

Argument for a More Sustainable Model of Indigenous Language Revitalization in Sabah, Malaysia

¹Jeannet Stephen, ²Christina Andin

³Nor Arifah Mohd Nor, ⁴Patricia Lajumin, ⁵Rita Lasimbang, ⁶Reany Koton, ⁷Joemin Maratin

^{1,2,6}Borneo Institute for Indigenous Studies (BorIIS), Universiti Malaysia Sabah

^{3,4}Centre for the Promotion of Knowledge & Language, Universiti Malaysia Sabah

⁵Kadazandusun Language Foundation

⁷SIL Malaysia

Corresponding author:

Christina Andin

christina@ums.edu.my

ABSTRACT

In this paper, the authors argue for the urgent need to document the practice of the use of indigenous languages in Sabah amongst the state's younger generation of indigenous communities and the need to examine the challenges in continuing that practice and thereafter to propose a solution to these challenges. The authors propose that the documentation and empirical information be used as material for indigenous language champions – including researchers and heritage language teachers - to determine the best strategy moving forward to sustain and promote intergenerational transmission of the language. A mixed-method research methodology involving quantitative and qualitative methods as well as community-based research methods is proposed for the production of a sustainable language revitalization model. The model proposed adopts the procedures outlined by the Sustainable Use Model (SUM) for indigenous language revitalization (Lewis & Simon, 2015). The authors suggests running this language revitalization process with the Kimaragang language in the north zone of Sabah, Malaysia as a pilot which if successful will be the base of the indigenous language revitalization model that can be adopted by other indigenous language speaker communities.

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous language sustainability is one of the interests of SDG 2030 which led the United Nations to launch the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022-2032) due to the rapid extinction of indigenous languages around the world. Experts estimate that roughly 42% of the world's languages are threatened, with fewer than 1000 speakers. This alarming situation has prompted for the United Nations to allocate special attention to indigenous languages through the International Year of Indigenous Languages in 2019 and now followed by the International Decade of Indigenous Languages 2022 – 2032¹ as a show of solid support to the efforts of indigenous communities to preserve their languages. There

¹ United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization. (n.d.) Los Pinos Declaration-Making a Decade of Action for Indigenous Languages. 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages. https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/los_pinos_declaration_170720_en.pdf

are currently about 7,139 languages available in the world (Eberhard, Simons & Fennig, 2021) and most of them are now in danger of extinction. Maintenance and promotion of indigenous languages is included in SDG4² (Inclusive and quality education, and lifelong learning) because the maintenance of indigenous languages ensure the well-being and identity of indigenous communities. Sustainability of indigenous languages is important not only to ensure the continuity of the culture, customs and history of the community, but is also important to address the loss of biodiversity and the problem of climate change (Reo et al., 2019).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Apart from the importance of the survival of indigenous identity and culture, the importance of sustaining the indigenous language is the relevance of the language and early childhood education (Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education/MTB-MLE). According to Heugh (2021), the MTE (mother tongue education) study in the African continent from 1930 – 2021 confirmed among others "... the longer the use of MTE medium, the higher student achievement; 4 years increases opportunities but not enough to sustain lifelong literacy; 6 years increases opportunities to sustain literacy and to reach secondary school; 8 years offers best chances to reach end of secondary successfully". Education based on the learner's mother tongue provides a positive schooling opportunities for the Indigenous children i.e. they can better understand the basic concepts in their study. Eduardo & Gabriel (2021) quotes Dupere (2016) in which Dupere stated that education is one of the five main challenges to the children of the world's Indigenous People which is "the devaluing of Indigenous teachings and low graduation, and enrollment rates". Ethnologue data stated the highest percentage of Indigenous languages was found in the Asian continent (32%), followed by Africa (30%), Pacific (18.5%), American (15%), and Europe (4%). According to Schaeffer (2018), for countries in Asia, Malaysia leads in the percentage of languages in trouble or dying (81% of the 136 languages). Malaysia topped China (53% of the 298 languages), India (15% of the 448 languages), and Indonesia (49% of the 707 languages) in the percentage of languages threatened. Schaeffer added that 112 (82%) of the total languages in Malaysia are indigenous languages.

