

## **UNDERSTANDING THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF CREOLE LANGUAGES IN MELAKA**

**Fazlinda Hamzah, Mohd Azlan Shah Sharifudin, Nur Asyikeen Kamarudin,  
& Anuar Sopian<sup>1</sup>**

### **ABSTRACT**

Beyond the rich history of Melaka which mainly revolves around colonisation and trading, lies the unique account of languages which are spoken only by a few members of the community. Malay, Chinese, and Indian are not the only communities who regard Melaka as their home as there are those who are known as the *peranakan* and they are Chetty, Baba Nyonya, and Melaka Portuguese communities. What is interesting about these communities is how some of them still use their own languages; Malay Chetty Creole, Baba Malay Creole, and Melaka Portuguese Creole, respectively. However, the fate of these languages is unclear. Review of literature has shown that the languages are facing language shift and the efforts for language maintenance should be undertaken seriously.

**Keywords:** *Malay Chetty Creole, Baba Malay Creole, Melaka Portuguese Creole, language maintenance*

---

<sup>1</sup> Universiti Teknologi Mara (UITM), Emel: fazlinda\_hamzah@uitm.edu.my

## **MENGENALI PERSEKITARAN BAHASA-BAHASA CREOLE DI MELAKA**

### **ABSTRAK**

Disebalik kekayaan sejarah Melaka yang kebanyakannya berkisar mengenai penjajahan dan perdagangan, terdapat bahasa yang unik yang hanya dituturkan oleh beberapa ahli masyarakat. Bahasa Melayu, Cina dan India bukan satu-satunya komuniti yang menganggap Melaka sebagai rumah mereka kerana mereka adalah yang dikenali sebagai peranakan dan mereka adalah Chetty, Baba Nyonya, dan masyarakat Portugis Melaka. Apa yang menarik tentang komuniti ini adalah bagaimana sebahagian daripada mereka masih menggunakan bahasa mereka sendiri; *Melayu Chetty Creole*, *Creole Malay Baba*, dan *Melaka Portuguese Creole*. Walau bagaimanapun, nasib bahasa-bahasa ini tidak jelas. Tinjauan kesusasteraan telah menunjukkan bahawa bahasa menghadapi perubahan bahasa dan usaha untuk penyelenggaraan bahasa harus dilakukan dengan serius.

**Kata kunci:** *Malay Chetty Creole, Baba Malay Creole, Melaka Portuguese Creole, penyelenggaraan Bahasa*

### **INTRODUCTION**

As workers from different parts of the world were shipped to work in farms in Africa, the Indian ocean region, the Orient, the Caribbean and Hawaii, it was incumbent upon these workers to work on a medium of communication that could be of assistance when it comes to interacting with the diverse community surrounding them through limited and basic speech system which has come to be known as pidgin (Bikerton, 1983). A pidgin is a basic language system which has no native speakers. As mentioned earlier, when these workers had no common language between them, they developed their own language as a means to communicate. Therefore, a pidgin is nobody's native language (Holmes, 2013).

Although pidgin is a language that comes into existence from the contribution of different languages, in terms of the sounds, the vocabulary, and the grammatical aspects, it also can develop its own unique features. As time goes by, a pidgin can develop into a creole language as it acquires native speakers. In the case of the workers in farms, the language was acquired by their children and has become their native language. While pidgin is limited in terms of its grammatical features, creole, on the other hand, is much richer in this aspect. Furthermore, the rules of creole are more uniformed among its speakers, compared to pidgin whereby the rules may vary from one speaker to another (Bikerton, 1983). Creole is able to serve a wide range of functions expected from a first language unlike pidgin which normally functions as a trade language (Holmes, 2013).

The fate of a creole, however, generally remains uncertain due to many factors. A creole can remain as a stable low variety language besides an officially standard high variety language. A creole may undergo a process called decreolisation wherein the language changes in the direction of the standard language. The creole may eventually be engulfed by the standard language. Interestingly, there is also a possibility for it to be standardised and adopted as an official language (Holmes, 2013).

