

Bilingual Education: The Road to Multilingualism

STUDYING A DIALECT OF MALAY LANGUAGE FAMILY – THE BATAK LANGUAGE, THROUGH FIELDWORK IN INDONESIA: LESSONS FOR FUTURE STUDY IN THE AREA.

Associate Professor Dr Kamsiah Abdullah

National Institute of Education Nanyang Technological University Singapore
kamsiah.abdullah@nie.edu.sg

Abstract: All research is field work but field work undertaken to study a dialect of a community 'foreign' to researchers, in an unfamiliar part of the world is a particularly daunting but enriching experience. So much about the language and culture of the people speaking the language, the dynamics of language and culture, the way language changes through contact with the outside world, can be learned through field study in the area. This paper will present a preliminary study on a dialect of Malay language family, that is, the Batak language, spoken by the Batak communities in the island of Sumatera Indonesia in 2010. The study was undertaken as part of a module on Methods and Approaches in Malay Linguistics taught at the National Institute of Education, Singapore (NIE). The first part of the paper will describe the aims and preparation process undertaken before the field trip. This will be followed by explanation on the actual study conducted in the field and its findings in relation to the objective of the research. Lastly, the limitations, accomplishment and implication in doing fieldwork research will be discussed. The issue of research ethics will be highlighted whenever appropriate.

Scope of the field work

Field work in linguistics can be defined as any type of linguistic data gathering where the linguist uses information from a pool of speakers interacting with each other or the researcher in their normal natural environment. Field study as one of the approaches in Linguistics was taught as a module called Methods and Approaches in Malay Linguistics taught at the National Institute of Education, Singapore (NIE). As part of the module students were encouraged to embark on a research on any one of the Malay Language families or dialects currently spoken in Indonesia and Malaysia. The Malays and Malay Dialect Groups or Ethnic groups prided themselves in being the indigenous or the original people of Singapore situated at the centre of a large geographical region comprising thousands of islands, big and small. A large number of the ancestors of the Malay peoples made Singapore their homes during the nineteenth and twentieth century.

To engage in field research on an upstream environment involving speakers of a language which is not usually known in present day Singapore - a huge international, modern cosmopolitan hub, is a particularly daunting experience. In many cases urbanites tend to avoid doing research in remote indigenous areas because of unfamiliarity with the environment, the culture and tradition and above all the different languages and dialects involved.

The area covered under this field work is actually related to a larger study on Languages and dialects of the Malays who are the indigenous people of Singapore. The term Malays in Singapore are normally classified under the ethnic group "Malay" but they belong to a number of linguistic groups within the Malayan sub-family, that is, the Riau-Johor Malay sub-group, the Bugis, the Javanese, the Boyanese, the Minangkabaus, the Banjaris and the Bataks.

Malay is an Austronesian Language Family (also known as Malayo-Polinesia) which branched into three primary subfamilies: Hesperanesia, Micronesia and Melanesia. These language families are dispersed throughout the islands of Southeast Asia and the Pacific. The Malay language spoken by Singapore Malays which encompasses many dialects and languages of the Austronesian language family comes under the Hesperanesian language branch. Hesperanesia is usually referred to as 'Nusantara' in Malay, (where 'nusa' means islands and 'antara' means in-between, amongst or inter). It is one of the primary branches of the Austronesian language Family. Under the Nusantara Family can be classified, the language families of Malayic Hesion which is the fore-runner of the Malayan Subfamily. These include Achinese, Madurese and Lampungs. Javanese and Boyanese are not a subfamily of Malayic-Hesion but comes under an earlier proto language, the Java-Sumatra- Hesion. Bugis language spoken by Bugis people is a branch of South Sulawesi languages. The Minangkabaus speak a language under the Malayan subfamily called Minangkabau which also includes Malay and Kerinci in Sumatera. The Banjaris comes

from Kalimantan a large island of Indonesia and speak Banjar which is closer to Malayan and Ibanic languages ²³⁵
The Bataks speak a number of Batak languages which are mainly spoken in Sumatera.

The Study on Batak Language

The Study on Batak Language is a small part of a baseline major study whose general aim is to track the origin of Malay language families and to understand its different branches and language families and dialects now spreading over a large area of maritime South East Asia also known as Nusantara (the Malay archipelago). For this particular part of the initial phase of study, the starting point is to focus on the smallest minority Malay group in Singapore. Thus the focus is on the Batak Language and its people whose origin is in Sumatera, Indonesia. The Batak community is not entirely unknown to Singaporean Malays, as there was a prominent village called “*Kampung Batak* or Batak Village” up to the 1950’s, before redevelopment of Singapore villages into urban residential estates took place. Some well-known and popular figures in Singapore also feature Batak names or marga or clan names like Siregar, Samosir, Nasution and others.

