

Sociolinguistic Dimensions of Language Shift and Identity Renegotiation Among Belait Speakers in Brunei Darussalam: Sociopolitical Implications

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Received: December 2025; Revised: January 2025; Published: March 2025

Abstract

This study investigates the ongoing shift of the Belait language in Brunei and its impact on identity renegotiation among its speakers. The research examines socio-political, cultural, and cognitive factors contributing to language attrition, particularly the dominance of Dialek Melayu Brunei and English. Using qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews and observations, data were analyzed through a sociocognitive framework to explore how Belait speakers navigate linguistic and cultural changes. Findings indicate that intra-marriage plays a crucial role in language preservation, fostering intergenerational transmission and reinforcing cultural identity. Conversely, mixed marriages accelerate the shift toward dominant languages, diminishing the use of Belait within households. Socio-political pressures, including language policies that prioritize Malay and English in education and administration, further marginalize Belait, limiting its functional domains. Additionally, economic influences, such as increased labor migration, contribute to the preference for dominant languages in professional settings. Despite these challenges, community-driven efforts, including familial language practices and cultural initiatives, demonstrate resilience in preserving linguistic heritage. The study highlights the urgent need for comprehensive language policies, educational inclusion, and institutional support to revitalize the Belait language. Addressing structural and attitudinal barriers is essential to sustaining linguistic diversity and strengthening cultural identity within Brunei's evolving multilingual landscape.

Keywords: Belait language; Language shift; Cultural identity; Intra-marriage; Language preservation

How to Cite: Zulfadzlee, Z., & Suhaimi, E. M. (2025). Sociolinguistic Dimensions of Language Shift and Identity Renegotiation Among Belait Speakers in Brunei Darussalam: Sociopolitical Implications. *Journal of Language and Literature Studies*, 5(1), 1-17. doi: <https://doi.org/10.36312/jolls.v5i1.2614>



<https://doi.org/10.36312/jolls.v5i1.2614>

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INTRODUCTION

Language plays a fundamental role in shaping cultural identity and fostering social cohesion, particularly within minority communities. For indigenous language groups, linguistic practices are not merely tools of communication but also essential markers of cultural heritage and identity (Jaffe, 1996). However, the pressures of globalization, urbanization, and socio-political factors have led to the gradual erosion of many minority languages worldwide, including the Belait language in Brunei (Eberhard et al., 2024). In today's world, where globalization is becoming more prevalent, Brunei is confronted with the task of preserving its linguistic heritage amidst the far-reaching effects of global influences (Zulkiflee, 2024). Belait, spoken by a small indigenous community in the Belait district, is experiencing a steady decline, primarily due to the dominance of Dialek Melayu Brunei (DMB) and English, which have become the primary languages in educational,

administrative, and economic domains (Martin, 1995). The linguistic shift among Belait speakers not only reflects broader patterns of language attrition but also signals profound identity renegotiation as speakers adapt to socio-political and cultural transformations (Extra & Gorter, 2001).

The decline of minority languages is a global phenomenon that has been extensively documented. Research indicates that linguistic erosion is often accompanied by cultural displacement, weakening intergenerational knowledge transmission and diminishing a community's sense of identity (Grenoble, 2021; Hamzah et al., 2022). Studies on indigenous language loss in Southeast Asia highlight similar challenges, where dominant national languages and economic pressures accelerate the abandonment of heritage languages (Sercombe, 2014). In Brunei, the prioritization of Malay and English through language policies and formal education has marginalized minority languages, including Belait (Jones et al., 1993). As a result, Belait speakers, particularly younger generations, are shifting towards DMB and English, leading to a critical loss of linguistic competence and cultural continuity (Martin, 1995). This trend aligns with sociolinguistic research on language shift, where external socio-political forces and internal community attitudes collectively influence language maintenance (Omar & Norahim, 2020).

