

Language contact and language vitality: evidence from Enggano

This paper reports the findings of our preliminary study on the interconnection between language contact and language endangerment/vitality in Enggano, a language spoken by approximately 1,500 speakers on the island of Enggano, 100 km southwest of Sumatra. Enggano is of particular interest as the language community was previously quite isolated, but has recently undergone an unprecedented language shift due to a massive influx of migrants, primarily settling in the northern and southern parts of the island in the villages of Banjarsari and Kayaapu. The Enggano island consequently serves as a living sociolinguistic laboratory for the study of the impact of language contact on (ethno)linguistic vitality, and our findings contribute to the broader sociolinguistic theory of language shift and endangerment. In our ethnographic study complemented with data from questionnaires and interviews, we compare the nature of intergenerational transmission of the Enggano language in the conservative village of Meok, located in the middle, and in the northern/southern villages of Banjarsari/Kayaapu. In all locations, the data points to a shift towards Indonesian, with almost all of the teenagers and young adults reporting that they are not fluent in Enggano. Even in the conservative village of Meok, 100% of the young generation learn the language from their grandparents rather than their parents. Similarly, Indonesian is used in formal contexts among all generations, and increasingly in domestic contexts as well with 60% of the young generation using Indonesian at home when speaking with their siblings. The shift is most pronounced in Banjarsari/Kayaapu. Our findings therefore support what has been reported in the literature, namely that migration to previously isolated areas and the resulting inter-ethnic and language contact can lead to accelerated language shift. Similar findings were reported for the Ugong language in Bradley (1989) and in the Indonesian context in Arka (2005, 2013). However, we do not argue that inter-ethnic contact always adversely affects the vitality of a (minority) language. Rather, the effect of contact on a minority language is critically determined by the nature of the multilingualism in which contact occurs (egalitarian vs. non-egalitarian; cf. François (2012)) and the extent of damage inflicted by the contact to the native ecological integrity of the speech community, since this can affect the traditional social networks (cf. Milroy 1987) necessary for maintaining the local equilibrium needed for healthy intergenerational transmission of the language. In the case of Enggano, the Indonesian language used for inter-ethnic communication is viewed as having higher prestige (Simanjuntak 2014) and hence the non-egalitarian multilingualism created by inter-ethnic contact has sped up the process of language shift in Banjarsari and Kayaapu. In the full paper we provide further discussion and detailed evidence from our qualitative and quantitative study on the vitality of Enggano in different villages on the island, in the context of vitality studies in other languages of Indonesia.

References

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