

The Iban of Sarawak, Malaysia: Ethnic Language Losing Ground to English and Sarawak Malay¹

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Date Received: 14 September 2021 Revised: 3 November 2021 Accepted: 8 November 2021

Abstract

Language use by the Iban people in Sarawak, Malaysia, was studied and the focus was on the following specific objectives: (a) to describe the language use patterns of the Iban people in Iban dominant and non-Iban dominant areas in nine domains and (b) to identify the stable domains of language use for the Iban language. The data were from 84 Iban respondents, elicited using a questionnaire designed based on the UNESCO framework. The percentage of Iban usage was higher in Iban-dominant areas (30%–70%) than in non-Iban dominant areas (10%–60%). The results revealed that there was intergenerational language transmission but English was encroaching into family communications involving spouse and children. Furthermore, the usage of Iban was dwindling outside the family domain. In particular, Iban was losing ground to English in four domains (friends, classmates, workmates, and prayers) and to Sarawak Malay in two domains (public places, and market). In non-Iban dominant areas, the results on languages used in public places and in new domains (social media communication) indicate that domains of language use currently occupied by Iban may be taken over by English and Malay in the future with more ethnically-mixed family, friendship, work, and public spaces.

Keywords: *Iban use, domain dominance, social media communication*

Introduction

In the complex multilingual ecosystem of Malaysia, indigenous languages are gradually losing their domains to other more dominant languages (Brenzinger et al., 2003). These languages are under the threat of economically and politically powerful languages, namely, Malay and English (McLellan, 2014). Research has shown a shift in indigenous language use towards Malay and English among the various minority groups in Malaysia, such as the Tindal in Sabah (Kijai et al., 2012), Mah Meri in Selangor (Coluzzi et al., 2017), and the Kejaman (Joan & Ting, 2016), Kayan (Wan et al., 2015), Bidayuh (Coluzzi, 2016), and Sihan (Mohamed & Hashim, 2012) in Sarawak. In neighbouring Brunei, the same language shift patterns can be seen among the Lun Bawang (Coluzzi, 2010) and Dusun (Chuchu & Noorashid, 2015). Given that the indigenous groups have small populations, the shift away from their ethnic language is expected.

A question arises whether numerically dominant indigenous groups also experience a shift away from their indigenous language. Sociolinguistic studies on numerically large groups, such as the Iban in Sarawak, are rather limited. Thus far, only Ting et al. (2020) have studied the language use of Iban in an Iban-dominant town, Song, located on the upper reaches of the Rejang River. In Song, where 87.18% of the population is Iban, the Iban language has medium vitality, measured using objective indicators (population, institutional support, and status) and subjective ethnolinguistic vitality from the Iban people's perspective.

The concept of ethnolinguistic vitality (ELV) was first proposed by Giles et al. (1977, p. 308), and groups with strong ELV are "likely to behave as a distinctive and collective entity within the inter-group setting." A group's vitality can be objectively measured based on these three main factors: demographic variables, institutional support, and status (Giles et al., 1977). A group with low vitality

¹ This paper was presented at the 3rd International Conference on Language Studies (iCLS 2021) held on 8–9 September 2021 at Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Kota Samarahan, Malaysia.

most probably experiences linguistic assimilation and is not perceived as a collective group, whereas a group with high vitality is seen as maintaining its language and distinctive features in multilingual settings (Bourhis et al., 1981). On the other hand, the vitality of a group can also be subjectively measured by taking people's perceptions and representations of vitality as mediators of linguistic behaviour (Landry & Allard, 1994). The construct of subjective vitality stems from the need to take into account individuals' perceptions of the societal conditions impinging upon them as members of their own group relative to salient outgroups, often credited as a better predictor of language behaviour (Bourhis et al., 1981; Hamers & Blanc, 1989).

