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AND MULTILINGUALISM IN EDUCATION

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Game Theory and Strategic Choice among Hakka, Standard Mandarin, English, and Malay in East Malaysia

Su-Hie Ting, Esther Jawing and Teresa Wai See Ong

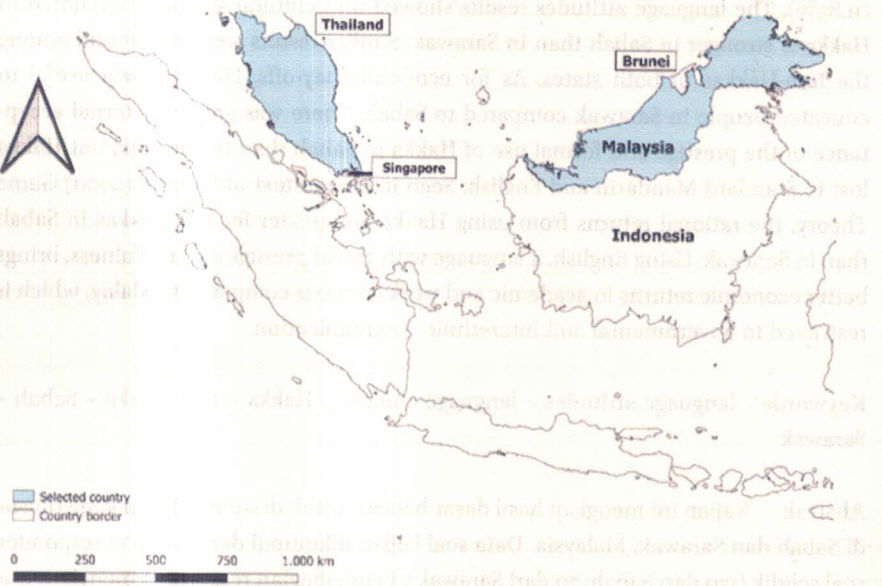
Abstract This study examined language policy outcomes for the Hakka diaspora in Sabah and Sarawak, Malaysia. The data for the study were from 200 questionnaire respondents (130 from Sabah; 70 from Sarawak). The distribution of respondents according to Hakka origin was 95 Hakka and 105 non-Hakka. This questionnaire obtained data on 11 language-use situations and three dimensions of language attitudes. The results showed that the Hakka in Sabah spoke Hakka in more situations than those in Sarawak (17.08%). However, the situation was reversed for non-Hakka Chinese because Hakka was used minimally in Sabah (3.79%) compared to Sarawak (11.83%). The language attitudes results showed that cultural solidarity anchored in Hakka is stronger in Sabah than in Sarawak. Similar results were also found among the non-Hakkas in both states. As for economic pay-offs, Hakka is less useful to educated people in Sarawak compared to Sabah. There was greater external acceptance of the prestige and formal use of Hakka in Sabah than in Sarawak, but Hakka lost to Standard Mandarin and English. Seen in the context of Laitan's (2000) Game Theory, the rational returns from using Hakka are greater for the Hakkas in Sabah than in Sarawak. Using English, a language with global prestige and usefulness, brings better economic returns in academic and work contexts compared to Malay, which is restricted to governmental and interethnic communication.

Keywords language attitudes – language choices – Hakka – non-Hakka – Sabah – Sarawak

Abstrak Kajian ini mengkaji hasil dasar bahasa untuk diaspora Hakka yang tinggal di Sabah dan Sarawak, Malaysia. Data soal kajian dikumpul daripada 200 responden soal selidik (130 dari Sabah; 70 dari Sarawak). Pembahagian responden mengikut asal usul Hakka adalah 95 Hakka dan 105 bukan Hakka. Soal selidik ini memperoleh data mengenai 11 situasi penggunaan bahasa dan tiga dimensi sikap bahasa. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa Hakka di Sabah bercakap Hakka dalam lebih banyak situasi (20.67%) daripada Hakka di Sarawak (17.08%). Walau bagaimanapun, kea-

daan terbalik bagi orang Cina yang bukan Hakka, kerana Hakka hanya digunakan dalam 3.79% situasi di Sabah, berbanding 11.83% situasi di Sarawak. Seterusnya, dapatan kajian untuk sikap bahasa menunjukkan bahawa perpaduan budaya yang ditunjangi oleh Hakka adalah lebih kuat di kalangan Hakka di Sabah berbanding di Sarawak. Dapatan kajian mengenai perpaduan budaya adalah serupa untuk bukan Hakka di kedua-dua negeri. Dari segi kepulangan ekonomi, Hakka kurang berguna kepada golongan yang berpelajaran di Sarawak berbanding dengan Sabah. Dilihat dalam konteks Teori Permainan Laitan (2000), pulangan rasional daripada menggunakan Hakka adalah lebih besar untuk Hakka di Sabah berbanding di Sarawak tetapi Hakka kalah kepada Mandarin dan bahasa Inggeris. Menggunakan bahasa Inggeris, bahasa yang mempunyai prestij dan kegunaan global, membawa pulangan ekonomi yang lebih baik dalam konteks akademik dan kerja berbanding bahasa Melayu, yang terhad kepada komunikasi kerajaan dan antara etnik.

