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**LANGUAGE CHOICE OF THE EURASIAN COMMUNITY IN  
PENANG: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC STUDY**

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***Abstract***

Although there are many studies conducted on language choice among minority groups in Malaysia, not many documented the Eurasian communities in Malaysia, particularly the ones in Penang. Due to this reason, the study outlines three main objectives: (1) to identify the most preferred language of the Penang Eurasian community based on the domains of language use, (2) to investigate the factors that determine language choice among the Penang Eurasians and (3) to examine to what extent language shift takes place among the Penang Eurasian community based on their language choice. Using Fishman's (1972) Domains of Language Use, the chosen domains include family, friendship, education, employment, religion and entertainment. In order to investigate whether language shift occurs in the Eurasian communities, the research design employed an explanatory mixed-method design that consisted of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews participated by Penang Eurasian respondents. The results of the study show that a majority of the respondents prefer using English as their dominant language in all of the selected domains, where setting and interlocutors were found to be influential factors that determined their language choice. The study also reveals that there were instances of code switching and language shift taking place in the Penang Eurasian community. Subsequently, the study provides a basis of comparison with previous ones carried out in other Eurasian minorities in Malaysia, particularly the Portuguese Eurasian community in Melaka.

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**Keywords:** Penang eurasians, domains, language choice, language shift, heritage language.



## 1. Introduction

Goh (2002) claims that in Malaysia, the Eurasians have been a distinctive minority group who have been referred to as “Serani”. Choo (2007) adds that a Eurasian is used to refer to all the people of multiracial identity with European and Asian ancestry, mostly from Southeast Asia countries like Malaysia and Singapore where they are a minority group. She also emphasises on the position of Eurasians as “in-betweeners” due to the fact that they are a community of hybrids with two different ancestry or heritage.

Walker (2012) states that Eurasian communities were built and expanded through inter-ethnic marriage and migration within, between, and beyond the empires of Southeast Asia. European ascendancy in Malaysia first began on August 1, 1509 in which the Portuguese first arrived to Malacca (Augustine, 1979). Through King Manoel of Portugal, the Portuguese took over Malacca in which one of the captains under his ruling, Alfonso d’Albuquerque, implemented a policy where his compatriots are allowed to marry Malay women. This policy was actually executed by the Portuguese empire to spread Christianity and increase the population of Christians and the evidence is the foundation of the fortress “A Famosa”. According to Beng (2014), when the Dutch took over Malacca, they created imperial system just as how Portuguese did when they were ruling Malacca. After the capture of Malacca from Portugal in 1641, the Dutch during their rule also intermarried with local people and expanded the Eurasian population (Augustine, 1979). Khoo (2006) cites that when the Dutch forced captured Malacca from the Portuguese in 1641, there was a small number of Germans who joined the Dutch force and thus, through intermarriages, the community of Eurasians with German ancestry was formed. Then, with the arrival of the British, they too implemented the policy of intermarriages for economic benefits, just like they did in India (Walker, 2012). Due to the assimilation with the local cultures, Choo (2007) mentions that the Eurasian identity is marked through cultural terms such as food, language, religion, customs and certain practices.

### 1.1. Eurasian Communities in Penang

According to Walker (2012), the Eurasian community in colonial Penang is the product of connections and interactions on a global scale. They were first formed through the arrival of Francis Light to Penang when the Sultan of Kedah formed an alliance with British, which later resulted in the taking over of the island of Penang from the Sultan of Kedah in 1786 (Choo, 2007). Augustine (1979) writes that the British also implemented intermarriage policy for economic purposes where the Eurasians can be the source to form more soldiers, sailors and other employees. He notes that Francis Light also brought more Eurasians to Penang from Port Queda for the purposes of business transactions and goods.

