

# Language shift between generations: Regional-speaking parents raise Indonesian-speaking children in North Sumatra

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## ABSTRACT

Language shift typically occurs when languages come into contact with one or more languages perceived as more superior for social, cultural, and economic reasons. This sociolinguistic phenomenon appears to be common in Indonesia due to influences from powerful languages, namely Indonesian as the national language and Javanese as the largest ethnic language spoken in the midst of hundreds of weaker vernacular languages. This study examines the occurrence of a language shift in regions of the North Sumatra Province of Indonesia, namely among middle economic class communities, and it also explores the influence of parents on their children's preferred use of regional languages or Indonesian. The data were obtained from four regions in North Sumatra targeted for regional language revitalization by the Balai Bahasa (Language Center) of Sumatera Utara Province in 2023, i.e., Malay, Asahan, Langkat, Labuhanbatu, and Tapanuli Tengah. To collect the data, this study involved 40 parents and examined their views regarding education of their children in terms of language use at home. This study not only focuses on language shifts, but also examines the complexity of the problem, including efforts to preserve regional languages as heritage languages. This study found that there is a considerable impact of parental language use in daily communication on their children's use of Indonesian for various reasons. It turns out that parents are willing to ensure that their children grow up in Indonesian even if it means "sacrificing" their regional language. They are content with the performance of their children at school when their children grow up in Indonesian. These findings suggest that revitalization needs to address families, especially parents, and promote the use of regional languages at home together with Indonesian to ensure intergenerational transmission without hindering educational aspirations.

**Keywords:** Language shift; Malay; parental attitudes; regional language; transmission process

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## INTRODUCTION

An ethnic language, sometimes referred to as a regional language or a vernacular, is both an identity and a treasure of the stored cultural values that have been passed from one generation to another and across civilizations. However, this cultural identity

is currently under siege by the dominance of languages worldwide (Yamamoto et al., 2008). Indeed, all across the world, ethnic communities are grappling with the gradual loss of their native tongues in favor of dominant languages, which

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leaves behind a huge cultural vacuum and a heretofore inattentive linguistic legacy. It turns out that the relationship between language and ethnic identity is complex, where language demarcates the boundaries existing between groups in certain scenarios (Christodouleas, 2008). Whenever there is a language shift, however, the concept of self within communities can be imagined differently, and the corresponding importance of boundaries to maintain social distance becomes the new priority (Christodouleas, 2008).

According to Crystal (2002, 2003) studies that deal with language shift are significant. As he observed, in the last century in the United States the number of native languages spoken in its territory has drastically declined. A similar phenomenon is occurring in Indonesia as reported by Idaryani dan Fidyati (2022). They found that regional and heritage languages face challenges due to the invasive nature of Bahasa Indonesia which finally weakens the use of those vernacular languages in public life. Fitriati (2023) particularly revealed that despite the vast number of speakers of Javanese, the language is currently undergoing a decline of use due to today's changing family traditions which no longer practice Javanese as the language of the home among young people. At the end of the day, this phenomenon inevitably leads to the diminishing role of ethnic languages in public discourse.

According to Crystal (2002, 2003), the shrinking of ethnic language speakers is generally due to pressure from those dominant speakers who are more powerful socially and economically. Similarly, Ewing (2014) said that language endangerment is caused by immigration and a takeover by economically and politically stronger people. Meanwhile, Fishman (1991) argued that even though these ethnic people are disadvantaged socially and economically, they have the right to maintain their language by having all the necessary support from the Government so that their language(s) will survive in the future. Thus, it is no wonder that currently the number of regional or ethnic languages has started to shrink significantly due to the use of dominant languages such as English, Mandarin, and Indonesian. In fact, Krauss (1992) earlier estimated that 25-50% of ethnic languages existing today are in danger of extinction and only around 5-10% of them may be categorized as safe.

Currently, this linguistic phenomenon seems to be occurring among the Malay communities of North Sumatra, Indonesia as reported by Adisaputera (2009). The regional Malay dialects such as Stabat Lama dialect, Secanggang (Langkat) dialect and Sungai Sakat (Labuhanbatu) dialect are currently in decline. Parents, once the custodians of this linguistic heritage, are increasingly choosing to raise their children speaking Indonesian, the national language as also supported by Zen and Apriana

(2015). This shift is driven by social, economic, and political forces. It threatens to silence the community voices. Frey (2013) argues that basically, language shift is the cessation of intergenerational linguistic transmission from a community to another language which is usually more dominant. This happens when they stop parent-to-child transmission at home. If this language shift continues for generations this might ultimately lead to the death of that ethnic language in the society. Therefore, understanding language shift is vital not only for understanding the death, preservation, and revitalization of languages, but also for understanding issues of immigration and assimilation. Among the Malay speakers, this language shift can be seen from the high intensity of the use of Indonesian by the dominant Malay communities as also found by Pramuniati et al. (2024). Such a shift appears to be worse among their younger generation. The number of people from younger generations who are able to comprehend and speak Malay is increasingly getting smaller, probably due to the speaking habits at home and social media.

To fully understand the phenomenon of language shift, it is significant to develop a generally applicable model of which explains the causes and processes of how societies change over time and why they are the way they are currently, as languages are intricately related to their speakers. Perhaps most importantly, such a language shift model will allow academics and activists to determine the next steps in this process, and what steps might reverse the process completely.