In this paper, we will attempt to scrutinise creole languages which are still being used in Melaka by reviewing all the available literature on them. In doing so, we intend to learn and make predictions about the fate of creole languages in Melaka.

### *Brief History of Melaka*

As Malaysia is increasingly known around the world as Asia's cultural melting pot (Webster, 2010), it is essential to understand that the gateway that made that all happen used to be the city of Melaka (formerly known as Malacca), situated on the Strait of Malacca, in the Southern region of Peninsular Malaysia. It all began in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century when the city started to be recognised by traders as a favoured port for them to replenish their supplies of food and fresh water, and for about four more centuries thereafter, it developed into the most valuable and bustling trading port in Southeast Asia. Colonisers and merchants came and went, leaving their marks on the city as they made interactions with the locals, marrying them, and even settling down in the city. This eventually led to Melaka becoming a fascinating location which has been attracting scientists and researchers of all fields.

Nevertheless, there are a number of factors today that may not work in favour of preserving the appealing vestiges of Melaka. This is true especially in terms of the languages of the locals which were developed hundreds of years ago following the era of colonisation and trading. Therefore, this paper is interested to review studies which have been done on creole languages which are still being used in Melaka.

### *Creole Languages in Melaka*

In Melaka, there are three recognised creole languages namely, Malay Chetty Creole, Baba Malay Creole, and Melaka Portuguese Creole. Malay Chetty Creole is a language used by the Chetty community which mainly resides in Kampung Chetty, Gajah Berang, Melaka. This community came about as a result of mixed marriages between the Indian traders from South India who came to Melaka and the local women of various background such as Malays, Javanese, Bataks and Chinese (Noriah Mohamed, 2013). This happened in the years of 1402 to 1511 (Noriah Mohamed, 2009; Neo and Varghese, 2017). The community adopted Malay language and cultures but practised Hinduism. The mother tongue of the children was Malay as the mothers did not speak Tamil and it continued until the present time. According to Noriah Mohamed (2009) Malay Chetty language is a creole

language since it is used as a mother tongue and it is more sophisticated than a pidgin language. The Malay Chetty Creole can be differentiated from the other Malay dialects in a number of characteristics. These differences can be observed in the pronunciation of /a/ as [a] at word final position which is normally pronounced as /ə/ in Melaka and Johor dialects, deletion of the phoneme /r/ as in the word final position, and deletion of /h/ as in /buwa/ for /buwah/. Moreover, the diphthong /ai/ is pronounced as /e/ as in /pʌkai/ to /pʌke/ and /au/ is pronounced as /o/ as in /hʌlau/ to /hʌlo/ (Noraih Mohamed, 2009).

There are several words that are unique only to the Chetty community. These words might have been directly translated from Tamil to Chetty language as well as the combination of both languages (Uthaya Sankar SB, 2007). For example, *thiam panthal* which means canopy's pole in English and *tiang khemah* in Malay language, *pelita duduk* which refers to kerosene lamp with five edges, *kepala kuil* which means head village, *anak-anak giling* which in Malay language means *batu giling* as well as *pusing-pusing* which is the act of giving blessing using a tray. Certain lexical items are also borrowed from Tamil language such as, *teney* (a *verandah* or resting spot for guests which is located right at both sides of the door). In addition, Uthaya Sankar SB (2007) stated that some Tamil words that are used by the Chetty people have undergone semantics and phonological changes that they do not sound like Tamil words anymore. For examples, *thambolam* has become *thombolam* in Chetty language which means tray, *parusam* becomes *parisom* (engagement), *kovalei* becomes *kaboleh* (bowl), *telpah* becomes *talapa* (headgear) and *annen* becomes *aning* (brother). Probably the reason for the phonological changes is due to the ease of articulation. There are also words used by the Chetties which are taken from Chinese language such as *bimpo* which means handkerchief.

