

# Language endangerment and vitality in Indonesia

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## 1. Introduction

In May 2018 I was asked to work with the last active speaker of Sar, a language spoken on Pantar island in the Indonesian province Nusa Tenggara Timur. Together with Bpk Amos Sir, who is an active speaker of Teiwa, another language of Pantar, and a passive speaker of Sar, Bpk Henrik (Endi) Bolang came to Kupang, on Timor island, where I was teaching at the time, to have his language documented. In the few days we had, we recorded and transcribed a 600-word list and some short monologues. When I asked Bpk Endi how he felt about being the last active speaker of his language, he answered in Sar:

*“Yea, nang, hmm na-traa' eta ga ge a... na was a na erra banna yang ba niraxau erra banna? Neeng na wultag, neeng walais, neeng waraqai. Ya la aang ga gamming aan pi traa' e ma ung telar, maang jadi traa' gam yesa e a suk ewar sir, suk ewar sir. A wa e maan ga gu gatta wan maang.”*

“Yes, my language will disappear because... I think I can make it live, but with whom do I do that? I talk with myself, speak to myself, listen to myself. Who responds so that our language will be used to talk to each other? There is no one, so our language here walks up and down, up and down... it comes and goes, has no place to stay.”

Bpk Henrik Bolang passed away nine months later, on 8 February, 2019, and Indonesia lost one of its 700 languages.<sup>1</sup>



Figure 1. Documenting Sar, with speaker Bpk Henrik Bolang and co-worker Bpk Amos Sir, Kupang 2018.

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<sup>1</sup> The Sar word list is available on the online open access lexical database called ‘LexiRumah’ (<https://lexirumah.model-ling.eu/>). All the recordings and transcriptions are available at The Language Archive, collection ‘Eastern Indonesia and Timor Leste’, [https://archive.mpi.nl/tla/islandora/object/tla%3A1839\\_cf775a05\\_676d\\_4f49\\_9937\\_6ddb6a83189f](https://archive.mpi.nl/tla/islandora/object/tla%3A1839_cf775a05_676d_4f49_9937_6ddb6a83189f).

## 2. Language endangerment and revitalization in Indonesia<sup>2</sup>

Applying the Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS, Lewis and Simons 2010), the *Ethnologue* estimates that about half of the languages in Indonesia are endangered, see Table 1. Similar percentages are reported in Anderbeck (2015).

Endangerment level	Number of languages	Percent of total
Not endangered	362	51.55 %
Endangered	345	48.85 %
Threatened	203	28.7 %
Shifting	69	9.8 %
Nearly extinct	28	4 %
Moribund	39	5.5 %
Dormant	6	0.85 %

Table 1. Total number of living languages in Indonesia, according to their level of endangerment (Eberhard et al. 2020).

In many places in Indonesia, the viability of a language is threatened because intergenerational transmission is disrupted. Parents are able to speak their local language, but use Indonesian with their children because that is the language of education and learning to speak it well will improve the future prospects of their children. However, research has shown that children who grow up bilingually, using different languages at home and in school, manage to learn the school language just as well as monolingual children. Initially, the bilingual children may have lower skills than the monolingual ones, but after one or two years with a good amount of exposure and sufficient usage of the school language, they will have attained the same level in the school language as monolingual children (Hammer et al. 2014). Bilingual children who are exposed to both languages in a balanced (equal) manner will attain the same developmental milestones in these two languages as monolingual children (Blom 2010), and will be able to use each of the two languages fluently in their respective domains, e.g. Indonesian for school and work, and the local language for talking to family and friends.

Compared to monolingual children, bilingual children also appear to have certain social-economic benefits and cognitive advantages. Research in the US has shown that immigrant children who speak both the home language and English well, earn 2,000-3,000 dollar more per year than those who speak English well but have lost their home language (Agirdag 2013). The cognitive advantages that bilinguals develop stem from the process of acquiring two languages and managing those languages simultaneously — inhibiting one so the second can be used without interference, which allows them to develop cognitive skills that extend into other domains. They appear to give bilingual speakers an increased working memory, and an enhanced

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<sup>2</sup> This section is partly based on Klamer, Marian. 2018. Documenting the linguistic diversity of Indonesia: Time is running out. In: Santri E.P. Djahimo (ed.), 2018. *Proceedings of 'Revitalization of local languages as the pillar of pluralism'*, p. 1-10. [Proceedings of the International Conference on Local Languages, organized by the Asosiasi Peneliti Bahasa-bahasa Lokal (APBL) & Nusa Cendana University, Kupang, 29-30 June 2018]. Salatiga: Satya Wacana Press.

capacity to appropriately control and distribute their attentional resources, to develop abstract and symbolic representations, and to solve problems (Adesope et al. 2010, p. 229).

