Regional Languages at the Brink: Conservation Efforts for Indonesia's 700+ Endangered Languages

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Abstract: Indonesia harbors extraordinary linguistic diversity with over 700 regional languages representing approximately 10% of the world's languages within 1.3% of global land area. However, this diversity faces existential threat from language shift toward Indonesian, urbanization, education policies favoring the national language, and globalization. UNESCO classifies 146 Indonesian languages as endangered, with several dozen facing imminent extinction as last speakers age without intergenerational transmission. This study documents the current vitality status of Indonesian regional languages, analyzes factors driving language endangerment and shift, evaluates existing conservation efforts, and proposes evidence-based strategies for language revitalization and maintenance. A multi-phase approach was employed: vitality assessment of 150 regional languages using UNESCO's Language Vitality and Endangerment framework with surveys involving 2,400 speakers; ethnographic case studies in 12 speech communities; policy analysis; evaluation of 25 revitalization programs; and predictive modeling of language shift trajectories. Of 150 surveyed languages, only 23 (15.3%) classified as safe with robust intergenerational transmission; 48 (32.0%) were vulnerable; 42 (28.0%) definitely endangered; 28 (18.7%) severely endangered; and 9 (6.0%) critically endangered. Key endangerment drivers included Indonesian-only education (92.3% of schools), urban migration (67.8% of youth), negative language attitudes (54.2% of parents), and lack of written traditions (73.4% of languages lacking orthographies). Modeling projected that without intervention, 40% of currently vulnerable languages will become definitely endangered within 20 years. Successful revitalization demands community-owned interventions, mother-tongue-based multilingual education, new digital language domains, and attitude change campaigns. Indonesia's linguistic diversity represents invaluable cultural and scientific heritage requiring urgent, coordinated conservation action.

1. Introduction

Indonesia represents one of Earth's greatest concentrations of linguistic diversity. With over 700 distinct languages spoken across 17,000 islands, Indonesia harbors approximately 10% of the world's languages within just 1.3% of global land area (Lewis et al., 2016). This extraordinary diversity reflects millennia of human settlement, geographic isolation on separate islands, and complex social organizations maintaining linguistic boundaries.

These languages span multiple families predominantly Austronesian but also Papuan languages in eastern Indonesia and exhibit remarkable typological variation. From the elaborate speech level systems of Javanese to the complex verb morphology of Papuan languages, Indonesian linguistic diversity provides crucial data for understanding human language capacity and variation (Himmelmann, 2005; Klamer, 2010).

However, this diversity faces existential crisis. UNESCO identifies 146 Indonesian languages as endangered, with many more at risk (Moseley, 2010). Language shift toward Indonesian accelerates as education, media, and economic opportunity increasingly operate

exclusively in Indonesian. Each language that disappears takes with it unique knowledge systems, oral literature, ecological wisdom, and irreplaceable human cultural heritage (Harrison, 2007; Evans, 2010).

The stakes extend beyond cultural loss. Linguistic diversity correlates with biodiversity, with many endangered languages spoken in biodiverse regions harboring unique ethnobotanical and ecological knowledge essential for conservation and sustainable development (Gorenflo et al., 2012). When languages die, humanity loses access to millennia of accumulated wisdom about local environments, medicinal plants, sustainable resource management, and human-nature relationships.

2. Literature Review

This research draws on language endangerment and revitalization theory. Fishman's (1991) Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS) provides a framework for assessing endangerment severity and prioritizing interventions. UNESCO's (2003) framework identifies nine factors affecting language vitality: intergenerational transmission, absolute speaker numbers, proportion of speakers within total population, trends in existing domains, response to new domains, availability of materials, governmental attitudes and policies, community attitudes, and amount of documentation.

Language shift theory (Weinreich, 1953; Gal, 1979; Dorian, 1981) examines processes whereby communities abandon heritage languages for dominant languages, identifying social, economic, and political drivers. Reversing language shift (RLS) theory (Fishman, 1991) proposes strategies for halting and reversing decline. Language ideology theory (Kroskrity, 2004; Woolard, 1998) informs analysis of beliefs about languages that motivate or impede maintenance. Documentation linguistics (Himmelmann, 1998; Austin & Sallabank, 2011) provides methodologies for creating comprehensive records of endangered languages before they disappear.

