

## **Endangered Intergenerational Language Transmission: Evidence from the Indigenous Dusun Society of Sabah, Malaysia**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This is an attempt to determine factors contributing to endangered intergenerational language transmission of mother tongue as a home language. A survey was conducted using four questionnaires to collect data from 120 students of the Dusun ethnic group living in a rural area in Sabah, Malaysia. At the time of the study, the respondents were around 15 years of age. They have learned the standard Dusun language in the primary school. A set of determining factors was used to evaluate the endangered indigenous language. Findings indicated that intergenerational language transmission of the mother tongue as a home language has been severely endangered. Majority of the students agreed that the trend in the existing Dusun language domain was highly limited. Meanwhile, utilisation of the endangered language in new domains and media was minimal. Some external factors such as social needs have triggered a widespread change than simple addition of new vocabulary items. In more specific, changes in the social needs have led to a change in linguistic vitality among the people of this indigenous community despite the implementation of pre-school and post-school reinforcements by the responsible party in Sabah. Finally, three initiatives for language revitalisation are proposed. These include increasing the

important status of this language in the society, systematic instruction in schools, and utilising the language for information and communication knowledge. The paper should be of interest to those in the areas of Malaysian languages and ethno-linguistics.

*Keywords:* Endangered language, indigenous Dusun, intergenerational language transmission, language revitalisation

### **ARTICLE INFO**

#### *Article history:*

Received: 28 June 2017

Accepted: 26 June 2018

Published: 25 March 2019

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## INTRODUCTION

With around 17.8% speakers of the overall population in Sabah, Dusun is the largest indigenous ethnic group in the state (Adnan & Hamdan, 2013). Their primary settlements concentrated in two areas, namely, the West Coast, in the regions of the interior, and the eastern coastal regions which are considered as the homeland for 12 subgroups of the Dusun community. Despite the variation in their dialects, communications between the these tribes are not altogether hampered, thanks to the fact that they share a common ancestry, with speakers from one tribe have the knowledge of, or are aware of the equivalent vocabulary of the other tribal factions. The inculcation of the Dusun language was implemented by Sabah's state government in 1997 after an early indication of a significant decline in the number of its native speakers over the past years. Such an effort is laudable though it was rather limited to teaching and learning in several main schools in the state. The gradual changes and nature of the factors involved have threaten the Dusun language vitality, and this fact suggests that the vitality of a minority language does not depend entirely on the size of the community (Ehala, 2010).

Malay, as a dominant language, is pervasive and it tends to expropriate the subordinate the role of the Dusun language as the mother tongue. The Dusun language should be passed on to the future generation through intergenerational language transmission. However, exposure to the mother tongue gradually decreases as the dominant language has started to take over the daily communication.

Previous research on intergenerational language transmission has found that parental language use was a foremost causative issue (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). In general, members of ethno-linguistic minorities tend to use the more dominant language if it has a socio-economic importance value. Over the past few years, the main concern has been the decline in the use of the mother tongue among the younger generation. The Dusun language status is classified as 6b (threatened) by Wurm and Hattori (1981). The main reason behind the declining use of the mother tongue as the main language spoken at home is due to speakers' tendency to selecting and incorporating Malay lexical relevant to the Dusun language. According to Dani, Jaffar, Seruji, and Amir (2011), such Malay words thrive in the Dusun language and are used for everyday speech.

There is fear that the mother tongue may eventually be lost if nothing is done to reverse this worrying trend. This concern has been expressed by the community members stating that there should be a concerted effort to preserve and promote the language. Better known as the Kadazandusun language, it incorporates the dialects of the sub-tribes. The consecutive teaching commenced as a trial at 15 selected primary classes throughout Sabah. These chosen schools were required to have a mainstream of Dusun pupils and knowledgeable language teachers. For the year 2000 and beyond, the teaching of the Kadazandusun language is implemented to years 4, 5 and 6, or for pupils aged 9, 10 and 11 years throughout Sabah.

