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A SURVEY ON THE STATUS OF THE LOCAL LANGUAGES OF PULAU SIMEULUE AND PULAU BANYAK AND THEIR USE WITHIN THE COMMUNITY

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Abstract

Within Aceh, the languages of Pulau Simeulue and Pulau Banyak are very different to those spoken elsewhere in the province. These languages appear to be the most endangered with relatively low numbers of speakers. This project investigates the status of the languages spoken in Pulau Simeulue and Pulau Banyak, Aceh Indonesia, and their use in the community. In addition to observation in the field, questionnaires were distributed to native speakers of Devayan, Sigulai, and Leukon in Pulau Simeulue, and Haloban in Pulau Banyak. The results of this study show that Devayan has the most speakers (possibly 30,000 or more), whilst Sigulai has somewhat less (perhaps 20,000). Leukon is spoken only in two villages (Lafakha with 687 inhabitants and Langi with a similar number), though language loyalty appears to be particularly strong amongst Sigulai and Leukon speakers. Haloban is spoken in villages on the largest island located in the more remote Kecamatan of Pulau Banyak Barat. Haloban speakers reside in two adjoining villages, Haloban and Asantola. Haloban is in a considerably weakened position.

Keywords: *Pulau Simeulue and Pulau Banyak languages, Sigulai, Devayan, Haloban, language loyalty, language shift.*

INTRODUCTION

Within the province of Aceh, it is the languages spoken on the islands of Simeulue (population 85,000) and Pulau Banyak (population 7,000) which are the most divergent, least studied and would appear to be the most endangered. On the island of Simeulue there are two main languages. According to Ethnologue Simeulue has 30,000 speakers, whilst Sikule (Sigulai) has 20,000 speakers. Simeulue is usually also referred to as Devayan. In addition to Devayan and Sigulai, another indigenous language, Leukon is also spoken in the Island. It is only used in two villages: Lafakha with 687 inhabitants and Langi with a similar number.

On the other hand, Pulau Banyak is located in Aceh Singkil District. Pulau Banyak means 'many islands', because it consists of 99 islands, but only two are inhabited. There are just seven villages in Pulau Banyak, three of which are Jamee-speaking (similar to Minang from West Sumatra), two are Nias-speaking, whilst the remaining two are Haloban-speaking. Haloban, with less than 1,000 speakers, is not spoken anywhere else and it is apparent that the younger generations have already shifted to Jamee and Indonesian.

This study seeks to ascertain the status of these languages and their use in the community. Pulau Simeulue and Pulau Banyak are currently relatively isolated, but there is talk of developing

these areas, and especially Pulau Banyak, into major tourist destinations. This could be a major increased threat to these languages. Equally it could be an opportunity to ensure they have a role within the developing eco-tourism in the area. Awareness raising and documentation is essential prior to the onslaught of tourism.

This region is a centre of frequent migration and dislocation due to frequent violent seismic activity. Recent archaeological studies reveal that there have been 20 tsunamis of comparable intensity to the 2004 tsunami over the last 7,000 years (Daly, 2015). Pulau Simeulue was very close to the epicentre of the 2004 tsunami which devastated large areas of Aceh and other countries further afield. The region potentially holds answers to language evolution in small remote island communities.

Aceh has also been off limits to researchers for some years due to a war of independence. Since the peace accord following the 2004 tsunami, Aceh has opened up to the outside world. There are early signs of awareness of language loss in Aceh (Zulfadli & Amery, 2016). Therefore, this study tries to find out the current status of the languages of Pulau Simeulue and Pulau Banyak, Aceh. It is hoped that it can raise awareness of endangered languages within the islands.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Attitude usually deals with the combination of feeling and judgment towards certain thing (Ajzen, 2005). When people perceive a variety of a language, they may judge the language as a medium for communication or come up with certain ideas of the speaker of the language. Language attitude reflects the favourable or unfavourable feelings towards a particular language that can provide an indication of the status of that language within society (Baker, 1992). Language attitudes may determine whether languages spread or decay (Carranza, 1982). It means that when a language is perceived as unfavourable and because of this belief then parents will not pass on the language to their children, the language is under threat.

