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Attitude and Language Use Pattern of Multilingual Malaysians

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ABSTRACT

Multilingualism is not a foreign phenomenon amongst Malaysians as Malaysia is known as a 'de facto' multilingual country with Malay, Tamil and Mandarin as the languages spoken by the majority population of Malaysians. However, there are not many studies done to observe this phenomenon in depth in Malaysia. The studies that are done to observe the attitude and use of different languages amongst general Malaysians itself are scarce while in truth, it is important for the country's language planning. This study aims to identify the language attitude and language use pattern of multilingual Malaysians towards their first, second and third language; and find the correlation between the two variables. The study of language attitude could help understand the language status held by respondents. Fishman (1979) believes that multilinguals choose the languages they speak according to the domains that the conversation is taking place thus this study would observe the language use pattern of multilingual Malaysians in five domains: family, friendship, education, religion and media. A quantitative research method was utilized by distributing online questionnaires to 100 multilinguals around Malaysia through the messaging app, WhatsApp. Results of the study indicated that there is a significant correlation between language attitude and language use pattern towards all three languages spoken by the respondents. The findings of this study would be helpful for future research investigating the multilingual phenomenon amongst Malaysians. It could also benefit language policy makers in encouraging the use of different languages in Malaysia.

Keywords: multilingualism, language attitude, language use pattern, domain

INTRODUCTION

Multilingualism is a growing phenomenon defined as “the ability of societies, institutions, groups, and individuals to have regular use of more than one language in their everyday lives over space and time” (Franceschini, 2011). Franceschini (2011) mentions that this phenomenon has been around for a long time, but it has only been recognized in linguistics for only around three decades.

Malaysia is known as a ‘de facto’ country with its citizens owning different native languages but only recognize the Malay language as the official language legally (Said & Ong, 2019). Despite the wide linguistic repertoire, there are not many studies observing how Malaysians utilize the languages they know in different domains. This study is conducted to observe the language attitude and the language use pattern of multilinguals in the Malaysian context and if there is any correlation between the two variables.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Past studies have observed that there is a correlation between language attitude and language use pattern (Sisamouth, 2017). Not many studies nonetheless, have been done to observe this phenomenon in depth in Malaysia. This study aims to fill these research gaps by discovering the language attitude and language use pattern of multilingual Malaysians towards their first, second and third language and identify if there is any correlation between the two variables.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ginting (2018, p. 126) defined language attitude as “the evaluation of language in a positive and negative way”. Similarly, Amin (2020, p 29) also defined it as “someone’s mental attitude or feelings towards the position of their own language or other’s languages”. Attitude towards a certain thing helps people to identify what they like or dislike (Haddock & Maio, 2004). Consequently, a person’s language of proficiency can be deemed differently according to different people.

For this study, the language attitude of multilingual Malaysians towards their first, second and third language was researched upon. A similar study that looked into the language attitude of multilinguals was a study by Sisamouth (2017) that analysed Patani-Malay speaking Thai students’ language attitudes and language use pattern towards Thai, Patani Malay and English. From the study, it was found that the respondents had a positive attitude towards all three languages.

A similar result was found in a study by Zein and Damanhuri (2019)

that studied the language attitude of a mixed-race adolescent. The Indonesian American adolescent had a positive attitude towards all three languages that he spoke: English, Indonesian and Javanese but Javanese ranked higher than the rest. The study concluded that this could be influenced by how the language was acquired and the community surrounding the adolescent.

Fishman (1965) had introduced language use patterns in a multilingual setting and the theory of domains in language use. The domains that were proposed by Fishman (1965) were home, friendship, education, religion and employment. Scholars can classify domains differently according to their research designs (Sisamouth, 2017). This study chose to examine the language use pattern of multilingual Malaysians according to the domains of home, friendship, education, religion and media.

The Relationship between Language Attitude and Language Use Pattern

The study of the relationship between language attitude and language use pattern have been researched in many nations but not many have been done in the context of Malaysia. A lot of language attitude studies in Malaysia were related to language acquisition and language learning motivation (e.g., Kamaruddin et al., 2018; Ponniah et al., 2017). Investigating the relationship between language attitude and language use pattern would add to our understanding of the linguistic phenomena in a multilingual society (Sisamouth, 2017).

Sisamouth (2017)'s study looked into the correlation of language attitude and language use pattern along with which domain does the correlation occur. The study found that there were positive correlations for all languages studied (Thai, Patani Malay and English) and proved that fostering a good language attitude can help multilinguals maximize the use of different languages in more domains in their life as agreed by Schober, Boer and Schwarte (2018).