The study by BorIIS-UMS found that intergenerational language transmission did not actively occur and is not going as well as the elders would like. This findings was the result of the Focus Group Discussion in the districts visited by the research group (e.g. in Tambunan, Keningau, Ranau, Papar, Kota Marudu, and Tamparuli). Interestingly, all of the respondents expressed their desire and hope that the younger generation would be able to learn their native languages. They were aware of the importance of their native language even though the language was not formally taught in the national education system. An example of this keen awareness was the efforts by the Kimaragang community to sustain and promote their language which resulted in the setting up of two heritage language community pre-school. However, due to financial constraints as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is now only one active nursery (communication with Joemin Maratin, 25 Nov 2021).

² Eberhard, David M., Gary F. Simons, and Charles D. Fennig (eds.). 2021. *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*. Twenty-fourth edition. Dallas, Texas: SIL International. Online version: <http://www.ethnologue.com>.

The increased lack of intergenerational transmission of indigenous language amongst the Orang Asal (indigenous) communities in Sabah is a major factor in the extinction of the native language. A recent study by BorIIS-UMS (in press) found that this occur not only amongst the Kadazans and Dusuns speakers but also amongst the Kimaragang speakers in the Pitas and Kota Marudu districts. Studies on the Kimaragang language have so far focused on descriptive linguistics such as its morphology, orthography, and phonology as well as studies on communities more on cultures such as ethnic calendar, history, customs and culture. Even though there are heritage language pre-schools that teach the Kimaragang language, an online mini-dictionary, and an orthographic guide, according to Ethnologue, the literacy rate of in Kimaragang language is only 5%. The findings of the BorIIS-UMS study tallies with the Ethnologue data which categorized that the Kimaragang language in the Red category (EGIDS 61-6b, Threatened) where the use and learning of the language is no longer the norm among the younger generation. Being at the red and endangered level is very worrying for the Kimaragang language, as well as the Indigenous languages in Sabah, as the extinction of a language will result in an irreversible loss of unique culture, especially if the implementation of the culture requires aspects of the use of language (e.g. the mantras and chants of the bobohizans), and the loss of knowledge of the Indigenous peoples of the community which in the long run will lead to the loss of one's ethnic identity and cultural identity. Individual. On the other hand, language preservation brings a variety of positive things to communities experiencing the threat of language extinction. Language preservation is not entirely because of language, "... it is important to keep in mind that revitalization is not just about language: it is a social movement and brings benefits to society as well as to individuals" (Olko & Sallabank, 2021: 9) but as Prof. Sallabank said, it benefits the speaker community.

The importance of language in Indigenous life is emphasized in UNDRIP or the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in Article 13 where indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and pass on to the next generation the history, language, oral traditions, philosophy, writing and literary system, and to name and maintain their own name for the community, place and private person. Meanwhile, Article 14 states that the Indigenous have the right to shape and control the education system and institutions that provide education in their own language, in teaching and learning methods that are compatible with their culture. In accordance with both Articles 13 and 14, the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022-2032), in line with resolutions A / 74/396 2019 (paragraphs 24-25) of the General Assembly of the United Nations, have the objectives among them to:

...draw attention to the critical loss of indigenous languages and the urgent need to preserve, revitalize and promote indigenous languages; and take urgent steps at the national and international levels....

which means there is an urgent need to conserve, empower and promote the Indigenous language and there is an urgent need for urgent measures to be implemented nationally and internationally.