The primary challenge facing the Belait-speaking community is the accelerated decline of their language due to interethnic interactions, socio-political pressures, and evolving cognitive perceptions of linguistic identity. Martin (1995) highlights that the Belait language is increasingly confined to older generations, while younger speakers adopt DMB or English as their primary means of communication. This linguistic transition signifies more than language loss, it represents a fundamental shift in identity, as speakers navigate competing cultural affiliations and societal expectations (Stapels & Eysel, 2021). Generally, solutions to language decline focus on revitalization strategies, including community-based language initiatives, policy interventions, and educational reforms (Qin et al., 2009; Abou-Zleikha et al., 2015). However, the effectiveness of these approaches varies, depending on sociopolitical contexts and the level of institutional support available for minority language preservation (Perkin, 2018).

One widely recognized strategy for preserving minority languages is the reinforcement of intergenerational language transmission. Hamzah et al. (2022) and Akintayo (2024) argue that language maintenance is most successful when heritage languages are actively used within family and community settings. In the Belait context, intra-marriage has been identified as a crucial factor in fostering linguistic continuity, as families where both parents are Belait speakers are more likely to transmit the language to their children. However, mixed marriages, where one parent speaks DMB or English, often result in the displacement of Belait, as children gravitate toward the more socially and economically dominant languages (De Houwer, 2009). This pattern mirrors broader linguistic trends observed in minority language communities worldwide, where the perceived utility and prestige of dominant languages contribute to the gradual erosion of indigenous languages (Grenoble, 2021; Akintayo, 2024).

Educational policies also play a decisive role in shaping language attitudes and usage. Research has consistently demonstrated that minority language preservation is significantly influenced by formal educational inclusion (Wickström, 2023). Countries that integrate indigenous languages into school curricula tend to experience higher levels of linguistic retention, as children are provided with institutional reinforcement of their heritage languages (Smith & Tan, 2018). However, in Brunei, the absence of Belait language instruction in primary and secondary education limits its exposure to younger generations, restricting its functional domains to informal settings. This exclusion from formal education accelerates language attrition, as younger speakers perceive Belait as having limited relevance beyond familial interactions (Martin, 1995). Similar challenges

have been noted in other indigenous communities, where linguistic policies favor national and global languages, undermining efforts to sustain minority languages (Grenoble, 2021).

A related factor contributing to the marginalization of the Belait language is the economic landscape of Brunei. The influx of foreign workers in the oil and gas industry, particularly in the Belait district, has reinforced the dominance of English as a professional lingua franca (Cleary et al., 1994). As a result, younger Belait speakers prioritize English for socioeconomic mobility, further displacing their heritage language. Mirolli & Parisi (2006) argue that language use is closely tied to economic incentives, with speakers naturally shifting towards languages that provide greater access to employment and social advancement. In the case of Belait, the limited economic utility of the language has led to its decreased usage, mirroring trends observed in other minority communities where globalization and economic shifts accelerate language loss (Musgrave, 2014).

While numerous studies have explored the factors contributing to minority language decline, focused research on the Belait language remains limited. Existing studies by Martin (1995) and Noor Alifah (2004) provide foundational insights into the sociolinguistic shifts within the Belait community but do not comprehensively address the socio-cognitive dimensions of identity renegotiation. Similarly, Nur Fa'iz Abdul Razak (2015) and Zainuddin (2023) highlight the cultural traditions of the Belait community yet overlook the intricate relationship between language decline and identity transformation.

Although the linguistic decline of minority languages has been widely studied, the specific case of the Belait language in Brunei presents a unique set of challenges and opportunities. Unlike other indigenous communities, the Belait language shift is shaped by complex socio-political factors specific to Brunei's multilingual landscape, where language policies, economic factors, and social integration processes interact in distinct ways. Furthermore, existing literature has predominantly focused on the broader causes of language shift, with limited attention to the cognitive dimensions of identity renegotiation among speakers. This study thus fills a gap in the literature by investigating how cognitive perceptions and community attitudes toward the Belait language influence both language use and identity transformation.

