

LANGUAGE VITALITY OF MALAYSIAN HAKKA DIALECT

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ABSTRACT

The rise of globalization and the interconnections of information have both facilitated the integration of human life but posed a threat to the survival of languages, particularly minority languages and dialects. In the multilingual context of Malaysia, minority languages and dialects encounter obstacles due to the prevalence of dominant languages. This research focuses specifically on the Hakka dialect spoken by Malaysian Chinese and aims to investigate its current status across different age groups. To achieve this objective, primary and secondary research materials were gathered through literature review, questionnaire surveys, interviews, and observations. Subsequently, the collected data was assessed and analysed using the nine criteria outlined in UNESCO's Language Vitality and Endangerment document from 2003. These analyses serve to demonstrate the vitality of the Hakka dialect within Malaysia. Research has revealed that the Hakka dialect continues to exhibit a high degree of dynamism. However, with the gradual disappearance of the younger generation's involvement in its development, the endangerment of the dialect is becoming increasingly severe. Therefore, prompt implementation of human intervention measures is imperative.

Keywords: Malaysian Chinese, Hakka dialect, Language vitality, UNESCO scale

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of study

Malaysia, being a multi-ethnic country, boasts a significant number of major ethnic groups, with over 30 in total. Among these groups, the Malays, Chinese, and Indians collectively form the majority, commonly referred to as the "Big Three". Based on recent census data from the first quarter of 2024, Malaysia's population comprises both citizens and non-citizens, totaling approximately 34 million people. Specifically, the citizen population consists of 17.7 million Malays, accounting for 57.9 percent, 6.9 million Chinese, representing 22.6 percent, 2 million Indians, contributing to 6.6 percent, and 4 million individuals from other minority groups, making up 12.9 percent (Department of Statistics Malaysia, n.d.).

The linguistic landscape of Malaysia is characterized by its diverse language use, which is a direct consequence of its rich ethnic composition. Currently, the most prevalent languages spoken in Malaysia are the indigenous Austronesian languages, which form the most complex language family worldwide. Within the Austronesian family, the languages spoken by the Malay population and the majority of ethnic minorities are classified as Malayo-Polynesian. Additionally, the Malay Peninsula, which has evolved into a significant

international trade and commercial center, has seen the introduction of other major language families, including Sino-Tibetan, Indo-European, Dravidian, and Aryan, due to migration. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2010) and Joshua Project (n.d.), Malaysia is home to approximately 152 languages and dialects spoken by over 30 ethnic groups. However, it is worth noting that some of these languages have become extinct since the 1950s, such as Orang Kanaq, Seru, and Kenaboi, due to multilingual competition.

The Malay language consists of Standard Malay, which is taught in the education system, and the Malay dialects of each state, such as Kedah Malay, Sabah Malay, Baba Malay, and Malaccan Creole Malay. The Chinese who migrated to Malaya during the British colonial period mainly came from Guangdong and Fujian provinces in southern China and therefore spoke mainly southern dialects, such as Hokkien, Cantonese, Hakka, Teochew, Hainanese, Fuzhou, Puxian, Guangxi Cantonese, Xinghua, and so on (Chen, 2003). Hokkien, Hakka, and Cantonese are among the strongest dialects. During the colonial period, Indian laborers who migrated to Malaysia were mainly Tamils (South India) and Sikhs (North India) as the largest population (Sandhu, 1969). The languages spoken by them can be categorized into the Dravidian languages, which include Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu, and Kannada, and the Aryan languages, which include Punjabi, Gujarati, Marathi, Sindhi, Mangala, and Hindustani (include Hindi and Urdu).

Currently, in Malaysia, Malay mostly use Malay language and English. Chinese and Indians community use Malay, English, Mandarin, and Tamil as the languages of instruction in the formal education system, in addition to their mother tongue and dialects.

