SUSTAINING THE MELANAU LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a strategy to sustain the Melanau language. The justification for sustaining the language includes possibilities of language endangerment which has destroyed thousands of languages of the world. The Melanau language which covers multiple dialects is exposed to many threats such as attitudes towards the language and dominant languages, especially in dealing with the forces of globalization. Therefore, the strategy to sustain the Melanau language includes programmes of documentation, promoting the language into cyberspace and media, the revival of art and literature, and the introduction of the language to the national academic setting. It needs to be implemented by various parties, especially the speakers of Melanau themselves. However, the sustainability effort might face challenges particularly involving multiple Melanau dialects. Thus, this situation deserves careful attention from all the Melanau speech communities.

Keywords: *sustainability, endangered language, native language, dialect*

1. Introduction

This paper describes ways to sustain the Melanau language. Many sociolinguists and researchers have come up with the cautions that many languages of the world are exposed to many kinds of endangerment due to forces of globalization; therefore, there is no exception for Melanau. However, of all the studies conducted on Melanau language, none had clearly defined a Melanau language due to the multiple dialects it covers. Therefore, this study aims at focusing on problems related to Melanau language as a whole.

Morris (1991) says, the term 'Melanau' used in his book, rather imprecisely, 'usually refers only to the speakers of related dialects in the Rejang area and on the coast.' In addition, as far as multiple dialects are concerned, Zaini (1998) classifies 6 Melanau 'dialects' based on the degree of mutual intelligibility and geographical position:

  a.   Kuala Rajang Dialect: Rajang, Jerijeh, Belawai, Segalang and Paloh

  b.   Seduan or Sibu Dialect: Sibu, Kanowit, Tanjong, Igan and Banyuk.

  c.   Matu-Daro Dialect: Matu, Daro, Beruit Island and Lassa River area.

  d.   Mukah-Dalat Dialect: Mukah, Dalat, Oya and Kut River

  e.   Balingian Dialect

  f.   Bintulu Dialect: Bintulu, Tatau, Kemena River and Sebiew.

Being part of the community's cultural heritage and diversity, the Melanau language deserves careful attention. The language will be increasingly under threat if there are no proper

sustainability plans, and without which the Melanau cultural diversity will possibly fade. At this point, the Melanau language will be very much changed from the language spoken by earlier generations, and language forms and patterns will be greatly influenced by a more dominant language. Consequently, the language will disappear. In accordance with the situation, Trask (1999) states that a language particularly a minority language may come under enormous pressure from a more prestigious or more widely used language spoken nearby. Thus, it is high time to explore solutions to the problem.

2. Rationale For Sustainability Program

2.1 Dealing with language threats

A systematic and organised sustainability program must be planned immediately and systematically so that the Melanau language is exposed to an enormous threat namely language death.

> "Languages typically die when speakers of a small language group come in contact with a more dominant population."

(Lydersen, 2009)

One of the main reasons for implementing a sustainability program is the possibility of language extinction due to the dominant functions of other languages. Trask (1999) defines 'minority language' as a long-established language spoken as a mother tongue by people in some part of a country in which the national or official language is something else. Melanau language, being a minority language, is exposed to threats especially in competing with dominant languages like Malay and English. At this point, based on observation among certain Melanau speech communities, it is found that Malay and English are more dominant because they are more widely used in a greater number of contexts.

Priya Kulasugaran (7 July 2013) writes, Ethnologue: Languages of the World, an international research project cataloguing the world's languages, lists 140 indigenous languages for Malaysia — with two already extinct. It was also reported that in 2003, it was estimated that 380,000 Malaysians use English as their first language. This indicates that the English language could easily gain popularity due to its dominant functions, and possibly due to its international status. The outcome of this, if not observed immediately, of course, is language death involving more indigenous languages.

Janse (2003) lists five (5) levels of language endangerment:

   i.   A language is potentially endangered if the children start preferring the dominant language and learn the obsolescing language imperfectly.

   ii. It is endangered if the youngest speakers are young adults and there are no or very few child speakers.

   iii. It is seriously endangered if the youngest speakers are middle-aged or past middle age.

   iv. It is terminally endangered or *moribund* if there are only a few elderly speakers left.

   v.   A language is dead when there are no speakers left at all.

Cited in Colls (2009), Claude Hagege claims that most people were not interested in the death of languages, but they must be cautious about the way the English language had progressed because it could eventually kill other languages.

2.2 Current Language Trends

Another reason for the implementation of a sustainability program is the existence of current trends in language use which has a great impact on a mother tongue. Among others, an unhealthy trend among the Melanau people, as well as other speech communities, is the use of 'code-switching' in their daily conversations. It might cause changes in language forms and sentence patterns, or even replace native words with the integration of dominant languages. According to Trask (1999), code-switching involves "changing back and forth between two language varieties, especially in a single conversation." Among the languages commonly mixed in the Melanau speech communities are Malay and English, without which they would experience problems in getting the right words for the intended meanings in an easier way. This could also happen due to the prestigious reputation of the languages used.