Another creole language found in Melaka is Baba Malay Creole. Baba Nyonya community was created when Chinese immigrants who came to Melaka in the 15th century were married to the local Malay women. As a result, the children of these marriages were not considered a pure Chinese but they were referred as *peranakan*. Baba Malay Creole in Melaka as compared to Baba Malay Creole in Penang contains more forms which derived from Malay language. The latter, however, mainly influenced by Penang *Hokkien* dialect (Noraih Mohamed, 2016). According to Nala Huiying Lee (2014), she noted that Baba Malay “appears to fit within the fuzzy boundaries of creolehood” (p. 379). Shellabear (1913) talked about the differences between the Malay language spoken by the Malays and the Baba Malay Creole which can be described in four aspects. The first one is many of the words exist in the Baba Malay Creole are not understood by the Malays since these words originated from Chinese origin. For example, words such as *ntia* for grandfather, *teng* for lamp and *kotoa* for a woman's purse, just to list a few. Secondly, some of the Malay words are mispronounced by the Baba Nyonya to the extent that these words are unrecognisable among the Malays such as *tinggek* for *tinggal* and *carek* for *cari*. Furthermore, they are unfamiliar with many common words used by the Malays, and lastly, they also adopted their idioms from Chinese idioms instead of Malay idioms such as *Dipiarakan sampai menjadi orang* (taken care of until he grew up).

One more creole found in Melaka is known as Melaka Portuguese Creole which is spoken by another unique community that can be found in Melaka. This community was born as a result of the conquest of Melaka by the Portuguese in 1511 which lasted for 130 years (Stefanie Pillai, Adriana Phillip, and Wen-Yi Soh, 2016). The contact between the Portuguese language and the local language has given birth to this creole. The vocabulary of this creole is mainly from the Portuguese language and some from the Malay and other languages. The creole's name as called by the community in their own language is *Papia Kristang* or simply *Kristang* (Hancock, 2009). *Kristang* is actually a Portuguese word for Christian (Baxter and Silva, 2005). According to Baxter, 1988, "The origins of Creole Portuguese in Malacca are intimately tied to the strategies that the Portuguese adopted in order to cope with a critical manpower problem in their Asian colonies. The Portuguese drew heavily on local peoples, in maritime trade and military endeavours. Missionary activities aided in creating local Christian populations of a Portuguese cultural and linguistic orientation" (p. 7). Hancock (2009) noted that the Portuguese, Dutch, Malay, English, Chinese and Indian are the main sources for the vocabulary of Melaka Portuguese Creole. Furthermore, the words in the Melaka Portuguese Creole which have been taken from the Portuguese language are derived from the archaic or dialect forms. For example, the word *arafing* which means conceit comes from archaic Portuguese *arafim*. The modern Portuguese word for it is  *vaidade*. Hancock (2009) also mentioned that Malay words are continuously adopted into the creole but altered to adapt to the syllabic structure of Melaka Portuguese Creole. For example, the word *halau* which means to shoo away is used as *alu* in Melaka Portuguese Creole.

### **The future of creole languages in Melaka**

#### *Loss of domains*

The creoles found in Melaka are unquestionably fascinating and unique and that is the reason why we have seen linguists exerting great efforts in documenting the creoles for the purpose of recording and studying the unique structures of the creoles as elemental by-products of assimilation and contact of various languages and cultures in the rich history of Melaka. However, there is also a pertinent question that needs to be answered with regard to the survival of these creoles. Will they be able to continue to survive?

