

## Peranakans in Singapore: Responses to language endangerment and documentation

Nala H. Lee

*National University of Singapore*

### Abstract

Baba Malay is a critically endangered contact language that is home language to the Peranakans in Singapore and Malacca. This paper provides a diachronic perspective on the ways in which the Peranakan community in Singapore has responded to the issues of language endangerment and documentation. It reports qualitative observations of the community's responses made by researchers of Baba Malay and community members in the 80s, when they first problematized the endangerment of Baba Malay. It also reports the qualitative and quantitative responses of community members towards language endangerment during and post- process of an ongoing language documentation project. Taken together, these observations show that Peranakans recognize how critically endangered Baba Malay is, and that the community is highly concerned about the potential loss of the language. The community's general reactions towards language documentation, as well as bottom-up steps taken towards safeguarding the language, are discussed as well. These include the community-led initiatives such as the implementation of language classes, as well as individual-led initiatives, including the development of podcasts and a textbook for language learners.

**Keywords:** Baba Malay, creole, Southeast Asia, endangerment, language documentation, revitalization

## 1. Baba Malay and its endangerment

Baba Malay is a contact language that is spoken in the Malay Archipelago, more specifically, in Melaka (a state within Malaysia) and in Singapore. The language has been assessed to be ‘critically endangered’ on the Language Endangerment Index (LEI) utilized by the Catalogue of Endangered Languages (ELCat) that is hosted on the Endangered Languages Platform (ELP, [www.endangeredlanguages.com](http://www.endangeredlanguages.com)). This article addresses the ways in which the community in Singapore has reacted to issues associated with language endangerment and documentation. To more clearly understand the current context of endangerment, it is useful to be aware of the context in which the language was formed.

The historical narrative of Baba Malay and its speakers begins as early as the 15<sup>th</sup> century, during which records attest to the existence of Chinese settlements in the Malay Archipelago (Fei 1436). Mostly traders, the Chinese men originated from the Zhangzhou and Quanzhou regions in Fujian province on the south-east coast of China. It was rare for women to make similar voyages out of China up until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Women were expected to stay behind to take care of the households, observe filial piety and ancestral worship, and there was also especially strict enforcement against female emigration in the time leading up to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Lim 1967: 63–65). The men who settled around the trading port in Melaka eventually married indigenous spouses. Some have indicated the possibility that the indigenous women were local Malay women (Vaughan 1879; Clammer 1980; Chia 1980), while others have hinted at the possibility that some of these women were slaves from the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia), such as the Batak, Bugis, and Balinese (Rudolph 1998). The descendants of this community formed by intermarriages are referred to as the *Peranakans*, or the ‘Straits-born Chinese’. The males are referred to as the *baba*, while the females are known as *nyonya*.<sup>1</sup> The endonym for the language is also *Peranakan*, while researchers mainly refer to the language as Baba Malay. It has a Malay-based lexifier and a Hokkien based substrate, mostly influenced by the Zhangzhou and Quanzhou variety (Lee 2014). While the lexicon is mostly Malay-based, there is considerable influence from Hokkien in particular domains, such as kinship, celebrations, customs, beliefs and religion, personal effects, cuisine and the household (Pakir 1986).

While Melaka flourished as a trading port under Portuguese rule between 1511 and 1641, it was less successful under the Dutch rule between 1641 and 1825. The Dutch preferred to use Batavia, or present-day Jakarta, as their main center of economic activities, and only occupied Melaka to prevent other European powers from occupying it (De Witt 2008). A considerable number of Peranakans moved to Penang after the

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<sup>1</sup> It is notable that the term *nyonya* is also found in Malacca Portuguese Creole, as well as Macanese Patuá, in which the term occurs as *nhonha*. With Portuguese influence extending over Malacca between 1511 and 1641, it is highly likely that the term was derived from the Portuguese form *dona*.

British annexed it in 1786, for Penang was thriving as a trading port at the expense of Melaka (Purcell 1967). Following that a sizeable number of Peranakans also moved to Singapore at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, shortly after the establishment of a British entrepot in Singapore (Skinner 1996). While the Peranakans in Penang notably do not speak Baba Malay,<sup>2</sup> the Peranakans in Singapore do. It is the attitudes and responses of this community towards language endangerment and documentation that this article is concerned with. The notion that Baba Malay is also endangered in Melaka is raised by Low (1991), who also provides a structural analysis of the language, and draws to the conclusion that the language is decreolizing.

