

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Research

Language plays a crucial role in shaping a person's identity and social relationships. Language is not only seen as a means of communication but also reflects an individual's identity, social status, and the environment in which they live (Edwards, 2009). Through language, individuals can interact and adapt to their environment. A person's language ability is not always stable. In certain situations, individuals may experience a decline in their mastery of a language that was previously well-mastery. When individuals move to a new environment or immigrate and grow up in a dominant language environment, the use of their first language is often displaced due to the demands to use the dominant language in their new place of residence. This change not only affects daily communication patterns but also impacts first language acquisition, leading to a decline in first language proficiency (Schmid & Keijzer, 2009).

Immigrants often experience a decline in their first or heritage language due to a lack of exposure and interaction in that language. This can occur due to the pressure for immigrants to adapt to using the dominant language of their environment. Maintaining fluency in the heritage language can be difficult for many heritage language speakers as the dominant language begins to take its place in everyday life. Immigrants often switch to the dominant language spoken in the place they immigrate to for reasons of education, employment, or social integration (Sebina, 2014). This gradual reduction in the frequency of using the heritage language can, over time, lead to a decline in abilities, such as limitations in vocabulary, sentence structure, and difficulty expressing and understanding the heritage language as one's native language.

This phenomenon of language decline is known as Language Attrition. Language attrition can occur in various languages mastered or used by individuals, such as in the first language, second language, and foreign language. However, this study focuses specifically on first language attrition. First language attrition refers to the decline in the ability to understand and use one's first language, typically occurring when individuals are more frequently exposed to and use a second language in their daily lives (Schmid, 2011).

Language Attrition is a specific aspect of Language Loss that falls under the scope of Sociolinguistics, which examines the complex interaction between language and society. Various factors, such as social factors and individual factors, can lead to language attrition (Schmid, 2011). This research focuses on what and how social factors can influence the decline of heritage language proficiency as a first language by immigrants living in an environment with dominance and intense exposure to English. Exploring the factors and causes of heritage language attrition will help find effective ways to maintain heritage language skills, which are the languages passed down through generations as a person's identity. This is important to understand because language attrition is not only linguistically impactful but also impacts social relationships, especially in family and cultural contexts.

According to a video by Teacher Education About Multilingual - TEAM (2023), which discusses the phenomenon of language attrition, language attrition is a normal process that can occur in all language learners or speakers. One example of language attrition that often occurs in real life is attrition in vocabulary, or what is commonly referred to as lexical attrition, which is the reduced ability or difficulty to access vocabulary in the language being learned or mastered, which can slow down speakers in

finding and pronouncing words. For example, an Italian speaker who experiences first language attrition due to the dominance of English, when he wants to say 'sugo', which means sauce in English, but because it is difficult to access the word 'sugo' because Italian is rarely used, the word 'sauce' is easier to find, so the speaker chooses to say 'sauce'. In the video, Prof. Sorace explains that language attrition in Italian speakers shows how first language skills can decline with lack of use. This explanation is certainly relevant to this research which highlights the attrition of heritage language as a first language that occurs in immigrants, because in this case, it is emphasized that even though the language is acquired since childhood, the lack of practice of using the first language caused by the dominance of other languages in the social environment can lead to the deterioration of language skills.

The issue that drives this research is the phenomenon of the loss of first language or heritage language skills experienced by the immigrant generation, especially when she is growing up in an English-dominant environment, as well as the lack of exposure to environments that support the use of the heritage language and affect the language attrition process, as experienced by Jenny Liao in a video on YouTube NBC News entitled "A Gap That Takes A Lifetime to Bridge: An Asian American's Effort to Relearn Her Language" as the main subject in this research. Jenny is an Asian American who grew up in New York with immigrant parents from China and experienced heritage language attrition as her first language. Her first language (L1) was Cantonese, which she learned at home as a child. However, since her school days, English (L2) has become her dominant language due to the constant use of English in her environment, which has gradually reduced her use of Cantonese, as it is rarely used outside her family circle. Jenny shared her story in a YouTube video published by NBC News on March 5, 2022,

highlighting the struggles of immigrant children to reconnect with their heritage languages.

This phenomenon can occur due to various factors, especially social factors, as a measure of language improvement and decline due to interactions between individuals that affect the frequency and quality of language use (Schmid & Kopke, 2019). By understanding the problem and its causes, this research will explore what and how social factors can influence the decline in inherited language skills experienced by Jenny, who lives in a dominant language environment and uses the dominant language actively until it replaces the position of the first language as a means of daily communication. This phenomenon confirms that the loss of a first language not only impacts aspects of communication but also identity formation and family relationships. Thus, this research explores how social factors in the context of immigration affect the process of first language attrition, particularly in heritage language speakers. This research not only describes the decline in the use of Cantonese but also focuses on how English, as the dominant language, contributes to this process. English became the language Jenny used in her education and surroundings, thereby influencing and shaping her emotional, cultural, and linguistic experiences. The NBC News video is treated as a narrative text that describes Jenny's life experience, in which the dominance of English gradually reduced her use of Cantonese.