In the study carried out in an Iban-dominant area, Ting et al. (2020) found that Iban is still the main language for communication in family, friendship, transactions, and religious domains in Song. At the time of the study, a majority of the Iban speak Iban in the friendship (85.9%) and transactions domains (shops, 82.8%; market, 88%), showing that Iban was some form of lingua franca for the people of Song. However, 75.3% of the 200 Iban people surveyed spoke Malay with their teachers and 61.6% spoke Malay with their superiors. The Malay language occupies the education and employment domains, indicating a shrinking of functional domains for the Iban language. The stable domains of language use of Iban, based on Ting et al.'s (2020) findings, were family, friendship, transactions, and religious domains. This indicated a reduction of functional domains once dominated by the ethnic language and the disappearance of strict domain separation that signals eminent language shift (Tsunoda, 2005). However, Ting et al.'s (2021) findings are applicable to an Iban-dominant area.

Little is known about Iban language use in areas that do not have a concentrated population of Iban people, such as Kuching, Miri, and other towns further away from the Rejang River hinterland. Despite its numerical dominance in certain areas in Sarawak, research findings indicate that Iban has only a medium vitality (Ting et al., 2021). The vitality and the use of the Iban language in non-Iban dominant areas have not been studied due to the focus on smaller groups. However, larger indigenous groups may also experience eminent language shift, particularly in town areas where there are fewer speakers of the indigenous language and there is a compulsion to use more widely understood languages for communication. Thus, in the face of the growing dominance of standard languages over the indigenous languages (Brenzinger et al., 2003), it is vital to identify the stable domains of language use for the Iban language.

In this study, the language use patterns of the Iban people in Iban dominant and non-Iban dominant areas in Sarawak were examined in nine domains based on UNESCO's framework of vitality/endangerment, namely, family, friends, neighbours, classmates, workmates, public places, market, religion, and social media communication. Describing these language use patterns of the Iban is important at this point in time when Iban may still be extensively used in certain localities, so that the findings can be used as a benchmark for future comparisons to assess the extent of language shift in future.

Background on the Iban in Sarawak

The Iban people are the largest ethnic group in Sarawak, encompassing 28.59% of the state's 2.8 million population (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2017). The Iban are also known as the "Sea Dayaks," a designation given by James Brooke to the ethnic group in the late 19th century due to their close connection with the sea (Sutlive, 1994). To date, the Iban are found mainly in Sri Aman, Betong, Sibu, and Kapit. In these Iban dominant areas, people of other ethnic groups speak the Iban language in the transactions and friendship domains, such as in Song and Kapit (Ting et al., 2021).

The Iban people are also found in neighbouring Brunei and Borneo Kalimantan. According to Sutlive (1994), the Iban language is also spoken in Kalimantan by the Iban who live in the north bank of the Kapuas River. Although Iban belongs to Western Austronesian family, it is not readily intelligible to a speaker of the Peninsular or Indonesian Malay (Omar, 1981).

There is little regional variation in the Iban language because dialect words are few and differences between areas of settlement are mostly in the accent or details in customs and rituals.

Iban does not have a writing system of its own, but through efforts of Christian missionaries, the Latin alphabet has been adopted for it. Due to the absence of a written tradition, the Iban literature consists largely of oral tradition; nevertheless, there are some efforts in codifying the language. For example, the Borneo Literature Bureau in Kuching has worked on the written form of the oral literature. Currently, there are Iban language textbooks for the secondary school (Forms 1 to 5), which were recently revised in 2014. There are also books on the Iban language or written in Iban.

The Iban language has been taught in school as early as the 1940s during the Brooke era. Iban has been included in the school curriculum in some primary schools since 1968 and in a few secondary schools since 1988, but there are no Iban-medium schools in Sarawak (Ting & Tensing, 2010). Teacher education programmes were in place to train teachers to teach Iban. In 1968–1969, Iban was offered as an elective subject in a teacher's training college, but it was not until 1988 that the central Curriculum Committee formalised it as part of the national curriculum. The next advancement was when the Iban language was offered as a minor to Iban students enrolled in the Malay Studies degree programme in Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris. Later, the Iban language undergraduate programme was introduced in two teachers' institutes in Sarawak (Philip, 2017).

Methodology of the Study

This descriptive study on the language use patterns of the Iban people in Iban dominant and non-Iban dominant areas involved 84 Iban speakers, who resided in Iban dominant and non-Iban dominant areas in Sarawak, Malaysia. Table 1 shows the demographic background of Iban respondents ($N = 84$). The respondents were government servants, business owners, students, housewives, and the unemployed. Iban was the language they first learned as a child for 94.0% of the respondents, while 96.4% of them first learned Iban from their parents.