Society is a strong variable influencing language shifts because there is a dynamic between the society and language use as spawned by Milroy (1980). This is because the kind of language used by individuals is influenced by the dominant language in the society or in a smaller unit of society called "family". It may be the case that someone who speaks a particular language as a mother tongue or heritage language is not very fluent in that language, especially if they were born in another region. If such a person attempts to speak this inherited language home in an imperfect way, they may receive criticisms or even harsh corrections from parents. This can actually hinder the use of the language as the language of the family. Eventually, the use of this language may end (Lai, 2009).

Accordingly, the weakening of language use can also occur within mixed marriages, particularly when individuals from different cultural, religious, or national backgrounds marry one another. Ismail et al. (2024) found that in families of Sundanese women and French men residing in France, children often prefer to speak French or English, despite understanding Indonesian and some Sundanese. This preference indicates a shift towards the dominant language of the society, highlighting the

challenges of maintaining minority languages within mixed marriage families. This has been confirmed by Kadir (2021) who found that mixed families tend to opt for a more dominant language at home although the mother is not a native speaker of that dominant language. In her Canadian study, Kadir (2021) pointed out that language shifts occurred from Indonesian to English due to social contexts surrounding the family. Indeed, mixed marriages generally force husbands and wives to negotiate about the language of the home (Perak, 2009)

In terms of language as a social tool, Ageev (2001) asserts that when people communicate, they automatically look for similarities both socially and linguistically, but this can be risky in the sense that they might have to suppress their true personal expressions. This is because they are indirectly forced to abandon their small differences and become similar to the majority. This can also cause language shifts. Today humans essentially live in a global village. All countries are interdependent, and for small countries, working together with other large countries becomes more important. By working more closely, everyone, even similar small countries, will begin to follow the majority. This can cause a shift in language even in terms of accent so that people will then behave socially and linguistically according to the customs and values of the majority.

While it is true that language shift is not rapid, many scholars say that it takes at least three generations, but this potential of shifting languages globally appears to be difficult to avoid despite extensive community and governmental efforts to prevent such shifts from happening. These scholars argue that it can take three generations to complete a language shift (Brenzinger, 2007; Edwards, 1984; Jaspaert & Kroon, 1993; Jones, 2003). However, the situation is not that simple. Therefore, Florey and van Engelenhoven (2001) noted, regarding Indonesian migrants in the Netherlands, that the three-generation shift view is a simplification and the situation is very complex. Huffines (1991) explained that the transition from Pennsylvania German to English occurred most frequently within two to three generations. Crawford (1996) and Palmer (1997) observed that language shift among immigrants to the US is accelerating and is now complete within two generations. Giles et al. (1977 as cited in Johnson et al., 1983) reported a shift from Welsh to English among emigrants from South Wales that occurred in less than two generations. Additionally, there may be variations in the third generation (Mesthrie, 2007). In the same vein, Li (1982) reported that, among third-generation Chinese Americans, the transition to English was slower among Chinatown residents than among non-Chinatown residents. All this suggests that the view of the three-generation shift needs to be re-examined, and attention should be paid to

investigating the details of each instance of language shift.

It appears that most studies conducted on the shift of local languages to Indonesian have mostly emphasized the gradual displacement of local languages or regional languages by Indonesian, especially in urban settings or economically developing regions. For example, Ulfa et al. (2018) showed a decline in the Javanese language among Central Java younger speakers, due to formal education and media placed on the Indonesian language. Meanwhile, other studies using participants from Aceh showed that parents' decisions to use a particular language significantly affected intergenerational language transmission due to their beliefs on educational and socioeconomic benefits of using Indonesian (Idaryani & Fidyati, 2022; Ismail et al., 2021). In a way or another, all these studies indicate that socio-economic issues, parental influence, and prestige of Indonesian create weighing against local languages. However, most studies pertaining to language shifts in Indonesia have not specifically targeted Malay-speaking communities in North Sumatra, whose linguistic identities and dynamics of intergenerational language transmission may vary in significant ways on account of cultural and regional peculiarities.

Therefore, this study aims to fill that gap by focusing on the Malay communities in the districts of Asahan, Langkat, Labuhanbatu, and Central Tapanuli, where the North Sumatra Language Center is presently working on language revitalization efforts. In fact, the present study extends the geographical scope of language shift research in Indonesia and provides important considerations in studying the interaction of regional revitalization policies with family-level language practices. This study is significant because these ethnic languages have the right to exist in Indonesia despite the overwhelming influence from Indonesian. Losing an ethnic language means losing the speakers' socio-cultural identity (Fishman, 1991). It also means a loss of cultural values which have been accumulated by their predecessors (Crystal, 2000).

## **METHOD**

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore patterns of language shift among Malay-speaking communities in four districts of North Sumatra: Asahan, Langkat, Labuhanbatu, and Central Tapanuli. The research focused on regional language revitalization activities undertaken by the North Sumatra Province Language Center in 2023, targeting 10 regions—6 based on the Batak language and 4 on the Malay language. Malay and Indonesian are structurally and lexically very similar due to their diachronic relationship, which, combined with the dominant status of Indonesian as

the national language, may contribute to language shift among young Malay speakers<sup>1</sup>.

