
The Use of Kristang in the Portuguese Settlement of Malacca

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Introduction

Kristang, a Portuguese creole presently still in use in South-east Asia, had its origins in Malacca. Events which accompanied the arrival of the Portuguese along the African Coast, India and Ceylon (Sri Lanka) were repeated resulting in the creation of another Portuguese Creole. The first contact between the Portuguese and the natives occurred in 1509. However, Alfonso de Albuquerque's men were not successful in establishing peaceful relations and returned a second time in 1511 taking the prospering commercial port by force. The objective was to control the spice trade right from its point of origin and thus gain complete monopoly of this trade with Europe.

As with every creole, Kristang is also the result of more than one substratum language. In this case, it has Malay and Portuguese as its two main fonts. A semantic analysis of the language would reveal other sources since most of the men on board the first Portuguese ship who settled or stayed for a consid-

erable period of time in Malacca were native speakers of some Indian and even African languages which in turn already had their own Portuguese-based creole. Therefore we not only find general syntactic characteristics of creoles in Kristang but also great similarities with the other Portuguese-based creoles of India and Africa.

Trade in South-east Asia was carried out in Malay as a *lingua franca* among the immense Babylon of languages spoken by traders who came from as far as the Middle East. But soon this new Portuguese-based creole was to become the language of trade not only in the Straits of Malacca but also in the present Indonesian Archipelago and it remained so right through most of the Dutch rule which took over from the Portuguese in 1641. Just as in other parts of Portuguese-controlled territories, the Portuguese King indirectly contributed towards a favourable environment for the creation of a creole by officially encouraging mixed marriages between Portuguese soldiers and traders and indigenous women during the 130 years of Portuguese rule in Malacca.

Kristang stands out as a unique creole and linguistic phenomenon, since it has survived a complete cut-off from Portuguese, one of its substratum languages, for over 300 years.

After the fall of Malacca to the Dutch, all Portuguese officials as well as the most wealthy mistocos left for other parts of the Portuguese empire, and the rest of the creole community was isolated and even persecuted by the Protestant Dutch. Nevertheless, Kristang survived, surrounded by increasing Malay and English language encroachment. The only possible linguistic and cultural contact which the community continued to have with Portuguese was through the priests sent to Malacca from the Macau Seminary. The Kristangs (now known as Portuguese Eurasians) maintained their mother tongue as a form of cultural identity just as their religion helped stress their ethnic identity among the dominant communities.

The Portuguese Settlement and Kristang

What is commonly known today as the Portuguese Settlement or *Perkampungan Portuguese* was not an inheritance from the Portuguese colonial era but was only established as recently as the 1930s. The ruling British authorities, following common practice, sought to place the ethnic groups into separate areas. Thus the Portuguese descendants were given a stretch of land in the Ujong

Pasir district and houses to live in. The Resident Councilor, Mr. Reginald Crichton, as well as the Collector of Land Revenue, Mr. E.V.G. Day, were the two British officials who made the establishment of the Settlement possible and the community showed its appreciation by naming the first two roads in the settlement after them. Other roads in the settlement were named after Portuguese heroes of the 16th Century. The families which were scattered throughout Malacca town gradually moved into the settlement and the present population is around 1,500 people.

It should not be taken that members of this ethnic group are only to be found in the settlement as the Malaysian Portuguese Eurasians who total 25,000 can be found all over Peninsular Malaysia. Usually moving out of the settlement to other parts of the country is synonymous with socio-economic progress and the continued use of the mother tongue by these Portuguese Eurasians is not common although there is little data available.

Just as there is little data on the extent of Kristang used by Malaysian Portuguese Eurasians in Malaysia and those who have emigrated to countries such as Australia, Canada and the United States of America, no survey has yet been done to establish the number of people using the language in the Settlement and the purposes for which Kristang is spoken. We could only gather some general information obtained by linguists and anthropologists who carried out research in the settlement and whose sole aim was to describe the language.

The number of Kristang speakers has been falling due to the younger and upwardly-mobile members of the settlement moving away to pursue their careers. Furthermore, the community has been facing rapid changes due to numerous development projects taking place in Malacca. The community is on the verge of having its settlement cut off from the sea which is the main source of income for some 150 fishermen and their families. This has contributed to a gradual erosion of the community as more members are being forced to move out to give way to the land reclamation and development projects affecting the settlement.

Faced with this threat to their hitherto peaceful existence, residents of the settlement are now attempting to take action to preserve their way of life and the cultural and linguistic heritage of the community. The older generation is concerned about the fate of the Kristang cultural identity and values.