In several studies, Acehnese youth appeared to be reluctant to use their indigenous language and shifted to Bahasa Indonesia (see for example, Al Awwal (2011); Alamsyah, *et al.* (2011)) has shown that the local language is regarded as a 'second class' language. The local languages spoken in Pulau Simeulue and Pulau Banyak may experience a similar phenomenon. When parents do not expose their mother tongues to their children and prefer to use the more dominant, standard language, linguistic suicide (Beck & Lam, 2006) is under way.

Parents play a very important role in ensuring that the indigenous languages are passed on to their children. To make sure that a language is used and accepted by children of a speech community is an indication of a survival of a language (Pendakur, 1990, p.5). If indigenous languages are no longer spoken by the next (children) or subsequent (grandchildren) generations, it is a result of 'linguistic tsunami' that may promote the condition of indigenous languages being at risk or endangered status (Aziz & Amery, 2016). A language is categorized as endangered when the language is not learned and acquired by the younger generations (Doyle, 1998). According to DeSwaan (2004, p. 568) a language is endangered when its speakers use the language "less and less, start to neglect its finer points, resort increasingly to another, rival language, and eventually stop teaching the original language to their children and largely forget it themselves." Once the older generations who master the language die, they will take the language with them leave no speakers behind. Therefore, the status and use of a language in a speech community need to be maintained.

METHODS

The data for this study were collected from the observation and questionnaires. The observation was conducted in Pulau Simeulue and Pulau Banyak. During the fieldwork in Pulau Simeulue, the researchers observed the native speakers in the area of each language community. For Devayan areas it covers Teluk Dalam and Kampung Air; for Sigulai, data were collected in Sibigo and Meunafa, Salang; and for Leukon in Lafakha. In Pulau Banyak, data were mainly collected in Haloban. In addition, approximately twenty questionnaires enquiring about the status of the local languages and their use within the community were distributed in each research location. The questionnaires were also used as the basis of an initial discussion with the language consultants in each location. The data were noted and then analysed in order to determine the language status and extent of use in the two Islands.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Current Status of the Languages of Pulau Simeulue and Pulau Banyak, Aceh

The languages indigenous to Pulau Simeulue are Devayan (also known as Simeulue), Sigulai and Leukon. Devayan, spoken in Teluk Dalam, Simeulue Timur, Simeuleu Tengah and other areas in the south of the island, has the most speakers (possibly 30,000 or more), whilst Sigulai, spoken in Simeulue Barat, Salang and Alafan in the north of the island has somewhat less (perhaps 20,000). Leukon is spoken only in two villages (Lafakha with 687 inhabitants and Langi with a similar number). Lafakha and Langi are geographically separated by Sigulai-speaking areas. Leukon speakers in Lafakha are very proud of their language, and proud of the fact that only they alone speak Leukon, but they also speak the languages of their neighbours, Sigulai and Devayan.

Sigulai speakers also speak Devayan, but not Leukon. It was apparent though, that our language consultants in Salang could understand our Leukon recordings made in Lafakha. It was also proved by the fact that Sitti Nasuha, our Devayan/Sigulai-speaking Research Assistant, who had never been to Lafakha or Langi before and had never heard Leukon spoken before, was able to understand it once she got used to the different accent.

Whilst Sigulai has fewer speakers, it appears that it is stronger than Devayan. It was observed that most senior members of Devayan community, sometimes had difficulty in retrieving the Devayan names of a number of fish, whilst people in Sigulai speech community, both in Sibigo and Meunafa, could retrieve all these terms with ease. In Sibigo, children could be heard counting in Sigulai whilst playing with their friends. In Kampung Air, however, children in the street that we observed were unable to count from 1 to 10 in any of the local languages. Rather Jamee was their dominant language.

