
Article

Intergenerational Language Transmission Fracture in Southeast Asian Chinese Families

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Abstract: Adopting a mixed-methods approach, this study investigates the intergenerational transmission of Chinese language among 90 Chinese families in Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia and uncovers ordered heritage language loss from 1st generation monolingualism to 2nd generation receptive bilingualism to 3rd generation majority language use. On the one hand, educational policy emerges as the central structural force behind language shift, and economic pragmatism and unfolding cosmopolitan identities serve as the ideological justification for the preference for dominant languages. The article presents new notions of “ethnic authenticity anxiety” of third-generation speakers and burden of “linguistic labor” on second-generation parents, being mediators of intergenerational communication. Results indicate that multilingualism in practice, rather than strict language separation is a more realistic and promising strategy and it has implications for community-based efforts to sustain heritage language learning in rapidly modernizing Southeast Asian societies.

Keywords: intergenerational language transmission; Chinese diaspora; heritage language maintenance; family language policy; Southeast Asia

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Problem Statement

The Southeast Asian Chinese is one of the largest migratory communities in the world, varied from ancient nautical businesspeople in pre-colonial eras to skilled workers today in search for cross-border work in fast-growing regional economies. These demographic changes have given rise to multilayered linguistic ecologies in which Chinese heritage languages co-exist with national languages and global English, vying for communicative space in the home and family domain, for recent studies show that heritage language maintenance involves complex negotiations between cultural preservation imperatives and pragmatic adaptation to host society expectations [1]. The importance of family language transmission goes beyond

language ability, as it is inseparably related to identity construction, inter-generational linkage, and cultural sustainability, nonetheless there is growing evidence of the systematic attrition of Chinese language varieties in several generations when parents would have preferred for their children to be bilingual speakers of Chinese [2].

The phenomenon of language shift in Southeast Asia's Chinese communities reveals emerging developmental patterns of diminishing productive skills in heritage languages; third generation speakers in particular often show very rudimentary oral and virtually no literacy skills in ancestral Chinese while achieving native-like fluency in dominant societal languages. This linguistic transformation mirrors wider socio-political processes in the postcolonial nations of Southeast Asia that adopted linguistic policies that favour national unity through the homogenisation of language, thus creating structural impediments to minority maintenance of language, reflecting the unique challenges faced by Indonesian Chinese families in maintaining heritage languages under assimilationist policies that have historically restricted Chinese language education [3]. The interplay of family dynamics, ethnic identity negotiations, and changing cultural practices have different effects on the development of language proficiency and maintenance practices across national locations, demonstrating the necessity of a more holistic approach that can account for both macro-policy level influences, and micro-level family practices that impact the pathways of intergenerational language transmission.

1.2 Literature Review

Theoretical frameworks for heritage language transmission have developed from linear models placing emphasis on parental input to more complex ecological approaches acknowledging the multiple agents who intervene in the production of linguistic outcomes, with contextual considerations particularly reflected in recent research on family language policies in multilingual settings [4]. Recent studies of Southeast Asian Chinese language use demonstrate extensive variation in heritage language maintenance patterns, with Malaysian studies revealing how dialect-specific communities like Cantonese speakers in Ipoh face unique challenges in maintaining their linguistic heritage amid competing pressures from Mandarin standardization and national language policies [5]. The processes driving intergenerational language attrition question traditional views about the direct influence of parents, but rather

raise bi-directional effects in which children's attitudes and societal incorporation practices are redefining family language use [6].

Empirical investigations into Chinese heritage language maintenance in Singapore highlight the emotional dimensions of family language policy, revealing how parental anxieties about cultural loss intersect with pragmatic concerns about children's educational success in English-dominant systems [7]. The visual representation of linguistic hierarchies in the urban scapes of Malaysia is an empirical demonstration of the ways in which postcolonial language ideologies continues to shape multilingual practices, and the continued domination of English despite constitutionally entrenched provision for the vernacular languages [8]. These multiple research lines converge in acknowledging that heritage language retention is a complex interplay of family resources, community support structures, and larger social-political conditions that enable or limit the transmission of minority languages across generations.

1.3 Research Objectives and Significance

Focusing on the complex dynamics of such intergenerational language transmission breaks in Southeast Asian Chinese families, this study attempts to bridge the knowledge gap on how family-level language practices interact with larger social factors to shape patterns of systematic heritage language attrition. The research employs a multi-level analytical framework that recognizes the unique position of Chinese-medium schools in Malaysia as institutional bastions of heritage language maintenance, contrasting with the absence of such support in Singapore and Indonesia [9]. Drawing on new contributions to the theorization of family language policy, we bring together micro-level ethnographic evidence with macro-level policy analysis in order to reveal the multifaceted nature of the influences on language transmission outcomes [10].

