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Resilience of Small, Endangered Languages in Alor Regency: A Case Study of The Kafoa Language

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Abstract

This article examines the language resilience of Kafoa in Southwest Alor District, Alor Regency, Indonesia. Kafoa was selected as the focus of this study because its sociolinguistic ecology is shaped by sustained contact with Abui and Klon, two neighboring languages that may influence the functional shift of Kafoa. The study investigates three interrelated dimensions: the ecological characteristics of the language environment, patterns of bilingualism, and domains of Kafoa language use. Taken together, these dimensions provide a holistic understanding of the resilience and ongoing shift of the Kafoa language. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through participant observation and in-depth interviews. The findings reveal that: (1) from an ecological perspective, Kafoa speakers are multilingual, with Kafoa, Indonesian, Abui, and Klon forming their linguistic repertoire, although the use of Abui and Klon occurs primarily in the form of code-mixing; (2) the bilingual behavior of Kafoa speakers is characterized by a primary preference for either Kafoa or Indonesian, and speakers do not use Abui or Klon in complete sentences or extended discourse; and (3) Kafoa is used across customary, religious, neighborhood, governmental, and family domains, but only the customary and family domains remain strongly associated with Kafoa. In the other domains, language use increasingly involves code-mixing between Kafoa and Indonesian, or between Kafoa and Abui or Klon. These findings indicate that Kafoa has undergone a shift in language function. Nevertheless, given the bilingual patterns of its speakers and the linguistic ecology in which they maintain frequent interaction with Abui and Klon speakers, Kafoa can still be considered a resilient language, despite the absence of language policy support at the local level.

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1. Introduction

Language extinction has become an issue of growing global concern. UNESCO, as cited by the Head of the Language Strategy Development Division of the Indonesian Language Development and Fostering Agency, reports that a language disappears approximately every fifteen days. The extinction of a language is marked by the complete loss of its speakers. Before reaching that stage, however, a language typically exhibits several warning signs of endangerment, including the shrinking of its functional domains, the declining use of the language among younger generations, and its restriction to older speakers. These indicators reflect the broader condition of a language's resilience, which encompasses both its natural capacity to survive within its speech community and deliberate efforts to sustain it through language policies and interventions implemented at various levels.

Regional and local languages are often perceived negatively by the wider public, including their own speakers, particularly when evaluated in terms of social prestige and economic value. Many local languages are now confined to limited domains of use and are therefore viewed as having little economic relevance or prestige. Such pragmatic perceptions may weaken positive language attitudes, which in turn contribute to the reduction of language functions and accelerate language shift. In fact, the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia (including its amendments) explicitly recognizes and protects the status and functions of regional languages. National language policy, as articulated in Indonesia's National Language Policy, positions regional languages as an essential component of cultural development and the formation of Indonesian national identity. Consequently, the significance of regional languages, particularly as first languages or mother tongues, lies not in their prestige or economic utility, but in the cultural and social values embedded in their use.

Alwi (2011:40) argues that regional languages function as markers of ethnic identity and are closely related to speakers' emotional attachment to their ethnic communities. This emotional attachment carries meanings and cultural nuances that cannot be fully expressed or comprehended through other ethnic languages, including Indonesian. Cosmological understandings of the relationships among humans, nature, and God are internalized through regional languages in ways that are culturally distinctive, deeply rooted, and naturally resilient. The values preserved through regional languages and internalized by their speakers underscore the importance of research on regional languages, both to prevent language extinction and to support the revitalization of languages threatened by declining numbers of speakers and the shrinking of their functional domains.

Kafoa, spoken in Alor Regency, falls into several categories associated with vulnerability to language shift and potential endangerment. It is the mother tongue of the communities in Wolwal and Probur villages in Southwest Alor District and is classified as a small language, with approximately 919 speakers. The sociolinguistic ecology of Kafoa is characterized by close contact with neighboring Hamap and Klon speakers, creating conditions conducive to language competition. These demographic and ecological factors suggest a heightened vulnerability to language endangerment. Furthermore, the multilingual environment in which Kafoa speakers use Kafoa, Hamap, Klon, and Indonesian may further contribute to the functional shift of Kafoa.

This study focuses on the vitality of Kafoa, particularly its resilience, through three interrelated analytical dimensions: (1) the language ecology of Kafoa, (2) bilingualism among Kafoa speakers, and (3) the domains of Kafoa language use. Examining these dimensions provides a comprehensive understanding of the current condition of Kafoa and allows an assessment of whether the language continues to maintain its functions or is undergoing a process of functional shift that may ultimately lead to language extinction.

