

# Levels of Vitality and Efforts to Maintain Bidayuh and Mah Meri

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## Abstract

This paper presents the results of research on the vitality of Bidayuh and Mah Meri (Besisi), two indigenous languages spoken in Malaysia. The main aim of the research is to gain a picture of the sociolinguistic situation of these two languages in their rural homelands and to assess their ethnolinguistic vitality. For this paper, however, only the overall results of a selected number of questions are presented and compared. Having shown the relatively high vitality of these two languages and positive language attitudes that are found in the two communities, the second part of the paper sets out to analyze the reasons that may account for such vitality and, most importantly, to look at how knowledge of these factors might help to improve our understanding of language revitalization. The factors that seem to help in the maintenance of minority heritage languages include encouraging endogamy largely by means of ensuring the community does not become too dispersed, upholding traditional values, widespread support for multilingualism, and maintaining religious beliefs that are distinct from the dominant ones.

## Introduction

Malaysia is a federation with about 28 million inhabitants. It is geographically divided into two parts: West Malaysia (the peninsula south of Thailand); and East Malaysia (consisting of the two states of Sarawak and Sabah in the north of the island of Borneo). Malaysia is a multilingual and multi-ethnic state with around 140 different historical languages (Ethnologue). According to the 2010 census (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2010), the population is made up of Malays (50.4%), other Bumiputras (11%), Chinese (24.6%), Indians, particularly Tamils (7.1%), and other ethnic groups (6.9%). The term ‘Bumiputra’ (lit. ‘princes of the soil’) refers to ethnic groups considered to be the indigenous inhabitants of Malaysia. In addition to Malays, these include the various Dayak tribal groups of Borneo and the aboriginal people of the peninsula, known as Orang Asli (lit. ‘Original People’).

In spite of this enormous linguistic diversity, the only official language in Malaysia is Standard Malay (Bahasa Malaysia), while English, the former colonial language, might be considered a *de facto* second language. Although it is not the official language, it receives considerable official support. Indeed, the position of English is strong throughout Malaysian society, with a significant presence in many ‘high’ domains (using the model of diglossia proposed by Ferguson, 1959, and further developed by Fishman, 1967, and Fasold, 1984), including the mass media. English also tends to be a common language of inter-ethnic communication, particularly among educated people (Asmah Haji Omar, 1992 & 2003).

Table 1 presents a basic overview of the linguistic repertoire of Malaysia, though of course the situation is far more complicated than can be represented in a single table.

It is not easy to assess the prestige of languages, especially as they are viewed differently by various individuals and ethnic groups. However, Table 1 attempts to rank these languages according to the prestige they seem to enjoy among the majority of their speakers, with the most prestigious languages at the top. The most prestigious languages also tend to be those that enjoy more official support, so there is almost no official support for those in the last row,

the local varieties of Malay and dialects of Chinese other than Mandarin. As can be seen, English has been placed in the first position.

<b>Languages</b>	<b>Practical and symbolic uses</b>
English	Inter-ethnic communication, modernity, economic opportunities, foreigners, tourism
Standard Malay	Inter-ethnic communication, nationalism, economic opportunities, Islam
Mandarin Chinese	Communication within the Chinese community, identity for the Chinese, economic opportunities
Arabic	Islam
Tamil	Communication within the Tamil community, identity for the Tamils
Other minority languages, including Indian languages, Cantonese, Hokkien and the languages of the Dayaks and Orang Asli	Communication within the ethnic group, local identity
Other varieties of Malay and Chinese dialects	Local communication and identity

**Table 1.** The Malaysian linguistic repertoire

Standard Malay also enjoys substantial prestige and shares many high domains with English, though in addition it is widely used in low domains among Malays and other Bumiputras. Its use as a language of inter-ethnic communication most often occurs when one of the speakers is Malay and is not fluent in English (Asmah Haji Omar, 2003, pp. 121–122). The medium of instruction in schools is mostly Malay, although many Chinese and Indians attend national-type Chinese and Tamil schools in which Malay is only taught as a subject.

Mandarin Chinese also enjoys substantial prestige despite lacking official recognition as a language of Malaysia. Arabic is spoken by few people but it retains a high level of prestige among the Muslim community due to its religious significance.

