

Belait Language Maintenance in Brunei Darussalam

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Abstract

The Belait language, an endangered indigenous language of Brunei, is experiencing a significant decline due to language shift, urbanization, and reduced intergenerational transmission. This study provides a descriptive analysis of the current status of Belait, examining the sociolinguistic factors contributing to its endangerment and evaluating strategies for its preservation. Findings indicate that Belait faces challenges such as the dominance of Malay and English, limited institutional support, and a sharp decline in fluent speakers. However, community-led revitalization projects, linguistic documentation, and digital initiatives have emerged as crucial interventions to mitigate this decline. Government-supported language documentation efforts, integrating Belait into digital platforms, and community-driven educational programs have been identified as key strategies for sustaining the language. This study underscores the urgent need for structured institutional support and policy driven initiatives to complement grassroots efforts, ensuring the survival of Belait as a vital component of Brunei's linguistic and cultural heritage. Strengthening language maintenance strategies through education, digital engagement, and government collaboration is essential to reversing the trend of language loss for future generations.

Keywords: Belait, minority, endangered, language maintenance, intergenerational transmission

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INTRODUCTION

The Belait language (BB) is one of Brunei Darussalam's indigenous languages, classified under the Austronesian family, specifically within the Baram-Tinjar subgroup of North Sarawak languages (Blust, 1972). Historically, it has been spoken by the Belait ethnic group, which is recognized as one of the seven indigenous (jati) groups under the Written Constitution States of Brunei 1959. This constitutional recognition underscores the importance of preserving the language, though it does not explicitly mandate language preservation efforts. The Belait language has variations across different regions, such as Kg Sungai Teraban, Kuala Balai, Labi, and Kg Kiudang, each displaying distinct phonological and lexical characteristics (Zulfadzlee, 2024a). Despite its historical significance, BB has faced a decline in usage

due to sociolinguistic factors, primarily language shift and diminished intergenerational transmission.

Language plays a pivotal role in preserving cultural heritage, identity, and historical continuity. In Brunei, where Malay and English dominate the linguistic landscape, Belait is increasingly overshadowed, especially in educational institutions, media, and official contexts. This shift has led to a diminished perception of Belait as a key component of the Belait community's identity, contributing to a sense of linguistic and cultural dislocation. The decline of the language represents not only a loss of linguistic diversity but also the erosion of cultural practices, traditions, and local knowledge systems embedded in the language.

Efforts toward language maintenance are essential to reversing this trend. Language documentation efforts ensure the systematic recording and accessibility of Belait for future generations, making it possible to preserve both its linguistic and cultural significance. The maintenance and preservation of the Belait language are crucial not only for the Belait community but also for Brunei's broader cultural heritage. Language diversity is an essential aspect of national identity (Edwards, 1984), and the loss of Belait would lead to the loss of cultural depth and historical continuity. Therefore, this study aims to provide a descriptive analysis of the current state of the Belait language, examining its challenges and ongoing efforts to sustain its use. The research focuses on the demographic distribution of Belait speakers, language use, language shift indicators, and language maintenance strategies.

The Current Status of Belait in Brunei Darussalam

The Belait language (BB) is primarily spoken in the Belait district of Brunei, with villages such as Kuala Balai, Labi, and Sungai Teraban being its primary areas of use (Noor Alifah, 2004). A smaller number of Belait speakers are also found in the Tutong district, particularly in Kampung Kiudang. However, migration and urbanization have relocated many Belait families to more developed areas, leading to a dispersed speaker population. Brunei, located in Southeast Asia, features a diverse linguistic landscape that reflects its rich cultural and historical influences. Research on regional languages in Brunei, including BB, has gained attention as it highlights the intersections of language preservation, the effects of globalization, and the importance of maintaining cultural identity (Zulfadzlee, 2024b). The map below shows the distribution of languages across Brunei, including Belait.

