Word Familiarity in Sarawak Malay Dialect: Assessing Vocabulary of the Young

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the familiarity level of Sarawak Malay Dialect (SMD) words in younger generations of speakers. Commonly used in Psycholinguistic studies to assess vocabulary knowledge, the familiarity rating method can provide some valuable information for studies in language loss. The aims of the study thus are to: (1) initiate the creation of SMD word familiarity database, (2) document words that are undergoing lexical attrition, and (3) compare loss of dialect words between two young generations of speakers. Fifty SMD words were used in this study consisting of a mixture of common and seemingly outdated dialect terms. Questionnaires for rating word familiarity were distributed to 37 respondents who are native SMD speakers between the ages of 13 to 26. The overall results showed that speakers were unfamiliar with approximately 50 percent of the words. However, when respondents were further divided according to two age groups, the younger of the two found more words to be unfamiliar than their counterparts by almost 20 percent. Additionally, across age groups, significant differences were observed in the familiarity level of 10 percent of the words. Although minimal, an obvious attriting pattern is observable showing that words are fast disappearing between generations.

Key words: Sarawak Malay dialect, familiarity rating, word familiarity, language loss, lexical attrition

ABSTRAK

*Kajian ini mendalami sejauh mana penutur generasi muda mengenali perkataan-perkataan dalam Dialek Melayu Sarawak (DMS). Sering digunakan dalam bidang Psikolinguistik untuk mengkaji tahap pengetahuan terhadap sesuatu perkataan, kaedah **familiarity rating** boleh memberi maklumat penting berkaitan persoalan dalam bidang kepupusan bahasa. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk: (1) memulakan pembinaan pangkalan data berkaitan pengetahuan perkataan, (2) mendokumentasikan perkataan yang mengalami fenomena kepupusan leksikal, dan (3) membandingkan kepupusan terma dialek antara dua kelompok penutur generasi muda. Sejumlah 50 perkataan digunakan dalam kajian ini merangkumi perkataan-perkataan lazim dan terma dialek yang dianggap ketinggalan zaman. Borang soal selidik berkaitan dengan pengetahuan perkataan telah diagihkan kepada 37 responden yang merupakan penutur jati DMS berumur antara 13 dan 26 tahun. Keputusan kajian menunjukkan bahawa penutur-penutur tidak mengenali 50 peratus daripada jumlah perkataan tersebut. Walau bagaimanapun, apabila mereka dibahagikan kepada dua kumpulan umur, kumpulan penutur muda didapati tidak mengenali lebih banyak perkataan berbanding kumpulan penutur yang lebih tua dengan perbezaan sebanyak hampir 20 peratus. Selain itu, melalui pembahagian kumpulan umur, perbezaan signifikan dapat dilihat dalam tahap pengetahuan mereka terhadap 10 peratus perkataan. Walaupun sekadar minimal, pola kepupusan leksikal adalah ketara dan menunjukkan perkataan dialek mulai pupus antara generasi.*

*Kata kunci: dialek Melayu Sarawak, **familiarity rating**, pengetahuan perkataan, kehilangan bahasa, kepupusan leksikal*

INTRODUCTION

Studies in the areas of language change have continued to rapidly develop as languages around the world continue to evolve and communities become more intertwined in a globally connected world. Language contact is thus inevitable and often results in language attrition. It is a phenomenon which refers to the loss of a first or second language or a part of that language. There has been considerable amount of research done on the issue including studies on dialect attrition. This type of attrition refers to the eradication of a traditional and locally embedded dialect form or forms in favour of one originating either from outside the community or from another group within the same community (Britain 2002). Research into dialectal word loss in particular, however, has been rather scarce even though the lexicon is considered important for linguistic self-identity in many communities as stated by Hill (in Sands et al. 2007). The loss of distinctive terms in a dialect is referred to as lexical attrition (Beal 2006: 55).