Additionally, attitudes towards language among certain modern families also contribute to language endangerment. Therefore, sustainability programmes are significant. In these families, the Melanau language is no longer passed on to children as a result of complex reasons such as mixed marriages or the perceived status of the language. The replacement of simple kinship terms with English words is an example of a common practice among them. Words like 'mum (mummy)' (English) instead of 'Mak' (Melanau) and 'uncle' (English) instead of '*tuwak*' (Melanau) are examples of commonly replaced terms. This progress is regarded as normal that anyone in a modern society would do to catch up with trends, but the Melanau communities must be aware of the fact that this trend will affect their language in a long run. Janse (2003), however, claims that "every language is the guardian of its speakers' history and culture." Therefore, modernisation does not require us to sacrifice our language or even let go of our identity to be able to survive.

2.3 Promoting Linguistic and Cultural Diversity

To promote linguistic and cultural diversity of a community requires us to come up with proper sustainability programs. These programs are targeted at not only promoting the Melanau culture in general but also the Melanau language specifically. This is important because we do not want Melanau to be known for its unique physical culture only, but also its vast beautiful collections of words. It is important to ensure that the Melanau language is not merely a physical culture. We must not be too ambitious to imagine its use in the international platform, but it would be a great achievement if the Melanau culture is not only identified for its annual celebration of Kaul festival or the freshness of its '*umai*', but also for its organised collections print and online sources of word lists, glossaries, grammatical and phonological descriptions, and literature. Despite all the challenges of globalization, the Melanau community has managed to plan for a special approach to sustain its cultural diversity.

2.4 Getting Recognition and Status

To get recognition of an effort is not a simple task, but it requires excellent performance throughout the process. Therefore, to ensure Melanau language gets recognition either locally or internationally or both, a proper plan is necessary. This can be achieved through the implementation of a sustainability program. Due to its limited function in a society, a minority ethnic language like Melanau has a bigger chance to be associated with a lower social class. The perceived lower social class has discouraged members of the society to use the language, especially in public domains. Therefore, the need to regain the status of the Melanau language

is an urgent task for the speech community themselves. They need to ensure that the language will no longer be associated with negative aspects.

> *"Being migrants in the early days, Melanaus are found almost everywhere in Sarawak. Sadly, though their children know their roots, many of them cannot speak or even understand their Melanau language intentionally or unintentionally, many of them registered themselves as other races, mostly as Malays. In some cases, their parents, both Melanaus, prefer to speak to their children using Malay or English. This language trend is mainly found in the towns and cities in Sarawak. There have been little efforts done to preserve the Melanau dialects and to teach the current Melanau generation continuous usage of their own dialects."*

(Wikipedia, 2013)

Above is a description of Melanau people and their language on an online free encyclopedia. This requires us to justify why we must disagree with the definition. As much as possible, we do not want to be generally associated with the qualities mentioned, but some are indicative of parts of the present Melanau community.

3.0 Strategy For Sustaining The Melanau Language

Members of the Melanau speech communities need to come up with better ways of sustaining the language. Unless a plan is worked out to maintain and revitalise whatever aspect the language lacks, there will be a better future for the language. Otherwise, the future generations of Melanau will only be able to recognise a physical culture. Brenzinger and de Graaf (2012) claim that speakers of an endangered language are the ones who uphold and give up languages; therefore, they are responsible to execute language maintenance and revitalization measures.

Elements of the sustainability program are as follows:

i.   Documentation

It is recommended that documentation of the Melanau language will include bilingual dictionaries, audio or video recordings, texts, and phonological and grammatical descriptions. This will allow language users and future generations to have better sources of information about the language. In addition, appropriate and recent technologies of information systems should be employed to ensure the security of the materials.

As far as a dictionary is concerned, a more user-friendly bilingual dictionary is in great need. For a non-Melanau, the existing bilingual Melanau dictionary is found quite complicated to use because the word lists are in Melanau. This creates a problem among those who do not have background knowledge of the Melanau language. Besides, it is also recommended that each Melanau dialect come up with a word list that could later be combined to come up with a concise Melanau Thesaurus. This effort might be tiresome, but the outcome might considerably benefit future Melanau speech communities.

ii.   Melanau Songs and Oral Tradition

The sustainability of a language can also be achieved through songs and oral tradition. It might not be the best way, but as far as Iban songs are concerned, they have gained popularity not only among the Iban communities, but also the general public throughout Sarawak. This, as a

result, has helped promote the Iban language. A similar approach in the Melanau language could probably help sustain the language.