Table 1 *Demographic Background of Iban Participants ($N = 84$)*

Demographic Variable	Percentage (%)	
Gender	Female	54.8
	Male	45.2
Age	19 years old and below	8.3
	20–39	34.5
	40–59	53.6
	60 years and above	3.6
Ethnic group of spouse	Iban	39.3
	Bidayuh	9.6
	Other indigenous	9.5
	Chinese	6.0
	Malay	2.4
	Indian	1.2
	Not married	32.1
Highest qualification	Primary 6 or lower	3.6
	Form 3	2.4
	Form 5	7.1
	Form 6	2.4
	Certificate	3.6
	Diploma	11.9
	Degree	42.9
	Master's degree	21.4
	Ph.D	4.8
Monthly Income	Less than RM2000	16.7
	RM2,000–RM3,999	13.1
	RM4,000–RM5,999	14.3
	RM6,000–RM7,999	14.3
	RM8,000–RM9,999	13.1
	RM12,000 and above	28.6

Table 1 *Demographic Background of Iban Participants (Cont.)*

Religion	Christian	88.1
	Muslim	9.5
	Hindu	1.2
	No religion	1.2
Residence in Iban dominant areas	Sri Aman	13.1
	Betong	14.3
	Miri	13.1
	Sibu	3.6
	Limbang	2.4
	Kapit	1.2
	Lubok Antu	1.2
	Sarikei	1.2
Residence in non-Iban dominant areas	Kuching	29.8
	Kota Samarahan	11.9
	Selangor	4.8
	Kuala Lumpur	3.6

A 87-item questionnaire in English and Malay was formulated based on UNESCO's evaluative factors of language vitality (Brenzinger et al., 2003). The nine factors were as follows, but in this paper, the results of only Factors 1, 4, and 5 are reported.

Factor 1: Intergenerational language transmission

Factor 2: Absolute numbers of speakers

Factor 3: Proportion of speakers within the total population

Factor 4: Loss of existing language domains

Factor 5: Response to new domains and media

Factor 6: Materials for language education and literacy

Factor 7: Governmental and institutional language attitudes and policies

Factor 8: Community members' attitudes towards their own language

Factor 9: Amount and quality of documentation.

A scale from 0 to 5 was assigned for all the factors, except for absolute numbers of speakers (Factor 2). The questionnaire was found to be internally consistent, with a Cronbach's alpha value of .722, which was more than the recommended cut-off value $\alpha = .700$ (Igbaria et al., 1994). The Total Variance Explained test (with an eigenvalue of 1.00 or higher), on the item-grouping or pattern loadings, was 80.81%. As the variance exceeded 60%, the data in the study were useful and reliable (Hair et al., 2014).

In October 2020, the first researcher sent the link to an online Google questionnaire to potential respondents through phone, email, and WhatsApp messages. The data on the nine factors of vitality were analysed and reported using frequencies and percentages.

Results

The results on the respondents' language use patterns in the nine domains were classified into family, other domains, and new media.

Intergenerational Language Transmission in Family Domains

Table 2 shows that Iban was the main language used in the home domains. Whether they were living in Iban- or non-Iban dominant areas made no difference because Iban was used for family communication, from grandparents to parents, siblings, and relatives (over 87.5%). However, Iban usage with spouse and children showed the encroachment of English into the family domain. In Iban-dominant areas, 45.8% spoke Iban with their spouse and 37.5% spoke Iban with their children. In non-Iban dominant areas, the pattern was similar: 46.7% and 33.3%, respectively. Overall, there

was still a strong intergenerational transmission of Iban regardless of whether Iban was the majority group in the area.