Katakunci sikap bahasa – pilihan bahasa – Hakka – bukan Hakka – Sabah – Sarawak



MAP 9.1 Map of Malaysia. (Generated by Michael M. Kretzer using 2021 Global Administrative Areas Data)

TABLE 9.1 Sociolinguistic and educational profile of Malaysia

Official Name of Country	Malaysia
Date of Independence	31 August 1957
Population (end of 2022)	33,871,431
Official Language(s)	Malay
National Language(s)	Malay
Number of Languages	136
Peculiarities	None
Literacy rate – 2022	95.31%

1 Introduction

1.1 Hakka vis-à-vis Other Languages in Malaysia

Hakka is the second-largest dialect group among the Chinese in Malaysia, after the Hokkien (Wang et al. 2016). Research shows that despite its numerical dominance among the Chinese in Malaysia, the Hakka dialect is no longer widely used because its usefulness is limited to the family domain, as indicated by studies in Johor (Ting and Hoo 2022) and Penang (Ong 2020; Wang 2015, 2017). Religion plays a role in the maintenance of the Hakka dialect among Buddhists in Kluang, Johor (Ting and Hoo 2022) but not for Catholics in Balik Pulau, Penang where Standard Mandarin is used for mass and religious activities (Wang 2016).

The diminishing use of Hakka among the younger generation is partly due to education, and the main competing languages are Standard Mandarin and English. In Malaysian schools, Standard Mandarin is an optional subject while English and Malay (the sole national and official language) are compulsory. In public schools, Malay is the medium of instruction but in government-aided and private schools, Standard Mandarin is the medium of instruction. In all Malaysian schools, English is a compulsory subject. Parents who choose to enrol their children in Chinese-medium education also tend to speak Standard Mandarin with their children, including Hakka families in Sarawak (Ting 2018). Standard Mandarin proficiency is considered a more useful asset for children to perform well academically and to secure jobs. Due to the economic value Standard Mandarin offers, Hakka is losing its role as a family language in some Hakka families in Kuching in Sarawak (Ting and Chang 2008), Sabah (Liao 2018, 2020), Kluang in Johor (Ting and Hoo 2022), and Penang (Ong

2020). Mixed marriages are another contributing factor. Mandarin ends up as the primary language for effective communication between spouses, which, in turn hinders the intergenerational transmission of the Hakka language in Sarawak (Chai 2016).

Thus far, research on Hakka language use in Malaysia has largely focused on language practices within families or small communities in selected areas such as Kuching (Ting 2018; Ting and Chang 2008), Sandakan in Sabah (Liao 2018, 2020), and Penang (Ong 2020; Vollman and Soon 2018). An exception is Ding's (2016) extensive study of 946 Hakka people in Sabah (Inanam, Menggatal, and Telipok near Kota Kinabalu) and Sarawak (Bau) in 2013–2015. While these studies offer perceptive insights into intergenerational transmission and domain shrinkage, they tend to lack a theoretical framework for explaining the mechanisms driving language shift. As a result, these studies cannot account for the strategic decision-making processes that individuals and families undertake in response to broader linguistic, educational, and economic pressures. The use of an explanatory framework such as Laitin's (2000) game theory of language choice, which conceptualises language choice as a rational, coordinated response to social incentives, can offer insights into why language shift occurs even in communities that express positive attitudes toward Hakka. The theory can explain the outcomes of language-in-education-type of language planning at the micro-level such as how parents' language decisions (like what language to teach children or use at home) are influenced by broader strategic considerations—especially social, economic, and identity-based incentives. Using Laitin's (2000) framework enables researchers to connect micro-level decisions to larger trends of language shift and maintenance by positioning the phenomenon as a strategic equilibrium given the perceived rewards of Mandarin proficiency over Hakka proficiency.

The study examined the use of Hakka and other languages by Hakka people living in Sabah and Sarawak. The objectives of the study were to:

- 1) determine the extent to which Hakka, Standard Mandarin, English, and Malay are used among Chinese who are Hakka and non-Hakka; and
- 2) determine attitudes towards Hakka in relation to competing languages in terms of economic pay-offs, cultural solidarity, and external acceptance.

2 Background of Hakka in Malaysia

There are 1.5 million Hakka people in Malaysia, which is 23.5% of the Malaysian-Chinese population (Wang et al. 2016), mostly living in Johor, Sabah, and

Sarawak. The Hakka people are commonly known as “guest families” or “kejia” in Standard Mandarin (Hashimoto, 1973: 1). The label was given because they do not have a clear place of origin, although scholar Xu (Leong, as cited in Carsten 2005) stated that they originated from the northern area in China, and later migrated to various parts of China. During the 12th century, the Hakka people began migrating southward to avoid the chaos of the Mongol regime. Later, they settled in Meizhou, Guangdong, which is presently recognised as the centre for standard Hakka dialect. The Hakka people who migrated to Malaysia mainly originated from the Hakka heartland in eastern Guangdong (Ting and Hoo 2022).

