



LANGUAGE SHIFT AND DECLINE IN REGIONAL LANGUAGE USE IN MULTILINGUAL CONTEXT IN INDONESIA

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Abstract

The phenomenon of language shift in Indonesia has become increasingly prominent due to the dominance of Indonesian as a national language and the growing influence of global languages, particularly English. This study analyzes key factors influencing language shift and examines its implications for the preservation of regional languages in Indonesia's multilingual context. Employing a qualitative literature review, this research synthesizes insights from scholarly journals, books, and prior studies. The analysis identifies several key factors driving language shift: urbanization, increased social mobility, education policies prioritizing Indonesian, and the widespread use of national and foreign languages in digital media and technology. Moreover, the perception that regional languages hold little economic value and limited social prestige has further accelerated their decline. This trend raises serious concerns about the potential extinction of several regional languages, as intergenerational transmission has diminished. The article highlights the urgent need for revitalization initiatives, including integration of regional languages into formal education, cultural programs, and digital platforms, to safeguard linguistic diversity. Therefore, understanding the dynamics of language shift is essential for developing effective and sustainable language policy strategies.

Keywords: Language Shift, Regional Language, Multilingual.

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is recognized as one of the most linguistically diverse nations globally, with over 700 regional languages documented (Nasrullah, 2024), underscoring its immense cultural and historical richness. This linguistic diversity not only reflects the nation's cultural depth but also serves as a living testament to its complex history and local identities. According to Putri et al. (2025), each regional language embodies traditional values, indigenous knowledge, belief systems, and community worldviews. Preserving these languages is, therefore, not only about maintaining a communication tool but also about safeguarding cultural heritage and collective identity.

However, despite this linguistic richness, the number of active regional language speakers has significantly declined in various parts of Indonesia (Anhar, 2024). Languages once widely spoken in families, communities, and traditional ceremonies are being marginalized and replaced by nationally or globally dominant languages. Research by Suhassatya (2025), Halim (2018), and Suryadinata (2020) demonstrates that this decline is most pronounced among younger generations, who are more proficient in Indonesian or foreign languages while neglecting their mother tongues. In some regions, regional languages are primarily spoken by older generations, putting these languages at risk of extinction due to a breakdown in intergenerational transmission.

The shift in language use is driven by complex social, cultural, and structural factors. The

strong dominance of Indonesian as a national language in administration, education, and media has suppressed the use of regional languages, which are often perceived as less practical in heterogeneous communities. Urbanization and increased population mobility also encourage adaptation to dominant languages for social integration (Sumarsono & Partana, 2002). Furthermore, the influence of digital media and technology, which primarily utilizes Indonesian or foreign languages, exacerbates linguistic inequality. At the policy level, insufficient regulations and the absence of consistent revitalization initiatives among local governments remain significant barriers to regional language preservation.

In Indonesia's multilingual context, the coexistence of multiple languages does not necessarily ensure balanced or harmonious use (Maharani et al., 2025). Languages with institutional legitimacy, such as Indonesian and English, receive greater exposure and formal support, marginalizing minority languages (Mujid, 2009). As a result, multilingualism, rather than ensuring cultural preservation, often accelerates language shift.

This trend has profound implications for cultural sustainability. The loss of regional languages erodes ethnolinguistic identity, oral traditions, folklore, poetry, prayers, and other cultural expressions rooted in local languages. Over time, this cultural erosion threatens to sever intergenerational connections and weaken collective identity.

This study aims to address the following research question: How does language shift occur, and what factors contribute to the decline of regional language use in Indonesia's multilingual society? The findings are expected to provide a foundation for designing effective policies and programs for language preservation, benefiting policymakers, educators, and local communities in safeguarding the nation's linguistic heritage.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative design using a library research method to systematically examine scholarly literature on language shift and the decline of regional language use in Indonesia. According to Zed (2008), library research is a systematic approach to examining and analyzing written materials, including books, journal articles, and policy documents. This method was selected to facilitate an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of language shift through comprehensive literature analysis.

Data sources included academic books, peer-reviewed journals, linguistic study reports, conference proceedings, and government policy documents relevant to the research topic. Sources were selected based on relevance, author credibility, and publication year, prioritizing recent studies (within the past five years) while incorporating influential classical works where necessary.