Apart from composing contemporary songs, reviving Melanau oral tradition can help sustain the language. Very little has been done to sustain this aspect of the Melanau culture. Aloysius Dris (1998) claims that 'the Melanau oral tradition is definitely fast disappearing', therefore, immediate actions should be planned to revive this tradition.

iii. Melanau Language on Cyberspace

Cyberspace is one of the most suitable places to promote and sustain the Melanau language. It can be achieved by extending the language online. A Melanau website can be specifically designed and maintained to promote the language and community as a whole. There has been no specific website that could be a one-stop centre for information on the Melanau culture. It is high time that the community come up with an online one-stop centre that could provide exact and proper information on the Melanau community. This could help sustain the Melanau diverse culture and unique language. Moreover, it is recommended that the community come up with an online bilingual dictionary through this website. This could help a lot, especially in sustaining the language.

iv. Academic Settings

Another sustainability program to put into practice is the introduction of the Melanau language into academic settings nationwide. This can be done by teaching the Melanau language in a formal education system. This approach can be considered as an ethnic identity awareness program. It might not be so practical without experienced or trained teachers. However, Iban, another ethnic language in Sarawak has gained recognition as one of the language subjects taught in schools nationwide, and it has also gained interest among the public universities in Malaysia. This indicates that the introduction of ethnic language into the academic system is worth the effort.

v. Media

The media comprising TV, radio, and press as a whole plays a very important role in sustaining a language. For instance, Melanau sociolinguists or associations can plan for a detailed proposal to produce Melanau-based TV and radio programs which could attract people to explore the term Melanau. These cultural programs will benefit the Melanau community and could help revive the unspoken words of Melanau and the long-forgotten tradition. In addition, the print media could also contribute to this effort. Melanau linguists, sociolinguists, or scholars can work out on coming with Melanau newspaper columns nationwide. This can be the best platform for Melanau writers to share interesting facts about the Melanau language and culture particularly.

4.0 The Parties Involved

Sustaining a language does not only involve the speech communities themselves but also policymakers, linguists, and language planners.

i. Policy Makers, Sociolinguists, and Scholars

Policymakers, sociolinguists, and scholars play very significant roles to implement the strategy. They are the ones who should take on the responsibility to initiate plans and programs to sustain

the language. Despite problems in getting experts in the area of Melanau language, any linguists and scholars who have the expertise can contribute to the program through collaborations with the speech communities.

Brenzinger and de Graaf (2012) propose that linguists and other scholars can help communities in such efforts, especially in providing language resources from archives, by training them to become language workers or even linguists, and also by assisting them to produce language learning and teaching materials. Therefore, it is recommended that linguists and community members should together be responsible for coming up with documentation of the wealth of linguistic diversity. This will enable them to pass on this legacy to future generations.

ii.   Speech Community, Parents, and Children

In order to sustain a language, every single member of a speech community needs to examine their attitudes towards languages surrounding them. This will decide whether or not they take on responsibilities to respect and protect their language from all kinds of threats. Either being a superior or a subordinate, or being parents or children, or being a leader or a member of any speech community does not indicate whose role is bigger or tougher. Everyone needs to collaborate to implement any sustainability programs concerning the Melanau community. It is everyone's responsibility to use, protect, and finally pass down their ethnic language to the next generation. This can be done through intergenerational transmission of the language. According to Soto (n.d.), children and our society as a whole lose something when languages, along with cultural wisdom and pride, are no longer passed down to the next generation.

5.   Challenges

5.1 Which Melanau Dialect?

The biggest challenge is the fact that Melanau consists of multiple dialects that we need to come to a decision about what to sustain. Should we sustain one standard Melanau language, or should the various dialects carry out their own efforts or both?

According to Aloysius (1998), "Language or dialect can be considered a problem area for the Melanau community because there are at least five or six different dialects within the community, which among some, are fairly incomprehensible so much so that another medium of communication becomes necessary" (p.234).

5.2 Where Do We Start?

Another challenge is to decide how and when we could introduce the language into the academic system. To be able to get into the system, a language has to be one of the dominant languages, but so far the Melanau language is not among the top ethnic languages in Sarawak.

6.   Conclusion

> "…the intergenerational transmission of the language, i.e. teaching the children the heritage language, is the most important feature of language vitality."

> (Brenzinger and de Graaf , 2012)

In line with the term 'sustainable development', it is necessary that the Melanau speech communities from multiple dialect groups collaborate to plan and implement sustainability programs that could ensure the survival of the language. This could also ensure that future Melanau generations will still be able to explore the beauty and uniqueness of the Melanau heritage, especially language.

Paul Lewis, Ethnologue editor says, "We should spend an awful lot of money to preserve a very old building because it is part of our heritage. Languages and cultures are equally part of our heritage and [they] merit preservation" (Colls, 2009). The question is whether it is worthwhile to sacrifice our culture and language in exchange for progress.

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