The findings of this study are expected to provide an empirical basis for understanding the actual condition of Kafoa and to inform language policy for regional and local languages in Alor Regency. Given that several local languages in Alor have already become extinct, it is essential to develop preventive measures to ensure that similar language loss does not affect other languages that still have surviving speaker communities, despite being categorized as endangered.

Maintaining and revitalizing the vitality of Kafoa represents not only an effort to preserve a language, but also a commitment to safeguarding the cultural values and worldview upheld by the Kafoa speech community.

Moreover, the central research question of this study is: How resilient is the Kafoa language in Southwest Alor District, Alor Regency? This question is addressed through an examination of the ecological characteristics of Kafoa, patterns of bilingualism among its speakers, and the domains in which the language is used. The language ecology shapes bilingual practices and patterns of language use across domains, which collectively influence either the resilience or the shift of the Kafoa language. On the other hand, specifically, this study aims to: (a). identify and analyze the ecological characteristics of the Kafoa language that contribute to its resilience or functional shift; (b). identify and analyze patterns of bilingualism among Kafoa speakers across different domains of language use in order to assess tendencies toward language resilience or language shift; and (c). identify and describe the domains of Kafoa language use and their patterns of change as indicators of the language's resilience or ongoing shift.

2. Methods

The preparation stage included a preliminary study, a field survey of the research site, the establishment of the research team, the development of research instruments and data collection tools, and the selection of participants.

The research instruments consisted of observation guidelines, interview protocols, and questionnaires where necessary. Participants were selected based on several criteria, including age, the degree of mobility among Kafoa speakers, physical health, and their knowledge and competence in the Kafoa language, particularly with regard to its linguistic structure and its use within sociocultural contexts.

The implementation stage consisted of three sequential activities. First, data were collected through field observations and in-depth interviews. Second, the collected data were processed and analyzed. Third, a focus group discussion (FGD) was conducted to facilitate data triangulation and enhance the validity of the findings.

3. Results and Discussions

3.1 Language ecology, bilingualism, and language endangerment

Empirically, the factor that most strongly influences language endangerment in Alor Regency is language ecology. Theoretically, this empirical finding is consistent with Haugen's view (as cited in Fill & Mühlhäusler, 2001:43), which conceptualizes language ecology as a framework for understanding the life of languages within contexts of bilingualism and multilingualism. Haugen metaphorically compares the relationships among languages to ecological relationships among particular species of plants and animals within a specific environment. He further defines language ecology as the study of the interactions between a particular language and the environment in which it is spoken (ibid., p. 57).

From a semantic perspective, the environment refers to how human beings conceptualize and interpret the world represented by the referents encoded in the vocabulary of a language. The concept of language ecology therefore involves three interconnected elements: the environment, human cognition, and the world referred to through language. The relationship among these elements is realized through language use. This view is consistent with Haugen's distinction between psychological ecology, which concerns language interaction within the mind of an individual, and sociological ecology, which concerns language interaction within society through different domains of language use.

Language interaction reflects the linguistic repertoire of individuals and communities. Linguistic repertoire refers to the range of linguistic knowledge and competence possessed by a

speaker, including both the vocabulary of particular languages and the number of languages that the speaker can use. In Indonesia, the dominant linguistic reality is bilingualism, with most people speaking at least a regional language as their mother tongue and Indonesian as the national language. Such bilingual situations create conditions for language competition, which may lead either to language shift or to language maintenance.

Bilingualism and multilingualism are manifestations of language ecology that may create vulnerability to language shift and language extinction. Language extinction represents the negative outcome of language resilience (Romaine, 1995:38–46), while language shift constitutes the process through which extinction may occur. Consequently, whenever indications of language shift emerge, language maintenance efforts become essential to interrupt the process leading toward language extinction. Ibrahim (2011:48) identifies several levels of language vitality: extinct, endangered, stable but threatened, and safe. Languages classified as endangered require urgent revival and revitalization efforts.

An endangered language is understood as a language undergoing a process that may eventually lead to language death. Crystal (2002:1) argues that a language becomes extinct when no one uses it any longer. Grimes, as cited by Sumbuk (2006:90–91), identifies several factors affecting language vitality, including the lack of socio-political and economic rights among indigenous communities, which also undermines the survival of their native languages. Such issues fall within the domain of language policy. Similarly, Mushin's (2016) study on the conservation of the Laiyola language found that inadequate government support contributed to language vulnerability.