The authors propose for this research to be conducted amongst the Kimaragang community as a pilot. This is because many studies have been done on the language and yet today there is still lack of intergenerational transmission of the language within the homes of the Kimaragang communities. Studies have been done on the grammatical system, the register of words, orthography, the dialectology of the Kimaragang language (Kroeger, 1985; Kroeger, 1987; Kroeger, 1988a; 1988b; 1988c; 1988d; 1988e; Kroeger, 1990a, 1990b; Kroeger, 1992; Kroeger, 1993; Kroeger 1996; Kroeger, 2004; Kroeger, 2010; and Levinsohn, 1991). In addition, the Kimaragang language also has a photo dictionary (Johansson, 1992) and an online or Webonary dictionary in the Kota Marudu dialect (SIL International, 2020). There is also folklore writing (Anding, 1996; Ladunan, 1996) and about the customs and ethnic culture of Kimaragang (Bitis Ampongou, 1998; Ismail Abbas, 1989; Pangayan, Shafi & Low., 2018). Efforts to preserve Kimaragang's ethnic language have been constrained even though the community already has Heritage Language Nursery, online mini-dictionary, and orthographic guide. According to Ethnologue, the Kimaragang ethnic literacy rate in their language is only 5%. A sustainable and strategic research on the reasons for the lack of intergenerational transmission will help to channel accurate information to the speaker community and help the community see whether their language is indeed at threatened levels, or is gradually recovering, or stable, or so on. The data, which could provide a challenge to the practice of the use and extinction of the Indigenous language, could help the Indigenous community to organize conservation strategies and make appropriate plans for their language conditions.

METHODOLOGY

A mixed study method involving the integration of both quantitative and qualitative data in the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) is proposed. According to both authors, it is not enough to simply analyze qualitative and quantitative data. Further analysis combines data from both methods for researchers to be able to both databases for additional insights into research problems and questions. Rouvier (2017) stated that there are various study designs that are commonly used in language conservation studies to explore issues separately or jointly. He stated that "A variety of research designs, including qualitative, quantitative, natural observational, and mixed methods approaches to language study have potential to further our understanding of language learning in LR contexts" (p.18). The LR in question is 'language revitalization' or language conservation.

Researchers suggest for the data collection methods to include in-depth interviews, Focus-Group-Discussion, and questionnaire methods. The characteristics of the respondents for the questionnaire were the ethnic Kimaragang youth aged 15 – 30 years old (the 'youth' definition as in the Malaysian Youth Policy, 2015) who have diverse educational, employment, and marital backgrounds. The youth data can be obtained from the Department of Statistics Malaysia's website. However, an initial check found that the breakdown of youth into ethnic groups is only to Bumiputera, other Bumiputeras, Chinese, Indians, Kadazan Dusun, Bajau, Murut, Malay, Melanau and others. The breakdown into ethnicity in Sabah is not available (but researchers will follow up with the Department of Statistics Malaysia Sabah office) and thus the probability sampling technique based on population and sampling

tables introduced by Krejcie and Morgan (1970) will take into account the ethnicity labelled 'Kadazan Dusun' for both male and female. Thus, after combined the number of youths labeled Kadazan Dusun in the three districts of the survey location ($n = 19,000$), the number proposed to be the respondents of the questionnaire is 377.

For the in-depth interview data and the Focus-Group-Discussions, purposive sampling/sampling intended to get 3 interview respondents and 4 – 5 FGD respondents in each field work district is proposed. As for the questionnaire, the Language Endangerment Index (LEI) is proposed to identify the practices and challenges in using the Kimaragang language.

The LEI is selected for use in this study because “The newest scale for assessing language vitality, the Language Endangerment Index (LEI) was developed for the Endangered Languages Catalogue (ELCat), represented online by the Endangered Languages Projects (Lee & Van Way 2014). LEI is unique from other assessment scales because it weighs the Intergenerational Transmission score twice as much as the other factors. This follows Fishman’s (1991) thesis that intergenerational transmission is not just a factor of language shift but the primary factor—absolute number of speakers, speaker number trends, and domain usage are not necessarily defining elements to language shift, but they are indicators.” (Gao, 2015: 184).