METHODOLOGY

To achieve the objective of this study, a quantitative correlational research design had been chosen. A convenience sampling method was used as the sampling technique where 95 multilingual Malaysians who could speak three languages, no matter the age or race, responded in the survey. The instrument used was a 4-part questionnaire with 77 questions in total, adapted from a similar study by Sisamouth (2017). The close-ended questionnaire was distributed through WhatsApp, a widely used messaging app amongst Malaysians.

Person Correlation was used to analyze the data and the results were interpreted based on Evans (1996) as shown in the table below.

Table 1: Pearson Correlation Coefficient (Evans 1996)

Pearson Correlation Coefficient	Relationship
0.00-0.19	Very weak
0.20-0.39	Weak
0.40-0.59	Moderate
0.60-0.79	Strong
0.80-0.1.00	Very Strong

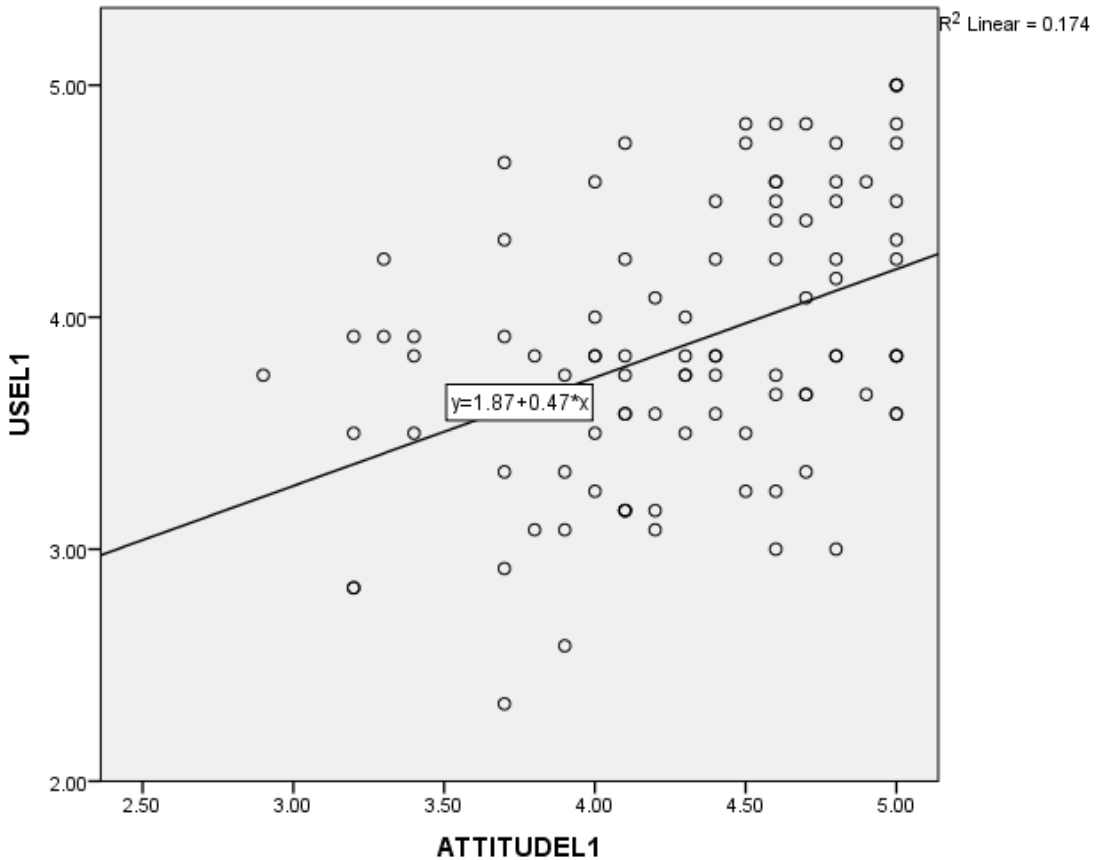
RESULTS

Of the sample of 95, 65.3 percent of the respondents were Malay, 17.9 percent were Chinese, 12.6 percent were Indian, and the remainder were Aboriginal, Kadazan, Dayak and Malbarian. 62 respondents chose Malay as their first language, 12 chose Chinese, 10 chose Tamil, another 10 chose English, and 1 wrote Semai. The second language with most speakers was English followed by Malay. The rest were Chinese, Malayalam, Tamil and Arabic.

A total of 12 languages were listed as the third language spoken excluding regional dialects. Speakers of Arabic and Japanese as a Third Language made 42.2 percent of the respondents. English was spoken as a Third Language by 16.8 percent of the respondents. Other languages that were spoken as a Third Language were Malay (13.7%), Mandarin (10.5%) and Korean (5.3%).