All these three creoles are witnessing the number of their speakers dwindling at a worrying rate. This can be seen when the domains in which these creoles are spoken have started to diminish. Melaka Portuguese Creole, for example, was once used in church until the Second World War before it was replaced with English, Malay, and Cantonese. English is rapidly replacing the creole in the *Kristang* community. Their children have started using English at home unless they have older family members who still speak the creole at home (Baxter, 1988). Sa'adiah Ma'alip (2019) stated that through the study of the use of the creoles in family domain, all three creoles are facing deterioration of their usage. She further noted

that, although some of the elder family members can speak the creoles, they normally will not use them when speaking to the younger generation because they feel that it is more important for the children to acquire English than the creoles. The same case can be said happening to the Chetty community as its younger generation prefer to use English as their medium of communication. Although they still use the Malay Chetty Creole in the family domain, there is a growing trend to replace the creole with English. (Rahilah Omar, Nasrun Alias and Teo Kok Seong, 2016; Noriah Mohamed and Meriam Abd Karim, 2005). Coluzzi, Riget and Kitade (2018) found in their study that 79 % of the Baba Nyonya community whom they have interviewed still use Baba Malay Creole in the family domain, followed closely by English which is 76.7 %. However, the findings from the study also showed that “The overall tendency is to use mostly Baba Malay with grandparents (90.6 %), whereas the use of the heritage language gradually decreases in parallel with the decrease of the age of the interlocutors” (p. 122). This shows that mainly, the younger generation of Baba Nyonya community will only use the creole if they speak to their grandparents. In addition, the study also demonstrated that English and Chinese varieties have started to replace the creole in other domains especially in the formal domains. This shows that all of the creoles are actually losing their speakers especially among the younger generation.

#### *Loss of speakers due to community settlement issues*

Another important factor that is worth to be noted when looking at the decreasing number of speakers is the location. The locations where these communities live are actually shrinking. The location is an important factor for the speakers if they are to maintain their creoles. This is because when they live close together, it provides them with more opportunity to use the language among themselves. The Chetty community settlement in Gajah Berang, known as Kampung Chetty is facing challenges in various ways. One of them is the development that is ongoing around the settlement. Uthaya Sankar SB (2013) lamented the fact that the Melaka government are allowing the development in a gazetted area such as Kampung Chetty. Two blocks of condominium, a multi-storey car park, and a hotel are among the projects approved by the government of Melaka. These projects are extremely close to the location of Muthu Mariamman Temple which is located in the heart of the settlement. Furthermore, the settlement is also shrinking because the younger generation of the community choose to leave and settle down at other places. This definitely has limited their opportunity to use the creole.

Kristang community also face the same issues related to land. In fact, the land issues have started in the late 40s (Ei Leen Lee, 2011). The reclamation project close to the Kristang settlement has threatened the livelihood of a number of older generations in Kristang community. Laub (2018) stated that a number of Kristang community members “rely on fishing to make a living, and they are at risk of losing their shoreline. Although some proposed plans include a canal to connect the settlement to the sea, the construction of the islands has altered the tidal flow of the area, making it harder to fish closer to the shore” (p.6). Furthermore, the younger

generation of the community choose to migrate for work. The traditional work for the Kristang community as fisherman is no longer an attractive choice especially to the Kristang younger generation. These socioeconomic impacts are definitely leaving a strain on the maintenance of their creole.

#### *Perception towards the creoles*

Noriah Mohamed and Meriam Abd Karim (2005), in their research, found out that the Chetty community members generally have positive perception towards their creole and they have the intention to learn and use the creole in their everyday life. However, this positive attitude towards the creole is not align with their effort to actually learn the language. They noted that only little effort is put by the community members to learn the creole. As for Kristang community, Stefanie Pillai, Wen-Yi Soh and Yunisrina Qismullah Yusuf (2015) found out in their study that the members of this community also have positive attitude towards their creole, which is Melaka Portuguese Creole. However, the positive attitude does not correspond to their use of the creole. They also note that having a positive attitude towards the creole does not guarantee that the members of the community will take serious effort or action to maintain their creole. Ei Leen Lee (2011) in her research stated that through her interviews with the community members, she concluded that the community has a 'laid back' attitude towards the preservation of the creole which is equally damaging to the maintenance of the language. For the Baba Nyonya community, although the use of Baba Malay Creole is decreasing in their everyday life, this does not mean they have negative attitude towards the language. Interestingly, several respondents from the Baba Nyonya community in Sa'adiah Ma'alip and Rahilah Omar's (2018) study stated that they are embarrassed to communicate using the creole because they are not well versed in the language. Coluzzi, Riget and Kitade (2018) observed that the community has a positive attitude towards the language whereby they would like to learn and improve their Baba Nyonya Creole as they see the creole as part of their identity as the Baba Nyonya community.