This study takes a comprehensive approach by combining sociolinguistic and socio-cognitive perspectives to examine language shift in the Belait community. Previous research on language shift in Brunei (Martin, 1995; Noor Alifah, 2004) has largely focused on demographic and educational factors, with less attention given to how language loss affects identity and cognitive processes. While studies in Southeast Asia have explored language decline in indigenous communities, few have specifically looked at how socio-political pressures, intermarriage, and shifts in linguistic identity interact in the Bruneian context.

Given these considerations, this study aims to examine the intersection of language shift and identity renegotiation among Belait speakers in Brunei. Specifically, it investigates how cognitive perceptions and community attitudes toward the language influence identity construction. Additionally, the study evaluates the role of mixed marriages and intergenerational language transmission in shaping linguistic behaviors, as well as the effectiveness of existing language policies and educational frameworks in preserving the Belait language. Given the socio-political pressures and economic factors contributing to the decline of the language, the study poses critical questions regarding how the Belait community can effectively address these challenges to preserve their linguistic heritage. Why are the Belait people renegotiating their identity, even though their status has been legitimized in the Written Constitution of the State of Brunei 1959? What strategies can be implemented to strengthen language preservation efforts and ensure the survival of Belait in Brunei's evolving multilingual landscape? By addressing these questions, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of language maintenance

strategies within minority communities and provides recommendations for fostering linguistic resilience in Brunei's multicultural context.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the ongoing shift in the Belait language and its impact on identity renegotiation within the Belait-speaking community in Brunei. A sociocognitive framework, as outlined by van Dijk (2017), was adopted to analyze how cognitive perceptions, discourse structures, and socio-cultural contexts influence language retention and adaptation. This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of how Belait speakers navigate linguistic change amid socio-political pressures and interethnic interactions. Given the study's focus on social and cognitive dimensions of language use, qualitative methods were deemed the most appropriate for capturing the complexity of identity negotiation and language shift.

Participants and Sampling

Participants for this study were recruited using a snowball sampling method, a widely used technique in qualitative research that allows for the identification of key informants through referrals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study focused on Belait speakers residing in Kampong Sungai Teraban and Kuala Balai, areas where linguistic shifts are most evident. The following is a map illustrating the distribution of Belait languages within Brunei:

The target population consisted of second-generation Belait speakers, as they play a crucial role in intergenerational language transmission. Participants were required to be at least 55 years old to ensure first-hand knowledge of linguistic and cultural changes. Factors such as linguistic and cultural backgrounds were taken into account. Furthermore, the study exclusively included participants of Belait descent, stipulating that both parents must belong to the Belait group. Additionally, it was required that these individuals currently reside in the Belait district and actively utilize the Belait language in their everyday interactions. All participants provided informed consent before data collection, in accordance with ethical research protocols.

Data Collection

The primary data collection method employed in this study was semi-structured interviews, which allow for flexibility in exploring participants' experiences while maintaining a structured framework (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Interviews, lasting approximately 60 minutes each, were conducted in familiar settings to create a comfortable environment for participants. The interview guide included open-ended questions related to linguistic practices, intergenerational language transmission, cultural traditions, and perceptions of language shift. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

The study utilized Miles and Huberman's (1994) Interactive Model of Qualitative Data Analysis, which consists of four interrelated stages: data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. This iterative process ensures that data analysis remains dynamic, allowing patterns and themes to emerge naturally from the collected information.

Initially, all interview transcripts and observational notes underwent data reduction, where extraneous information was filtered out to focus on key themes related to language shift, identity renegotiation, and socio-political influences. This step was crucial in structuring the data for systematic analysis. The reduced data were then organized into data display formats, such as thematic matrices and conceptual maps, to facilitate pattern recognition and thematic categorization (Saldaña, 2021).