In general, Nonis (2014) suggests that the Eurasian communities in Penang can be divided into two main groups: (1) the town Eurasians and (2) the Pulau Tikus Eurasians. The town Eurasians are the Eurasian communities who lived in Georgetown and were able to communicate well in English while the Pulau Tikus Eurasians are known to live away from the town and settled in the Northern Coast. The Eurasians there mostly worked in providing fresh supplies to ships and many were the remnants of the Portuguese community. Choo (2007) elaborates that “Eurasians have been referred to as “Serani”, a word believed to have originated from Nazarani or Christian, religion being one of their identifying

characteristics, and historically have been largely English-speaking” and thus, the Eurasian settlement in Pulau Tikus became known as the “Kampung Serani” (p.134).

Historically, when Japan invaded Malaya in 1941, Penang went through heavy bombing which killed thousands of people in Georgetown (Nonis, 2014). Augustinee (1979) explains that Japanese’s hatred towards British drove them to captivate and to execute Eurasians in Penang due to their British and European ancestry. Some of the Eurasians were kept in prison in Taiping, Perak whilst some managed to escape to Singapore through acquaintances. There were also Penang Eurasians who were transported to a Bahau in Negeri Sembilan (Augustinee, 1979). Due to World War Two, many Eurasians decided to migrate to Australia, the UK and Canada and the migration pattern increased gradually when Malaya and Singapore prepared for independence from Britain (Choo, 2007).

Goh (2002) points out that the Portuguese Eurasians in Pulau Tikus is traced back to the settlement in Malacca where the Portuguese Eurasians’ identity was at stake when Kampung Serani was to be demolished by the Penang Eurasian Association due to political and economic purposes. Despite the struggle to maintain a Eurasian presence in Pulau Tikus or in Kampung Serani and that the Pulau Tikus community fought for the place, the Catholic Church went ahead and destroyed the traces of the built heritage of the Eurasian community (Choo, 2007). Many negotiations took place before the demolition of the Kampung Serani; however evidence of the existence of Kampung Serani was removed and the Penang Eurasian Association was only left with the Heritage House in Jalan Kelawai, Georgetown as the reminder of Eurasian presence in Penang (Nonis, 2014).

Nonetheless, Nonis (2014) explains that the Penang Eurasians contributed and achieved well in sports, education and music. For example, the College General and the formation of the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus as well as the St Xavier’s Institution that have been established in Penang since 1809 became important centres of Catholicism within the region (Walker, 2012). Overall, the Eurasians in Penang has gone through many challenges and might still face other obstacles to maintain their heritage as a community.

## **1.2. Language Use in Eurasian Communities**

In Malaysia, published studies on Eurasians communities are mostly related to those on language shift, language maintenance and policy. To illustrate, David and Faridah (1999) conduct a study on the language status of the Eurasians in the Portuguese settlement of Malacca in Malaysia. The study aims to determine whether the Kristang creole is going through a shift or is being maintained in the community. The results of the study show that the older generation mostly claim that Kristang is their language of use while the younger generation state that they tend to use English more frequently than their mother tongue and that they are also able to speak more languages than the elders. This shows that there is a gap between the two generations in terms of their language choice. Consequently, the language situation of the Portuguese Eurasians in Melaka indicates that the younger generation has shifted in their use of heritage language into a more dominant language such as English.

Lee (2011) further examines the Portuguese creole in Melaka and the factors that contribute to language shift and the community’s awareness towards their language situation. The findings show that the lack of perseverance for the community’s heritage language is primarily caused by economic factor.

The respondents also mentioned other factors such as historical background and socio-cultural factor as several of the reasons that have led to language shift among the Portuguese community in Malacca.

In another research, Pillai, Soh, and Kajita (2014) discuss the role of family and language policy on the Portuguese creole in Melaka and its effects on the status of their heritage language. Similar to David and Faridah (1999), they report that the younger generations' usage of the heritage language, Portuguese creole, is minimal even though all of them identified the creole as their mother tongue. Hence, the usage of the heritage language in the community is said to be declining due to the influence of dominant languages; hence the process of language shift for this creole is essentially emerging.

Yet, documented studies on the Eurasian communities in Penang have not been addressed as rigorously as the Eurasians communities in Melaka and other parts of the country.

