

## LANGUAGE ENDANGERMENT IN INDONESIA

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### ABSTRACT

In Indonesia, language endangerment is primarily related to language shift. Data show that the most important symptoms of language shift and of the vitality of a language are number and quality of the domains in which it is used and transmitted. The second crucial symptom of language endangerment is the loss of transmission from one generation to the next. This is what is now being seen in many communities across Indonesia where children are no longer acquiring their parents' language. There are two general endangerment scenarios that have occurred in Indonesia. The first is the immigration scenario in which members of another speech community from outside the area move in and due to economic and political advantage essentially 'take over' a local speech community, imposing their own language. The second is the emigration scenario in which members of a local speech community temporarily migrate outside of the community for education or work, and on returning bring the dominant language from outside into the community. Finally, we can now find in many parts of Indonesia that social changes including economic, educational and political contexts, promote a shift from local to dominant language.

**Keywords:** language endangerment, language shift, immigration and emigration scenarios, dominant language.

### 1. Language Endangerment

There are roughly 6,000 languages in the world today. About 400 of those languages are found in Europe and the Middle East, 1000 indigenous languages are found in the Americas, there are some 2000 languages in Africa, and as many as 3,500 or half the world's languages are found in the Asia-Pacific region (Lewis, Simons and Fenning 2014). Of course some of the languages are much "larger", that is they have many more speakers, than others. Around 350 languages (about 5% of the total) have more than a million speakers, and together these account for 90% of the world's population. There is an inverse relationship between the number of speakers a language has and the number of languages of that size. That is, only 75 languages account for 80% of the world population. If we narrow it down further, the largest eight languages of the

world - Mandarin, Spanish, English, Hindi, Portuguese, Bengali, Russian, and Arabic – which make up just a little more than 0.1% of all languages – are the languages spoken by 40% of the world's people. Conversely, the vast majority of languages of the world are spoken by very small groups of people who are often marginalised in the larger society. This inverse relationship is illustrated by the diagram in Figure 1 from Romaine (2007: 118).

Over the past two decades there has been growing concern that the number of living, functional languages in the world has begun to decrease dramatically (Crystal 2000, Fishman 2001). Languages become endangered when they are used in fewer and fewer situations, for example because a dominant language like English, Mandarin, Spanish or Indonesian is used more often and in a broader range of contexts. This is

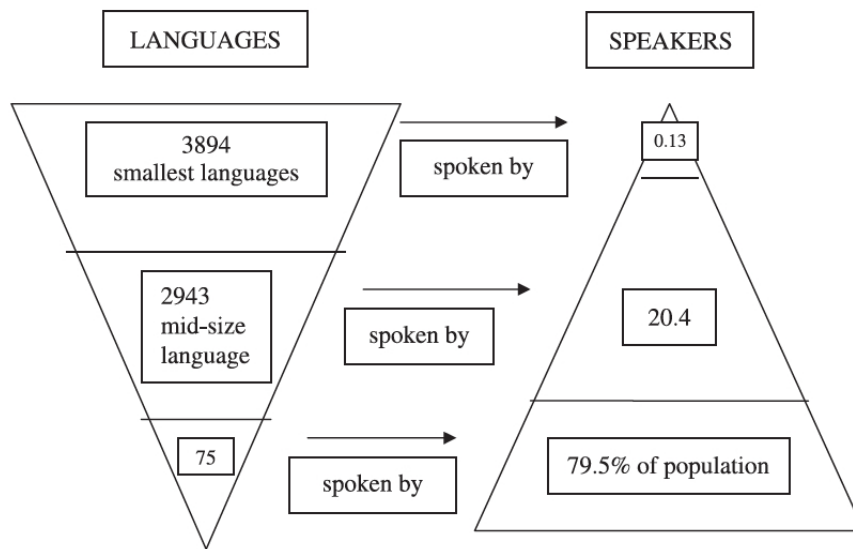


Fig. 1. Inverse relation between number of languages and size of population.

often combined with a process of reduced transmission of the language from one generation to the next until younger people can no longer speak the language of their ancestors. It is estimated that anywhere between 25-50% of languages are endangered or are on the brink of being lost. Only about 5-10% of the world's languages are currently truly safe, while the remaining languages, about half, are weakening, that is they are beginning to show signs of being endangered. Indeed, it is possible that 150 years there may be only about 300 languages still spoken in the world (Krauss 1992).