1.2 Statement of problem

With the advent of globalization and the proliferation of the internet, individuals have gained easy access to all corners of the world, and language learning resources have become readily available. As a result, the dominant languages of major economies have become the preferred choice for foreign language learning, driven primarily by economic interests. Consequently, the global language landscape is gradually shifting towards a state of unipolarity, with lesser-spoken languages facing the threat of endangerment. Bernard (1996) highlighted in the mid-1990s that a mere 4% of the world's languages were spoken by a staggering 97% of the global population. Conversely, 3% of the population spoke the remaining 96% of languages. Wang (2016) further examined the number and distribution of languages, the size of their respective speaker populations, and the prevalence of endangered languages. By utilizing these reference coefficients, Wang aimed to analyse the linguistic continuum within the natural ecological framework. His findings revealed a dual polarization phenomenon occurring at both ends of the spectrum. On one hand, larger languages are gravitating towards a position of power and dominance. On the other hand, endangered languages are steadily deteriorating and inching closer to extinction. According to the UNESCO report on Language Vitality and Endangerment, over 50% of the world's 6,000+ languages are currently witnessing a decline in the number of speakers. Moreover, it is estimated that around 90% of these endangered languages are at risk of being replaced by more mainstream languages within the twenty-first century (Brenzinger et al., 2003).

From a macroscopic standpoint, the language landscape in Malaysia has exhibited a parallel trajectory, wherein Malay and English have emerged as the most predominant languages while the survival of other languages has been curtailed by factors such as constitutional provisions, the influence of national policies, and practical economic considerations. On a micro level, language usage among Chinese Malaysians has also become increasingly polarized, manifesting at two opposing ends of the spectrum. Mandarin, as a lingua franca, coexists as a unipolar language, competing against dialects. In other words, the Chinese dialects persist within the context of Malay and English on one hand,

and Mandarin on the other, although some dialect speakers still maintain a significant population base.

1.3 Objective of the study

A substantial body of research has been conducted on the utilization of Chinese dialects by both local and foreign scholars. The studies have explored various topics, such as history, politics, economics, education, language ontology, language contact, linguistic phenomena, and language comparison. However, only a limited number of studies have examined the extent of language vitality from this perspective. Furthermore, there are even fewer studies that evaluate the Hakka dialect vitality using specific indicators or criteria. While the number of speakers is often used as a crucial indicator, it is not a comprehensive measure. Thus, this study aims to comprehensively examine the Malaysian Hakka dialect, employing the criteria for evaluating language vitality published by the UNESCO Endangered Languages Expert Group.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Language vitality

The term “language vitality” refers to the degree to which a language is used and spoken within a society. This concept is closely associated with the examination of minority languages and has evolved into the field of “ethnolinguistic vitality”. Originally, the idea of ethnolinguistic vitality was developed as a conceptual tool for analysing the social changes that impact the strength of ethnolinguistic communities in intergroup settings (Harwood et al., 1994). Initial studies focused on three indicators collectively known as “objective vitality”: status, population, and institutional support. The underlying assumption was that “higher status, institutional support/control, and/or positive demographic trends indicate greater vitality of ethnolinguistic communities”(Smith et al., 2017).

However, the vitality of a language is also influenced by the subjective perceptions of individuals within the community. If the majority of individuals hold similar perceptions, these perceptions become dominant within the community and directly impact the level of language vitality. Bourhis et al. (1981) introduced the Subjective Vitality Questionnaire (SVQ) as a tool for measuring the subjective assessment of in-group/out-group vitality for each aspect of the objective vitality framework, including demographic factors, institutional support, and status. The SVQ has played a significant role as a pioneering template for subsequent studies on subjective vitality, with Smith et al. (2017) suggesting that approximately 45% of all studies have employed some versions of this questionnaire.

A significant portion of the research conducted regarding language vitality in Malaysia has primarily focused on the language development of ethnic minorities, specifically the Orang Asli of the Malay Peninsula and the Aborigines of Sabah and Sarawak. Generally, minority languages with larger population bases tend to exhibit higher levels of language vitality. In a study conducted by Coluzzi (2017), the ethnolinguistic vitality of minority languages in Malaysia was examined, with a particular emphasis on the Bidayuh and Mah Meri languages. The results of the study revealed that both of these minority languages demonstrate a high degree of ethnolinguistic vitality in Malaysia. These findings were similarly observed among the Bidayuh and Mah Meri ethnic groups in Peninsular Malaysia. However, it is important to note that a language shift has been observed among the Mah Meri youth, although the Mah Meri language still maintains a significant level of vitality (Coluzzi et al., 2017). In another study focused on the vitality of the Kadazandusun language in Sabah, Malaysia, Ting and Tham (2014) argue that the vitality of the Kadazandusun language can be categorized as Level 4 (educational), 5 (written), and 6b (threatened) on the Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS), depending on the language use situation within the family, which is considered “safe”. Nonetheless, there has