## **2. Problem Statement**

Thomason and Kaufman (2001) claim that in a multilingual community, speakers of two or more languages have the ability to use different languages based on the addressees, settings and situations. When two or more languages are used in a community, the usage of one language will affect the usage of another language which will impact and alter both languages' status in a community. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia Official Portal (2016), the Others (which include minority ethnics such as Eurasians, Nepalese, Vietnamese and other ethnic groups) consist of only 1% of the total population in the country. As stated by May (2011), minority communities tend to express themselves or converse through a majority language that hold more power, prestige and influence which eventually causes decline on the usage of their own language. Because the Eurasian community in Penang is a very small minority group living in a multilingual society, it is highly possible that they are faced with the risk of losing their respective heritage language. Besides, the language choice of a minority group may change or alter in a certain period of time, which later might result in language shift. In the case of the Penang Eurasian, such situation must be taken into account in order for its community to view the usage of their heritage language in relevant domains.

According to Goh (2002), the incident of the demolition of the Penang Eurasian settlement, Kampung Serani in Pulau Tikus, has emphasised the historical and cultural connections between Penang's Eurasian community and the Portuguese-Eurasians of Melaka. Choo (2007) writes that the struggle of the Penang Eurasians to maintain their heritage in Penang might not be similar to those Portuguese-Eurasians in Melaka who still live in the community's settlement. This establishes different conditions between the Penang Eurasians and the other Eurasian communities in Malaysia in which the kind of network system that currently exists might not support the maintenance of their heritage language. The findings from previous studies on the language use of the Portuguese Eurasians in Melaka cannot be generalised to the Penang Eurasians as they are not living as one cohesive unit like the Eurasians in the Portuguese Settlement in Melaka. Hence, the findings of this study are essential in providing preliminary understanding of the language use and language choice of the Eurasians in Penang.

## **3. Research Questions**

The research questions that foreground the study are as listed below:

- a) What is the most preferred language of the Eurasian Community in Penang based on the domains of language use?
- b) What are the factors that determine language choice among the Penang Eurasians?
- c) To what extent does language shift take place among the Penang Eurasian community based on their language choice?

For the purpose of the study, Fishman's Domains of Language Use (1972) is incorporated to study the language choice of the Penang Eurasian community. In particular, the domain analysis framework comprises five domains that are family, friendship, education, religion and employment. This study adapted the five domains of language use and because the construct can expand utilisation of habitual language that is possibly different based on different media depending on how it is perceived, an additional domain of entertainment is also included. Therefore, this study employs six domains in total, which are the family, friendship, education, religion, employment and entertainment domains in order to address Research Question 1. Because language choice of a community may lead to language shift, Holmes' (2013) factors affecting language shift is referred to study the factors contributing to language shift. According to her, there are three main divisions in the factors contributing to language shift. They are; a) economic, social and political factors, b) demographic factors, and c) attitudes and values. These divisions are particularly used to answer Research Questions 2 and 3).

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

In particular, this study sets out to:

- (1) to identify the most preferred language of the Penang Eurasian community based on the domains of language use,
- (2) to investigate the factors that determine language choice among the Penang Eurasians and
- (3) to examine to what extent language shift takes place among the Penang Eurasian community based on their language choice.

Laruelle (2015) mentions that a Eurasian is a person who was born of a mixed Euro-Asian marriage. In this study, it is important to note that the participants are those born of a mixed Asiatic and European ancestry which defines them as Eurasians. They can be of Asiatic ancestries such as Malay, Chinese, Thai, Indian and Anglo-Indian mixed with European ancestries such as British, Portuguese, French, German, Spanish and Dutch. Consequently, the findings of the study are only limited to Penang Eurasians and therefore cannot be generalised to all Eurasian communities in Malaysia.