Before the Hakka people came into contact with other Chinese dialect groups, they were not aware of other Chinese sub-groups. As they began mingling with other Chinese dialect groups during migration, they developed their collective group identity and ethnic consciousness (Jones 2010). The Hakka people were farmers in the hilly, less-fertile regions (Constable 2005). However, as the regions were rather small, many migrated to other parts of China (Jones 2010), such as Southern Fujian, Jiangxi, Guangxi, Hunan, and Sichuan (Egerod 1967; G. Wang 2003; Ramsey 1987, as cited in Ungsitipoonporn 2007). Later in the 17th and 18th centuries, the Hakka people migrated once again, mainly to Taiwan and Thailand.

2.1 Hakka Migration to Sabah State in Malaysia

In Malaysia, records of Hakka Christian missionaries arriving in Kudat, a town in Sabah, were found as early as 1883 (Wong 1999). The pioneer Hakka migrants came as traders, coolies, and sojourners (Wang 1991, as cited in Jones 2010). Later, more Hakka people were brought in to work as labourers and agriculturalists under immigration schemes. Other Hakka people were involved in gold mining in Bau, Sarawak and Pulai, Kelantan (Carsten 2001). The Hakka men were known for their martial arts skills, while the women were recognised for their fieldwork because they did not practise foot-binding culture and thus, were able to work in the field (Leong 1985, as cited in Carsten 2005). As the Hakka people began settling in Malaysia, they established schools, which used the Hakka dialect as a medium of instruction.

In Sabah, most of the Chinese living there are of Hakka descent. In the 1990s, the Hakka community formed 57% of Sabah's Chinese population (Zhang 2002) and in 2003, the proportion increased to 58% (Ding and Goh 2020). Many Hakka people in Sabah are Christians, brought by the Basel Missionary Society or their ancestors. The Basel Missionary Society was a Protestant movement based in Basel, Switzerland. In the 19th century, the mission-

aries were sent to Guangdong Province, China to recruit the Hakka people to work in Sabah under favourable conditions (Tsang 1983). These workers were placed in Inanam, Menggatal, Telipok, and Kudat, and Hakka settlements grew up in these locations (Han 1975).

2.2 Hakka Migration to Sarawak State in Malaysia

In Sarawak, Hakka people account for 31.5% of the Chinese population (539,000) (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2010). According to Chew (1990), the early Chinese migrants who arrived in Sarawak were from Kalimantan and were mostly Hakka. Later in the 19th century, more Hakka people arrived due to the discovery of gold and antimony in Bau. The Hakka leaders formed *kongsi*, an association to integrate and assist the Hakka migrants. The formation of *kongsi* led to their successful adaptation to the social, political, and economic milieu in Sarawak. The Hakka people also shared similar religious practices, and many believed in Taoism (Overmyer 2003). Taoists believe in the Tai Pek Kong and other traditional deities (Tan 2014).

Thus far, case studies on Hakka families in Sarawak have found a break in the transmission of the Hakka language by Generation X to their children (Ting 2018; Ting and Chang 2008). These case studies in Kuching City in Sarawak showed that the older generation speaks Hakka to one another but when there are intermarriages, it becomes necessary for the couple to speak Standard Mandarin or English with each other and their children. This is how Hakka loses its place as a language of family communication in Hakka families.

However, at present, the use of Hakka is largely restricted to the Hakka community and does not spread to other Chinese dialect groups. As migration commonly takes place nowadays due to globalisation, some Hakka families have migrated to western countries, such as Australia, for better education and career prospects (Wang 1991, as cited in Jones 2010).

3 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is Laitin's (1993, 2000) game theory of language regimes. The essence of the game theory is the micro-rationality of language choice, where the tide of globalisation carrying world languages (like English) meets the power of nationalism seeking to maintain vernacular languages. In multilingual settings, "a decision to acquire a particular language does not imply a decision to drop another language" (Laitin 1993: 235). In this context, individuals develop a multilingual repertoire and make strategic lan-

guage choices among the competing languages. Laitin (1993: 143) states that people have "multiple ethnic heritages" and "complex language repertoires and can communicate quite effectively across a range of apparently diverse cultural zones."

In settings with multiple ethnic heritages, the use of languages in an individual's linguistic repertoire reaches an equilibrium. From a rational point of view in Laitin's (1993) game theory of language regimes, language choices are made based on the utility functions of the languages and the economic returns of the language choices. For example, the utility value of choosing an ethnic language is the aversion to in-group scorn and protection against the loss of local honour in the speech community.