been a decrease in intergenerational usage of the Kadazandusun language, while the Sabah Malay dialect is gaining prominence.

In contrast to the aforementioned groups, minority populations with smaller population bases tend to have less robust languages, and in some cases, these languages have even reached endangered levels. Mohamed and Hashim (2012) conducted a primary data collection through fieldwork, observation, and interviews. The data were analysed to demonstrate that the Sihan language does not meet the nine criteria for language vitality set forth by UNESCO. The functional load of the Sihan language is diminishing in various domains. In a related study, Hidayati et al. (2018) also noted that the Vaie language in Malaysia is potentially “unsafe” according to UNESCO’s assessment.

2.2 Malaysia Hakka dialect studies

In terms of objective vitality indicators, the language vitality of Malaysian Hakka is undeniably high, considering its population of 1,092,854 speakers (Tan, 2021). Nonetheless, the actual situation is not promising. Studies have shown that Hakka families are experiencing a language shift due to the influence of dominant languages like Mandarin and English. Lin (2010) and Li (2012) conducted surveys on the language situation in Chinese new villages in Malaysia and arrived at the same conclusions. The language situation in Hakka families is transforming. Across generations, from grandparents to parents to grandchildren, there is a shift from the exclusive use of the Hakka dialect to a mixture of Mandarin and Hakka dialect, and ultimately to the exclusive use of Mandarin. Additionally, Fan and Choo’s (2023) study of Chinese new villages revealed a similar pattern of language development, with particular concern regarding dialect inheritance. The situation of Hakka culture inheritance is arguably even more critical, as it faces the risk of complete loss.

In all studies on family language policy and language transmission, it has been observed that the language identity of the younger generation tends to lean towards Mandarinisation (Ding, 2022; Ong, 2021). The causes for this phenomenon are varied, encompassing mixed marriages and urbanization, as well as the influence of the lingua franca and strong dialects (Ting, 2018). Additionally, Wang & Benjamin (2006) have suggested that the linguistic similarity between the Hakka dialect and Mandarin also plays a part. The shift in linguistic tendencies among the younger generation can be attributed to the decline in language vitality (Ralf & Tek, 2020). Ong (2020) posits that the language vitality of the Hakka dialect is currently at a critical level among the younger generation. Ting and Hoo (2022) employed the EGIDS to analyse the vitality of the Hakka dialect within this demographic. The findings indicated that the vitality level was at EGIDS level 6B (threatened). Despite the subjects’ ability to speak Hakka, the percentage of usage amounted to only 5.17%. This suggests that the language vitality of the Hakka dialect in Malaysia is currently facing a significant challenge.

According to a review of the aforementioned study, the language usage of Malaysian ethnic groups, both within the family and in society, is undergoing a transition towards the adoption of the lingua franca and dominant language. Dialects are progressively being supplanted as the primary mother tongue within families.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study used a range of research methods, such as questionnaires, interviews, observations, and a review of institutional literature, to collect both primary and secondary data on the indicators of objective and subjective vitality. The collected data were analysed using SPSS 22.0 and Microsoft Excel of Window 11, followed by an assessment of language vitality.

3.1 Sample

The questionnaire design was adapted from the studies conducted by Wang (2012) and Fan and Choo (2023) on the language situation and language vitality of Chinese Malaysians. The questionnaire encompassed inquiries regarding respondents' background information, language usage, and language attitudes. The items were intentionally formulated to be answered using a multiple-choice or Likert 5-point scale.