The Belait community historically recognized as a distinct ethnic group under Brunei's 1959 Constitution, one of the seven *puak jati* (indigenous groups). Despite this recognition, the number of fluent BB speakers has sharply declined due to various sociolinguistic factors, placing the language in the endangered category. Martin (1990) classifies BB as a minority language due to its relatively small number of speakers. Similarly, Blust (1972) lists it as an endangered language within the Baram region's minority group. One of the most precise indicators of this decline is the decrease in the number of native speakers. Martin (2005) estimated that only 800 individuals were fluent in BB, likely decreasing further due to intergenerational language loss. A study by Martin (1995) illustrates this decline across three generations: 96% of grandparents were fluent in BB, 60% of parents were fluent, but only 9% of children could speak it. In the latest Drayton (2022) study, the number is only declining to an estimated 200 people. This number is based on estimates made by sources and informants of the

Belait people. The decline in the number of Belait speakers over the past 35 years is very worrying, and continuous efforts must be made to preserve and preserve this language. According to Martin (1995), the vitality rate of Belait was 0.5, which already signalled its critically endangered status. However, Noor Azam and Ajeerah's (2016) study predicted that the vitality rate has declined further to 0.1. These findings emphasized the urgent need for revitalization efforts to prevent the language from extinction.

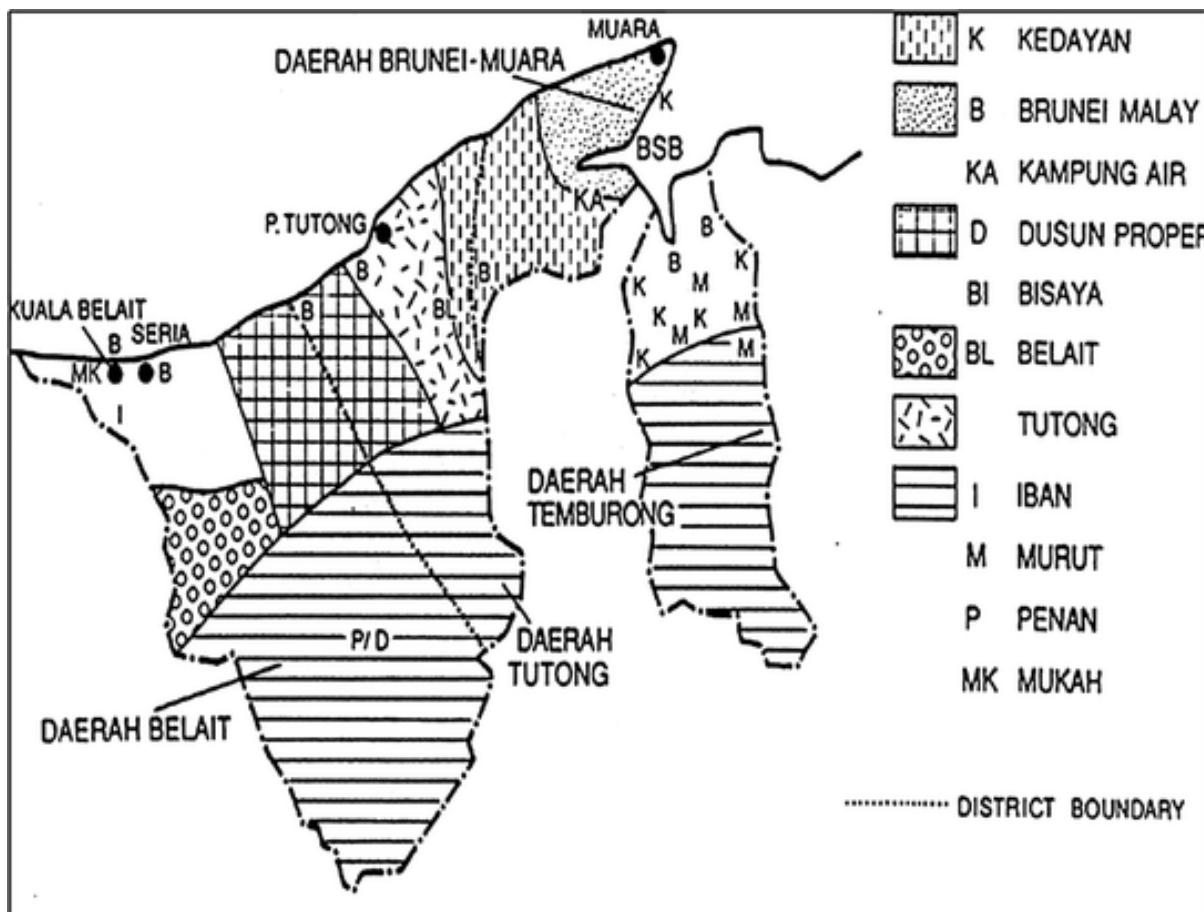


Figure 1. Map 1: Languages in Brunei Darussalam (Nothofer, 1991)

