

Language Choice in the Malaysia-Thailand Border: A Domain-based Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to identify the *lingua franca* at the border of Malaysia-Thailand via the domain concept introduced by Fishman (1972). This concept proposes several domains such as family, business, neighbourhood, friendship, work and religion, which can be used as the basis for studies on language choice in multilingual communities such as the Malaysia-Thailand community. This study focuses on business, family and tourism domains because the Malaysia-Thailand border, i.e. Rantau Panjang and Golok are popular shopping destinations. Data for the research were collected through questionnaires distributed to respondents in the Malaysia-Thailand border. Findings of the research show that respondents from Malaysia use different languages when they communicate with those from Thailand. The respondents in the 20-40 age range are more inclined to choose Kelantanese Malay dialect, Thai language or Chinese. However, older respondents (above 40 years) choose only Kelantanese Malay dialect. These results show that language choice at the Malaysia-Thailand border is influenced by the age of the respondents. The findings also show that respondents from Malaysia and Thailand are more inclined to choose Kelantanese Malay dialect in family domain. This shows that Kelantanese Malay dialect functions as the *lingua franca* at the Malaysia-Thailand border as opposed to Thai language.

In other words, the Thai respondents have assimilated with the Malay community at the Malaysia-Thailand border.

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INTRODUCTION

Language choice occurs when there is more than one language or different languages are being used in a community with members of various backgrounds, native languages, cultures and ways of life (Fishman, 1972). Members of the community will choose a language as the *lingua franca* between them in their daily life (Fishman, 1972; Holmes, 2001; Asmah, 2006; Mohammed Azlan, 2010).

Generally, a study on language choice has to consider the languages used in a multilingual society (Chambers, 2002; Borbely, 2005). One language will be chosen as the *lingua franca* in such communities and this is witnessed at the Malaysia-Thailand border communities. In specific, this paper seeks to determine the dominant language or the *lingua franca* at the Malaysia-Thailand border and the social variables influencing the choice. Towards that end, this paper will apply the concept *who speaks what language to whom and when* introduced by Fishman (1972). Fishman notes that studies on language choice should take into consideration the languages used in a community with speakers of various native languages. This is in line with the aim of this paper that seeks to analyze the language choices of communities at the Malaysia-Thailand border, who are made up of different races and use various languages by focusing on three domains, namely, business, family and tourism domains.

Generally, this paper is of exploratory nature as it seeks to explore information on language choice at the border and

across the border. The exploratory concept is appropriate in the linguistic field as it now focuses on research that has transformative and innovative features. In this context, transformation refers to changes and innovation relates to new and current elements. The combination of social variables with language usage points to interdisciplinary nature of this research – which is one of the elements of transformation.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The Malaysia-Thailand border is an area that connects communities from two countries and members from these communities interact with each other on a daily basis. In such a situation, a language has to be chosen in order for them to communicate with each other and the language chosen must be a language that is understood and widely used by all (Asmah, 2003, 2004b; Mohammed Azlan, 2010).

Based on that premise, this paper seeks to identify the dominant language used at the Malaysia-Thailand border. Fishman (1972), Ervin-Tripps (1972) and Asmah (2004a) state that language choice is the norm in a multilingual community. Therefore, each individual from Malaysia or Thailand and from different backgrounds will choose a language or languages in order for them to communicate with other.

THE CONCEPT OF DOMAIN

The concept of domain, as introduced by Fishman (1972, pp. 435-453) and in relation to language choice phenomenon that occurs

in multilingual societies and his explanation, concentrates on the relationship between the linguistics aspects and social categories (Asmah, 2004a). He notes that domain refers to the social categories that are typically controlled by a set of conventional actions. He explains the connection as:

...regardless of their number, in terms of institutional contexts and their congruent behavioral co-occurrences. They attempt to summate the major clusters of interaction that occur in clusters of multilingual setting and involving clusters of interlocuters. Domains enable us to understand that language choice and topic, appropriate though they may be for analyses of individual behavior at the level of face-to-face verbal encounters, are, as we suggested above, related to widespread socio-cultural norms and expectations.

(Fishman, 1972, p. 442)

Based on the aforementioned concept, topic, role and place, along with the language chosen, are among the factors contributing to the formation of domain. For example, if a mother talks with her child on issues regarding family matters (topic) at home (background), the domain identified will be family domain.

