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The Effects of a Linguistic Tsunami on the Languages of Aceh¹

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Abstract

The languages throughout the world are in crisis and it is estimated that 50% to 90% will have disappeared by the end of this century (Grenoble, 2012). Colonisation, nationalism, urbanisation and globalisation have resulted in a linguistic tsunami being unleashed, with a few major world languages swamping others. The rate of language loss today is unprecedented as this small number of dominant languages expands rapidly. Small minority languages are mainly in danger, but even large regional languages, such as Acehnese with millions of speakers, are unsafe. Similar to the case of a tsunami triggered by an earthquake, it is generally too late before speakers are aware of what is happening. In most cases language shift will have already progressed and irreversible before people realize it. This paper examines the early warning signs of impending language shift and what can be done for minority languages to have the best chance of survival. We draw on the local situation in Aceh, as well as other parts of the Austronesian speaking world and Australia, where the record of language loss is the worst in the world. Language shift in Australia is well-progressed; in Indonesia it is more recent. Lessons learned from places such as Australia and Taiwan have relevance for Indonesia today.

Keywords: Endangered languages, Acehnese, language shift, minority languages, linguistic diversity.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Michael Krauss (1992) in his seminal article published in *Language* in 1992 drew the attention of linguists all over the world to language endangerment. Certainly the phenomenon of language loss is not exactly new. Over history, the loss of languages had always occurred with the expansion of empires, and at times, as the result of natural disasters. An eruption of a volcano on Sumbawa Island resulted in the loss of Tamboran due to the death of all speakers. According to Dixon (1991, p. 241), Tamboran is now known only from a wordlist in Raffles (1817). But as Krauss (1992) and others point out, things are basically different now. There has been a dramatic change in the rate of language loss and currently the process is a phenomenon occurring worldwide on all continents at an ever accelerating rate.

In 1991, Anne Pakir (1991) from Singapore coined the term ‘killer language’ in reference to English, but this term has become greater in its scope to also refer to the relatively small number of thriving, expanding languages, most important amongst them being English, but also Mandarin Chinese, Spanish, Portuguese, Indonesian, Russian, Swahili, Tok Pisin, etc., that are swamping Indigenous languages, which have existed for many centuries. And the tide is still rising unabated.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Language Loss and Revival in Australia

Language extinction in Australia, arguably, shows the worst record compared to that in any other continent or nation on earth. Of the 250 or more languages spoken at the time of colonisation, there are now only 13 at last count (NILS II in Marmion, Obata & Troy, 2014) still being transmitted naturally to the younger generation, and this language loss continues in the remote northern and central regions where the stronger languages are located. Conversely, some of the lost languages in the south and east of Australia are being revived, but it is apparent they will never be the same as they were when these languages were spoken fluently. Revived languages, such as Kurna of the Adelaide Plains (Amery, 2016), in many respects are a poor reflection of their former selves as they were only partially documented. The full grammatical complexity, special registers, dialectal variations, idiom and metaphor are largely lacking. As Yedda Palameq, a young speaker of Paiwan (a language from the southeast of Taiwan), who learnt her language in adulthood told the second writer, that her grandmother says she speaks Paiwan “without salt” referring to the absence of metaphor and idiom used by younger speakers. But as revived languages gain native speakers, they will evolve and develop in line with the needs of their speakers². Whilst Hebrew has developed into a fully functioning language as the national and official language of the state of Israel, it seems unlikely that revived languages in Australia will

²When Amery visited Taiwan in 2014, a widely held view was expressed that to focus on Indigenous languages was somehow inward looking and would cut their speakers off from the rest of the world. To the contrary, it was the speakers of Taiwanese Indigenous languages who often had the best English and were the most widely travelled, having linked up with the world’s Indigenous peoples movement. Similarly for numbers of Kurna people in Adelaide, engaging with their language has opened up their world and enabled them to travel to many other countries and link up with Indigenous peoples there.

develop into more than an additional language used alongside English, for a somewhat restricted range of functions. Even Hebrew shows many hybrid features and is influenced much by the native tongues of its founders (Zuckermann, 2004, 2006).

