

Attitudes Towards Standard Indigenous Language: Findings From Focus-Group-Discussions With Kadazandusun Communities

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This study explored the attitudes of Indigenous language speakers towards the standard variety of Indigenous language that is taught in the local education system. The study categorizes the attitudes held amongst the Kadazandusun community comprising parents and community leaders from four districts in Sabah that are known to have a significant number of Kadazandusun population. Data in this article came from the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) sessions held during fieldwork in these four districts. The questions from the FGD stemmed from these two overarching research questions: (1) What is your view on the teaching of the standard Kadazandusun language in the school; and (2) Do you feel your own dialect/language should also be taught in the school? Responses from the communities can be categorized into these themes: (1) status and future of the standard, (2) aspirations for their dialect/language, and the more interesting part was (3) community's suggestions for making the standard more user-friendly. These themes are discussed in the context of the teaching of the standard Kadazandusun language. This study contributes to the understanding of the complexities involved in the process of indigenous language standardization. Without diminishing the concerns that have been voiced by the communities, given that the majority of the indigenous languages of Sabah are hovering around EGIDS 6b (threatened), the authors propose for communities to approach differences they see in the standard with a more positive angle and in unison aim towards the larger goal of creating new speakers of indigenous languages. In addition, the authors find it crucial that curriculum policy makers continue the inclusive decision-making in the preparation of curriculum and materials for the standard dialect while creating avenues for the other dialects to access teaching and learning resources.

Keywords: *standard language, Kadazandusun, language attitudes, language ideology, language planning*

INTRODUCTION

In the months of September and October 2018, newspapers in Sabah reported yet another difference of opinions on the issue of the standard indigenous language in school within the indigenous Kadazan and Dusun communities. In those months, news headlines such as 'Bundu Liwan not a pure mother tongue' (*Daily Express*, 30 Sept 2018), 'Proper

Kadazan should be taught in schools' (*The Borneo Post*, 4 Oct 2018), 'Dialek Bundu Liwan paling banyak penutur' [translation: 'Bundu Liwan dialect has the most speakers'] (*Daily Express*, 15 Oct 2018), 'Bunduliwan it is' (*Sabah News Today*, 24 Sept 2018), and 'Bundu-Liwan dialect official Kadazandusun in school' (*The Borneo Post*, 24 Sept 2018) appeared indicating the heated debate with advocates from both sides providing their views on what is *proper* and what should *be*.

This present study falls under the field of language standardization which encompass these keywords *standard language* (standard Indigenous language, in this present context), *language ideology*, *language planning*, and *language attitudes*. Readers can wholly benefit from McLelland (2020) who explained the development of the field of language standardization beginning from language ideologies, and in particular standard language ideology. McLelland identified three waves of language standardization studies beginning with the first wave with classic work from Haugen (1966) on language planning and the four-fold framework for language planning in standardizing a language: selection, codification, elaboration, and implementation. In this first wave of language standardization studies, ideological stances featured heavily in research that introduced us to studies in prescriptivism, language purism, and stigmatism. It is within these perspectives that the standard language ideology give its "assumptions about language correctness; belief in 'the one best variety'; and a demotion of all (non-standard) variety (Vogl 2012, 13)" (McLelland, 2020: 110). McLelland pointed out that the standard language ideology "simultaneously shapes and hides many of the actual practices of speakers, especially minorities and migrants' (Gal 2009, 14, cited by Vogl 2012, 1)" (ibid). The second wave of language standardization studies, according to McLelland, was when researchers paid attention to multilingualism within the "the monolingualist ideological paradigm" and "monolingual native speakers as the norm" standard (ibid). Keywords in this second wave include diagglossia, pluricentric standards, language contact, native speakers vs new speakers, and vernaculars. In this context, the process of transferring the standard language ideology to speakers of "regional and minority languages or dialects may reinforce speakers' sense that they do not speak their language 'properly'" (ibid: 112). Finally, the third wave of language standardization studies "seek to understand how language standardization ideologies and processes are discursively constructed and enacted in multilingual contexts" (ibid.: 117).