The Batak People

The choice of the Batak language was a result of careful consideration regarding the interest of the students, proximity of the native land of the Bataks to Singapore and the historical links of the Batak people residing in Singapore and their homeland. The Bataks, the smallest minority Malay group in Singapore had been coming to Singapore before the 20th century. Until 1978, there were less than 350 Bataks in Singapore. (1)²³⁶ The Bataks are mainly Christians, unlike other Malays who are wholly Muslims. There were also Bataks who were originally Muslims like the Mandailings and some who took Malay wives and converted to Islam. They mostly came for economic, educational and social reasons and unlike other Malay communities who attended Malay Language or Muslim schools, they received Western education which was seen as a passport to getting a white-collar job.

The Batak Homeland

Sumatra, one of 13,000 islands that make up the country of Indonesia is where the homeland of the Batak people. Most of the Bataks live in the Northern Central part of Sumatra who collectively comprise around four million people, making them one of the largest ethnic groups in that country which hosts over three hundred distinct ethnolinguistic minorities. There are six distinct Batak tribes in this area: Angkola/Sipirok, Karo, Mandailing, Pakpak / Dairi, Simalungun and Toba. Although these six groups have many things in common, there are differences in their languages, histories and traditions. It is said that the term *Batak* was first used by Malay settlers to describe any non-Muslim in this part of Sumatra. (In fact a Batak, upon conversion to Islam, was no longer considered a Batak by the Malay, but ethnically Malay.) The Mandailings are Muslims, the Batak Karos are either Muslims or Christians and the rest and majority are Christians due to their conversion to Christianity during the colonial era.

An important characteristic of the social structure of the Bataks whether Muslims, Christians or animist is their special kinship organization of family groups into *marga* (s) or clans. In their tradition *adat* or custom, which is still practiced widely until now, is their obligation to their *marga*. *Marga* determines their everyday conduct, their economic pursuits and marriages. Among them, it is taboo to marry within one’s own *marga* even though there is no blood relations among the potential marriage partner. One well-known talent of the Bataks pertains to their music and singing abilities. In former times, songs were sung to tell stories, folk history, legends and also for the calling of spirit. In those days singers were believed to have special mystical powers.

²³⁵ Retrieved from Wikipedia – http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malayic_languages .

²³⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malays_in_Singapore#The_Batak

Aims of the Field Study

The field study aims to obtain primary data on the Batak language from the native speakers of the language in their homeland. This brought us to the land of the Bataks in the island of Sumatra, Indonesia whose regional or provincial capital is Medan .

It is not the aim of the study to produce a full description of the language, but only to understand its relationship to Malay language. Thus the methodology employed Lexicostatistics and Glotochronology methods to ascertain the position of the Batak languages in relation to Malay, such the length of period when the two language separated from Malay and other Austronesian languages.

Lexicostatistics and Glotochronology

Glotochronology is an approach in historical linguistics that estimates the time at which two or more languages diverged from a common earlier proto-language. It is based on the assumption that the basic or core vocabulary of a language changes or is replaced at a constant average rate. The result is an estimate of the age of the language studied or its origin. Glotochronology uses Lexicostatistical method that is a simple mathematical technique to estimate the distance between two related languages.

Lexicostatistics is also widely used as a method in comparative linguistics. It involves quantitative calculations of lexical cognates or words that have a common origin. This method was developed by Morris Swadesh who collected and created words and the meaning slots in languages being studied. The Swadesh Word list contain 207 meanings in a number of languages. It was later reduced to 100 most important words presented as a list. The present study on Batak languages uses Lexicostatistics and the 207 Swadesh Word list as a basis of comparing cognate words or words having common meaning in Batak and Malay.

Before the field study, trials and practices using Lexicostatistics and Glotochronology methods were tested using published data. A 207 Swadesh word list in Malay language encompassing concepts in human language such as personel pronouns, body parts, verbs of basic actions, numerals, was looked into and the Malay version was produced. The list was to be used as an instrument in the actual field work with the native speakers of Batak language or dialects in Indonesia. Some students make the effort of getting pictures to represent the words that could create confusion to the informants. Others thought of other ways to relate the meanings – such as using gestures.

