

Strategies for revitalizing endangered Borneo languages: A comparison between Negara Brunei Darussalam and Sarawak, Malaysia

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Abstract

This article outlines various strategies that can be adopted to support efforts to revitalize the languages of the minority people of Borneo. This issue is crucial for the whole of Borneo in order to facilitate maintenance of the diversity of existing languages of Sabah and Sarawak in Malaysia and Kalimantan in Indonesia.

The primary focus of the article is to compare strategies between Brunei and Sarawak. In Brunei, the minority indigenous languages are officially regarded as dialects of Malay, though from a linguistic perspective the percentage of shared cognates (PSC) between five of the languages that are recognised as spoken by the indigenous Brunei people (Tutong, Belait, Dusun, Bisaya and Lun Bawang) is less than 43% (Nothofer, 1991, p. 158). Meanwhile, in Sarawak, more than 20 indigenous languages are still spoken.

Strategies adopted in Brunei include lexicographical efforts by the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (Language and Literature Bureau) to collate lists of words in the indigenous languages and also courses on the Tutong, Dusun and Iban languages offered by the Universiti Brunei Darussalam Language Centre.

The main strategies adopted in Sarawak are different, because there is an emphasis on primary education: facilitating indigenous languages, particularly for the Iban, Kelabit and Bidayuh communities, to make them the primary languages in pre-schools though the system of mother-tongue based multilingual education (MTBMLE). Another initiative is to use cyberspace and create webpages in the indigenous languages.

In conclusion, the paper evaluates these strategies: which ones are more effective?

Abstrak

Makalah ini akan menjelaskan beberapa langkah atau strategi yang boleh dilaksanakan untuk membantu usaha-usaha menghidupkan semula bahasa-bahasa kaum minoriti yang terjejas di Pulau Borneo. Perkara ini sangat penting di seluruh Borneo, kerana kepelbagaian bahasa yang ada di Kalimantan (Indonesia), di Sabah dan Sarawak (Malaysia) serta di Negara Brunei Darussalam.

Fokus utama makalah ialah perbandingan strategi antara Brunei dan Sarawak. Di Brunei bahasa kaum minoriti dianggap secara rasmi sebagai dialek-dialek Bahasa Melayu, walaupun dari segi linguistik lima daripada tujuh bahasa yang diiktiraf sebagai bahasa jati Brunei (Bahasa Tutong, Bahasa Belait, Bahasa Dusun, Bahasa Bisaya dan Bahasa Lun Bawang) menunjukkan PSC (% shared cognates) yang kurang daripada 43% dengan Bahasa Melayu Brunei (Nothofer, 1991: 158). Manakala di Sarawak jumlah bahasa jati yang masih dituturkan lebih dari dua puluh.

Antara strategi yang digunakan di Brunei adalah usaha-usaha lexicografik Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka mengumpulkan senarai istilah dalam bahasa jati, dan menganjurkan kursus dalam Bahasa Tutong, Dusun, dan Iban di Pusat Bahasa Universiti Brunei Darussalam.

Di Sarawak strategi utama yang digunakan berbeza, kerana adalah penekanan pada peringkat pendidikan awal: pemerolehan bahasa jati, umpamanya dalam masyarakat Iban, Kelabit dan Bidayuh, dipelajari sebagai bahasa pertama di tadika dibawah system MTBMLE (pendidikan berpelbagai bahasa berasaskan bahasa ibunda). Sebuah langkah lagi ialah penggunaan ruang siber dan laman-laman web dalam bahasa-bahasa jati.

Sebagai kesimpulannya, makalah akan menilai tentang strategi tersebut: strategi mana yang lebih berkesan?

Introduction

The island of Borneo has a rich diversity of both indigenous and immigrant languages, concomitant with its complex history of migrations both from overseas as well as internally. Many of these languages are spoken only by small minorities in Borneo's four polities: Negara Brunei Darussalam (henceforth Brunei), Sabah and Sarawak (both states forming part of the Federation of Malaysia), and the provinces of Kalimantan which are part of Indonesia (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: Political map of Borneo.

Source: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Administrative_map_of_Borneo_\(Indonesian\).png](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Administrative_map_of_Borneo_(Indonesian).png)

In light of the small number of speakers, many of these languages can be deemed to be endangered as a consequence of both language-external and internal factors. Table 1 lists some major causes of language endangerment. It is possible for more than one of these factors in either column to combine as contributory causes of endangerment.

Table 1: Factors contributing to language endangerment in Borneo

External Factors	Internal Factors
• language ecology (influence of other more powerful languages) • rural > urban migration • exogamous marriages • dams and deforestation > forced relocation of communities	• break in intergenerational transmission within families • dialectal diversity > reluctance of communities to agree on a standard variety • voluntary language shift

It is normally assumed that language loss is undesirable, and that the preservation and revitalization of languages is a desirable objective, just as with plant and animal species in the biological and related sciences. However, it is quite possible that there are instances where

communities voluntarily abandon their language, possibly for reasons of political or economic expedience, without necessarily being pressured to do so.