With that description, we now turn to our working definition of language attitudes in this present study. This study adopts Garrett (2005: 1251):

Social evaluations of language are rightly regarded as a central concern in sociolinguistics. Such evaluations can reveal the dynamic identificational and relational forces at work within sociolinguistic communities. *These include prejudice held against or in favour of regional or social varieties of language. And they include allegiances and affiliative feelings towards one's own or other groups' speech norms and stereotypes of speech styles.*

which is self-explanatory (italicised my own) in our attempt to understand the language attitudes of the speaker communities from the different dialects of Kadazan and Dusun towards the standard indigenous languages, Kadazandusun. Within this operational definition that “include prejudice held against or in favour of regional or social varieties of language”, we now begin to capture the crux of the attitudes towards the standard Kadazandusun based on the newspaper headlines: ‘Bundu Liwan **not** a **pure** mother tongue’, ‘**Proper** Kadazan **should** be taught in schools’, ‘Bundu Liwan dialect **has the most** speakers’, ‘Bunduliwan **it is**’, and ‘Bundu-Liwan dialect **official** Kadazandusun in school’. It is quite clear that there are segments of the community that do not accept the standard indigenous language – Kadazandusun. The less than embracing attitudes is a given if based on Garrett (2010: 7) who stated that “attitudes towards language, positive and negative, are often influenced by the process of standardisation in languages” and this is very much seen via the examples of the newspaper headlines.

Given the debate between the two sides, Dorian (1994) on language purism possibly explains the use of the words in bold. Assigning a language to be *pure* and *proper* depicts conservative attitudes toward change in the grammar or word choice available in the standard indigenous language that is promoted. In her study of the Tiwi language in Australia, Dorian states that language purism “purism can be seen to represent a form of conservatism, a harking back to the favored forms or styles of earlier times” (p. 480) and that “puristic attitudes may threaten the very success of the effort to promote a standard language” (p. 479).

Malaysian Borneo comprising the states of Sabah and Sarawak are blessed with the highest number of indigenous languages in Malaysia. According to official Sabah State Government’s data (Sabah State Government Official Website), Sabah has 33 ethnic groups with 50 languages and about 80 dialects such as Kadazan, Lotud, Dusun, Bajau, Murut, Rungus, and Bisaya. In explaining for the name or label given to the standard Indigenous language – Kadazandusun or Bahasa Kadazandusun (BKD) – it is important for readers to know of the history that comes with the name. Stephen (2000) detailed the development of the nomenclature behind the conjoined names of Kadazandusun (KD), and thereafter other labels following KD such as Kadazan Dusun Murut (KDM) and Kadazan Dusun Murut Rungus (KDMR). Prior to Stephen (2000), Reid (1997) had earlier explicated on the endangered identity of the Kadazans and Dusuns in Sabah. Much earlier in 1990, Lasimbang and Miller (1990) wrote that ethnic labels are important to the Kadazandusun community because of its role in representing “self-perception...inclusion and exclusion...and power and prestige” (p.1). Fast forward to 2017, the label is still rejected by many and a single Kadazandusun culture and identity is yet to emerge (Tangit, 2017: 190). It appears therefore that the issue of labels in the community is still present, and the authors would argue, sets the background for the language attitude towards Bahasa Kadazandusun (BKD), the standard indigenous language in school.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study is qualitative in nature and used in-depth interview techniques with stakeholders from the Kadazandusun communities identified as having an impact on the

direction of the Kadazan language and Dusun language (e.g., community leaders, NGOs, and parents). The present data and analysis is only part of a larger 2-year study and the responses here only apply to the locations described in the first eight fieldwork. The questions for the FGD were: (1) In your opinion, is the Kadazandusun language a new language? (2) Are the children in your family or community speakers of the indigenous language? (3) Are there any improvements that can help make BKD a better language course for the children learning the indigenous languages at school, and (4) What do you or the village administrative body do in order to help maintain your indigenous language? The FGDs were conducted in four (4) locations i.e. two heavily-populated Kadazandusun community were chosen in each of the two (2) districts. The invitation for the FGD were given earlier to the village head or the person in charge of village administration to invite community members to attend. Given that the authors did not impose a strict number of people must be at the FGD, the number of respondents fluctuated from between 5 – 10 people at each setting. Often times the respondents were males and respondents, especially women folks, did not stay long as they had other chores to do. The FGD session typically run for about 40 minutes to an hour. Table 1 below provides the details of the FGD:

| No. | District | Village | No. of FGD |
|--------------|----------|----------------------|------------|
| 1 | Tambunan | 1. Kg. P 2. Kg. T | 2 |
| 2 | Keningau | 1. Kg. K 2. Kg. L | 2 |
| Total | 2 | 4 | 4 |