A significant factor contributing to language shift is intermarriage and cultural assimilation. Furthermore, the loss of traditional Belait cultural practices, once closely linked to language use, exacerbates this decline. Rituals, oral traditions, and indigenous knowledge that were once transmitted in BB are increasingly being conducted in Malay, diminishing the functional domains of BB. The lack of institutional support further accelerates language endangerment. Unlike Malay and English, which are reinforced through Brunei's national education policies and government initiatives, BB lacks formal recognition in the education system. There are no standardized learning materials, school programs, or media representation that promote its use (Martin, 2005). As a result, younger Belait individuals grow up without structured opportunities to learn or practice the language, aligning with Fishman's (2001) theory that the absence of institutional reinforcement leads to rapid language decline. This is compounded by BB not being used in official government

affairs or economic sectors, making it less relevant in modern professional and academic settings.

The perceived lack of economic value attached to BB also plays a crucial role in its decline. Noor Alifah (2004) found that younger Belait speakers regard Malay and English as more useful for education, employment, and social mobility, leading them to prioritize these languages over their ancestral tongue. This reflects the global trend described by Crystal (2000), who argues that languages without economic or educational incentives face a higher risk of extinction. Without practical advantages associated with BB proficiency, there is little motivation for younger generations to invest in learning and maintaining the language.

As BB is rarely heard in radio broadcasts, television programs, or formal gatherings, its visibility continues to decline. This aligns with UNESCO's (2003) framework for assessing language vitality, which states that languages with limited presence in media and formal institutions are at higher risk of extinction. The absence of BB in digital platforms and modern communication channels means that younger generations are less exposed to it, accelerating its marginalization.

Therefore, BB exhibits multiple signs of language shift and endangerment, including declining speakers, lack of intergenerational transmission, limited institutional support, and the growing dominance of Malay and English. BB risks further marginalization without immediate intervention, eventually leading to its extinction. To address this trend, proactive measures such as community-led revitalization programs, linguistic documentation, and policy support are necessary to ensure that BB remains a living language for future generations.

Literature Review

The world's linguistic diversity is under threat, with a staggering number of languages facing extinction. Nearly half of the approximately 7,000 documented languages are considered endangered (Bromhamm, 2022). The maintenance of endangered languages has thus become a pressing concern in linguistic research, with scholars seeking to understand the complex factors that influence language preservation. Language is deeply tied to cultural identity, and the loss of a language often erodes cultural traditions, customs, and values. As Kroskrity (2000) mentioned, language is a key symbol of cultural identity, and its maintenance is essential for preserving cultural heritage. In many small communities, language is the primary means of transmitting cultural knowledge, history, and values from one generation to the next. The intergenerational transmission of language is thus critical for the survival of cultural identity, and efforts to promote language maintenance must prioritize the engagement of young people in language revitalization initiatives. Language maintenance refers to efforts to ensure that a language is passed down and continues to be spoken by future generations (Tanio et al, 2024). The framework for language maintenance encompasses various domains, including educational policies, community involvement, and family practices. In Brunei, the maintenance of the Belait language relies heavily on community-driven initiatives and educational support, yet these efforts are challenged by the broader societal shift towards the national languages of Malay and English.

For instance, Hariyanto et al. (2023) investigate the Bangka Malay language, focusing on the factors contributing to changes in its usage and the initiatives aimed

at its preservation. Utilizing a descriptive qualitative methodology, their research incorporates interviews and observations regarding language practices among the residents of the Bangka Belitung Islands. The findings indicate that several sociolinguistic elements, such as the prevalence of national and foreign languages and the diminishing transmission of Bangka Malay across generations influence the shift in language usage. Despite these obstacles, the study underscores the efforts undertaken by governmental bodies and local communities to uphold the language. Prominent strategies include promoting language education from an early age and cultivating pride in the language to mitigate the impact of external linguistic pressures. Although these initiatives have yielded encouraging outcomes, the authors stress the necessity for further enhancement to ensure the ongoing vitality of Bangka Malay. The insights provided by Hariyanto et al. (2023) shed light on the complexities of language maintenance, particularly emphasizing the significance of early education and community engagement in preserving linguistic heritage. Nonetheless, the research also highlights the challenges encountered in maximizing the effectiveness of these efforts, particularly in environments where dominant languages overshadow minority ones. The study advocates for additional initiatives to bolster the pride and usage of Bangka Malay, especially in the context of increasing globalization and the rising prominence of national languages.