3.2 Language policy

Language policy is the process of deliberating and making decisions about language. Such decisions are shaped by social, economic, and political considerations aimed at strengthening national identity. Language policy must also take into account the needs and aspirations of the speech community. Fishman (as cited in Eastman, 1983:7) argues that language planners should recognize that speech communities generally want their languages to be better organized, standardized, and functional.

Language policy should therefore support language maintenance rather than contribute to language loss or extinction. In this context, language policy involves both corpus planning through codification and status planning through implementation. Indonesia's linguistic situation demonstrates that language policy requires comprehensive and strategic approaches because the national language, regional languages, and foreign languages occupy different positions within a diglossic system. Such diglossic bilingualism can easily accelerate the shift of smaller regional languages and ultimately contribute to their extinction.

3.3 Discussion

Kafoa is spoken by the community of North Probur Village, particularly in Habolat Hamlet, Southwest Alor District, Alor Regency. The village consists of two hamlets: Hamlet A (Lola) and Hamlet B (Habolat). North Probur Village has a population of 1,534 people, and this number also represents the total number of Kafoa speakers, comprising 750 female speakers and 784 male speakers distributed across eight neighborhood units (RT). However, active use of Kafoa is concentrated primarily in Habolat Hamlet, where the language has been transmitted across generations since the time of the ancestors.

According to Mr. Yoel Pulakai, the Head of Government Affairs in the North Probur Village administration and a native Kafoa speaker, the origin of the Kafoa language is closely connected to the ancestral migration of the Habolat people from the mountainous region of Mataru in search of a new settlement. During this migration, the ancestors stopped at a spring to obtain water. After constructing a bamboo channel to direct water into a container, an ill-intentioned individual secretly pierced the bamboo so that the water would spill before reaching the container. A bird

perched nearby witnessed the event. When the ancestors later returned and found that the container was not filling, the bird is believed to have spoken in human language and revealed what had happened. From that time onward, the language of the Habolat ancestors became symbolically associated with the bird, and the language came to be known as Kafoa.

This origin narrative demonstrates that Kafoa speakers regard the emergence of their language as a historical reality rather than a myth. Contemporary Kafoa also differs significantly from neighboring languages. Its geographically restricted distribution suggests strong kinship ties within the speech community and contributes to language resilience. At the same time, the expanding role of Indonesian as a lingua franca creates conditions that may gradually reduce the functional domains of Kafoa. In the absence of supportive language policies, a small language such as Kafoa remains vulnerable to endangerment.

Number of speakers and the ecological characteristics of Kafoa

The Kafoa-speaking community of Habolat Hamlet consists of 919 speakers, including 463 males and 456 females. Among male speakers, 250 are under 17 years of age, 140 are between 18 and 40, and 78 are between 41 and 80. Among female speakers, 240 are under 17, 130 are between 18 and 40, and 81 are between 41 and 80. These show that children and adolescents constitute 53.31% of all speakers (490 individuals), adults aged 18–40 account for 29.38% (270 individuals), and older speakers account for 17.3% (159 individuals). This distribution has several important implications. First, Kafoa is a small language with a limited speaker population, making it inherently vulnerable to language endangerment. Second, the adult age group—those most likely to experience high levels of social mobility and therefore expected to contribute to language shift—does not exhibit extensive code-switching between Kafoa, Klon, and Abui.

From the perspective of psychological language ecology, Kafoa speakers are multilingual, possessing competence in several languages. Socially, Kafoa speakers are geographically bordered by Abui-speaking communities to the east and north and Klon-speaking communities to the south and west. This ecological setting influences language use, particularly in border areas where Kafoa speakers frequently interact with neighboring communities through Klon, Abui, and Indonesian. Consequently, many speakers in these contact zones can be characterized as bilingual or multilingual.

Bilingualism among the Kafoa speech community

Bilingualism and multilingualism among Kafoa speakers were identified through patterns of language choice across different domains of interaction. Both code-mixing and code-switching occur in everyday communication. Depending on the interlocutor and communicative context, speakers may use combinations such as Kafoa–Abui, Kafoa–Klon, or Kafoa–Indonesian.

Despite this multilingual repertoire, Kafoa speakers generally maintain Kafoa and Indonesian as their primary languages. Kafoa remains the preferred language because it functions as the community's mother tongue, while Indonesian is selected for broader communicative and accommodative purposes as the regional lingua franca. In local market interactions, particularly at Lola Market, Indonesian is the dominant language. When interlocutors have limited proficiency in Indonesian, speakers often shift to Kafoa while incorporating elements of Abui or Klon through code-switching or code-mixing.