Data collection involved systematic searches in both digital and physical libraries, using academic databases such as Google Scholar, ResearchGate, and Garuda. The analysis employed content analysis techniques, incorporating coding, thematic categorization, and cross-source comparisons to identify key factors contributing to language shift, its societal impacts, and proposed preservation strategies. Findings are presented in a descriptive-qualitative format, supported by core theories in sociolinguistics and language planning.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The language shift in Indonesia is not just a conjecture, but a real phenomenon that has been proven through various scientific studies and reports of international institutions. A number of regional languages have experienced a drastic decline in the number of active speakers, which indicates a weak process of language inheritance from generation to generation. For example, research shows that the Osing language in Banyuwangi, Tolaki in Southeast Sulawesi, and Kajang in South Sulawesi is increasingly rarely used by young people in their daily lives. Many of them prefer to use Indonesian or even a foreign language because it is considered more modern and relevant in today's social context. Data from UNESCO also corroborate these findings, with more than 140 regional languages in Indonesia being included in the endangered category. This category

indicates that these languages no longer have enough speaker regeneration to sustain their future survival. One of the most worrying factors is the weakening of the use of regional languages in intergenerational communication in the family and educational environment. When parents no longer pass on their mother tongue to their children, the cycle of natural inheritance is interrupted. Schools as formal educational institutions have also not fully become a space that supports the use of regional languages, because the focus of learning is dominated by Indonesian and foreign languages. This condition clearly reflects that the language shift is taking place in various regions of Indonesia, and if it is not addressed immediately, the risk of language extinction will increase.

One of the main factors that drives the language shift in Indonesia is the dominance of the Indonesian language in various aspects of social and institutional life. As the national language, Indonesian has become the main tool in the formal education system, mass media, government, and public communication at large. All administrative activities, teaching and learning processes, and the delivery of information through television, newspapers, and online media are almost entirely in Indonesian. This puts the national language in a very strong and dominant position compared to the regional language. Meanwhile, regional languages are often used only in certain informal contexts, such as family communication, local community conversations, or in traditional ceremonies. The absence of regional languages in formal spaces has led to a decline in their function as a broad means of communication, and this has accelerated the process of marginalization of local languages. This dominance is reinforced by the social perception that develops in society, where the Indonesian language is seen as a symbol of progress, education, and social mobility. Many young generations prefer to use Indonesian in their daily lives because it is considered more prestigious and relevant to the demands of the times. As a result, the use of regional languages has become increasingly marginalized, especially in urban environments, and only remains among the elderly. This reality shows that the dominance of national languages, although important for national unity, also has a major impact on the survival of regional languages if not balanced with strong preservation policies.

The process of urbanization and social mobility that is increasingly massive in Indonesia is also an important factor in encouraging the shift in regional languages. When individuals or families migrate from village to city in search of a better education, job, or life, they are exposed to a new social environment that is generally heterogeneous and dominated by the use of Indonesian or even foreign languages. In such a situation, regional language speakers tend to have to adapt to the language spoken by the majority in order to communicate effectively and be socially accepted. As a result, the use of mother tongues began to shift and was slowly abandoned in everyday life. Children who grow up in urban environments are also more exposed to the Indonesian language through school, media, and social interaction outside the home. Meanwhile, regional languages that are only spoken by parents in the domestic environment become increasingly foreign to them, especially if they are not transmitted consistently. In a mixed community consisting of various ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, the choice to use Indonesian as the primary language of instruction became a common form of social adaptation. Regional languages in this context are considered less efficient and exclusive, so they are often ignored for the sake of ease of communication across groups. This phenomenon, if it continues without preservation efforts, will accelerate the process of forgetting and losing regional languages in the midst of the mobility of modern society.

Media and digital technology play a big role in accelerating the shift of regional languages in Indonesia. In today's digital era, social media, television, and various internet platforms dominantly use Indonesian or foreign languages, especially English. Access to information, entertainment, and social interaction carried out online almost entirely takes place in these languages, while the existence of regional language content is very limited, even tends to be ignored. The lack of representation of regional languages in the digital space causes people, especially the younger generation, to lose emotional closeness and the habit of interacting using their mother tongue. Children and adolescents as the largest group of technology users actively shape their linguistic habits through what they see, hear, and consume on a daily basis. When regional languages are not present in the media they access, then it is likely that the language will

be marginalized in daily life. Furthermore, digital media also creates language standards that are considered "modern" and "global," so that regional languages often have no place in today's communication context. Without intervention in the form of production and promotion of digital content based on local languages, the process of language shift will continue along with the development of technology.