For English, aspects of lexical attrition in a variety of dialects found in England have been studied (Beal

2006; Britain 2002; Burbano 2001). Other dialects include those of Inuit language (Tulloch 2005), N|uu, a dialect of Southern Africa (Sands et al. 2007) and Shetland (Bugge 2010). Britain (2002) cited a survey done by a regional newspaper based in Norwich to measure the extent to which younger people still know or use local dialect words of Norfolk and north Suffolk in England. The rate of lexical attrition was found to be considerable and dramatic, with those over 60 recognising over three-quarters of the words, and those under 18 less than one word in five. Bugge (2010) did a socio-lexical survey of 47 Shetlanders' recognition of Shetland dialect vocabulary to examine the role of 'family' in intergenerational transmission of dialect words. Age was found to be the most defining social factor influencing the size of the speakers' survey score. The older their age, the bigger size of vocabulary they recognised. Individual variation within each age group, however, was great and family background seemed an important factor influencing the variation. Burbano (2001) investigated the extent to which traditional words in Sunderland dialect are used in the speech of secondary school students in Tyne and Wear. The average positive answers (APA) by the young speakers in each school only added up to less than 50%.

In Malaysia presently, minority languages are gaining more attention for research in language loss such as the Renum language in Sarawak (Md. Zahid Akter 2008), and Mah Meri in the Peninsular (Umaiyah Haji Umar 2009). These studies however, do not focus specifically on the loss of dialect words. In the case of SMD, although it has been widely studied and observed, research has been very much descriptive in nature discussing observable patterns in the language system (e.g. Collins 1987; Dayang Sariah & Mary Fatimah 2012; Salbia Hassan 2012). There have also been studies on the social perspectives of language (Idris & Rosniah 2009). Several studies have attempted to document the SMD and are not limited to the Kuching variant of the dialect (Asmah Haji Omar 2008; Madzhi Johari 1988; Zainal Abidin Merjan 1992).

This study thus is interested in investigating the attrition of Sarawak Malay Dialect (henceforth known as SMD) at the lexical level. The aim was to examine the level of familiarity rating of SMD words in young generations of Sarawak Malay speakers. It is part of a larger on-going research on lexical attrition in SMD (see Radina Mohamad Deli et al. 2012) with a focus on the Kuching variant of the dialect.

The use of familiarity rating method was based on the need for an initiation for the creation of a database for Malay language items. The only reference found for familiarity ratings of Malay words is done about 2 decades ago by researchers from National University Singapore. The survey was carried out to gather, collect and document perceptive familiarity to 530 Standard Malay words (Pareira et al. 1992; Lee et al. 2007), did a familiarity rating study for morphological structures of 4,238 words, comprising stems and affixed forms. Since then, there are no other studies found pertaining to similar subject matter. This study, an extension of Radina Mohamad Deli et al.'s (2012) earlier study, is possibly the very few (if not the only one) done to rate dialect words. Additionally, a familiarity judgement study was also done for Malay idioms (Radina Mohamad Deli et al. 2013). European languages have long enjoyed a considerable amount of documentation, not just based on corpus and frequency counts, but also in terms of familiarity rating -a method used mainly by psycholinguists and cognitive psychologists. Coltheart's (1981) MRC Psycholinguistic database and Quinland's (1992) Oxford Psycholinguistics for English language and CELEX *Psycholinguistic Database* for English, Dutch and German language items are amongst the leading psycholinguistic databases in the world. The familiarity rating method is considered important because it tells researchers how frequent language speakers read, hear or uses words and/ or how well they know the meaning of certain language items. This information is important for the validity of studies to do with language acquisition, comprehension and production among other aspects. Whilst corpus studies in frequency of words are significant for documenting the amount of times words appear particularly in print, familiarity rating gathers the relationship between knowing words and understanding them. Some studies show a high correlation between frequency and familiarity rating while others have found otherwise. For this study, they are considered as being mutually exclusive. One cannot or should not be substituted with each other.

In the current study, it is felt that using familiarity rating to document words may be able to tell us considerable information about certain language items: a) current 'relevance' of words for speech and b) differences in familiarity rating between generations of speakers. Thus, the objectives of this study are to:

- initiate the creation of a database of Sarawak Malay words based on familiarity ratings, and
- document words that are undergoing lexical attrition,

- compare loss of dialect words between two young generations of speakers.

