

Main threat to spoken language is social attitudes of speaker: Prof

Neil Chan

KOTA KINABALU: The main threat to a spoken language is the social attitudes of the speaker of the language itself, according to a visiting American academician.

Prof James Thomas Collins of Northern Illinois University (NIU) expounded his thesis at a talk entitled 'Language research based history, geography and communication' held at Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) on Wednesday.

"There are languages that disappear due to disease or wars but these factors do not exist generally (in modern times) so it is the attitude of the speakers which discard the use of the language or do not pass down the language



Prof Collins

to their children which have caused the decline in their use," he said.

Collins who is also the Director of Centre for SouthEast Asian Studies at NIU this social attitude is the main threat to a spoken language - whether people prefer to use English or do they prefer to use Malay as the language of their area.

"Among the Chinese as well we can see now a tendency to emphasise on Mandarin over Chinese dialects such as Cantonese or Hakka, so the real threat lies in the heart of the speaker and his attitude towards the language of his/her district.

"One of the steps we can take to combat this language threat is we have to find a way to reassure native speak-

ers of a language and culture in their and their traditional practices of their area have a value and its continued usage has a value.

"That is all we can do as an 'outsider', the government, non governmental organisations, churches and religious bodies, all of them need to play their role to convince natives speakers of a language of the value of its continued usage."

He said this during the first portion of his talk where he dwelled on how historical geographical and communication factors play a large role in local differentiation of languages and dialects even in the same state or district or local area, using examples in West Malaysia and Sarawak.

Collins said on Thursday he would be talking about

Borneon languages that seem to be in good shape, those that don't seem to be in good shape, those languages that seem to be in good shape but aren't, languages that are competing with each other and also ways to assist communities of the language speakers to maintain their languages and also about some traditional ways that help make it possible for small languages to survive.

"I will also be talking about projects underway now in parts of Borneo especially Indonesian Borneo, so there would be also views on that," he said.

The talk also saw a 'Letter of Intent' signed between UMS and NIU for mutual cooperation between the universities in the field of education by the Dean of the School of Social Sciences Assoc Prof. Inon Shaharuddin Abdul Rahman for UMS and Collins for NIU.