#### *The maintenance of the creoles*

As strange as it may sound, according to Baxter (1988), in the past, the social separation of Melaka Portuguese Creole speakers had provided a good opportunity for them to maintain their language. Actually, this is also true for other creoles to survive the language shift. However, this is impossible for the current situation. English has begun to infiltrate the homes of these speakers. Many of the speakers have moved out from their traditional settlements. Therefore, several serious steps should be taken to ensure the survival of the creoles. Baxter (1988) suggested to the Kristang community to start their own newsletter. This offers them with a good opportunity to actually use the language not just orally but in a written form. Furthermore, with the advancement of technology, Haja Mohideen (2010) proposed that these communities to have their own websites which contain information about

their communities and languages. This is a very sound suggestion not only for the benefit of the community themselves but also for anybody who is interested in to learn about their communities and languages. In addition, a change in the perspective by the younger generation should also be encouraged. As mentioned by Haja Mohideen (2008), the younger generation should be made aware that all languages are intrinsically and linguistically equal to one another. With this in mind, they will have a more positive attitude towards their creole and thus multilingualism can be promoted. Moreover, Sa'adah Ma'alip (2019) recommended that language classes to be conducted at the community settlements as a platform for the community members to brush up their knowledge of their own creoles.

## **CONCLUSION**

Undeniably, the creole languages in Melaka; Malay Chetty Creole, Baba Malay Creole and Melaka Portuguese Creole are very unique and valuable to the country. The efforts to preserve and maintain the languages, however, is not an easy task. With a number of factors, such as assimilation and socioeconomic effects, among others, the language shift is not something unavoidable. However, there should be an ongoing effort at least to record the languages so that learning the languages will be viable to the future generations of these communities and others. With the use of technology, the channel to learn the languages can be made accessible to others who are interested in the languages although they are not within the confined of the settlements. It is also important to note that one of the reasons for the language shift among the speakers is the lack of economic value of the creoles. However, these creoles are the cultural identity of these unique community and all languages should be viewed as equal.

## **REFERENCES**

- [1] Baxter, A.N. (1988). *A Grammar of Kristang (Malacca creole Portuguese)*. Pacific Linguistics: The Australian National University.
- [2] Baxter, A.N. and De Silva, P. (2005). *A dictionary of Kristang (Malacca creole Portuguese)*. Pacific Linguistics: The Australian National University.
- [3] Bickerton, D. (1983). Creole languages. *Scientific American*, 249(1), 116-122.
- [4] Coluzzi, P. Riget, P. N. & Kitade, R. (2018). Is the Baba Nyonya a doomed minority? A preliminary study on the vitality of Baba Malay in Melaka, Malaysia. *Grazer Linguistische Studien*, 89, 111-139.
- [5] Haja Mohideen (2010). The maintenance of malaysia's minority languages. Retrieved October 15, 2019, from [http://irep.iium.edu.my/9829/4/ICMM2010\\_p27.pdf](http://irep.iium.edu.my/9829/4/ICMM2010_p27.pdf)
- [6] Haja Mohideen & Shamimah Mohideen. (2008). Survival of the minority Kristang language in Malaysia. Retrieved October 15, 2019, from <http://www.languageinindia.com/july2008/kristanmalaysia.pdf>
- [7] Hancock, I. (2009). The Portuguese creoles of Malacca. *Revue Romaine de Linguistique*, 3(4), 295-306.