While we know that different languages have always been developing and dying out over generations, what is different about the current situation is an exponential increase in the number of languages dying compared with the past. This rate far exceeds the rate with which new languages develop and thus the total number of languages is quickly shrinking.

With the loss of indigenous languages there is concomitant loss of cultural diversity. This includes the loss of indigenous knowledge – that is, much of the reservoir of knowledge that

a certain society has about their environment and technological responses to living in that environment is lost when the language used to identify, catalogue and discuss it is lost (Maffi 2001, Zent 2001). Languages “are vital parts of complex local ecologies that must be supported if global biodiversity, as well as human cultures and even humanity in general, are to be sustained” (Romain 2007: 130). Loss of language can also lead to a loss of one’s identity and sense of place, which in the case of marginalised societies can also lead to social ills like substance abuse and suicide (King, Smith and Gracey 2009). In this way linguistic diversity and the maintenance of indigenous languages is a matter of social justice and loss of indigenous languages can also be seen as an issue of human rights. This includes the protection of linguistic rights in education, but also a recognition that the privilege often granted to large languages flows directly from the economic and political privilege and power of the speakers of those languages. The result is that language policies are always overtly political and ideological and often have negative consequences for speakers of minority languages (May

2002). This can be caused on the one hand by a failure to implement positive policies that already exist and on the other extreme, the active suppression of linguistic rights by governments (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000). Finally, The idea that linguistic diversity or multilingualism is incompatible with progress and modernity and international relations ignores the fact of highly functional multilingualism has been the norm in many parts of the world and for much of history as far as we can see. Like bio-diversity, cultural diversity (including linguistic diversity) has positive consequences, providing for more adaptive and thus stronger societies. “The monolingualism of much of the First World [and we could add, increasingly in much of the developing world] is as provincial as it is historically anomalous” (Turin 2005: 4).

## **2. What is the situation in Indonesia?**

Indonesia is very rich in language diversity. According *Ethnologue*, 706 of the worlds 7,105 living languages are located in Indonesia (Lewis, Simons and Fenning 2014). This amounts to about 10% of the world languages being spoken in a country that includes only 3.5% of the world population. Indonesia is second only to Papua New Guinea in terms of the amount of language diversity found here (Tucker 2001). This diversity is not evenly distributed across the country. In the west, on the islands Sumatra and Java, a relatively small number of languages with very large speaker populations are found. As you move eastward across the archipelago, the number of languages increases while the population of each languages decreases, so that hundreds of languages are found Maluku and Papua, often with speaker populations of only several thousand people or fewer.

But in this linguistically very diverse nation, the people of Indonesia have been united by the national language, Indonesian – a standardized form of Malay (Anwar 1990, Sneddon 2003). Indonesian was officially named the language of the nationalist

movement in 1928, was made the official language with independence in 1945 and – especially under policies of Suharto’s New Order government – gained widespread use throughout the archipelago. In 1970 about 40% of the population could understand Indonesian, while by 1990 that had increased to 67% and is now much higher (Hajak 2005). The spread of Indonesian has been supported by government education policies, its wide spread use in all forms of media, and the economic aspirations of the population which associate Indonesian with modern and more prosperous lifestyles. While the role of indigenous languages is recognized in the Indonesian constitution, in recent years smaller languages have been experiencing increasing levels of stress (Hajak 2005). One thing that makes the situation in Indonesian different from many other parts of the world where language sift is occurring, is that here there is a not a dominant group of native speakers who are putting pressure on minority language speakers, as is the case for example, in China with Mandarin or in the United States and Australia with English (as described by O’Shannessy 2011). Instead, Indonesian until now is still mainly a second language for most speakers. It is not a dominant ethnic group that is promoting its own language over that of others, rather the political and economic pressures around nationalism are driving a shift among Indonesians from being second speakers to becoming first (and often only) speakers of this language.