Three main factors can be identified for the endangerment of the language, the first of which being the dominance of British culture and the English language among the Peranakans. This phenomenon in particular has been discussed in some length by Lim (2010; 2016a). The Peranakan identity and culture have been described as being “syncretic” (Hardwick 2008: 38) and “hybrid” (Lim 2010: 330). Besides having developed their home language, which they refer to as a *patois*, the Peranakans also created their unique culture, which is a blend of Chinese, local and Western customs and traditions – this includes dress, religion, and cuisine, to name a few domains. For a more in-depth overview of Peranakan, culture, please see Tan (1988). What is relevant at hand, is the amount of Western influence that was brought about by British colonialism. With the British settlement of Penang, Melaka and Singapore in the nineteenth century, Peranakans were learning English (thus differentiating themselves from other Chinese migrants) and identifying themselves as the King’s Chinese (Song 1967), thus aligning themselves with the British rather than the Chinese (Tan 1979). Previously, some wealthy Peranakan families had sent their sons to China for education. Now, most were sending their children to English schools (Tan 1979). With their knowledge of English, Peranakan men were also employed as middlemen who mediated between the migrants and the English colonial administrators, leading them to be socially influential and socioeconomically advantaged (Ansaldo et al. 2007; Lim 2016b). Paradoxically, the circumstances that led to the heyday of the Peranakans, also led to the current state of Baba Malay’s endangerment (Lim 2016a). The dominance of British influence on the Peranakans can be seen in the history of the Peranakan Association Singapore – it was initially set up as the Straits Chinese British Association, the name of the association reflecting the Peranakans’ early ties with the British administrators.<sup>3</sup> The dominance of English over the lives of the Peranakans then continued into the 1960s and beyond. In 1966, a bilingual language policy was

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<sup>2</sup> The Peranakans in Penang speak Penang Hokkien instead. Skinner (1996) postulates several reasons for it, chief among which is the fact that there was already a stable settlement of married Hokkien speakers in Penang preceding the arrival of the Peranakans from Malacca, whereas there was no such settlement in Singapore.

<sup>3</sup> The association was renamed the Singapore Chinese Peranakan Association after the British removed themselves from Malaya in 1963, post-World War II. Later in 1966, it was renamed the Peranakan Association Singapore, and the association’s name as stayed the same since.

implemented in Singapore (Pakir 1994) – students are categorized into broad ethnic groups, and assigned a ‘mother tongue’<sup>4</sup> that they have to learn as an academic subject, in addition to English, English having effectively been chosen as the medium of education and administration in Singapore.

The second contributing factor to the endangerment of Baba Malay then, is the additional requirement under the aforementioned bilingual language policy implemented in the 60s. The Peranakans, who were and are still officially classified as Chinese, are required to learn Mandarin in school.<sup>5</sup> Incontrovertibly, the policy must have had an impact on Baba Malay, explaining in part why fluent speakers of the language are above the age of 50. Baba Malay, on the other hand, never gained official recognition, and was relegated to the home domain (Lee 2014). Today, the position of Baba Malay within the home domain itself is threatened. A recent census reinforces this impression, with English being the most frequently spoken language at home for 36.9% of the residents in Singapore. The census also reports that the Chinese (the label under which Peranakans are subsumed) literate resident population aged 15 years and over are mostly literate in two languages, these being English and Mandarin, at 58.0% and 62.6% respectively (Department of Statistics Singapore 2015).

The last contributing factor to the endangerment of Baba Malay, which is equally if not more noteworthy, is the fact that the community is not expanding. It is crucial to note that even though Chinese-Malay intermarriages still do occur and intermarriages in general are becoming increasingly common with one in five marriages in Singapore being an intermarriage (Department of Statistics Singapore 2017a), these intermarriages result in neither Peranakan ethnicity nor culture. At one point, Peranakans were marrying among themselves (Pakir 1986), but these intra-community marriages are no longer the practice (Tan 1988). Rather, it is increasingly common for the Peranakans to marry Chinese from other groups, such as the Hokkiens, Teochews, and Hakkas among others. This was in fact documented as a trend in the 70s by Tan (1979) who was carrying out his research in Melaka. The trend continues today, even in Singapore, given the increasingly limited pool of potential Peranakan spouses. Newer figures for the number of Peranakans in Singapore or Melaka are not available, with the Peranakans officially subsumed under the wider Chinese label. But an early census of the population in 1911 shows that of the 194,016 Chinese in Singapore, 155,132 were China-born while 38,884 were Straits-born (or Peranakan, in other words) (Song 1967: 24). With the progression of time and the natural decrease in the number of Peranakans (since intermarriages have long ceased resulting in Peranakan ethnicity),

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<sup>4</sup> The concept of a ‘mother tongue’ here is more akin to that of a second language that is taught in schools.