The final stage of the analysis involved conclusion drawing and verification, where recurring patterns were examined in relation to existing literature on language shift and identity construction. This step ensured that the findings were grounded in both empirical data and theoretical frameworks. To enhance the validity of the analysis, triangulation was employed by comparing interview responses with observational insights. Additionally, member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with participants to confirm the accuracy of data representation and interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study on the Belait language shift in Brunei corresponds with van Dijk's (2008) sociocognitive framework, where the interrelation between social reality, cognition, and discourse is analyzed which involves the processes of language use and identity formation. This framework is particularly useful for the interpretation of why the Belait community is renegotiating their identities, even though it has legally gained its official status. This study demonstrates the impact of socio-political forces, for example, language policy favoring DMB and English, on the marginalization of Belait, which enacts reduction in the range of functional domains. According to van Dijk (2014), dominant discourses in policy and the media shape and develop collective cognition while also supporting negative language ideologies for minority languages.

This study also describes the cognitive sequence of language change for the Belait community, in which Belait speakers adopt strong and ideological ideas which influence their speech choices in daily interactions (Kheirkhah Cekaite, 2018). In addition, the results and discussions indicate that economic factors and intermarriage drive language shift, which conforms to van Dijk's (2009) assumption that linguistic choices are defined by power relations and economic opportunity. The issue of the means of language maintenance, which is the focus of the respective research question, is also tackled by intergenerational transmission of Belait within families, a process which counters cognitive deterioration, through preservation of linguistic socialization (Fishman, 1991). Hence, using van Dijk's sociocognitive framework provides insight into the ways in which external socio-political structures mediate the development of internal cognitive representation of language and serves to highlight the need for policy change and community based activities to preserve the Belait language in Brunei's changing multilingual context.

Language Shift and Identity Renegotiation

The data gathered from Belait speakers highlight a significant trend of language shift and identity renegotiation, illustrating how sociopolitical and intergenerational factors shape linguistic behavior. The shift from Belait to dominant languages such as Dialek Melayu Brunei (DMB) and English is evident in familial interactions, where younger generations increasingly favor dominant languages over their heritage language. This phenomenon aligns with previous research indicating that language shift is often driven by socio-cognitive factors, including perceptions of language prestige and economic utility (Grenoble, 2021; Hamzah et al., 2022).

One informant's narrative underscores the automatic adaptation to the linguistic preferences of younger family members, demonstrating the gradual displacement of Belait within domestic settings:

(Excerpt Data 1)

"Like myself my cucu, pun dorang sudah pandai cakap English. Bila dorang cakap in English aku pun jawab in English automatic kan. Atu yang masalahnya. Yatah ganya kekurangannya bila anak lain sudah kawin dengan urang (puak) Brunei, ilang bahasa atu. Ilang."

"Like myself, my grandchildren, they already know how to speak English. When they speak in English, I automatically reply in English too. That is the problem. That is the weakness—when my children marry Brunei Malays, the language disappears. It disappears."

As seen in Excerpt Data 1, the informant highlights how younger generations' preference for English prompts older speakers to unconsciously shift their own linguistic practices. The automatic response of replying in English instead of Belait illustrates a cognitive adaptation to the linguistic environment of younger family members. This pattern aligns with research by Lake et al. (2017), which emphasizes that perception plays a crucial role in shaping language use within communities. The repeated use of the word "*ilang*" (disappears) further reflects an internalized sense of loss and inevitability regarding the decline of Belait, mirroring broader global trends in minority language erosion (Extra & Gorter, 2001). The role of mixed marriages in accelerating this linguistic transition is particularly noteworthy. The informant further states:

(Excerpt Data 2)

"Bila anak lain sudah kawin dengan urang (puak) Brunei, ilang bahasa atu. Jadi bila dorang balik ke familynya pun, pupus tia bahasa atu jua, cakap (bahasa Melayu) Brunei tah pulang durang bah."

"When my children marry Brunei Malays, the language disappears. So when they return to their families, the language also fades away, they just speak Brunei Malay instead."

In Excerpt Data 2, the informant explicitly connects the loss of Belait to interethnic unions, noting that once a Belait speaker marries into a Brunei Malay family, the language is no longer actively used in the household. This observation supports findings by De Houwer (2009), who emphasizes that the linguistic choices of parents significantly influence children's language acquisition. In households where one parent speaks a dominant language such as DMB, children are more likely to adopt it as their primary language, reducing the functional space for Belait. This phenomenon is not unique to the Belait community; similar trends have been documented in various minority language contexts, where intermarriage contributes to linguistic shift by prioritizing majority languages over indigenous tongues (Grenoble, 2021; Akintayo, 2024).