2.2 Language Death

What are we losing when a language dies? Does it matter? Language is not merely a system of communication, although it certainly achieves that purpose. Language represents culture and transmits culture from one generation to the next. Every language encodes a particular view of the world, a way of life, knowledge of the environment, weather patterns, etc., that have developed over centuries. By virtue of language structure, speakers attend to different aspects of the situation. It is not so much a matter of what you can say in a language, but what you must say. Tense, for example, is important in English but not in Bahasa Indonesia. The number of people spoken to is essential in many Aboriginal languages, but it is not in English. Some Aboriginal languages use different pronouns dependent upon the kin relation. Kaurua has many specific words for deceased kin (something English simply does not have) and bereaved relatives (English can only manage widow, widower and orphan). What we lose is not only different knowledge systems and unique grammatical structures but also elaborate ways of speaking.

Indigenous languages, which have developed over hundreds or thousands of years within a specific environment, contain detailed knowledge of that environment and its fauna, flora, landforms, weather patterns and cultural practices. There are sometimes clues in the language which point to certain unique properties which may lead to ground-breaking and game-changing scientific discoveries in areas such as pharmaceuticals, food preparation, land management, fire management and so on. Indigenous languages do have a value, and for this reason have recently been dubbed ‘treasure languages’ (Bird, 2015).

2.3 The Early Warning Signs

What are the early warning signs for languages in danger? One important factor is to do with the number of speakers and if the number of speakers is decreasing, this is a clear danger sign. But language vitality is not simply a matter of the number of speakers as Ravindranath and Cohn (2014) show in their discussion of Javanese with more than 80 million speakers. Most languages in Australia probably had fewer than 100 speakers, and none ever had more than a few thousand, but they thrived in a stable language ecology prior to colonisation. Nevertheless, such small numbers of speakers definitely adds to the vulnerability of a language when this ecology is disrupted.

What is more important than the number of speakers is the age profile of speakers. If the language is only spoken on a daily basis by the older generation and the younger speakers are all speaking the national language although they still understand the language of their parents, then this is a red alert. If this pattern continues and the younger generation raises their children speaking the dominant language, intergenerational transmission will then be disrupted. The maintenance of intergenerational transmission is absolutely necessary to language survival.

Another important parameter of imminent language shift is a decrease in domains of use where the dominant international, national or regional language may reach into many areas of life such as media (radio, television, print, etc.), government, education, religion, law, advertising, written communication, business, the workplace, dealings with foreigners or outsiders, etc., which consequently provides less and less opportunity for use of the language.

Attitudes to language are crucial. If the younger generation regards the language as being ‘old-fashioned’ or ‘not cool’, they will likely abandon the language. Is the language perceived positively, or is it seen as ‘backward’, inward looking, incapable of expressing abstract ideas, unable to deal with the modern world? Is it considered *kasar* ‘vulgar’ or *kampung* ‘country bumpkin’, etc.? What language do children and teenagers use with each other in informal contexts? The use of the dominant language in daily conversation is a clear sign of imminent language shift.

Positive attitudes alone, however, may be insufficient to rescue a language because at times there might be a reasonably large gap between what people say and what they do. They may say that their language is very important to them, but not follow through with speaking it. They may say that they speak to their children in their language most of the time; yet, close observation may reveal that they do not actually often speak it to their children.

Another warning sign is high levels of intermarriage, particularly where the couple falls back on the shared dominant language for use at home instead of taking the time and effort to learn to understand each other’s language. Intermarriage does not have to cause language shift, however. Our colleague, Zuckermann, at the University of Adelaide is an Israeli married to a Chinese woman from Shanghai. They each speak to their three boys in their own language, so the boys grew up speaking Israeli and Chinese as dual first languages. And since they moved to Adelaide when the children were quite young, they have since acquired English and are already fluent trilinguals. In northeast Arnhemland, marriage is exogamous – that is, one must marry a spouse from another clan belonging to the opposite moiety. Traditionally, this meant the wife was a speaker of another language (sometimes a very different language, sometimes a dialect). Their children would grow up speaking their mother’s language until maturity and then switch to their father’s language (their own language) and speak it from then on. Typically a child would grow up with grandparents speaking four different languages. Even though the numbers of speakers of these languages are relatively small, they were maintained because there was a very strong ethos for people to speak their own language. A husband would become angry if his wife started speaking his language saying “You’ve got your own lingo. Speak your own,” which is quite the opposite attitude to that existing in mainstream Australia.

Code-switching and code-mixing may be an expression of linguistic versatility and a means of selectively including or excluding interlocutors. However, when code-switching is the only way for speakers to express themselves in the language, it may be an alert that the dominant language has made massive inroads into the minority language, replacing vocabulary and forms of expression resulting in language loss.