The remaining languages occupy the low position in a diglossic relationship with English and Standard Malay and are used mostly in non-official settings in the family and among friends. The Chinese dialects occur in a diglossic relationship with Mandarin Chinese and sometimes English.

In Malaysia, the phenomenon of code-mixing and code-switching between the first languages of the speakers and English and/or Malay is widespread (Asmah Haji Omar, 1992). McLellan (2010) notes that language-mixing is the norm in the region, and mixed English/Malay might even be regarded as a distinct code in its own right.

The vitality of the minority languages varies considerably. Research carried out by lecturers at different Malaysian universities indicate a relatively healthy vitality for many of them (see, for example, Ting & Ling, 2013; Ting & Tham, 2014; Roshida Hassan, Kamila Ghazali & Asmah Haji Omar, 2015) while others are undergoing rapid language shift, with

Malay and in some cases English replacing the heritage language (see for example Wazir Jahan Karim, 2001; David, 2006; Pillai, Soh & Angela Kajita, 2014).

The current study considers two Malaysian minority languages, Bidayuh and Mah Meri. Recent surveys suggest that both of these languages belong with the first group, suggesting that their vitality is relatively assured, at least for the time being (Coluzzi, Riget & Wang, 2013). The current study builds on the results of those reports.

## The Bidayuh and the Mah Meri

Bidayuh is an Austronesian language spoken in the state of Sarawak in East Malaysia, while Mah Meri (Besisi) is an Austroasiatic language spoken on the west coast of West Malaysia in the state of Selangor. The speakers of these languages are both indigenous groups: the first is one of the numerous Dayak groups found on the Island of Borneo and the second is one of the Orang Asli groups, or Malaysian aborigines.

The Bidayuhs, also known as Land Dayaks, are the fourth largest ethnic group in Sarawak, following the Ibans, Chinese, and Malays. About 193,000 individuals (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2010) (about 8 percent of the total population of Sarawak) live in the Lundu, Bau, and Kuching Districts (Kuching Division) and in the Serian District (Samarahan division) (Rensch, Rensch & Noeb, 2006). Many more Bidayuhs reside on the Indonesian side of the border (West Kalimantan) where the Malaysian Bidayuhs originate from. There are also some Bidayuhs who have emigrated to other parts of Malaysia.

Traditionally, the Bidayuhs lived in longhouses situated on hills, and they depended primarily on shifting cultivation and planting hill rice. As they moved to the plains, they switched to wet rice and sago, though nowadays many of them mainly cultivate cash crops such as rubber, cocoa, oil palms and pepper, in addition to a vast array of fruits and vegetables, while some also rear animals like pigs and chickens (Asmah Haji Omar, 1983, pp. 438–439; Minos, 2000). More Bidayuhs have now found employment in government offices and private businesses, most of them located in Kuching, the administrative centre of Sarawak (Salleh, 2006, p. 89).

The Bidayuhs used to practice animist beliefs, but the first missionary efforts to convert them to Christianity began in the 19th century under Rajah Brooke (Minos, 2000). Nowadays the great majority of Bidayuhs are Christian, mostly belonging to the Catholic and Anglican Churches. Only a few elderly people have clung to their traditional animist beliefs, and churches are now a feature of every Bidayuh village.

The Mah Meri, on the other hand, belong to the Senoi Orang Asli group. They are still in the main animist, even though some have converted to Islam. Most Mah Meri are farmers, working in their own orchards or in the palm oil plantations that have replaced the original mangrove forests. Some Mah Meri have shifted to salaried jobs outside their homeland, but there are still a few fishermen even though pollution has interfered with the source of their living. On a positive note, thanks to tourism and trade, many Mah Meri devote themselves to traditional activities such as carving wooden masks and statues and weaving ornaments, mats, bags, and pouches made of *Pandanus* strips and other plants (Rashid Esa, 2006, pp. 26–27; Reita Rahim, 2007; Werner, 1997). Together with another Orang Asli group, the Jah Hut, the Mah Meri are considered the best wood carvers in Malaysia.