On the other hand, the utility value of assimilating external languages is the external acceptance by new speech communities. Examples of external languages with political power to impose their use for educational and administrative purposes are French in France, Han Chinese in China, and Kyotsugo Japanese in Japan (Laitin 2000). In the case of Malaysia, external languages include Malay, which is the sole national and official language developed based on the ethnic language of the majority ethnic group. The functional domains for Malay are official governmental communication, the medium of instruction in government-funded schools, and language of law courts. However, English and Standard Mandarin have functions for economic exchange in trade and business. English is also the global language with utility value in higher education.

To conceptualise the need for various languages in communities with multiple ethnic heritages, Laitin (2000) proposed the 3 ± 1 language regime. The languages needed to function in the community are the global language, the two state languages, and the vernacular language. Speech communities speaking vernacular languages need more languages to function in the community while the speech community whose language is also the state language needs fewer languages to function in the community (e.g., $3-1$). In the context of the present study, Hakka is a vernacular language, and it is expected that the Hakka people need English (global language), Malay (sole national and official language), Standard Mandarin, and Hakka to communicate in the Malaysian community.

4 Method of Study

The descriptive study involved the collection of questionnaire data from 200 Chinese participants (130 from Sabah; 70 from Sarawak), of which 95 were

TABLE 9.2 Demographic information on the Hakka respondents (N=200).

Demographic characteristics		Sabah Chinese (n=130)		Sarawak Chinese (n=70)	
		Hakka (n=75)	Non-Hakka (n=55)	Hakka (n=20)	Non-Hakka (n=50)
Gender	Female	52	33	16	33
	Male	23	22	4	17
Age	Less than 20	10	4	1	1
	21-30	56	51	19	49
	31-40	3	0	0	0
	41-50	6	0	0	0
Marital status	Single	67	55	20	50
	Married	6	0	0	0
	Divorced/ widowed	1	0	0	0
Ethnic groups	Chinese	74	55	20	50
	Indigenous	1	0	0	0
Religion	Islam	0	0	0	1
	Christianity	46	13	6	22
	Buddhism	28	39	14	26
	Others	0	3	0	1

Hakka and 105 were non-Hakka. The selection criterion for the Hakka participants was their Hakka parentage (either father or mother). The ability to speak Hakka was not among the selection criteria because the purpose of the study was to investigate the extent to which Hakka is spoken by people with Hakka parentage. Table 9.1 shows the demographic information of the respondents.

The questionnaire elicited data on 11 language use situations, namely, communication with family, friends, neighbours, school/university mates, colleagues, vendors in the market, shopkeepers, bank officers, government officers, cleaners, and people at the place of worship. The three dimensions of language attitudes were cultural solidarity, external acceptance, and economic pay-offs. The means and percentages were calculated to make comparisons among the Hakka people in Sabah and Sarawak, and among the Hakka and non-Hakka people.

5 Results

5.1 Extent to which Hakka, Standard Mandarin, English, and Malay are used among Chinese who are Hakka and non-Hakka

Table 9.2 shows the expected results that Hakka people speak the Hakka dialect more frequently than Chinese from other dialect groups. The Sabah Hakka use Hakka more extensively with their family (78.67%) than the Sarawak Hakka (65%). Interestingly, 57.33% of the Sabah Hakka respondents speak Hakka with their friends but the percentage is only 25% for the Sarawak Hakka. The results show that Hakka is still relevant in the social domain in Sabah but not in Sarawak.

Next, Hakka is used by about one-quarter of the respondents with school/university mates (Sabah Hakka), neighbours (Sarawak Hakka), vendors in the marketplace (Sarawak Hakka), cleaners (Sarawak Hakka), and places of worship (both Sabah and Sarawak Hakka). School/university mates, people at places of worship, and neighbours can be considered an extension of the social domain. The results are consistent with the moderately frequent use of Hakka in the social domain in Sabah but less so in Sarawak.

Table 9.2 results on the non-Hakka concur with this finding because 18% of the non-Hakka respondents (both Sabah and Sarawak) speak Hakka with friends but the percentages of respondents speaking Hakka in other language domains are lower. In Sarawak, the use of Hakka with vendors in the marketplace and cleaners associates Hakka with lower socioeconomic backgrounds. The results on the 14% of the non-Hakka in Sarawak who speak Hakka with their family suggest the low likelihood of other Chinese dialect groups adopting Hakka as a language for family communication.

Seen in the context of Laitin's (1993) Game Theory, the use of Hakka among Hakka people in Sabah and Sarawak can be seen as strategic behaviour shaped by demographic context and identity affiliation. In Sabah, where the Hakka population is relatively larger compared with other Chinese dialect groups, the use of Hakka is more prevalent, particularly within the private domains of family and close social networks. Individuals align their language use with group norms to maintain social cohesion and maximise cultural affiliation benefits. The norm of speaking Hakka is maintained and implicitly enforced within these networks, especially by older generations. They may articulate identity-linked expectations, such as the belief that those who do not speak Hakka risk losing their Hakka identity. Such reinforcement functions as a form of social sanction, helping to sustain the equilibrium around Hakka language use in these domains.

TABLE 9.3 Frequency of respondents speaking Hakka in 11 language use situations (N=200).