Preparation for the Field Study

The purpose of the visit, that is to study the Batak language and meet the native speakers of the language was made clear so that full use of the little time that we had for the study, can be made. Full itinerary together with travel insurance was prepared before the trip. The first destination was Medan, a cosmopolitan city with over two million residents. It was identified as a starting point for excursions in the region of the Batak. Residents of Medan consist of two main thnic groups the Batak Peoples – as well the Malays of Sumatera. Contact with the University of North Sumatera (USU) , our host, was made very much earlier. Arrangements with the travel agents for accommodation and transport was done to make the trip of 12 students and lecturers a comfortable one.

The Actual Field Study in Medan

The field trip undertaken in November 2010 was carried out as part of the practical aspect of data gathering for the study on heritage languages of the Malays in Singapore. Malay language is studied in Singapore schools and research on the Malay language heritage, its language families and origin was supported by the Ministry of Education, specifically the Malay Language Learning and Promotion Committee (MLLPC). Overseas educational trips to understand the various cultures and languages of our heritage roots even as far as China and India are encouraged and supported by our Ministry of Education.

Upon reaching Medan, a meeting and briefing was held in USU where our Singapore students meet with the Indonesian student volunteers who are native speakers of various dialects of the Batak language. After that interviews and travel to the villages of the Batak clans was undertaken, that is, on the second and third day of our arrival in Medan. The student researchers were able to visit the scenic Lake Toba as well as some historical sites related to the Batak people during their free time and after their gathering of data was completed.

Data gathering Procedure

There were two parts of data gathering: the first task is a semi-structured interview . The second task involved calculations using Lexicostatistics and Glotochronology methods.

a) Semi or unstructured interviews

Guide questions of what to investigate with regards to Batak language, dialects and use among the speakers were prepared before the trip and these were used when the semi or unstructured interviews were undertaken with native speakers who are also students at USU. Some of the interviews were conducted after lunch break and some did the interview once the preliminary introduction at the university was completed. This form of free-flowing and indeterminate interview was selected as it can also be like an opening conversation between two persons who unknown to each other.

We would like it to be less formal and more 'collegial' rather than like a formal interview between a 'foreigner researcher' and native speaking informants as subject of research.

The question of research ethics were strictly followed. Even though the student researchers possessed a set of guide questions, they were told not to seek answers directly or to impose it on the informants. Rather, they are encouraged to improvise allowing the interview to follow whatever course it takes. They should remain neutral during the data gathering process. They were told to withhold their own opinions vis-à-vis the questions and to remain impassive and objective in the face of their respondents' answers.

It is heartening to note that the recording of the interview was done in a smooth and easy manner. The Batak words to the full Swadesh list in Malay was obtained by the students who worked in threes for the project.

Findings from the project.

Findings from the semi-structured interviews.

The students reported many current facts on the sociolinguistics of Batak language. Some of the important findings are:

1. Most Bataks are now bilingual and speak at least two dialects.
2. Almost all understood and are able to speak Bahasa Indonesia, a variety of Malay
3. Among non Bataks, the Indonesia language is used.
4. Among Bataks, the relevant Batak dialect is used.
5. The younger Bataks are more inclined to speak Indonesian and some are not fluent in the Batak dialects
6. Even though the use of bahasa Indonesia is prevalent among the people residing in towns and cities, it is often replaced by the Batak language when they return to their villages.
7. Batak language is widely used in the Batak homeland where Indonesian is only used for administrative purposes and with non-Bataks.

Finding using Lexicostatistics and Glotochronology

Two groups of students worked the the Batak Toba dialects, the largest in terms of speakers. Another group chose to study both the Batak Toba as well Batak Pak Pak Diari. The result of their calculations are as follows:

- Sarifah Hassan, Maznunnisah and Md Farhan who studied the Batak Toba language found that the language separated from Malay about 3249 years ago.
- Emrizal M Suhaimi, Nurfaeza Rahmat and Nurul 'Ain Kamarulzaman who also studied Batak Toba found that the language separated from Malay about 2157 years ago (standard error – 110 years)
- Ahmad Farkhan Mohd Nasir, Erfasiah Abdul Rahim, Noryanti Yahya found that according to their list, Batak Toba separated from Malay also about 3813 year to 3005 years ago.
- Ahmad Farkhan Mohd Nasir, Erfasiah Abdul Rahim, Noryanti Yahya who also studied Batak Pak Pak Diari, a more recent dialect found that it separated from Malay about 5267 years ago (std error 660 years ago).