METHODOLOGY

A total of 37 SMD speakers aged between 13 to 25 were involved in this study (male/female). The 13-year-olds are form one students of a local secondary school whilst the rest are undergraduates of Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. Data from the speakers will initially be grouped together but later divided according to age groups (13 & 19-25 years old). A questionnaire with 5-point likert scale rating for familiarity was designed (e.g. 1 - unfamiliar and not understood, 5 – very familiar and understood etc.). Answers 3, 4 and 5 require written meanings or synonyms to the words in SMD as well as in standard Malay. The 50 words used were collected through observations and interviews with native speakers of the language. Sixty percent of the words are perceived as being outdated or less frequently used by today's generation of speakers. Forty percent of them are common everyday phrases. They were not controlled for parts of speech or any specific domain or criteria. Ten words which are considered old terms were taken from Monaliza Sarbini-Zin et al.'s (2012) study. A majority of the words and their meanings are listed in *Daftar kata dialek Melayu Sarawak* (1998), which is one of the few 'official' large-scale documentation of vocabulary in SMD.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Familiarity Ratings for SMD Words

This section presents the results on the levels of familiarity rating for SMD words in the two groups of young speakers. Table 1 shows words that are categorised as 'familiar' and 'highly familiar'. Some dialect words are still familiar and understood by the speakers. 'Familiar' category words are those that score a familiarity level mean score of 3.00 to 3.99, while the 'highly familiar' words have a score of 4.00 to 5.00 (refer to Table 1).

Most highly familiar words consist of common nouns, verbs and adjectives with active meanings. The adjective *mantak* mainly refers to the state of being raw or uncooked for food. The term has a high phonetic proximity to the standard Malay *mentah*. It also has a common ending of /ak/, one of

the typical characteristics of SMD word endings. *Engkah* or *letak* in standard Malay refer to the verb to put. The noun *uras* is a general term for garbage. The SM synonym is *sampah* which is believed to be interchangeably used by SMD speakers. Other familiar terms such as *belunjor, rangkak*, and *betekang* refer to actions or conditions to do with the human body. According to Tsunoda (2005), words that refer to well-known animates, the human body, and human classification are resilient to loss. Although these three words do not directly define the human body or human classification, they are words that relate to the human body. To be precise, *belunjor*, is a verb that describes the act of putting out or stretching out one's feet when one is sitting down on the floor. Traditionally, the Malays sit on the floor, on a woven mat or a carpet, with legs folded and tucked in or in a lady-like fashion where the legs are gracefully tucked in by the side. But when the legs are tired and when one is in one's own home or within family circle (otherwise, to *belunjor* is considered impolite), one may *belunjor* to rest one's feet. *Rangkak*, is an adjective to mean someone who has a voracious appetite or to a certain extent, gluttonous. *Betekang* means unclean, filthy or murky and this adjective can be used to describe one's clothing or the state of one's belongings and habitat. Thus, these words have an indirect relevance to the human body and human being.

Table 1. Words with high familiarity (known words)

	SMD Words	Mean		SMD Words	Mean
Familiar	telok	3.0000	*Highly familiar*	aruk	4.0000
	dasan	3.0000		tapuk	4.1351
	ampus	3.0811		kumbuk	4.1351
	acap	3.1351		rangkak	4.2432
	tumpik	3.2778		betekang	4.2778
	bicu	3.3243		mupok	4.2973
	ngeteng	3.4324		lantoh	4.3333
	ipak	3.4324		ngesor	4.5676
	percak	3.6216		saruk	4.6216
	belunjor	3.7297		cerik	4.6757
	ngintu	3.8108		uras	4.6757
	jamek	3.9730		engkah	4.7568
				mantak	4.8108

Table 2 displays the words that are unfamiliar to the speakers which makes up half of the total vocabulary presented in this study. Words that have a mean score of between 1.00 and 1.99 are

categorised as 'highly unfamiliar' while those that fall in the range of 2.00 to 2.99 are classified as 'unfamiliar'. This list of words comprise of nouns, verbs and adjectives.