In Indonesia, language endangerment thus is primary related to language shift. Himmelmann (2010) in his discussion of languages in Sulawesi, suggests that the most important symptoms of language shift and of the vitality of a language, are number and quality of the domains in which it is used and transmission. He defines language endangerment as a rapid reduction in both the quality and the number of domains it is used in. This is considered important,

because different registers and vocabulary will be used in different domains, so as domains shrink, so do the completeness and robustness of the language. The second crucial symptom of language endangerment is the loss of transmission from one generation to the next. This is what is now being seen in many communities across Indonesia where children are no longer acquiring their parents' language, and instead are acquiring Indonesian (or others of Malay) as their first language. Himmelmann (2010) also points out crucially that this in itself is not the cause of language shift – that is, children do not just stop acquiring their parents' language – rather there are always a number of complex, interrelated causes which facilitate reduction in domains and transmission, which in turn mean the loss of language. Himmelmann (2010) describes two general endangerment scenarios that have occurred in Sulawesi and which also have occurred in many other parts of Indonesia. The first is the immigration scenario in which members of another speech community from outside the area move in and due to economic and political advantage essentially 'take over' a local speech community, imposing their own language. The second is the emigration scenario in which members of a local speech community temporarily migrate outside of the community for education or work, and on returning bring the dominant language from outside into the community. Another important scenario that we can now find in many parts of Indonesia is one where the changing social situation, including economic, educational and political contexts, promotes a shift from local to dominant language. In the following section we will look at two situations like this.

### **3. Two Examples from Indonesia: Maluku and Java**

#### *3.1 Language shift in Central Maluku.*

The region of the Maluku has high linguistic diversity, with forty-two languages spoken

just in the islands of Central Maluku. These include Ambon island where the regional capital of Ambon city is located, the Lease islands (Haruku, Saparua, Nusalaut), Buru Island, and Seram Island. As many as 50% of these languages of Central Maluku are endangered (Florey 2005), and threat to the languages here is rapidly increasing due to a complex combination of issues.

Maluku is a multi-religious part of Indonesia, where the population has long been divided about equally between Christians and Muslims (at least until the recent increase in transmigration to the area). It has long been noted that there is a historic link between religious identity and language use in Central Maluku (see Florey 2006; Musgrave and Ewing 2006). Villages that converted to Christianity during the Dutch colonial period, beginning from the late 16th century, had closer contact with the colonial authorities, which in turn provided greater access to education and employment and also encouraged the use of Ambonese Malay as a lingua franca. Because of the prestige and opportunities related to use of Ambonese Malay at the time, and the association of High Malay with Christianity, this led to more rapid loss of indigenous languages in Christian villages. While Muslim Ambonese also spoke Ambonese Malay in interactions with Christians (cf. Kennedy 1955:56), indigenous languages spoken in Muslim villages retained their importance in most domains. As we will see below, this pattern of greater language maintenance in Muslim villages is breaking down in recent times and now the indigenous languages of Muslim communities are also increasingly endangered (see Florey 2005; Musgrave and Ewing 2006). Very different scenarios of language maintenance and language loss can be seen in four different parts of Central Maluku as outlined below (Florey and Ewing 2010).

*Allang–Wakasihu.* Allang and Wakasihu are dialects of the same language and are located

on the west end of the north peninsula of Ambon island (Ewing 2010). This ethnolinguistic group also encompasses the Muslim village of Larike and the Christian village of Liliboi. Allang, a Christian village where I conducted research in the early 2000s, has a population of over 4,000, but at that time there were only approximately 70 Allang speakers remaining, or less than 2% of the population. The language is now silent in Liliboi. In the two Muslim villages of Wakasihu and Larike language shift to Ambonese Malay is starting to occur, but the language is still strong there.

*Tulehu, Tengah-tengah, Tial, Waai.* Language vitality is strongest in the three Muslim villages of Tulehu, Tengah-tengah, and Tial (which Musgrave terms Souw Amana Teru, see Musgrave and Ewing 2006). Research indicates that some 10,000 of the 18,790 people in these three villages (53%) are fluent speakers of Souw Amana Teru, and there may be a further 6,000 passive bilinguals. There are only a few elderly rememberers of the language in the Christian village of Waai, where language use is limited to the domain of ritual practices.

*Rutah, Amahei, Haruru, Makariki, Soahuku.* This language of southern Seram Island is strongest in the Muslim village of Rutah, although, like Allang, perhaps only 2% of the population of 2,286 people are fluent speakers. The language is moribund in the four Christian villages, with a total of no more than ten speakers.

*Alune.* Alune speakers live in twenty-six villages in western Seram island, all are Christian, with a total population of around 15,000. The language is stronger in the interior of the island, while language shift has been occurring for several years in coastal villages, making the language endangered there. In the mountain village of Lohiasapalewa, population 208, for example, all residents, from the oldest to the youngest, are fluent speakers of Alune.