Domains of Kafoa language use

Kafoa is used with relatively little code-mixing or code-switching in several domains. Customary domain; The customary domain remains the most strongly associated with Kafoa. Traditional ceremonies, ritual speech, ceremonial procedures, and culturally significant objects

are expressed in Kafoa because the language is considered essential for preserving accurate meanings and complete cultural understanding.

Religious domain; Kafoa is used in household worship services, particularly in introductions, opening remarks, sermons, and closing sections. However, many liturgical texts, especially formal prayers, continue to be delivered in Indonesian.

Neighborhood domain; Interactions among neighbors are generally conducted in Kafoa, although Indonesian increasingly appears through code-mixing and code-switching, particularly when discussing modern topics. Older speakers often struggle to find Kafoa equivalents for contemporary concepts, while younger speakers are generally reluctant to create or adopt new Kafoa lexical equivalents.

Government domain; In local administrative meetings, such as neighborhood or community meetings, Kafoa is still used, even when modern topics are discussed. Nevertheless, code-switching and code-mixing occur because speakers frequently rely on Indonesian terminology for administrative and contemporary concepts.

Family domain; The family domain remains one of the strongest domains for Kafoa use, with interaction among family members generally taking place in Kafoa as the community's mother tongue.

The ecology of the Kafoa language

Sociologically, Kafoa is surrounded by Abui- and Klon-speaking communities. Lexicostatistical analysis demonstrates that Kafoa is significantly different from both languages. Swadesh vocabulary comparisons indicate that Kafoa shares only 27.4% of its lexicon with Abui and 9.7% with Klon, leaving lexical differences of 72.6% and 81.3%, respectively. These figures indicate substantial linguistic distance.

This linguistic distance reduces the likelihood of extensive code-switching between Kafoa and either Abui or Klon. Although code-switching does occur, Kafoa speakers generally maintain Kafoa grammatical structures even when incorporating elements from neighboring languages. This pattern suggests limited linguistic interdependence between Kafoa and the ecologically adjacent languages.

Because linguistic interdependence with Abui and Klon remains relatively weak, Indonesian has increasingly become the dominant language of wider communication. Indonesian is gradually expanding into domains traditionally associated with Kafoa and other local languages.

Within Indonesia's language policy framework, the relationship between Kafoa and Indonesian is characterized by diglossia. Kafoa functions as a local language, whereas Indonesian occupies the higher-status position as the national language. Diglossia is a natural feature of multilingual societies, but it requires public awareness to prevent lower-status languages from being marginalized or displaced. Misunderstandings about the appropriate functional distribution of local languages and Indonesian have contributed not only to the expansion of Indonesian into traditional Kafoa domains but also to the increasing use of Indonesian by Kafoa speakers themselves in family and customary settings.

Bilingualism and language attitudes among Kafoa speakers

The bilingualism of Kafoa speakers is primarily characterized by the use of Kafoa and Indonesian. Both languages occupy strong positions: Kafoa as the regional language and mother tongue, and Indonesian as the national language. Kafoa indexes ethnic identity, while Indonesian indexes national identity.

Language choice among Kafoa speakers is strongly influenced by Indonesia's diglossic linguistic environment. Many speakers perceive local languages as offering limited economic opportunities, prestige, and communicative reach. Although interview data reveal generally positive attitudes toward Kafoa, actual language use does not consistently reflect these attitudes. The frequency of Indonesian use within the family domain is now comparable to that of Kafoa.

Pragmatic considerations have become more influential than identity-based or cultural considerations in determining language choice. As a result, the role of Kafoa in preserving and transmitting cultural values has gradually weakened.

Domains of language use

Kafoa speakers distinguish only implicitly between domains that are strongly associated with Kafoa and those that allow greater linguistic flexibility. The family and customary domains remain the most characteristic domains of Kafoa use. Their continued use of Kafoa in these settings is not merely a matter of domestic convention but reflects a deeply rooted awareness of Kafoa as both the language of their ancestors and a marker of ethnic identity.

The resilience of these domains depends on the continued transmission of traditional speech forms, kinship terminology, systems of address, and cultural practices. Field observations and in-depth interviews indicate that current signs of leakage into the family and customary domains should be interpreted as early indicators of potential language shift rather than as evidence of complete domain loss. Although many speakers cannot explicitly define the concept of a mother tongue in theoretical terms, they intuitively understand and enact the cultural values and moral messages embedded in Kafoa.