Beyond familial dynamics, socio-political influences further exacerbate the decline of the Belait language. Brunei's national language policies prioritize Malay and English in educational and administrative domains, marginalizing minority languages such as Belait. The informant's narrative reflects this structural challenge, as the lack of institutional support reinforces the perception that Belait has limited practical value:

(Excerpt Data 3)

"Ah jadi bila indung ani, mendangar cematu, mengikut tia jua cakap (bahasa Melayu) Brunei tia jua. Ilang tia bahasa (Belait) atu."

"So when the mother hears them speaking like that, she follows along and speaks Brunei Malay as well. That is how the Belait language disappears."

In excerpt data 3, the informant highlights the influence of social interactions on language use, particularly how parental linguistic adaptation further reinforces the dominance of DMB within households. This observation aligns with Martin (1995) and Jones et al. (1993), who argue that the prioritization of Malay and English in Brunei's educational and governmental institutions has relegated minority languages to the periphery. When Belait speakers perceive their language as having limited socio-economic value, they may gradually shift to more dominant languages, even in private and familial settings (Omar & Norahim, 2020). The phrase "*mengikut tia tua cakap*" (she follows along and speaks) signifies how language choices are often dictated by external pressures rather than individual preferences, further reinforcing sociolinguistic theories on language hierarchy and adaptation (Stapels & Eyssel, 2021).

The findings also underscore the emotional and cognitive responses of Belait speakers to language loss. The repeated emphasis on words such as "*kekurangannya*", "*ilang*", and "*pupus*" across multiple excerpts demonstrates the profound impact of linguistic displacement on identity construction. These sentiments align with sociocognitive frameworks that suggest language is not merely a communicative tool but an integral part of cultural identity (van Dijk, 2017). When speakers perceive their heritage language as diminishing, they experience not only linguistic loss but also an existential shift in identity and belonging.

These insights contribute to the broader discourse on language shift and identity renegotiation by demonstrating how socio-political structures, interethnic relationships, and cognitive perceptions interact to influence linguistic outcomes. While community-driven efforts such as familial language practices attempt to resist language attrition, the overwhelming influence of external socio-political pressures continues to drive the decline of Belait. Given these findings, the study underscores the urgency of implementing targeted language revitalization strategies, including bilingual education programs and institutional support, to ensure the preservation of the Belait language and its cultural significance within Brunei's evolving multilingual landscape.

Language Use and Identity Among Belait Speakers in Multicultural Settings

The data reveal that Belait speakers frequently shift from using their native language to Dialek Melayu Brunei (DMB) in both public and private settings, reflecting a broader sociocognitive process of identity negotiation. This linguistic adaptation demonstrates the influence of external social pressures and the desire to conform to dominant cultural norms. Research suggests that language choice in multicultural settings is often shaped by perceptions of linguistic prestige, social mobility, and the avoidance of social conflict (Holliday, 2018; Giles & Billings, 2017). One informant illustrates this adaptation by expressing a conscious effort to avoid drawing attention to their ethnic identity through language use:

(Excerpt Data 4)

"Macam urang Belait ani, bagi amba I don't know other Belait ah, urang Belait ani considered bah, we don't want to be seen. Durang ani becakap pasal kami kali ni mengucap kami kali ni pasal kami kali ni durang ani. We don't want urang atu salty bah. Jadi bahasa atu kurang tia. Hamba also cakap Brunei tia."

"Belait people, at least for me—I don't know about other Belait—Belait people are considered like this: we don't want to be seen. When they talk about us, maybe we react, maybe we say something about it. We don't want others to be annoyed. That's why our language is used less. I also speak Brunei Malay now."