The theoretical significance lies in advancing understanding of Chinese heritage language transmission in Southeast Asian contexts. The practical implications relate to evidence-based interventions that promote sustainable multilingual development supporting families' autonomous language planning choices and children's emerging identity formations.

2. Data and Methods

2.1 Research Design

This mixed-methods research examines intergenerational language transmission in 90 Chinese families residing in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia, and is intended to be representative of Southeast Asian sociolinguistic settings characterized by different language policy orientations. Whereas Malaysia has a predominantly Malay-based national framework, with constitutional guarantees of vernacular education, and Singapore an English-medium and multicultural policy backdrop, in contrast to this is Indonesia's policy of assimilation to the ethnic Chinese community and the potential outcome in terms of language maintenance at different sociopolitical pressures.

The three-generational family ideal is proposed as the main analytic construct, by which criteria for selection of participants serve to provide both cross-contextual comparability and a representative sample of the diversity of the Chinese diaspora. First-generation subjects included those who had immigrated from China before 1970 or were born to Chinese-speaking parents prior to 1960 and who had used this language predominantly throughout their lives. Second generation respondents: Respondents aged 35-55 at the time of the survey belonged to the generation of immigrants born after the move from home language to majority language as medium of instruction in the school. Third generation, however, reflect current linguistic predicaments dyed by the forces of globalization, digital communication, and emerging ethnic identity formulations.

2.2 Data Collection

The data for this study were collected through concurrent triangulation design which integrated questionnaire surveys with in-depth interviews; and ethnographic observation from January to December 2023. The broadest of these survey tools contained 92 items assessing the levels of language competence in each of four skills (speaking, listening, reading, writing) in various languages; language-specific pattern of use in all the above eight domains; language attitudes through adapted Likert-scale items from previously established sociolinguistic measures; and detailed demographic

variables including measures of educational achievement, principal occupation and extent of cross-national connections.

Table 1

Data Collection Methods and Sample Distribution Across Research Sites

Data Collection Component	Singapore	Malaysia	Indonesia	Total Sample	Data Type
Family Units Recruited	30	35	25	90 families	-
Survey Respondents					
- First Generation (G1)	28	34	23	85	Quantitative
- Second Generation (G2)	43	51	37	131	Quantitative
- Third Generation (G3)	41	48	35	124	Quantitative
Interview Participants					
- G1 Interviews (60-90 min)	15	18	12	45	Qualitative
- G2 Interviews (45-60 min)	20	22	15	57	Qualitative
- G3 Interviews (30-45 min)	18	20	14	52	Qualitative
Observation Sessions					
- Family Gatherings	12	15	10	37 events	Ethnographic
- Daily Interactions	24	28	20	72 sessions	Ethnographic
Total Data Hours	156	189	127	472 hours	Mixed
Languages	Mandarin,	Mandarin,	Mandarin,	11	-

Data Collection Component	Singapore	Malaysia	Indonesia	Total Sample	Data Type
Documented	Hokkien, Cantonese, Teochew, English	Hokkien, Cantonese, Hakka, Malay, English	Hokkien, Hakka, Indonesian, Javanese	varieties	

2.3 Analytical Methods

For quantitative analysis, multilevel modelling was conducted that took into consideration the nested nature of individuals within families and of families within countries, with language proficiency scores and usage frequency as dependent variables in regression models including individual level predictors (age, education, gender) and family level variables (socioeconomic status, heritage language vitality). Statistical procedures consisted of chi-square analyses for categorical comparisons between generations and countries, ANOVA for continuous variables with post-hoc Bonferroni adjustments, and structural equation modeling to investigate the associations between language attitudes, proficiency and transmission practices.

Qualitative data were subject to systematic thematic analysis on NVivo software, the latter by way of initial coding frameworks developed from theories of language shift and maintenance and refined following iterative engagement between theoretical literature and empirical data. The analysis process consisted of several cycles to identify underlying patterns and theoretical connections.

Triangulation approaches combined quantitative patterns with qualitative perspectives through joint displays and meta-inferences, examining convergence and divergence across data sources to develop comprehensive explanations for observed language transmission patterns.

3. Results

3.1 Three-Generation Language Use Patterns

Through examination of the patterning of language use over three generations, it is demonstrated that there is a movement from heritage language dominance to

majority language preference that bears a clear pattern of development in each site. The first generation remains strong in proficiency in their own Chinese varieties, with 92% speaking it at native level in at least one regional dialect (mostly Hokkien, Cantonese, or Hakka) and only partially in national languages of their countries. First-generation participants' use of daily language is focused on Chinese varieties in the family, while there is only transactional CS to majority languages in markets or bureaux, reflecting their migration experiences and community-based social networks.