Language revitalization efforts in Indonesia could focus on informing parents about the benefits of being bilingual, so that children grow up speaking Indonesian in school and a local language at home.

In addition, it is vital that revitalization efforts of endangered Indonesian languages are combined with the documentation and description of these languages. Currently less than 100 of the 700 languages of Indonesia have been grammatically and lexically described. Through descriptive work, speakers are provided with an orthography so that they can write down the history of the local community, their traditional stories, songs and poems, to be kept for future generations. With a script, local languages can also be used in social media and text messages. It enables speakers to compile dictionaries of their language, so that the local vocabulary of e.g. animals, plants, agriculture, and words for local culture-specific concepts and artefacts can be documented. Dictionaries also help the younger generation to see how certain Indonesian words are translated into the local language, and vice versa. All of this enhances the functions of local languages, and it makes the intangible heritage that such a language is, more tangible.

### **3. Factors accelerating the shift of local languages to Indonesian**

In Indonesia, speakers of local languages are increasingly using Indonesian with their children. An example was mentioned by Lauder and Lauder (2020 Inlali talk): while elder speakers of Kao (North Halmahera) can speak Kao to each other, they do not use it with their grandchildren, because the grandchildren do not understand it anymore. Many of the children that I met during my fieldwork on Pantar and Alor still understand their (grand-)parents' language but use Indonesian to answer when spoken to in that language, and they speak Indonesian with their peers (Klamer 2017). As a result, these local languages are no longer passed on to the next generation, and will die when the adults of today pass away.

There are many factors why speakers stop transmitting their language to the younger generations. Here I list some of them.

First, there are *geographic* and *socio-economic* reasons why this happens: nowadays, many Indonesians in the course of their life relocate to an area where the language of their parents is not spoken. Examples include youngsters in remote areas who have to leave their home village and stay in town for educational purposes; the “brain drain” of local language speakers who move out of their language community because of urbanization; and migrants who relocate from overpopulated to underpopulated areas. Such migrants typically shift to using Indonesian or the lingua franca of their new location. If the proportion of immigrant settlers among a population is large, this may also cause a local community to shift to Indonesian or a regional Malay variety, at the expense of the local language. This is what happened in the Raja Ampat archipelago, where Ma'ya, which was used as a local lingua franca till the 1950's, has been displaced by Malay under the influence of immigrants (Remijnsen 2001, p. 15). Adults may have all kinds of economic or socio-political reasons to relocate to an area where their local language is not spoken. For example, the Dhao speakers living in Kupang (Balukh 2020), or the Baduy in Java

who must move because their farming land has diminished (Kurniawan, Inlali talk 2020), or the Marori in southern Papua, who have lost their foraging land (Arka 2013).

The second reason why transmission of a local language may get broken is *social*. Due to the linguistic diversity of many Indonesian regions, in many marriages, the local language is spoken by only one of the spouses. In some cases, the new spouse acquires the local language while living in the new environment; in other cases, however, they revert to using Indonesian or the local Malay variety to communicate with their spouse and neighbors. An example of the latter are the Nasal speakers who marry non-Nasal speakers (McDonnell, Inlali 2020).

A third factor in breaking the transmission is *attitudinal*. For a long time, it has been the Indonesian government's policy that local languages should not be spoken in school, because it was considered backward. Primary school teachers were even instructed to punish children for speaking the local language. This happened with e.g. children speaking Dhao (Timor) or Abui (Alor) up till the 1980's (Saad 2020), while Manggarai (Flores) speaking children were still punished for this in 2017 (Balukh, [this volume](#)). These are just a few examples; similar situations where the local language is, or has been, actively oppressed by the schools are attested in many locations, especially in rural areas of eastern Indonesia. At the same time, Indonesian has much prestige, and teachers and government officials encourage the use of Indonesian in all domains. In this respect, Indonesian is replacing not only the local languages but also the high registers that have formerly been in use for official purposes as is the case for e.g. Javanese and Balinese, as well as in e.g. Leti, in the southern Moluccas (Saupia, Inlali 2020).