<sup>5</sup> While English is an official language that is used for administration and education in Singapore, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil are recognized as official ‘mother tongues’, taught in schools to broad ethnic categories of the Chinese, Malays and Indians, respectively. Of these groups, the Chinese number the most at 74.3%. Malays make up for 13.3% of the total population. Indians account for 9.1% of the total population, while ‘Others’ category makes up for the remaining 3.2%.

it is only plausible that most Peranakans will marry outside their own community, whether it be to a person from another Chinese group or to someone else outside that Chinese ethnic framework. Hence, in addition to English and Mandarin, which are recognized official languages that also have been adopted as home languages, Peranakans of child-bearing age also have the option of passing on Baba Malay and/or the language of their spouse's family to their children. More often than not, this may not be an option, considering that the language is no longer being spoken by most people of child-bearing age. The language is moribund, with those of the grandparent generation speaking the language (Lee 2014). The chances of Baba Malay being transmitted to the younger generation, as a language spoken by 1,000 speakers in Singapore out of 5.61 million people, is extremely low (Department of Statistics Singapore 2017b).

All factors above being considered, Baba Malay is assessed to be a shifting language in Ethnologue (Simons & Fennig 2017), and a "critically endangered" language in ELCat (Lee 2014). In reaction to the threats of language endangerment, a language documentation project on Baba Malay has been underway since 2012 with a break between the years of 2015 and 2016. Thus far, the project has resulted in 100 hours of audio files, 92 hours of which are archived at the Kaipuleohone Language Archive based at the University of Hawai'i. Selected transcripts have also been archived. In addition, the project has resulted in a grammar of Baba Malay as it is spoken in Singapore, and a two-way lexicon (Baba Malay-English, English-Baba Malay).

The current article documents the diachronic responses of the community towards language endangerment, as well as their reactions towards language documentation. It is imperative that such responses are recorded and discussed for two crucial reasons. First, there is a mistaken assumption that contact languages are unworthy of documentation because they are not linguistically unique enough to warrant documentation, or that they themselves are associated with language loss of their component languages, and therefore are undeserving of documentation (Lee 2017; Lee 2018). Second, in relation to Baba Malay itself, there is an unofficial notion that the Peranakans accept language loss, or even welcome it, because they themselves were among the first in the Malay Archipelago to embrace English, benefitted socio-economically from this conscious decision, and in doing so, shifted away from their home language.<sup>6</sup> This discourse is troubling, as it is problematic, and this article seeks to redress the situation. Both issues can be inherently tied to issues of well-being and identity, and it is imperative that the responses of the Peranakans towards the loss of their language be recorded and discussed.

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<sup>6</sup> This comment was made by a senior scholar in the field of language contact in personal communication.

## 2. Previous responses to language endangerment

That Baba Malay is facing language endangerment was recognized as early as the 1980s in Singapore. To the author's knowledge, the issue of Baba Malay's endangerment was not discussed or highlighted earlier. The fact that there was no earlier discourse on the language, or culture was highlighted by Chia (1983a), who states that it is strange that the Peranakans did not write about themselves before this, even though there are a number of Peranakans who wrote in their language, mostly translating Chinese classics into Baba Malay, or producing newspapers and magazines in Baba Malay, the topics of which would have concerned the wider society. Felix Chia, who was a writer in the Peranakan community then, wrote *wayang Peranakan* 'plays in Baba Malay', as well as commentaries on the social lives and histories of the Peranakans. His published titles included *The Babas* (1980), *Ala Sayang* (1983b), and *The Babas Revisited* (1994). The problematization of Baba Malay's endangerment, along with other aspects of cultural loss, was particularly evident in his work. Chia explicitly addressed the decline of the Peranakan culture, including its language, in a talk given at the National University of Singapore in 1983 – the title of the talk was “Peeping through the nonya window curtain and seeing the decline of the Baba culture” (Chia 1983a). In it, Chia (1983a: 6) treats the language as being separate from the rest of its culture, the culture in this regard including notions such as religious ceremonies and tangible culture. He attributes the decline of Peranakan culture to several reasons, including the “reluctance, or inability, to speak Baba Malay on the part of children in the one Baba parent family”, alluding to the fact that while it was once common for Peranakans to marry each within the Peranakan community, it had at the time of writing become common for intermarriages to take place between Peranakans and non-Peranakans, mainly Chinese of other dialect groups. Chia (1983a: 1) also states that other causes of cultural decline, include “[g]reater knowledge of the English language, modernity and the exposure to all things Western”. In *Ala Sayang*,<sup>7</sup> Chia (1983b: 51) alludes again to the fact that Peranakans are intermarrying with non-Peranakans, stating that the “oral usage by the young who are part Baba has been diluted with the tongue of the non-Baba parent”. To Chia (1983b:51), the oral language of Baba Malay was at that time already a “dying tongue”, while the written language was by then “dead”, having “vanished with the last copies of the Baba Malay newspapers and magazines of the 1930s” – very few people were able to read Baba Malay and the singing of hymns at the Kampong Kapor Methodist Church was the only exception.<sup>8</sup> The writing of Baba Malay was by then carried out by very few people, if any at all (Chia 1983b). Another observation he then makes is that while previously, Baba Malay used to be written the way it was spoken, newer ways of

