

Assessing the Vitality of Endangered Languages in Central Maluku

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The past decade has witnessed a marked upsurge internationally in concern about language endangerment, which has stemmed from a growing realization that the world's linguistic resources are rapidly shrinking. There have been calls for action from members of language communities and from linguists. Documentation of endangered languages has begun to receive stronger support internationally from universities, community organizations and from governmental and philanthropic funding bodies. Researchers in the newly developing field of language endangerment studies draw on a wide range of factors to assess language vitality, such as size of the speech community, disruptions to language transmission, shrinking domains of language use, grammatical restructuring and so forth. Speech communities are characterized in the literature by a profusion of poorly defined terms, such as healthy, shifting, threatened, endangered, moribund, obsolescent, and extinct. The lack of standardized assessment and definitions of language vitality impedes comparison of language endangerment scenarios across communities.

This paper discusses a tool which is being developed in four language communities in Ambon and Seram islands to assess language vitality in Central Maluku, eastern Indonesia. This standardized test provides an informed overview of linguistic vitality based on empirical data rather than less formal tools (e.g. survey, self-reporting or observation). It permits researchers to assess intergenerational transmission of linguistic and other indigenous knowledge, to undertake comparisons of linguistic vitality between sites, and to analyze if and how linguistic ability varies according to factors such as age/generation, gender, special roles, religious affiliation, and so forth. The findings provide feedback to the wider community to raise awareness of language vitality and language shift or loss, and allow the development of appropriate language learning materials. The linguistic data provide a comparative cross-linguistic database for typological analyses of linguistic features, historical-comparative analyses of linguistic relatedness and language change, and sociolinguistic analyses of language shift and language variation.