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The Resilience of Mother Tongue-Local Languages, Contributions of Speaker Owners, and Obstacles to Language Policy Implementation

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Abstract

This paper examines the resilience of mother tongues, understood as local languages, from two key perspectives: the contribution of native speakers and the challenges in implementing language policy. As members of a speech community, native speakers play a crucial role in sustaining their language's vitality. However, negative attitudes—such as apathy or indifference toward one's native language—significantly undermine its resilience. Beyond the role of native speakers, the vulnerability, shift, and even extinction of local languages are also influenced by weak regulatory frameworks and the lack of effective monitoring at the implementation level. This condition underscores that the endurance of a local language is largely dependent on the endurance of its speakers. No matter how well-crafted policies and regulations may be, they remain ineffective and meaningless if native speakers themselves do not actively maintain their linguistic heritage. True linguistic resilience, therefore, emerges from the steadfast commitment of native speakers, supported by robust and enforceable language policies.

1. Introduction

The right to life of a language should be a matter of concern for every individual and society, particularly for its speakers and governing authorities. As key stakeholders, both speakers and policymakers must collaborate rather than shifting responsibilities. Joint efforts in establishing principles, policies, and implementation strategies for language preservation should embody both regional and national commitment to maintaining linguistic diversity—one of the foundational pillars of the nation-state, as reflected in the national motto Bhinneka Tunggal Ika ("Unity in Diversity").

Mother tongues, or local languages, may be juxtaposed with other linguistic entities such as the national language, Indonesian, and foreign languages. In the modern era, characterized by rapid advances in communication, information, and transportation, there has been a noticeable shift in the functions, status, and significance of local languages as mother tongues. This shift—often described, albeit figuratively, as a form of "annexation"—has reached an alarming point, as

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it has permeated public consciousness, including that of native speakers themselves, who increasingly regard this linguistic erosion as a natural process.

The diminishing scope of native language use, accompanied by the erosion of traditional linguistic domains, is expected to continue until many of these languages disappear altogether. The Head of the Language Strategy Development Division of the Language Development and Fostering Agency (BPLP) once cited a UNESCO report stating that one language becomes extinct—losing its speakers—every fifteen days. If this phenomenon were mirrored in Indonesia, approximately twenty-four local languages could vanish within a single year. Such a projection is not unfounded, given the growing number of languages currently classified as endangered. This prediction must, therefore, become a collective awareness and a shared concern among both stakeholders and policymakers.

Language policy in Indonesia, which relegates local languages—the mother tongues of their speakers—from national affairs to regional jurisdiction, effectively narrows the scope of centralized control in preservation efforts. This decentralization has widened disparities in attitudes toward local languages and has rendered many protection initiatives fragmented or inconsistent. Only a limited number of provincial and municipal governments have enacted regulations concerning the protection and revitalization of local languages. Even so, these regulations are often rendered ineffective when they remain rhetorical rather than actionable. Consequently, UNESCO's warning that one language disappears every fifteen days may soon become a reality in the Indonesian linguistic landscape. The current condition of local languages resembles the old adage: "Like a carp growing on a rock—reluctant to live, unwilling to die." The decline in linguistic elements used by native speakers has become widespread and is paradoxically perceived as natural. Policy interventions remain largely aspirational, hindered by native speakers' limited understanding of the intrinsic value of their own languages. Although numerous scientific and pragmatic perspectives have been proposed by scholars, researchers, and language advocates, these efforts have yet to significantly enhance the vitality of local languages.

Various approaches and initiatives aimed at preserving and maintaining native languages have thus far produced suboptimal results, indicating persistent challenges. There appears to be a fundamental issue in the attitudes and awareness of native speakers, the insufficient strength of regulatory frameworks, and the general public's limited understanding of the philosophical and cultural significance of local languages. Expressions of concern, positive attitudes, and supportive policies are rendered meaningless if native speakers themselves are reluctant to use their mother tongues, the domains of language use continue to shrink, and numerous local languages have already lost their speakers entirely.

2. Theoretical Review

2.1. Mother Tongue and Local Language

Conceptually, a mother tongue refers to the first language a person acquires from birth. From a sociological perspective, this interpretation highlights the role of the mother or primary caregiver in early language transmission. In linguistic studies, this first language is often abbreviated as L1 and regarded as the foundational linguistic system that shapes an individual's communicative competence. The term mother tongue itself is deeply rooted in linguistic and philosophical traditions, carrying an archaic and symbolic resonance that emphasizes emotional and cultural attachment to one's first language.

The term local language was not commonly used in earlier linguistic literature. Instead, the expression regional language was more prevalent, based on empirical observations of languages spoken across wider geographical areas—typically confined within a single administrative region. However, with the growing attention to minority languages spoken by smaller, localized

communities—such as those limited to specific villages, hamlets, or subdistricts—the term local language has become more accurate and inclusive in describing these linguistic varieties.