Sun (2006) argues that the distribution of languages, specifically whether they are concentrated, mixed, or scattered, will have a significant impact on language vitality. The Chinese Malaysians established a unique form of village settlement during the Emergency period (1948 - 1960), which continues to be preserved to the present day. This type of settlement in clustered villages promotes ethnic cohesion and can have a positive influence on the preservation and safeguarding of culture, traditions, and language (Carstens, 2007; Li, 2012; Ma, 2020). Over time, many areas have undergone development, leading to the migration of some Chinese individuals to live in mixed settlements outside of the new villages. Taking into account these aforementioned considerations, this study examines the usage of the Hakka dialect among Chinese individuals residing in Chinese new villages and mixed settlements, focusing specifically on four age groups of Hakka Chinese.

The respondents were predominantly residents of the Chinese new villages, specifically those residing in Serdang Hakka New Villages located in Selangor. A total of 218 valid questionnaires were collected from this group. As for the mixed settlements, respondents were selected from various areas in Selangor, namely Semenyih, Petaling Jaya, Klang, Sepang, Kajang, and Shah Alam. A total of 216 valid questionnaires were collected. The background of the respondents was required to have a minimum understanding of the Hakka dialect. The following table shows the distribution of respondents according to their age.

Table 1. Respondents' distribution according to their age

Age	Hakka new village		Mixed settlement	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
15-20	24 (11.0%)	26 (11.9%)	19 (8.8%)	33 (15.9%)
21-40	25 (11.5%)	28 (12.8%)	28 (13.0%)	32 (14.8%)
41-60	33 (15.1%)	31 (14.2%)	22 (10.2%)	31 (14.4%)
61 and above	25 (11.5%)	26 (11.9%)	28 (13.0%)	23 (10.6%)
Total	107 (49.1%)	111 (50.9%)	97 (44.9%)	119 (55.1%)
	218 (100%)		216 (100%)	

3.2 Language vitality evaluation

The statistical data, interviews, and observations in this study were evaluated and analysed based on nine criteria (referred to as the UNESCO scale) outlined in the 2003 UNESCO document "Language Vitality and Endangerment" (Brenzinger et al., 2003). The nine criteria are as below:

- Factor 1: Intergenerational language transmission
- Factor 2: Absolute number of speakers
- Factor 3: Proportion of speakers within the total population
- Factor 4: Trends in existing language domains
- Factor 5: Response to new domains and media
- Factor 6: Materials for language education and literacy
- Factor 7: Language attitudes and policies
- Factor 8: Community members' attitudes toward their own language
- Factor 9: Amount and quality of documentation

4.0 LANGUAGE VITALITY OF THE HAKKA DIALECT IN MALAYSIA

4.1 Intergenerational language transmission

Table 2 illustrates the distribution of the Hakka dialect and other language usage (dialect: other language) among the four age groups of respondents residing in the new villages and mixed settlements. The language patterns within families in both types of residences display comparable intergenerational shifts, characterized by a decrease in the proportion of Hakka dialect usage across each age group, alongside a concurrent rise in the utilization of Mandarin-based lingua franca.

Table 2. Respondents' family language use (in percentage)

Age	Hakka new village	Mixed settlements
61 and above	96.7 : 3.3	87.3 : 12.7
41-60	83.6 : 16.4	68.3 : 31.7
21-40	64.9 : 35.1	61.5 : 38.5
15-20	29.7 : 70.3	40.1 : 59.9

Further interviews and observations indicate that the increasing popularity of Chinese language education and the language competition in contemporary societies have led parents to prioritize the language that can benefit their children economically. Additionally, when couples come from different dialects or ethnic groups, using a dominant language becomes the preferred choice for effective communication, which has become a significant factor in the shift of family language. Furthermore, the older generation has also embraced the changing times by communicating with their grandchildren in Mandarin. This change in family language is especially noticeable in mixed communities.

The intergenerational transmission of the Hakka dialect, as previously mentioned, is classified as “stable yet threatened” (5-) according to the degree of endangerment (DOE) of Factor 1, i.e., “the language is spoken in most contexts by all generations with unbroken intergenerational transmission, yet multilingualism in the native language and one or more dominant language(s) has usurped certain important communication contexts”. The Hakka dialect is mainly at risk due to the influence of the Mandarin. If consider only the usage of the Hakka dialect among the younger generation, it falls under the category of “Definitely Endangered (3)”. This means that the language is primarily spoken by fathers and older generations, while children are no longer learning Hakka as their first language at home.