Holmes's (2013) theory guided the study, particularly the social, economic, political, demographic, and attitudinal factors that encourage language shift. The questionnaire was carefully developed to operationalize these categories within the sociolinguistic context of Acehese, incorporating both closed-ended and open-ended items to capture quantitative and qualitative information. The final instrument contained 26 items, and all participants provided informed consent before completing the questionnaire<sup>1</sup>.

The questionnaires were distributed exclusively in middle-income areas of Asahan, Langkat, Labuhanbatu, and Central Tapanuli, as the middle class is often viewed as a trendsetter or "role model" in society (Lareau, 2011), making their sociolinguistic behavior central to understanding language shift. The target group comprised Malay community members in these four regions, specifically parents who, despite regional language backgrounds, chose to raise their children as Indonesian speakers. The questionnaires were distributed in July and August 2023 to 40 respondents, all of whom returned completed forms. These instruments aimed to uncover parents' attitudes toward language use at home, perceptions of Indonesian and ethnic languages, and related information<sup>1</sup>.

Data collection involved a semi-structured questionnaire with both open-ended prompts and limited closed options. The instrument functioned as a framework for qualitative elicitation, enabling participants to provide nuanced responses. Some participants completed the forms independently, while others received assistance from the researcher or a field assistant, who also recorded oral responses when necessary. Three methods were used: self-administered questionnaires, completion with a field assistant at home, and follow-up to collect completed forms. In both cases, specific information was confirmed as needed.

Determining respondents' income was approached by requesting a monthly income range rather than exact amounts, as not all participants were willing to disclose precise figures. This approach helped identify middle-class status, which was considered central to the study's focus. The sample included 40 respondents aged 37 to 67, with representation across various age groups, ethnicities (18 Malays, 10 Batak, 7 Karo, 5 Javanese), genders (28 women, 12 men), marital statuses (32 married, 8 widowed), and employment statuses (34 working, 6 retired).

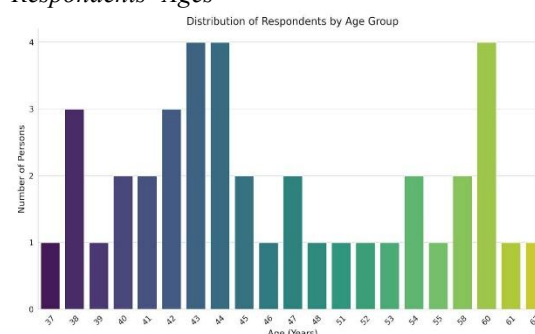
Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step procedure, was used to analyze the data. This included familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming

themes, and producing the report. Themes were coded and described both verbally and in terms of percentages. This approach enabled the identification of dominant and marginal patterns in language attitudes and practices. Although no statistical analysis was conducted, frequencies of key themes were noted descriptively to support interpretation. The aim was to provide contextualized insights into linguistic choices amid sociocultural change, not to generalize findings.

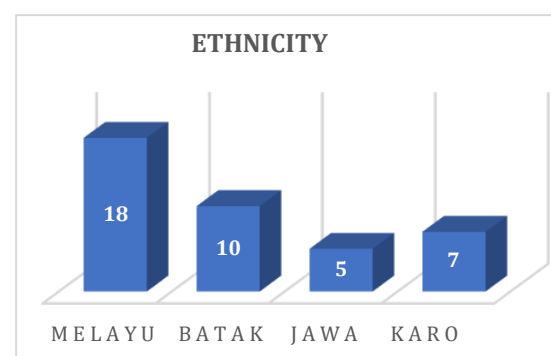
To enhance the validity of the findings, data were triangulated through interviews with selected and willing participants who had filled out the questionnaire. Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the study, with informed consent obtained from all participants and anonymity maintained in all reports and publications

The number of respondents in the study was 40, with ages ranging from 37 years to 67 years. In this study 1 person was taken representing the age group: 37, 39, 46, 48, 51, 52, 53, 55, 61, and 67, and 2 persons representing the age group: 40, 41, 45, 47, 54, and 58, and 3 persons representing the age group of 38 and 42; and finally, 4 persons representing the age group of 43, 44, and 60.

**Figure 1**  
*Respondents' Ages*



**Figure 2**  
*Respondents' Ethnicity*



Ten respondents were selected for each region. The ethnicity of the respondents was 18 Malays, 10 Batak people, 7 Karo people, and 5 Javanese people. Based on gender, the group of the respondents was identified as 28 women, 12 men. Meanwhile, the

marital statuses of 32 respondents were married, 8 were widows/widowers. The employment status of 34 respondents were still working, and 6 were retired.