Prior to the expansion of science and technology, most mother tongues were indeed local or regional languages. The rapid advancement of communication, information, and transportation technologies has since increased both vertical and horizontal social mobility, leading to significant changes in the linguistic ecology. As a result, monolingualism has gradually shifted toward bilingualism and multilingualism. Consequently, the concept of the mother tongue is no longer synonymous with that of the local language. In the Indonesian context, the equation can be symbolically expressed as BI/B1 = BL/BI/BA, illustrating that one's first language (Bahasa Ibu, or B1) may now refer to a local language (Bahasa Daerah), Indonesian (Bahasa Indonesia), or even a foreign language (Bahasa Asing), depending on the sociolinguistic setting.

2.2 Local Language Resilience

Language resilience refers to the capacity of a language to withstand "pressures" or "attacks" on its functions, status, and roles within its speech community. This resilience can manifest naturally, through continued use and intergenerational transmission, or artificially, through conscious efforts to maintain and revitalize the language. The former is often described as language resistance—the persistence of a language within its community—while the latter is more accurately termed language maintenance, referring to deliberate efforts to preserve linguistic vitality.

Analyzing the resilience of local languages in Indonesia cannot rely on a single, linear perspective, as numerous complex variables influence whether a language survives, shifts, or becomes extinct. A multi-perspective approach is therefore essential for addressing these challenges, identifying effective solutions, and formulating appropriate strategies for preservation. At a minimum, such efforts should aim to sustain the current functions of local languages; at best, they should restore functions that have been eroded or "appropriated" by dominant languages.

In this regard, two primary perspectives underpin the discussion of factors affecting language resilience: internal and external factors. Internal factors encompass the linguistic community itself—its speakers, attitudes, and cultural values—which remain the most decisive elements in determining a language's vitality. External factors involve broader socio-political and institutional influences, such as language policies, educational systems, and governance structures. In Indonesia's multilingual context, where disparities in the number, function, and status of languages are significant, government intervention through well-formulated regulations is critical. Such policies are necessary to maintain a balance among the functions and statuses of Indonesian (the national language), local languages, and foreign languages within the linguistic ecosystem.

2.3 Language Policy

Language operates much like a living organism within an ecological system, where competition naturally arises among different linguistic entities. Some languages gain prestige and dominance, while others remain marginal and vulnerable, leading to what sociolinguists refer to as language hegemony. To prevent such competition from resulting in linguistic inequality or endangerment, effective language policy is indispensable. A well-designed language policy fosters shared awareness, promotes balanced language use, and ensures the prioritization of the national language while simultaneously safeguarding local languages and supporting the acquisition of foreign languages.

In essence, language policy refers to the process of deliberation and decision-making concerning the status, function, and use of language(s) within a society. Speakers of every language naturally desire prestige for their linguistic identity, at least to avoid subjugation under linguistic hegemony or the pressures of language shift. Eastman (1983:7), citing Fishman, asserts that the formulation of language policy must be based on sociolinguistic realities and community needs, taking into account not only linguistic diversity but also the social functions that sustain it.

3. Discussion

3.1 Why Is the Resilience of Mother Tongues and Local Languages Fragile?

This explanatory question requires a high level of sensitivity and awareness to explore the various factors, both internal and external, that contribute to the fragility of the resilience of mother tongues and local languages. Observational data and facts from several local languages and mother tongues in East Nusa Tenggara show the following symptoms.

First, functionally, mother tongues and local languages have limited functions. The functions they fulfill are limited to the family, neighborhood, and customary spheres. Functions in the realms of religion, government, and village market transactions, for example, tend to be taken over by Indonesian. This phenomenon is ongoing, unstoppable, massive, and recognized as a natural process. Once the awareness of the function of Indonesian in spheres typical of local language use is reached, the awareness of the importance of local languages among speakers is simultaneously eroded.

There is a principle in language use that "the function of language is its use." This principle has implications for the behavior of speakers who tend to prioritize the communication function of language without considering the meaning of their language choice. The issue of language survival and demise is not directly related to the "stomach." Therefore, maintaining, saving, restoring the vitality, and developing mother tongues and local languages are not serious issues. Minority groups who speak local languages care less about their languages than about meeting basic needs.

Next, efforts to save local languages are only the focus of researchers and observers who are concerned about language extinction. This concern is not fully supported by the speakers. Moreover, the transmission of mother tongues and local languages between generations tends to be hampered, and the causes are difficult to identify, like untangling a tangled thread. Upon closer inspection, it turns out that it's not the younger generation who is reluctant to use their local languages; the older generation also wants to lose out. Diction that is less understood and preferred by the younger generation is replaced by Indonesian diction.

The fragility of the resilience of mother tongues and local languages implies symptoms of language shift, characterized by the following. Firstly, multilingual speech communities or speech communities where the languages are diglossic. Certain languages have high status or prestige, while others have low status. Speakers of low-status languages (L) tend to choose (use) high-status languages (H). Language choice by L speakers is not solely due to internal language factors, such as grammatical structure, while H language structure is simpler, but can also be caused by social differences. Holmes (2000:55) states that H language does not necessarily have a majority or dominant speaker population, and often H language is more influenced by the status of its speakers, even if the number of speakers is small. This differs from Ferguson's (1972) definition of prestige languages, which includes, among other things, literary heritage and standardization.