The correlation between language attitude and the language use pattern of Multilingual Malaysians towards their L1

Table 2: Scatterplot of L1



As seen in Table 2, a Pearson correlation examined the correlation between the language attitude and the language use pattern of Multilingual Malaysians towards their first language (L1). The scatterplot above depicts that the correlation of language attitude and language use of L1 is positive, moderate in strength and is statistically significant ($r = .417$, $p < .001$). This shows that when language attitude towards L1 increases, the use of L1 increases too, hence, there is a correlation between the two variables. The overall data analysis for L1 shows that the respondents had a positive language attitude towards their first language. This supports Sisamouth (2017) and Kumala (2021) who mentioned that speakers have a positive attitude towards their first language as it is their mother tongue representing their identity, hence, should be preserved.

From the survey, it was also found that L1 was mostly used in the domain

of home which reflects the definition of first language; a language that one learns ‘during early childhood’ from their home environment (Saville-Troike & Barto, 2016). Zein and Damanhuri (2019) had similar findings when they reported that the subject of their research used his first language with his mother since he was born and the community he lived in.

The correlation between language attitude and the language use pattern of Multilingual Malaysians towards their L2

Table 3: Scatterplot of L2

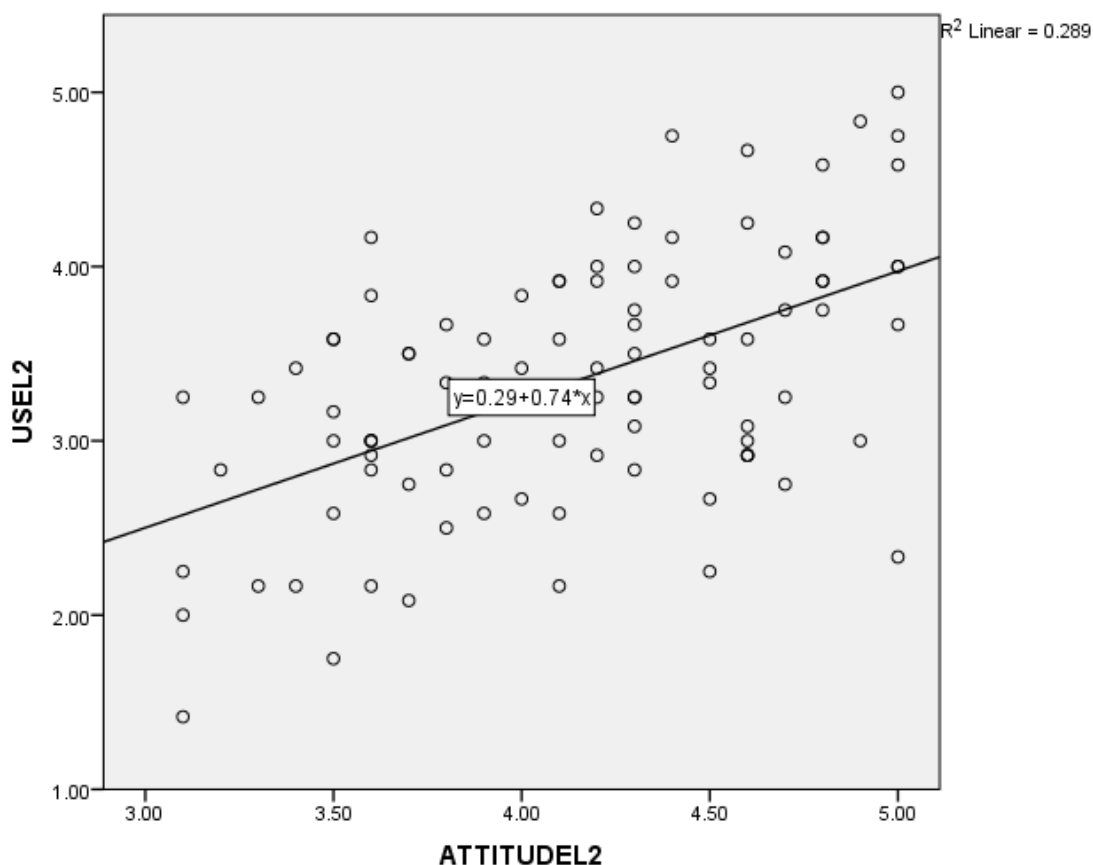
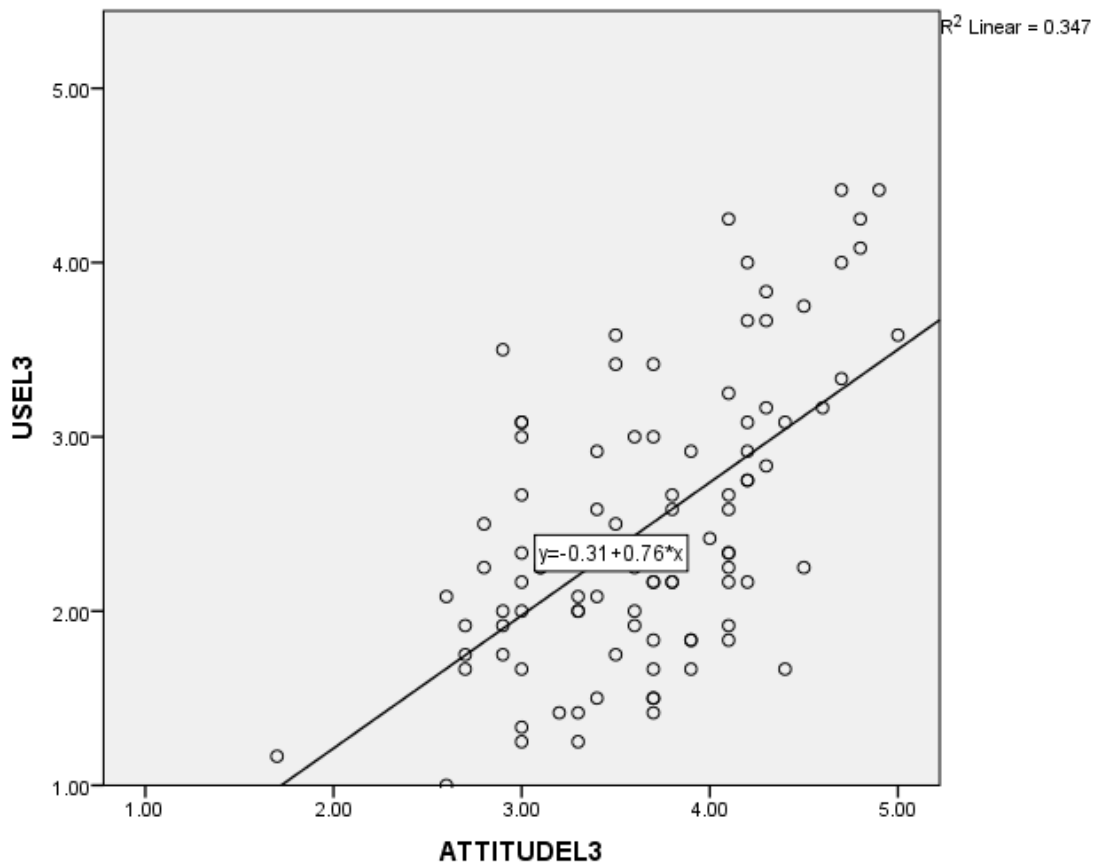