Table 2. Words with low familiarity (unknown words)

	SMD words	Mean		SMD words	Mean
Highly unfamiliar	tadeng	1.2162	*Unfamiliar*	kaleng	2.1081
	suit	1.2162		ngansa	2.2703
	kaso	1.2432		kelido	2.2973
	perepat	1.2432		pagu	2.3243
	tekoan/ tengkoan	1.2703		kenceng	2.3243
	gelegar	1.4054		ladin	2.4595
	godang	1.4595		rutit	2.4595
	rembo	1.6216		lang	2.6486
	langkok	1.6216		ayong	2.6757
	ganjo	1.7838		sep	2.6857
	menais	1.7838		sandit	2.8108
	langar	1.8108		ngepok	2.8378
	kolom	1.9730			

The unfamiliar terms were further categorised into word class (refer Table 3). It is apparent that the highly unfamiliar nouns in the list are either rather technical or ordinary but perhaps archaic to these young speakers. *Suit, kaso, perepat,* and *gelegar,* are jargons to describe parts of a wooden house in particular flooring and roofing. It is not surprising therefore that the young speakers are vastly unaccustomed to these words. *Godang* is derived from the word 'go down' which is a word which typically refers to a warehouse or a store house especially one which is at a dockside that appears to be quite antiquated. The word 'setor', a 'Sarawakianised' pronunciation of the English word store would most probably be a more familiar choice among these young speakers. In the same way, words like *tadeng* and *tekoan* or *tengkoan* are considered obsolete. The alternatives for these words would mostly likely be *antin-antin* for the former and perhaps 'teapot' as substitute for the latter.

Table 3. Further categorization of unfamiliar words according to word class

Highly unfamiliar nouns	Highly unfamiliar verbs	Highly unfamiliar adjectives	Unfamiliar nouns	Unfamiliar verbs	Unfamiliar adjectives
tadeng	kolom	rembo	kaleng	ngansa	rutit
suit		menais	kelido	sandit	ayong
kaso		ganjo	pagu	ngepok	
perepat		langkok	kenceng		
tekoan/ tengkoan		langar	ladin		
gelegar			lang		
godang			sep		

Less unfamiliar nouns such *as kaleng, kelido, pagu, kenceng, ladin, lang*, and *sep* are words to do with equipment or furniture in a household. Kaleng is a container for holding water made of metal – iron or aluminium, while kelido is a wooden ladle and *ladin* a knife. These are typical everyday items that one would find in household, just like *tekoan* or *tengkoan*. It is quite unanticipated however to find that *tekoan* or *tengkoan* is comparatively a highly unfamiliar word to this young group of speakers. *Pagu* for shelves, *sep* for a food cupboard or a larder and *lang* for a door have been found to be unfamiliar words to these speakers. To have found that *sep* is alien to the young speakers is not surprising as a food cupboard has long been a thing of the past since the emergence of the refrigerator. But, for *pagu* and *lang,* the findings are also less expected as these literally are still much in use particularly among older groups of speakers. Alternatives for the two terms are possibly the standard terms 'rak' and 'pintu'.

Why the verbs and the adjectives in the list are unfamiliar to these speakers can be explained by the diminishing frequency of their usage coupled with the availability of other alternative words or variations of these words that are more commonly used. These words are not totally foreign to these young speakers of 13 to 25 years old but rather less and less heard from their young parents who are generally in their 30s and 40s. Words like *ngansa, sandit* and *ngepok* seem out of fashion as they suggest old practices or beliefs. *Sandit,* for instance, basically means to carry a baby strapped to one's body traditionally in a sarong. This method of carrying a child is less practised nowadays, hence the less frequent usage of the word although the term may also refer to the act of slinging a bag. Similarly, the word *ngepok* could well be very much replaced with the standard Malay word *pukul* which means to beat ingredients for baking. *Ngansa* has a bad connotation to its meaning. It is an act of crying out or wailing, with a belief to be,

with a wish, albeit without intent, to cause harm to the person one is crying for. This belief or rather superstition may not hold anymore among young families and therefore seldom uttered if not at all. Presumably, *nangis* or cry would suffice as an alternative word. In the same way, adjectives such as *ayong, menais* and *ganjo* have their respective variations. These would be actual or closer to standard Malay words – *penin, comot* and *tinggi.*

Comparing Word Familiarity between 2 Groups of Speakers

When data was collapsed according to age groups, the younger speakers were found to be less familiar with more words than their counterparts (56% word loss as opposed to only 38%). Although according to the established generational description that all participants belong to the Generation Millenial aka Gen Y, we believe that in this present study and possibly other intergenerational language studies it is crucial to group language speakers according to prominent 'life events' or 'experiences'. A distinction of age group was made in a study by Ting and de Run (2012) in which age grouping was achieved by the collective memories of the samples. The 15 to 24 and the 25 to 34 age groups recalled and highlighted different major events respectively. Therefore, for this study, our participants were grouped into 13 year olds and 19 to 25 year olds based on these assumptions–13 year olds' contacts would primarily be peers attending the same school, generally coming from the same town or city. Conversely 19 to 25 year olds belong to the categories of undergraduates who presumably have more contacts with people or students from other parts of the town, city or states. Their parents may also possibly be of different generations and therefore would affect their language choices and patterns.