The data were presented and analyzed based on the questions asked to the respondents following a thematic analysis where each theme was represented in terms of percentages and described verbally. The patterns were then interpreted based on their distributions in the data. Themes in this study were coded with thematic analysis, which is a qualitative method used to identify, code, and report patterns (themes) in data. Thematic analysis was selected because it is versatile and suitable for exploring participants' beliefs, attitudes, and motivations for the use of language in a sociolinguistic context. Thematic analysis for this study adhered to Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step procedure: (1) Familiarization with the data: Transcription of all the responses to the open questions of the questionnaire was made, and the data were read multiple times to ensure immersion. Notes and initial impressions were recorded during this stage; (2) Generating initial codes: Manual open coding was used to code the responses. Brief labels (codes) were assigned to each meaningful portion of the text that summarized its meaning. For example, "*biar anak lancar di sekolah*" or "*takut nanti susah bersosialisasi*" were coded as "academic success" and "social integration," respectively; (3) Searching for themes: Repeating context codes were assigned to potential themes after all data were coded. For instance, education, work, and mobility codes were coded in "Perceived Socio-Economic Benefits of Indonesian" while inheritance, emotional attachment, or sadness codes were coded in "Cultural Identity and Emotional Attachment"; (4) Reviewing themes: themes were defined by reviewing all of the extracts under each theme to ensure consistency. Some of the themes were merged or subdivided into sub-themes to achieve a better description of the data; (5) Defining and naming themes: All the themes were titled and defined clearly to align with its scope. Examples of the final themes included: "Instrumental Motivation for Language Shift", "Parental Language Ideology", "Barriers to Regional Language Transmission", "Efforts to Preserve Regional Languages"; (6) Producing the report: The conclusion analysis was done by presenting the themes with supportive evidence of representative quotes from the respondents. Percentages were calculated to establish the proportion of original answers to the total sample (n=40).

This analytical approach enabled the researchers to identify both dominant and marginal patterns in language attitudes and practices. Although no inferential statistical analysis was conducted, frequencies of key themes were noted descriptively to support the interpretive account.

The aim was not to generalize, but to offer contextualized insights into how individuals made sense of their linguistic choices in the face of sociocultural change.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings and analysis of the study, organized thematically to illuminate the sociolinguistic dynamics of language shift among Malay-speaking communities in North Sumatra.

### Respondents' Language Background

Out of the 40 respondents, it was observed that around 34 (85%) of them were taught regional languages as their mother tongue. Only 6 (15%) use Indonesian as their mother tongue. In terms of other languages spoken at home, respondents' answers showed that Indonesian was the most dominant. This is followed by those using regional languages, bilingualism, and others. This shows that more and more parents are willing to use Indonesian as a language at home. It is also clear that regional languages have not been completely forgotten and that respondents from a Malay background have not completely stopped using regional languages. (See figures 3 and 4 for more details)

**Figure 3**

*Languages Mastered*



**Figure 4**

*The First Language Learned*



In spite of ethnic divisions, all of the participants were closely familiar with Malay, probably because they reside in Malay-dominated regions and Malay closely resembles Indonesian. A 48-year-old male interviewee reported:

*Saya orang Batak, istri saya Melayu. Tapi ya, karena lingkungan sini kan... orang-orang ngomongnya pake Bahasa Melayu atau*



*Indonesia, ya... jadi di rumah pun kami lebih sering lah pake Bahasa Indonesia. Apalagi kalo udah ngomong sama anak-anak, kan... biar mereka juga ngerti...*

[I am Batak, and my wife is Malay. However, due to our surroundings—people here speak either Malay or Indonesian—we tend to use Indonesian more frequently at home. Especially when communicating with our children, so they can understand as well.]  
(Male respondent, 48 years old, Langkat)

This is the kind of way interethnic families play with language, gravitating towards Indonesian when communicating with children, but here motivated by social setting as well as needs for intergenerational bonding.

Respondents accounted for two main possibilities regarding their mother tongues. Most named regional languages as their mother tongue, with fewer naming Indonesian. On questions regarding languages they speak and the first learned, respondents described a complex linguistic history, often involving both regional languages and Indonesian.

Some of the informants indicated that, although raised in the indigenous languages, Indonesian increasingly took over usage on a daily basis. This is a natural reflection of new social conditions and pragmatic communication functions for communicating with subsequent generations, especially children. For instance, one respondent shared:

*Kalau saya sih... bisa lah bahasa daerah, soalnya dari kecil dengar orang tua ngomong, kan. Tapi sekarang... di rumah ya lebih sering pake Bahasa Indonesia aja. Biar anak-anak lancar ngomong, gitu. Lagian di sekolah juga mereka kan belajar pake Bahasa Indonesia, bukan bahasa kampung.*

[As for me, I can speak the local language because I heard my parents had spoken it since I was a child. But nowadays, at home, we tend to use Indonesian more frequently. This is in order that the children can speak fluently. Besides, at school, they learn using Indonesian, not the regional language.]

(Female respondent, 39 years old, Labuhanbatu)

These vignettes predict an altering language tendency, with the indigenous languages being preserved but Indonesian as the language which surfaces for cross-generational communication.

### Language Use Patterns at Home and in Communities

As many as 34 respondents stated that although the regional language was their mother tongue, Indonesian was another language used at home,

namely 21 respondents. Most of the respondents indicated that although their mother tongue was a regional language, Indonesian was dominating daily usage of language at home. Indonesian was used mainly by parents to enable education and integration of the children. The following is what one respondent had to say:

*Di rumah itu kadang-kadang gado-gado lah bahasanya, campur aja. Tapi anak-anak udah biasa pake Bahasa Indonesia, mungkin karena di sekolah pun gitu. Jadi ya kita ikutin aja.*

[At home, the language used is sometimes a mix—a 'gado-gado' of sorts. However, the children are accustomed to using Indonesian, perhaps because that's what they use it at school as well. So, we just follow along.]