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<sup>7</sup> *Ala Sayang*, literally translating to ‘oh love’, is used as an expression of endearment.

<sup>8</sup> Today, the use of Baba Malay in church is limited to an annual Chinese New Year Eve mass that takes place at the Holy Family Church, where there is a sizeable Peranakan group among the Parish.

writing were incorporating the orthographic system of standard Malay,<sup>9,10</sup> some Peranakan having learnt standard Malay in English-medium schools before 1965. Notably, the effect of standard Malay on Baba Malay is limited, since the bilingual education policy that required the Chinese-classified Peranakans to learn Mandarin as a designated ‘mother tongue’ in school took root in 1965 and is still on-going.

In *The Babas Revisited*, Chia (1994: 45) reiterates the stance, that “the sudden interest in things Baba that comes up now and then is nothing but a passing fancy”, and alludes to his earlier work, *The Babas*, wherein he states that the culture and its language are destined for decline, and that nothing can be done about the situation, as other Peranakan writers would agree. In it, he also alludes to the rule that requires Peranakan students to learn Mandarin in schools – “the learning of Mandarin is also exacting a price on our school children, especially Baba pupils who are already finding it difficult to cope, not having a Chinese-speaking environment at home... [b]esides, learning Baba Malay at home is certainly counter-productive to the learning of Mandarin” (Chia 1994: 46). These reactions are interesting, for they encapsulate the reactions of the public towards the endangerment of the culture and language at that time.

As an academic topic, the endangerment of Baba Malay in Singapore was broached in more detail by Lau (1984) as the subject of her Masters thesis. Lau’s (1984) study included the examination of tapes of natural conversation among the Peranakans, as well as excerpts taken from a play. She observes that Baba Malay was being replaced by English – that older generations tend to use more English while talking to the younger generation, and that the younger generation are inclined to use English when talking among themselves as well as with the older generation.

Important research was also carried out by Pakir (1986), whose dissertation focused on the analysis of Hokkien influence in Baba Malay, in a bid to resolve the question of whether Baba Malay is a creole or a dialect of Malay. Of its endangerment status, Pakir (1986: 2) notes that in 1986, Baba Malay is a “dying language”, “since there are fewer and fewer native speakers and the truly monolingual speakers of BM can only be found in the above-seventy age group”. Her work provides an estimate of at least 5,000 fluent and non-fluent speakers at the time of her writing. She also highlights the efforts of the community, in attempting to revive the language through plays and church services held in the language, reiterating again the stance of Chia (1994), that that “speakers are conscious, with an air of *carpe diem*, that within the next generation or two there will no longer be a language called BM” (Pakir 1986:2) (emphasis in original).

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<sup>9</sup> Chia (1983b) gives this example: The word for slowly would have been spelled *plan-plan* by earlier writers, while later ones would spell the same term as *pelan-pelan*, as with standard Malay orthography. Note that the term is actually pronounced [pəlan-pəlan] in careful speech, but [plan-plan] in fast speech.

<sup>10</sup> Contrary to the notion that there was a standard, the orthography of Baba Malay has never been standardized.

It is plain from the available discourse that since the 80s, both the community and researchers had begun to recognize the threats that Baba Malay faced. In particular, the works of several Peranakans should be mentioned. These include the works of Baba William Gwee and Baba Philip Chan. In 1993, Baba William Gwee published *Mas Sepuluh: Baba Conversational Gems*, which is a glossary of Peranakan terms and idioms, and in 2006, he published a Baba Malay-English dictionary (Gwee 1993; Gwee 2006). Baba Philip Chan published a short handbook titled *Speak Baba Malay: The Easy Way* in 2007 (Chan 2007), and had planned on conducting language lessons based on his handbook, but passed away before he could do so. It is notable that in a foreword to Chan's handbook, Gwee writes that “[c]hanging times, particularly in Singapore have caused much of the Baba way of life to wane [...] Fortunately, the community have not totally abandoned their language which is after all, the last bastion of their very identity” (Chan 2007:6–7). This is an interesting view of what language does for the culture, noting that without the tangible parts of the culture such as their unique way of dress,<sup>11</sup> Peranakans are not distinguishable from other Chinese groups. This is also perhaps, one of the rarer, more optimistic assessments of Baba Malay's prospects, considering the discourse before and after then.

