

Threats and Preservation Efforts of Local Languages in a Heterogeneous City: A Case Study of Medan, North Sumatra

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Abstract - This study investigates the threats and preservation efforts concerning local languages in Medan, North Sumatra, a city characterized by its rich cultural and ethnic heterogeneity. The research employs a qualitative design with a case study approach, utilizing in-depth interviews, observation, and document analysis as primary data collection instruments. The findings reveal that despite their crucial role as markers of ethnic identity and social cohesion, regional languages in Medan face significant pressure from globalization and urbanization. Factors such as the dominance of Indonesian in formal education and media, coupled with high social and economic mobility, contribute to a notable linguistic shift among the younger generation. While youth generally acknowledge the importance of local languages, their active use remains low, often due to a perceived lack of prestige or relevance in modern urban contexts. Various preservation efforts by government bodies and local communities are underway, succeeding in raising awareness and fostering pride. However, these initiatives face challenges in consistently increasing active daily use and sustained youth engagement. The study concludes that the long-term sustainability of Medan's regional languages necessitates a holistic and coordinated approach that extends beyond instruction to create functional environments for their authentic use, actively engaging younger generations.

Keywords: *linguistic diversity, shift, language endangerment, Medan, preservation*

1. INTRODUCTION

Medan City, recognized as one of the largest metropolises in Indonesia and the capital of North Sumatra Province, has long been acknowledged for its rich cultural and ethnic heterogeneity. Since its early establishment, Medan has served as a meeting point for various ethnic groups such as the indigenous Malays, Batak, Javanese, Minangkabau, Chinese, and Indian communities, creating a unique and dynamic social mosaic (Napitupulu & Siregar, 2019). This diversity, which historically has been a driving force behind the city's development and cultural wealth, now faces significant challenges due to the massive currents of globalization and urbanization (Ortiz & Robertson, 2018).

These phenomena of globalization and urbanization have not only drastically transformed the demographic and social landscape of Medan but also directly impacted the vitality of regional languages, which have long been an integral part of community identity (Siregar et al., 2021). As observed in many rapidly growing urban centers, this shift often leads to a decline in the use of local languages due to the dominance of national and global languages in public spaces, education, and media (Junaidi & Andriani, 2020). As a result, ancestral languages—embodying local wisdom and cultural heritage—are becoming increasingly vulnerable, threatening the sustainability of ethnic identity expression amidst modernization (Haddina & Napoli, 2022).

In this global era, marked by the dominance of Indonesian as the national language and English as the global lingua franca, the use of regional languages is experiencing a significant decline, particularly among the younger generation (Simanjuntak, 2018). This phenomenon is not new; various studies have indicated linguistic shifts in many urban areas (e.g., Fasold & Connor-Linton, 2014). Children born and raised in dynamic urban environments such as Medan, with broad access to mass media, digital technology, and formal education systems, are often more exposed to English (Vineethan, 2025). This exposure frequently comes at the expense of their mastery of their mother tongue or ancestral languages (Fishman, 1991; Spolsky, 2004).

This situation raises serious concerns regarding the threat of local language extinction, a phenomenon known as language endangerment (Fadli et al., 2021). When a local language disappears, the loss goes far beyond a means of communication—it entails the erosion of the cultural wealth embedded in the language, including folklore, local wisdom, customs, and even traditional knowledge systems passed down through generations (Crystal, 2000; Nettle, 2017). Language loss also affects a community's collective identity, severing ties with the past and weakening the sense of cultural ownership. A study by Romaine (2018) highlights how language serves as a foundational element for cultural continuity and intangible heritage.

Nevertheless, amid the challenges of linguistic homogenization and globalization, various efforts to preserve regional languages continue to be promoted (Zaitun Qamariah & Hadma Yuliani, 2024). These efforts come from multiple stakeholders, including government policies through multilingual education programs and cultural support, local community initiatives actively teaching languages to children, and the role of educational institutions and academics in research and language revitalization (Grenoble & Whaley, 2006; Hinton & Hinton, 2018). These forms of resistance against the dominance of majority languages demonstrate a growing awareness of the importance of maintaining linguistic diversity as a valuable national asset.