There was a discrepancy in the number of years the Batak Toba language separated from the Malay language family. This is to be expected as the study is a preliminary one. Their findings and much of the results are based on their own respondents' information about the words (in Batak) on the Swadesh Word list. Further studies should be done by interviewing more informants in order to be more certain of the findings.

Besides these the students were able to gain knowledge on the phonology, morphology and syntax of the Batak dialect that they studied.

Students' Reflections

The students gave very good feedback on the research journey. They were enthusiastic about doing the type of research not normally undertaken by others. They mentioned their anxiety at first and their preparation which took a lot of time and effort. But their initial fear was unsubstantiated, they really enjoyed doing the kind of research involving native speakers in a faraway lang from Singapore. Many students wrote on their appreciation on the culture and people. They now had more knowledge and would like to learn more on the people, their history and their tradition. Some mentioned their rapport with the interviewees and their ability to blend together with the Batak

students. All mentioned positively of their memorable visit to the Batak homeland as well their appreciation of the culture and language of this hospitable people. They had gained new insights and made new friends.

Accomplishments

Some of the noted accomplishments gained from the project are as follows:

1. Students discovering new information and consolidating their old or established knowledge on the subject.
2. They were able to obtaining different perspectives on the 'same' topic in participants' and informants' own words.
3. They gained information on participants' views, attitudes, beliefs, responses, motivations and perceptions on the topic studied.
4. They are able to examine shared understandings of everyday life and the everyday use of language and culture of this particular groups
5. They brainstorm and generate ideas among themselves and their interviewees
6. They also gained insights into the ways in which individuals are influenced by others and by their environments
7. The project help to generate a sense of rapport between the researcher and the researched.

Lessons for Future Study

Some lessons could be drawn from our study. This shows the way to channel concern and appreciation of linguistic diversity into concrete knowledge building projects. The most concrete result of this study is that scientific inquiry such as field work in a designated foreign land can be carried out successfully if adequate preparation and training is undertaken before the actual trip. The time and financial burden should be calculated even before embarking on the trip and to account for unexpected expenses. In our case a special boat, not the regular passenger boat had to be chartered and this involved extra expenses.

Moreover, the planning part should involve many parties including the students themselves who know more about their needs than older people. Most important for the academic part is the intellectual training and information of the place to do the field study. It should be thoroughly researched so that many of the "culture shock" can be avoided. If possible the project planners should work in partnership with a local host or university familiar with the subject so that the activities could be done smoothly.

Research ethics should be practiced at all times. Respect for others must be the motto when we travel to other places. Researchers should be flexible and accommodating in their interaction with the informants and host. Congenial atmosphere for more meaningful and closer interaction should be created so that a more 'authentic' response. We had a particular case where "interviews" between student researchers and informants were held in a bus while traveling on a long journey to the village. The informants gained a lift to their villages while our students get their information. At other times informants follow our group and stayed with us in our hotels. Field study can be an enriching experience for both the researcher and the researched. Work and play can be experienced together.

References

- Asmah Haji Omar. (2001). *Kaedah Penyelidikan Bahasa di Lapangan*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Blust, R. (1988). *Malay Historical Linguistics: A Progress Report*. In Mohd Thani Ahmad and Zaini Mohamed Zain, *Rekonstruksi dan Cabang-cabang Bahasa Melayu Induk. Siri monograf sejarah bahasa Melayu*. Pp 1-33. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Nigel Edley and Lia Litosseliti. (2009) . *Contemplating Interviews and Focus Group*. In Lia Litosseliti , *Research methods in Linguistics*. Continuum International Publishing.
- Nothofer, Bernd. 1988. "A discussion of two Austronesian subgroups: Proto-Malay and Proto-Malayic." In Mohd. Thani Ahmad and Zaini Mohamed Zain (eds.) 1988. *Rekonstruksi dan cabang-cabang Bahasa Melayu induk, Siri monograf sejarah bahasa Melayu*.pp. 34-58. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.

*1st International Conference on Foreign Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics
May 5-7 2011 Sarajevo*

Paitoon, M.C. (2002). *Glotokronologi Dialek Austronesia: Satu kajian Leksikostatistik di Pulau Karimun, Indonesia*. Singapura: Persidangan Antarabangsa Bahasa, Sastera dan Kebudayaan Melayu ke-2.