According to Fishman (1972), there are various factors contributing to building the concept of domain. Asmah (1991a, 1991, 2004a) also asserts that some of the

factors that assist in building a domain are environment, types of occupation, food, cultural and social systems, arts, customs, religion, education and gender. Based on the different factors that make up a domain, the total number of domains in each community would therefore vary. For example, Schmidt-Rohr (in Gumperz & Hymes, 1972) studied German speakers before World War II and identified nine domains, which included family, playing field, school, church, arts, newspaper, military, court and government administration. Fasold (1984), on the other hand, identified eight domains and these were family, friendship, neighbourhood, business, school, occupation, government and religion. It seems that family domain is a typical domain. This study concentrates on business, family and tourism domains as the research site chosen (Malaysia-Thailand border) is a popular tourists destination for shopping.

RESEARCH LOCATION

Four towns were chosen for this study on language choice at the Malaysia-Thailand border. The towns chosen are Tumpat (Pengkalan Kubur) and Pasir Mas (Rantau Panjang) on the Malaysian side and Golok and Tabai represent the Thailand border towns.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research is at its initial stage and we have concluded a pilot study involving 30 respondents at the Malaysia-Thailand border. The data on language of the respondents were gathered from the questionnaires

distributed. The questionnaire is divided into two; Sections A aims to attain the respondents' social and background information by using questions on age, race, gender, occupation, level of education and the respondent's first language. Section B aims to obtain information on the language choice of the respondents; for example Malay language, Thai language, English, Chinese, Tamil, *bahasa rojak* or the Kelantanese dialect. *Bahasa rojak* in this case refers to a mixed language where the participants in the language situation are able to communicate in two or more languages (Asmah, 2007; Choi & Chong, 2007). From our observations in this study, *bahasa rojak* used by the respondents is a mixture of the Kelantanese dialect and Thai language. Therefore, the list of languages reflects the various language choices that the respondents could choose as their *lingua franca* at the Malaysia-Thailand border (refer to Appendix A – Questionnaire).

We prepared two sets of questionnaires for the Malaysian and Thai respondents. Each item in the questionnaire is categorized according to domain, language choice and country. As this study focuses on business, tourism and family domains, the questions on language choice focused on situations on buying-selling, visiting and matters pertaining to family.

The concept of domain applied in this study refers to *who speaks what language to whom and when*, as proposed by Fishman (1972). *Who speaks* refers to the sellers or vendors at the Malaysia-Thailand border who choose a language (*what language*)

when they speak to anyone (*to whom*) and the setting or context of the conversation such as at the business premise or at home (*when*). Holmes (2001) states that an individual will choose a language as the *lingua franca* in a multilingual community. The choices made are influenced by social factors such as with whom one speaks to, the social contact, function and topic of conversation. In essence, the different choices of language reflect that different languages are used in different situations such as occupation, location, time and topic. In addition, there are also language choices that represent different social classes (economic, education, race) in the same language community (Ervin-Tripp, 1972; Mohammed Azlan Mis, 2011). Therefore, language choice exists when various languages are available in the communication repertoire of a community. This entails that a speaker in a community has to choose the appropriate language based on the topic, situation and interlocutor.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The tables below exhibit the language choices of the respondents at the Malaysia-Thailand border in family, tourism and business domains.

Business Domain

In the business domain, the respondents choose several languages for communication purposes. The findings for the respondents from Malaysia and Thailand will be presented separately.

Malaysian Respondents

The table 1 shows the percentages of language choice by the Malaysian respondents in the business domain.

In the business domain, the Malaysian respondents chose five languages for communication purposes. The findings below indicate that the total number of language choices in the business domain:

- a. 2 (6.7%) chose Malay language.
- b. 3 (10%) chose Thai language.
- c. 5 (16.7%) chose Chinese language.
- d. 8 (26.7%) chose *bahasa rojak*.
- e. 12 (40%) chose the Kelantanese dialect.

In the business domain, the Malaysian respondents chose the Kelantanese dialect as the main language choice, that is 12 (40%) as compared to other languages. This indicates that the Kelantanese dialect has a commercial value among those who conduct

their businesses at the Malaysia-Thailand border. In fact, the Kelantanese dialect is the most common choice as it makes business transactions easier.