Further analysis was done to examine words that are significantly different in terms of familiarity rating between the two groups (refer Table 4). Of all words in the list, five were significantly different between the two groups. The words are *kaleng, ampus, rutit, ngepok, sep*. The words *kaleng, ampus, rutit, ngepok* and *sep* were generally unknown to the 13 year olds. This is dissimilar to their counterparts who categorised the terms as familiar words. Four other words were almost significantly different and they are *ngesor, dasan, acap, rembo*. Of the four, *dasan, acap,* and *rembo* carry opposing familiarity value with the younger

generations not knowing these words. Although *ngesor* has a very active meaning to describe a person who shows off – it is possible that this generation of speakers prefer to use an English substitute as in to 'show off'. Either that or there was a limitation in terms of transcription or spelling of a word – since SMD does not have a standard reference on how words are spelt and thus creating confusion in the participants. The word *ngesor* is usually but not exclusively spelt without 'r' (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka 1998). *Dasan* has possibly been replaced with the word *tempat* or *bekas*. The use of more standardized words is hardly surprising because of the influence of the media and tremendous exposure to the standardized terms. It is worth to note that some homogenization of terms and perhaps accent have come about due to contact and the need to assimilate phonologically between local dialect and standard form. For example, in words like *pisok* which is phonetically /piso?/ for *pisau*, Collins (1987) asserted that the common glottalic ? ending in SMD words is a form of dialect innovation. Another phonological feature common to SMD is monophtongisation (Collins 1987) in words like *rantey* /rante/ from its standard Malay equivalent /rantai/.

Table 4. P value for word familiarity level between groups

Words	P-value
rutit	0
kaleng	0.003
ampus	0.014
sep	0.033
ngepok	0.038
rembo	0.054
ngesor	0.056
dasan	0.057
acap	0.057

It is thus evident that loss of dialect words does not necessarily involve the loss of objects or customs from the vocabulary of the speakers. This could also be due to a widespread variation in terms that refer everyday concepts (Beal 2006: 55). Specific terms and less frequent forms (Schmid & de Bot 2003) may be especially prone to loss.

From the findings, it is evident that even within these younger generations, there is approximately 18% loss of the words. An obvious attriting pattern is observable showing that words are fast

disappearing between generations. However, we could not see how consistent the process is just by assessing 2 groups and a limited number of words.

CONCLUSION

The lexical attrition in SMD is minimal in comparison to truly attriting languages of the world. In the case of SMD, the lexical attrition occurring is minimal and the phenomena does not suggest that the dialect is at the risk of undergoing large-scale attrition. In the case of SMD there are no major systematic changes occurring within the lexicon to suggest an extensive attrition of lexicon. No significant interlanguage effects were observed. The attrition in this study merely refers to the loss of dialect words over the use of more present-day terms. It is not claimed that this loss of vocabulary involves eradication of old term or word meanings which is often the case for extreme vocabulary loss (Bordin 2009). These meanings are still very much active in the discourse of the native speakers.

Hence, familiarity judgement studies of dialect words can benefit studies in language change. However, perceptive familiarity alone may not be able to inform us of participants' real knowledge of the word. Respondents must be elicited for word meanings to be able to gauge their true knowledge or understanding of the words. For future research, the study can be expended to include speakers from other generations. It will be interesting to look at how much of these words have been lost between the generations so we can have a rough estimate of the amount of words that are gradually being lost from the vocabulary of SMD. Studies on the loss of vocabulary should be deemed important as it has been suggested that L1 (or in our case, dialect) attrition is usually occurs first to the lexicon which is often considered as vulnerable and volatile (Schmid & Köpke 2008).

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