Kristangs have always distinguished themselves by their religion and their language as the term 'Kristang' bears a double meaning: the language spoken and the religion practised.

The Study

The writer's contact with members of the community over the last few years has prompted this investigation into the use of Kristang and the chances of its survival. As interest has been expressed by certain parties to aid the community, the data collected in this study could be used in plans to promote the survival of the community and language. The data was obtained from a survey undertaken to collect information on the use of Kristang in the Settlement. However, since only a quarter of the population in the Portuguese Settlement participated in the survey, this study can only offer a general picture of the use and survival of Kristang in the Settlement.

The Survey

The survey was carried out on a house-to-house basis using a questionnaire which was administered to 216 residents of the Portuguese Settlement in Malacca over seven days. The results showed that males outnumbered females, and residents in the age group of 50 and above outnumbered those in the younger age groups. It was always easier to approach the men in this survey. The male interviewees, especially those over 50 years, were often free from chores and willing to cooperate whilst the women were usually involved in household work and less willing to give their opinion freely in the presence of their husbands. Mothers of children in the age group 4-10 years often helped as co-respondents.

The Questionnaire

The questionnaire comprised three parts. In Part 1 of the questionnaire, the aim was to get to know the interviewee's language acquisition background. I intended to find out whether the differences in the subjects' first language had any influence on their knowledge and use of Kristang. Thus once the responses were analysed, the data were grouped according to the subject's first language background.

Question 1.2 of Part 1 sought to establish who had taught the respondent his first language. This was especially relevant for those with Kristang as their first language, since the aim was to find out if there was any identifiable pattern among the various age groups. For those who had Kristang as their first language, question 1.4 aimed to find out for how long the subjects remained isolated from other languages. By analyzing this, according to age and gender groups, I hoped to gather information on the acquisition and use of Kristang in the homes of the respondents. For the same reason, questions 1.5 and 1.6 were on the acquisition and use of Kristang for those who did not learn it as their first language.

Part 2 of the questionnaire was aimed at finding out the purposes for which the subjects used Kristang and with whom. In question 2.1 therefore a list of five purposes was drawn up: scold/insult, converse, greet, gossip (using Kristang as a secret language), play. These seemed to constitute a good coverage of the daily uses of Kristang without tiring the subjects by being too detailed. Some items in question 2.1 were left out if they did not apply to the younger subjects. For example, we would not ask those in the age group of 0-15 years whether they used Kristang for any of the five speech purposes with their work colleagues. Question 2.2 aimed to find out what whether the subjects used the language passively in their thoughts and dreams and if religious and cultural activities influenced the subjects' use of Kristang. With regard to singing, all types of songs were accepted as responses, such as folk songs (which comprised the majority of responses), hymns and lullabies.

Part 3 of the questionnaire aimed to elicit the respondents' opinions and suggestions on ways of preserving their creole. This information was gathered for the respective authorities and cultural organizations interested in providing aid and support to the community.

Results and Discussion

Firstly, the results show a general decrease in the number of Kristang mother tongue speakers. For those aged 50 and over, 75% had Kristang as their first language whereas in the youngest age group (0-15 years), 54% said they had learnt Kristang as their first language. This means that over the past 35 years, the number of Kristang mother tongue speakers declined by 21%. We might note, however, that between the age groups 0-15 and 16-20 years, there is a

decrease of only 13%, since 23% of the latter group are Kristang mother tongue speakers. This might suggest an increase in the number speaking Kristang as a first language. It is possible that this is due to a growing awareness among members of the community of their language and cultural inheritance but more data is required to validate this.

In all age groups, children learn Kristang as a mother tongue mainly from parents and grandparents. There has been a slight decrease in the role of parents as exclusive agents of transmission of Kristang and an increase in the dual role of parents and grandparents as such agents. Thus the parents of the 4-15 year age group play a smaller role as teachers of Kristang compared to those 50 years and above. The combined role played by parents and grandparents has increased from 47% for those 50 years and above, to 58% for those aged 4-15 years.

This change could be due to various factors, one of which could be that the parents of the 4-15 age group who belong to the 30-40 and 40-50 age groups were those who accounted for a decrease in Kristang as the mother tongue when compared to the group of 50 years and above. Thus they themselves could be playing a lesser role as agents of transmission in a situation where the 4-15 age group depend equally on their grandparents for their part in teaching Kristang as the mother tongue.

The data shows that for the younger age groups, the majority learnt their second language before going to school but in the older age groups we can observe the reverse. Thus Kristang was the sole language for a longer time for the older age groups compared to the younger age groups.