- [8] Holmes, J. (2013). *An introduction to sociolinguistics*. Pearson Education Limited: New York
- [9] Laub, R. (2018). *Kristang: Anatomy of a unique Malaysian language*. Retrieved October 24, 2019 from <https://newnaratif.com/research/kristang-an>
- [10] Lee, E. L. (2011) Language maintenance and competing priorities at the Portuguese settlement, Malacca. *Ritsumeikan Journal of Asia Pacific Studies*, 30, 77-99.
- [11] Ma'alip, S. (2019). Tahap keterancaman bahasa masyarakat kreol di Melaka. *Akademika*, 89(1), 109-123.
- [12] Nala Huiying Lee. (2014). *A grammar of Baba Malay with sociophonetic considerations*. The University Of Hawai'i At Manoa: Hawai'i.
- [13] Ndumbe III, K. P. (2007). Raising citizen awareness in the learning of African languages: approach and experience of the Africavenir Foundation in Cameroon. Alexander, A. & Busch, B. (eds), *Literacy and linguistic diversity in a global perspective: an intercultural exchange with African countries*, Strasbourg Cedex: European Centre for Modern Languages, Council of Europe Publishing, pp. 39-48.
- [14] Neo, D. & Varghese, M. (2017). Identity politics of being and becoming of the Chetti Melaka in Singapore. *Pertanika Journals Social Sciences & Humanities*, 25 (1), 337 – 352.
- [15] Noriah Mohamed & Meriam Abd. Karim (2005). Penggunaan bahasa Melayu kreol Chetti Melaka: Satu analisis domain. *Jurnal Bahasa* 5(1), 1 – 50.
- [16] Noriah Mohamed (2016). Hybrid language and identity among the Samsam, Baba Nyonya and Jawi Peranakan communities. *Kemanusiaan*, 23 (1) ,1–23.
- [17] Noriah Mohamed. (2009) The Malay Chetty creole language of Malacca: A historical and linguistic perspective. *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 82 (1) 55-70.
- [18] Pillai S., Phillip A., Soh WY. (2016) Revitalizing Malacca Portuguese Creole. In: Trifonas P., Aravossitas T. (eds) *Handbook of Research and Practice in Heritage Language Education*. Springer International Handbooks of Education. Springer, Cham.
- [19] Pillai, S., Soh, W.-Y, & Yusuf, Y. Q. (2015). Perceptions about one's heritage language: The case of the Acehnese in Kampung Aceh and Malacca Portuguese-Eurasians in the Portuguese settlement in Malaysia. *Kemanusiaan*. 22(2), 67 – 92.
- [20] Rahilah Omar, Nasrun Alias & Seong, T. K. (2016). Pemilihan bahasa masyarakat Chetti di Melaka. *Jurnal Melayu*, 15 (2), 211-222.
- [21] Sa'adiyah Ma'alip & Rahilah Omar. (2018) Penguasaan bahasa Baba-Nyonya dalam kalangan masyarakat Baba-Nyonya di Melaka. *Jurnal Melayu*, 17 (2), 312-327.
- [22] Shellabear, W. G. (1913). *Baba Malay: An introduction to the language of the straits-born Chinese*. *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 65, 49-63.
- [23] Uthaya Sankar SB. (2007). Wajah Malaysia dalam budaya Chetti. *Dewan Budaya*, 29(3): 10-13.
- [24] Uthaya Sankar SB. (2013). Kekalkan keunikan Chetti Melaka. *Malay Mail Online*. Retrieved October 04, 2019, from <https://www.malaymail.com/news/opinion/2013/12/29/kekalkan-keunikan-chetti-melaka/589033>.
- [25] Webster, G. (2010, October 26). Malaysia: Asia's cultural melting pot. *CNN*. Retrieved from <http://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/asiapcf/10/22/malaysia.country.profile/index.html>.