

Formality and Informality Dimensions of Language Use by Chinese Speakers in Sarawak

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the influence of formality on language choice by Chinese speakers for the religious, transaction, education and employment domains. A survey was conducted on 300 Chinese speakers in Kuching, Sarawak (150 Foochow, 150 Hokkien). The participants were presented with at least one formal and one informal situation in the four selected domains and asked to indicate the main language used. The results showed that for the religious domain, formality does not influence the language choice, and the Chinese speakers spoke mainly Mandarin, some English and a little of either Hokkien or Foochow for informal discussions on the religious text, talking with the priest or monk, and praying. As for the transactions domain, the use of Bahasa Malaysia transcends the formality of interactions. The Chinese speakers rely on Mandarin and some Chinese vernacular languages when interacting in the market, food court, shops and when using public transport services but Mandarin usage lessens and there is a corresponding increase in English usage, indicating that English is associated with formality. In the education domain, interestingly it is Mandarin which is not influenced by formality dimensions but there is a clear pattern of decreasing use of Bahasa Malaysia and increasing use of English in more formal interactions involving teachers, as contrasted with general workers and administrative staff. In the employment domain, English is mainly used for meetings but in interactions with colleagues of the same hierarchical status, Mandarin and Bahasa Malaysia are main languages used with colleagues from the same and different ethnic groups. The study shows a functional differentiation of languages for the Chinese speakers on an incline of formality of domains of language use but it is only clear for English which is seen as a formal language. Mandarin and Bahasa Malaysia are unaffected by formality in some domains but in other domains they represent the less formal languages. The underlying factors for this disparity will be discussed.

Keywords: Formality, language use, language choice, Chinese, vernacular

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Formality dimensions of interactions are dependent on the situation, the status of the interactants and the purpose of the interaction. The formality continuum may range from serious meetings with high ranking officers to casual conversations with close friends. Appropriate language choices constitute workplace literacy because inappropriate choices lead to social *faux pas*. The paper examined the formality and informality of language use of Chinese speakers of Foochow and Hokkien in Kuching, Sarawak, specifically in the transactions, religion, education and employment domains. The language use of the Chinese speakers was examined by sub-group (Foochow and Hokkien) because their use of the vernacular language has been found to differ based on previous research (Puah & Ting, 2013).

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Certain domains of language use are characterised by particular languages, which gives rise to the notion of functional differentiation of languages, for example, the official language in the government domain and ethnic languages in the family domain. According to Fishman (1972), “domain is a sociocultural construct abstracted from topics of communication, relationship between communicators, and locales of communication, in accord with the institution, of a society and the area of activity of speech community in such a way that individual behaviour and social patterns can be distinguished from each other and yet related to each other” (p. 20). In other words, within domains, there are various situations which may call for the use of different languages, depending on the topic, interactants and specific location. These situational factors determine the ultimate formality of the situation, which in turn, influences language choice. Wardaugh (1992) stated that speakers apply formal and informal styles when speaking in different conditions. An example given by Holmes (2001) is that in a formal transaction in bank or ritual service in church, one’s language choice is influenced by the formality of the situation (p. 9). On the other hand, one might use colloquial or slang words in casual conversations with friends and family members (Joos, 1972).

In Malaysian setting, formality is usually attached to standard languages, like English, where it is used to communicate with those at higher hierarchical levels of organisations (Nair-Venugopal, 2000; Ting, 2007). Jacobson (2001) reported that code-switching between English and Bahasa Malaysia occurs during formal meetings in Malaysian universities although the meeting may start out in the national language to establish a framework for the language to use.

