

Local identity, local languages, regional Malay, and the endangerment of local languages in eastern Indonesia

John Bowden

Jakarta Field Station

Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology

Malay, like other major ‘world languages’, is in fact a diverse kaleidoscope of different varieties with different influences and varying degrees of mutual intelligibility between so-called ‘dialects’.

Varieties of Malay are now national languages in Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and Brunei, and they are native languages to minority groups in places as diverse as Sri Lanka, the Cocos islands in Australia, the Pattani Malay in southern Thailand, as well as minorities in the south of the Philippines and amongst the Moluccan community in the Netherlands.

The national language, *Bahasa Indonesia*, is a variety of Malay based on the court Malay spoken in Riau sultanate, and it was this variety that served as the basis for the development of the national language after the Indonesian language was selected as the language of Indonesia at the Youth Congress in Bandung prior to independence in 1928. However, alongside official Indonesian, there are also dozens of distinct vernacular ‘Malayic languages’ spoken in Sumatra and Kalimantan, and a large number of lingua franca varieties that have sometimes been spoken for hundreds of years. These varieties are scattered across the Indonesian archipelago, and particularly in the east. Sometimes so-called ‘creole’ varieties of Malay, the eastern dialects, have, over lengthy influence by local languages in their regions, picked up many features that are both characteristic and ‘emblematic’ (see Friedman, 1999) of local languages spoken in their regions.

Indonesia is home to more local languages than any country on earth except for its neighbour, Papua New Guinea. According to Ethnologue, there are over 700 distinct languages spoken in the country. Most of Indonesia’s indigenous linguistic diversity is concentrated in the eastern part of the country, in Papua, Maluku, Nusa Tenggara, and to a lesser extent, Sulawesi. As elsewhere in the world, much of this linguistic diversity is currently under threat of extinction. In some parts of the country, the process of mass linguistic extinction is indeed well under way.

Many people assume that when Indonesians give up their former native vernaculars, they replace these local languages with ‘Indonesian’, and thus imply that local linguistic emblems are lost in the process of language shift as people move to a nationalistic mode of communication. In reality, however, most communities are shifting to one of the varieties of local Malay and not really to ‘Indonesian’ at all, at least not as a home language. In this paper, I examine the viability of some local languages spoken close to the centres of a number of eastern Malay varieties and argue that when language shift is taking place, people are not really giving up the ability to speak in a tongue that is emblematic of their local identity. In modern Indonesia, local Malays are rich markers of local identity, and strong emblems of local authenticity for their speakers. In the conclusion to this paper I compare the Indonesian situation with other cases around the world where people shifting languages are also not really moving to standard national languages but rather to basilectal variants of such national languages which retain local authenticity as far as their new native speakers are concerned.

Reference

Friedman, Victor A. 1999. *Linguistic Emblems and Emblematic Languages: On Language as Flag in the Balkans*, (Kenneth E. Naylor Memorial Lecture Series in South Slavic Linguistics, No. 1).

Columbus: Department of Slavic and East European Languages and Literatures, The Ohio State University.