2.4 Additive Bilingualism

It is, of course, important for members of any society to have competence in the national and official languages of the country. Parents sometimes bring up their

children as monolingual speakers of the national/official language, and they believe that it will enable them to have the best chance in life, the best education, employment options and access to wealth and prosperity. Whilst this is true to some extent, it does not need to be at the expense of their own language. In fact, many studies show the benefits of bi-/multilingualism which improves the ability to think laterally and enhances memory and cognitive function (Latham, 1998), even staving off Alzheimer's disease in old age (Bialystok, Craik & Luk, 2012). Successful immersion and bilingual programs in Canada, Hawai'i, New Zealand, the Isle of Man, Ireland and Australia have shown very positive results and enhanced academic performance.

2.5 Language Loyalty in Aceh

Acehnese is still spoken by approximately 2.4 million speakers (Arka, 2008, p. 67), yet it cannot be guaranteed to continue to remain strong since nowadays members of a typical Acehnese family prefer to speak Bahasa Indonesia rather than Acehnese at home (Alamsyah, et. al., 2011). The fact that the Acehnese descendants who reside in Kampung Aceh (Village of Aceh) in Yan district in Kedah, Malaysia still speak Acehnese to their children (Yusuf, et al., 2012, p. 1) indicates that they are still loyal towards the language. The situation in Aceh province particularly in big towns, however, is quite different "where parents mostly do not speak Acehnese with their children anymore" and they tend to use Bahasa Indonesia instead (Zulfadli, 2014, p. 95).

Bahasa Indonesia has become a 'killer language' to Acehnese as it is replacing the usage of the local language for a number of reasons such as the parents' belief that it will help their children at school. Besides, Bahasa Indonesia has a function as a 'neutral' language for different dialect speakers in Aceh (Alamsyah, et. al., 2011, p. 39). Its role as a national and official language has "seriously impacted vernacular languages in more formal situations and has put them under immense pressure" (Zulfadli, 2014, p. 96). Bahasa Indonesia plays an important role as the lingua franca throughout Indonesia. It is now spoken widely among Indonesian people from all parts of the archipelago and is used as the medium for science, literature and the arts, and cultural expression (Alwi, et. al., 1993, pp. 1-2).

Bahasa Indonesia became the official language in Aceh when the province became a part of Indonesia in 1950 (Yusuf, 2013, p. 3). In the 1970s, the New Order government of the Republic of Indonesia urged that the people use good Bahasa Indonesia to promote national unity (see Arka, 2013), including in Aceh. The mass campaign has caused the national language to be used in virtually all aspects of public life, and consequently the use of local languages has declined greatly (Zulfadli, 2014, p. 28). The influence of Bahasa Indonesia is also found on virtually all local languages in Aceh. This has negatively impacted the Acehnese language, as a result of the failure of the central government to promote indigenous languages. The use of Bahasa Indonesia is found in schools, courtrooms, as well as official events in the Province (see Yusuf, 2013, p. 1). Its use is also encouraged for teachers in their classrooms, resulting in school children having less access to Acehnese at school (Zulfadli, 2014, p. 29). As a consequence, Acehnese has borrowed many words from Bahasa Indonesia which has had a phonological impact on Acehnese, for example, the typical Acehnese /s/, which sounds like the dental fricative [θ], now tends to be realised as the alveolar fricative [s], especially among the young generation in urban areas (Zulfadli, 2014, p. 29).

English has recently become more popular and widespread within Aceh, especially after the tsunami. Many people in Aceh speak English well and the Acehnese language has continued to borrow English words via Bahasa Indonesia (Zulfadli, 2014, p. 20). The influence of English is obviously noticeable today on the names of stores, coffee shops, and other building names in Banda Aceh. Signage in the Acehnese language is not easy to find, which may exacerbate the growing disloyalty towards the local languages.

It is arguable that at the present time the Acehnese language may not be in danger. However, Zulfadli (2014) is concerned that it is not in a stable position due to the trend of language shift from Acehnese to Bahasa Indonesia continuing in urban areas, combined with the ongoing campaign for the use of the national language. With reference to the measurement of the degree of endangerment of a language, introduced by Fishman (1991) through the Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS) and the factors of language vitality and endangerment parameters called the Major Evaluative Factors of Language Vitality (UNESCO, 2003), it may be misleading to consider the position of Acehnese to be endangered due to an absence of previous studies having been conducted on this matter (Zulfadli, 2014, p. 98). Nonetheless, Zulfadli (2014) argues that based on the findings that young people particularly in big towns in Aceh prefer to speak Bahasa Indonesia (Alamsyah, et. al., 2011) the Acehnese language may be rated with a low score, and it should alert interested parties and related stakeholders to start to take action.