So far language use in domains has been seen as one-dimensional in that language use in the domains is treated as homogeneous. In reality, there are various situations of language use in a particular domain, for example, in a workplace, there are casual chit-chatting along the corridor or during tea-breaks in meetings, and small scale and large scale meetings involving different people which may influence language choice. By referring to Fishman (1972), it is clear that a study of language choice needs to take account of the different permutations of factors constituting the formality of a situation which eventually determines what the appropriate languages are, for instance, topic, relationship between interactants and locale. Given this, it is important to present situations on a continuum of formality for participants to respond to when studying language use in domains.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

A total of 300 participants, 150 Foochow and 150 Hokkien, were involved in this study. The selection criteria were: (1) the participants must be living in Kuching at the time of the study; (2) they must have at least one parent who is Foochow or Hokkien; and (3) they must be able to speak Mandarin and their own ethnic language. As this paper focused on the formality and informality dimensions of language use by Chinese speakers in Kuching, Sarawak, it is pertinent to know that the standard Chinese language is Mandarin, and literacy is usually acquired formally although spoken skills in Mandarin can be learnt through informal means. The participants’ age ranged from 20 to 69, and their monthly income was mostly in the RM1000-RM4999 range. See Table 1 for demographic details of the participants.

Table 1 Demographic details of Foochow and Hokkien participants

Categories		Foochow (n=150)	Hokkien (n=150)
Gender	Male	75	75
	Female	75	75
Age	20s	42	23
	30s	58	57
	40s	36	46
	50s	10	21
	60s	3	3
Socio-economic status	Below RM1000	18	8
	RM1000 – RM2999	42	33
	RM3000 – RM4999	77	85
	RM5000 – RM6999	7	19
	RM7000 and above	6	5

The data for this study were elicited using a questionnaire designed for a larger study on language use of Foochow and Hokkien speakers in Kuching. For this paper, the data came from questions on the participants' language use in four domains of language use: religion, transactions, education and employment. The domains were determined based on Platt and Weber (1980) who identified eight domains of language use in Malaysia and Singapore. The other domains not included in this study are family, friendship and neighbourhood because these involve non-work related interactions. In this study, we subsumed the legal domain under the transactions domain and used it to mark the highest end of formality. For the four selected domains, participants were asked to report the commonly used languages for formal and informal situations as follows:

- Religion – talking with church/temple friends, talking with the priest/monk, Bible/Sutra discussion, and praying
- Transactions – market, food court public transport, shop, bank, law
- Education – workers, administrative staff, teachers
- Employment – interactions with colleagues, interactions in meetings

In the listing of situations for the four domains above, the more informal interactions are placed at the beginning of the list and the more formal interactions are placed at the end of the list. In the questionnaire, open-ended questions were used to allow participants to write down the main language used for the informal and formal situations.

One limitation of the question on the religious domain is that some participants may not be either Christians or Buddhists, in which case they responded to the question hypothetically. Even so, their answers would indicate their notions of the appropriate language use for situations of varying formality in the religious setting.

For the data collection, the first researcher used her “social network” (Milroy, 1980) to enlist participants who fulfilled the selection criteria. The participants were asked to sign a consent form if they agreed to participate in this study. The questionnaires were responded either immediately or returned within one to two weeks. Out of the 320 questionnaire distributed, 300 (93.75%) were returned. In the analysis, the frequency of language use for each situation mentioned in the questionnaire was calculated and the results are presented next.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Language Use in Religion Domain

Table 2 shows the language use in the religious domains for communication with church or temple friends, priests or monks, Bible or Sutra discussion, and praying – on an incline of formality from informal to formal. In the religious place of worship, the interactants and the topic make a difference in the formality of the interactions. Other church or temple goers are on equal footing with the participants in the religious context but the religious teacher (whether priest or monk) has a higher status because of their religious knowledge, and therefore, interactions with church or temple friends are less formal than interactions with priests or monks. Discussions on religious matters and the religious text may be with other Christians or Buddhists or the religious teacher, and the topic of discussion is definitely more serious than casual talk with other church or temple goers. The most formal interaction is praying to God or Buddha for the Christians and Buddhists respectively. The results show that these conceptualisations of the formality of interactions in the religious setting are accurate, and are reflected in the patterns of language use.