Domain	Sabah Chinese (n=130)		Sarawak Chinese (n=70)	
	Hakka (n=75)	Non-Hakka (n=55)	Hakka (n=20)	Non-Hakka (n=50)
Family	59 (78.67%)	4 (7.27%)	13 (65%)	7 (14%)
Friends	43 (57.33%)	10 (18.18%)	5 (25%)	9 (18%)
Neighbours	10 (13.33%)	1 (1.82%)	5 (25%)	3 (6%)
School/University mates	18 (24%)	6 (10.91%)	2 (10%)	3 (6%)
Colleagues	4 (5.33%)	1 (1.82%)	2 (10%)	0 (0%)
Market	9 (12%)	0 (0%)	5 (25%)	2 (4%)
Shops	9 (12%)	0 (0%)	2 (10%)	3 (6%)
Bank officers	4 (5.33%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Government officers	4 (5.33%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Cleaners	1 (1.33%)	0 (0%)	1 (25%)	0 (0%)
Church/mosque/temple	18 (24%)	2 (3.64%)	5 (25%)	0 (0%)

Table 9.3 shows similarities in Mandarin use among the Chinese respondents, whether they are from Sabah or Sarawak and whether they are Hakka or from other Chinese dialect groups. The respondents used Mandarin frequently with family and friends (including school/university mates), and the percentages are even higher than those for Hakka use (see Table 9.2). A moderate percentage (30%-50%) of respondents speak Mandarin with neighbours, colleagues, vendors in the market, shopkeepers, and with believers of the same religion, and again the percentages are higher than for Hakka use (see Table 9.2). These two sets of comparisons underscore the greater utility function of Mandarin over Hakka for the Hakka respondents. Fewer respondents (less than 25%) speak Mandarin with bank officers, government officers, and cleaners, because most of them are not Chinese and therefore do not speak Chinese.

Viewed through the lens of Laitin's (1993) game theory of language regimes, the widespread use of Mandarin among Chinese respondents in both Sabah and Sarawak reflects its higher pay-off as a common linguistic strategy across dialect groups and settings where Chinese interlocutors are expected. Its utility is especially evident in private and semi-public domains—such as with family, friends, neighbours, colleagues, and religious circles—where using a

TABLE 9.4 Frequency of respondents speaking Mandarin in 11 language use situations (N=200).

Domain	Sabah Chinese (n=130)		Sarawak Chinese (n=70)	
	Hakka (n=75)	Non-Hakka (n=55)	Hakka (n=20)	Non-Hakka (n=50)
Family	61 (81.33%)	52 (94.54%)	18 (90%)	38 (76%)
Friends	71 (94.67%)	54 (98.18%)	19 (95%)	43 (86%)
Neighbours	31 (42.33%)	27 (49.09%)	8 (40%)	27 (54%)
School/ University mates	41 (54.67%)	49 (89.09%)	16 (80%)	38 (76%)
Colleagues	26 (34.67%)	24 (43.64%)	7 (35%)	21 (42%)
Market	29 (38.67%)	26 (47.27%)	8 (40%)	22 (44%)
Shops	28 (37.33%)	26 (47.27%)	8 (40%)	21 (42%)
Bank officers	9 (12%)	15 (27.27%)	2 (10%)	11 (22%)
Government officers	7 (9.33%)	9 (16.36%)	0 (0%)	7 (14%)
Cleaners	4 (5.33%)	6 (10.91%)	0 (0%)	6 (12%)
Church/mosque/ temple	46 (61.33%)	31 (56.36%)	8 (40%)	11 (22%)

shared language maximises communicative efficiency. The use of Mandarin also signifies a broader sense of belonging in the Chinese community vis-à-vis the Malay and indigenous groups. However, the utility of Mandarin is minimal in domains with non-Chinese interlocutors (e.g., banks, government offices, and interactions with lower-tier workers from other ethnic groups), illustrating the limits of its strategic value in cross-ethnic interactions.

Next, Table 9.4 shows differences in the extent of English use by the respondents. English is most frequently used with school/university mates and friends (over 80%), except for Hakka respondents in Sabah (school/university mates, 58.67%; friends, 56%). This is an interesting result, and indicates that many of the Hakka respondents' friends are Chinese and Hakka, as reflected in the frequent use of Mandarin and Hakka (see Tables 9.2 and 9.3).

However, the Sarawak Chinese and Sabah respondents from other Chinese dialect groups possibly have more ethnically diverse social circles, which calls for the use of English as a shared means of communication. A moderate percentage (30%-50%) of respondents speak English with family (only Sarawak

TABLE 9.5 Frequency of respondents speaking English in 11 language use situations (N=200).