Thai Respondents

Table 2 shows the percentage of language choice by the Thai respondents in the business domain.

In the business domain, the Thai respondents chose three languages for communication purposes, namely:

- a. 15 (50%) chose Thai language.
- b. 7 (23.3%) chose *bahasa rojak*.
- c. 8 (26.7%) chose tje Kelantanese dialect.

Compared to the Malaysian respondents, the Thai respondents are more inclined to choose Thai language in their business transactions. This shows that the business traders at the Malaysia-Thailand border are competent in at least two languages.

TABLE 1
Malaysian Respondents for Business Domain

Business Domain	Language/dialect							Overall Total
	Malay	Thai	English	Chinese	Tamil	<i>Bahasa Rojak</i>	Kelantanese	
Total	2	3	0	5	0	8	12	30
Percentage (%)	6.7	10	0	16.7	0	26.7	40	100

TABLE 2
Thai Respondents in the Business Domain

Business Domain	Language/dialect							Overall Total
	Malay	Thai	English	Chinese	Tamil	<i>Bahasa Rojak</i>	Kelantanese	
Total	0	15	0	0	0	7	8	30
Percentage (%)	0	50	0	0	0	23.3	26.7	100

Based on the informal interviews with the traders at Rantau Panjang, the authors were informed that the traders understand and are able to speak basic Thai. It is therefore not surprising that Thai language is the preferred language in the business domain.

Tourism Domain

The findings on the language choice of the Malaysian and Thai respondents in the tourism domain will be elaborated in the next section.

Malaysian Respondents

Table 3 below shows the percentage of language choice by the Malaysian respondents in the tourism domain.

In the tourism domain, the findings indicate that the Malaysian respondents chose five languages, namely:

- a. 3 (10%) chose Malay language.
- b. 5 (16.7%) chose Thai language.

- c. 5 (16.7%) chose Chinese language.
- d. 8 (26.7%) chose *bahasa rojak*.
- e. 9 (30%) chose the Kelantan dialect.

In the tourism domain, the main language chosen by the Malaysian respondents is the Kelantanese dialect. This is similar with the findings in the business domain and this indicates that the Kelantanese dialect is the *lingua franca* at the Malaysia-Thailand border. It is also interesting to note that *bahasa rojak* records a high percentage of usage among the respondents for business transactions and tourism. *Bahasa rojak*, which is a mixture of the Kelantanese dialect and Thai language, is widely used at the Malaysia-Thailand border because not all of the traders are able to speak Thai competently, especially those who are 40 years and older. Based on the informal interviews, only speakers who are in the 18-20 years are able to speak fluent Thai

TABLE 3
Malaysian Respondents in the Tourism Domain

Tourism Domain	Language/dialect							Overall Total
	Malay	Thai	English	Chinese	Tamil	<i>Bahasa Rojak</i>	Kelantanese	
Total	3	5	0	5	0	8	9	30
Percentage (%)	10	16.7	0	16.7	0	26.7	30	100

TABLE 4
Thai Respondents in the Tourism Domain

Tourism Domain	Language/dialect							Overall Total
	Malay	Thai	English	Chinese	Tamil	<i>Bahasa Rojak</i>	Kelantanese	
Total	0	10	0	0	0	10	10	30
Percentage (%)	0	33.33	0	0	0	33.33	33.33	100

as they frequently ply the border between Malaysia and Thailand.

Thai Respondents

Table 4 shows the percentage of language choice of the Thai respondents in the tourism domain.

In the tourism domain, the Thai respondents chose three languages and the three languages are:

- a. 10 (33.33%) chose Thai language.
- b. 10(33.33%) chose bahasa rojak.
- c. 10 (33.33%) chose the Kelantanese dialect.

It is interesting to note that an equal number of the Thai respondents selected Thai language or *bahasa rojak* or the Kelantanese dialect as their language choice. It can be inferred that the Kelantanese dialect and *bahasa rojak* are competing for a position with the Thai language.

However, the situation is reversed with the Malaysian respondents who are more inclined to choose the Kelantanese dialect or *bahasa rojak* dialect as compared to other languages in their repertoire. The findings also show that the Thai respondents have lesser number of language choice compared to the Malaysian respondents who have 5 (language choices).

Family Domain

The last domain presented in this study is the family domain. The family domain denotes whatever aspects or activities conducted with family members.