Anthropological and sociolinguistic researchers have developed the concept of Ethnolinguistic Vitality (EV) as a heuristic for the levels of language endangerment. Landweer (2012) lists the following factors which may influence levels of EV:

- relative position on the urban-rural continuum;
- domains in which the language is used;
- frequency and type of code switching;
- population and group dynamics;
- distribution of speakers within their own social networks;
- social outlook regarding and within the speech community;
- language prestige; and
- access to a stable and acceptable economic base

This article offers a comparison between Brunei and Sarawak in terms of the strategies adopted in the two polities for indigenous minority language revitalization. As a framework for the discussion, some possible revitalization strategies are outlined, followed by background descriptions of the multilingual situation in Brunei and in Sarawak.

Revitalization strategies

The five strategies considered in this article are as follows. (The list may be incomplete, as there could also be other strategies; and they may be combined rather than isolated in their implementation.)

- 1) offering the endangered minority languages as subjects for credit-bearing modules or courses in higher education institutions
- 2) documenting and describing the endangered languages in terms of their lexis, grammar and phonology
- 3) mother-tongue based multilingual education (MTBMLE): offering initial play-school and pre-school education in the home language of the community to ensure that children achieve initial literacy, oracy and numeracy in the same language that is used in their family
- 4) developing websites in and about the languages, and offering communities online social media spaces in which they are encouraged to use their language, especially for communication with diaspora family and friends
- 5) enhancing the ethnolinguistic vitality (EV) of the endangered language, especially the prestige and the domains in which it is used

The first of these is a ‘top-down’ strategy, normally instigated or sanctioned by the authorities within the higher education institution; the second is most likely to be undertaken by academic researchers or by language planning agencies (such as the *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka* – Language and Literature Bureau – in both Brunei and Malaysia), and can also be considered as ‘top-down’. The remaining three are ‘bottom-up’ initiatives which are adopted and developed by the communities themselves, although they may require the permission of national and local government agencies and the collaboration of academic linguistic researchers. If documentation (strategy 2) is done through online ‘crowdsourcing’ approaches, then it may be viewed as community-driven and ‘bottom-up’.

The languages of Brunei: A brief note

The most thorough and detailed description of Brunei's languages is that of Nothofer (1991), who divides them into Malay dialects: Kedayan, Kampung Air and Brunei Malay, and non-Malay isolects: Tutong, Belait, Dusun, Murut, Penan, Mukah, and Iban. Dusun is subdivided into 'Dusun Proper' and Bisaya. The last four listed (as well as Bisaya) are also spoken in Sarawak.

The Brunei government, including the *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka*, designates seven of these languages as belonging to the *puak jati* (indigenous groups): Brunei Malay, Kedayan, Tutong, Belait, Dusun, Bisaya and Murut.

The Penan, Mukah and Iban languages, although spoken by a number of Brunei citizens and permanent residents, are not considered indigenous to Brunei, as their main linguistic homelands lie within Sarawak. However, Murut is listed as an indigenous language of Brunei, even though most of its speakers reside in the Lawas District of Sarawak (where the language is known as Lun Bawang), as there is a substantial community of Murut speakers in the Temburong district of Brunei (Coluzzi, 2010).

Five of the languages of the *puak jati* can be classified as endangered, the exceptions being Brunei Malay and possibly Murut / Lun Bawang. Brunei Malay derives its high ethnolinguistic vitality from its dual function in Brunei society: firstly as the L1 of the powerful majority Brunei Malay community; and secondly as the default lingua franca of all Bruneians. Kedayan is endangered owing to its high percentage of shared cognates (PSC) with Brunei Malay (see Table 2). Belait is the most seriously endangered Bruneian language, with almost no younger speakers, but Tutong, Dusun and Bisaya are also perceived as endangered, both within their communities and by researchers.

Table 2: PSCs between Peninsular Standard Malay (PSM) and Brunei languages
(from Nothofer, 1991, p. 158)

COGNATE PERCENTAGES BASED ON THE SWADESH LIST											
	Kedayan	BSB	Kampung Air	Iban	Tutong	Belait	Dusun proper	Bisaya?	Penan	Murut	Mukah
PSM	80	84	82	65	33	29	40	38	29	24	35
Kedayan		94	95	64	37	28	43	45	27	26	38
BSB			94	64	37	28	41	43	26	25	36
Kampung Air				65	39	30	42	43	26	24	35
Iban					34	24	38	36	27	28	34
Tutong						54	40	42	34	30	39
Belait							35	36	34	33	32
Dusun proper								82	31	29	33
Bisaya?									31	30	33
Penan										30	37
Murut											30

Discussion below focuses on the introduction of Basa' Tutong as a subject of study at the Universiti Brunei Darussalam Language Centre, and the efforts of the Brunei *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka* to document all of Brunei's indigenous languages.