There are around 2,800 Mah Meri individuals living in various villages in the Southwestern part of the state of Selangor. Nearly half of them live on Telo' Gunjeng, the island officially known as Pulau Carey, or Carey Island (named after John Carey, an English planter), which is separated from the coast by the Langat River. Currently, there are approximately 1200 Mah Meri people in five villages on the island (Reita Rahim, 2007).

## Methodology and Results

The research was carried out by the author and two colleagues at the University of Malaya, Patricia Nora Riget and Wang Xiaomei, through a sociolinguistic questionnaire on language use and attitudes that was distributed among 266 Bidayuh respondents (out of the total population of 193,000) and 86 Mah Meri (out of a total population of 2,800). The main aim of the research was to determine the sociolinguistic situation of these two languages in their rural homelands and to assess their ethnolinguistic vitality through a comparison of the answers provided by the older and younger respondents. However, this paper will only present the results of fourteen out of the twenty-six original questions (Coluzzi, Riget & Wang, 2013 & forthcoming).

The language knowledge of the two groups in ‘low’ domains is shown in Table 2.

	Bidayuh	Mah Meri
<b>1) Which language do you speak more fluently?</b>		
Heritage language	161 (60.5%)	0
Heritage language, Malay, English	11 (4.1%)	26 (30.2%)
Heritage language, Malay	83 (31.2%)	54 (62.8%)
Malay	8 (3.0%)	4 (4.7%)
<b>2) What is your first language/mother tongue?</b>		
Heritage language	238 (89.4%)	79 (91.9%)
Heritage language, Malay, English	2 (0.8%)	0
Heritage language, Malay	20 (7.5%)	2 (2.3%)
Malay	2 (0.8%)	2 (2.3%)
<b>3) Which language do you normally use within the family?</b>		
Heritage language	227 (85.3%)	66 (76.7%)
Heritage language, Malay, English	5 (1.9%)	1 (1.2%)
Heritage language, Malay	28 (10.5%)	14 (16.3%)
Malay	5 (1.9%)	3 (3.5%)
<b>4) Which languages do you normally use with your friends?</b>		
Heritage language	139 (52.2%)	46 (53.5%)
Heritage language, Malay, English	17 (6.3%)	2 (2.3%)
Heritage language, Malay	98 (36.8%)	31 (36.0%)
Malay	5 (1.9%)	6 (7.0%)
<b>5) Which languages do you normally use with your neighbours?</b>		
Heritage language	208 (78.1%)	46 (53.5%)
Heritage language, Malay, English	6 (2.2%)	2 (2.3%)
Heritage language, Malay	43 (16.1%)	31 (36.0%)
Malay	5 (1.8%)	6 (7.0%)

**Table 2.** Language knowledge and language use in ‘low’ domains

It can be seen from Table 2 that the heritage language is the first language for about 90% of the respondents of the two ethnic groups, with less than 5% not including it among the

languages they speak most fluently. When interacting with family members, fewer than 4% of the respondents of the two groups do not use their heritage language (on its own or together with the other languages of their repertoire) while around 2% (Bidayuh) and 7% (Mah Meri) use Malay instead of their respective heritage language when talking to friends and neighbours.

Language use in ‘high’ domains, such as with the doctor, in public offices and with the police, is shown in Table 3.

	<b>Bidayuh</b>	<b>Mah Meri</b>
<b>6) Which languages do you normally use with the doctor?</b>		
Heritage language	22 (8.2%)	0
Heritage language, Malay, English	3 (1.1%)	1 (1.2%)
Heritage language, Malay	59 (22.1%)	3 (3.5%)
Malay	171 (64.2%)	82 (95.3%)
<b>7) Which languages do you normally use in public offices?</b>		
Heritage language	14 (5.2%)	0
Heritage language, Malay, English	4 (1.5%)	86 (1.2%)
Heritage language, Malay	50 (18.8%)	3 (3.5%)
Malay	191 (71.8%)	82 (95.3%)
<b>8) Which language do you normally use with the police?</b>		
Heritage language	16 (6%)	0
Heritage language, Malay, English	2 (0.7%)	0
Heritage language, Malay	61 (22.9%)	0
Malay	181 (68%)	86 (100%)

**Table 3.** Language use in ‘high’ domains

The diglossic situation of these minority languages is reflected in these results. Malay is mainly used with doctors, police officers, and those working in public offices. However, at the same time there are also some Bidayuh respondents who claim to use their heritage language in these situations, as even some of those who are not Bidayuh end up learning some Bidayuh. In contrast, this is not the case among the smaller Mah Meri community.