The second generation constitutes "transitional" bilinguals whose knowledge of heritage languages is largely receptive while their knowledge of national languages is more productive, expressing a phenomenon that sociolinguists called "passive bilingualism", that is, one in which understanding is far greater than speaking. Quantitative assessments have shown that 78% of second-generation participants can comprehend Chinese speech at an intermediate or advanced level; however, only 45% are able to speak with the same level of proficiency, and even fewer (23% and 12%) can read and write Chinese at those levels, respectively. This generation manages intricate linguistic repertoires through purposeful code-switching with the use of Chinese for emotion and culture and the use of English, Malay, or Indonesian in professional exchanges and abstract thinking, a practice that reflects the double socialization the youth receive in their heritage culture and in the dominant public culture.

3.2 Factors Influencing Family Language Choice

Educational policy emerges as the predominant structural force structuring intergenerational language shift, with the most rapid attrition of the heritage language evidenced among the English-medium state system in Singapore, seconded by the monolingual Indonesian policy in Indonesia, and moderated by Malay-medium provision in the Chinese language situation in Malaysia. Second-generation parents pursue English as a sign of career benefits, and appreciate Chinese language as cultural capital, rather than for their so-cio-economic function.

Social identity negotiations are evident in complex language ideologies that posit HL as signifiers of ethnic authenticities and that, at the same time, link these to traditional, less cosmopolitan orientations that do not accord with contemporary, multicultural identities. Third generation offspring perceive heritage languages as "grandmother's tongues" that produce feelings of family warmth without being

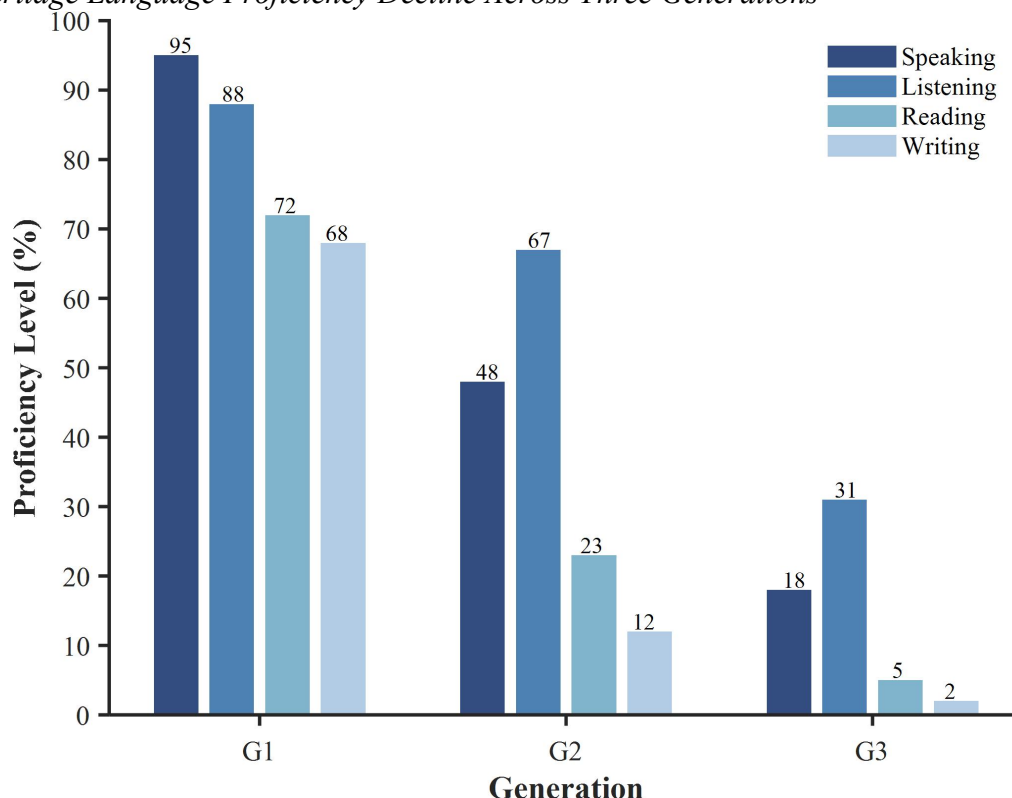
relevant to peer interactions nor digital communicative practices, resulting in the formation of what can be called compartmentalized language use in which Chinese languages are confined to ritualistic greetings and food related lexicon and all discussion in dominant languages.