As seen in Excerpt Data 4, the informant explicitly states that Belait speakers tend to avoid visibility in social interactions, fearing that using their native language may invite negative attention. The phrase "*we don't want to be seen*" suggests a deliberate effort to remain inconspicuous in multilingual environments, reinforcing previous studies

indicating that speakers of minority languages may shift to dominant languages to avoid exclusion or discrimination (Van Dijk, 2008). The concern expressed in "*we don't want others to be annoyed*" further highlights the role of external social perceptions in shaping linguistic behavior. By opting for DMB over Belait, speakers seek to maintain social harmony and avoid potential discomfort for non-Belait interlocutors. This behavior aligns with sociolinguistic theories that emphasize language as a tool for managing social inclusion and group identity (Stapels & Eysel, 2021).

A similar pattern is evident in the younger generation's language choices, as highlighted by another informant:

(Excerpt Data 5)

"Kadang-kadang ada anak-anak durang ani malu bah kan bebahasa atu sama urang ani. Kalau saya, inda saya malu, cuma saya takut, urang yang di sekeliling ani mencakapi kedia yang inda tau bahasa Belait ani bah. Kitani macam becakap bahasa kitani ani kan, kali nya durang behapa durang ani nya? Yatah sampai ani I respect people who speak Tutong, when dorang jumpa they will cakap Tutong no matter who's next to them which is the bahasa is good, inda durang malu."

"Sometimes, the younger ones feel embarrassed to speak the language with others. For me, I am not embarrassed, but I am afraid that people around us might talk about them not knowing the Belait language. When we speak our language, they might say something like, 'What are they talking about?' That's why I respect people who speak Tutong—when they meet, they will speak Tutong no matter who is next to them, which is good. They are not ashamed."

In excerpt data 5, the informant reveals that younger Belait speakers often feel hesitant or ashamed to use their native language in public, preferring DMB instead. This reluctance reflects the broader sociolinguistic phenomenon where speakers of minority languages experience pressure to conform to dominant linguistic norms due to concerns about social perception (Musgrave, 2014). The informant's personal stance—"I am not embarrassed, but I am afraid that people around us might talk about them not knowing the Belait language"—suggests that while some individuals maintain a positive attitude toward Belait, social scrutiny discourages its active use.

Furthermore, the informant contrasts this attitude with that of the Tutong community, stating, "*I respect people who speak Tutong—when they meet, they will speak Tutong no matter who is next to them.*" This comparison highlights a critical difference in language attitudes: while Tutong speakers confidently use their heritage language regardless of the audience, Belait speakers are more sensitive to external social pressures. This divergence aligns with findings from Charamba & Marupi (2023) and McLellan (2022), who emphasize that community-level factors—such as collective identity and perceived language value—play a crucial role in language maintenance. The Tutong community's strong linguistic resilience contrasts with the Belait community's greater vulnerability to language shift, further underscoring the role of societal attitudes in shaping linguistic choices. Another informant further elaborates on the impact of social pressure on their linguistic choices:

(Excerpt Data 6)

"Dulu, kami cakap Belait saja sama kawan-kawan. Tapi makin lama, makin jarang sudah. Sekarang pun, kalau ramai urang Brunei atau urang luar, kami pun cakap Melayu Brunei. Inda nyaman bah kan bebahasa Belait kalau orang di sekeliling inda faham."

"Before, we used to speak Belait all the time with our friends. But over time, it became less common. Even now, if there are many Brunei Malays or outsiders around, we also speak Brunei Malay. It feels uncomfortable to speak Belait when people around us don't understand."

As shown in excerpt data 6, the informant describes a gradual decline in the use of Belait in social settings, reinforcing the notion that social environment plays a crucial role in language retention. The phrase "*before, we used to speak Belait all the time*" suggests that linguistic practices have undergone significant changes due to external influences. This aligns with previous research on language shift, which highlights how social interactions dictate language preferences over time (Giles & Billings, 2017). The mention of "*uncomfortable to speak Belait when people around us don't understand*" reflects a common theme in multilingual societies, where minority language speakers often switch to majority languages to facilitate communication and avoid social exclusion (Van Dijk, 2008). These findings underscore the complex interplay between language use, identity, and social context. Belait speakers exhibit a tendency to conceal their linguistic identity to conform to broader societal expectations, particularly in multicultural environments where dominant languages like DMB and English are prioritized. The reluctance to use Belait in mixed settings reflects an adaptive strategy for navigating social interactions while minimizing the risk of exclusion or conflict.

