

# **CHAPTER I**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Background of the Study**

Language is essential as it is regarded as one of the tools for people to reach to the commodity they are attempting to get in order to survive in one community. Therefore, it has somewhat become a social message carrier, and at the same time, bound people into an exclusive way of thinking. It means that it is usually the agreement among speakers of a language that determines the word and the referent of a particular object. The agreement does not occur only in the matter of the object but the choice of language being used in a community where several languages exist.

Language is one of the major determinants in indicating one's background as well as origin. It has also been considered as a vital tool for communicating and socializing with people (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). It is used by people regardless of age, gender and races. Even the disable people who are mute and deaf possessed their own language which is known as the sign language. Language can be acquired, shifted and also loss due to many reasons and one of them is migration to a new place (Song, 2010). Most people acquired, shifted or loss their native languages when they moved to a new place as they tried to adapt with the new environment and connect with the local people (Tseng & Fuligni, 2000). In order to be accepted by the major population in a society, some tend to perceive their native language negatively and neglect the importance of preserving the origin language inherited from their ancestors. Hence, it can be seen that one's language may shift to other language as a result of migration to a new surrounding that is different from the ordinary environment.

According to Fishman (1972), the language used in the communities that apply more than one language depends greatly on two main indicators which are change or stability in the actual language usage. Nevertheless, the speech communities that employ more than one language normally categorized the

various languages under low or high variety language (Ferguson, 1959). The high variety languages are the languages used by majority of the population whereas the low variety languages will be the ones used by the minority groups. Based on Giles (1977) and Kibrik (1991), the high variety language typically possessed a greater opportunity to be the language used at home.

Furthermore, languages do not take place in vacuum, on the contrary, they are used in communities which are also in constant contact and relation with each other. They are almost never stable and affected by each other; thus, some influences as well as changes might occur in between those languages. Moreover, some languages become stronger while some languages diminish or even die due to various sociological reasons according to Baugh (2011). Correspondingly, in most situations this change takes place as a result of the effect majority language towards the minority language. Various factors may affect this change, thus a wide sociolinguistic analysis is required to understand what happens and why it happens.

According to Saussure cited by Mahadi (2012) believes that language is a system of signs. For him, a sign consists of a signifier (the sound- image or the written shape) and a signified (a concept), in the manner that, they both are inseparably linked with each other. In other words, the sound-image cannot be separated from the concept, that is to say, these two never part with each other. He further likens language and thought to a sheet of paper; He believes that thought is the front part of paper and sound the back part. It is impossible to cut any of the two parts without cutting the other. In the sense that, in language the sounds and thought are inseparable.

Every ethnic has its different and unique indigenous language that is spoken by speakers having the same identity. The Indonesian Chinese (Tionghoa) as one of ethnic groups in North Sumatra attempt to survive amongst the heterogeneity of ethnics coming not only from North Sumatra province but also other areas in Indonesia, such as West Sumatra and Java. Many ethnics are mistaking of thinking that Indonesian Chinese speak Mandarin language; however, the Indonesian Chinese contain of numerous tribes that there is an assimilation of the Chinese in North Sumatra, such as Hakka (Khek), Hokkien,

Konghu, Teochew, Hailohong and Henghwa tribes. Out of those, the Hokkien populate the most and therefore many Indonesian Chinese are accustomed to speaking Hokkien language instead of Mandarin language.

Growing up as a Chinese in Medan, Hokkien played a very big part in almost everything as it is technically our first language. My teachers and classmates from kindergarten all the way through high school were mostly Chinese, and Hokkien was often the language we use to ask questions, play and talk with our friends. Also, the food shops we frequent, stores we go to – many are owned by Chinese, and Hokkien was, and is very much still the language we use to communicate.

The prominence of Hokkien in Medan can be contributed to the fact that teaching and learning Mandarin was banned for about 35 years throughout Indonesia from the 1960s to the early 2000s. However, Hokkien survived the ban in Medan, because it is a spoken language and there were not as many eyes watching over Medan at that time as compared to other central cities, such as Jakarta, Bandung, or Surabaya, where both Mandarin and other Chinese languages failed to remain.

When talking about Medan Hokkien, it does not include just the city of Medan. Other North Sumatran cities surrounding Medan with significant Chinese communities also speak the language, including Chinese people from the cities of Binjai, Lubuk Pakam, Tanjung Balai, Pematangsiantar, and many more despite what tribes they belong to. People dealing in local trades, businesses, schools use Hokkien predominantly and they switch to using Indonesian only when necessary.