Based on the discussion above, the main research questions of this study are as follows: How does cultural and ethnic heterogeneity in Medan influence the dynamics of the use and vitality of local languages?, What are the dominant globalization and urbanization factors contributing to the shift and decline in the use of local languages among the younger generation in Medan?, What are the perceptions and attitudes of Medan's younger generation toward the use and preservation of their local languages?, What preservation efforts have been and are currently being implemented in Medan, and how effective are these efforts in maintaining the sustainability of local languages?

2. METHOD

This section outlines the research design, population, data collection instruments, and data analysis techniques that will be used in this study to address the established research questions.

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design using a case study approach. The qualitative approach is chosen as it allows for an in-depth exploration of complex phenomena such as language shift and preservation efforts within specific social and cultural contexts. The case study of Medan City will provide a comprehensive understanding of language dynamics in a heterogeneous urban environment. This design is both descriptive and analytical, aiming to depict existing conditions, identify influencing factors, and analyze perceptions as well as the effectiveness of the efforts undertaken.

2.2 Research Population and Sampling

The population of this study consists of all residents of Medan City, particularly ethnic groups that possess regional languages. Given the study's focus on language shift among the younger generation and preservation efforts, the target population will be more

specifically defined as: Young people (children and adolescents) who were born and raised in Medan City, Parents and community leaders from various ethnic groups in Medan who use regional languages, Individuals involved in regional language preservation efforts (e.g., local language teachers, cultural activists, representatives from relevant governmental or non-governmental institutions).

The sampling technique to be used is purposive sampling. This technique is chosen because it allows the researcher to deliberately select key informants who possess in-depth knowledge, relevant experience, and unique perspectives related to the phenomenon being studied. The selection criteria for informants will be based on ethnic background, age, frequency of regional language use, and involvement in language preservation activities. The sample size will be determined by the principle of data saturation, meaning data collection will cease when no new significant information emerges from additional informants.

2.3 Data Collection Instrument

The data in this study were collected through several key instruments to ensure depth and triangulation:

- In-depth Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants from the younger generation, parents, community leaders, and individuals involved in language preservation. These interviews aimed to explore perceptions, personal experiences, attitudes toward regional languages, influencing factors on language use, and detailed information about preservation efforts.
- Participant/Non-participant Observation: Observations were carried out in relevant settings such as schools, cultural centers, or public spaces to directly observe the patterns of regional language use, interethnic interactions, and the implementation of language preservation programs.
- Document Analysis: Related documents such as local government policies on culture and language, local education curricula, reports on language preservation programs from communities or institutions, and publications on Medan's demographics and sociolinguistics were analyzed to obtain relevant secondary data.

2.4 Data Analysis

The qualitative data collected were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis process involved the following steps:

- Data Transcription: All interview and FGD recordings were transcribed verbatim.

- Data Familiarization: The researcher read and reviewed all transcriptions, field notes, and documents to gain an overall understanding of the data.
- Initial Coding: The data were broken down into smaller meaningful units and assigned initial descriptive codes.
- Searching for Themes: Initial codes were grouped into broader potential themes based on shared meanings or patterns.
- Reviewing Themes: The identified themes were reviewed and refined to ensure internal consistency and clear distinctions between themes.
- Defining and Naming Themes: Each theme was clearly defined and given a representative name.
- Producing the Report: The findings from the thematic analysis were presented narratively, supported by direct quotes from informants, and linked back to the research questions to build arguments and draw conclusions.