### 3. Current responses to the language endangerment

The community's current responses to language documentation are collected in this section. During the course of language documentation (introduced in Section 1), two types of responses to language endangerment were recorded. First, a survey on attitudes towards the language and language endangerment was conducted as part of a matched guise study focused on understanding change in the language's coarse-refined register (Lee 2014). Results of the survey were intended as independent variables that predicted change, but are useful for the understanding of general sentiments towards language endangerment. The second type of responses delineated in this section include comments that consultants made during the course of language documentation. Also relevant but outside the scope of the language documentation project are responses comprising comments on public platforms, including newspaper articles and social media.

Forty participants were surveyed, all of whom claimed to have learned Baba Malay from birth but stated that they had different levels of proficiency in the language.

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<sup>11</sup> Where dress is concerned, the Peranakan men traditionally wore the *baju lokchuan*, a Chinese attire made of silk, while the females wore the *baju Panjang*, a long blouse over a *sarong*. Eventually, the men began to prefer English suits due to colonial influence, while the women favoured the *sarong kebaya*, the *kebaya* being a short jacket made of European material such as voile and often elaborately embroidered by hand around the edges with Chinese motifs. Whereas these forms of dressing were once common, they no longer are.

These participants were recruited via the researcher's network – Peranakans whom the researcher knew who participate in the survey and approach their Peranakan acquaintances to do the same. The participants, in four gender and age group categories (whether or not they were 50 and above)<sup>12</sup>, were asked the following yes/no questions after they had listened to various guises of the same words, and answered questions regarding whether or not the speaker they heard was a speaker of Baba Malay.<sup>13</sup>

- i. If you have children, would you want your children to speak Baba Malay?
- ii. If a person does not speak Baba Malay, can that person be Peranakan?
- iii. Do you feel that Baba Malay is endangered?
- iv. Are you worried that Baba Malay is endangered?

The questions were provided in this sequence, because directly eliciting attitudinal data as with (iii) and (iv) might affect responses to more indirect questions, as with (i) and (ii). The responses were as follows. Overwhelmingly, (i) 100% of all respondents stated that they would want their children to speak Baba Malay, if they had children. At the same time, (ii) 100% of all respondents also stated that it was not necessary for a person to speak Baba Malay to be Peranakan. Question (iv) also yielded a 100% 'yes response' – all respondents were worried that the language was endangered. Question (iii) is the only one on which responses differed – 82.5% of all respondents felt that Baba Malay is endangered, with the difference in the response of older and younger respondents being small, at 80% for younger respondents and 85% for older respondents.

While the lack of variation in responses to these questions meant that they could not be used as predictors in the wider study on language change (see Lee 2014), the results are interesting. In considering the responses to question (iv), it is evident that the community perceives language endangerment as a threat, although responses to question (iii) show that there is a very small discrepancy in how the magnitude of the threat is perceived – most respondents feel that Baba Malay is endangered, but not all agree. It is also interesting to consider the responses from question (i) and (ii) together. While (i) all respondents stated that they would want their children to speak Baba Malay if they had children, the same respondents were also of the opinion that it was not necessary for a person to speak Baba Malay in order to lay claim to the Peranakan identity. The narrative appears to be that while it is good to have the younger generation continue speaking the language, this is not absolutely necessary for expressing Peranakan-ness. The assumption that there should be some sort of link between the language and the identity are also raised in a comment recorded below. In general,

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<sup>12</sup> 50 is indicated here as a tipping point, since those above 50 would not have had to undergo the compulsory bilingual education system explained in Section 1. Predictably, fluent speakers are also found to be above the age of 50.

<sup>13</sup> The significance of this question, and the results of this study are reported in Lee (2014).

results are encouraging for any potential revitalization efforts going forward. It is also interesting to consider, as a reviewer points out, if the general response to (ii) would change after increased awareness and language maintenance efforts.

