

Journal Article

Linguistic pragmatism, lingua francae, and language death in Indonesia

Yvonne Sewell

The University of Oxford, Oxford, United Kingdom

Received: September 13, 2022 / Accepted: October 17, 2022 / Published Online: November 1, 2022
© Pioneer Publications LTD 2022

Abstract

Indonesia holds incredible linguistic diversity with up to 750 distinct languages. According to the Indonesian Language Association (ILA), 728 native languages are spoken in Indonesia, whereas Kompas cites 720, Ethnologue (2005) lists 743, and LIPI reports 749. In 2016, UNESCO indicated that 139 native Indonesian languages were threatened with extinction, which makes up for almost 17% of their languages. In Indonesia, due to ideals of nationalism and to an extent, modernisation, Bahasa Indonesia poses the biggest threat to indigenous languages. After defining some key terms and giving an overview of Indonesia's language policy, three Indonesian linguistic landscapes will be described through a lens of linguistic imperialism, followed by recommendations for the preservation and revitalisation of regional indigenous heritage languages (RIHLs).

Keywords linguicide, language death, lingua franca, indigenous languages, Indonesia, Bahasa Malaysia, linguistic instrumentalism, linguistic pragmatism, colonialism, regional indigenous heritage languages

1. Introduction

In Asia, there has been centuries-long political subjugation which has permanently damaged the identity of many Indigenous peoples. For example, in 1899 the Ainu language in Japan was banned, along with its cultural traditions. It took over a hundred years to acknowledge the mistake of linguicide, and now only 15 speakers of Ainu exist. In the Philippines, a land with rich linguistic and cultural heritage, the Lumad people took linguistic preservation into their own hands when the government wouldn't, only to be met with violent military opposition, including bombing Lumad schools and commandeering school sites for military camps. On Haruku Island in Eastern Indonesia, as long ago as 1546, the Haruku people were accused of paganism and banned from speaking Haruku or practicing traditional ceremonies (Dovchin, Pennycook, & Sultana, 2017).

Indonesia holds incredible linguistic diversity with up to 750 distinct languages. According to the Indonesian Language Association (ILA), 728 native languages are spoken in Indonesia, whereas Kompas cites 720, Ethnologue (2005) lists 743, and LIPI reports 749. In 2016, UNESCO indicated that 139 native Indonesian languages were threatened with extinction,

which makes up for almost 17% of their languages. In Indonesia, due to ideals of nationalism and to an extent, modernisation, Bahasa Indonesia poses the biggest threat to indigenous languages.

Language is one of the most enduring legacies of European colonialism. However, for Indonesia, a country spanning some 17,000 islands and boasting the fourth largest population on the planet, after centuries of Dutch colonialism, and Japanese rule in the 1940s, nationalism has spurred a kind of linguisticism in the form of Bahasa Indonesia.

After defining some key terms and giving an overview of Indonesia's language policy, three Indonesian linguistic landscapes will be described through a lens of linguistic imperialism, followed by recommendations for the preservation and revitalisation of regional indigenous heritage languages (RIHLs).

2. Linguistic Imperialism

Thirty years ago, Phillipson's (1992) theory of linguistic imperialism (LI) made waves in the applied linguistics' field. Drawing on and synthesising ideas from multiple disciplines, Phillipson created the LI framework to better situate the study of language

learning and teaching under a ‘macro-societal’ lens. From the Social Sciences, imperialism theories, international cultural phenomena analyses, sociology of language, and theories of the state and hegemony were incorporated. Likewise, theories of language learning and teaching, educational language planning, and linguistic human rights were borrowed from the Humanities. Phillipson (1992) defined linguistic imperialism as ‘the dominance of English asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural (material properties) and cultural (ideological properties) inequalities between English and other languages’ (p. 42). In 2012, Phillipson updated his criteria for linguistic imperialism as follows (2012, p. 212):

- a form of linguistic imperialism which manifests in favouring the dominant language over another;
- a structurally manifested concept where resources and infrastructure are provided to the dominant language;
- as being ideological, encouraging beliefs that the dominant language form is superior to others, thus more prestigious (and ‘normal’)
- as being intertwined with the same structure as imperialism in culture, education, media, and politics;
- as having an exploitative essence that causes injustice and inequality between those who use the dominant language and those who do not;
- as having a subtractive influence on other languages,
- as being contested and resisted because of these factors.