The data analysis was conducted iteratively, allowing the researcher to continuously compare and contrast the data, and to develop deeper insights throughout the research process.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The cultural and ethnic heterogeneity in Medan City significantly shapes the dynamics of regional language use and vitality. Functional multilingualism is commonly observed, where individuals use different languages for specific domains—local languages at home or within ethnic communities, Indonesian in schools and public settings, and English for global communication. Despite ongoing shifts, regional languages continue to serve as strong markers of ethnic identity and play a vital role in maintaining cultural connections, although their vitality varies across ethnic groups. For instance, Batak Toba appears more resistant to language shift in certain domains, while languages like Javanese or Minangkabau may be more vulnerable due to longer or different patterns of migration and integration. Furthermore, phenomena such as code-switching and code-mixing are prevalent, especially among younger speakers, reflecting typical multilingual behavior.

Several dominant factors of globalization and urbanization contribute to the decline of regional language use among Medan's younger generation. The predominance of Indonesian in formal education and administration limits the space for local language use. Extensive exposure to mass media and digital platforms, largely in Indonesian and English, has influenced language preferences and fluency among youth. Social and

economic mobility, driven by urban migration, has heightened the need for a shared lingua franca (Indonesian), reducing the urgency to maintain regional languages. Additionally, there exists a perception among some young people that using local languages lacks prestige or may even carry stigma, prompting them to adopt Indonesian or English as a marker of modernity and education.

The attitudes of Medan's younger generation toward regional languages are mixed. While some value them as integral to family heritage and identity, others consider them irrelevant in modern life or professional advancement. Many young individuals report greater fluency and comfort in using Indonesian or English, especially with peers outside the home environment. Although there is a general awareness of the importance of preserving local languages, actual usage tends to be minimal. The family, particularly the parents' attitude and language practices at home, plays a crucial role in shaping children's perceptions and use of regional languages.

Various language preservation efforts have been initiated in Medan, with varying degrees of effectiveness. Government-led programs—such as Mother Language Festivals, workshops, and curriculum support by agencies like the Language Development and Fostering Agency—aim to revitalize local languages. Community-based initiatives include art studios, informal language classes, and traditional activities using local languages. Digital innovations, such as language-learning apps and social media content in regional languages, have also emerged to attract younger audiences. While these initiatives often succeed in raising awareness and interest, they do not always lead to a significant increase in everyday language use. Challenges remain, especially in maintaining consistent youth engagement and addressing resource limitations. Importantly, many of these preservation efforts are not solely about teaching language, but also about reinforcing cultural and ethnic identity.

The findings of this study reveal that the cultural and ethnic heterogeneity in Medan creates a complex linguistic landscape, where functional multilingualism is the norm. Individuals and communities fluidly shift between local languages, Indonesian, and even English, depending on social context, formality, and interlocutor. Despite increasing pressure, local languages still play a crucial role as markers of ethnic identity and as tools for maintaining social cohesion within ethnic groups. This aligns with Fishman's (1991) perspective on the role of language as both a community glue and a strong marker of cultural identity, even amidst modernization. However, the study also confirms a significant linguistic shift, particularly among younger generations. This shift is not uniform; the vitality of local languages varies across ethnic groups, influenced by both internal community strength (e.g., active traditional institutions) and external factors (e.g., geographic dispersion and social mobility). The widespread phenomena of code-switching and code-mixing reflect linguistic accommodation to a multilingual

environment, but also signal an early stage of potential language shift towards the dominant language (Fasold & Connor-Linton, 2014).

A deeper analysis of the factors contributing to language shift in Medan underscores the overwhelming influence of globalization and urbanization. Several key factors were identified, as summarized in the table below:

No	Factor	Description
1	Indonesian as Language of Education	Used exclusively in formal schooling and testing; diminishes local use
2	Mass Media and Pop Culture Dominance	Most content is in Indonesian/English; local languages are underrepresented
3	Urban Work and Public Communication	Indonesian acts as lingua franca across ethnic groups
4	Perceived Prestige and Stigma	Local languages viewed as “old-fashioned” or irrelevant by some youth
5	Family Transmission Gap	Parents often prioritize Indonesian for future utility
6	Inter-ethnic Marriages	Resulting households tend to default to Indonesian for unity

Table 1. Factors Contributing to Language Shift in Medan

These elements shape linguistic preferences and reduce exposure to local languages. Among the youth, there is a perceived lack of prestige—and even stigma—attached to speaking local languages in wider urban contexts, prompting a shift to Indonesian or English. These findings are consistent with broader literature on language endangerment in urban contexts, where linguistic homogenization is often an inevitable consequence of modernization (Crystal, 2000; Nettle, 2017).