Secondly, the characteristics of language shift begin with the use of code mixing, code switching, and due to language attitude variables, speakers of a language abandon their mother tongue—the local language. Language attitudes are often inconsistent with language choice. In

situations like this, language policy researchers are often trapped by the narrative and rhetoric of native speakers regarding their positive attitudes toward their language, meaning their loyalty to it, while the reality of use shows the opposite.

Thirdly, the fragility of the resilience of mother tongues—local languages—to the point of extinction if all members of a speech community choose to use a language other than their mother tongue. This does not occur suddenly in one generation but rather through a long, intergenerational process. This phenomenon makes it difficult to predict the fragility of resilience, so that language extinction often precedes language preservation measures.

Next, social mobility is the most dominant variable influencing language shift. There is no room for suppressing mobility, as this is a characteristic of humans as social beings. On the other side, the fragility of resilience to language shift is also conditioned by intermarriage. Married couples in intermarriages can choose to use the husband's language, the wife's language, the language of both husband and wife, or neither husband nor wife, each of which will influence the language acquisition of their children.

3.2 Speaker-Owner Contribution to Mother Tongue-Local Language Shift

Whatever the triggering factors, the resilience of a language depends heavily on the resilience of its speakers. For pragmatic purposes, or for the practical functions of language, an individual or group of speakers may choose a language other than their native language mother's wishes. However, in areas where the mother tongue is typically used, it's best not to choose another language. Typical areas should not include elements of other languages or the use of other languages, because the persistence (use) of a language in typical areas does not violate sociolinguistic principles.

A language's continued survival, vitality, shifting functions, and even extinction are the responsibility of its speakers. Therefore, the speech community is obligated to maintain various supporting instruments, especially the cultural aspects that store the lexicon and structure, in addition to using these lexicons and structures to express the unique local culture. The uniqueness that labels the identity stored and expressed through the mother tongue—the local language—must be strongly maintained. The development of society and culture is inevitable, but this should not erode the substance of culture due to the shifting function (use) of the local language as a means of expression. Theoretically, it is difficult, but with a strong will, it can become inevitable. To strengthen the resolve of native speakers to contribute to the resilience or even shift of local languages, they need to be reminded of the role of their mother tongue, namely:

a. as the primary means of language acquisition;
b. as the primary means of establishing norms and values;
c. as a marker of humanity; and
d. as a building block of grammatical and semantic foundations for learning, understanding, and using a second language, and so on.

3.3 Language Policy Perspective

Language policy in Indonesia is highly holistic in terms of regulations, encompassing laws, government regulations, ministerial regulations, and various regional regulations. Government Regulation Number 57 of 2014 concerning the Development, Fostering, and Protection of Language and Literature, as well as Enhancing the Function of the Indonesian Language, Article 6 paragraphs (1) and (2) concerning the function of regional languages, and Article 21 paragraphs (1) through (4) and (5) concerning the development of regional languages. Several noteworthy points include:

a. The regulation regarding the function of ethnic personality and identity of regional languages (local languages) as intended by Article 6 paragraph (1) of the Government Regulation is not something that is stated by outsiders without supervision, but rather grows from the speaker himself as an insider. The etic-emic paradigm must be a model to strengthen the belief of native language speakers (local languages) regarding the noble values contained and expressed in their mother tongue.

b. The function of communication tools in the family, and other functions and functions as stated in Article 6 paragraph (2) only contain affirmations (re-expressions).

Regulation of the Minister of Education and Culture Number 42 of 2018 concerning the National Policy on Language and Literature, Article 7 paragraphs (1) to (8) clearly and firmly regulates the development of regional languages.

The scope of regional language development includes: (1) strengthening and enhancing the function of regional languages, (2) developing regional languages through the preparation of teaching materials, translation, and publication of development results, (3) linguistic research, (4) enriching vocabulary, (5) standardizing and codifying rules, (6) and translation. The formulation of these articles is merely a reminder. Furthermore, the use, development, and interest in local languages are not yet widespread and widespread.

Indonesian Law Number 24 of 2002 concerning the National Flag, Language, and Emblem, Article 42 paragraph (2), explicitly states that the development, fostering, and protection of regional languages and literature are carried out in stages, systematically, and sustainably by regional governments under the coordination of language institutions (Language Centers/Language Offices). Delegating the management of regional languages by the central government to the regions constitutes discrimination and hegemony. Article 4 paragraph (3) emphasizes further regulations in Government Regulations. In reality, Government Regulations do not explicitly regulate the development, fostering and protection of regional languages.

4. Conclusion

Regional languages are increasingly vulnerable to extinction due to their fragile linguistic resilience. The primary responsibility for their preservation lies with native speakers, supported by governmental efforts through well-formulated policies and regulatory frameworks. However, the functions and status of regional languages remain highly susceptible to shifts and decline. Without systematic supervision, active development, and sustainable protection, initiatives to preserve these languages are unlikely to yield optimal outcomes. The critical question, therefore, is how many minority local languages—some with only double-digit numbers of speakers—can realistically be saved. Instead of witnessing successful protection and revitalization, the current trend reveals a continual decline in the number of active speakers, signaling an urgent need for collaborative, community-based language preservation strategies.

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