Table 2 Language use in informal and formal situations in religious domain for Chinese speakers of Foochow and Hokkien

Languages used	Foochow participants				Hokkien participants			
	Talking with church/ temple friends	Talking with priest/ monk	Bible/ Sutra discussion	Praying	Talking with church/ temple friends	Talking with priest/ monk	Bible/ Sutra discussion	Praying
Mandarin	126	125	125	126	92	91	92	91
Foochow	13	8	1	2	0	0	0	0
Hokkien	1	0	0	0	27	16	10	17
Bahasa Malaysia	0	0	0	0	1	2	2	2
Bidayuh	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1
Iban	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1
English	30	24	27	27	44	42	43	43

Results show that both Foochow and Hokkien participants reported using Mandarin in the religious domain, regardless of with whom they talked (Table 2). The number of Foochow participants speaking Mandarin ranged from 125 to 126 while the number of Hokkien participants speaking Mandarin was slightly less (91-92). English was only used by a small group of Foochow (less than 20%) and Hokkien (less than 30%) participants, and there is not much difference for formal and informal situations. However, Foochow and Hokkien were more frequently used for informal interactions with friends in church or the temple. Foochow and Hokkien were used less frequently when the participants talked with the priest or monk, and even less for discussions of the religious text and prayers. The results show that formality does not influence the Chinese participants' use of Mandarin and English in the religious domain but Foochow and Hokkien are associated with informality.

One limitation of the study is that the participants were not asked to indicate their religion, and they might not be either Christian or Buddhist. When they answered the questions on language use in the religious domain, they might be doing so hypothetically. Even so, their responses would provide an indication of what they thought were appropriate languages to use in various situations in the religious domain, and this is reflective of societal norms in language choice.

Language Use in Transactions Domain

In this study, the transactions domains is divided into two categories: formal transactions which encompass bank and legal transactions; and informal transactions which include buy-and-sell transactions in shops, public transport services, such as taxi and bus, food courts, and markets (see Table 3). This categorisation is based on the complexity of the transactions and technicality of language, with the assumption that complex transactions involving technical language are seen as more formal.

Table 3 Language use in informal and formal situations in transactions domain for Chinese speakers of Foochow and Hokkien

Languages used	Foochow participants						Hokkien participants					
	Market	Food court	Public transport	Shop	Bank	Law	Market	Food court	Public transport	Shop	Bank	Law
Mandarin	139	137	114	137	82	80	99	97	102	101	79	69
Foochow	55	52	16	39	7	6	0	0	0	0	0	0
Hokkien	28	26	15	23	2	2	142	136	102	98	13	9
Hakka	5	5	1	3	0	0	17	14	11	13	0	0
Bahasa Malaysia	87	94	99	86	97	85	96	99	104	97	91	87
Bahasa Sarawak	1	1	1	1	0	0	2	3	5	3	1	1
Bidayuh	1	1	1	0	0	0	5	5	4	2	0	0
Iban	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	0
English	11	15	21	23	95	88	5	9	21	24	91	94

Table 3 shows that the number of participants reporting Bahasa Malaysia use is similar across the six sub-domains of transactions, showing that Bahasa Malaysia is not associated with formal or informal use. Both Foochow and Hokkien participants relied on Bahasa Malaysia and English in formal transactions. However, there seems to be an inverse relationship between the use of English and Chinese languages (Mandarin, Foochow and Hokkien). English was used more frequently in banking and legal transactions and less frequently in buy-and-sell transactions in shops, public transport services, food court and markets. Instead of English, the participants used Mandarin, Foochow and Hokkien. Note that Foochow is hardly used by the Hokkien participants because they may not be able to speak Foochow but the Foochow participants used both Foochow and Hokkien for conducting transactions. The results clearly show that English tends to be used for more formal transactions with bankers and lawyers and Chinese languages (Mandarin, Foochow and Hokkien) are more suited for transactions with providers of public transport and vendors in markets, food courts and shops but Bahasa Malaysia is free of formality associations in the context of the transactions domain. Mandarin is used for buy-and-sell transactions in all six sub-domains of transactions examined, showing that it is free of formality dimensions.

Language Use in Education Domain

In the education domain, the language use of Foochow and Hokkien participants with general workers, administrative staff and teachers were examined. Interactions with teachers are seen as more formal because of the higher status of teachers in the school; the status being partially derived from their higher qualification and position in the school compared to administrative staff and general workers.