The number of speakers in the Settlement who learnt Kristang as a second language is much bigger than those who learnt it only as a third language. Thus despite the decline in the use of Kristang, the language appears to maintain a strong position as a living language among the Portuguese Settlement dwellers.

It is interesting to look at the reasons given by English mother tongue speakers for learning Kristang. The main reason is socializing with native Kristang speakers (74%) for the men, followed by marriage (26%) for both men and women.

Could the fact that the Kristang mother tongue speakers are beginning to learn a second language at an earlier age influence the extent of their use of Kristang and thus the chances of its transmission and survival? Upon looking at the data, it appears that those who learnt a second language at an early age are now those who speak Kristang less in their daily routine. For example, in the 0-15 age group, only 50% of the respondents use Kristang 'a lot' whereas this percentage increases gradually until it reaches a value of 70% for those above 50 years of age.

Even in this group of speakers of Kristang as a mother tongue, only a very small percentage claim to speak the language 'exclusively', namely 6% in the 31-40 age group, 8% in the 21-30 age group, and 6% in the age group 50 and above. Of the Kristang speakers in the age group 0-15 years, none speak the language 'exclusively'. This means that even the younger subjects who were interviewed already spoke a second language, probably English or Malay.

Let us look at the influence of another language (namely English) on the use of Kristang for those who learnt English and Kristang simultaneously as their mother tongues. Here none of the 0-15 age group use Kristang 'a lot', the majority (62.5%) claim to use it a little. In the 16-20 age group, 50% use the language 'a lot', which shows a difference in relation to speakers from the same age group but with Kristang as mother tongue, that is, 60%. So although the tendency among those in this group seems to be to use Kristang less compared with those with Kristang as their sole first language, it is clear that as we progress into the older age groups, even those whose mother tongue is not Kristang use the language more than the younger ones. In fact it is in the English/Kristang mother tongue group that we find a record-breaking number who use the language 'a lot' - 87.5% for those above 50 years of age. Thus it is clear that the younger members of the community, i.e. those exposed to a second and third language at an increasingly earlier age, use Kristang less.

This tendency is common also to those who had English as their mother tongue and Kristang as their second or third language. In fact, for English mother tongue speakers, only 1% learnt Kristang as their third language. The remaining 99% claimed it was their second language. The influence of the mother tongue (other than Kristang) on the use of Kristang by those speakers is very strong. In the 0-15 age group, only 8% claim to use Kristang 'a lot'. In the 16-20 age group, 100% use the language 'a little'. We can observe an

obvious decrease in the use of Kristang by non-Kristang mother-tongue speakers as we go from older age groups to the younger ones.

Now that we have a clearer idea of the extent to which Kristang is used by the various age groups within the three mother-tongue groups, we will try to look at the functions Kristang is used for.

Respondents were asked which of the following five purposes they used Kristang for: to 'scold/insult', 'converse', 'greet', 'gossip', 'play'. For all the three mother tongue language groups, Kristang is used most for conversation. The English mother tongue speakers who use Kristang less speak the language mostly for conversation (95%). The next most common function is 'gossip' Again, there is hardly any difference between Kristang and English/Kristang speakers: 89% and 88% respectively. This is followed quite closely by the English mother tongue speakers: 79%. Using Kristang to 'scold/insult' ranks third and is mostly used by English/Kristang speakers (72%) and least by English speakers (49%). Using Kristang to 'greet' does not occur as often as expected. The group which uses Kristang the most for this purpose is the Kristang mother tongue group: 85%. Kristang is used least for 'play'.

However, it was found that all the age groups (including those which had English as the mother tongue) use Kristang in various degrees for all the five functions. Therefore, it appears that the inhabitants of the Portuguese Settlement of Malacca are still using their native creole.

It is interesting to note that all the three age groups claim to speak Kristang mostly for the two more complex speech functions 'converse' and 'gossip'. One might have assumed that the English mother tongue speakers who mostly claimed to use Kristang 'a little', would use the language for simpler communication purposes. Gossiping in Kristang is taken to be similar to talking (secretively) about people from other language groups, i.e. using Kristang as a secret language.

Conclusion

The data collected from the survey revealed that there is a general decline in the use of Kristang for daily language communication purposes among the younger inhabitants of the Portuguese Settlement. It also shows that there is a

difference in the extent of its use by Kristang mother tongue speakers and those who learnt it as a second language. However, the results do not necessarily point to a doomed scenario for Kristang. Perhaps, if the respective entities who wish to help this community take proactive steps, the survival of Kristang in Malacca might be achieved.

Bibliography

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