Table 4 shows the results for the survey for the two groups in terms of language attitudes. We can see that more than 93% of the members of the two communities express pride in speaking their heritage language and approximately 80% claim that they would like to learn it or improve their knowledge of it.

As many as 98% of the Bidayuh and about 87% of the Mah Meri believe that their heritage language should be officially protected while 94.7% of the Bidayuh and 86% of the Mah Meri think that their heritage language should be studied at school.

Regarding the use of these languages in the media, the great majority of Bidayuh and Mah Meri would like to see their heritage language used in publications and also to hear it on the radio. Though there are already some radio programmes broadcast in Bidayuh, almost all of the Bidayuh respondents (98%) would like to have a dedicated radio station for their heritage language; and 95% of the Mah Meri respondents would be happy to be able to enjoy some radio programmes in their language.

	Bidayuh	Mah Meri
<b>9) Do you feel proud of speaking your heritage language?</b>		
Yes	258 (97.0%)	80 (93.0%)
No	1 (0.4%)	4 (4.7%)
It depends	4 (1.5%)	1 (1.2%)
<b>10) Would you like to learn/improve your heritage language?</b>		
Yes	215 (80.8%)	67 (77.9%)
No	16 (6.0%)	7 (8.1%)
It depends	34 (12.8%)	10 (11.6%)
<b>11) Should your heritage language be officially protected?</b>		
Yes	260 (97.7%)	75 (87.2%)
No	2 (0.8%)	7 (8.1%)
<b>12) Should your heritage language be studied at school?</b>		
Yes, compulsory	169 (63.5%)	42 (48.8%)
Yes, optional	83 (31.2%)	32 (37.2%)
No, it should not be studied	12 (4.5%)	9 (10.5%)
<b>13) Should a periodical in your heritage language be available to the community?</b>		
Yes, all in it	123 (46.2%)	21 (24.4%)
Yes, some articles in it	134 (50.4%)	58 (67.4%)
It depends	1 (0.4%)	0
No	6 (2.3%)	7 (8.1%)
<b>14) Should there be a radio station/radio programmes in your heritage language?</b>		
Yes	261 (98.1%)	82 (95.3%)
No	4 (1.5%)	4 (4.7%)

**Table 4.** Language attitudes

## Discussion

The data shows that the vitality of these two languages is high even though Bidayuh seems to fare a little better than Mah Meri. However, a comparison between the answers provided by the older and younger respondents reveals a degree of language shift towards Malay and English (Coluzzi *et al.*, 2013 & forthcoming). The better performance of Bidayuh compared to Mah Meri is partly due to the different size of the two ethnic groups and the fact that some bottom-up revitalization activities are currently being carried out for Bidayuh. It is generally true throughout the world that only well-supported minority languages do as well as Mah Meri, and particularly as Bidayuh.

So what are the reasons accounting for such a high degree of ethnolinguistic vitality? Four main reasons can be suggested. First, the Mah Meri and the Bidayuh are close-knit communities where the heritage language dominates all low and medium domains. The majority of Mah Meri and Bidayuh, in fact, can make a living in their own land where few outsiders live, so Malay is rarely used. Standards of living are in many cases not very high,

but most of the members of these two groups have chosen not to abandon their villages. Nevertheless, some of those who have decided to give up agriculture and to find a job elsewhere, particularly young people, are able to commute from their home villages to the towns in Selangor (Mah Meri) or Sarawak (Bidayuh), especially to Kuching, the administrative centre of Sarawak, where more jobs are available. This enables these commuters to use their own language when they return home. Among the Bidayuh and Mah Meri who have moved permanently out of their communities, language maintenance is affected and the second generation tend to speak Malay or in some cases English rather than their heritage language. In fact, while endogamy is the norm in the original villages where nearly all families are made up of people of the same ethnicity and language, in the bigger towns and cities outside the community, the tendency is for Bidayuh and Mah Meri to find partners belonging to other ethnic groups, and this eventually leads to Malay and in some cases English becoming the home language that children grow up with (Coluzzi *et al.*, 2013).