The languages of Sarawak: A brief note

The 2005 edition of the Ethnologue online resource (Raymond, 2005) lists a total of 47 languages of Sarawak, 46 of which are living. The other, Seru, is listed as extinct. The latest edition (Lewis, Simons & Fennig, 2013) lists all the languages of Malaysia together, a total of 140. Of these, 52 are now listed as being spoken in Sarawak. The difference, as ever, is due to the sources consulted and to the varying perceptions of what constitutes a language as opposed to a dialect, variety or subvariety. 26 of these are described as ‘threatened’ and 3 as ‘shifting’, all of them indigenous languages of the Austronesian family.

Sarawak Malay, as distinct from ‘Peninsular Standard’ Malay, serves as Sarawak’s major lingua franca, alongside Iban and English. Mandarin serves this function among Sarawak’s Chinese community, who form 25.5% of Sarawak’s population and whose heritage languages include Hokkien, Hakka and Foochow (Ting, 2012, p. 384). As in Brunei, it is possible to distinguish between Sarawak Malay as the L1 of the Malay community, who comprise about 23% of the state’s total population, and Sarawak Malay as a unifying lingua franca (Asmah Haji Omar, 1983; Nor Hashimah Jalaluddin, 1994; Ting, 2012).

Juxtaposed with these economically and politically powerful languages in Sarawak’s complex multilingual ecosystem, the minority indigenous languages can be considered as endangered. This applies even to Iban, perceived as ‘marginalized’ by Ariffin Omar and Teoh (1994) despite the Iban being the largest ethnic group (29% of the state’s population). It also applies to Bidayuh, the fourth largest language in terms of number of speakers, with about 8% of the total population of the state, partly because it is not a unified language and is extremely diverse in terms of its five major varieties, not all of which are mutually intelligible (Campbell & McLellan, in press; Rensch, 2006; Topping, 1990).

Comparison of revitalization strategies of Brunei and Sarawak

The basic pattern emerging from a review of endangered language revitalization strategies is that the first two of the five revitalization strategies in the above list are favoured in Brunei, whereas the third, fourth and fifth strategies are favoured in Sarawak. The information presented below illustrates this.

Basa’ Tutong in Universiti Brunei Darussalam (UBD)

In 2012, Basa’ Tutong was introduced as a credit-bearing module, along with Dusun and Iban, for all students at the UBD Language Centre. Anecdotally this has had a dramatic and positive effect on Bruneians’ perceptions of this language (Noor Azam, in press). Students who have enrolled are mostly not from families where Tutong is spoken. The unexpectedly high demand for enrolment has led to the introduction of a minor programme in Borneo Languages. In their responses to a survey reported by Noor Azam, UBD Language Centre students express the view that the minority indigenous languages are part of Brunei’s national heritage. Reversal of language shift was not among the original aims of the introduction of Basa’ Tutong modules, but it could be a consequence if the student interest is sustained.

Documentation efforts for minority languages in Brunei

As well as convening a 1995 conference and its related publication (DBP, 1995), the Brunei *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka* has published a dictionary of Basa’ Tutong, and more recently an extensive wordlist of the seven languages of Brunei’s *puak jati* (DBP, 2011). One must note in passing that they are labelled as *dialek* (dialects) of Malay, in spite of the evidence within the listings which confirms Nothofer’s PSC figures (Table 2 above) showing that they should be considered as separate languages. However, in line with the case made by Noor Azam

(2005), if they are deemed to be dialects of Malay, then the Brunei government, through the DBP and other agencies, has a duty to document, protect and preserve them in accordance with Brunei's 1959 constitution.

MTBMLE in the Bidayuh community in Sarawak

Mother-tongue based multilingual education (MTBMLE) is a worldwide linguistic human rights movement asserting the right of all children to be educated initially in their home language. It is supported by the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO), and projects have been introduced at play-school and pre-school level in the Iban, Kelabit and Bidayuh communities in Sarawak, as well as by the Kadazandusun and Iranun communities in Sabah. The Bidayuh Multilingual Education project (DBNA, *n.d.*; Ik Pahon, Josak, Tan, Vega & Simpson, 2010) has started pre-schools in nine villages using the children's home language (local variety of Bidayuh) as a means for them to achieve initial oracy, literacy and numeracy prior to encountering Malay and English when they enter Malaysian government primary schools. The mother-tongue is thus perceived as a 'bridge language', in line with principles outlined by Skutnabb-Kangas (2000, 2009) among others. For such initiatives to be feasible, language documentation work is required, so that teachers and pupils are able to use a consistent and logical spelling system for learning to read and write and narrating stories in their local language varieties. The support of the local communities in contributing to teachers' remuneration and providing suitable venues and materials for the pre-schools is another critical factor in their success.