Erniati & Wijaya (2023) conducted a relevant study on language maintenance, which examines the patterns of language use and preservation within family settings in Wakasihu State, Central Maluku. This research underscores the intricate challenges associated with conserving regional languages, particularly when viewed through the prism of social factors such as age, gender, education, and employment. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach that integrates qualitative methods, including interviews, observations, and note-taking, alongside quantitative data gathered from a random questionnaire administered to 50 members of the Wakasihu community, this study offers a comprehensive exploration of the elements that affect language retention. The results from Erniati & Wijaya (2023) indicate a pronounced generational gap in language maintenance, with the older generation exhibiting a greater degree of retention of the local language, while the younger generation experiences a significant reduction in language usage. This trend is reminiscent of findings from the Bangka Malay study, where the language shift among younger individuals is a critical factor in the language's decline. The research advocates for promoting positive attitudes and awareness regarding the significance of language preservation, especially among younger speakers, as the linguistic environment changes.

Another relevant study on language maintenance and shift in multilingual contexts is 'Marriages of Unequal Languages' by Ting & Berek (2021), which examines the language choices of Bidayuh speakers in mixed marriages with Melanau, Chinese, and Malay partners in Kuching, Sarawak. The study surveyed 101 respondents from these mixed marriages to assess the ethnolinguistic vitality of the various groups involved using Giles, Bourhis & Taylor (1977) framework. The framework considers demographic strength, institutional support, and language status variables in determining language vitality. The study found varying vitality levels across the groups: Melanau had low vitality, Bidayuh had medium to low, Chinese had medium, and Malay had high vitality. The findings of this study have significant implications

for understanding language shift in mixed marriage contexts. In Bidayuh-Melanau mixed marriages, proficiency in the Bidayuh language was retained, but the Melanau language was gradually lost due to its low vitality. In contrast, in Bidayuh-Chinese marriages, proficiency in both ethnic languages was sufficient for casual conversations, indicating that when both languages have similar vitality, they are more likely to coexist. However, in Bidayuh-Malay mixed marriages, the results were stark: only a quarter of the respondents could speak Bidayuh, whereas more than half were proficient in Sarawak Malay, reflecting the high vitality of Malay. This finding underscores the influence of societal prestige and language dominance in the context of mixed marriages. This research sheds light on how the societal prestige of specific languages, mainly Malay, contributes to the decline of other ethnic languages in mixed marriages. It highlights the lack of agency among parents to pass on their native language, allowing the dominant and more prestigious languages to prevail. The study also emphasizes that the choice of language in such marriages is not solely a personal decision but is heavily influenced by the community's sociolinguistic landscape, which prioritizes certain languages over others.

The studies by Hariyanto et al. (2023), Erniati & Wijaya (2023), and Ting & Berek (2021) provide valuable insights into language maintenance, highlighting the challenges of language shift and the role of social factors in language preservation. Hariyanto et al. (2023) emphasize the need for early education and community pride in preserving Bangka Malay, a concept relevant to Belait as external languages like Malay and English dominate. Erniati & Wijaya's (2023) findings underscore the generational shift in language use, with older generations retaining their language more than younger ones, a trend observed in Belait. Ting & Berek (2021) focus on how intermarriage and language vitality influence language retention, pertinent to Belait, where mixed marriages and low language vitality contribute to language erosion. These studies collectively emphasize the need for focused research and strategies to maintain minority languages like Belait, addressing the community's unique sociocultural and linguistic challenges.