Malaysian Respondents

Table 5 below presents the percentage of language choice of the Malaysian respondents in the family domain.

In the family domain, the Malaysian respondents chose four languages for communication purposes, as follows:

TABLE 5
Malaysian Respondents in the Family Domain

Family Domain	Language/ dialect							Overall Total
	Malay	Thai	English	Chinese	Tamil	<i>Bahasa Rojak</i>	Kelantanese	
Total	0	6	0	3	0	9	12	13
Percentage (%)	0	23.07	0	7.69	0	30.77	38.47	100

TABLE 6
Thai Respondents in the Family Domain

Family Domain	Language/dialect							Overall Total
	Malay	Thai	English	Chinese	Tamil	<i>Bahasa Rojak</i>	Kelantanese	
Total	0	0	0	0	0	15	15	30
Percentage (%)	0	0	0	0	0	50	50	100

- a. 6 (23.07%) chose Thai language.
- b. 3 (7.69%) chose Chinese language.
- c. 9 (30.77%) chose *bahasa rojak*.
- d. 12 (38.47%) chose the Kelantan dialect.

In the family domain, 38.47% of the Malaysian respondents chose the Kelantanese dialect as their lingua franca. This shows that the Kelantanese dialect is the preferred language at home. It is also interesting that *bahasa rojak* recorded a high percentage of usage at home, recording around 23.07%. This result also indicates that majority of the Malaysian respondents at the Malaysia-Thailand border are bilingual.

Thai Respondents

Table 6 shows the percentage of language choice by the Thai respondents in the family domain.

In the family domain, the Thai respondents chose two languages for communication purposes and details are as follows:

- a. 15 (50%) chose *bahasa rojak*.
- b. 15 (50%) chose the Kelantanese dialect.

An equal number of the respondents chose *bahasa rojak* and the Kelantanese dialect in the family domain. This indicates that Thai language is not used at all by the Thai respondents in the family domain. It, therefore, implies that the Thai respondents in this study have assimilated with the community at the Malaysia-Thai border. The assimilation process can be attributed to the mixed marriages between the communities at the border. Hence, the choices of *bahasa rojak* and the Kelantanese dialects by the respondents.

SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

Table 7 shows the overall findings of language choice of the respondents at the Malaysia-Thailand border in all the three domains.

The respondents living in the Malaysia-Thailand border in this study have a strong tendency to choose the Kelantanese dialect as their *lingua franca*, while their second choice is *bahasa rojak*, followed by Thai language, Chinese language and finally the standard Malay. However, the respondents do not speak English and Tamil at all.

TABLE 7
The Overall Findings of Language Choice at the Malaysia-Thailand Border

Language Choice	Language/dialect							Overall Total
	Malay	Thai	English	Chinese	Tamil	<i>Bahasa Rojak</i>	Kelantanese	
Total	5	39	0	13	0	57	66	180
Percentage (%)	2.8	21.7	0	7.2	0	31.7	36.6	100

CONCLUSION

In the study on the language choice at the Malaysia-Thailand border, the languages that have been identified as the *lingua franca* are the Kelantanese dialect and Thai language. The respondents from Malaysia have overwhelmingly chosen Kelantanese dialect in all the domains investigated, whereas, the respondents from Thailand are more inclined to choose Thai language and *bahasa rojak* in the business and tourism domains. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that Thai language is not used at all by the Thai respondents in the family domain.

This research on language choice at the Malaysia-Thailand border shows the respondents' various language choices. This preliminary report has successfully shown that the Kelantanese dialect is the most dominant language because it is used in all the domains identified by the respondents from both countries. This indirectly points to the fact that the Kelantanese Malay dialect has crossed the race and geographical boundaries. The ability of the communities at the Malaysia-Thailand border to use more than one language indicates that transformation has taken place, for 'survival' and to blend-in with the local communities. A follow-up study on the process of the transformation of language usage at the Malaysia-Thailand border and with higher number of respondents would certainly be able to prove this claim.