Table 1: Location of Focus Group Discussion

RESULTS

Table 2 below provide the summary of extracted relevant responses from the community members obtained from the FGD exercise in the fieldwork locations. The summary is categorized based on the four questions described earlier and no identification of location is provided to avoid misunderstanding or finger-pointing:

| No. | FGD Questions | Responses from community |
|-----|---|--|
| 1. | In your opinion, is the Kadazandusun language a new language? | The process of learning the native language (the standard Bunduliwan dialect) becomes more complicated as children are not exposed to the use of their own dialects at home. When should they use their dialect and when to use the BKD dialect taught in school? The Kadazandusun language taught in school is not the same as the learners' dialect at home. Therefore, children are unable to practice the |

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| | | <p>Kadazandusun language learned in school in everyday speech.</p> <p>Parents worry about their children's mastery of their own dialect because even the BKD language in the textbooks is confusing (all villages).</p> <p>Parents were unable to assist children to do their BKD homework because parents too were not familiar – or have never heard –some of the vocabulary used in the textbook.</p> <p>According to them "it is better to have one language in the system than nothing at all". If given the choice, they chose the Dusun language to study in school.</p> |
| 2. | <p>Are the children in your family or community speakers of the indigenous language?</p> | <p>Due to those around the children (parents, other family members, friends) who speak in Malay or English, the percentage of youths 20 years old and below in the village who are still fluent in the Dusun language is less than 5%.</p> <p>A respondent who was also a teacher of the BKD subject expressed regret and used the word 'already broken' because in his estimation the youths in Tambunan and Keningau districts could not speak the Dusun language. He compared the situation to Ranau where in Bundu Tuhan about 85% of youths there can speak Dusun fluently.</p> <p>An informant said in her village there were only 5% of youth who speak Dusun and the rest are 'passive bilingual' (they could understand but could not speak fluently) to which he said this situation breaks her heart.</p> |
| 3. | <p>Are there any improvements that can help make BKD a better language course for the children learning the indigenous languages at school?</p> | <p>One mother suggested being given synonyms from various dialects to a vocabulary in the textbook. For example, the synonym of '<i>gonob</i>' in the Liwan dialect and '<i>tapi</i>' in the Tangaa dialect refers to the noun '<i>kain sarung</i>'.</p> |

| | | |
|--|--|--|
| | | <p>Maintain the existing BKD label and vary the vocabulary based on the dialects among the Kadazan and Dusun communities. In addition, create a complete dictionary/glossary based on different dialects in the Kadazan and Dusun languages.</p> <p>Most respondents express their views on the role of "dictionary/glossary" to solve the problem of vocabulary that is not commonly heard. Informants voiced the need to put more synonyms of other dialects in the BKD textbook.</p> <p>One mother suggested that the teaching of BKD be not too 'rigid' or too 'formal' like the teaching of BM and BI teaching. According to her, the Dusun language is an oral language and not traditionally a written language. She found her son was interested in learning to speak BKD but was really uninterested when it comes to writing an essay in the language.</p> <p>Since the BKD subject in the school is not a core subject, unfortunately it is not on the top of the list when it comes to materials for teaching and learning. One respondent gave an example that there was only one dictionary for them to use in the whole school. In addition, the time allocated for the subject is also limited.</p> <p>An informant who was a BKD teacher said teaching BKD to Year 1 and 2 pupils was very challenging. He suggested the use of the Malay language as a medium for schools whose pupils have difficulty understanding BKD.</p> <p>An informant stated the importance of elders in the conservation and revitalization of the Dusun language in his village. This is because elders are native speakers who are living heritage themselves with Indigenous knowledge in <i>sundait</i> (puzzles), <i>hiis</i> (poetry), <i>tangon</i> (people's story) and other forms of oral literature of the</p> |
|--|--|--|

| | | |
|----|--|--|
| | | <p>Indigenous community.</p> <p>An informant suggested there be a clear continuity for BKD learners from primary school to secondary school. At present, there are some secondary schools nearby the location of the primary schools but do not offer BKD to students.</p> |
| 4. | <p>What do you or the village administrative body do in order to help maintain your indigenous language?</p> | <p>Most informants say they already have the awareness to care for their language. For example, they speak the Liwan dialect with their families in their homes. However, this is found only at the family level and there are not much initiative at the village level as a collective apart from seasonal language promotion activities during the Harvest Festival month.</p> |