In the context of Belait language (BB) research in Brunei, several studies have been conducted from various perspectives, particularly in the non-linguistic fields such as culture and society. Notable works in this area include Hughes-Hallet (1938), Shariffuddin (1980), Dzulkefli Hj Yusof (1984), and Martin (1990, 1995, 2005), all of which explore the Belait community's culture, social practices, and historical background. These studies provide crucial insights into the ethnography and cultural identity of the Belait people. However, research on the language has been relatively lacking, with only a few studies focusing on linguistic aspects. For example, Kumanireng (1995) explored the passive constructions in BB, while Muhammad Sayful Islam (1996) conducted historical linguistics research on the reflexes of Proto-Austronesian sounds in BB. Noor Alifah (2004) examined the structure of BB, and Ifwah Fauzani Chuchu (2006) focused on passive sentences in BB. Additionally, Nurulkhairiyah Mat Sani (2008) investigated the use of BB among the younger generation. These studies contributed significantly to our understanding of the language's structure and usage, but the body of research dedicated to the Belait language remains limited, particularly when compared to other languages in Brunei.

Despite a few studies focusing on linguistic aspects, much of the research remains fragmented and narrow in scope, often examining isolated linguistic features or historical contexts rather than addressing the broader sociolinguistic dynamics of language use and maintenance in Belait-speaking communities. As a minority language, Belait faces significant challenges in terms of language shift, particularly in the face of the dominant languages in Brunei Malay, and English. Moreover, BB is under-documented and under-researched, which further exacerbates concerns about its vitality, as there is limited quantitative or qualitative data to assess the extent of language loss or the effectiveness of current preservation efforts.

This study fills a critical gap by comprehensively examining language maintenance strategies in the Belait community, focusing on the sociolinguistic challenges it faces, such as generational language shift and limited institutional support. By employing a qualitative approach and analyzing BB's linguistic and cultural dimensions, this study aims to contribute to the growing body of research on endangered languages in Brunei, offering valuable insights into the factors affecting language use and maintenance in Belait-speaking communities. Furthermore, it emphasizes the need for a more robust and focused effort to document and preserve the Belait language, ensuring that future generations are equipped with the necessary tools and knowledge to continue speaking and valuing their linguistic heritage.

METHOD

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative methodology to explore the maintenance strategies and challenges faced by the Belait language (BB) in Brunei. A qualitative approach was selected as it enables a deep understanding of the linguistic and sociocultural factors that influence language preservation and shift (Creswell, 2013). Given the limited availability of quantitative data regarding Belait, qualitative methods provide richer insights into the current state of the language, community perceptions, and the impact of cultural and policy efforts. While alternative approaches, such as mixed methods or ethnography, were considered, the qualitative framework was chosen because it is best suited to capture the lived experiences and attitudes of native Belait speakers. This approach allows for a deeper exploration of the language's role in shaping cultural identity, the community's efforts to preserve it, and the broader sociolinguistic dynamics at play.

The participants in this study were native Belait speakers aged 50 and above who exhibited varying language proficiency levels. The participants were selected using purposive sampling, ensuring they actively spoke and engaged with the Belait language. This sampling method was chosen to include diverse speakers, providing insight into language use and attitudes. Data were collected through two primary methods: document analysis and semi-structured interviews. Documents were analyzed, including prior research on language shift (Martin, 1995, 2005; Noor Alifah, 2004; McLellan, 2014; Ifwah Fauzani Chuchu, 2024) and official reports and policy documents concerning language preservation from Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka Brunei and other governmental cultural initiatives. These documents were selected based on their relevance to the study of language shift and preservation efforts, particularly those published in the last two decades, to ensure they were contextually relevant. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the

participants to explore their perceptions and experiences regarding language use, transmission, and revitalization efforts. Interview questions were designed to address areas such as the role of Belait in their daily lives, factors contributing to language shift, strategies they believe could support revitalization, and their views on governmental and community-driven preservation initiatives. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, and all interviews were recorded with the participants' consent.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. The process involved familiarising the data through transcription and repeated readings, initial coding of key ideas, theme development around topics like language decline and community involvement, and refining themes for consistency with the research questions. This approach provided a detailed understanding of Belait's current status and revitalization needs. The study contributes to the broader discussion on language preservation in Brunei and offers a model for similar research on endangered languages.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Factors in Maintaining Belait language

The most significant finding of this study is the continued decline in intergenerational transmission of BB. As previously discussed, the younger generation of Belait speakers often does not acquire the language as their first language, leading to limited proficiency. The following excerpt from an interview with a Belait-speaking participant illustrates this issue:

(Excerpt data 1):

"Now majority parents bawa anak cakap in English. Yea tapi macam Melayu Brunei lah ah bukan standard. Like myself my cucu, pun dorang sudah pandai cakap English. Bila dorang cakap in Eng aku pun jawab in English automatic kan. Atu yang masalahnya."