Ever since the implementation phase of teaching in 1997, the Kadazandusun language has been exposed to a total of 27,453 primary and secondary school students by 976 language teachers at 628 primary and secondary schools in 13 districts. In addition, the Kadazandusun language was also offered as an elective subject at the state's local university from 1998, and as a minor programme in 2010. As of June 2012, the first batch of 20 students for the Bachelor in Preparatory Programme in teaching the language began their studies at Tuaran Kent Teacher Institute (Lasimbang, 2013). These seem to show the tremendous effort done to ensure the vitality of the language, or at least, that is the positive impression of it. At the same time, however, merely reporting the implementation of the language in schools and higher institution does not consolidate the oral communication within the society. It is also important to determine whether the present young generation will still continue to leverage the language. Based on the writer's experience as the native speaker of the language, it is rather obvious that despite the many efforts by the relevant authorities, the use of the Dusun language as the mother tongue among the new generation remains low or unsatisfactory.

Reversing Language Shift Theory was introduced by Fishman (1991). The theory describes the socio-functions of language use from the point of view of reversing language shift efforts for the purpose of attaining and augmenting intergenerational mother-tongue transmission. Fishman was

responsible for developing the Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS) based on minority language function. The GIDS provides a means of evaluating where a language is on this scale of disruption from full use by many users to no use by any users. As the number of domains associated with a language begins to diminish (that is, as the language loses its uses), parents may decide that the language is a less valuable resource for their children than another language, and so the language begins to lose users as well. Fishman's 8-level GIDS focuses on the key role of intergenerational transmission in the maintenance of a language. The most notable stage is stage 6, which represents the intergenerational transmission in mother tongue language. It clearly provides key to language revitalisation. The degree of any endangered language is marked in a range, from stable to extinction. The possible cause to consider is non-trivial language contact as explained by Thomason (2001). Language contact takes its toll when members in a speech community accept foreign elements as a norm (Coates, 1993). The infiltration of external foreign elements can therefore be extensive.

The assertion that the Dusun language changes signifies the speakers' liking in borrowing vocabulary from other languages. The inclination in adopting foreign lexical for daily interaction gradually accentuates code mixing. Taking into account the notion of base or host language for a pertinent analysis of code mixing, it makes sense to think of the base language as the dominant language of the bilingual speaker making

the switch, since that language is the most important one in determining one's verbal behaviour (Appel & Muysken, 2005). The speaker gradually switches to the second language and eventually stops using the mother tongue (Černý, 2010). Verschueren, Östman, and Blommaert (2001) believe that good-paying jobs affect the parents' choice of language for their children. The formal learning environment and the instrumental importance of the Malay and English languages have dominated the social interaction, while the mother tongues are increasingly marginalised at the same time (David, Cavallaro, & Coluzzi, 2009). This proves that the gradual changes and nature of the factors involved have contributed to the Dusun language vitality threat. Therefore, this study seeks to find the current threat on intergenerational language transmission of the mother tongue as a home language.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

A survey was conducted using four questionnaires related to intergenerational language transmission, native speakers in the Dusun speech community, the current language setting, and response to new domains. A set of determining factors, that allow the researcher to evaluate the endangered Dusun language, are referred to as factors 1 (intergenerational language transmission), 2 (native speakers in the Dusun speech community), 3 (the current language setting) and 4 (Response to New Domains). The proposed questionnaires were tailored to the diversity of local circumstances adapted from Dwyer (2011).

## **Sample and Selection of the Participants**

Random sampling was used to select 50 percent samples from a population of 220 Dusun students in two secondary schools of Ranau district. Approximately 120 teenagers aged 15 were chosen for this study. They represented their speech community from the rural locality regardless of gender. They were selected based on the fact that they had learned the standard Kadazandusun language in primary school and had less contact with speakers of other languages compared to their counterparts living in urban areas.

In this study, the accessible population comprised a sample of 120 Dusun secondary school students (74 male and 46 females) residing within the area marked 95 Central Dusun, as shown in Figure 1. Ranau district, which is located in area 95, comprises more than ten villages and is inhabited by the indigenous Dusun people. The language throughout the area has been classified as threatened by Wurm and Hattori (1981).