#### **5. Research Methods**

This study used a mixed method research design in which both qualitative data and quantitative analysis were used to analyse the findings. According to Johnson, Onwuegbuzie & Turner (2007), the mixed method research is the type of research in which the researcher combines both quantitative and qualitative method approached for broad purpose of depth and wide range of understanding. In particular, the design used in in this study is the explanatory design. It was used in this study to attain the quantitative data and then followed by the qualitative data. According to Ivankova, Creswell & Stick (2006) in this research design, the researcher first collects and analyses the quantitative data and then

qualitative data are collected and analysed second to help explain and elaborate on results obtained in the first phase.

### **5.1. Quantitative Data**

The questionnaire used in this was a sociolinguistic questionnaire that consisted of demographic data on the background of the participants, followed by items on the language choice of participants based on different domains and finally participants' attitude towards the language. As a research instrument, the questionnaire was adapted from Fishman (1966) and also Dweik, and Al-Obaidi, (2014) and was piloted before data collection was carried out. In general, the questionnaire consisted of three main sections:

- The first section of the questionnaire covered the demographic background of the participants such as gender, age, marital status, profession, education and language background.
- The second section contained questions on the respondents' language choice in different domains of language use.
- The third section included questions on the participants' attitudes towards their heritage language and the other dominant languages spoken in their community.

Using judgment sampling, the population for the study involved Eurasians who were residing in Penang. A total of 80 participants between the ages of 15 to 75 took part in the study, in which 47 of them were females and the other 33 were males. 56 of them were single whereas the remaining were married. They local Eurasians of various occupational, educational and religious backgrounds. The participants profile show that a majority of the participants (57 of them) have tertiary education, followed by 23 participants with secondary level of education. They participants basically comprised of government and private professionals, self-employed professionals, retirees and students.

### **5.2. Qualitative Data**

In terms of collecting the qualitative data, interviews were used and carried out on ten participants. The qualitative data for this research is interview in which the participants were interviewed by the researcher to collect data in order to examine whether or not the language choice of the participants is leading to language shift. Semi- structured interview questions were used to collect the qualitative data of this study. According to DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006), semi-structured interviews are often used as the data source for qualitative data. According to Longhurst (2003), although semi structure interview has a list of predetermined questions, interviews are carried out on a conversation manner offering participants the chance to explore issues that they feel important. In order to collect the information from the interview, audio recording were used to attain the data needed. The interview questions were also piloted before the interview sessions took place. In this study, the semi- structured interviews were carried out in places convenient to the participants of the study, and also in the association's heritage house. In total, 10 participants were randomly selected for the interview sessions. The interviews were then transcribed and coded. The data were analysed to support the quantitative data analysis in order to examine if the language choice of the participants of the study leads to language shift.

## 6. Findings

To begin with, the results of the study show that a majority of the participants reported English (40 participants), Portuguese (15 participants), Hokkien (7 participants) and Tamil (7 participants) as their heritage language. However, 3 participants claimed Mandarin as their heritage language and 2 considered Malay as their heritage language. Other European languages that were listed as heritage languages by the participants include French (2 participants), Spanish (2 participants), German (1 participant) and Dutch (1 participant). Because it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss each finding in greater details, the following sub-sections present only general findings and discussions in relation to the objectives of the study.

### 6.1. The Most Preferred Language of the Eurasian Communities in Penang

Table 01 shows the overall results of the Penang Eurasian participants' language choice in all the six domains selected in the study. The data illustrate that 61.05% of the participants speak English in family domain whilst 37.32% of the participants stated preference to switch between two languages or more when they are speaking to their family members. Switching between two or more languages includes the use of languages such as English, Malay, Mandarin, Tamil, Hokkien and Portuguese. Only 1.45% of the participants preferred speaking in Malay in the family domain and 0.19% mentioned switching between three languages when speaking in family domain.

In the friendship domain, most participants (51.79%) used only English as their preferred language when interacting with their friends. 1.96% of the participants chose to use only Mandarin when they are speaking with their friends whereas 1.79% speak only Malay in the friendship domain. Interestingly, close to half of the total number of participants (44.46%) highlight that they prefer to switch between two or more languages when communicating with their friends. The switches mostly involved English, Malay, Mandarin and Tamil in the friendship domain (see Table 01).