Table 2: Summary of FGD extracts

DISCUSSION

Based on the responses given for each category, we found that the standard Indigenous language – based on the Bunduliwan dialect – is still considered as different from the learners’ home language. We also found that in the villages where the FGD was conducted, the mastery of Indigenous language amongst Dusun youths is low and at a worrying level. In addition, parents were concerned on the time and content aspects in teaching their children their own dialects while the children at the same time is also learning the standard dialect at school. We also found that the communities (the majority were also parents themselves) were invested in the teaching of the standard dialect at schools. The suggestions for improvements to BKD were an encouraging sign that the parents were aware of the limited opportunities to have an indigenous language within the national education system and therefore the language and those working to place the indigenous language within the system deserve support and constructive feedback. Finally, we found that the communities quite lack initiative to start indigenous language revitalization programs at their community level. The typical FGD responses to question no. 4 was they hold these activities (story-telling and other oral cultural activities involving the language) during the Harvest Festival celebration month (usually in May). The ensuing paragraphs will discuss these findings.

Both the districts chosen for the FGD are Kadazandusun-populated areas with Dusun Liwan and Murut being the major indigenous languages. The respondents’ information related to the very low percentage of youths able to speak in their ethnic language tallies with the 6b (threatened) that the Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS) categorized for Dusun Liwan, Kuijau, Murut Tagal, and Murut Tahol (Ethnologue, 2021). Category 6b is described as “the language is used for face-to-face communication within all

generations, but it is losing users”. Another way of describing category or stage 6b is the “intergenerational transmission is in the process of being broken, but the child-bearing generation still speaks the language so revitalization efforts might be able to restore transmission of the language in the home” (Quackenbush, 2016). This paper is not the only research that has found out such findings, other researchers have also found that indigenous language transmission at the homes of Indigenous Kadazans or Dusuns are not happening as much as needed to stem the ‘threatened’ stage to move to ‘dying’. In their study of 300 Kadazandusun undergraduates in local public universities in Malaysia, Dani & Kining (2016) found that the indigenous youths’ grasp of their indigenous languages are negatively affected by their frequent use of the Sabah Malay Dialect as their everyday language. The youths also prefer to use Malay when they communicate with their elders at home as they felt more comfortable to do so. It is however not informed how many of the 300 respondents were actually fluent in Kadazandusun. This is because, an overwhelming 87% of them reported to use Malay even while conversing with those from the same ethnic group.

Responses from the communities that find the standard language in the school different or unfamiliar is understandable what with the depth and breadth of various ethnic communities – with their own dialect – that can be found in Sabah. Differences in vocabulary, word choice, or pronunciation surely would be common with its many ethnic and sub-ethnic communities but overall still retain a similarity that could enable communication between these ethnic communities especially when these language families of Dusunic, Paitanic and Murutic are from the Austronesian stock (Ethnologue, 2021). Sansalu (2013) provides a glance of the depth of multilingual and multiethnic communities that is Sabah. Citing King, 1984; Raimond Tombung, 1991; and Sansalu, 2008, Sansalu provides the list of ethnic communities within the Dusunic language family: Bisaya, Bonggi, Bundu, Dusun, Dumpas, Garo, Gonsomon, Kadazan, Kimaragang, Liwan, Lintaga, Lotud, Luba, Manantaga, Mangkaak, Minokok, Nulu, Panansawa, Rumanu, Rungus, Sindapak, Sokid, Sonsogon, Sarayo, Tagahas, Tagalong, Tanggara/Tanggaah, Tatana, Tindakan, Tidong or Tindal, Tinagas, Tobilong, Tolonting dan Tuhawon. Further, the Paitanic language family comprise ethnic communities of Abai Sungai, Bagahak, Kawananan, Kolobuon, Lingkabau, Lobou, Makiang, Melapi, Paitan, Pingas, Sungai, Sukang, Sondayo, Tombonuo dan Talantang (in Dayu Sansalu, 2008) and for the Murutic language family, the ethnic communities Alumbis, Baukan, Gana, Kalabakan, Kwijau, Kolod, Lundayeh, Lun Bawang, Ngabai/Nabay, Okolor, Paluan, Selungai, Serudung, Sembangkung, Sumambu, Tagol/Tagal dan Timugon (ibid).