The selected students met during school hours to complete questionnaires for the study. They were informed about their involvement in the study via a memo presented by the headmaster to the teacher of each class. The questionnaires were administered by the researcher for a group of 8-12 students per session. Each questionnaire took around five minutes to answer. The survey was conducted as part of an educational project to revise the standard language curriculum in primary school. Prior to this study, the Primary School

Standard Curriculum for elective subjects was not implemented. Written language used throughout the questionnaire is Malay,

and the national language of Malaysia is used in public, schools and mass media.

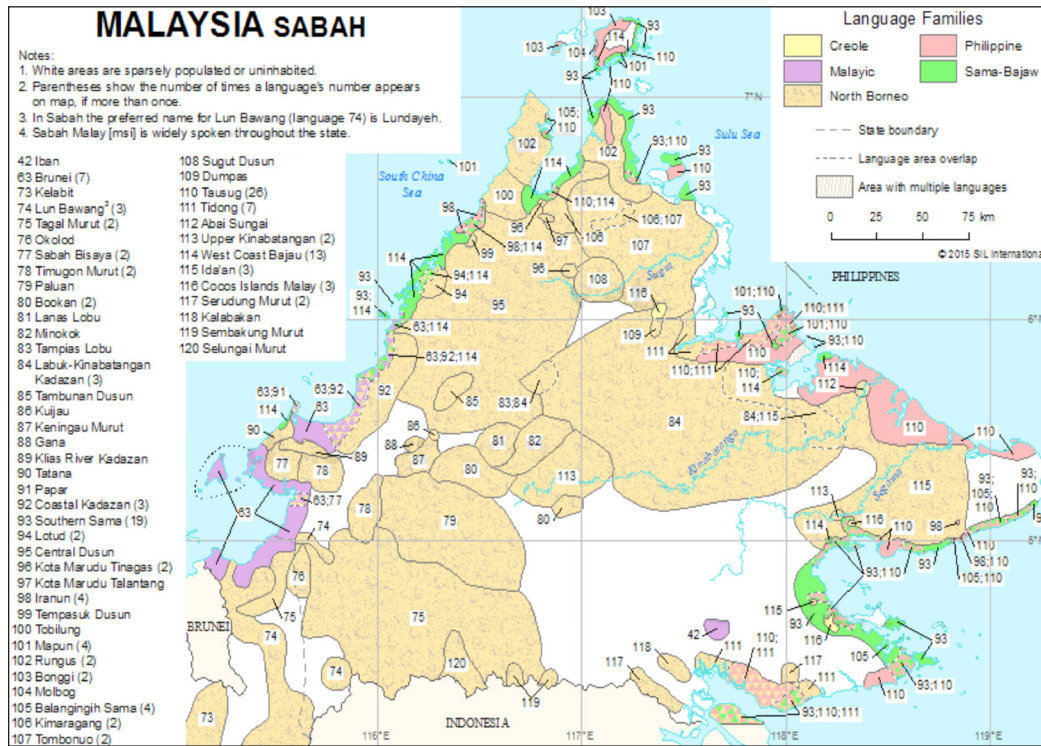


Figure 1. Language families in Sabah, Malaysia (Wurm & Hattori, 1981)

### Assessments and Measures

The assessment tool was adopted from Dwyer (2011). Four factors were used to assess the language current threat. The variables were graded from 0-5. Zero marks the absolute shift to a new language interpreted as extinct, while five represents the vitality of a language that is interpreted as safe.

For factor 1 (Intergenerational language transmission), the mother tongue is said to be safe if it is at grade 5. It is still used by the speakers, and being passed down from generation to generation.

For factor 2 (Native speakers in the Dusun speech community), a group of speakers in a speech community is a more accurate indicator of language vitality compared to unknown population (Dwyer, 2011).