Domain	Sabah Chinese (n=130)		Sarawak Chinese (n=70)	
	Hakka (n=75)	Non-Hakka (n=55)	Hakka (n=20)	Non-Hakka (n=50)
Family	17 (22.67%)	16 (29.09%)	6 (30%)	21 (42%)
Friends	42 (56%)	47 (85.45%)	18 (90%)	40 (80%)
Neighbours	5 (6.67%)	10 (18.18%)	1 (5%)	14 (28%)
School/University mates	44 (58.67%)	50 (90.90%)	17 (85%)	44 (88%)
Colleagues	23 (30.67%)	18 (32.73%)	8 (40%)	17 (34%)
Market	15 (20%)	22 (40%)	6 (30%)	8 (16%)
Shops	18 (24%)	31 (41.33%)	7 (35%)	12 (24%)
Bank officers	27 (36%)	22 (40%)	10 (50%)	24 (48%)
Government officers	22 (29.33%)	28 (50.91%)	8 (40%)	22 (44%)
Cleaners	1 (1.33%)	5 (9.09%)	3 (15%)	3 (6%)
Church/mosque/ temple	7 (9.33%)	8 (14.54%)	7 (35%)	11 (22%)

respondents), colleagues, bank officers, and government officers. Fewer respondents (less than 25%) speak English with neighbours (as they might live in Chinese-dominant neighbourhoods), and cleaners. However, the range of percentages for English use is wider for the Sabah and Sarawak Chinese respondents who are Hakka and non-Hakka in the market (16%-40%) and at church/mosque/temple (9.33%-35%). In the context of Laitin's (1993) game theory, English has extensive utility functions except for informal interactions with neighbours and lower-level employees from other ethnic groups.

Next, Table 9.5 shows differences in the use of Malay by the respondents. Malay is most frequently used with school/university mates and friends (over 80%), except for Hakka respondents in Sabah (school/university mates, 58.67%; friends, 54.67%). This is possibly due to the Hakka social circles, which calls for the use of Mandarin or Hakka. Malay is also frequently used in the market, shops, banks, and government offices, and with cleaners. The high percentages show the utility function of Malay in the transactional and employment domains. A moderate percentage (30%-50%) of respondents speak Malay with colleagues, but Malay is hardly used with family and at

TABLE 9.6 Frequency of respondents speaking Malay in 11 language use situations (N=200).

Domain	Sabah Chinese (n=130)		Sarawak Chinese (n=70)	
	Hakka (n=75)	Non-Hakka (n=55)	Hakka (n=20)	Non-Hakka (n=50)
Family	16 (21.33%)	14 (25.45%)	4 (20%)	21 (42%)
Friends	41 (54.67%)	45 (81.82%)	13 (65%)	40 (80%)
Neighbours	6 (8%)	21 (38.18%)	3 (15%)	14 (28%)
School/University mates	44 (58.67%)	49 (89.09%)	17 (85%)	44 (88%)
Colleagues	32 (42.67%)	20 (36.36%)	7 (35%)	17 (34%)
Market	51 (68%)	41 (74.54%)	10 (50%)	8 (16%)
Shops	44 (58.67%)	41 (74.54%)	9 (45%)	12 (24%)
Bank officers	36 (48%)	35 (63.64%)	7 (35%)	24 (48%)
Government officers	45 (60%)	39 (70.91%)	8 (40%)	22 (44%)
Cleaners	26 (34.67%)	33 (60%)	8 (40%)	3 (6%)
Church/mosque/ temple	1 (1.33%)	5 (9.09%)	2 (20%)	11 (22%)

church/mosque/temple. If the respondents are Christians or Buddhists, they usually use Mandarin or English in churches and temples. There are few Muslims among the respondents – only one among the Sarawak Hakka is married to a Malay Muslim (0.5% of the total of 200 respondents).

In line with Laitin’s (1993) game theory model, Malay has high utility in domains where transactional efficiency (e.g., markets) and institutional compliance (e.g., workplaces, government departments) are prioritised. Malay, however, has limited strategic value in intimate and religious settings, where identity alignment and shared cultural capital favour the use of Mandarin, Hakka, or English. Malaysia’s national language policy represents a state-driven attempt to shift the linguistic equilibrium toward Malay in formal domains. However, as Kaschula and Kretzer (2019) argue, macro-level policies often fail to shape micro-level practices. Among Chinese Malaysians, especially in Sabah, language choices reflect strategic preferences: older generations often lack Malay proficiency, while younger speakers—though fluent—avoid using Malay with other Chinese (Ting and Nelson 2010). This indi-

cates that ethnic identity and communicative pay-off outweigh state-imposed incentives in informal interactions.

5.2 Attitudes Towards Hakka in Relation to Competing Languages in Terms of Cultural Solidarity, Economic Pay-Off, and External Acceptance

Table 9.6 presents mean scores for seven items related to cultural solidarity, external acceptance, and the economic value of Hakka, rated on a 7-point scale (4 as the midpoint). Attitudes toward Hakka as a symbol of cultural solidarity are strongest among Sabah Hakka respondents ($M=5.38$), who also view it as a useful language for broader intra-Chinese communication. In contrast, Sabah non-Hakka respondents are similar to Sarawak respondents (both Hakka and non-Hakka) who show ambivalent attitudes. They do not strongly associate Hakka exclusively with Hakka identity ($M=3.95$), but acknowledge its utility for intra-Chinese communication ($M=4.55$). These attitudes suggest a potential for Hakka to serve as a language for communication among Chinese groups but the possibility is remote because Hakka is difficult to learn for those not raised in Hakka-speaking environments.