"Now, most parents speak to their children in English. Yes, but it's like Brunei Malay, not the standard. Like myself, my grandchildren are also fluent in English. When they speak in English, I automatically respond in English too. That's the problem."

Data 1 highlights the shift towards English as the primary language of communication within families, even among Belait speakers. As the participant suggests, younger generations, including grandchildren, are more comfortable speaking in English, and older generations tend to respond in English out of habit. This shift away from BB is a clear indicator of the language's endangered status, as it is no longer being passed down as the primary mode of communication between generations. Historical linguistic studies have shown that language shift typically

begins when younger generations no longer acquire the language as their first language at home (Fishman, 1991). In the case of BB, Malay has largely replaced it as the dominant language in household interactions, particularly in families with mixed ethnic backgrounds where Malay serves as the lingua franca. This finding aligns with earlier studies by Martin (1995) and Noor Alifah (2004), which revealed that while older generations still speak BB fluently, younger generations have limited proficiency. Noor Alifah (2004) further noted that younger Belait speakers, particularly those raised in urban environments, show limited proficiency in BB, often understanding the language passively but struggling to speak it fluently.

Based on the findings presented in Data 1, Data 2 further illustrates the decline in intergenerational transmission of Belait, particularly in families that have moved to urban areas like Bandar Seri Begawan, where the use of Brunei Malay has gained dominance. According to Martin (1995), the movement of Belait speakers from traditional villages such as Kuala Balai to more urbanized areas has resulted in increased contact with other ethnic groups, leading to language attrition. The following excerpt from the interview highlights how this shift is observed within the participant's own family:

(Excerpt Data 2):

"Example my father's punya brother ah, anak kawin di Bandarkan, anak durang ani cakap Brunei. dorang pun cakap Brunei. even my sister mother tongue, my sister di Bandar, inda mau cakap Belait, cakap Brunei. my sister yang di sini ah cakap Brunei juanya. Yang di sini ani empat lima all my sisters cakap Brunei. Kami adi berdi cakap Belait, the siblings cakap Belait tapi anak-anak inda. Ada yang inda pandai, ada yang make an effort atu adalah tapi nada. Sayangkan, lakas ilang. Aku kalau urang atu pandai cakap Belait ku bawa cakap Belait, kalau inda pandai ku bawa cakap Brunei. tapi atulah mix mix pandai-pandai lah."

"Example, my father's brother's children, they got married in Bandar, and their children speak Brunei Malay. They also speak Brunei Malay. Even my sister, who speaks Belait as her mother tongue, when she moved to the city, no longer speaks Belait. She speaks Brunei Malay. My sisters here all speak Brunei Malay. We, the siblings, still speak Belait, but our children do not. Some of them don't know how to speak it, some make an effort, but there's nothing to be done. It's sad, it's quickly disappearing. I, if someone knows how to speak Belait, I speak Belait with them, but if they don't, I switch to Brunei Malay. It's just a mix of languages."

Data 2 provides further evidence supporting the findings from Data 1 regarding the decline in Belait's intergenerational transmission. The participant highlights how, even within their own family, there is a noticeable shift from Belait to Brunei Malay, particularly among the younger generation. For example, the participant's nieces and nephews, raised in urban areas (Bandar), have adopted Brunei Malay as their primary language, while the older generation continues to speak Belait. This shift is also seen with the participant's sister, who no longer uses Belait despite it being her mother tongue. This is significant because it shows how the influence of urbanization, coupled with the dominance of Brunei Malay, leads to the erosion of indigenous languages like Belait. The participant expresses frustration over the rapid decline of Belait, noting that despite some family members trying to maintain the language, it is increasingly difficult to sustain its usage across generations. The inability of the younger generation to speak Belait fluently further emphasizes the challenges of intergenerational language transmission. This situation resonates with Fishman's (1991) assertion that language shift is most noticeable when children do not learn their heritage language as their first language.