The language assessment for factor 3 (The current language setting) will determine where, with whom, and topic variety used within a language. The more consistent and continuous language utilisation is, the stronger the language turns out to be. The language is said to be idyllic if it is used in all domains.



For factor 4 (Response to New Domains), new domains comprise of schools, vocation vicinity, mass media, as well as broadcasters and international net. The language is dynamic if it is applicable in every latest domain.

The degrees of language endangerment are examined according to the scale index. A 5-point score is assigned for each factor (except for factor 2). From a summation matrix of the scores, the degree of endangerment and urgency for revitalisation efforts can be determined.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results related to Factor 1 are shown in Table 1. The data indicate that for the group as a whole, intergenerational language

transmission is at Grade 2 of the language endangerment scale, which refers to as 'severely endangered'.

The observed counts and column percentages in Table 1 indicate that 50 males (42%) and 34 females (28%) agreed that the intergenerational language transmission is severely endangered. It can be concluded that the males are somewhat more worried about the degree of intergenerational language transmission than their female counterpart. Meanwhile, the overall count revealed that as many as 84 (out of 120 respondents) chose scale 2, i.e. severely endangered. The language is used mostly by grandparental generation onwards.

Table 2 indicates that Scale 1 (critically endangered) seems to be reasonably well

Table 1  
*Intergenerational language transmission cross tabulation*

Degree	Gender			Total
	Scale	Male	Female	
Critically endangered	1	23 (19%)	12 (10%)	35 (29%)
Severely endangered	2	50 (42%)	34 (28%)	84 (70%)
Definitively endangered	3	1 (0.8%)	0	1 (1%)
Total	3	74 (62%)	46 (38%)	120 (100%)

Table 2  
*Native speakers in the Dusun speech community cross tabulation*

Degree	Gender			Total
	Scale	Male	Female	
Critically endangered	1	23 (19%)	5 (4%)	28 (23%)
Severely endangered	2	17 (14%)	12 (10%)	29 (24%)
Definitively endangered	3	23 (19%)	20 (17%)	43 (36%)
Unsafe	4	8 (7%)	7 (5%)	15 (12%)
Safe	5	3 (3%)	2 (2%)	5 (5%)
Total		74 (62%)	46 (39%)	120 (100%)

preferred. It refers to the language being used mostly by the grandparental generation onwards. The male group response of twenty three (19%) is much higher compared the low rating of five (4%) by the female group.

As shown in Table 3, seventy one of the students agreed that the degree of language endangerment is at scale 1, which refers to as highly limited domains. The highest scale is obtained from forty nine or 41% of the male group compared to twenty two from the female group (18%). Therefore, the trend in the existing language domains indicates that the language is used only in a very restricted domain and for a very few functions.

Table 4 reveals that seventy one (59%) of the male students chose minimal on new domains and media compared to forty five (37%) of females. This finding can be interpreted as ‘the language is used only in a few new domains.’

The overall response on four language endangerment factors related to the Dusun language is displayed in Figure 2. Intergenerational language transmission is on scale 2 (70%), on the degree of severely endangered, which is interpreted as ‘the language is used mostly by the grandparental generation and up’. Meanwhile, the response on the proportion of speakers within the population is on scale 3 (36%), on the

Table 3  
*The current language setting cross tabulation*

Degree	Gender			Total
	Scale	Male	Female	
Highly limited domains	1	49 (41%)	22 (18%)	71 (59%)
Limited or formal domains	2	12 (10%)	6 (5%)	18 (15%)
Dwindling domains	3	9 (8%)	13 (11%)	22 (19%)
Multilingual parity	4	2 (2%)	4 (3%)	6 (5%)
Universal use	5	2 (2%)	1 (1%)	3 (3%)
Total	5	74 (63%)	46 (38%)	120 (100%)

Table 4  
*Response to new domains cross tabulation*

Degree	Gender			Total
	Scale	Male	Female	
Minimal	1	71 (59%)	45 (37%)	116 (96%)
Coping	2	3 (3%)	1 (1%)	4 (4%)
Total	2	74 (62%)	46 (38%)	120 (100%)

degree of definitively endangered, which is concluded as ‘A majority speak the language’.