As part of a language documentation program in Central Maluku, a research team including myself and three other colleagues conducted a language vitality test in a number

of the villages described above. The results of the first, receptive knowledge, portion of the test are shown for a representative village in each for the four language areas in Figure 2. As mentioned above, it has been widely reported in the literature that languages spoken in Christian villages in Maluku are becoming obsolescent more rapidly than languages spoken in villages which had converted to Islam. Figure 2 shows how this pattern is changing today. We can see that language shift is advanced in both the Christian village of Allang and Muslim village of Rutah. These villages both demonstrate what Dorian (1981) has called 'tip', or the abrupt failure of transmission from one generation to the next, at which point shift to a dominant language (in this case Ambonese Malay) becomes much stronger. In Allang and Rutah, tip took place between Generation 1 (50+) and Generation 2 (30–50). Now we can see that twenty-five years later, Muslim Tulehu is following the same path. Here tip is taking place between Generation 4a (high school) and Generation 4b (primary school). While the Alune language is still strong in Christian Lohiasapalewa, we can see a gradual downward trend that suggests it too is accelerating towards tip in the youngest generation.

Looking more closely at two of these villages, Allang and Tulehu (see Musgrave and Ewing 2006), we see that they do represent the historical trend, where linguistic vitality extends much deeper into Muslim Tulehu than it does in Christian Allang. Although it needs to be remembered that Allang also remained a vital language well into the twentieth century, unlike the many Christian villages that lost their indigenous languages early in the colonial period. However, the results for Tulehu suggest that under the age of 30, the proportion of fully fluent speakers in the community drops off rather rapidly. This implies that in a short time, perhaps two generations, language loss in Tulehu will have reached the point that

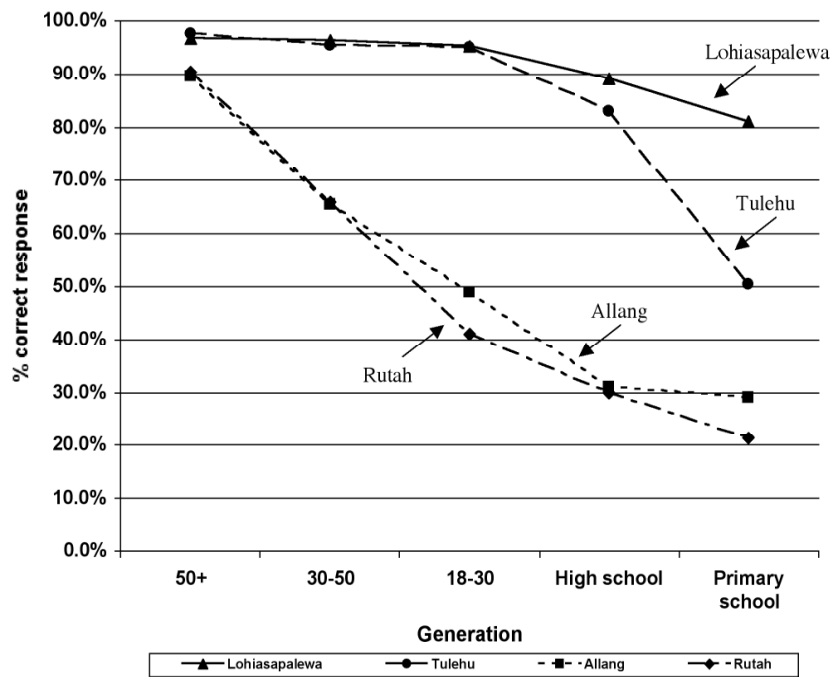


Fig 2. Language vitality in four villages of Central Maluku (Florey 2009).

has already been reached in Allang. Tulehu has long experienced contact with outsiders due to its status as a port, yet the appearance of language loss among younger residents is relatively recent. Historically, Tulehu was not physically isolated, but this community, and other Muslim communities, maintained an inward orientation as a result of their particular relationship with the Dutch colonial authorities. The community's orientation is now more outward looking, as a result of a different relationship with external authority, now the Republic of Indonesia, and of the increases in educational opportunities which have come with that change.