Table 4 Language use in informal and formal situations in educations domain for Chinese speakers of Foochow and Hokkien

Languages used	Foochow participants			Hokkien participants		
	General workers	Administrative staff	Teachers	General workers	Administrative staff	Teachers
Mandarin	97	93	96	91	94	95
Foochow	5	5	1	0	0	0
Hokkien	2	1	1	60	46	1
Hakka	1	1	0	4	4	0
Bahasa Malaysia	125	114	105	126	113	101
Bahasa Sarawak	1	1	0	4	4	0
Bidayuh	1	1	0	3	3	0
Iban	1	1	0	1	1	0
English	15	35	87	21	41	89

A clear pattern is shown in Table 4 whereby Bahasa Malaysia and Mandarin are the main languages used in the education domain. The number of participants reporting use of Bahasa Malaysia and Mandarin is 101-126 and 91-97 respectively. The use of these two languages is not affected by the status of the interactants in the school. Although participants were not asked to whom they spoke Bahasa Malaysia and Mandarin, the results in the next section (Table 5) clearly shows that the Chinese participants spoke Bahasa Malaysia with non-Chinese and Mandarin with Chinese.

On the other hand, as shown in Table 4, more participants spoke English with teachers (87 Foochow and 89 Hokkien) than either with administrative staff (35 Foochow and 41 Hokkien) and general workers (15 Foochow and 21 Hokkien). The Foochow participants did not use Foochow much in the school setting but the Hokkien participants used progressively less Hokkien as they moved from general workers and administrative staff to teachers, showing that Hokkien is seen as a language more suited for informal interactions with people of lower status in the school setting.

Language Use in Employment Domain

In this study, the language use in employment domains comprises communication with colleagues and in meetings. Colleagues here refer to those at the same hierarchical level in the organisation so that status would not influence the language choice. The contrast is made with interactions in meetings which are naturally more formal than “casual” interactions involving work on a one-to-one basis in the workplace. As other studies on language choice in the workplace (Ting, 2002; Ting, 2007) have shown that language choice is influenced by ethnicity of the interactants, the participants in this study were asked to report the language used with colleagues of different ethnic groupings.

Results in Table 5 show that Bahasa Malaysia and English are the languages of meetings. Some participants reported using English outside of the meeting context (less than 54 for Foochow, less than 46 for Hokkien) but generally it can be concluded that English is hardly used in day-to-day interactions with colleagues at the same hierarchical level in the workplace. Instead it is Mandarin which dominates in interactions with Chinese colleagues, regardless of whether they are from the same Chinese sub-group (Foochow or Hokkien) or other Chinese sub-groups such as Hakka. Table 5 shows that some Foochow participants preferred to speak their own language to other Foochow colleagues and likewise for Hokkien participants.

Table 5 Language use in informal and formal situations in employment domain for Chinese speakers of Foochow and Hokkien

Languages used	Foochow participants					Hokkien participants				
	Colleague who is Hokkien	Colleague who is Foochow	Colleague who is other Chinese	Colleague who is non-Chinese	Meeting	Colleague who is Hokkien	Colleague who is Foochow	Colleague who is other Chinese	Colleague who is non-Chinese	Meeting
Mandarin	110	91	124	1	47	77	111	116	9	43
Foochow	0	54	0	0	1	0	2	0	0	0
Hokkien	25	0	0	0	0	115	10	14	3	1
Hakka	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	4	0	0
Bahasa Malaysia	0	0	0	105	36	3	8	7	105	30
Bahasa Sarawak	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	0
Bidayuh	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	0
Iban	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
English	20	12	20	54	85	40	43	46	72	92

When the results are compared across domains, the formality dimensions of some languages become apparent. Unlike other domains (religious, transactions and education) where Bahasa Malaysia usage is not affected by the formality of situations, in the employment domain, Bahasa Malaysia functions as a formal language for the Chinese participants. In their office, the Chinese participants confined the use of Bahasa Malaysia to meetings and interactions with non-Chinese colleagues although they may use Bahasa Malaysia extensively outside their workplace. Bahasa Malaysia is mainly used for interethnic communication in the transactions and education domains. Bahasa Malaysia did not surface much in the religious domain because the interactions are mainly with other members of the Chinese community since the participants are Chinese and the religious domain tends to be more ethnically homogeneous even for indigenous ethnic groups, thereby calling the shared ethnic language into use (see Ting, 2012; Ting & Ling, 2012). This study shows that Bahasa Malaysia is a language for interethnic communication and seems to be free of formality associations, but because it is more frequently used for meetings in the workplace, it has an edge of formality to it. This study did not delve into the nature of Bahasa Malaysia used in different domains but experience from living in Malaysia shows that a more colloquial form of Bahasa Malaysia is used when the interactions are not formal. It is also common for Malays to speak the regional varieties of Malay when interacting informally and to switch to the standard Malay language, Bahasa Malaysia, in meetings. However, as the Chinese participants in this study were mostly unable to speak Bahasa Sarawak – evident from the low frequencies in all the four domains studied – they relied on Bahasa Malaysia.