The highest number of responses for the trend in the existing language domains falls on scale 1 (59%), which is a highly limited domain (the language is used in restricted domains and for very few functions). The fourth factor (new domains and media accepted by the endangered language) lies on scale 1 (96%), which is used only in a few new domains.

Speakers of a language usually do not impose a negative attitude toward their language. They feel it is important to keep up with the identity through the language. On the other hand, if they consider the native language irrelevant, they will avoid using it in communication. If the speakers of a language community thought that the mother tongue is a hindrance to education achievement and economic progress within the majority groups, they would switch to another language that

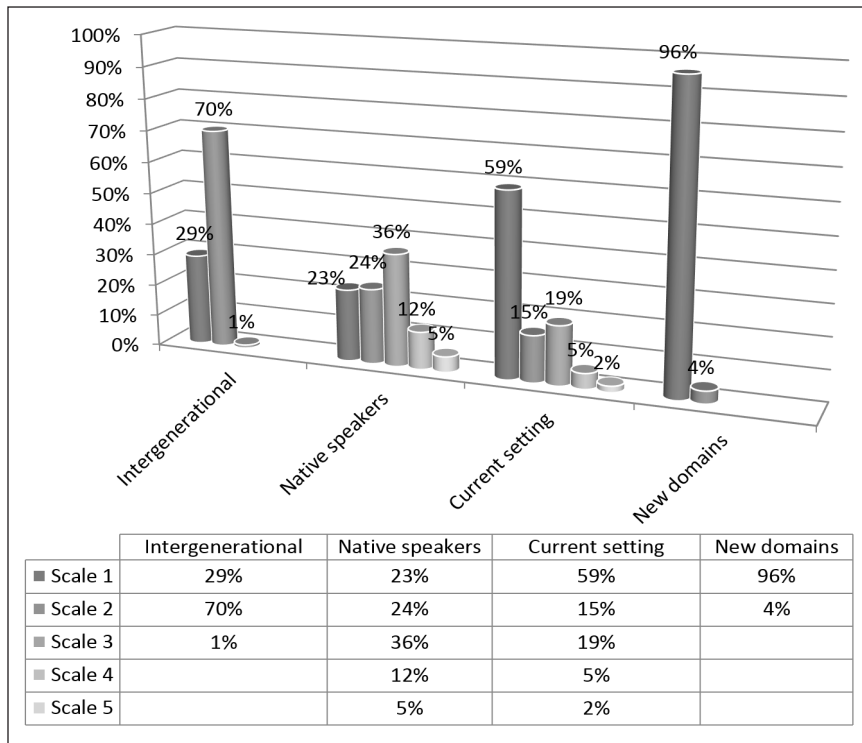


Figure 2. The overall responses on the 4 factors related to the Dusun language

fulfils their ultimate goals. Malay language is the main medium of instruction across Malaysia. As with other races in Malaysia, the Dusun people are not spared from

using the Malay language in their daily communication as a base language. There may be several base languages, depending upon the criterion used. Such ambience



could encourage language change among the speech community. Whether or not the Dusun language is still the language in the home is doubtful (Dani, 1996). Nontrivial language contact previously explained by Thomason (2001) could be a possible cause, whereby at least some people use more than one language on contact situations. Language contact in this substantive sense does not require fluent bilingualism, but some form of communication between speakers of different languages is necessary. Nontrivial language contact plays an important part in the Dusun speakers' daily interactions. At the time of such contact, there will be exposure to other languages, which will eventually result in language change. Meaning or grammatical features formerly used by a certain group as a speech community is assimilated to the host language (Coates, 1993). The sociolinguistic factors which reside in the structure of language and the minds of the speakers are thus accounted for according to language change. According to Aitchison (1998), the infiltration of external foreign elements can therefore be extensive. However, it is not as chaotic as the substratum versus borrowing shows. Subsequently, Aitchison explains substratum as the importers of foreign elements consisting of imperfect learners. Simultaneously, she describes borrowing as the importers of unfamiliar elements consisting of pickers-up of useful bits.