Allang has long had an outward orientation through religious affiliation and through the trading of horticultural products. These factors might suggest that Allang could have shifted to Malay much earlier. But these connections would have only provided contact with the outside for a limited number of men in privileged economic and political positions. In the twentieth century, improved

transportation and communication and the Dutch government's liberalized policies towards indigenous education all led to greater exposure to Malay and presumably triggered the shift that is still continuing. Today the increased ease of transportation to Allang ensures there is a much greater movement of people, of all different backgrounds, in and out of the village. In comparison to Tulehu, Allang was physically isolated for much of its history, and this was undoubtedly a factor in the rather late onset of language shift in the community. However, the higher degree of engagement with outside influences, which was a characteristic of Christian communities in Central Maluku provided an environment in which language shift was likely to occur.

The historical fact that Allang maintained its language into the twentieth century and the current situation in Tulehu where language shift is clearly increasing suggest that the extent of language maintenance is not a direct result of religion per se. Additionally, it seems that neither

an outward orientation, nor the movement of Malay speaking people through an area is sufficient on its own to have caused the shift to Malay among speakers of indigenous languages on the Hitu peninsula. Rather it is the combination of these factors that has contributed to the loss of these languages. Such a combination seems to have begun affecting Allang in the early twentieth century, and a similar combination is now producing similar results in Tulehu.

*3.2 Language shift among Javanese speakers.* The other language I will report on is Javanese. The situation with Javanese was chosen because, as a very large and relatively strong language, it provides a contrast to the previous discussion of the situation in Central Maluku, which has many languages with small speaker populations. As we will see below, a large number of speakers is not necessarily a guarantee that a language will always remain strong and vital. With some 85 million speakers (Lewis, Simons and Fenning 2014), Javanese is by far the largest regional language in Indonesia. It is also the largest language in the Austronesian language family in terms of first language speakers (and the eleventh largest language in the world, Adelaar 2010). Among Austronesian languages it is only surpassed by Malay/Indonesian in size when we consider second language speakers as well. Nonetheless, for the past two decades or so, there has been growing concern that it may also be facing a form of endangerment, despite its large number of speakers and the dominant social-political position of the Javanese in Indonesian society. Even in the early 1990s speakers were anecdotally noting that children in Javanese families, where both parents were Javanese speakers, were often speaking Indonesian as their first language (e.g. as reported for the Cirebon variety in Ewing 2005).

Young Javanese are shifting to Indonesian and there is also a shift in the role of high Javanese and low Javanese. For

several generations the pattern has been that children learn low Javanese as their first language. By the time they are school-age they will start learning high Javanese and then learn Indonesian in school. They acquire Javanese and its speech levels from family, while they learn Indonesian from school. But in the last decade or so this pattern has been disturbed, with more and more young people feeling more comfortable speaking Indonesian than Javanese. As Javanese loses domains of usage, especially in areas of education, government and economic livelihood, it also loses prestige.

Kurniasih (2006) undertook a detailed study of the reasons for language shift in the area of Yogyakarta. She looked at the situation in terms of economic and educational background of parents, roughly dividing them between working class and middle class (although the criteria were more nuanced than just this). When she looked at patterns of language use by school-aged boys and girls in lower class and middle class families, she found that there were sticking differences. Among lower class boys, the majority only speak Javanese at home, including both low and high speech styles. Some working class girls also speak only Javanese at home, but the majority of them, while speaking both low and high Javanese, also regularly use Indonesian. When looking at middle class families, the pattern shifts. The majority of girls speak only Indonesian at home, and the remaining girls speak both Indonesian and Javanese. Among middle class boys, on the other hand, the vast majority speak both Javanese and Indonesian at home, with just a small percentage who speaks only Indonesian at home. None of the middle class children speak only Javanese at home. From this we see that girls have a preference for speaking Indonesian and middle class girls have an especially high preference this direction, while working class boys show a very strong preference for just speaking Javanese at home. The

pattern of language use at school is of course different because of the dominant role of Indonesian in education, but similar patterns still hold. All working class children speak both Javanese and Indonesian at school and most of them, both boys and girls, use both low and high Javanese in this context. The major difference is that a higher proportion of boys use high Javanese this environment relative to girls. In this context the lower class children tend to use Indonesian with the teachers in the class, but often switch to Javanese when speaking to other students, and they regularly use Javanese both among themselves and to teachers when outside of the classroom. Among middle class children, the majority of girls speak only Indonesian at school while the majority of boys speak both low Javanese and Indonesian at schools. Only a small proportion of both boys and girls also use high Javanese. In all cases, the middle class children tend to speak Indonesian both inside and outside the classroom.