3.3 Specific Manifestations of Language Transmission Fracture

Language competence levels from one generation to the next showed remarkably steep declines in the productive skills, with speaking registering on average for a 47% drop between the first and second generations and an additional 61% drop between the second and third generations, as shown in Figure 1. Contraction of Chinese domains of language use proceeds in predictable stages, from loss of literacy, to withdrawal of speech to contexts that exclude non-familial others, to receptive-only knowledge of high-frequency household words and routinised expressions.

Figure 1

Heritage Language Proficiency Decline Across Three Generations



Cultural identity indices are highly associated with language proficiency, and third-generation individuals with limited Chinese language skills also exhibit weakened ties to ceremonial cultural activities, ancestral histories, and ambivalent

ethnic identifications favouring national identity over ethnic group membership. The failure of intergenerational relationships plays out in the greater need for majority languages in the many grandparent-grandchild communication opportunities, with the resulting translation/interpretation strain placed even more on the middle generation than is already the case, in the construction of communication triangles which perpetuate the disuse of heritage language in the family system.

4. Discussion

The documented language shift patterns reveal complex interactions between state language policies and globalisation processes. Paradoxes of effort and effect came into play as the "Speak Mandarin Campaign" in Singapore accelerated the rate of dialect loss through linguistic purism in favour of standard Mandarin and as suppression policies of Chinese languages in Indonesia resulted in permanent linguistic fractures that liberalization efforts have been unable to repair. Those results correspond to Fishman's (1991) reversing language shift theory, which claims that top-down policies devoid of popular support are seldom successful in the preservation of heritage languages. The valorisation of English as transnational capital is part of a world-wide phenomenon that re-forms local linguistic hierarchies – a claim that underpinned Blommaert's (2010) notion of 'truncated multilingualism' where heritage languages become functionally limited to narrow domestic domains.

Beyond the measured drop in proficiency, interviews and assessments disclose more profound implications for the family dynamics and cultural transfer. The emergence of "ethnic authenticity anxiety" in the third generation is a new discovery which contributes to current literature on heritage speaker identity (Tse, 2000; He, 2006). This paradox becomes the source of an impasse, because linguistic barriers impede full access to one's heritage culture and phenotypical markers block full integration into the dominant group. The burden of this process is the responsibility of 2nd generation parents, and this linguistic responsibility constitutes "linguistic labor" or emotion work that keeps family communication functioning at high personal cost.

Three important points of intervention are implied here which had not been previously identified in Southeast Asian settings. First, the survival of Chinese-medium schools in Malaysia confirms that institutional support plays a role in conditioning language shift trajectories and hence provides support for

Hornberger's (2008) continua of biliteracy perspective. The second, the importance of digital media to heritage language maintenance is under researched despite the high levels of online content engagement observed for third generation participants. Third, this study also highlights that 'flexible multilingualism' is likely to be more feasible than rigorous language segregation policies noting that families develop and adopt strategies that respond to diverse linguistic pressures. Such key findings lead to context-based interventions that synergize and collaborate with families rather than oppose families' pragmatic linguistic choices.

5. Conclusion

This study on intergenerational language transmission of Southeast Asian Chinese families demonstrates a stable trend of heritage language loss that developed from first-generation monolingual Chinese dominance via second-generation receptive bilingualism to third-generation majority language monolingualism. Language shift patterns are surprisingly similar in these three countries, Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia, even though the social and political context of the three nations differ, implying that pressures of modernization and the force of globalization have similar effects on the maintenance of minority languages to varying degrees regardless of political context. Educational systems can be identified as the key institutional lever in the process of language shift, and economic pragmatism and shifting notions of cosmopolitan subjectivity are the ideological justification for the destruction of minority languages and the privileging of major over minor languages, in a mutually reinforcing spiral of assimilation.

Several methodological limitations constrain the generalizability of findings, particularly the urban bias in sample selection. The study design is cross-sectional in nature, and no causal inferences can be made and no distinction can be drawn between cohort and life-cycle effects. Longitudinal studies following individual families over longer periods in the future would provide insight into the vicissitudes of language shift and comparative studies involving rural populations and the working-class would potentially uncover different patterns of language maintenance.

The evidence concerning the fracture of language transmission requires an integrated effort at various social levels, and families need assistance to create sustained multilingual practices that are respectful of translanguaging while

consciously cultivating HL competencies through facilitated and purposeful exposure. Community organizations require assistance in updating heritage language education through the use of digital technology and culturally meaningful curricula to link linguistic ability to identity exploration and bonding across generations. Policy initiatives should identify languages so closely associated to heritage languages as resources to be used in multicultural societies, and provide institutional backing through extension of mother tongue education opportunities, recognition of these languages in the realm of examinations, and funding for community-based language maintenance programs that would contribute to cultural preservation as well as cognitive training.

Conflict of interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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