The results on attitudes towards the Hakka language reveal regional differences. Sabah Hakka respondents generally viewed Hakka as a prestigious language ($M=5.04$), yet simultaneously associated it with rural populations ($M=4.47$) and the elderly ($M=4.78$), and were neutral about its use in formal settings ($M=4.01$). The Sarawak Hakka respondents also saw Hakka as prestigious ($M=4.85$) but strongly rejected the view that it is limited to rural areas ($M=3.05$) or to older speakers ($M=2.95$). Sabah respondents appear to accept Hakka's declining relevance among younger and urban communities, while Sarawak respondents perceive Hakka as more socially integrated and age-inclusive. These attitudes are consistent with earlier findings on actual language use. In Sabah, Hakka use is largely confined to family and close friends, whereas in Sarawak, it extends to neighbourhoods, markets, and religious spaces. Despite regional variation, both groups agree that Hakka lacks formal status, as indicated by relatively low agreement on its use in institutional contexts—Sarawak ($M=3.10$) and Sabah ($M=4.01$).

There is little economic pay-off from speaking Hakka, as respondents across groups generally disagreed that it is used by educated people. In line with Laitin's (1993) game theory of language regimes, this reflects a shift in language choice driven by utility: as education increases, Hakka's value diminishes, while languages like Mandarin, English, and Malay gain prominence. The

TABLE 9.7 Mean scores showing respondents' attitudes towards Hakka (N=200).

Attitudes towards Hakka	Sabah Hakka (n=75)		Sabah Chinese not Hakka (n=55) Mean		Sarawak Hakka (n=20)		Sarawak Chinese not Hakka (n=50)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Cultural solidarity – Hakka is a language for Hakka people.	5.38	1.75	4.60	1.91	3.95	1.88	4.54	1.91
Cultural solidarity – Hakka is a language for Chinese people to talk with one another.	5.38	1.37	4.36	1.56	4.55	1.54	4.28	1.58
External acceptance – Hakka is a prestigious language	5.04	1.29	4.18	1.20	4.85	1.14	4.18	1.12
External acceptance – Hakka is a language spoken by rural people.	4.47	1.80	3.44	1.56	3.05	1.76	3.54	1.40
External acceptance – Hakka is a language spoken by old people.	4.78	2.24	3.56	1.64	2.95	1.85	4.12	1.65
External acceptance – Hakka is a language spoken in formal situations.	4.01	1.46	2.98	1.24	3.10	1.45	2.70	1.34
Economic pay-off – Hakka is a language spoken by educated people.	3.85	1.34	3.56	1.36	3.25	1.45	3.60	1.26

Note: Scale of 1 to 7, and 4 is the mid-point.

association of Hakka with less-educated speakers, such as cleaners and market vendors (particularly in Sarawak), further reinforces its limited role in high-status or formal domains.

TABLE 9.8 Mean scores showing respondents' attitudes towards Mandarin (N=200).

Attitudes towards Mandarin	Sabah Hakka (n=75)		Sabah Chinese not Hakka (n=55)		Sarawak Hakka (n=20)		Sarawak Chinese not Hakka (n=50)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Cultural solidarity – Mandarin is a language for Chinese people.	5.53	1.70	4.76	2.06	3.85	1.90	4.70	1.66
External acceptance – Mandarin is a prestigious language	5.61	1.14	6.07	1.07	5.90	1.25	5.84	1.22
External acceptance – Mandarin is a language for people in the world to talk with one another.	5.65	1.10	5.38	1.22	5.50	1.00	5.06	1.35
External acceptance – Mandarin is a language spoken by rural people.	4.59	1.73	3.53	1.73	3.00	1.89	3.34	1.52
External acceptance – Mandarin is a language spoken by old people.	4.19	1.76	3.51	2.04	3.20	2.07	3.16	1.54
External acceptance – Mandarin is a language spoken in formal situations.	4.64	1.30	4.75	1.35	4.75	1.83	4.60	1.54
Economic pay-off – Mandarin is a language spoken by educated people.	4.13	1.59	4.20	1.86	3.85	1.87	4.22	1.66

Note: Scale of 1 to 7, and 4 is the mid-point.

As past findings (Ting 2018; Ting and Chang 2008) have shown that the main language competing with Hakka is Standard Mandarin, the respondents' attitudes towards Mandarin are described for comparison purposes. Table 9.7 shows the mean scores of respondents' attitudes towards Mandarin. The

respondents agreed that Mandarin is a language for Chinese people (mean scores exceeding 4), except for Sarawak Hakka ($M=3.85$), who were in marginal disagreement.