Nevertheless, despite these many ethnic and sub-ethnic communities, Sansalu concludes that even with the differences found, the speakers in these communities could still manage to understand one another fairly well (2014: 450). The authors therefore suggest that differences in the textbook not be blown out of proportion. Much like any other languages, learning an indigenous language take time and effort as well. The far more concerning issue is if the older and more fluent members of the communities could manage to understand the different dialect – give or take a few vocabulary and pronunciation errors – would that mean instead that the children are not using their home dialect as fluent speakers at home i.e. there is no intergenerational transmission of the dialect happening at the home, hence the standard

dialect at school is unfamiliar? This is a question worth investigating as it potentially brings the focus on the issue of the lack of intergenerational transmission of the indigenous language at home and the role of family and how could resources be projected towards helping to make intergenerational transmission happen at home.

How relevant is the above discussion to the issue of language attitudes in this study? It is very relevant in that the findings in the FGD and in Dani & Kining (2016) could be posited as the outcome of the distraction that is the language polemic where the Indigenous communities are not united in trying to find a solution to the very real problem. The real problem is that the indigenous languages are at a distressing stage i.e. threatened or in trouble. The authors argue that time spent on debates on highlighting what should be pure or proper could be better spent to support the revitalization work via initiatives that provide help to the policy makers in crafting a more robust language learning program. Or in another example, community leaders could rally the community to have a weekly language class for their dialect, or the village council could initiate collaborative programs such as *Elders at VIU* at the Vancouver Island University where the *Elders-in-Residence* program provide “Support and use of Indigenous knowledge and Aboriginal languages within VIU; Support for all learners by offering traditional knowledge and spiritual guidance” among others. It is telling that there was very limited variety in the responses towards the fourth question (What do you or the village administrative body do in order to help maintain your indigenous language?) apart from some activities during the once-a-year harvest festivities. This is a stark difference to the initiative by the Maori community in running the Te Kōhanga Reo, or Māori language nests, which displayed a coming-together to solve a problem approach. This can be seen in this description on the official New Zealand History website, “The essence of Te Kōhanga Reo was to bring the elders who were fluent speakers together with their mokopuna, the preschool generation, and the parents, following the Māori model of whānau development” (nzhistory.govt.nz). Te Kōhanga Reo started from a grassroot movement of community that wanted to save their language.

CONCLUSION

This paper sets out to provide a report of the responses obtained during the Focus Group Discussion held at Kadazandusun villages with community members. In our analysis, we found that it is possible that the language attitudes towards the standard dialect could stem from feelings that are in favor of one’s language variant. These include feelings of allegiance and affiliation towards one’s own speech norms and/or stereotypes of speech styles, vocabularies, or pronunciation. This study also found a positive aspect which was these feelings by some - that end up as newspapers headlines with conservative tones - the communities were aware that they still need the BKD in schools and should support it by giving suggestions for improvements. More importantly, this study found that the larger issue right now is the lack of transmission of the indigenous language at the home. It is highly possible that if intergenerational transmission of indigenous language is flourishing at the home, the slight differences in word choice, vocabulary, or pronunciation while learning the BKD at school will not deter students from getting As in this subject. In conclusion, for language revitalization efforts to be successful, the indigenous communities and policy

makers should work together towards the larger goal – in the case of the indigenous communities of Sabah – to create new speakers and change the 6b EGIDS category to a more positive category. The current efforts by the Ministry of Education in engaging with the indigenous language speaker communities (parents, community leaders, heritage language teachers, the youths, indigenous academics and researchers from local higher education institutions) to improve the curriculum and language teaching and learning are commendable but there is always room for improvement. Inclusion of indigenous communities in the decision-making process is part of the Sustainable Development Goals. It is in this SDG-context that the authors propose policy makers also assist the other indigenous dialects to access relevant teaching and learning resources so as to bring these languages out of the threatened category of language endangerment.

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