

Critical ecological factors in ethnolinguistic vitality: evidence from Enggano

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This paper discusses ecological factors affecting the ethnolinguistic vitality of Indonesian minority languages with reference to Enggano (eno, ISO 639-3, Austronesian, around 1500 speakers). Ethnolinguistic vitality is defined as the extent to which a group is likely to behave as “a distinctive and collective entity within the intergroup setting” (Giles, Bourhis, and Taylor 1977:308) and, therefore, the extent to which its language is passed on to the next generations (Pauwels 2016:37). Research on ethnolinguistic vitality is critical in language endangerment as it has practical policy implications (e.g., for language maintenance and revitalisation).

The research reported in this paper is a qualitative study, part of our current language documentation on Enggano. It is based on ethnographic/interview data, combined with questionnaire data with a total of 26 participants from different villages across the island. We investigated patterns of language use in different important domains such as domestic, traditional (*adat*), and public in-/out-group interactions with targeted Enggano consultants consisting of three different age groups (elders, middle-aged adults and children). The data sets across different age groups provide evidence for the rate of intergenerational transmission of Enggano. The analysis is framed within an interdisciplinary ecolinguistic perspective: we examine the dynamics of the Enggano language as part of larger co-existence and mutual interactions of the Enggano speech community with their natural-biological, social-cultural-symbolic, and cognitive ecologies (Haugen 1972, Næss 2008, Chen 2016, among others).

Essential questions to be addressed include: (i) the assessment of the ethnolinguistic vitality of contemporary Enggano and (ii) the most critical factors affecting the level of vitality revealed in (i). Our findings suggest that Enggano is endangered (or level 3 on UNESCO’s Language Vitality Assessment 6-point scale) and that a complex dynamic of intertwined variables has led to this low vitality. This is supported by our questionnaire data on self-assessed Enggano fluency, shown in Figure 1. As seen, there is a significant change in mother tongue fluency, indicating insufficient intergenerational transmission of the Enggano language. In addition, our other data suggests a clear shift towards Indonesian among the Enggano children, a pattern familiar in other parts of Indonesia.

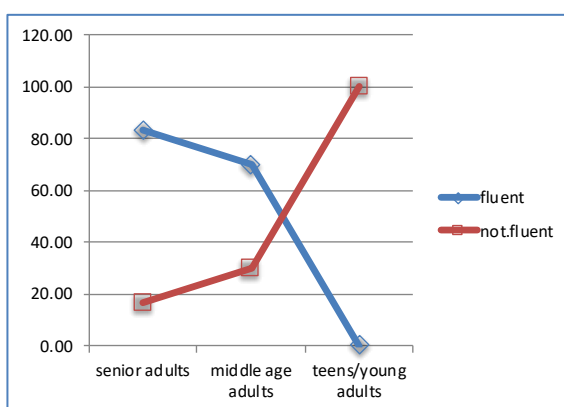


Figure 1. Enggano Fluency across three generations

Based on our comparative analysis of the vitality of other minority languages with relatively healthy vitality in Indonesia, such as Loloan (Sosiowati et al. 2019), we argue that the two most critical factors for vitality are (i) the distinctive identity-related symbolic status of the language and (ii) local territorial integrity allowing healthy close-knit social networks (cf., Gumperz and Hymes 1972, Milroy 1987, Milroy and Milroy 1992) to function well on a daily basis. The properties associated with these two situated ecological factors are weak in Enggano. Territorial integrity has been significantly weakened by the influx of migrants to the island in the past three decades, especially in the northern and southern parts of Enggano Island. The weakening appears to extend to the central part of the island,

where Enggano is still spoken by Enggano adults. Importantly, the symbolic status of the Enggano language as a distinctive collective Enggano identity in relation to other ethnolinguistic groups in the immediate region of Bengkulu-Sumatra has been diffused, split and therefore weakened by the emerging and competing identities associated with modern religions (Christianity and Islam). The introduction of modern religion, which has had a devaluing effect on the local indigenous belief system and therefore also the indigenous identity has been reported elsewhere in Indonesia (Arka 2010). In the full paper, we provide further data and discussion of possible strategies mitigating the negative effect of these two factors.

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