The results concur on the prestige and international status of Mandarin (mean scores 5.50–5.90). Table 9.7 shows that Sabah Hakka respondents associate Mandarin with younger adults ($M=4.59$) and senior citizens ($M=4.19$), similar to their views of Hakka (Table 9.6). However, Sabah non-Hakka and Sarawak respondents reject these associations for Mandarin. While Mandarin is widely accepted in formal contexts (Table 9.7), Hakka lacks such status (Table 9.6). Additionally, Mandarin is linked to education and economic opportunity—especially by Sabah and Sarawak non-Hakka respondents—whereas Hakka is associated with lower education levels, underscoring Mandarin's greater socio-economic utility.

From Laitin's (1993) game theory of language regimes, these patterns reflect strategic language choices based on perceived pay-offs: Mandarin offers higher socio-economic and institutional utility, being linked to education and economic opportunity, whereas Hakka is associated with lower status and limited domains, influencing speakers' preferences accordingly.

6 Discussion

The discussion focuses on rational returns from strategic language choices of the Chinese who are Hakka and non-Hakka. The results of this study provide empirical evidence that the Hakka people in East Malaysia have the 3+1 language regime (Laitin 2000). They need the global language (English), two state languages (Malay and Mandarin), and the vernacular language (Hakka). The language use results show that the utility functions of the Hakka dialect are confined to the family domain and can extend to the friendship domain (for communication with Hakka friends) but seldom beyond these domains. From a rational point of view in Laitin's (1993) game theory of language regimes, the Hakka dialect has utility value as a symbolic resource of Hakka identity. Language attitudes are not static but constantly evolving, and it is possible that the Hakka dialect will lose its symbolic value.

Future generations of the Hakka people may even see the Hakka dialect as a disadvantage as they may want to be viewed as modern and progressive, and they would then choose English and Mandarin over the Hakka dialect. There are greater economic returns from choosing external languages for educational and work purposes. The results on language use in the transactional, employment and religious domains already show how these languages are

preferred to the Hakka dialect. The future social value of the Hakka dialect is dismal. Social circles comprise people who are Hakka and not Hakka, which gives Mandarin, English, and Malay better utility value for interethnic communication.

Once parents view multilingualism as an investment for better job prospects, the lower socioeconomic value of the Hakka dialect will become more apparent. Some parents believe that their children cannot cope with learning too many languages, so they would choose to drop the vernacular language, leaving their children with the 3+0 language regime: global language (English) and two state languages (Malay and Mandarin). “Sadly, many ideas that people have about children growing up with a second or third language in childhood are not of any benefit to these children and may in fact have adverse effects” (De Houwer 1999: para. 2). When resources such as time are limited, parents weigh their gains and losses when they decide which language to use as the home language, and their strategic language choice will invariably favour languages that offer a wider range of symbolic and material resources. Mandarin can signify their Chinese identity and, in this respect, can be seen as a better cultural resource than the Hakka dialect, and past studies on the Hakka language use in Malaysia already provide these indications (Ting 2018; Ting and Chang 2008; Wang 2015, 2017; Wang et al. 2016). The Chinese community in Malaysia strives towards a unified identity and decries dialect divisions, so it is not surprising that Mandarin will ease the Hakka dialect out of its current role as the language for family communication. Mandarin is a pillar for the pan-Chinese identity that transcends the Chinese dialectal identity, and this is the non-material symbolic gain offered by Mandarin. In writing about econo-linguistic policy in the university context, Grin (2010: 7) states that “language policy is complex not only because it carries material and physical implications, but also because it touches upon non-material, symbolic issues with a considerable political, social and cultural content”. In the larger context of Malaysia, it is more important for the Chinese community to stand as a unified group vis-à-vis the Malay, Indian, and Indigenous, rather than as separate Chinese dialect groups.

7 Conclusion

This study applies Laitin's (1993, 2000) language regime framework to explain contrasting Hakka language dynamics in Sabah and Sarawak. In Sabah, higher proportion of Hakka within the Chinese population and the influential role of Hakka-speaking churches sustain broader use and stronger cultural solidarity, enhancing Hakka's utility in community domains. In Sarawak,

where Christians are predominantly Foochow and the Hakka population is smaller, Mandarin and English dominate formal and socioeconomic spheres, thereby relegating Hakka mainly to ethnic identity functions.

These structural differences shape distinct language regimes, influencing Hakka speakers' strategic choices as predicted by Laitin's (2000) game theory: in Sabah, the social and identity pay-offs support continued Hakka use, while in Sarawak, economic and social incentives favour Mandarin and English, accelerating Hakka decline. This choice is rational because people have limited resources, and they need to allocate their resources to maximise their utility (Grin 2003). Consequently, parents are likely to make strategic decisions not to transmit Hakka to their children, prioritising English and Standard Mandarin to maximise future job opportunities. Parents who wish their children to enter public universities and the civil service in Malaysia may make strategic choices to ensure that their children have good proficiency in the national language. Together, these findings demonstrate how demographic composition, institutional support, and economic incentives interact within state language policies to create regionally distinct language regimes, influencing language maintenance and shift in minority communities.

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