As described by Fishman (1991), if every generation transmits their language to the new age group, the language will survive. In case the opposite happens,

another language will gradually oust the language as the primary language in socio linguistics. In general, the new generation will gain knowledge about the language from the elderly, except that they are exposed to the communally valuable Malay language at school. Language, which is highly regarded within the community, leads to changes through the use of the indigenous language. On the contrary, some speakers managed to develop a new domain for their native language. Social agents such as schools, fresh operational surroundings, international net and mass media broadcasting are normally controlled by the national or prevailing language. Even though the existing domain for the endangered language may not be gone astray, the more dominant language has an advantage in a new domain, such as the realm of a reality television show.

Voluntary adaptation, particularly in favour of the latter language, is regarded as having greater utility or prestige (Černý, 2010). In Malaysia, this is an observed fact as the Malay language is a compulsory or a must pass subject in schools in order to pursue to higher institution. Verschueren et al. (2001) believed that such instrumental motivation had influenced parents' livelihood and perception on the choice of language for their kids. Specific language requirements in the work force encourage parents to review the language exposure their kids must have in order to excel in life. Reid (1997) pointed out that in Malaysia, many educated parents preferred speaking to their children in Malay or English.

Reyhner (1999) suggested that parents speak the Dusun language at home, especially with the youngest generation and offered a model where fluent elders are teamed with younger learners, either in the form of so-called language nests or one-to-one, and this calls for language vitality. Crystal (2000) proposed six initiatives for language revitalisation, which began with increasing the language status in society, increasing capital, as well as legal power, systematic instruction, especially at a school or university; language inscription and utilisation of the information and communication knowledge. Of the six initiatives recommended by Crystal (2000), the first was perfected by the Dusun community as they are the majority tribe in Sabah. To their advantage, many local politicians originated from the same tribe. The second initiative is more directed to individual achievement. The third one relies heavily on the political will and it needs a majority support. The fourth and fifth were and are still being implemented by several parties in Sabah, while the last initiative is still in its infancy.

## CONCLUSION

A curriculum that is properly planned and executed with the earnest effort apparently does not assure that the indigenous language is used for everyday speech, let alone the sustainability of the language. This is what taking place within the Dusun community in Sabah. It is time to engage the social aspects in the curriculum via

socio linguistic perspective. Ultimately, the results derived in this study have demonstrated that the Dusun language is unquestionably threatened. In particular, the Dusun language has lost its privileges as the language spoken at home by the younger generation. It does not abruptly turn out to be extinct. It becomes moribund since the community of speakers has gradually shifted to using another language. Some external factors like social needs have triggered a more wide-spread change than the simple addition of new vocabulary items. Moreover, changes in communal needs have also led to a change of linguistic vitality to the community despite pre-school and post-school reinforcements have been and are being done by the responsible party in Sabah.

There are several significant conclusions from this study in accordance with the socio linguistic current trend in the indigenous Dusun language. Youngsters change their lifestyles constantly, and this comes with a fresh language repertoire. There is no denying about the continuous exposure to the plural society in Malaysia even though the native speakers live in rural areas. Language change prevails in stages. According to informants, those between the age of 30 and 59 years have had their formal education in and could speak the Malay language, as well as the mother tongue and their first language at home, but they often use the Malay dialect of Sabah when interacting with their children and grandchildren. Meanwhile, the younger generation (25

years and below) uses the Malay dialect at home and in their day-to-day conversation. Although these groups are still grasping their mother tongue, they still prefer the Malay dialect. The most crucial is the young generation's language attitude is inclined towards their instrumental motivation and social interaction. Nonetheless, it is important to highlight that this research is limited to only one tribe in Sabah. The author proposes that future studies focus on comparing the situation of use of the Dusun language and other indigenous languages in Sabah.

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