(Male respondent, 49 years old, Central Tapanuli)

These trends are easily illustrated in the tables and figures of the study.

**Figure 5**  
Respondent's Mother Language



**Figure 6**  
Language Used at Home



Figure 5 shows that 34 respondents (85%) were taught regional languages as their mother tongue, while 6 respondents (15%) utilized Indonesian as their mother tongue. Figure 6, however, shows that Indonesian is the most dominant language used at home with regional languages and bilingual use coming second. The shift shows that parents go out of their way to accommodate their children's needs using Indonesian at home.

**Table 1**  
*Language Use*

Situation/Position/Realm	Language		
	Local	Indonesia	Bilingual
At home	13	6	21
Outside the house	8	19	13
In a particular social domain	1	33	6
In a certain emotional state	8	6	26
Certain topics of conversation	21	6	13

Table 1 shows that the majority of positions at home use mixed languages (bilingual), namely 21 (52.5%), followed by regional languages at 13 (32.5) and finally Indonesian at 6 (15%). In fact, the majority of positions outside the home were Indonesian, 19 (47.5%), bilingual, 13 (32.5%), and regional languages, 8 (20%). In certain social domains, Indonesian was dominant at 33 (82.5%), bilingual at 6 (15%) and regional language at only 1 respondent (2.5%). In emotional situations, the dominant ones are bilingual, namely 26 (65%), regional languages 8 (20%), finally Indonesian 6 (15%). For special or specific topics of discussion, the dominant ones are regional languages 21 (52.5%), followed by mixed languages 13 (32.5%), and Indonesian 6 (15%). These findings indicate a gradual but clear language shift towards Indonesian in public and social domains, while regional languages maintain a strong presence in intimate and cultural contexts. This aligns with sociolinguistic theory suggesting language shift begins individually but must be accepted community-wide to become established (Hickey, 2010).

### Intergenerational Transmission and Family Language Practice

The participants' recollections of their parents' mother tongues further support the narrative of generational language shift. Most respondents stated that their mothers and fathers grew up speaking regional languages. As shown in Figure 7 and Figure 8, a significant majority of the respondents' mothers (34) and fathers (32) spoke regional languages. Few of them spoke Indonesian or other languages. This background had a significant influence on the respondents' early language experiences. Surprisingly, although having been brought up in families where regional languages dominated, most of the respondents themselves chose to raise their children in Indonesian. Out of 40 respondents, 26 reported growing up speaking Indonesian, while only 12 grew up speaking a regional language. This contrast suggests a shift in parental ideology—valuing Indonesian for its perceived utility and broader social function. Respondents were also asked about the language their spouses use. 20 of them indicated that their partners used Indonesian, while 16 noted the use of regional languages, and the rest reported other languages. This shows that mixed-language

marriages are common and that Indonesian often becomes the unifying medium.

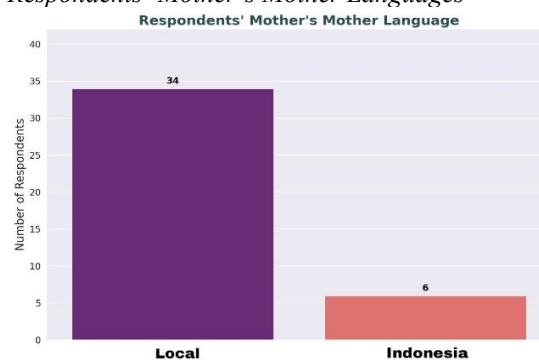
*Kami ini kan sama-sama Melayu, tapi ya... tetep aja lebih sering ngomong pake Bahasa Indonesia. Takut anak-anak bingung denger dua bahasa terus-terusan. Jadi ya kami sepakat, pake Bahasa Indonesia aja lah di rumah.*

[Both my spouse and I are ethnically Malay, but we still tend to speak Indonesian more frequently. We're concerned that our children might get confused if they constantly hear two different languages. Therefore, we've agreed to use Indonesian at home.]

(Female respondent, 39 years old, Asahan)

This shows that even in monoethnic families, Indonesian is increasingly seen as a neutral, practical, and modern language of the future generation.

**Figure 7**  
*Respondents' Mother's Mother Languages*



**Figure 8**  
*Respondents' Father's Mother Languages*



Moreover, when asked about the language spoken between partners, 26 respondents stated they used Indonesian, while 14 used regional languages. This has implications for children's exposure to language. It is likely that if both parents use Indonesian between themselves, children will hear more Indonesian at home—even in unstructured settings. Therefore, the use of Indonesian within intimate relationships can unintentionally reduce children's exposure to regional languages.

### Language Use and Acquisition Among Children

When asked about the first language spoken at home by their children, the respondents' answers revealed a strong preference for Indonesian, though bilingualism was still present. As shown in Figure 9, 24 respondents (60%) reported that their children spoke both Indonesian and a regional language at home, while 12 respondents (30%) said their children used only Indonesian, and only 4 (10%) reported exclusive use of a regional language. These statistics indicate that while some families still employ regional language usage, the most common linguistic input children receive is Indonesian, either monolingually or bilingually.