Table 2 *Frequencies and Percentages on Language Use in the Family Domains*

Domain	Language	Iban Dominant Areas		Non-Iban Dominant Areas	
		Frequency <i>n</i> = 24	Percentage %	Frequency <i>n</i> = 60	Percentage %
Parents	Bidayuh	0	0.0	1	1.7
	English	1	4.2	5	8.3
	Iban	22	91.7	54	90.0
	Standard Malay	1	4.2	0	0.0
Spouse	Not married	8	33.3	20	33.3
	Chinese Dialect	0	0.0	1	1.7
	English	3	12.5	7	11.7
	Iban	11	45.8	28	46.7
	Sarawak Malay	1	4.2	0	0.0
	Mandarin	0	0.0	1	1.7
	Standard Malay	0	0.0	3	5.0
	Other Ethnic Language	1	4.2	0	0.0
Children	No children	8	33.3	22	36.7
	Chinese Dialect	0	0.0	1	1.7
	English	6	25.0	13	21.7
	Iban	9	37.5	20	33.3
	Mandarin	0	0.0	1	1.7
	Standard Malay	0	0.0	3	5.0
	Other Ethnic Language	1	4.2	0	0.0
Siblings	Bidayuh	0	0.0	1	1.7
	English	1	4.2	5	8.3
	Iban	21	87.5	54	90.0
	No brothers and sisters	2	8.3	0	0.0
Grandparents	Iban	24	100.0	60	100.0
Relatives (e.g. cousins, uncles, and aunts)	Bidayuh	0	0.0	1	1.7
	English	1	4.2	5	8.3
	Iban	21	87.5	54	90.0
	Sarawak Malay	1	4.2	0	0.0
	Standard Malay	1	4.2	0	0.0

Language Use in Other Domains

Table 3 (please see following page) shows that more respondents spoke Iban in Iban-dominant areas than in non-Iban dominant areas. In the Iban-dominant areas, Iban was the most frequently used language in six out of seven domains studied: Religion (66.7%), followed by friendship (54.2%), market (41.7%), neighbourhood (41.7%), education (41.7%), employment (33.3%). The results indicate the Iban was hardly used in public places (8.3%), indicating that their contacts were not Iban and other languages were needed for inter-ethnic communication. Public places in this study refer to post offices, hospitals, and restaurants.

In non-Iban dominant areas, Table 3 shows that Iban was the most frequently used language only with neighbours (35%). It is interesting that in non-Iban dominant areas, the respondents still had many opportunities to speak Iban with Iban neighbours. These results suggest that they may be inclined to live in areas with Iban people or befriend Iban neighbours.

However, the Iban respondents actually spoke the most Sarawak Malay in three other domains, that is, with friends (Sarawak Malay, 33.3%; Iban, 30%), in the market (Sarawak Malay, 45%; Iban, 28.3%), and in public places (Sarawak Malay, 38.3%; Standard Malay and English, 26.7% each; Iban, 6.7%). These domains probably had more people from various ethnic groups, which necessitated the

use of Sarawak Malay, which is spoken by Malays and many indigenous people. In the more formal domains, English was the most frequently used language with classmates (English, 35%; Sarawak Malay, 30%; Iban, 20%), workmates (English, 30%; Sarawak Malay, 25%; Standard Malay, 18.3%; Iban, 13.3%), and for prayers (English, 58.3%; Iban, 35%). Results show a differentiation of language use in non-Iban dominant areas into Iban in the neighborhood domain, Sarawak Malay in friendship and transactions domains, and English in the education, employment, and religious domains.