**Table 01.** Participants' Language Choice in Domains

Language/Domain	English (%)	Malay (%)	Tamil (%)	Mandarin (%)	Code-Switching (%)	Total (%)
Family	61.05	1.45	0.19	-	37.32	100
Friendship	51.79	1.79	-	1.96	44.46	100
Education	21.41	14.19	-	1.88	62.97	100
Employment	56.25	2.19	-	-	41.56	100
Religion	71.24	8.53	1.86	5.93	12.43	100
Entertainment	61.25	-	-	-	38.75	100

As illustrated in Table 0.1, the most dominant language used among the Penang Eurasian participants' (21.41%) in the education domain is the English language. 14.19% of the participants considered using Malay as their preferred language when they are communicating with the domain. Only 1.88% of them preferred to speak in Mandarin in schools. As observed in the earlier two domains, many participants (62.97%) viewed code-switching as their preferred language use when converse in the education domain. In particular, most of them cited switching between English and Malay frequently in

the education domain when conversing with the respective interlocutors. The results also reveal that more than half of the participants stated that they also code-switch more than two languages in the education domain.

From the data in Table 0.1, the results indicate that English is the choice of language among the Penang Eurasian participants in the employment domain. 56.25% of them use English, whereas 2.19% prefer to use Malay in their workplace. The remaining 41.56% participants opted to switch between languages (such as English, Malay, Mandarin, Hokkien and Tamil) when they communicate with their superiors, colleagues and clients.

Similarly, in the religion domain, most participants (71.24%) were in favour to use English as their choice of language whilst 8.53% stated that they use Malay. 5.93% and 1.86% of them prefer Mandarin and Tamil respectively when conversing in the religion domain. Yet, 12.43% of the participants maintained that they also code-switched within the religion domain. The languages that they cited to be using include switches involving English, Malay, Mandarin, Hokkien, Arabic and Tamil (see Table 01).

In the last domain, the entertainment domain, 61.25% of the participants chose English as their language choice when compared to other languages. 38.75% also switched between two or more languages when they take part in events or for different entertainment purposes. The languages stated by the participants are usually English, Malay, Mandarin, Tamil, and Spanish.

To sum up, the domains of language use based on Fishman (1972) were analysed one by one to explicate the participants' language choice in all six domains and when they are involved in different circumstances in each of the domains. However, the results of the findings clearly show that English is the most preferred the language to be used in all the domains selected. The findings of the study also show that code switching, the use of more than one language, variety, or style by a speaker within an utterance or discourse, or between different interlocutors or situations (Romaine, 1992) is also a common language choice among the Penang Eurasian participants of the study. Due to the linguistic repertoire of the participants, code switching is therefore becoming inevitable and frequent. These general findings illustrate that the instances of code-switching in all the domains have significant influences on the patterns of language use and language choice among the Eurasians in Penang. However, it is evident English has become a dominant language in the selected domains when compared to other heritage languages listed by the participants.

## **6.2. Factors that Determine Language Choice among the Eurasians in Penang**

The findings of the study suggest that the factors that determine the language choice of the Penang Eurasians are based on the domains of language use and the addressees or the people that are involved in the domains itself. Eventhough the language choice of the Penang Eurasian are mostly English, there were slight changes in their language choice in certain domains due to the interlocutors and/or situations. Wei (1994) writes that settings, interlocutors and topics are important variables that affect language choice. To illustrate, the language use in the Penang Eurasians' family domain is very much affected by the members of the family that the participants interact with, which subsequently is further defined by speech events that the participants belong to. The results of the study also show that participants speak in a different language with their father and another with their mother. This signifies that the addressee can

be one variable that influence the language choice of the Penang Eurasians. Likewise, in other domain such as the workplace, some participants claimed that they prefer to use Malay with their colleagues. Again, the findings suggest that the addressee is an important factor contributing to the language choice of Penang Eurasians.