Table 3 presents the Pearson correlation used to examine the relationship between the language attitude and the language use pattern of Multilingual Malaysians towards their second language (L2). The findings revealed that the relationship of language attitude and language use of L2 was positive, also moderate in strength and was statistically significant ($r = .537, p < .001$). Even though the relationship is similar to the first language, it can be seen that the r

value is higher than the one for their attitude and first language correlation, indicating that there was a stronger linear relationship between the respondents' attitude and the second language (L2). This finding may be explained by what was revealed from the survey conducted where the respondents said that they used their second language mostly with their friends of different races. Positive attitude towards the second language have also been reported by Abbas and Iqbal (2018), Kimber (2014) and Ting and Rose (2014) where a second language such as English were perceived positively by speakers because the language allowed the speakers to communicate with other communities or assimilate with members of the society.

The correlation between language attitude and the language use pattern of Multilingual Malaysians towards their L3

Table 4: Scatterplot of L3



As for the correlation of language attitude and L3, Table 4 above depicts that there is a moderately positive and statistically significant correlation ($r = .589$, $p < .001$) too. This shows that the respondents had a positive language attitude towards their third language, and this relationship is slightly stronger than those of attitude with L1 and L2.

From the responses in the survey, it was discovered that the third language was usually a language learnt from formal education or of a personal interest. Most respondents listened to music and surfed the internet in their third language, but rarely used it in the domains of home and friendship. In this case, language planning in education, media and globalization trends have again been proven to be greatly influencing user's language choice, resembling to what have been reported by Lee (2014), Lin (2016), Sinayah et al. (2017) and Ting (2010). The scholars cautioned on the possibility of language diversity and language shift if no effort to preserve the use of the first language among multilinguals is done.

CONCLUSION

This study concluded that a positive attitude towards a certain language correlates with a language use and there was a significant correlation between language attitude and language use pattern towards all the languages spoken by multilingual Malaysians. The first, second and third language were used for different purposes and reasons. More research should be done on the relationship between language attitude and language use with a bigger sample, for a broader generalization. It could be done by each specific domain of language use. A study of language attitude and language use pattern and their effects on language preservation or shift, would also be beneficial in understanding multilingualism in Malaysia.

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