Moreover, the role of younger generations in this language shift aligns with Musgrave (2014), who notes that younger speakers of minority languages often experience greater pressure to conform to dominant linguistic norms. This generational shift is fueled by the perception that dominant languages offer greater social and economic opportunities, reinforcing the Belait community's preference for DMB and English. The findings suggest that without targeted efforts to reinforce the value of Belait, the language may continue to decline, ultimately impacting the cultural identity of its speakers.

The Role of Intra-Marriage in Language Maintenance and Socioeconomic Challenges

The data collected highlight intra-marriage within the Belait community as a crucial factor in the preservation and transmission of the Belait language. Marriage patterns significantly influence intergenerational language retention, as the primary language spoken within a household determines whether a minority language is maintained or displaced by dominant languages. In the context of the Belait community, intra-marriage fosters a linguistic environment where Belait is actively spoken, ensuring its continuity across generations. One informant explicitly describes how intra-marriage supports language preservation:

(Excerpt Data 7)

"Macam contohnya amba, mama urang Belait, bapa urang Belait. Jadi bila durang kawin bahasa atu masih ada. Kami sebagai anak ani ngikut. Macam contohnya amba, mama urang Belait, bapa urang Belait. Jadi bila durang kawin bahasa atu masih ada. Atu satu faktor ah bila sudah durang ani kawin sama-sama urang Belait ani, anak pun ikut."

"For example, myself, my mother is Belait, my father is Belait. So when they married, the language remained. We, as their children, followed. For example, myself, my mother is Belait, my father is Belait. So when they married, the language remained. That is one factor—when they marry fellow Belait speakers, their children follow as well."

As seen in excerpt data 7, the informant emphasizes that intra-marriage plays a crucial role in maintaining linguistic continuity. The repetition of "*bila durang kawin bahasa atu masih ada*" (when they married, the language remained) underscores the direct correlation between marriage practices and language retention. This statement aligns with Smith & Tan (2018), who argue that intra-marriage fosters environments where native languages are naturally spoken, supporting intergenerational language transmission. The informant further highlights that children in intra-married families are more likely to adopt Belait, reinforcing the findings of Jones & Lim (2019), who suggest that endogamous

marriage practices strengthen cultural identity and ensure the continuity of linguistic traditions.

However, while intra-marriage contributes significantly to Belait language maintenance, broader socio-political and economic factors complicate these efforts. The increasing dominance of DMB and English in Brunei's educational, administrative, and business sectors continues to marginalize the Belait language. One informant describes the external pressures that challenge Belait language retention:

(Excerpt Data 8)

"Bila masuk sekolah, Melayu Brunei saja durang pakai. Inda tah cakap Belait di skulah. Jadi makin lama, bila kana biasakan, inda kan ingat lagi cakap Belait atu."

"When they enter school, they only use Brunei Malay. They don't speak Belait at school. So over time, as they get used to it, they will eventually forget how to speak Belait."

In excerpt data 8, the informant highlights the impact of Brunei's education system on language shift. The exclusive use of DMB in schools limits the functional domains of Belait, reinforcing its status as a secondary or private language. This observation supports Sercombe (2014), who notes that national education policies that prioritize majority languages contribute to the linguistic marginalization of minority communities. When children do not have opportunities to use their heritage language in formal settings, language attrition accelerates, leading to long-term linguistic displacement (Grenoble, 2021).

Furthermore, economic factors also influence language choices within the Belait community. The influx of foreign workers in the oil and gas industry, particularly in the Belait district, has strengthened the role of English as the primary language of business and professional communication. One informant elaborates on the growing reliance on English in the workplace:

(Excerpt Data 9)

"Di tempat kerja, English saja durang pakai. Kalau cakap Belait, siapa jua kan paham? Jadi biasa tah cakap English saja."