Bahasa Jamee (or Jamu), a language derived from Bahasa Minang spoken in West Sumatra, is dominant in the capital Sinabang in the south of Pulau Simeulue and is primarily the language of trade and business. As elsewhere in Indonesia, Bahasa Indonesia is the official language, the language of government, police, the law courts, education, health services and the mosque.

There are just seven villages in Pulau Banyak, with the majority of the population speaking Bahasa Jamee (Jamu) on the island of Pulau Balai, the ferry port and administrative centre. Haloban and Nias are spoken in villages on the largest island located in the more remote Kecamatan of Pulau Banyak Barat. Haloban speakers reside in two adjoining villages, Haloban and Asantola. Some 30 minutes away by boat (or 3 hours strenuous walking) is the Christian Nias-speaking village of Ujung Sialit, whilst the Muslim Nias-speaking village of Suka Makmur is located even further away and accessible only by boat. There is considerable movement of people between these two Nias-speaking villages and Pulau Nias itself located to the south in the province of North Sumatra.

Haloban is in a considerably weakened position. Bahasa Jamee (also known as Jamu or Bahasa Pulo) is now the language of everyday communication in Haloban and Asantola. It was observed that younger members of the Haloban population have a passive understanding of their language. This contrasts with Sibigo on Pulau Simeulue, where young children were still spontaneously counting in Sigulai whilst playing in the street with their friends as mentioned earlier.

In contrast with the status of Haloban, Nias spoken in Ujung Sialit is much stronger. It is spoken by all members of the community for all informal and intimate purposes. Children only begin to learn Bahasa Indonesia when they commence school, and many older people have little or no knowledge of Indonesian. Frequent contact with the numerous speakers on Pulau Nias is no doubt a major contributing factor in maintaining the strength of Bahasa Nias in Pulau Banyak, as well as the isolation of these villages from centres of Jamee influence.

Everywhere we went in Pulau Simeulue, as well as Haloban, Bahasa Indonesia plays a very strong role in the mosque. This contrast with Ujung Sialit, where Nias plays a very strong role within the church.

Preliminary Understanding of the Sociolinguistics of Pulau Simeulue and Pulau Banyak

Clearly Bahasa Jamee (Jamu) is an expanding lingua franca throughout Pulau Banyak and Pulau Simeulue, whilst Bahasa Indonesia serves as the official language, the language of government, of the law courts, of education and of religion to a large extent. The domains occupied by the local languages (Sigulai, Devayan, Leukon, Haloban and Nias) seem to differ somewhat from region to region. It was evident from our questionnaire that some respondents would like to see their

languages used for a wider range of functions than is currently the case, though others insisted that Indonesian was the appropriate language for use in a wide range of formal contexts, religion etc.

Raised Awareness of Endangered Languages within Aceh

In casual conversation, a number of people spontaneously raised the endangered status of Bahasa Haloban and asked the researchers for advice as to what could be done. It was clear that our very presence engendered a raised awareness of the plight of these languages.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this survey have showed that Indonesian and Jamee have penetrated the Pulau Simeulue and Pulau Banyak societies. Sigulai, Leukon, and Nias can be predicted that they will stay much longer in the community. Even though the use of Devayan was not as strong as those Sigulai, Leukon, and Nias, it can be seen that the utility of the language was still found in the young generation. However, Haloban language was really in a red flag situation considering that the number of speakers who still use the language was very few and children do not acquire the language actively.

It can also be concluded that language vitality and language loyalty does not necessarily correlate well with language size or remoteness. On Pulau Simeulue there does seem to be a strong correlation between remoteness and language vitality (and Nias on Ujung Sialit and Suka Makmur also confirms this), but Haloban does not. Haloban is rather remote, but language shift is most pronounced there.

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