3. METHOD

The data for this qualitative descriptive research were mainly collected from the observation of the participants. The attitudes of Acehnese speakers in Banda Aceh were observed mainly during short daily conversations and other language use situations. The conversations and language use took place mostly during transactions and short conversations in business contexts and the workplace. The data were noted and then analysed in order to determine the extent of language loyalty and pattern of language shift.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this research show both very interesting and surprising phenomena. The first writer always opened short conversations and small talk in Acehnese. However, in most cases the interlocutors mainly aged 20-50 years responded in Bahasa Indonesia instead. Many times the writer re-replied in the local language, but they kept using the national language. In a conversation between the first writer and a shop attendant at a shopping mall in Banda Aceh, he found it was surprising that the shop attendant used Bahasa Indonesia in his reply to the writer's Acehnese inquiry. The shop attendant was obviously an Acehnese speaker, and what was more surprising was that the writer overheard him speak Acehnese with his friends who arrived at the scene, which perhaps indicates that for him, Acehnese has become a narrowly focussed in-group language for use with intimates only.

The first writer also observed that children in some big towns in Aceh shifted their language into Bahasa Indonesia. One evening, he was queuing for ablution in a Mosque in the Ketapang area, Banda Aceh. He heard a group of young teenagers speaking in Bahasa Indonesia with a strong Acehnese influence. He understood that they knew Acehnese because they switched their language into Acehnese when they talked to some other friends. This observation indicates that children in Banda Aceh generally shift their language into Bahasa Indonesia when they talk amongst themselves.

Such code-switching and language shifting occurs in virtually all conversations and occasions observed particularly among younger people. A survey conducted by Irmalia (2015) involving 86 students from three different senior high schools in Sigli district found that 23 students (38.3%) said that they use the national language when they speak with their family and friends at school or outside of the school. Interestingly (or sadly in this case) 9 participants (15%) admitted to speaking Bahasa Indonesia all the time. The survey also revealed that no single student responded that he/she never used Bahasa Indonesia in the context mentioned above.

The findings above suggest that Acehnese people now prefer Bahasa Indonesia rather than Acehnese or other local languages spoken in the province. It means that children are now being raised in families where Bahasa Indonesia becomes their first language. As a consequence, it may be possible that in the next one or two generations the Acehnese language will not be spoken by people living in the big towns. In turn it may influence parents or children in other small towns or villages to no longer speak Acehnese. The failure of decision makers and stakeholders such as the provincial and district governments to address these trends will only hasten the process. Deliberate language policy is required to raise awareness of and to preserve local languages.

5. CONCLUSION

The loss of languages occurring in other parts of the world and laborious efforts in order to bring them back should serve as a salutary lesson to interested parties in Aceh Province. The spirit of Aceh is embodied in the local Acehnese languages, so that a distinctive 'Acehneseness' can continue.

There are signs of the emergence of some awareness of these issues as evidenced by the Kongres Aceh Peradaban (Aceh Civilisation Congress) that was held in Banda Aceh in December 2015. Significantly it was organised by the Acehnese diaspora, who perhaps are able to view the situation in Aceh from something of an outsider's perspective and are perhaps more aware of what is happening elsewhere in the world. This congress passed a number of recommendations towards the strengthening of local languages. The proof, however, will lie in the implementation of these measures.

Let us make a place for Acehnese and other local languages in public life alongside Bahasa Indonesia. Acehnese should be visible in the landscape in signage and public art. The local languages should be able to be seen and heard in the media, radio and television, as well as in drama and film. Local languages need a place within education alongside Bahasa Indonesia and English. There needs to be literature, storybooks, on-line learning material, mobile phone applications, electronic games, etc., in local languages in order to support their profile within the community. Local languages should not be abandoned; instead they need to be out-front, alongside Bahasa Indonesia. All these cannot be realised without proactive involvement of the policy and

decision makers at all levels in the province. The large number of Acehnese speakers today is not a guarantee that the position of the language is safe if the younger people in Aceh stop speaking the indigenous languages at home and the community of speakers gradually decreases.

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