Critics of LI argue that it is not imperialism which is responsible for the global linguistic imbalance, rather globalisation and individuals’ social and economic desires to learn other languages (Mufwene, 2007). Arguably, such ‘desires’ could encompass all the above criteria bar the last.

3. Globalisation

One cannot discuss linguistic imperialism or linguistic instrumentalism without first considering globalisation and the myriad ways it has been developed, (mis)understood, and enveloped (or not) worldwide, particularly in education. Furthermore, it is prudent to examine the historical precedents and modern application of the term globalisation in both its linguistic and cultural implications.

While globalisation can seem like a relatively new phenomenon, it can of course be traced back to the 1500s and the start of Western hegemony through transatlantic exploration (see Mignolo, 2017). The expansion of the British empire during the 18th and 19th centuries further strengthened the English language’s far-reaching hegemonic status. However, LI, as aforementioned, is not unique to English nor a contemporary issue; consider the Roman Empire and Soviet Union, with Latin and Russian being their

respective linguistic weapons. Globalisation, be it through language, military, infrastructure, politics, or media, can be understood as a materialistic concept, with many factors, languages, and peoples at play.

4. Linguae Francae

Lingua franca can be defined as any non-native language which is used to communicate amongst speakers of mutually unintelligible languages or dialects. While English as Lingua Franca is the most prevalent of such languages, there are other examples such as French, Portuguese, Spanish, Mandarin, and Indonesian. For some, the status of English as lingua franca (ELF) has been, and is, a natural sociological phenomenon with needless criticism bestowed upon the status quo. However, for others, (E)LF cannot be labelled apolitical, agentless, nor incidental, thus applying an ‘ism’ with negative connotations, as in *racism* and *sexism*, i.e., *linguicism*. However, said connotations are not necessarily omnipresent, as discussed below in the case of Sumatra, Lombok, and Sulawesi.

5. Linguistic Pragmaticism

Linguistic pragmaticism (used synonymously with linguistic instrumentalism), wherein there is a tangible reason to use a language other than the mother-tongue, can be sub-divided into ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors. Push factors are what encourages or enforces people to learn a language, whereas pull factors account for what draws people to learn or use a language. These can also be understood as top-down and bottom-up forces respectively. In the case of Indonesia, for many people there is a triangulation of linguistic forces present, all pushing and pulling.

6. Indonesian Language Policy

The concept of “language policy” is tricky to characterize and as a result there are numerous definitions which can be referenced (see Cooper, 1989; Judd, 1997; Spolsky, 2004; Kaplan, 2013). Spolsky’s (2004) definition which refers to ‘the language policy of a *community* as the set of its language practices, its language beliefs, and its language management’, seems most fitting for this context, and the reason is semantics. The use of ‘community’ suggests a bottom-up approach rather than a top-down decision enforced by government.

In 1928, young leaders of this island-country declared a pledge, the *Sumpah Pemuda* (Youth Pledge), which stated, “We the sons and daughters of Indonesia uphold the language of unity, the Indonesian language” (Sneddon, 2003, p. 102). This statement, which promoted the Indonesian language as the national language, was then recognized in the 1945 constitution

following liberation from the Japanese.

Since 2009, it has been law that Bahasa Indonesian is the national language and must be used for all formal activities, including medium of instruction in schools. The main motivation behind this policy was to unite the country after years of subjugation. In Indonesia, in contrast to the Philippines, Bahasa Indonesia was chosen from a minority tribe, rather than Javanese, for example, which was spoken by the majority. This was deemed the most peaceful and fair approach. In the Philippines, when Tagalog - the largest linguistic population was chosen as the national language (for similar political reasons), it was met with less success.

Now, a closer look at a small sample of Indonesia's RIHLs.

