involved	10	14	24
No of Trained Teachers	18	23	41
No of Resource Teachers	15	4	19

(Source: CDC, Ministry of Education Malaysia (MoE))

The number of schools participated in Semai Language teaching programme in Peninsular Malaysia has increased up to 28 in 2013 - 2014 (15 in the state of Perak while the state of Pahang the total number of school participating in the programme remains 14 (Source: CDD, MoE, 2014)).

The efforts made by the Semai language Committee and support from CDC in chartering the way for Semai Language teaching is commendable especially considering the situation where before this project, Semai language had no substantial linguistic documentation, orthography system and dictionary! Furthermore, the team at CDD not only comprises of dedicated officers under the Ethnic Language Unit but also as a result of direct positive input from Semai community and the local teachers.

6.0 Conclusion

The teaching of Semai language provides the opportunity for the Semai children to interact and participate in a language programme that reflects their own language and cultural heritage. It is a good example of successful indigenous (Orang Asli) language revitalization programme in Malaysia. It is hoped that this success story would pace for more revitalization of other Orang Asli languages of Peninsular Malaysia. The Semai indigenous language revitalization programme provides a good starting point for a more comprehensive indigenous Orang Asli language revitalization programme in Malaysia. The progamme, other than safeguarding the native indigenous language from extinction, also helps to foster positive self-regards among Semai Orang Asli community towards themselves, their language as well as their cultural identity. This effort will also help develop, maintain and sustain the Semai language and cultural identity and consequently preserve the language from facing extinction.

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