In short, the findings of the study indicate that the factors determining the language choice of the Penang Eurasians can be drawn out from the attitude of the participants towards language. Through their attitude towards language, it can be seen that most participants stated that that they prefer English as their choice of language in terms of attaining social success and achieving economic status. This signifies that social success and economic status are influential that determine the language choice of the Penang Eurasians.

### **6.3. Language Shift among the Eurasian Communities in Penang**

Based on the semi-structured interview findings, the results specify that there is an emerging language shift among the Penang Eurasians based on their language choice. Many of them prefer English as their choice of language based on all the domains of language use. They also demonstrate a very positive attitude towards English in which they stated that English is the language that helps them in attaining social success and in achieving economic status. Pillai, Soh, and Kajita (2014) claim that the younger generation of the Portuguese Eurasians in Melaka usage of their heritage language is declining due to the influence of dominant languages. The rate of language shift in the Eurasian communities in Penang, however, might be more rapid as most of them come from diverse Eurasian backgrounds Portuguese, British, Spanish, Dutch and German. Furthermore, the Eurasians in Penang are not confined to a living compound such as the one in the Portuguese Settlement in Ujong Pasir, Melaka. As a consequence, language shift in the Penang Eurasian communities is heavily influenced by the lack of social networks that can sustain the usage of the respective heritage language.

To further elaborate, when asked about the status of their heritage language, half of the participants felt that it is either endangered or dying. The other half who claimed English as their heritage language negated that their language is dying as English is a universal language and mostly everyone knows it. As an illustration, in the interview with Participant 1, he explained that his heritage language, Portuguese, is dying since there are not many Eurasians who are willing to learn the language. He stated that:

*“Because not many of them want to learn. Not willing to learn, there are handful only that are willing to learn. Other than that, nobody bothers about it. There are people from Melaka who are willing to come out from Melaka to teach, just to spread the language, but no one is interested in bringing them up”.*

Similarly, Participant 10 also clarified that most of the Penang Eurasians are not speaking the Portuguese language anymore as she confirmed that even she does not speak that language.

*“I think yes, because most of us are not speaking Portuguese anymore. I don't even know how to speak this language. So, it feels like its slowly dying.”*

In another interview, Participant 7 claimed that her heritage language, Spanish, is dying in the Penang Eurasian communities. She mentioned that:

*“It is a sad thing, but it is happening because my father doesn’t know Spanish. Only his mother knows Spanish. In terms of my fathers’ generation, they all have already forgotten it”.*

These responses on the status of their heritage language depicts that there is an emerging language shift in the Penang Eurasian communities based on their language choice in the various domains of language use. According to Holmes (2013), the attitude and value of the people towards the language that can become influential reasons that cause of language shift. This is depicted in the interviews where most of the participants claimed that they do not know the language because they were mostly taught English by their parents. Several of the respondents also pointed out that not many in the community is using the heritage language and due to that, they are not willing to learn the heritage language. In other words, most of the participants are using English as their preferred language because it is the language that they grew up with. Lee (2011) discusses that in the case of Portuguese creole in Melaka, the lack of perseverance for the community’s ethnic language is mainly caused by economic factor and other factors such as historical background and socio-cultural factor. Similarly, these factors are also influencing the language choice of the Eurasian participants of the study. More importantly, they indicate that language shift is taking place in the Eurasian communities in Penang.

## **7. Conclusion**

All in all, the study has a few significant implications on Penang Eurasian community. The findings of the study provide the Penang Eurasians insights and awareness on their language use that is significant for future precautionary steps in order to preserve their respective heritage language and cultures. The study is also useful in terms of providing a basis of comparison between the Portuguese Eurasian community in Melaka and the Eurasian communities in Penang in terms of their language choice and language use due to their differences Portuguese ancestry (in Melaka) and a mixed Asiatic and European background (in Penang). Because the study also explicates that language shifting is taking place due to the language choice of the Penang Eurasians, the findings of the study are important in documenting the language contact phenomena among Eurasians in different regions in Malaysia.

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