The same trend is followed in the data on the first acquired language as well. Indonesian was cited as the first acquired language by 26 children (65%), followed by bilingual acquisition (30%), and only 2 children (5%) were cited as having acquired a regional language first. These findings indicate what Saville-Troike (1996) refers to as a sign of language loss—where parents no longer feel there is sufficient reason to pass the language to the next generation. Decreased intergenerational transmission may be due to pragmatic reasons, such as convenience of education, communication among friends, and assumed prestige of Indonesian. All but a few parents did express a desire to preserve cultural identity in language terms, even if that involved the selective use of regional languages. One respondent explained:

*Anak pertama dulu, sempat lah kami ajar bahasa daerah. Tapi pas masuk TK, malah bingung dia. Kayak ngomongnya campur-campur gitu. Jadi kami pikir, udahlah... daripada susah, semua anak pake Bahasa Indonesia aja. Biar gampang.*

[With our first child, we initially taught the local language. However, upon entering kindergarten, he became confused, mixing languages in their speech. Consequently, we decided that, to avoid complications, all our children should use Indonesian at home for ease.]

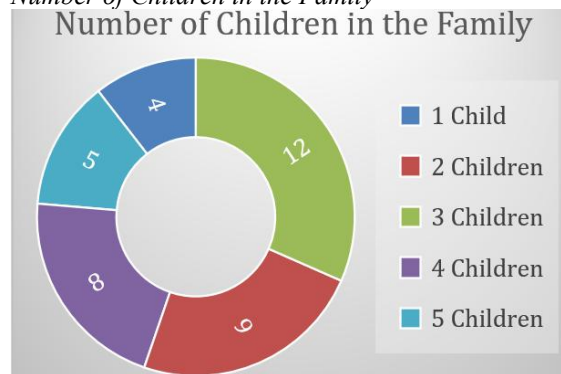
(Male respondent, 41 years old, Labuhanbatu)

This interview extracts a persistent shift in approach: initial attempts at transmitting regional language typically yield to more practical

alternatives as children enter formal education. It also gives some insight into why 36 of 40 informants (90%) chose to bring up their children in Indonesian, as noted in Question 18. Of these, some had initially used a regional language but changed to Indonesian, especially for younger siblings. Only 2 parents (5%) continued to raise their children in regional languages only, and another 2 (5%) used both. These figures show most parents are consistent in their use of language, choosing Indonesian not just as a neutral medium but as an active investment in the futures of children. But the small numbers continuing with regional languages show that emotional and cultural considerations still persist, but in limited form.

Most individuals (33 or 82.5%) had one to four children. Others had up to five or more children, and 36 (90%) raised their children in Indonesian (Figure 9).

**Figure 9**  
Number of Children in the Family



However, it should be noted that in some cases, parents start raising them in the regional language and then switch to Indonesian. Others switch when the first child is a little older, and subsequent children start learning Indonesian from a much younger age. Therefore, most parents made their decision to raise their children in Indonesian, which shows consistency and determination. The fact is that only 2 (5%) each raise their children to speak regional languages and are bilingual—regional languages and Indonesian (Figure 10). It is possible they were trying to protect part of their heritage. This view was actually confirmed by one of the parents.

**Figure 10**  
The Language(s) that Children Are Raised in





## Parental Decision-Making and Language Planning

Regarding the ages of the children when the parents decided to raise their children using a particular language, the majority of parents made this decision before or when the child was born, namely 18 (45%), 1 year old 13 (32.5%), then 2 to 4 years old 9 (22.5%). This represents a clear intention to support education in Indonesian and is supported by responses to previous questions.

In school language instruction, almost all the respondents (36 out of 40) agreed that Indonesian was employed as the prevailing medium of instruction, both primary and secondary. All 4 respondents said they were exposed to bilingual education in Indonesian and regional languages, but nobody answered with exclusive use of a regional language. This finding reinforces the earlier response to Question 18, in which a vast majority of parents stated that they were raising their children in Indonesian. Similarly, all respondents acknowledged that Indonesian was the language of instruction at the senior high school level, which

aligns with national education regulations mandating the use of Indonesian as the official instructional language.

## Parental Motivations for Language Shift

When the parents were queried regarding the alleged advantages of bringing up their children in Indonesian, they furnished a variety of answers that were classified into six general themes as illustrated in Table 2. The most frequent answer was better career opportunities and economic success (15 responses), followed by greater social or communicative capacity (10 responses), and academic success (8 responses). Fewer parents mentioned the status of Indonesian as a national language (5), one its popularity or trendiness, and one the usefulness of bilingualism with local languages. While not all the respondents had yet begun to realize these benefits—particularly those whose children were still young—most parents (20 out of 40) expressed strong belief in the long-term advantages of early Indonesian exposure.

**Table 2**  
*Benefits of Raising Children in Indonesian*

Questions	Number of respondents
Job/ Career/ Income	15
Improved Communication/ Social Skills	10
Better education/studies	8
National language	5
Trendy/Fashion	1
Bilingual (local & Indonesian)	1

Several respondents pointed to the role Indonesian plays in providing their children with confidence, especially in dealing with friends or in the formal setting of schools. One parent said that her own experiences of difficulty with Indonesian at the tertiary level prompted her to prepare her children linguistically from a much younger age. Even where tangible outcomes had yet to emerge, the majority of respondents viewed their language choices as strategic investments in their children's social and academic futures. However, a few parents (three respondents) were silent on the issue, reflecting either uncertainty or reserve in commenting on long-term effects.