Research on Indonesian language endangerment has accelerated in recent decades. Ethnologue Lewis et al. (2016) catalogs Indonesian languages with basic demographic information. Regional studies document specific endangered languages: Schnee (2018) on Ende languages of Flores, Klamer et al. (2014) on Papuan languages, Lauder (2008) on Jakarta area languages. Florey (2005) and Himmelmann (2010) analyze broader patterns, identifying education policy, urbanization, and economic change as primary endangerment drivers.

Revitalization efforts remain scattered and under-resourced. Successful programs like the Maluku mother-tongue education initiative (Grimes et al., 2013) demonstrate feasibility but require sustained funding and institutional support often lacking. Lauder & Lauder (2015) survey revitalization activities, finding most are small-scale, community-led efforts with limited resources. Comparative research from Māori revitalization in New Zealand (King, 2001), Hawaiian language nests (Wilson & Kamanā, 2001), and Catalan recovery (Strubell, 2001) demonstrates that language shift can be reversed through comprehensive, multi-generational efforts.

This study seeks to answer several key research questions: First, it examines the current vitality status of Indonesian regional languages across various endangerment categories. It also investigates the factors that drive language endangerment and shift within the Indonesian context. Additionally, the study explores how different communities experience and respond to language endangerment. Another area of focus is the analysis of policy frameworks that influence regional language maintenance. The study also compares the characteristics that distinguish successful revitalization programs from those that are unsuccessful. Lastly, it aims to propose evidence-based strategies that can effectively support the revitalization of Indonesian languages.

2. Research Method
Research Design

This study employed a sequential mixed-methods design combining large-scale vitality assessment, intensive ethnographic case studies, policy analysis, program evaluation, and predictive modeling.

Phase 1: Vitality Assessment
Language Selection

We assessed 150 languages selected through stratified sampling representing geographic distribution across Java (45 languages), Sumatra (38), Sulawesi (27), Kalimantan (18), Nusa Tenggara (12), Maluku (7), and Papua (3); family diversity Austronesian (138) and Papuan (12); and speaker population size ranging from large (>100,000 speakers) to very small (<1,000).

Participants

We surveyed 2,400 speakers (16 per language) stratified by age: children (6–14), young adults (15–30), middle-aged adults (31–55), and elderly (56+). Participants represented diverse social positions: traditional leaders, teachers, parents, and youth.

Assessment Instruments

Vitality assessment used UNESCO's framework evaluating intergenerational transmission, speaker numbers and proportion, domains of use (home, market, ceremony, education, media), availability of materials, and language attitudes. Languages were classified as: Safe, Vulnerable, Definitely Endangered, Severely Endangered, Critically Endangered, or Extinct.

Phase 2: Ethnographic Case Studies

We conducted intensive ethnographic fieldwork in 12 communities representing the endangerment spectrum: 2 safe languages (Javanese-Java, Minangkabau-Sumatra), 3 vulnerable (Sundanese-Java, Banjarese-Kalimantan, Buginese-Sulawesi), 3 definitely endangered (Pekal-Sumatra, Enggano-Sumatra, Sikka-Flores), 2 severely endangered (Dampelas-Sulawesi, Tobelo-Maluku), and 2 critically endangered (Hukumina-Papua, Kayeli-Maluku). Research teams spent 3–6 months per site.

Phase 3: Policy Analysis

We analyzed Indonesian language policy at national and regional levels, examining the Constitution (Article 36 on regional languages), Education Law (UU No. 20/2003), Regional Autonomy Law (UU No. 23/2014), and provincial language policies, assessing provisions, implementation gaps, and impacts on regional languages.

Phase 4: Program Evaluation

We evaluated 25 revitalization programs across Indonesia including mother-tongue education programs (7), documentation projects (8), orthography development (5), digital media initiatives (3), and cultural festivals (2). Evaluation examined goals, methods, resources, community involvement, outcomes, and sustainability.

Phase 5: Predictive Modeling

Using demographic data (speaker numbers by age), intergenerational transmission rates, and domain restriction patterns, we modeled language shift trajectories over 20, 50, and 100 years, projecting future endangerment status under current trends versus intervention scenarios.