Table 3 *Frequencies and Percentages on Language Use in Other Domains*

Domain	Language	Iban Dominant Areas		Non-Iban Dominant Areas	
		Frequency <i>n</i> = 24	Percentage %	Frequency <i>n</i> = 60	Percentage %
Neighbours	Chinese Dialect	0	0.0	2	3.3
	English	1	4.2	15	25.0
	Iban	10	41.7	21	35.0
	Sarawak Malay	7	29.2	16	26.7
	Standard Malay	4	16.7	4	6.7
	Other Ethnic Language	2	8.3	2	3.3
Friends	Chinese Dialect	0	0.0	1	1.7
	English	1	4.2	15	25.0
	Iban	13	54.2	18	30.0
	Sarawak Malay	7	29.2	20	33.3
	Mandarin	0	0.0	1	1.7
	Standard Malay	3	12.5	5	8.3
Classmates	English	3	12.5	21	35.0
	Iban	10	41.7	12	20.0
	Sarawak Malay	7	29.2	18	30.0
	Mandarin	0	0.0	2	3.3
	Standard Malay	4	16.7	7	11.7
Workmates	English	6	25.0	18	30.0
	Iban	6	25.0	8	13.3
	Sarawak Malay	8	33.3	15	25.0
	Mandarin	0	0.0	2	3.3
	Standard Malay	1	4.2	11	18.3
	Not Working	3	12.5	6	10.0
Prayers	Bidayuh	0	0.0	1	1.7
	English	3	12.5	35	58.3
	Iban	16	66.7	21	35.0
	Sarawak Malay	2	8.3	1	1.7
	Standard Malay	3	12.5	2	3.3
Public Places (e.g., post office, hospital, restaurant)	Chinese Dialect	0	0.0	1	1.7
	English	7	29.2	16	26.7
	Iban	2	8.3	4	6.7
	Sarawak Malay	9	37.5	23	38.3
	Standard Malay	6	25.0	16	26.7
Market	Chinese Dialect	0	0.0	1	1.7
	English	0	0.0	3	5.0
	Iban	10	41.7	17	28.3
	Sarawak Malay	11	45.8	27	45.0
	Standard Malay	3	12.5	12	20.0

One of the main differences in language use in the two areas was in the religious domain. In the Iban-dominant areas, the most frequently used language for praying was Iban (66.7%), but in the non-dominant areas, it was English (58.3%). The dominance of Iban in the religious domain in Iban-dominant areas was consistent with Ting and colleagues (2021) findings, who reported that a

majority of the Iban respondents in Song used Iban in the religious domain. In the present study, the Iban respondents living in Iban-dominant areas attend church services conducted in Iban. However, in non-Iban dominant areas such as Kuching, Samarahan, and Sibu divisions, where the Iban people were not the majority, church services are usually conducted in English to cater to other ethnic groups (e.g., Chinese and Bidayuh, who are also Christian).

Language Use in New Domains and Media

Social media communication is a new domain of language use that has grown in the last two decades. Table 4 shows that English was the dominant language in new domains and in media, regardless of whether the participants were living in Iban or non-Iban dominant areas. The percentages of English usage in descending order involved watching YouTube contents, searching or reading internet information, social media communication, writing emails for work communication, and writing SMS messages. It is understandable that a great deal of YouTube contents and internet information are in English and that work communication has to be in a formal language, and in a language that is understood by other ethnic groups.

Table 4 *Frequencies and Percentages on Language Use in New Domains and Media*

Domain	Language	Iban Dominant Areas		Non-Iban Dominant Areas	
		Frequency <i>n</i> = 24	Percentage %	Frequency <i>n</i> = 60	Percentage %
Emails for work communication	English	15	62.5	43	71.7
	Sarawak Malay	4	16.7	1	1.7
	Standard Malay	5	20.8	16	26.7
Searching or reading internet information	English	20	83.3	52	86.7
	Sarawak Malay	1	4.2	1	1.7
	Standard Malay	3	12.5	7	11.7
Social media communication (e.g., FB, Twitter, Instagram, Tik Tok, etc.)	English	17	70.8	41	68.3
	Iban	3	12.5	9	15.0
	Sarawak Malay	1	4.2	2	3.3
	Mandarin	0	0.0	1	1.7
	Standard Malay	3	12.5	7	11.7
Watching YouTube contents	English	21	87.5	55	91.7
	Iban	0	0.0	1	1.7
	Sarawak Malay	1	4.2	0	0.0
	Mandarin	0	0.0	1	1.7
	Standard Malay	2	8.3	3	5.0
Writing SMS messages	English	6	25.0	33	55.0
	Iban	10	41.7	20	33.3
	Sarawak Malay	4	16.7	2	3.3
	Standard Malay	4	16.7	5	8.3

The only sub-domain where Iban still had a function was writing SMS messages (41.7% in Iban dominant areas and 33.3% in non-Iban dominant areas). SMS messages are more private and are sent to family and friends who may be mostly Iban. The more frequent use of English for writing SMS messages among Iban respondents living in non-Iban dominant areas indicated that their social network may be more ethnically diverse and comprised more contacts from other ethnic groups, thereby requiring the use of English.