Indonesian is also seen as a pragmatic advantage, especially in getting children ready for college. One parent said,

*"Kami mikirnya gini, biar anak-anak nanti nggak susah kayak kami dulu. Dulu kami kuliah pun kadang susah juga ngomong karena Bahasa Indonesianya kurang. Jadi ya dari kecil kami ajar lah Bahasa Indonesia, biar siap mereka."*

[Our thinking is this, we want our children to avoid the difficulties we faced in the past. When we were in college, we sometimes

struggled with communication due to our limited proficiency in Indonesian. Therefore, we have been teaching them Indonesian from an early age to prepare them better.]

(Female respondent, 37 years old, Central Tapanuli)

This reflects that offering Indonesian at a young age is part of a deliberate education plan among parents. Though three did not utter a word regarding this, the rest shared strong belief that the benefits of using Indonesian would become real because there were no responses with undertones implying doubts or regrets about this choice of language.

These findings concur closely with widely accepted research proclaiming economic mobility as a driving force behind language shift. In this study, all participants identified themselves as belonging to the middle class and cited this status as a primary reason for choosing Indonesian. As one respondent put it,

*"Sekarang kan persaingan makin susah. Kalau anak-anak nggak lancar Bahasa Indonesia, ya kasihan lah nanti mereka. Makanya kami nggak maksa mereka pake bahasa kampung*

*terus. Yang penting bisa Bahasa Indonesia dulu, biar bisa maju."*

[Nowadays, competition is becoming increasingly tough. If our children are not fluent in Indonesian, it would be unfortunate for them. That's why we don't insist on them using the local language all the time. The important thing is that they can speak Indonesian first, so they can progress.]  
(Male respondent, 45 years old, Asahan)

This finding affirms the notion that Indonesian is seen not only as a language of wider communication but also as a symbol of socioeconomic advancement. This perspective supports Bekker's (2003) claim that the middle class tends to prefer the use of a more universal language.

### **Spousal Communication and Modeling for Children**

Although many parents themselves grew up in regional-language households, a majority now converse with their spouses in Indonesian. As shown in Figure 8, 26 respondents reported using Indonesian with their partners, while only 14 maintained their regional language in spousal communication. This pattern marks an early sign of intergenerational shift: even when both parents share the same ethnic background, they opt for the national language at home. Consequently, 36 respondents are raising their current children entirely in Indonesian; just 2 each are committed to either regional-only or bilingual child rearing. In this way, parental spousal interactions model the linguistic environment children absorb from birth.

This is considered to be a major change. The complexity of this language shift is that what is statistically given contains many other dimensions of language identity. Change begins with this generation's decision to adopt Indonesian, but it is likely that only the next generation will use Indonesian as their mother tongue. This raises the real possibility of parents' expectations of the education system in Indonesia. This may mean that what the government needs to provide, at least in terms of parental expectations, is more Indonesian language schools rather than regional language schools. An inherent requirement may also be the appointment of teachers who are better trained in Indonesian, or even teachers who can speak Indonesian. This means that they must speak Indonesian at a sufficient level so that the children do not receive a substandard education.

This phenomenon is obviously a threat to regional languages because they will be used less frequently. The reduced use of regional languages is not yet considered language extinction, because a complete language shift is needed. This can only happen "when a community switches to a new language so that the old language is no longer used"

(Fasold, 1984). However, regional languages can still be used in kindergarten, during interactions with regional-speaking parents at home, through contact with regional-speaking extended family members, and even with regional-speaking neighbors. In this process children will definitely maintain a certain level of proficiency in the regional language. The reality is that the situation has changed, meaning that not everyone in the house and family no longer speaks the regional language. There has been a transition from everyone's mother tongue to a regional language to a mother tongue which is now considered Indonesian for the majority of society, starting from the attitude of parents who prefer Indonesian. Therefore, there is a shift, although not yet complete; but this remains a complex change.

Parents typically decide on their children's primary language very early, often before or immediately after birth. A majority of participants chose Indonesian by the time their firstborn was one year old; a smaller number made the switch by age two. Only five families delayed the shift until their child was four years old or older. This trend suggests that most parents are intentional and consistent in introducing Indonesian early, aiming to establish it as their children's primary language during the early years.

It appears that all these sociolinguistic patterns confirm Fishman's (1991) original language shift definition, in which every generation shows diminished competence in their mother tongue. Although respondents in the early years communicated in local languages, they now structure daily life in Indonesian and raise their kids as such. As a result, younger generations have increasingly limited exposure to regional languages, especially in the domains of speaking, reading, and writing. It is only the committed minority that persist in engaging intensively with their heritage language, retaining its use in specific family or community settings.

### **Patterns and Processes of Language Shift**

While motivations for language shift vary between families, this study reveals shared patterns that allow for generalizations. These findings support Hickey's (2010) perspective on broader trends in the language shift. Furthermore, this study confirms several key factors contributing to language shift, as previously discussed in the literature. Participants' responses reflected widely recognized drivers such as socioeconomic mobility, educational aspirations, and the increasing dominance of Indonesian in both public and private domains.