In modern society, increasing globalization has a tremendous impact on indigenous language loss around the world. Languages that are commonly used in business throughout the world such as English and Mandarin Chinese have trickled into remote locations, thus competing with smaller, local languages according to Rymer (2012). It happens to the Hokkien community in North Sumatra; people, especially children, are taught to speak English or some Mandarin language. The researcher found this phenomena was caused by family. Parents start to believe that in order to have better job prospects, children must be solely fluent in the dominant language rather than indigenous language. In fact,

according to Perlin (2014, p.71) states that the languages that are most likely to disappear over the next century are unknown outside their communities. It means that if a language is confined to use within a community, it truly becomes endangered according to Baines (2012).

There are growing numbers of Medan Chinese households that view Hokkien as a second-class Chinese language, and they strive to exclusively use Mandarin or English to become their perception of “elite” compared to the rest of Chinese Medanese who speak solely Hokkien. This notion has observably starting to trickle down from adults to teenagers and children.

It is Hokkien that provides the basics for Chinese Medanese to pick up Mandarin or English so much faster compared to other first – time learners. Tones, grammar, and vocabularies come very instinctively because they are similarly structures to Hokkien, one just needs to learn the “switch” and build on it to learn those languages, Mandarin or English.

Language maintenance is important for preserving connections to the past and one’s ancestors. The globalization that has changed people’s mind against indigenous language led to widespread language loss. Chew (2015) states that revitalizing the languages is a step toward healing the historical trauma and ensuring survival of people’s lives. The Indonesian Chinese in Medan speak Hokkien in their ordinary interaction or communication; some have forgotten and abandoned it.

Historically, this language was once forbidden by the regime of the New Order for the Chinese people were accused of being involved in the Communist Party *coupe de tat* – the 1965’s terror that brought Indonesia into practically the psychological war between West and East alignment, the truth about which has not yet been fully proven. That tragic incident put the Chinese into such a fragile position that many of them were massacred. Whether it happened long time ago or happens in the present day, the Hokkien language is gradually facing extinction. People’s mindset is influenced either by the historical event or modern globalization. In addition to that, Meza (2015) states that learning one’s heritage language is an important factor in reclaiming ties to the past and to one’s cultural roots. Indigenous language should not be vanished; instead of that it should be

preserved in order to show the importance of language that shows identity and symbolizes the culture of one's ethnic.

Language maintenance is seen to be applicable to preserve the existence of Hokkien language among its speakers. Hokkien native speakers should be conscious and realize that mother tongue or the so-called indigenous language is needed to teach and practice especially for children so children will not feel ashamed of their own language.

The research finding is tightly relevant to the previous study done by Indra Hartoyo who is the lecturer of FBS UNIMED that Hokkien language is required in the field of work. However, the study conducted was inadequate and the finding was too limit that the Hokkien language is maintained in the field of work. The researcher found that language is very vital to be taught in the early stage of language acquisition regardless of how sophisticated and advanced the development of the technology is. Hokkien language should be maintained so that the Chinese generation will be perpetuated. The reason of conducting of this study is that the researcher felt that Hokkien language is functioned as communicative or spoken language; it does not possess any grammatical or structural sentences. It is basically used to communicate with one another to show the identity, culture or custom and more importantly to reveal intimacy among others.

The researchers has also observed that there are some families taking efforts in maintaining their ethnic languages. This phenomenon makes the researchers feel that it is necessary to describe this phenomenon and to find out the factors influencing the language maintenance in society especially in the families.

In a nutshell, it cannot be denied that language is important in socializing with others. Through the variety of studies that have been conducted by past researchers, it can be seen that language may be maintained due to many reasons and some of them are due to language attitude and language practices. Hence, the study has been made to see how to maintain Hokkien language among its speakers in Medan. The findings will also be significant to both researchers and practitioners in the future.

## **1.2 The Problems of the Study**

Based on the background in the previous part, the study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What maintenance do the Hokkien speakers make to use their language in Medan?
2. How do the Hokkien speakers maintain their language?
3. Why do Hokkien speakers maintain their language in the way they do?

## **1.3 The Objectives of the Study**

In relation to the problems, the objectives of the study are: (1) to find out what maintenance Hokkien speakers make to use their language in Medan, (2) to find out the process of Hokkien speakers maintain their language, and (3) to find out the reasons of Hokkien speakers maintain their language.

## **1.4 The Scope of the Study**

This study focused on language maintenance of Hokkien's language among Hokkien speakers in Medan. The researcher found that Hokkien's language faces extinction or declination rate among its speakers especially the loss of simple vocabularies used in the daily conversation.

## **1.5 The Significances of the Study**

After conducting this study, it is hoped that this study is significantly beneficial for either theoretical or practical aspects. Theoretically, the finding of this research will be useful for the next researcher who will run further research dealing with language maintenance particularly in discussing about indigenous language or mother tongue.

Practically, it is hoped that this study is useful for all Hokkien speakers to realize that it is important to maintain their language in order to keep the existence of their ethnic groups.