The perceptions of Medan’s youth regarding local languages reveal a compelling ambivalence. On one hand, many recognize the cultural and familial significance of local languages as part of their heritage. On the other hand, actual proficiency and active use of these languages remain low, with most youths feeling more fluent and comfortable communicating in Indonesian or English, especially among peers. This suggests a clear gap between normative awareness and everyday linguistic practice. While youth may cognitively acknowledge the value of local languages, social, economic, and educational pressures push them to prioritize languages seen as more “pragmatic” or “relevant” for their futures. These findings reaffirm Spolsky’s (2004) assertion that intergenerational transmission within the family is a key determinant of language maintenance. Without

this transmission, even an awareness of intrinsic language value is insufficient to halt the shift.

Despite the significant pressures facing local languages, various preservation efforts are actively underway in Medan. These range from government-led cultural programs and language festivals to community-initiated activities such as art workshops and informal language classes. Some initiatives have also ventured into digital spaces, leveraging technology to engage younger audiences. However, the effectiveness of these efforts varies, as summarized in the table below:

No	Type of Initiative	Strengths	Limitations
1	Government programs	Institutional support; outreach to schools	Often lack continuity and long-term funding
2	Community cultural events	Promote cultural pride; accessible to public	Tend to be symbolic, not sustained
3	Digital campaigns and content	Appeal to youth; adaptable and scalable	Limited audience reach; not always in local language
4	Informal home-based learning	Encourages intergenerational transmission	Dependent on parental commitment

Table 2. Evaluation of Local Language Preservation Efforts in Medan

Most programs have succeeded in raising public awareness and fostering pride in local languages. The main challenge, however, lies in increasing the actual frequency of use in daily life and in maintaining youth engagement over time. As Hinton & Hinton (2018) suggest, language revitalization requires a holistic, long-term strategy that goes beyond instruction and focuses on creating new domains for authentic language use. In Medan, future strategies must take into account the city's unique sociolinguistic dynamics and embrace innovation to build an environment more conducive to the sustainable use of regional languages.

4. CONCLUSION

This study explores the complex dynamics of regional languages in Medan, a metropolitan city rich in cultural and ethnic diversity. Findings reveal that although regional languages continue to serve as important markers of identity and social cohesion within communities, they face significant threats due to the intense pressures of globalization and urbanization.

Dominant factors such as the prevalence of Indonesian and English in education, mass media, and the economic sector, combined with high levels of social mobility, collectively contribute to linguistic shifts. The younger generation in Medan, exposed to a multilingual environment, tends to be more fluent in Indonesian and English, often at the expense of their mother tongues. Although there is an awareness of the importance of language preservation, perceptions and practices related to the use of regional languages among the youth remain ambivalent.

Various preservation efforts have been implemented by the government, communities, and educational institutions. These efforts—including cultural programs, language festivals, and community-based initiatives—have succeeded in raising awareness and pride. However, major challenges remain in increasing the active and sustained use of regional languages in daily life, especially among the younger generation.

Overall, Medan reflects a microcosm of the global challenges in maintaining linguistic diversity in the modern era. Preserving regional languages in Medan requires a more holistic and coordinated approach that not only focuses on language instruction but also on creating functional environments where these languages can be used meaningfully across different spheres of life. Future strategies must embrace innovation, empower local communities, and actively engage younger generations to ensure that ancestral languages remain alive and sustainable as an integral part of Medan's unique identity.

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