7. Sepa

Sepa is an Austronesian language of Sepam Island (one of the Maluku islands) in Eastern Indonesia. The Indigenous Peoples of Amahai face(d) language endangerment due to the nationalisation of Indonesian. Modernisation and migration also add to the threat of Sepa language death. According to Maggakatung, Ridwan, Syarifudin, Darma, and Sulaeman (2021), the Sepa language can now, regrettably, be classed as extinct on the Maluku islands, due to children neither learning nor speaking it (moribund). However, according to UNESCO (2010), such a language could also be classed as *critically endangered* as it is spoken elsewhere in Indonesia. Furthermore, according to Himmelman (2009), the fate of moribund languages is not always death and is a *symptom* rather than a *cause* of language endangerment. (Note that current data for the number of Sepa speakers is scarce, with UNESCO's latest data being 12 years old.) Aside from nationalism, the Sepa language is also threatened by the dominance of Ambonese, a Malay based creole developed during the Dutch colonisation of the Maluku islands, mainly for trade purposes. Currently, it is the main language on Ambon Island, and a second language on other Maluku islands. However, its economic value raises Ambonese's dominance over Sepa; a powerful factor, as described by the Mackey geo-linguistic concept (Mackey, 1973), wherein language vitality results from a balanced equation of sociolinguistic, demographic, psychological and *economic* factors. Here, a 'push' and 'pull' factor to learn Ambonese is a fiscal one, and a very real threat to an Indigenous language.

8. Lampung

In contrast, on Sumatra Island in Indonesia, the Lampung language is preserved through an official government language policy. Although there are almost 1.5 million speakers of Lampung, which dwarfs other endangered languages, in contrast to Indonesian it is still a minority language. On Sumatra Island, Lampung

is well-maintained primarily through medium instruction in schools (the 2009 language policy allows some native languages in primary schools). There are two main varieties of Lampung: Lampung Api and Lampung Nyo, with around 980,000 and 205,000 speakers respectively. Despite attempts made by the government to preserve the language(s), Lampung is still threatened by language shifts, lack of documentation, and limited speakers. Language shifts are a linguistic phenomenon primarily fuelled by language contact, nowadays further propelled through digital literacies. In a research project aimed at developing a Lampung-English Android-based bilingual dictionary app, Ariyani et al (2022), reported that all university students and 40% of adults and teenagers own a smartphone on the island. While the latter number seems low, it is promising for language preservation through technology, nonetheless. In their research, Ariyani et al (2022), suggest that technology can play a crucial role in storing, documenting, preserving, and maintaining endangered languages. However, the very nature of language is to communicate, to culturally belong, to connect with ancestors. Technology can reach far and wide, but it takes humanistic endeavours to connect deeply through language.

9. North Central Sulawesi: Tomini-Tolitoli Languages

The Tomini-Tolitoli languages are indigenous to North Central Sulawesi in Indonesia, and can be categorised into eleven major languages, of which two are moribund (Dondo, Taje), one is endangered (Totoli), and eight are vital but long-term endangered (Himmelman, 2009). Sociologically of interest is the peaceful integration of migrants into the Tolitoli area with little linguistic (or physical) turmoil. The Bajau people of the Philippines migrated to empty settlements on the east and west coast of the area from as early as the 16th century. The intermarriage of Bajau and Tolitoli nobilities became a centuries old tradition which strengthened trade (fish and produce such as coconuts and spices being the key goods). Despite this long history of intermingling, linguistic homogeneity has not occurred. Instead, according to Himmelman (2009), other *linguae francae* (LFs) are employed in any instances wherein non-Tomini-Tolitoli speakers are present. Indonesian, Kaili (from Central Sulawesi), or Bugis (Southern Sulawesi) are used as LFs. Based on these factors, linguistic imperialism is not prevalent, and instead a balanced (but questionable stability) bi/multilingual situation has developed. Homogenous settlements use their mother-tongue to communicate, and Indonesian to communicate with outsiders. Likewise, in heterogenous settlements, Indonesian retains its status as a unifying language. In Sulawesi, multilingualism has been the norm for centuries, with Bugis, Chinese, and Bajau bilingual in their L1 with L2 Indonesian, many generations before nationalism

required them to do so.