The shift in language use within families, as observed in the intergenerational transmission, is further compounded by the dynamics in mixed marriages, where language practices also impact the maintenance of Belait. Data 3 illustrates the impact of mixed marriage on maintaining the Belait language within the family. The participant, who is married to a Bruneian woman, indicates that while they communicate in Brunei Malay (Brunei Malay) at home, their children are reluctant to learn Belait. The participant's wife understands Belait but prefers responding in Brunei Malay when the meaning is clear. This dynamic highlights how language use in mixed marriages can lead to language attrition, especially when one language (in this case, Brunei Malay) is more dominant or preferred by the spouse. The participant notes that this language shift becomes even more pronounced when children from mixed marriages marry other Bruneians, further reducing the use of Belait.

(Excerpt Data 3)

"Macam hamba di rumah ani hamba urang Belait bini hamba urang Brunei, cakap Brunei. Anak pun inda mau belajar Belait. Bini hamba, bini hamba ya buleh tau kalau urang becakap ya tau, hamba mengajar daripada maksud. Kadang-kadang direspong dalam bahasa Brunei lah apa yang dimaksudkan atu. Cematalah, ya paham cematu. Yatah ganya kekurangannya bila anak lain sudah kawin dengan urang Brunei, ilang bahasa atu."

"In my household, I am Belait, my wife is Bruneian, we speak Brunei Malay. The children don't want to learn Belait. My wife understands it, but she only responds in Brunei Malay when she understands the meaning. It's like that, she understands like that. The issue arises when the children marry other Bruneians, the language disappears."

This finding aligns with existing research on the impact of mixed marriages on language maintenance, demonstrating that the dominance of one language over another can reduce the use of minority languages like Belait. In mixed marriages, the home language choice often favours Malay, given its widespread use and official status in Brunei. This supports Hudson's (1978) argument that language choice in interethnic marriages typically shifts toward the dominant societal language, thereby diminishing the transmission of minority languages. Similarly, Ting & Berek (2021) highlight that language choice in such marriages often leans towards the more widely spoken or prestigious language, further hindering the intergenerational transmission of minority languages. This contributes to the continued decline in Belait language proficiency within families, placing its survival at greater risk.

Efforts and Strategies for Language Maintenance

Documentation and Digital Initiatives

Linguistic documentation is a crucial component of BB preservation. Hinton (2011) emphasizes that endangered languages risk disappearing entirely without proper records, making documentation a first step toward revitalization. As part of these efforts, the Endangered Languages Archive (ELAR) at SOAS University of London has begun digitally preserving BB through multimedia resources, including audio recordings of native speakers, transcriptions, and ethnographic information (Dlayton, 2022). This digital repository is essential for researchers and language learners, ensuring that BB materials remain accessible for future generations.

Further steps have been taken to enhance the availability of BB learning resources. Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka Brunei (DBPB) has initiated plans to publish a BB dictionary following the successful documentation of other indigenous languages such as Tutong and Kedayan (Aminah & Azurin, 2013). Additionally, the Daftar Kata 7 Dialek publication in 2011 provided a foundational reference for BB and other minority languages in Brunei. However, BB remains one of the least documented languages, highlighting the urgent need for expanded research and structured language-learning materials.

Digital platforms also offer modern solutions for language revitalization. Social media has emerged as a key tool, with younger Belait speakers using TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram to share BB phrases, cultural insights, and language-learning content. These initiatives align with the broader trend of digital language preservation, where online engagement plays a crucial role in revitalizing endangered languages (Wattam, 2013). Expanding these efforts by creating mobile applications, YouTube language tutorials, and interactive online courses could further promote BB among younger speakers.

Community-Based Revitalization Programs

The role of the community in preserving the Belait language (BB) is critical, as grassroots efforts have become the primary means of revitalization due to the lack of formal government policies. Ifwah Fauzani Chuchu (2024) notes that language preservation directly empowers the Belait community by strengthening their cultural identity and ensuring their active participation in social and economic development. One key initiative is the integration of BB into local cultural events, such as the Mettae

Belait Kitah program, organized by the Belait District Museum in May 2024. This program aimed to raise awareness of Belait traditions through exhibitions of traditional attire, archaeological artefacts, and cultural activities (Daniel Lim, 2024).