4.2 Absolute number of speakers and proportion of speakers within the total population

It is challenging to provide an exact figure for the number of language speakers due to the official Malaysian census rarely includes Chinese dialects in its survey categories. However, there are three official figures available. According to Tan (2000), in 1991, the population of the Hakka dialect in Malaysia numbered approximately 1,338,233, which accounted for 27.3% of the Chinese population at that time. This figure decreased to 1,093,000, or 21.3%, in the year 2000 (Department of Statistics, 2003, as cited in Voon, 2018: 28). After more than a decade of development, the population of the Hakka dialect experienced a further decline to 1,092,854 in 2016 (Tan, 2021), representing 20.3% of the total population.

Table 3. Hakka Malaysians' population over the years

Year	Peninsular	Sabah	Sarawak	Total
1991	1,081,862	113,628	142,743	1,338,233
2000	783,000	148,000	162,000	1,093,000
2016	No detail	No detail	No detail	1,092,854

With the evident decline in the proportion of the Hakka population and the increasing trend among the younger generation to abandon the language, it is important to consider that the actual number of true Hakka dialect speakers is lower than the reported figures. Consequently, in line with the classification guidelines provided by the DOE for Factor 3, it can be concluded that the Hakka dialect is at level 3 (Definitely endangered), indicating that the majority of the population no longer utilizes the Hakka dialect.

4.3 Trends in existing language domains

It has been observed that the usage of the Hakka dialect is more prevalent among respondents residing in Chinese new villages as compared to respondents living in mixed settlements. Respondents from new villages can fulfil their daily communication needs solely through the use of the Hakka dialect. On the other hand, respondents from mixed settlement face significant challenges in this aspect. The usage of the Hakka dialect is declining outside the home domain. Table 4 presents data indicating that only older respondents from new villages utilized the Hakka dialect in informal settings such as “shop” and “kopitiam” during frequent communication situations. In other words, the usage of the Hakka dialect decreases as the formality of the occasion increases.

Table 4. Respondents’ communicative language in various settings(in percentage)

Age	Setting				
	Hospital / clinic	Government	Educational institutions	Shop	Kopitiam
New village					
15 - 20	English (50.0)	Malay (92.0)	Mandarin (88.0)	Malay (36.0)	Mandarin (46.0)
21 - 40	Malay (62.3)	Malay (75.5)	Mandarin (71.2)	Mandarin (32.1)	Mandarin (28.3)
41 - 60	Malay (90.6)	Malay (96.9)	Mandarin (82.8)	Malay (29.7)	Hakka (54.7)
61 and above	Malay (88.2)	Malay (94.1)	Mandarin (78.4)	Hakka (47.1)	Hakka (66.7)
Mixed settlement					
15 - 20	Malay (53.8)	Malay (82.7)	Mandarin (71.2)	Mandarin (50.0)	Mandarin (46.2)
21 - 40	Malay (56.7)	Malay (83.3)	Mandarin (46.7)	English (43.3)	English (43.3)
41 - 60	Malay (71.7)	Malay (92.5)	Mandarin (56.6)	Malay (37.7)	Mandarin (32.1)
61 and above	Malay (74.5)	Malay (88.2)	Mandarin (92.2)	Cantonese (29.4)	Cantonese (35.3)

Note: The percentage data represent the respondents’ most frequent use of language in the setting.

The employment of the Hakka dialect in various settings aligns with level 3 (dwindling domains) in Factor 4 in the DOE. This indicates that the usage of the Hakka dialect is diminishing. Within the family, parents and children have started employing dominant

languages such as Mandarin and English for their daily interactions, resulting in the children becoming “semi-users” of their mother tongue (receptive bilingual users).