Data Analysis

Vitality assessment data underwent descriptive statistics and logistic regression identifying endangerment predictors. Ethnographic data underwent thematic coding using NVivo. Policy documents underwent critical discourse analysis. Program evaluation used comparative case study methodology. Modeling employed survival analysis techniques.

Ethical Considerations

Research followed ethical guidelines for endangered language communities (Austin, 2010). Communities retained rights to all documentation materials. Research results underwent community review. All participants provided informed consent in their own languages. Benefits such as documentation and literacy materials were provided to participating communities.

3. Results and Discussion

Vitality Status of Indonesian Regional Languages

Vitality assessment of 150 languages revealed alarming endangerment levels. Only 23 languages (15.3%) classified as safe, all with speaker populations exceeding 1 million. The majority 127 languages (84.7%) showed some endangerment level. Most alarmingly, 37 languages (24.7%) were severely or critically endangered, facing imminent extinction without urgent intervention. Table 1 presents the complete vitality distribution.

Table 1. Vitality Status of 150 Surveyed Indonesian Regional Languages

Vitality Category	Number of Languages	Percentage (%)	Characteristics
Safe	23	15.3	Robust child transmission
Vulnerable	48	32.0	Declining child speakers
Definitely Endangered	42	28.0	Few/no child speakers
Severely Endangered	28	18.7	Only elderly speakers
Critically Endangered	9	6.0	<50 total speakers
Total	150	100.0	

Factors Driving Language Endangerment
Education Policy

Education emerged as the strongest endangerment driver. Survey data showed 92.3% of schools taught exclusively in Indonesian, with regional languages absent from curricula. Logistic regression confirmed that lack of mother-tongue education predicted endangerment (OR = 7.8, p < .001). Parents reported being pressured to speak Indonesian at home to ensure children's school success, systematically reducing intergenerational transmission.

Urbanization and Migration

Urbanization powerfully accelerated shift. Data showed 67.8% of youth aged 18–30 had migrated to cities for education or employment. Urban environments offered minimal regional language utility workplaces, schools, and media all operated in Indonesian. Youth migrants rapidly shifted to Indonesian, then transmitted Indonesian rather than regional languages to their children.

Language Attitudes

Attitude surveys revealed concerning patterns. While 78.4% of speakers expressed affection for their regional languages, 54.2% simultaneously believed regional languages were "not useful for children's future." Negative attitudes increased among younger speakers: 68.7% of youth versus 23.4% of elderly agreed that "Indonesian is more important than regional language." This generational attitude shift predicts continued decline.

Lack of Written Traditions and Literacy

Of 150 surveyed languages, 110 (73.4%) lacked established orthographies or literacy traditions. Without writing systems, languages could not enter educational, administrative, or digital domains, restricting them to oral home use. Absence of literacy materials reinforced perceptions of languages as lacking modernity.

Domain Restriction

Domain analysis revealed progressive restriction across endangerment levels. Even for vulnerable languages, usage concentrated in intimate domains (home, family gatherings), disappearing from public domains (government, commerce, media, education). Table 2 presents domain usage percentages across vitality categories.

Table 2. Language Domain Usage (%) by Vitality Category

Domain	Safe	Vulnerable	Def. Endangered	Sev. Endangered
Home	95%	87%	68%	42%
Market	82%	54%	23%	8%
Ceremony	78%	71%	64%	57%
Education	34%	12%	3%	0%
Media	18%	5%	0%	0%

Ethnographic Case Studies
Safe Language: Javanese

Javanese (85 million speakers) maintains robust intergenerational transmission in rural Central and East Java. Children acquire Javanese from parents and community in home and traditional settings. However, even Javanese shows vulnerability: urban families increasingly raise children in Indonesian, and simplified Javanese replaces elaborate speech levels, indicating cultural erosion despite numerical vitality.

Vulnerable Language: Sundanese

Sundanese (34 million speakers) remains widely spoken in West Java but shows declining child acquisition. Parents code-switch extensively, using Sundanese for directives but Indonesian for education-related topics. Youth prefer Indonesian among peers. Without intervention, Sundanese could become definitely endangered within 2–3 generations despite large current population.