Intergenerational transmission, or the inheritance of language to the next generation, was found to be one of the factors in the extinction of the language of indigenous minorities or ethnics around the world. Menurut Lee & Way (2016), “the importance of intergenerational transmission is irrefutable, for it is certain that a language ultimately faces extinction if younger generations have no knowledge of it. ELCat identifies intergenerational transmission as the most critical factor in assessing level of endangerment.” The LEI gives importance to examining the factors that led to the extinction of a language in determining the powerful status of the language (Lee & Way, 2016). Compared to other scales of language-enabled measurement, the philosophy of the Language Extinction Index is in line with researchers’ purpose of understanding the story and not just going headlong to propose a magical solution to the communities. This view is in line with Lee & Way in that “without understanding and investigating fundamental common factors responsible for language endangerment, very little progress will be made in assessing language vitality and, consequently, less can be done to help communities preserve their languages. ELCat strikes a balance between these different perspectives.” (ibid: 279).

In addition, apart from the sensitivity of the Language Extinction Index (LEI) to take into account and examine the factors of extinction, the index is open, and is an instrument that can be used by researchers and community:

“...a quantitative system that can be used to assess language endangerment, and that can be understood and implemented easily by other researchers and community members. ... All descriptions are written in clear and straightforward terms, so that these scales can be used by anyone: community members, linguists, or the general public.” (ibid: 278). Basically, the open/open access nature of the Language Extinction Index gives researchers the comfort and

confidence to use the questionnaire instruments without worrying about copyright issues. Next, once the survival data through the Language Extinction Index is obtained, the community will be guided in a community-based workshop project to adopt sustainable Use Model to start the process of preservation of their language. Sustainable Use Model uses scale for the speaker community to establish their language in terms of Function, Language Acquisition, Language Usage Motivation, Environment, and Functional Differentiation Degrees (Lewis & Simon, 2015).

Meanwhile, for the sustainable use model (SUM) community-based workshops, purposive sampling is also used to select community members related to language conservation aspects (e.g. parents, community leaders, heritage language teachers, representatives of ethnic/cultural associations, etc. necessary). The handbook 'Guide for Planning the Future of Our Language' (SIL International, 2016) recommends that the participants of the Sustainable Use Model workshop are not too crowded, "Try to keep the group to a reasonable size (we recommend 12-15 people). If it gets too big, not everyone's ideas get heard. It is better to have several meetings in smaller groups than one big meeting." (p. 9). The questions (FAMED) that will be discussed with the community at the SUM workshop are as follows:

1. Does the indigenous language have usefulness or function at these four levels:
- literacy, oral, identity, and history? (Function)
2. Does the language have the infrastructure for students to obtain the fluency required? (Acquisition)
3. Is the community motivated to use the language for its functions?
(Motivation)
4. Is the external environment (policy, attitude) negative to the use of language to the functions? (Environment)
5. Does societal norms keep the functions assigned to the indigenous language distinct from the functions assigned to other languages? (Distinct niche)

ONCLUSION

The empirical data on the practices of and challenges to the use of indigenous language amongst the indigenous youth will be useful to produce a sustainable model of indigenous language revitalization. The authors argue that indigenous communities do not have the financial capacity to carry out their own language preservation projects and they hope for research centers or education institutions – both public and private - to assist them.

Over the years, language preservation projects, including the teaching of the Indigenous language in heritage language community pre-schools are funded by external bodies and private organization. That may be good and commendable as private industries also have their responsibilities for community outreach and social services. Nonetheless, a

complete dependence on donations and kindhearted gestures is not a consistent and stable strategy for sustaining the indigenous languages. Already during the COVID-19 pandemic, some community pre-schools have to be closed due to financial constraints. What the researchers argue and posit in this paper is the sustainable model that is both strategic and long-term which involves the speaker community – hands on – as well as the relevant agencies within the public sector. Adopting the sustainable use model will avoid our indigenous communities from depending on foreign donations and return the responsibility of maintaining and conserving the Indigenous language to the speaker community itself and to the state and country.