The comparison of language use patterns across domains show unequivocally that Mandarin is not associated with formality dimensions. The standard Chinese language can be used for both informal and formal situations in any domain, with interactants of any status – with some exception for meetings where Mandarin is still used but less frequently because Bahasa Malaysia and English are also used. In light of this, Mandarin levels out status differences.

Languages of Chinese sub-groups, Foochow and Hokkien in particular where this study is concerned, are definitely seen as informal languages. The Chinese participants of this study reserved them for more informal interactions in the religious domain (other church or temple friends), transactions domain (market, food court, public transport services, shops), education domain (general workers, administrative staff) and with other colleagues from the same ethnic group in the workplace. Foochow and Hokkien are clearly L (low) languages in the context of diglossia. The same applies to Hakka, the language of another Chinese sub-group but the frequencies are too low in this study for an extensive discussion in the results, mainly because most of the Foochow and Hokkien participants in this study were unable to speak Hakka and, therefore, could not use it in their daily lives. Although the frequencies are low for Iban and Bidayuh (Sarawak indigenous languages), they cluster with the languages of the Chinese sub-groups and tend to be used for informal interactions.

Along the same vein, in the context of diglossia, English is clearly a H (high) language because it is used for the more formal interactions in the transactions domain (with bankers and lawyers), education domain (with teachers) and in meetings in the employment domain. In the employment domain, English is also used more frequently with non-Chinese colleagues but this is a language choice made based on ethnicity rather than formality associations of English. The exception is the religious domain where English has a minimal role and is not clearly associated with either more formal or informal interactions.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The study on language use by Chinese speakers in Kuching, Sarawak in religious, transactions, education and employment domains showed that English is for formal use and ethnic languages of the Chinese sub-groups (Foochow and Hokkien) are for informal use. However, Mandarin, the standard Chinese language, levels out status differences and can be used for both formal and informal use, mainly with other Chinese speakers. Bahasa Malaysia, the national and official language, is also somewhat free of formality associations and functions mainly as a shared language for interethnic communication with the non-Chinese (see also Evans, 2010; Ting, 2007). Unlike Mandarin, Bahasa Malaysia tends to be used in meetings and as a result it has a formality edge to it. The formal use of Bahasa Malaysia arises from its official language status, whereby the Malaysian constitution specifies that it has to be used for communication on governmental business. Mandarin and Bahasa Malaysia seems to be unaffected by formality in some domains but in other domains they represent the less formal languages because Mandarin functions as the shared language for communication within the Chinese community and Bahasa Malaysia functions as the shared language for interethnic communication with the non-Chinese community. Where these two languages are concerned, ethnicity considerations override formality dimensions in language choice. Based on this study, the most formal language is English, which is the main language for conducting banking and legal transactions, interacting with teachers and in meetings. English is not the ethnic language of a particular ethnic group, and it is often learnt formally, which is probably why the language is seen as more suitable for formal use. The study also shows that language choice in certain domains is free of formality considerations. In the religious domain which is more ethnically homogenous, it is the shared Chinese language which governs the language choice rather than formality considerations. However, formality considerations in language choice are very important in transactions, education and employment domains because the complexity of subject matter (banking and legal matters versus buying of products) and status of interactants (teacher versus general worker) and purpose of interaction (meeting versus casual work interactions). This study indicates that many factors intersect to determine the formality of situations, and a study of the permutations of these factors may contribute towards an understanding of the overall formality index of situations within domains of language use.

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