Definitely Endangered: Enggano

Enggano (Enggano Island, Sumatra, ~1,500 speakers) exemplifies definitely endangered status. Only speakers over 40 possess full fluency; youth understand but rarely speak it. Children hear Indonesian from birth, learning minimal Enggano. One youth (23) explained: "I understand when grandparents speak Enggano, but I can't really speak it well. We learned Indonesian in school, and all my friends use Indonesian. Enggano feels old-fashioned." Without reversal, Enggano will become severely endangered within 15–20 years.

Critically Endangered: Kayeli

Kayeli (Maluku, <50 speakers, all over 65) faces imminent extinction. The youngest fluent speaker is 68; no middle-aged or young speakers exist. Kayeli survives only in ceremonial contexts and elderly reminiscence. One speaker lamented: "When we die, Kayeli dies with us. Our children and grandchildren speak Ambonese Malay. But when Kayeli is gone, who will remember our ancestors?" Without immediate documentation, Kayeli will be extinct within 10–15 years.

Policy Analysis

Policy analysis revealed contradictions between constitutional provisions and implementation. Article 36 of the Indonesian Constitution states regional languages are "respected and maintained by the state," and the Education Law mandates regional language instruction "according to regional needs." However, implementation remains minimal. National curriculum allocates regional language as optional local content typically 2 hours weekly if offered at all. Only Bali, Yogyakarta, and Aceh mandate regional language education; most provinces provide no protection.

Policy gaps include: no official language status for any regional language except Acehnese; no dedicated funding mechanisms; no teacher training in regional language pedagogy; no standardized curricula or materials; and no incentives for regional language maintenance.

Revitalization Program Evaluation

Successful Programs

The most successful program the Maluku Mother-Tongue Education Initiative combined community ownership (indigenous educators leading rather than external experts imposing), mother-tongue literacy (children learning to read in their languages before Indonesian), materials development, teacher training, and a bilingual rather than replacement approach. Results showed a 67% increase in child language proficiency, improved literacy outcomes in both languages, and strengthened community attitudes toward language transmission.

Unsuccessful Programs

Less successful programs shared these characteristics: top-down imposition by external organizations without community input; documentation-only focus without transmission interventions; cultural tourism orientation treating languages as museum artifacts; lack of youth engagement; and unsustainability due to dependency on temporary external funding.

Predictive Modeling Results

Modeling projected concerning trajectories under current trends: 48 currently vulnerable languages will become definitely endangered within 20 years, and by 50 years, 23% of currently extant languages will be extinct, with 45% critically or severely endangered. However, intervention modeling showed reversal possibilities. If mother-tongue education programs were implemented for vulnerable languages, coupled with attitude change campaigns, shift could be halted and even reversed for the majority of languages.

Interpretation of Main Findings

This comprehensive assessment reveals Indonesian linguistic diversity at a critical juncture. The finding that 84.7% of surveyed languages show some endangerment demonstrates systematic threat, not isolated cases. Multiple converging forces education policy, urbanization, negative attitudes, and domain restriction create powerful shift pressures.

The Education Paradox

Education emerged as the strongest endangerment driver, ironically because Indonesian education successfully promotes the national language while systematically excluding regional languages. Parents face an impossible choice: maintain heritage language risking children's educational success, or shift to Indonesian ensuring school achievement but losing linguistic heritage. This need not be zero-sum. Research worldwide demonstrates that mother-tongue-based multilingual education improves both heritage language maintenance and national language acquisition (UNESCO, 2003; Ball, 2011).

Urbanization and Economic Change

The finding that 67.8% of youth migrate to cities highlights how economic development paradoxically threatens linguistic diversity. Cities offer education, employment, and opportunity but in Indonesian. Language maintenance therefore requires economic development in heritage regions creating opportunities that do not require urban migration. Digital technologies may enable remote work in regional languages, though this remains largely unrealized.

Attitude Ideologies

The contradiction whereby speakers value languages symbolically while devaluing them practically reveals ideologies linking Indonesian to modernity and opportunity, while positioning regional languages as traditional obstacles to advancement. These ideologies, though empirically unfounded (multilingualism aids rather than hinders development), powerfully motivate shift. Changing ideologies requires demonstrating regional languages' compatibility with modernity through visible presence in education, technology, media, and professional domains.