REFERENCES

1. Anding, Lusiau. (1996). *I tusing om i tikus*. Unpublished MS.
2. Ampongou, B. (1998a). *Momorini' dalam masyarakat Kimaragang*. Buuk wulan 3M boros Kadazandusun.
3. Ampongou, B. (1998b). ed. by Raymond B. Tombung and Lesaya Sorudim, 51. Kota Kinabalu: Department of Sabah Museum and State Archives.
4. Boutin, Michael E. and Inka Pekkanen, eds. (1993). *Phonological descriptions of Sabah languages*. (Sabah Museum Monograph, vol. 4). Kota Kinabalu: Sabah State Museum.
5. Campbell, Lyle; Nala Huiying Lee; Eve Okura; Sean Simpson; Kaori Ueki; & John Van Way (2013). *New knowledge: Findings from the Catalogue of Endangered Languages (ELCat)*. Paper presented at the 3rd International Conference on Language Documentation and Conservation. February 28–March 3, 2013, University of Hawai'i at Manoa.
7. Clayre, B. M. (1996). The changing face of focus in the languages of Borneo. *Papers in Austronesian linguistics*, No. 3, ed. by Hein Steinhauer, 51–88 (Pacific Linguistics, Series A, No. 84). Canberra: Australian National University.
8. Clayre, B.M. (1987). *Hukum-hukum adat istiadat suku-suku kaum Daerah Kota Marudu [Customary laws of the people of the Kota Marudu District]* Kudat: Syarikat Perusahaan Percetakan TEP.
9. Dwyer, Arienne M. (2011). Tools and techniques for endangered-language assessment and revitalization: Vitality and viability of minority languages. *Proceedings of the Trace Foundation Lecture Series*, October 23–24, 2009, New York. Online: https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/dspace/bitstream/1808/7109/1/Dwyer2011_AssessRevitalize.pdf.
10. Dupere, K. (2016). 5 educational hurdles Indigenous children face around the world. <http://mashable.com/2016/08/08/indigenous-education-inequality/#jywl2iix3mqb>
11. Eduardo, J. P., & Gabriel, A. G. (2021). *Indigenous Peoples and the Right to Education: The Dumagat Experience in the Provinces of Nueva Ecija and Aurora, in the Philippines*. *SAGE Open*, 11(2), 215824402110094. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440211009491>
12. Ismail Abbas. (1989). *Tarian-tarian ritual Sabah: Fungsi dan masa depannya*.
13. Ismail Abbas and Shaong, Charles. (1984). *Tarian-tarian tradisional Sabah*. Kota Kinabalu: Kementerian Kebudayaan, Belia dan Sukan Negeri Sabah.