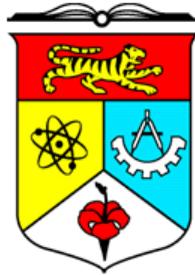
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APPENDIX A

QUESTIONNAIRE FORM



UNIVERSITI
KEBANGSAAN
MALAYSIA
National University of Malaysia

Soal selidik ini bertujuan untuk mengenal pasti pilihan bahasa dalam perhubungan seharian yang digunakan oleh komuniti di sempadan Malaysia-Thailand. Kajian ini dilakukan bagi memenuhi projek penyelidikan ERGS/1/2011/SSI/UKM/02/9 “Tinjauan Rintis Lingua Franca di Sempadan Malaysia-Thailand Berdasarkan Model Sociolinguistik”. Diharap anda menjawabnya dengan jujur.

MALAYSIA-THAILAND

BAHAGIAN A

Umur	21-40 tahun	[]
	41 - 55 tahun	[]
	56 ke atas	[]
Kerakyatan	MALAYSIA	[]
	THAILAND	[]
Jantina	Lelaki	[]
	Perempuan	[]
Bahasa Pertama	Bahasa Melayu	[]
	Bahasa Cina	[]
	Bahasa Tamil	[]
	Bahasa Thai	[]
	Dialek Melayu Kelantan	[]
	Lain	[]
	Nyatakan: _____	

BAHAGIAN B

Tandakan [✓] pada jawapan yang berkenaan.

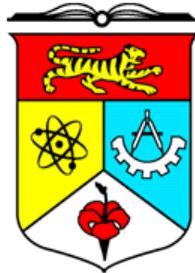
Domain Perniagaan	Apakah bahasa pilihan anda ketika berinteraksi dengan orang Thai yang sedang membeli-belah di Kelantan (sempadan Malaysia-Thailand)?						
Pilihan Bahasa Responden	Bahasa Melayu	Bahasa Thai	Bahasa Inggeris	Bahasa Cina	Bahasa Tamil	Bahasa Rojak	Dialek Kelantan

Domain Keluarga	Apakah bahasa pilihan anda ketika berinteraksi dengan orang Thai yang menziarahi ahli keluarga di Kelantan (sempadan Malaysia-Thailand)?						
Pilihan Bahasa Responden	Bahasa Melayu	Bahasa Thai	Bahasa Inggeris	Bahasa Cina	Bahasa Tamil	Bahasa Rojak	Dialek Kelantan

Domain Pelancongan	Apakah bahasa pilihan anda ketika melancong (sempadan Malaysia-Thailand)?						
Pilihan Bahasa Responden	Bahasa Melayu	Bahasa Thai	Bahasa Inggeris	Bahasa Cina	Bahasa Tamil	Bahasa Rojak	Dialek Kelantan

APPENDIX B

QUESTIONNAIRE FORM



UNIVERSITI
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THAILAND-MALAYSIA

BAHAGIAN A

Umur	21-40 tahun	[]
	41 - 55 tahun	[]
	56 ke atas	[]
Kerakyatan	MALAYSIA	[]
	THAILAND	[]
Jantina	Lelaki	[]
	Perempuan	[]
Bahasa Pertama	Bahasa Melayu	[]
	Bahasa Cina	[]
	Bahasa Tamil	[]
	Bahasa Thai	[]
	Dialek Melayu Kelantan	[]
	Lain	[]
	Nyatakan: _____	

BAHAGIAN B

Tandakan [✓] pada jawapan yang berkenaan.

Domain Perniagaan	Apakah bahasa pilihan anda ketika berinteraksi dengan orang Thai yang sedang membeli-belah di Kelantan (sempadan Malaysia-Thailand)?						
Pilihan Bahasa Responden	Bahasa Melayu	Bahasa Thai	Bahasa Inggeris	Bahasa Cina	Bahasa Tamil	Bahasa Rojak	Dialek Kelantan

Domain Keluarga	Apakah bahasa pilihan anda ketika berinteraksi dengan orang Thai yang menziarahi ahli keluarga di Kelantan (sempadan Malaysia-Thailand)?						
Pilihan Bahasa Responden	Bahasa Melayu	Bahasa Thai	Bahasa Inggeris	Bahasa Cina	Bahasa Tamil	Bahasa Rojak	Dialek Kelantan

Domain Pelancongan	Apakah bahasa pilihan anda ketika melancong (sempadan Malaysia-Thailand)?						
Pilihan Bahasa Responden	Bahasa Melayu	Bahasa Thai	Bahasa Inggeris	Bahasa Cina	Bahasa Tamil	Bahasa Rojak	Dialek Kelantan