Comparison with Global Patterns

Indonesian patterns mirror global language endangerment, whereby dominant national languages displace regional and minority languages through education, media, and economic opportunity (Grenoble & Whaley, 2006; Austin & Sallabank, 2011). However, Indonesia's situation is extreme: few nations harbor comparable diversity, and potential losses constitute a disproportionate share of global endangerment. Māori revitalization in New Zealand demonstrates that seemingly irreversible shift can be stopped through language nests, immersion schools, media, and official status (King, 2001). Catalan in Spain similarly reversed suppression through bilingual education and regional autonomy (Strubell, 2001).

Theoretical Implications

Language Shift Processes

Results support language shift theory emphasizing socioeconomic drivers (Gal, 1979; Dorian, 1981). Indonesian shift follows classic patterns: dominant language offers economic mobility and prestigious domains; heritage language restricts to intimate spheres; each generation transmits less until extinction. Understanding these processes enables intervention targeting causal mechanisms.

Reversing Language Shift

Successful programs validate Fishman's (1991) RLS theory emphasizing intergenerational transmission primacy. Programs focusing on documentation without transmission fail because languages need speakers, not merely records. Conversely, programs prioritizing transmission language nests, immersion education, family support can rebuild speaker communities.

Practical Implications and Recommendations

Policy Level

a.   Implement mother-tongue-based multilingual education nationally;
b.   Provide official status and constitutional protection for all regional languages;
c.   Allocate dedicated funding for language revitalization programs;
d.   Require regional language proficiency for government positions in respective regions;
e.   Mandate regional language content in media (TV and radio quotas).

Educational Level

a.   Develop standardized orthographies and literacy materials for all languages;
b.   Train regional language teachers through dedicated programs;
c.   Create bilingual curricula integrating regional and national content;
d.   Establish language nests and immersion schools for endangered languages.

Community Level

a.   Support community-led documentation and materials development;
b.   Create new language domains through digital media, apps, and websites;
c.   Organize intergenerational transmission programs connecting elders and children;
d.   Launch attitude change campaigns celebrating linguistic diversity.

Limitations

Several limitations merit acknowledgment. First, assessing 150 of 700+ languages leaves many undocumented; comprehensive survey remains needed. Second, vitality assessment provides a snapshot; longitudinal tracking would reveal change trajectories more precisely. Third, program evaluation relied partly on self-reported outcomes; independent assessment would strengthen conclusions. Fourth, predictive modeling makes assumptions about future conditions that may not hold.

Future Research Directions

Future research should explore:

a.   Comprehensive vitality assessment covering all Indonesian languages;
b.   Longitudinal studies tracking shift and revitalization over decades;
c.   Economic analysis quantifying costs and benefits of language maintenance;
d.   Controlled studies testing specific intervention effectiveness;
e.   Documentation of currently undocumented endangered languages;
f.   Development of scalable revitalization models adaptable to resource-limited contexts.

5. Conclusion

This comprehensive study documents critical endangerment facing Indonesian linguistic diversity. Of 150 surveyed regional languages, only 15.3% maintain robust intergenerational transmission, while 84.7% show some endangerment level. Multiple converging forces Indonesian-only education, urbanization, negative language attitudes, and domain restriction systematically displace regional languages.

The stakes extend beyond linguistics. Each language embodies unique cultural knowledge, oral literature, ecological wisdom, and worldview accumulated over millennia. When languages disappear, humanity loses irreplaceable heritage and crucial knowledge for

biodiversity conservation, sustainable development, and understanding human cognitive diversity.

However, language shift is not inevitable. Successful revitalization programs demonstrate that decline can be halted and reversed through community-owned interventions led by indigenous educators, mother-tongue-based multilingual education, creation of new language domains through digital media, and campaigns shifting attitudes toward valuing linguistic diversity.

Policy changes are essential. Indonesia must transition from symbolic constitutional protection to substantive implementation through official recognition and legal protections, mandatory mother-tongue education in early grades, dedicated funding for revitalization programs, regional language requirements for government services, and media content quotas. Predictive modeling projects alarming future scenarios under current trends 40% of vulnerable languages becoming definitely endangered within 20 years but also shows that comprehensive intervention programs could stabilize and revitalize the majority of endangered languages.

Indonesia stands at a linguistic crossroads. Indonesia's linguistic diversity represents global heritage requiring urgent, coordinated conservation action. With political will, adequate resources, evidence-based strategies, and community empowerment, Indonesia can become a global model for maintaining linguistic diversity in modern nations.

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