Fourth, there are *socio-linguistic* reasons why languages stop being transmitted to the younger generation. The most noticeable one is the increasingly limited domains of use of local languages due to the dominance of Indonesian. While the local languages were formerly used both in the public sphere (e.g. to negotiate marriages or to discuss village/clan politics) as well as the home, Indonesian is now becoming increasingly dominant in the public domain, causing the local language to retreat to the home domain. A next step would be a further retreat where the local language is only used as the prestige or poetic register of the language (Lauder and Lauder, Inlali 2020). Importantly, the retreat of the local language does not necessarily happen because it is considered negatively. It is often still highly valued, but is used in fewer domains. As a result, the younger generation is exposed to it less, and will have fewer opportunities to acquire it. Indonesian is not the only language causing the retreat of local languages. In many locations, there is also pressure from local Malay varieties, which function as colloquial languages for interethnic communication. Local Malays that are taking over the role of local languages in the informal home domain can be found everywhere in Indonesia: in Northern Halmahera, where Ternate Malay takes over the role of Gamkonora in informal domains; in Maluku, where Ambonese Malay on Kisar island is taking over from local Oirata; in West Timor, where Kupang Malay is taking over from Dhao and Amarasi; in Alor and Pantar, where Alor Malay is taking over from the twenty local languages spoken on the islands; or in southern Papua, where Papuan Malay is taking over from Kalabra and Marori. But besides local Malay, it may also be a local lingua franca that takes over the role of other local languages in informal domains. Manggarai in Central Flores is doing exactly that, replacing the local languages, and Gorontalo in northern Sulawesi is taking over from local Suwawa. In turn, Gorontalo is being replaced by Gorontalo Malay in the informal domains (Barlow, Inlali 2020).

Fifth, there may be *psychological* reasons that obstruct transmission of language. Speakers may not be consciously aware that they are shifting to Indonesian more often, and use the language in a larger range of domains. Such unconscious language shift may happen in speakers who do not experience their local language as a part of their own unique cultural heritage, because language is something that cannot be seen and touched.

Sixth, transmission gets broken because certain *pre-scientific ideas* about language prevail in speakers. For example, parents may have the idea that children will just ‘pick up’ the local language from others as they grow up, like they did themselves. However, they do not realize that such spontaneous language acquisition will not happen in a situation where everyone around the kids speaks Indonesian, including the parents. Parents and teachers may also believe in the myth that the local language spoken in the home will have a negative effect on the acquisition of Indonesian as school language, which is totally wrong (Grosjean 2010, pp. 176–177). Another myth that can often be heard is that monolingualism is the best way to support the political unity of a nation. In this way of thinking, using a local language can be seen as a negative political choice against the nation’s unity, rather than a positive cultural choice by which speakers cherish their local heritage. However, bilingualism is a worldwide phenomenon, found on all continents and in the majority of the countries of the world. Slightly more than half of Europe’s population is at least bilingual (Grosjean 2010, pp. 13–17). There is no relation between monolingualism and political views.

As mentioned, languages with too few speakers are threatened if these speakers are not transmitting the language to children. However, a low number of speakers is not in itself a threat to the language. For instance, the situation on the islands of Alor and Pantar, where about twenty languages with 100-5,000 speakers have survived for hundreds of years until today, illustrates that it is possible for a small language to survive. If the speakers are bilingual (or multi-lingual), the condition for survival of the language is that their bilingualism should be both balanced and stable. That is, there should not be a single dominant language to which all the bilinguals want to shift, and the bilingual situation should not be short-lived or referring to limited domains only. Rather, it should be multi-purpose and continue for generations. In sum, small languages may survive despite of their low numbers of speakers, but they are threatened when situations of unbalanced and unstable bilingualism arise.

Finally, the lack of an orthography can also be a factor in language endangerment, because it prevents the speakers from using their language in domains where writing is useful or required. Furthermore, a script makes a language more tangible and highly valued. It helps to make history, literature and poetry in the language visible as heritage to be passed on to the next generation. However, an orthography or written sources in themselves are useless in preventing languages from dying: if languages are no longer transmitted to children, they will die, irrespective of the number of speakers they have or the amount of written records that was produced.

#### **4. Factors supporting the maintenance of local languages in Indonesia**

Given the numerous factors accelerating the shift of local languages to Indonesian discussed in the previous section, an approach of language maintenance that might work well in Indonesia involves taking measures to maintain or restore intergenerational transmission of local languages.

This implies that speakers are encouraged to use their local language in the informal domains at home, with families and friends, including communities living in diaspora situations. It would also imply that people are encouraged to use the local language in modern media and youth culture.

There are at least two ways in which the maintenance of local languages can be supported. First, local speakers must be involved in any maintenance activities, as well as Indonesian stakeholders. Second, it is important to share existing knowledge about language transmission and bilingualism with local speakers and the general public.