Second, the ideologies of nationalism (one nation, one language) and of modernity (new is better than old) have not yet completely replaced the traditional thinking and values (Coluzzi, 2015). Identity in a country inhabited by so many different ethnic groups is felt as important, and local traditions and languages are still seen as valuable assets that are very important for maintaining such local identity. The national and international languages and the local language, new and old, can coexist.

The third factor is closely related to the second. Multilingualism in this part of the world is still the norm and is generally seen as something positive. Most Malaysians speak at least three languages, a minority of them only two and there are virtually no monolinguals. Therefore, maintaining at least one ethnic language together with the national (Malay) and international (English) language is not normally seen as difficult or wasteful.

Finally, religion also plays an important role. The members of Bidayuh and Mah Meri mostly follow Christianity and animism respectively. It seems as if having a religion different from the dominant one in the country (Islam in this instance) helps to keep local identity strong and to restrict encroachments from the majority culture and language.

What can be learnt from these considerations? How can awareness of these factors help to improve our understanding of language revitalization? And how can other minority languages benefit from such understanding? Let us look at these factors one by one and see how they might be adapted for other minority situations.

Living in a close-knit community is probably the most important factor. If people leave their original territory where the local language dominates, or if they migrate to places where other languages are predominant, it becomes very difficult to maintain the ethnic language. And it becomes even more difficult, if not impossible, when people speaking one minority language get married to partners speaking other languages, as this normally results in the adoption of the national language or, in some cases, English as the language of the home. Therefore, perhaps the most effective way to keep inter-generational transmission and maintain a minority or regional language is to help local people to find ways of making a living in their own land. Incentives and jobs should be created, traditional activities should be valued and, wherever possible, cultural tourism should be promoted. Another solution would be to improve transport facilities and thereby allow members of these communities who have jobs elsewhere to commute to work on a daily basis.

Also, as far as nationalism and its tendency towards centralization and homogenization are concerned, more political autonomy for regions where minority languages are spoken should be considered, to enable the local languages to gain official status within those areas. To counteract the pervasive ideology of modernity may prove more difficult as it is one of the basic tenets that sustain the present worldwide economic system (Coluzzi, 2015). One possibility is to try and deconstruct the ideology of 'new' and 'modernity', to expose its

irrationality and its limits with clarity, and to highlight the positive aspects of tradition and the small scale economy that used to be part of it.

In relation to the third factor, studies highlighting the advantages of bilingualism, even when it includes a local language, should be spread among the general public.

Finally, in terms of religion, not much can be done if the minority happens to share the same religion as the majority (even though religious functions and sermons in the local language might be considered). However, if we consider politics instead of religion, it would be helpful either to encourage local political parties that may or not be affiliated to the mainstream parties, or else to establish local branches of the mainstream political parties which conduct business in the local language in order to enable the community to differentiate itself to some degree from the majority.

Obviously, whenever possible, more traditional language planning activities should also be employed, including the use of the minority language in the media and its use in education. Indeed, this survey clearly shows strong support for such activities, and they will help spread the minority language and raise its prestige. When a community is dispersed or else it lives together with people speaking other languages, traditional language planning strategies may still be the only means available to maintain the minority languages, but these may prove less effective than the proposals suggested here, as the examples of Bidayuh and Mah Meri in Malaysia seem to confirm.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, economic and ideological factors are fundamental in language endangerment and efforts at revitalization, and it seems that they are the first that should be tackled for effective and long-lasting support for the local minority languages. Considering the present global trends, this may prove to be difficult, but perhaps not impossible, and it is definitely worth attempting. Strategies such as those suggested to preserve local cultures and languages may even help to relieve global problems such as climate change, poverty, terrorism, and war, as these can be seen as side products of consumer capitalism, macro-nationalism, and globalization. Attention to the needs of local communities may help to counter these threats.

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