10. Preservation and Revitalisation

Language preservation, maintenance, and revitalisation is heavily dependent on grassroots interest in such linguistic endeavours. The linguistic sub-field of field linguistics has evolved to acknowledge this need, providing training for the documentation of languages amongst new and experienced linguists. However, unsurprisingly much of this training is offered in affluent areas far removed from the indigenous communities who need the support, training, and education the most, as in East Indonesia (Himmelman, 2009).

Himmelman's call to action in 1998 did not go unnoticed. The need for education *in-situ* in indigenous countries, along with training in field linguistics, language documentation, and cooperative endeavours has been heard by universities and funding organisations. Well-known and successful training models include the Guatemalan *Proyecto Lingüístico Francisco Marroquín* (PLFM), Advocates for Indigenous California Language Survival, and the Indigenous Language Institute (New Mexico), and the Indigenous Language Worker Program via the Certificate in Aboriginal Language Work at Pilbara TAFE College (Florey & Himmelman, 2009).

The absence of well-established programs in other parts of the world is telling. Resource-poor countries in parts of Africa and Asia are yet to see initiatives emerge from governments, universities, or language planning agencies. Fiscal and resource limitations are gargantuan in such areas. However, through initiatives such as Himmelman's (2006, 2007) wherein trained linguists go into the field to further prepare local graduates have seen some success. As he notes, it is not a lack of enthusiasm for language preservation that is the problem, rather the lack of an appropriate toolbox (Himmelman, 2009).

Despite more recent interest in language preservation, and organisations such as Volkswagen Endangered Languages Program allocating funds for similar projects, the inequality of opportunities remains stark. Namely that funding applications must be made in English, regardless of the locale. Even good intentions have layers of linguistic imperialism deeply embedded in their infrastructure. An obvious recommendation here is to allow funding applications in English, a lingua franca, and the regional language of the area to be researched.

In addition to education and promotion of indigenous languages, inspiration can be taken from other places. For example, India, a country with 114 languages, successfully incorporates indigenous languages into numerous domains effectively sustaining her linguistic diversity. According to Groff (2016), 47 languages are used in media, some states produce bilingual textbooks, 87 are used for publications and 71 for radio. Furthermore, minority

languages can be (and are) used as medium of instruction. Despite India's colonial history, linguisticism of any kind does not seem to prevail. With regards to the linguistic scope mentioned in this paper, a consideration in Indonesia could be to broadcast a wider range of languages through TV, radio, and press. As we have seen, Indonesian as a national language is somewhat of a success story, with little threat of linguistic disunification at this point.

11. Conclusion

As described in this paper, against all odds the linguistic scape of Indonesia does not fall under Phillipson's LI criteria. While the lens of linguistic imperialism is a useful consideration regarding language instrumentalism and the effects thereof, one must also consider nationalism, modernization, and globalisation on the micro and macro scale. While the colonial legacy in many places has a lot to be desired, we can also look to the remote islands of Sulawesi and the vast culturally diverse continent of India to remember that multilingualism needn't follow an inevitable path to hegemony. The preservation and revitalisation of minority languages is essential, and linguists have an extremely grave responsibility to make recommendations for, promote, and ensure the survival of these languages.

Yvonne Sewell has been working in the field of language learning since 2012. Originally from the UK, she has worked at schools in South Korea and China, where she currently lives and works. She has completed her MSc in Applied Linguistics for Language Teaching at the University of Oxford and focuses on language learner motivation amongst adolescents.