Website development: eBario etc

The eBario project (www.ebario.org) aims to bridge the digital divide between urban and rural communities by improving connectivity in remote areas through the use of VSAT and related technologies. In response to requests, a resource was provided for the Kelabit community in Bario, north-eastern Sarawak, to communicate online with other Kelabit residing outside their home area: when using www.kelabit.net they are encouraged to communicate in the Kelabit language. The eBario project has also collected and posted digitized video- and audio-clips of Kelabit *laku*, songs of the older women in the community, capturing these for posterity so that they are not forgotten by the younger generation (McLellan & Yeo, 2006).

The rapid development of social media, including Facebook™, Twitter™ and Whatsapp™, facilitates interaction using minority languages, since these technologies are language-neutral, allowing online asynchronous or synchronous interaction in any language having a writing system. Since these are recent developments, there are as yet very few studies on whether and how effectively these social media can serve to promote minority language maintenance and revitalization.

One example of the use of social media for a Sarawak minority language is the *Sinda Dayak Bidayuh Bau* Facebook group, a closed group which currently boasts 5,810 members. Its introduction statement reads as follows:

Sina Bidoyoh Bau de pakai otto adin mo bogo de bisapur/birawur duoh sina Kirieng duoh Biputis. Dati otto suba yak klakar pakai sina Bidayuh sa otto de juo' ida komut sinda kupuo.

Samah-samah otto bikutung pimande, blajar sina Bidayuh de bonar-bonar.

[Free translation: the Bau Bidayuh language that we use is often mixed and combined with Malay and English. So let us try to use the Bidayuh as it is spoken in our villages.

So that we can maintain our unity and not be divided, let us study the Bidayuh language in depth]

This message thus signals the creation of a space for interaction in one local variety of Bidayuh, with a subsidiary aim of encouraging group members to study the language while using it online.

EV enhancement through extension of domains of use

This fifth strategy, enhancement of ethnolinguistic vitality, encompasses the other four, since it is a possible consequence of all of them. Offering languages such as Basa' Tutong in higher education contexts creates a new domain of use; documentation, through wordlist and dictionary compilation and grammatical description enables the study of the languages at both pre-school and higher levels of education; and the development of websites and social media spaces where the languages are used also shows expansion into a new domain.

Discussion: Comparison between Brunei and Sarawak

Institutions of higher learning in Sarawak have yet to adopt the first strategy, except for Iban, which has long been available as a subject for public examination at primary and secondary school-levels. The initial reactions of Bruneians suggest that the strategy of offering minority languages as subjects for study in higher education has the potential to transform popular perspectives about them.

The Sarawak branch of the Malaysian *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka* has conducted minimal language documentation work on languages other than Malay since its metamorphosis from the Borneo Literature Bureau of the colonial era (Idros Samsudin, 2011). One work on Bisaya of the Limbang valley, Yussin (1992, cited in Martin, 1994), originates from the Kuala Lumpur DBP, rather than the Kuching DBP. However, the increasing interest in language documentation among researchers, both those based in universities and in other organisations such as the Tun Jugah Foundation and the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL, www.sil.org), has led to better documentation of Sarawak's many minority languages. The *Forum Kepelbagaian Bahasa di Borneo* (FoKEBB, 'Forum for Language Diversity in Borneo') and similar gatherings attest to the importance of documentation as a prerequisite for language revitalization.

Minority communities in Brunei have yet to develop any MTBMLE initiatives; nor have they developed websites or social media spaces, in spite of the relatively good online connectivity in Brunei. One problem is that connectivity does not yet extend to all the interior rural areas where the minority languages are still spoken.

Conclusion

As a brief conclusion, the comparative analysis of five main strategies employed in Brunei and Sarawak for minority language revitalization shows some similarities, but also some contrasts, especially in terms of the roles played by the Sarawak branch of the Malaysian *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka* and the *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka* of Brunei. The Brunei DBP, whilst maintaining its view of Brunei minority indigenous languages as dialects of Malay, has nonetheless supported documentation research. Until now the main focus of the Sarawak DBP has been promoting knowledge of Malay among Sarawakians. But a recent news media report (Borneo Post, 2014) refers to funding granted to the Sarawak branch of the Malaysian DBP for endangered minority language preservation: this suggests that the Sarawak DBP may follow the lead set by its Brunei counterpart in this area.

For successful revitalization of any of Borneo's endangered minority languages, there is a need for all the five strategies to be deployed, along with others. The timeframe required to evaluate the effectiveness of these strategies must be long-term. There is no 'quick fix'.

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