*Language maintenance.* No evidence was found of organized efforts to promote language maintenance for the Malay community. However, there is sufficient evidence that language maintenance does occur, although with lower

intensity because the language addressed to children at home and at school is Indonesian. This is proven by the finding that around 35% of respondents continued to talk with their partner in the regional language. In this way, at least the use of regional languages in the household can be enforced. This confirms Hoffman's (1991) view, as long as people at least try to continue using the language. Another factor in language maintenance is the community context. These communities predominantly speak regional languages and therefore the language will be maintained due to exposure to the language in various domains of use. Children will still enjoy contact with regional languages, albeit within certain limits; however, such contacts will be further strengthened by the presence of regional language communities.

*Language death.* It is believed that regional languages in the Malay community have not yet reached the stage of language death. What is encouraging is that there is still intentional interaction between partners in this language. This to some extent creates the necessary environment to promote these languages and prevent language death, as suggested by Nettle and Romaine (2000). In this case, confirmation of a language shift occurring in this community should be considered a warning sign.

*Bilingualism.* There is sufficient evidence of bilingualism in this community. Although Indonesian is dominant in household and spousal communication (52.5% and 35%, respectively), there remains evidence of bilingual practices, suggesting that some families still incorporate regional languages alongside Indonesian. This suggests that we may be dealing with linguistically intelligent individuals, as Alexopoulou (2011) views that switching between two linguistic systems increases cognitive alertness. Meanwhile, Bhattacharjee (2012) states that bilingual children have greater confidence in speaking to more people and a wider audience than monolingual children.

*Indonesian hegemony.* The findings of this study, namely 36 (90%) children were raised in Indonesian and only 5% were regional and bilingual (Indonesian and regional languages), confirms that parents do have the choice to raise their children in Indonesian. Researchers suggest that certain stages are achieved during the language shift process. There appear to be three visible stages in this process, namely the decision-making stage, decision implementation, and evaluation stage.

Finally, a decision must be made, especially by parents, to raise children in Indonesian. This decision can be taken at the time the child is born or later. The decision may be motivated by social class or a real interest in the child's future. In addition, there is a second stage, called execution, which means where their children will be raised in Indonesian and when they go to school they are also

exposed to the use of Indonesian. This could further include parents communicating with each other in Indonesian at home on a regular basis. The third stage, called evaluation, implies that the parents talk to the child about the decision to raise him in Indonesian and not the regional language. This also involves evaluating whether there is any regret about this decision. Parents may even encourage their children to continue using the local language as a second language.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, this study confirms a significant language shift among regional language-speaking communities in North Sumatra towards Indonesian usage, especially in educational and family settings. Such direction is driven by interethnic communication needs, economic aspirations, and educationally based motivations. Pragmatic language ideologies of parents are key in promoting such a direction, and structural contrasts between Indonesian and Malay ease the transition process. While others still attempt to maintain regional languages, attempts are uncoordinated and ignored. The study also finds a three-stage model of decision-making in parental actions: choosing an initial language, applying it to the daily context, and ongoing monitoring. A major point of critique of the present study emerged, namely, the neglect of children's own attitudes toward languages when studying the broad intergenerational dynamics of language acquisition; this offers a serious limitation. The insight that emerges indicates an immediate need for renewal events of sufficient strength so as to involve truly children and their parents in the effort to preserve an int-local language heritage.

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## **APPENDIX A**

### **Questionnaire Items Used in the Study**

*(Based on Holmes' (2013) sociolinguistic framework: social, economic, political, demographic, and attitudinal factors)*

#### **Section A: Demographic Information**

- Q1. What is your age?
- Q2. What is your gender?
- Q3. What is your ethnic background?
- Q4. What is your highest level of education?
- Q5. What is your monthly income range?
- Q6. What is your current occupation?
- Q7. How many children do you have?

#### **Section B: Language Background and Use**

- Q8. What is your mother tongue?
- Q9. What language did you first learn as a child?
- Q10. What language(s) do you speak fluently?
- Q11. What language is most frequently used at home?
- Q12. What language is most frequently used with your spouse/partner?
- Q13. What language do you use when talking to your children?
- Q14. At what age did you begin using Indonesian to communicate with your children?
- Q15. What language(s) does your child most often speak at home?
- Q16. What was the first language your child learned?
- Q17. In what language is your child being raised? (Indonesian / Regional / Both)

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Guiding Questions for the Semi-Structured Interviews (Based on Holmes' (2013) Sociolinguistic Framework: Social, Economic, Political, Demographic, and Attitudinal Factors)**

1. Why did you choose to raise your children using the language?
2. Do you think Indonesian is more useful for your child's education than your regional language? Why or why not?
3. Do you believe knowing a regional language is important for your child? Explain.
4. In your opinion, what are the advantages of raising children in Indonesian?
5. Have you ever tried to teach your child your regional language? Why or why not?
6. Are you concerned that your regional language might be lost in future generations?
7. How do you feel when your child does not speak your regional language?
8. What efforts have you made to maintain the use of your regional language in the family?
9. Do you believe both Indonesian and regional languages should be taught equally at home? Why or why not?