As part of the documentation itself, the following comments were recorded from three consultants in Singapore in conversations about the language itself. These consultants participated in the language documentation project over the course of two years, and these observations were shared in various sessions with the researcher. All consultants cited here were at least 70 at the time of recording. The form of the names provided here follow those that were previously agreed on for publications ensuing from language documentation. The three responses here reveal interesting perspectives on the endangerment of Baba Malay, and what if anything, can be done about it. These comments are in Peranakan and English; where necessary, interlinear glosses and free translations are provided. Words in English are provided in regular font, Baba Malay words derived from Malay are provided in *italics*, Baba Malay words derived from Malay that are different in phonological form from standard Malay are in *italics*, and Baba Malay words derived from Hokkien are underlined. Please refer to Lee (2014) for the orthographic system for Baba Malay utilized here.

**a) Baba Peter Wee:**

Great cultures come and go. You cannot bring it back the way it was. You have already missed the boat. No one can speak it well now.

*Sumua* *chakap* Mandarin.

all speak

‘All speak Mandarin.’

*Sumua* *kahwin orang lain*.

all marry people other

‘All marry other people.’

**b) Baba Victor Goh:**

(He role-plays as a young child and the child’s mother in the first two lines of this excerpt and assumes his own persona from the third line onwards.)

Mummy *ini* *apa?*

this what

‘What is this, Mummy?’

*Tak tau lah.* Like that *pi amek pi amek* tuition.  
 NEG know EMP go take go take  
 ‘I don’t know. In the case, go take up extra tuition classes (for Mandarin).’

*Kita mana chakap* Mandarin?  
 1PL where speak  
 ‘In what world do we speak Mandarin?’

*Sumua orang tak, sekarang tak tau chakap Per-anak-an.*<sup>14</sup>  
 all people NEG now NEG know speak MID-child-NMLZ  
 ‘All people do not, now they do not know how to speak Peranakan.’

*Kita orang mia Per-anak-an, kita mesti belajair kita Per-anak-an.*  
 1PL people GEN MID-child-NMLZ 1PL must learn.refined 1PL MID-child-NMLZ  
 ‘Our Peranakan, we must learn our Peranakan.’

**c) Nyonya Jane Quek:**

*Sekarang, kita chakap Per-anak-an sama kita mia kawan.*  
 Now 1PL speak MID-child-NMLZ with 1PL GEN friend  
 ‘Now I speak Peranakan with my friends (agemates).’

*Kita mia chuchu pun banyak tak tau chakap Per-anak-an.*  
 1PL GEN grandchildren also many NEG know speak MID-child-NMLZ  
 ‘Many of our grandchildren do not know how to speak Peranakan.’

*Gua tak tinggal sama dia-orang.*  
 1SG NEG live with 3-PL  
 ‘I do not live with them.’

*Dia mak bapak tak chakap Per-anak-an sama dia.*  
 3SG mother father NEG speak MID-child-NMLZ with 3SG  
 ‘Their mother and father do not speak Peranakan with them.’

It’s like that *lah*.

<sup>14</sup> The gloss MID represents the Malay prefix *ber-*. When combined with *anak* ‘child’, the word *beranak* is formed, meaning ‘to give birth’. When further suffixed with the nominalizer *-an*, the term *beranakan* is formed, meaning ‘womb’. The autonym Peranakan denoting ‘a person who is locally-born’ may have been formed in this fashion. In another analysis, *per-* might have been derived from the Malay person prefix *pe-*, giving rise to ‘descendants’ when combined with *anak* ‘child’ and the nominalizer *-an*. This is a less plausible interpretation because it would require that the person prefix to be attached to a noun, even though the person prefix is more regularly attached to verbs.

*Boleh chakap mesti chakap.*

can speak must speak

‘If one can speak it, they must speak it.’

The three excerpts above show that the consultants all recognized the threats that Baba Malay was and is still facing. In (a), Baba Peter Wee pegs the language as having gone past critical endangerment to the point of no return. He states in this session, and in several others, that it would not be possible to find many people who would be able to speak Baba Malay fluently, and that it would have been more productive to have done language documentation work in the 80s. In (b), Baba Victor Goh states similarly that Peranakans do not know the language anymore, and in (c), Nyonya Jane Quek draws the division between those who speak the language and those who do not – her grandchildren do not speak the language, and the ones who use the language more often than not are her agetates. The three consultants also provide different reasons for the language’s endangerment, with Baba Peter Wee and Baba Victor Goh in (a) and (b) highlighting the role of Mandarin, Baba Peter Wee in (a) discussing the role of marriage outside of the community, and Nyonya Jane Quek in (c) highlighting that this is not a language that those of child-bearing age use with their children anymore. In (b) and (c), both Baba Victor Goh and Nyonya Jane Quek state that it is important for Peranakans to be able to speak their language. Baba Peter Wee states that it is difficult for the language to ever be the way it was, but in a separate interview with the local newspaper, he states “[i]f this younger generation wants to teach and propagate it, so be it” (Hong 2017).