In comparison, social media communication in Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Tik Tok reaches a wider audience who may not be Iban, which is why the percentages of Iban use was below 15%. As social media communication will continue to grow in prevalence, it is likely that even communication among Ibans will take place increasingly in English, Sarawak Malay, and Standard Malay. The use of standard languages (English and Standard Malay) ensures ease of communication.

The emergence of Sarawak Malay is indicative of the potential for the Malay dialect to develop into a lingua franca, particularly with many indigenous people having mastery of the dialect.

Discussion

The study produced two noteworthy findings on the Iban language losing ground to English and Sarawak Malay in non-Iban dominant areas and the growth of English in the new domains and media. These two findings will be discussed next.

First, using UNESCO's evaluative factors of language vitality, the study showed that there is intergenerational transmission of Iban but even in the family domain, English is used in communication with spouse (11.7%-12.5%) and children (21.7%-25%). The results also showed that the use of Iban is dwindling outside the family domain, particularly in non-Iban dominant areas where the interaction is mostly with people of other ethnic groups. The results of the present study on the use of Iban in Iban-dominant areas concur with Ting et al.'s (2020) findings because their study was also conducted in an Iban-majority area. In Song, Iban is still somewhat a lingua franca because Iban people made up 87.18% of the population. However, in the present study, the respondents were from several localities where the Iban population is large but not as numerically strong as in Song. In these areas (Sri Aman, Betong, Miri, Sibul, Limbang, Kapit, Lubok Antu, and Sarikei) the percentage of the Iban population ranges from 25.18% to 87.38%.

The concern is concerning the decline in language use patterns of Ibans living in non-Iban dominant areas. The Iban respondents reported using more Sarawak Malay and/English than Iban in six out of seven domains of language use studied, with the exception of the religious domain. Many Iban people have moved out of Iban longhouses to study and work in the urban areas. This brings them into contact with ethnically-diverse social and work networks with Chinese and Malay from different dialect groups, and other Indigenous groups—not only from Sarawak but also from Sabah. Among the Sarawak indigenous groups, the Iban is the largest group but there are already signs that Sarawak Malay and English are sharing space with Iban in the friendship, education, employment, religious, and transactions domains in non-Iban dominant areas. In this respect, the Iban language use pattern in non-Iban dominant areas reflects those of smaller indigenous groups. While there is intergenerational transmission of the ethnic language to the youngest generation of speakers, the use of the language in the society with other ethnic groups is minimal for the Bidayus in Sarawak (Coluzzi, 2016), the Iban and Lun Bawang in Temburong of Brunei (Coluzzi, 2010), and the Mah Meri in Selangor (Coluzzi et al., 2017). Although the transmission of the heritage language to the next generation is a salient factor for evaluating a language's vitality (Brenzinger et al., 2003; Fishman, 1997; Lewis & Simons, 2010), these results may give a false sense of security to the communities, such as in the case of the Iban in Sarawak. According to the Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale, the vitality is acceptable only if more than 80% of the children are acquiring the heritage language (Lewis & Simons, 2010). In the present study, only about one-third of the Iban respondents spoke Iban with their children in both Iban-dominant (37.5%) and non-Iban dominant (33.3%) areas. While not conclusive, the results indicate that less than 80% of the children are acquiring Iban. Intermarriages or mixed racial backgrounds of parents cause other languages to be used in family conversations (Umbat, 2020). There is supporting evidence in the present study on the high percentage of intermarriages because 39.3% of the respondents (out of 67.9% married respondents) had Iban spouses. A comparison of this percentage with the results on parents' use of Iban with children indicates that in some Iban families, Iban may not be the family language. Umbat (2020) attributed the younger Ibans' lack of motivation to learn Iban to the negative effects of mass media (shortening of words when sending short text messages that affects spelling and structure), community migration from rural to urban areas, and the overpowering influence of Sarawak Malay. Umbat's (2020) point on the migration is backed up by the empirical results in the present study, whereby there is less Iban usage among Iban respondents in non-Iban dominant areas (usually urban areas) compared to Iban-dominant areas (usually rural areas). Besides, Standard Malay and Sarawak

Malay are emerging as the lingua franca among the Sarawak indigenous for interethnic communication (Ting & Campbell, 2017).