A similar pattern is evident in the customary domain. For Kafoa speakers, tradition is not primarily a conceptual system but a lived practice inherited from parents and ancestors. They believe that adherence to ancestral teachings contributes to survival, protection from misfortune, fulfillment of daily needs, and a meaningful life as understood within their sociocultural worldview.

In addition to these core domains, Kafoa speakers participate in broader social interactions involving neighborhood relations, religious activities, government administration, and economic transactions. These domains are more flexible, and Indonesian increasingly functions as the primary language. Code-switching between Indonesian and Kafoa is particularly common in these settings, along with various forms of Kafoa-based code-mixing. These patterns indicate an emerging potential for language shift that could be addressed through regional and local language policies oriented toward the maintenance of Kafoa.

Indicators of Kafoa language resilience

The Kafoa speech community is characterized by relatively egalitarian social relations and openness toward neighboring cultural communities. These characteristics contribute to flexible language practices. However, this flexibility has not yet resulted in a substantial loss of Kafoa functions. Although code-mixing with Abui and Klon occurs, significant grammatical differences and low lexical similarity limit deeper linguistic convergence. Sociolinguistically, these adaptation constraints both restrict cross-linguistic integration and create conditions that continue to support the use of Kafoa.

From the perspective of language policy, there are currently no local regulations or institutional measures supporting Kafoa use. Domain-based language planning and maintenance strategies are absent at both village and district levels. Furthermore, no explicit regency-level policies have been developed to implement Government Regulation No. 57 of 2014 on the Development, Fostering, and Protection of Language and Literature and the Enhancement of Indonesian, or Ministry of Education and Culture Regulation No. 42 of 2018 on National Language and Literature Policy. Under these conditions, Kafoa resilience appears to depend largely on natural intergenerational transmission.

Nevertheless, the diglossic relationship between Kafoa and Indonesian, together with perceptions of Indonesian as the language of greater prestige and utility, has begun to affect Kafoa language resilience. Pragmatic considerations increasingly influence language choice across domains, including domains traditionally associated with Kafoa. As a small language with fewer

than 10,000 speakers, Kafoa remains vulnerable to functional shift and should therefore be regarded as an endangered language requiring sustained maintenance and revitalization efforts.

4. Conclusion

Based on the findings and discussion, several important conclusions can be drawn regarding the Kafoa language. Kafoa is a small language that is lexicostatistically distinct from Abui and Klon, whose speaker populations are geographically adjacent to the Kafoa-speaking area. When these linguistic characteristics are considered in relation to the current vitality of Kafoa, the following conclusions emerge.

a. The ecological characteristics of Kafoa within the broader context of local languages indicate a degree of language resilience, largely because of lexical differences and the distinct linguistic repertoires of neighboring languages. However, Indonesian also forms part of the linguistic ecology of Kafoa, and its dominant role as the language of wider communication creates conditions that may contribute to the gradual shift of Kafoa, particularly because Kafoa has a more limited functional range.

b. The Kafoa speech community can be characterized primarily as Kafoa–Indonesian bilingual. Interaction with Abui and Klon speakers is generally reflected in code-mixing practices that signal familiarity and social closeness. There is little evidence of a diglossic relationship between Kafoa and either Abui or Klon; Kafoa is perceived as neither a high-prestige nor a low-prestige language in relation to these neighboring languages. In contrast, a diglossic relationship is evident between Kafoa and Indonesian, and this is reflected in the frequent use of code-switching and code-mixing between the two languages.

c. The domains traditionally associated with Kafoa are gradually shrinking as Indonesian increasingly enters these domains. Indonesian is now used in family interactions, customary practices, and other domestic contexts that were previously dominated by Kafoa. This expansion of Indonesian into traditional Kafoa domains provides an important indication of an emerging process of language shift. Nevertheless, the shift remains at a potential rather than an advanced stage, suggesting that language maintenance measures implemented through regional and local language policies could still be effective.

d. Kafoa has begun to experience a shift in its domains of use. Without language maintenance policies that clearly differentiate the functions and domains of Kafoa and Indonesian, Kafoa is likely to become increasingly endangered. Under these conditions, the language's long-term resilience will depend on several interconnected factors: positive language attitudes among speakers, awareness of the importance of Kafoa as a mother tongue, and recognition of the cultural values embedded in Kafoa verbal expression. Together, these factors constitute the principal foundations for sustaining the vitality of the Kafoa language.

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