The sentiments collected through language documentation are also echoed in publicly available discourse. In the same newspaper article cited above, which appeared in a weekly column on heritage languages in Singapore, the writer states that “[s]ome in the community say that the Speak Mandarin Campaign, which began in 1979, played a significant role in its decline” (Hong 2017). The aim of the campaign was to persuade Chinese Singaporeans (among whom the Peranakans officially number) to speak Mandarin instead of whatever home language they spoke, where necessary, so that the bilingual education policy (described in Section 1) could be successful. It was noted that encouraging the use of Mandarin would “lighten the burden of Chinese students” in the English and Mandarin bilingual system (Ngiam 1979: 27). Other home languages on the other hand would hamper them from successfully attaining Mandarin in school (*The Straits Times* 1979). Beyond Mandarin as the main cause of Baba Malay’s decline, community members are said to be optimistic about a possible revival in the language. Of a language class that the Gunong Sayang Association<sup>15</sup> began offering last year, the association’s cultural advisor, Baba Victor Goh (also one of the consultants named above), said that it was all about “sustainability”. He also identified the classes as the

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<sup>15</sup> The Gunong Sayang Association (*gunong*: mountain, *sayang*: love), translating to Mountain of Love, is a cultural association that still practices traditional forms of Peranakan performances.

start of a new period of revival and acknowledges the difficulties involved in revitalization, stating that “[i]t’s a brave start, but it’s a good start” (Hong 2017).

It is also notable that clearly, not everyone shares the same views or attitudes towards language loss in the community. There are some who question the value of the language, in relation to the Peranakan identity in particular. In a Facebook post, a younger man in his 30s wrote, “If I don’t speak baba Malayu, it does not make me less a Baba [...] Therefore if I am born and bred here, with my Peranakan cultural roots instilled except for the language, it does not make me less of a Peranakan [...] We need to be always resilient and adaptive to changes and culture will grow naturally to reflect its identity in different eras” [sic]. It would be accurate to state, however, that even where a more neutral stance is expressed towards the conservation of the language, community members still respect the attempts of others to revitalize the language. Baba Peter Wee, who was interviewed in the *Straits Times*, in his capacity as president of the Peranakan Association Singapore states that the current generation “has to take its own initiative” to “reinterpret” Peranakan, and “[i]f this younger generation wants to teach it and propagate it, so be it” (Hong 2017).

Overall, the sentiments towards the language that are shared on public platforms such as social media are more welcoming than not. The main platform that is utilized by Peranakans for sharing Peranakan matters is Facebook. At the time of writing, there are at least ten public groups available on various Peranakan topics, such as food, antiques, and other aspects of the culture. Also relevant is the fact that in addition to public groups for the discussion of general Peranakan matters, there is also a Facebook group that is dedicated to discussing the language and sayings in the language. On one of these public Facebook group page, a poster states “[*k*]ita *chuba boleh* expose *anak-anak kita sama* family member and *kawan-kawan yang tau chakap* and *harap* one day, *jorang boleh* pick up the language”,<sup>16</sup> translating to: ‘we can try to expose our children to family members and friends who know how to speak (the language) and hope that one day, they can pick up the language’.

#### 4. Responses to language documentation

While the above sections discussed the reactions of the community towards language endangerment, this section looks at how the Peranakans in Singapore have reacted

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<sup>16</sup> *Kita chuba boleh* expose *anak-anak* *kita sama* family member and  
 1PL try can child-PL 1PL with  
  
*kawan-kawan yang tau chakap* and *harap* one day  
 Friend- PL REL know speak hope  
  
*jorang* *boleh* pick up the language  
 they can

towards the language documentation project itself. Four areas are discussed here, these being the availability of consultants, the role of younger community members, the role of consultants themselves in the documentation, and the links between documentation and revitalization.

When the project first began in 2012, it was hard to find consultants. There were three key consultants involved, these consultants being the ones featured in the section above. Other consultants who participated tended to be their friends or family who would come in and out of conversations. Seven other potential consultants approached in that year were hesitant about coming onboard the project, most of them citing a lack of time. Last year alone, the researcher received about five enquiries about becoming a consultant. Part of this has to do with the increased number of public platforms on which this project is discussed. For example, the project was discussed at a public panel session on the endangerment of Baba Malay (titled *Mari Kita Berbual-bual* ‘Let us chat’), that was organized by the Select Centre<sup>17</sup> in Singapore in 2016. The project was also highlighted at yet another public panel discussion held in 2017, titled *Minority Languages in Singapore: Challenges and New Horizons*. This session was part of the *Festa di Papia Kristang*, the first Kristang Language Festival organized by Kodrah Kristang, a Kristang revitalization initiative in Singapore. All five who expressed an interest in becoming a language consultant on this project alluded to having been at one of the public panels, or having heard of the project through a friend who was at one of the panels.