Regarding the first suggestion, it is important to involve local speakers who are in executive or leading positions. This includes the local government - though this may be unstable and complicated, local heads of schools, traditional leaders (cf. Kao tribal chief, Lauder and Lauder, Inlali 2020), and religious leaders who can preach in the local language (Balle, Inlali 2020). There are also examples of native speakers or students who document their own local language, or a language spoken in their vicinity (Riesberg, this volume). For example, students of English at Universitas Artha Wacana in Kupang can write their thesis about one of the local languages spoken on Timor, Alor or Pantar. And linguists should make an effort to train and support consultants with whom they work to become independent language documenters. If feasible, linguists or linguistic projects could support promising native speaker consultants to get a degree in linguistics. Besides the local involvement, it is also important that linguists work together with local or regional institutions (Soriente, Inlali 2020), such as local universities or offices of the Badan Bahasa (Lovstrand and others, Inlali 2020). As the local situations in Indonesia are all different from each other, it is only possible to develop meaningful strategies to support local languages in collaboration with the people who live in those situations and understand them.

A second approach to maintenance of local languages in Indonesia is to provide the general public with knowledge and information, so that local leaders and school teachers have access to the right information, and can share this with parents and children. Linguists can set up research projects studying the effects of being bilingual (or multilingual) in Indonesia, publish about the cognitive advantages of bilingualism, and mention these benefits in public lectures or speeches they give. Word list or dictionaries of local languages can be published to help enhance their status, and to provide orthographies to speaker communities. We can raise awareness that language is a piece of immaterial heritage that will get lost when it is not used.

## **5. Encouraging signs**

One of the very encouraging signs is that, unlike former days, the Indonesian national government now has a positive attitude towards the preservation of cultural heritage, including the oral traditions and languages spoken in the nation, as the Cultural Advancement Law No 5 indicates:

Indonesia's Cultural Advancement Law No 5, 2017 (Lauder & Lauder, Inlali 2020)

The Promotion of Culture aims to: (1) develop noble national cultural values; (2) enrich cultural diversity; (3) strengthen national identity; (4) strengthen national unity; (5) educating the life of the nation; (6) improve the image of the nation; (7) realize a civil

society; (8) improve people's welfare; (9) preserve the nation's cultural heritage; and (10) influence the direction of the development of world civilization (see Chapter I, Article 4).

Objects of the promotion of Indonesian culture are: (a) **oral traditions**; (b) manuscripts; (c) customs; (d) rites; knowledge; (e) traditional technology; (f) art; (g) **language**; (h) folk play; and (i) traditional sports (see Chapter I, Article 5).

Another encouraging development is the suggestion made by various speakers at the Inlali conference, to increase collaboration between the Badan Bahasa and linguistic researchers at universities, both inside and outside of Indonesia.

It is also encouraging to see that many communities have positive feelings towards the local language as a marker of their culture and identity, and many communities react positively to interventions by outsiders. This was reported in various talks of the Inlali conference, and happens in many locations in Indonesia. For instance, I have witnessed a fundamental change in language attitudes taking place in Alor and Pantar in the time that linguists have been working there, between 2002-2020. From an earlier situation where no one spent a thought on the use of local languages, and many parents just spoke Malay with their children without reflecting on it, there are now adults who actively strive to keep using their local language in the home, and there are local leaders who go around convincing other parents to follow. Teachers organise competitions in story-writing and poetry in the local language. There are also positive reactions from students, the future leaders, who use their local language in modern media and hip-hop, rap and rock lyrics. The increased availability of mobile phones and internet throughout Indonesia makes video clips of all kinds of local language usage appear on YouTube.

Many have also experienced that students in Indonesia are eager to learn to document local languages. For example, colleagues at the University of Hawaii, Universitas Kristen Artha Wacana, and Leiden University, organized a seven-day linguistic training workshop from 7-13 May 2018. The aim was to learn to document minority languages in Nusa Tenggara Timur. There were 29 students who participated in the training, and the results were amazing. Besides doing the training, the students also recorded, translated and annotated a story and a word list of seven local languages spoken in and around Kupang: Helong Darat di Bolok, Uab Meto di Amarasi Nekkese, Abui, Termanu, Uab Meto di Burain, Sar, Rote Thie, and Rote Lole.

It is my hope that because of positive experiences like these, there will be more and more young Indonesians who value their local language as an exponent of their unique intangible heritage, and who actively decide to keep on speaking it. I also hope that we can convince more and more parents to use their local language with their children, because it is these parents who hold the key to the survival of local languages. If they do not pass on their language, it will die; if they teach it to their children, it will live. Only by such concerted efforts will it be possible to keep Indonesia's rich linguistic heritage. Time is running out, but it is not too late yet.

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