4.4 Community members’ attitudes toward their own language

The language attitudes of members of speech communities, whether positive, indifferent, or negative, can significantly influence language usage across various domains, ultimately impacting the vitality of the language itself. Ten items were administered to examine the respondents’ attitudes towards the Hakka dialect. The majority of respondents from the new village agreed with all ten items. Regarding Item 1 (*I believe that dialects have greater utility than Mandarin in Malaysia*), all age groups, except for the “15-20 years old” group, agreed that the Hakka dialect is more useful than Mandarin. Items 2 (*When all peoples present are Chinese, I prefer dialects for communication*) and 3 (*In my daily life, I prefer to use dialects*) elicited agreement or strong agreement from the three older age groups, indicating their preference for using the Hakka dialect in daily life and prioritizing it in situations where all peoples are Chinese. In contrast, the youngest age group held a negative attitude towards prioritizing the Hakka dialect in situations involving only Chinese people but still preferred to use it in their daily lives. As for Item 4 (*Speaking dialects in public would give the impression of vulgarity*), the youngest age group disagreed, whereas the other age groups agreed. Finally, Items 9 (*I find dialects easier to learn than Mandarin*) and 10 (*Dialects convey information with greater accuracy when conversing with Chinese peoples*) received agreement or strong agreement from respondents across all age groups.

All age groups agreed or strongly agreed with Items 6 (*Speaking dialects with family and friends creates a closer bond*) and 7 (*I am willing to teach my children dialects from an early age*) in mixed residential areas. Regarding Item 8 (*I am concerned that many children today are unable to speak dialects*), all age groups expressed concern about their children’s inability to speak dialects. Additionally, all age groups agreed or strongly agreed with Items 3, 5 (*It is imperative for Chinese individuals to be able to speak the dialect of their own dialect groups*), and 10. Most of the age groups disagreed with the Hakka dialect in Items 1 and 2, indicating a preference for Mandarin and a belief that dialects are not easier to learn than Mandarin (Item 9). However, despite this preference, they did not hold a negative impression of the Hakka dialect and did not consider it to be vulgar (Item 4). The data reveals that the respondents in both types of residential areas held a positive attitude towards the Hakka dialect. However, the degree of agreement among the respondents in the Chinese new village was significantly higher compared to those in the mixed residential area. The cohesion of the dialect group, fostered by the settlement living form, plays a crucial role in this regard (see Table 5).

Table 5. Level of identification with Hakka dialect among respondents

Item	15 - 20		21 - 40		41 - 60		61 and above	
	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation
New village								
1	2.94	0.87	3.49	1.37	3.77	1.34	3.29	1.47
2	2.92	0.99	3.70	1.17	3.59	1.53	3.57	1.42
3	3.14	0.95	3.77	1.10	4.16	1.01	4.08	1.09
4	2.74	1.01	3.40	1.18	3.48	1.43	3.24	1.53
5	3.64	0.98	4.04	0.85	4.41	0.81	4.43	0.76
6	3.80	0.81	4.23	0.80	4.41	0.83	4.37	0.77

7	4.04	0.81	4.34	0.90	4.03	1.18	3.94	1.12
8	3.90	1.02	4.02	0.99	3.67	1.46	3.82	1.37
9	3.44	0.97	3.72	1.18	3.67	1.32	3.92	1.07
10	3.22	1.00	4.13	1.06	4.11	1.14	3.86	1.20
Mixed settlement								
1	2.88	0.94	3.15	0.84	2.94	0.89	2.84	1.17
2	2.98	0.96	3.00	0.82	2.96	0.96	3.27	1.42
3	3.04	0.84	3.18	0.89	3.34	0.85	3.88	1.05
4	2.73	0.87	2.53	0.93	2.43	0.93	3.22	1.42
5	3.46	0.80	3.55	1.00	3.47	0.87	4.20	0.89
6	3.71	0.75	3.77	0.79	3.83	0.83	4.25	0.87
7	3.71	0.75	3.83	0.76	3.83	0.87	3.78	1.01
8	3.54	0.78	3.32	0.89	3.60	0.86	3.80	1.06
9	3.08	0.81	2.95	0.91	3.19	0.92	3.24	1.14
10	3.13	0.77	3.17	0.96	3.21	0.97	3.75	1.09

Note:

The mean value is categorized into four intervals: 1.00-2.00 for strongly disagree, 2.01-3.00 for disagree, 3.01-4.00 for agree, and 4.01-5.00 for strongly agree (Norasmah & Salmah, 2011) .