In addition to having more consultants come forward, there is an increased interest in younger Peranakans in the project itself. When the project first began, it was solely the project of a single researcher, because there was not very much interest from others within or outside the community. Today, the team has expanded, with two more linguistics undergraduate students coming onboard the team. One of them, from a different university than the researcher, is a volunteer research assistant, who is carrying out the work because of his interest in the language as a younger Peranakan. He is currently also on board a different team that is developing a textbook for the language (see Section 5). Another Peranakan undergraduate has also professed interest in documenting the language and is in talks about joining the documentation team in the future.

Beyond simply the availability of consultants and a research team, the role of the community itself in the documentation has expanded. Early documentation work on the language was guided mostly by the researcher, who suggested topics and questions for elicitation and conversation. The community now from time to time suggests various topics for documentation, including the playing of *cherki*, a traditional card game that is similar to mahjong, and the process of preparing Peranakan cuisine. Regarding

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<sup>17</sup> The Select Centre is a non-profit organization in Singapore, that describes its mission as advancing the interflow of ideas and knowledge between different languages, cultures and disciplines through translation, adaptation and other forms of intercultural practices.

documenting cuisine, it was suggested by a community member that a respected home cook within the community be video and audio-recorded cooking and instructing throughout the process. The growing interest of the community in the documentation project can be gauged by the increased amount of ownership that the community is beginning to take in the documentation process, as opposed to the early days of being passive participants in the project.

Another way in the community has moved forward is in going beyond documentation, to ask how the documentation may be useful to revitalization. The grammar that was created as part of the documentation project is now utilized to some extent by community members to create pedagogical material for language classes, more specifically a textbook for learners of Baba Malay. More information is provided in the next section.

The responses here are encouraging – they indicate a growing interest in language documentation, as well as what documentation can be used for.

## 5. Moving forward

Since the inception of the language documentation project, the community has become more aware of the threats that Baba Malay faces. This is due, perhaps in some small part to the language documentation project, but in much bigger part to the recently available public platforms for discussing matters of language endangerment.

There are now various ongoing efforts to revitalize the language, all of which are community-driven. The Gunong Sayang Association is now running language classes at a minimal cost that covers material and a small contribution to the continued running of the association. The introductory series of classes have been conducted twice, and each time running at full capacity of 25 students. In each class, a speaker of Baba Malay, often a seasoned performer in *wayang Peranakan* ‘Peranakan plays’, conducts the lesson, and provides practice time during which participants get to interact with group facilitators who are often performers themselves. At the beginning, the researcher was approached to develop material for the class. Now, having had two iterations of the basic class, a team of three classmates has volunteered to develop further material required. Two of them have training in applied linguistics while the third is one of the two research assistants in the language documentation project. In the works is a Baba Malay textbook on which language classes can be based.

In a separate project, an individual in the community has been working on creating podcasts in the language. The individual has scripted fifty dialogues in Baba Malay with the help of an experienced *wayang Peranakan* performer. She aims to record the fifty dialogues, and to release these with an accompanying book of transcripts and translations. The cost of this project has mainly been borne by the

individual, and it is not profit-driven. It is hoped that the podcasts and accompanying volume can be used as pedagogical material for revitalization purposes in the future.

Meanwhile, the possibility of other projects has been and is being discussed, including the translation of children's books into Baba Malay. These projects are all community-driven. There is a clear sense of ownership with regard to who is responsible for revitalizing the language.

All in all, based on longitudinal observation and the types of responses that have emerged in the course of language documentation, and towards language documentation, it is clear that Peranakans in Singapore have become more concerned about the potential loss of Baba Malay in recent years. It is also quite clear that the language is inherently tied up with issues of well-being and identity. As a community, the Peranakans are also taking steps towards revitalizing the language. These being the explicit wishes of the community redresses two concerns earlier mentioned at the end of Section 1. Contact languages such as Baba Malay are worthy of documentation, because just as with any other non-contact language, their loss threatens the well-being and identity of their speakers. Second, in relation to Baba Malay itself, the current generations of Peranakans do not accept language loss, nor welcome it, as some have imagined, given that their ancestors might have been the first in the Malay Archipelago region to shift towards English for socio-economic reasons. To assume otherwise would be to jump to conclusions, and to disregard the wishes of the community.

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