Email: yvonnejsewell@outlook.com

References

- Ariyani, F., Putrawan, G. E., Riyanda, A. R., Idris, A. R., Misliani, L., & Perdana, R. (2022). Technology and minority language: An Android-based dictionary development for the Lampung language maintenance in Indonesia. *Tapuya: Latin American Science, Technology and Society*, 5(1), 2015088. <https://doi.org/10.1080/25729861.2021.2015088>
- Blust, R. (2009). *The Austronesian languages* (Pacific linguistics; 602). Canberra: Pacific Linguistics, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University.
- Cooper, R. (1989). *Language planning and social change* (Cambridge core). Cambridge.
- Dovchin, S., Pennycook, A., & Sultana, S. (2017). Language, Culture and the Periphery. In *Popular Culture, Voice and Linguistic Diversity* (Language and Globalization, pp. 1-26). Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Ethnologue. (2022). Indonesia. Retrieved April 22, 2022, from

- <https://www.ethnologue.com/country/ID>
- Florey, M. (2009). *Endangered Languages of Austronesia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Florey, M., & Himmelmann, N. P. (2009). New Directions in Field Linguistics: Training Strategies for Language Documentation in Indonesia. In *Endangered Languages of Austronesia* (pp. Endangered Languages of Austronesia, 2009-11-26). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Groff, C. (2016). Language and language-in-education planning in multilingual India: A minoritized language perspective. *Language Policy*, 16(2), 135-164. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10993-015-9397-4>
- Himmelmann, N. P. (1998). Documentary and descriptive linguistics. *Linguistics*, 36(353), 161-196. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ling.1998.36.1.161>
- Himmelmann, N. (2008). Chapter 1 Language documentation: What is it and what is it good for? In J. Gippert, N. Himmelmann & U. Mosel (Ed.), *Essentials of Language Documentation* (pp. 1-30). Berlin, New York: De Gruyter Mouton. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110197730.1>
- Himmelmann, N. P. (2009). Language Endangerment Scenarios: A Case Study from Northern Central Sulawesi. In *Endangered Languages of Austronesia* (pp. Endangered Languages of Austronesia, 2009-11-26). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Judd, D. R. (1997). The role of governmental policies in promoting residential segregation in the St. Louis metropolitan area. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 66(3), 214-240. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2967162>
- Kaplan, R.B. (2013). Language planning. *Applied Research on English Language*, 2(1), 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.22108/are.2013.15459>
- Kompas. (2022, April 22). Kompas. Retrieved April 22, 2022, from <https://www.kompas.id/kategori/humaniora/>
- Mackey, W. F. & Laval Univ., Quebec (Quebec). International Center for Research on Bilingualism. (1973). Three Concepts for Geolinguistics. Publication B-42. [Washington, D.C.]: Distributed by ERIC Clearinghouse, <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED187099>
- Maggalatung, Muhammad, Ridwan, M., Syarifudin, S., Darma, D., & Sulaeman, S. (2021). Reviewing Sepa Language Extinction of the Indigenous Peoples of Amahai, Moluccas, Indonesia. *Technium Social Sciences Journal*, 22, 778-789.
- Meighan, P. J. (2021). Decolonizing the digital landscape: The role of technology in Indigenous language revitalization. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 17(3), 397-405. <https://doi.org/10.1177/11771801211037672>
- Mignolo, W. (2017). *Local histories/global designs: Coloniality, subaltern knowledges, and border thinking* (University Press Scholarship Online). Princeton.
- Mufwene, S. (2007). Issues in the Study of Pidgin and Creole Languages. *NWIG: New West Indian Guide / Nieuwe West-Indische Gids*, 81(3/4), 338-341.
- Phillipson, R. (1992). *Linguistic imperialism*. Oxford University Press.
- Phillipson, R. (2009). *Linguistic imperialism continued* (Taylor & Francis eBooks). New York, N.Y.: Routledge.
- Rahmi, R. (2016). The Development of Language Policy in Indonesia. *Englisia*, 3(1), 9-22.
- Suwarno, B. (2020). Acquisition Planning for Regional Indigenous Heritage Languages in Indonesia. *SAGE Open*, 10(3). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244020948843>
- Spolsky, B. (2004). *Language policy* (Key topics in sociolinguistics). Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Sneddon, J. N. (2003). *The Indonesian language: Its history and role in modern society*. Sydney, NSW: UNSW Press.
- UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in danger. (2022). UNESCO. Retrieved April 22, 2022, from <http://www.unesco.org/languages-atlas/>