According to Table 5, the degree of identification with the Hakka dialect varies significantly when comparing the highest age group to the youngest age group. An independent samples t-test was conducted to analyse respondents from the “61 years old and above” group and the “15-20 years old” group in the Chinese new village. The results indicated a significant difference between the higher age group (N=51) and the lower age group (N=50) at the 0.05 level of significance ($t=-3.42$, $p=0.00$). Furthermore, a comparison of their means revealed that the high age group had a higher level of agreement with dialect use (3.85 ± 0.73), compared to the low age group (3.38 ± 0.66). Similar results were observed in the mixed residential area, where the high age group (N=51) and the low age group (N=52) also showed a significant difference at the 0.05 level of significance ($t=-3.34$, $p=0.00$). The mean value indicated that the high age group had a higher level of identification with the use of the Hakka dialect (3.62 ± 0.70) compared to the low age group (3.23 ± 0.48). Through interviews and observations, it was evident that the younger generation’s attitude towards the Hakka dialect, although not entirely negative, was characterized by indifference. This can be attributed to the fact that the Hakka dialect is no longer their mother tongue.

Table 6. Differences in the level of identification with the Hakka dialect among respondents in high and low age groups

Form of residence	Age group	Mean	T value	Significance
New village	High age group	3.85	-3.42	0.00*
	Low age group	3.38		
Mixed settlement	High age group	3.62	-3.34	0.00*
	Low age group	3.23		

Note: *Indicates differences presented at 0.05 level of significance.

The Hakka dialect identification exhibited by respondents from various age groups in the two residences aligns with level 4 in Factor 8 in the DOE, indicating that the majority of the respondents support the preservation of the language.

4.5 Other factors

The Hakka dialect lacks its written language. Therefore, it is unable to be integrated into the official education system that relies on written symbols. Consequently, its acquisition is limited to informal settings such as family education, where it is learned naturally. The Hakka dialect displayed a limited receptiveness to new linguistic variations and media sources (Factor 5), primarily manifesting in the regular Hakka news broadcasts on the government-owned radio station AiFM and the content produced by individual self-media outlets. This level of engagement was assessed as being at Level 1 (minimal) according to the DOE. The Hakka dialect did not meet the criteria for Factor 6 (Materials for language education and literacy) and Factor 9 (Amount and quality of documentation) according to the UNESCO scale, as it scored at the lowest level, 0 (No orthography is available to the community and No material exists).

Regarding Factor 7 (Governmental and institutional language attitudes and policies), the status of the Hakka dialect in the multilingual context of Malaysia aligns with the DOE's Level 1 (Forced assimilation) and Level 4 (Differentiated support). Article 152 of the Malaysian Constitution unequivocally states that Malay is the sole official language, whilst simultaneously safeguarding the rights of other ethnic groups to freely employ and acquire knowledge of their respective mother tongues and dialects (Federal Constitution, 1957). However, regrettably, no official initiative exists to rescue and preserve the Hakka dialect. Despite efforts undertaken by civil society organizations, the outcomes have been marginal at best. The lack of proactive measures from the Malaysian government can be attributed to its longstanding implementation of an implicit language assimilation policy.

5.0 CONCLUSION

In the competitive multilingual environment of Malaysia, the status of the Hakka dialect as a mother tongue faces challenges from dominant external languages such as Malay and English, as well as the internal dominant language of Mandarin. Although the population base of the Hakka dialect meets the criteria for a high-vitality language based on the objective vitality index, the results of subjective vitality surveys are pessimistic. The younger generation has low recognition of the Hakka dialect overall, and there is an increasing inability to speak it or a decline in its usage. When evaluating the nine criteria of the UNESCO scale, the Hakka dialect is generally considered highly dynamic but is also under significant threat. Furthermore, without a written form to serve as a symbol for recording the language, the endangered status of the Hakka dialect will continue to worsen without active human intervention.

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