Beyond cultural events, informal language classes have been initiated by elder Belait speakers to teach younger generations basic vocabulary and pronunciation. However, these initiatives face challenges such as low participation, lack of structured resources, and difficulty sustaining interest among youth (Noor Alifah, 2004). To address these limitations, integrating language learning into daily community activities, such as traditional storytelling sessions and mentorship programs, has been proposed. Similar models have been effective in other indigenous communities, where intergenerational learning fosters stronger linguistic retention (Grenoble & Whaley, 2006).

A particularly promising approach involves leveraging tourism as a means of language preservation. The Homestay Alai Gayoh Anak Pulau (HAGAP) in Tutong serves as a model, offering visitors an immersive experience in Dusun traditions, including language exposure. Promoting BB through tourism-related cultural programs can increase both local and international interest in the language while providing economic incentives for Belait speakers to continue using and teaching it (Ifwah Fauzani Chuchu, 2024).

Role of Media and Cultural Events

The role of media in language preservation is significant, yet BB has little presence in mainstream platforms. Unlike Malay and English, which dominate Brunei's television, radio, and print media, BB remains largely absent from public discourse. The Bahasa Mengenali Bangsa program by Radio Televisyen Brunei (RTB) attempted to bridge this gap by showcasing BB and other indigenous languages through documentary-style television and radio segments. However, these efforts must be expanded to ensure wider exposure and regular audience engagement (Ifwah Fauzani Chuchu, 2024).

Cultural events remain a powerful platform for BB revitalization. The Belait Cultural Festival 2024, held at Taman Rekreasi Kampung Sungai Mau, featured seven traditional performances highlighting the region's diverse ethnic heritage, including Belait traditions (Daniel Lim, 2024). Such festivals provide opportunities for BB to be actively used and celebrated, reinforcing its role as a living language rather than a relic of the past.

In addition to large-scale events, grassroots efforts such as oral storytelling competitions, traditional music performances, and community theatre can further normalize BB use. Schools and universities can also play a role by incorporating BB in linguistic and cultural workshops. The University of Brunei Darussalam (UBD) previously introduced BB as an elective course under its Language Center in 2022, attracting 40 students, none of whom were native BB speakers. However, the course has since been suspended due to the lack of qualified instructors (LC Newsletter, 2022). Addressing this gap by training BB-speaking educators could provide a sustainable path toward language instruction.

Moreover, promoting BB in public signage, community announcements, and local government communications could help increase its visibility in daily life.

Similar initiatives in other minority language communities have demonstrated that linguistic visibility is crucial in language retention and revitalization (Coluzzi, 2017).

CONCLUSION

Maintaining the Belait language (BB) requires a multifaceted approach that combines community involvement, linguistic documentation, digital initiatives, and media integration. While grassroots efforts have played a vital role in sustaining BB, institutional support remains limited. To address this, it is crucial to implement concrete strategies involving community-driven and institutional efforts. One important recommendation is the integration of BB into Brunei's educational system through elective courses or language programs at the primary and secondary levels as an early stage and exposure. This would provide younger generations with structured opportunities to learn and practice the language in a formal setting. Additionally, government-supported language documentation projects, including creating a standardized orthography and developing digital dictionaries, would significantly contribute to preserving BB for future generations.

This study is significant as it contributes to the documentation, awareness, and revitalization efforts of BB, an indigenous language at risk of extinction. The findings highlight BB speakers' significant challenges, particularly those arising from language shift, urbanization, and insufficient institutional support. By thoroughly examining language maintenance strategies, this research provides essential insights for linguists, educators, policymakers, and cultural organizations dedicated to preserving Brunei's indigenous languages. Additionally, this study is a foundational reference for future inquiries into language endangerment and revitalization efforts within Brunei and in the broader context of Austronesian linguistics.

The preservation of BB extends beyond the mere maintenance of a language; it encompasses protecting the Belait community's cultural identity, traditions, and shared history. BB may face extinction within a generation or two if prompt and ongoing measures are not taken. However, by implementing targeted revitalization initiatives, such as formal educational programs, government-supported documentation, and digital media engagement, BB has the potential to thrive as a dynamic language for future generations. Achieving this goal will require all involved parties' collaborative and continuous efforts, ensuring that BB remains a vital component of Brunei's linguistic heritage, as recognized in the Written Constitution of Brunei (WCSB 1959).

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