14. Johansson, Jim. (1992). Kimaragang dictionary word list. Unpublished MS.
15. Johansson, Jim. (1993). Kamus kigambar: Kamus bergambar [Picture dictionary].
16. Kota Kinabalu: Department of Sabah Museum and State Archives.
17. King, Julie K. (1979). Dialect comparison and bilingualism: The Kudat Division. Sabah Museum Annals 1:23–46. Kota Kinabalu: Sabah State Museum.
18. Kroeger, Paul R. (1985). Linguistic relations among the Dusunic groups in the Kota Marudu District. BRB 17(1):31–46.
19. Kroeger, Paul R. (1987). On definiteness in Kimaragang: A rule and its exception. Unpublished MS.
20. Kroeger, Paul R. (1988a). Case marking in Kimaragang causative constructions.
21. Papers in Western Austronesian linguistics, No. 3, ed. Hein Steinhauer, 241–276 (Pacific Linguistics, Series A, No. 78). Canberra: Australian National University.
22. Kroeger, Paul R. (1988b). The elsewhere condition in Kimaragang focus marking. Unpublished MS.
23. Kroeger, Paul. (1988c). Panambarasan dot tolu baasa: Buku rangkai-rangkai kata tiga bahasa [A trilingual phrase book]. Kota Kinabalu: Persatuan Dusun Sabah Bersatu.
24. Kroeger, Paul. (1988d). A variable rule analysis of some factors affecting the articulation of intervocalic glottal stop in Kimaragang. Unpublished MS.
25. Kroeger, Paul. (1988e). Verbal focus in Kimaragang. Papers in Western Austronesian
26. linguistics, No. 3, ed. Hein Steinhauer, 217–240 (Pacific Linguistics, Series A, No. 78). Canberra: Australian National University.
27. Kroeger, Paul. (1990a). Asu vs. Tasu: On the origins of the Dusunic moveable T-.
28. Language and oral traditions in Borneo, ed. by James T. Collins, 93–114. Selected papers from the First Extraordinary Conference, 4–9 August 1990, Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia.
29. (Borneo Research Council Proceedings Series, vol. 2). Williamsburg, VA: Borneo Research Council.
30. Kroeger, Paul. (1990b). Stative aspect and unaccusativity in Kimaragang Dusun. Oceanic Linguistics 29(2):110–131.
31. Kroeger, Paul. (1992). Vowel harmony systems in three Sabahan languages. Shifting patterns of language use in Borneo, ed. by Peter W. Martin, 279–296. Papers from the Second Biennial International Conference, 13–17 July 1992, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia (Borneo Research Council Proceedings Series, vol. 3). Williamsburg, VA: Borneo Research Council.
32. Kroeger, Paul. (1993). Kimaragang phonemics. Phonological descriptions of Sabah
33. languages, ed. by Michael E. Boutin and Inka Pekkanen, 31–45 (Sabah Museum Monograph, vol. 4). Kota Kinabalu: Sabah State Museum.
34. Kroeger, Paul. (1996). The morphology of affectedness in Kimaragang Dusun. Papers in Austronesian linguistics, No. 3, ed. by Hein Steinhauer, 33–50
35. Kroeger, P. (2005). Kimaragang. In Adelaar, K. A., & Himmelmann, N. (2005). The Austronesian languages of Asia and Madagascar. London: Routledge.
36. Ladunan, M.B. (1996). It Tasi-asi. Unpublished MS. SIL Language and Culture Archives.

37. Lee, N., & Van Way, J. (2016). Assessing levels of endangerment in the Catalogue of
38. Endangered Languages (ELCat) using the Language Endangerment Index (LEI).
Language in Society, 45(2), 271-292. doi:10.1017/S0047404515000962
39. Levinsohn, Stephen H. (1991). Introduction. Thematic continuity and development in
languages of Sabah, ed. by Stephen H. Levinsohn, 1–6 (Pacific Linguistics, Series C, No.
118). Canberra: Australian National University.
40. Pangayan, V.B., Shafii, A.S., & On, L.K. (2018). Meanings and Symbols in The
Decorative Motifs and Patterns of Sinudot and Lapoi of The Kimaragang's Costume.
REKA 2018.
41. Reo, N. J., Topkok, S. M., Kanayurak, N., Stanford, J. N., Peterson, D. A., & Whaley, L.
J. (2019). Environmental Change and Sustainability of Indigenous Languages in
Northern Alaska. Arctic, 72(3), 215–228. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26822408>
42. Shaeffer, S. F. (2020). Mother Tongue and Early Childhood Care and Education:
Synergies and Challenges. UNESCO Bangkok; UNESCO Bangkok. Asia and Pacific
Regional Bureau for Education
43. SIL International. (2020). Kimaragang Dictionary.
<https://www.webonary.org/kimaragang/en/overview/introduction/>
44. SIL International. (2015). A Guide for Planning the Future of Our Language.
<https://www.sil.org/guide-planning-future-our-language>
45. Yogesh Hole et al 2019 J. Phys.: Conf. Ser. 1362 012121