Second, the growth of the new domains and media (social media communication) is a phenomenon that affects the use of Iban, regardless of whether the respondents were living among Iban people. Whether it is for personal use (accessing internet information, watching YouTube videos, communicating in social media platforms), or work purposes (emails), English is the main language. A great deal of internet information and YouTube material is in English. Brenzinger et al. (2003, p. 10) stated that the use of English in the new domains and media signifies the “mesmerising power” of the language, which is no surprise considering its status as the global language. Moreover, “schools, new work environments, new media, including broadcast media and the Internet, usually serve only to expand the scope and power of the dominant language at the expense of endangered languages” (Brenzinger et al., 2003, p. 11). “Speakers may consider the dominant language to be the language of social and economic opportunity” (Brenzinger et al., 2003, p. 10), which leads to these languages being favoured. Iban lacks instrumental value as a language for wider communication. The present study showed that the only sub-domain where Iban is still used more than English is writing SMS messages and this is only for respondents living in Iban-dominant areas. The results indicate that in future, with less of the younger Iban people speaking their ethnic language and with more social and work contacts who are non-Iban, it is expected that the space for Iban use in social media communication may decline further.

In the present study, we did not investigate whether respondents accessed radio and television programmes through the internet. In Malaysia, the mainstream radio and television programmes are aired by the government-owned agency, Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM). However, now there are many live internet radio channels offered by entertainment portals established by the private sector such as FM Radio. The online non-mainstream channels still serve listeners or viewers who like the idea of radio and television. Even though the mode may be called old media (as opposed to the “new media” such as Tik Tok or IG), these non-mainstream entertainment portals are online making them also a part of the “new” social media. The popularity of live internet radio channels should be further investigated, particularly their role in perpetuating the use of Iban.

Conclusions

The study on the language use of the Iban of Sarawak, Malaysia showed that the Iban language is losing ground to English and Sarawak Malay, particularly in urban areas where the Iban is not the dominant ethnic group. Iban is still frequently used in the family, neighbourhood, education, employment, religious and transactions domains in Iban-dominant areas such as Sri Aman, Betong, Miri, Sibul, Limbang, Kapit, Lubok Antu, and Sarikei in Sarawak. However, the frequent use of Iban is restricted to the Iban community, and communication with other ethnic groups, in these Iban-dominant areas, largely take place in English, Sarawak Malay, and Standard Malay. One domain of language use where Iban is almost excluded is social media communication, but at the present time, a portion of the Iban people still write SMS messages in Iban.

The present study is significant in showing that the numerical dominance of the Iban people in the geographical vicinity determines the extensiveness of Iban use and this is linked to the number of Iban people in their family, social, and work networks. By comparing the patterns of Iban use in Iban-dominant and non-Iban dominant areas, the study has shown that indirectly, intermarriage and migration from Iban to non-Iban dominant areas caused a decrease in the use of Iban. Using direct evidence based on the language use results, the study has pinpointed the religious and education domains “suffer” the most dramatic drop in the use of Iban when Iban people move from Iban-dominant areas to non-Iban dominant areas. The friendship, employment and transactions domains are less affected, but the rise in the use of English, Sarawak Malay, and Standard Malay is inevitable due the presence of other ethnic groups in these spaces. The most stable domains of language use for the Iban language seems to be the neighbourhood and public places, probably because these are public domains with their own constellations of interactants. The situation is different for

interactions with friends, workmates, and shop vendors because one can choose who to interact with. The snapshot of Iban language use is captured at this point in time. In future, family, friendship, work, and public spaces will become more ethnically-mixed, and language use patterns will change. The present findings can serve as a benchmark for future comparisons to assess the extent of language shift. Further studies are needed to examine the vitality of the Iban language, as reflected in the use of Iban in various domains, in relation to density of Iban people in the various spaces. The presence of more Iban in the family, social, and work networks may result in greater Iban use, and this may be an underlying factor that can explain the extensiveness of Iban language use. Such studies will lead to a better understanding of the language dynamics of ethnic minority communities that live among more dominant linguistic communities.

Acknowledgement

The researchers thank all the Iban respondents for participating in the study.

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