One of the big challenges in maintaining the existence of regional languages in Indonesia is the lack of optimal policy support from the government, both at the central and regional levels. Although the government has passed Law Number 24 of 2009 concerning the Flag, Language, and State Emblem and National Anthem—which includes the importance of the protection and development of regional languages—its implementation in the field is still very limited. Many regions do not have derivative regulations that specifically regulate local language preservation efforts. The existing revitalization program has not yet touched all endangered languages. Other factors that weaken these preservation efforts are budget limitations, the lack of human resources who are experts in language documentation, and the low awareness of the community itself on the importance of preserving the mother tongue. Without strong regulatory support and the active involvement of local communities, Indonesia's regional languages continue to be vulnerable to extinction.

The shift in language not only has implications for the loss of means of communication, but also has a far-reaching impact on the cultural identity of a community. Language is the main medium to transmit values, history, and a way of life of a group of people. When regional languages are abandoned, non-material cultural heritage such as folklore, oral traditions, regional songs, and various other cultural expressions also disappear. Moreover, the extinction of language also means the loss of distinctive thinking systems and concepts that cannot be fully translated into other languages. In other words, the extinction of a language is the same as the extinction of one way of looking at the world. In this context, language shifts have a direct impact on weakening local identities and accelerating cultural homogenization, which ultimately erodes the richness of diversity that has been a hallmark of Indonesia.

Although Indonesia is known as a multilingual country, the reality is that the existing multilingual situation does not necessarily create a balance in the use of languages. Instead, what often happens is the dominance of one or two languages—especially Indonesian and foreign languages—which have higher economic and social power, while minority languages are increasingly marginalized. In a multilingual society that is not equipped with a policy of protection for small languages, there is an inequality that strengthens the position of the dominant language and weakens the existence of other languages. Without state intervention and collective awareness, multilingualism has the potential to become a tool of linguistic hegemony that actually accelerates the process of marginalization and extinction of local languages. This shows that multilingualism is not a guarantee of sustainability, but must be accompanied by a strategy of equity and protection of minority languages in a concrete way.

Various literature reviews propose a number of strategies for the preservation of regional languages that can be applied systematically and sustainably. One important approach is to integrate regional languages in the local curriculum, so that students not only learn national and foreign languages, but also understand the language and culture of their ancestors. In addition, the development of digital content in regional languages such as films, songs, podcasts, and storybooks needs to be encouraged so that local languages remain alive in the digital space that is familiar to the younger generation. Another relevant strategy is the empowerment of local communities to document language through dictionaries, folklore, and audio recordings, as well as reviving the practice of using language in everyday life. In order for all of these strategies to run effectively, policy support and budget allocation from the local and central governments are the main key. Without political commitment and seriousness from various parties, the preservation of regional languages will be difficult to realize on a broad scale and have a long-term impact.

CONCLUSION

The shift in language and the decline in the use of regional languages in the multilingual context in Indonesia is a complex phenomenon influenced by various social, cultural, and structural factors. Based on a literature review, it was found that more and more regional languages have experienced a decrease in the number of active speakers, and some are even in critical condition. The dominance of Indonesian as a national language in education, media, and public space is the main cause of the marginalization of local languages. The process of urbanization, social mobility, and the influence of digital media reinforce this imbalance, especially among the younger generation who tend to be more familiar with national or foreign languages.

The lack of digital content in regional languages, the implementation of local language protection policies has not been optimal, and low public awareness have also accelerated the process of language shift. As a result, not only the communication function is in danger of being lost, but also the cultural identity, oral traditions, and unique ways of thinking of a local community. In a multilingual society, without adequate protective policies, languages with economic and social power will dominate, while minority languages continue to be marginalized.

Therefore, a comprehensive preservation strategy is needed, such as integrating regional languages into local curricula, producing local language-based media content, and empowering communities to document and revive their languages. Policy and budget support from the central and regional governments is an important foundation in efforts to maintain the sustainability of Indonesia's linguistic heritage. Through a deep understanding of the process of language shift, it is hoped that concrete steps can be formulated to preserve linguistic diversity as part of the nation's cultural wealth.

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