Similar patterns emerged when Kurniasih (2006) looked at the language used by parents with their children. The vast majority of lower class fathers used only Javanese with their children, while the vast majority of working class mothers used both Javanese and Indonesian. No lower class parents used only Indonesian. Among the middle class, the vast majority of mothers used only Indonesian with their children, while the majority of the fathers used both Javanese and Indonesian. No middle class parents used only Javanese. Interviews also confirmed language attitudes that were consistent with the survey data. It is mothers who tend to reinforce the use of Indonesian, and middle class mothers in particular seem to discourage the use of Javanese. Mothers' attitudes and practices seem to have a particularly strong effect on their daughters. Conversely, the language attitudes of fathers, who tend to prefer Javanese and value the use of high Javanese, have a stronger impact on sons.

Past studies of Javanese have suggest that traditionally men are more likely than women to have command of high Javanese, while those of higher classes would generally be expected to have better command of high Javanese than those from lower class backgrounds. Kurniasih (2006) demonstrates the trend that boys do still make more use of high Javanese than girls, thus following the traditional pattern, but interestingly today people in higher socio-economic background are now less likely to speak high Javanese than those of lower socio-economic background, thus reversing the traditional pattern. One reason Kurniasih (2006) gives for this is change in family structures. Lower class families still have a more traditional extended structure where children have access to many adults (parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents) – as well as other children of all ages – from whom they can acquire Javanese. In contrast, middle class Javanese tend to live in small nuclear families. Another important factor related to the choice of language is mobility, with middle class families much more likely to have travelled extensively, including spending time in Jakarta. Middle class families also tend to be future oriented – looking outside their local context for building their lives. In this situation Javanese does not seem so important to them. Kurniasih also suggests that there is “an underlying difference, perhaps in values, whereby males attach more significance to in-group solidarity through the use of Javanese, rather than striving for social and educational advancement through the use of Indonesian” (2006: 23). Other researchers have also found that women are often the forefront of language change and language shift in various cultures around the world. Reasons that have been suggested for this include the desire of mothers for their children to get ahead and the importance of symbolic capital, such as ability to use a prestige language, for woman, who might not have access to economic or other kinds of capital that are more accessible



to men. While Cameron (2003) points out that there are many varied relationships between gender and language shift found around the world, and not all of them have women at the forefront of change, nonetheless the Javanese case does match with many similar cases around the world. These findings are also consistent with Smith-Hefner's (2009) work with young people in Yogyakarta, where she found young women to have a preference for Indonesian. Among the factors that she identified for this was the fact that young women had a particular interest in emotional and interpersonal expressiveness, and that they found contemporary forms of Indonesian much more amenable to these needs.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The brief outlines of different language shift scenarios given above are representative of situations across Indonesian. For example, while there are not yet any results of major studies about the use of Sundanese today, impressionistic reports suggest that it may be in a situation very similar to Javanese. More detailed research may reveal whether there are similar class and gender differences in terms of shift to Indonesian as well as the loss of speech levels. One of the most common responses that one hears across Indonesia when any given speech community faces the prospect of language shift is that more education is necessary. However, experience has shown that top-down, authority driven attempts to maintain language almost never work, at least not on their own. What the research reported here has shown is that it is very much language attitudes, especially of parents, but also of children and the boarder community, that determine whether transmission of the language to the next generation occurs, and not simply whether the language is taught as an additional subject in schools for a few hours a week. What is actually needed is a combination of top-down and bottom-up initiatives (compare Florey and Ewing 2010). Within society,

it is crucial to look for ways to turn around certain trends. For example, there seems to be a feeling today that learning a local language in addition to Indonesian and English will somehow be a burden, yet many communities across Indonesian and around the world have been multilingual for generations. Why has the fallacy that monolingualism is somehow better arisen and how can we counter it? Additionally we need to find creative ways to provide positive and attractive role models for the use of local languages that will appeal to young people. There is a growing association of local languages with backwardness and old-fashioned ways of life. Discovering new ways to re-envisioned and re-energise the concept of local identity within the contemporary world and discovering new roles for local languages that re-invigorate these identities will go a long way towards helping to maintain the richness of linguistic diversity in Indonesia as well as around the world.

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