"At work, they only use English. If I speak Belait, who would understand? So we just get used to speaking English all the time."

As shown in excerpt data 9, the informant describes the necessity of using English in professional settings, reinforcing the findings of Cleary et al. (1994), who observed that economic factors often drive linguistic shifts toward dominant global languages. The phrase *"biasa tah cakap English saja"* (we just get used to speaking English all the time) highlights the gradual normalization of English as the primary mode of communication, even among Belait speakers. Mirolli & Parisi (2006) argue that language is closely tied to economic identity, and when a minority language holds little economic value, speakers naturally shift toward languages that provide greater professional and social mobility.

Despite these challenges, the Belait community continues to demonstrate resilience in preserving their language through intra-marriage and other grassroots strategies. The ongoing efforts to maintain linguistic heritage align with global trends in minority language revitalization. Similar to initiatives aimed at preserving endangered languages such as Ukrainian amidst geopolitical conflicts (Chaika et al., 2024), intra-community practices like intra-marriage serve as fundamental mechanisms for language maintenance. However, as Ting (2023) suggests, these efforts must be reinforced by institutional support and policy interventions to ensure long-term sustainability. The findings from this study highlight the dual role of intra-marriage in both language preservation and identity

reinforcement within the Belait community. While intra-married families successfully transmit the language to their children, external pressures—particularly in education, employment, and social interactions—continue to threaten its long-term viability. To counteract language attrition, comprehensive language policies that recognize and support linguistic diversity in Brunei are essential. Initiatives such as incorporating Belait into school curricula, promoting bilingual education, and creating platforms for public use of Belait can complement existing community-driven preservation strategies.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide critical insights into the language shift among Belait speakers and the sociocultural factors influencing their linguistic choices. The results reveal how intra-marriage plays a crucial role in language preservation, yet external pressures, such as interethnic interactions, educational policies, and economic factors, contribute to the gradual decline of the Belait language. These findings align with broader sociolinguistic theories on language maintenance and shift, demonstrating how minority language communities navigate identity renegotiation in response to external influences (Grenoble, 2021; Hamzah et al., 2022).

Belait speakers frequently shift to Dialek Melayu Brunei (DMB) and English, particularly in public and professional settings. This shift is primarily driven by social adaptation, where speakers prioritize linguistic conformity to maintain social harmony and avoid marginalization. The reluctance of younger Belait speakers to use their heritage language in public aligns with research that suggests language attitudes significantly shape linguistic choices (Stapels & Eyssel, 2021). As highlighted in Excerpt Data 4, Belait speakers consciously avoid using their language to prevent drawing attention to their ethnic identity, reinforcing Van Dijk's (2008) model of discourse and social cognition, where individuals regulate language behavior based on external social cues. The impact of mixed marriages further exacerbates this shift. As demonstrated in Excerpt Data 5, speakers in mixed-marriage households prioritize DMB or English due to their greater social utility. This finding supports De Houwer (2009), who argues that parental language use significantly influences children's linguistic acquisition, with dominant languages often taking precedence in interethnic families. The comparative analysis with the Tutong community in Excerpt Data 6 further illustrates how language prestige influences linguistic resilience. While Tutong speakers exhibit strong linguistic pride, Belait speakers demonstrate greater sensitivity to external pressures, resulting in a lower retention rate of their native language. This observation aligns with Charamba & Marupi (2023) and McLellan (2022), who emphasize that community attitudes toward language value play a crucial role in language maintenance efforts.

Despite the challenges posed by interethnic interactions and multilingual exposure, intra-marriage within the Belait community emerges as a significant factor in language preservation. The data suggest that families in which both parents are Belait speakers create an environment conducive to the intergenerational transmission of the language. As illustrated in Excerpt Data 7, intra-marriage facilitates linguistic continuity by reinforcing Belait as the primary language spoken within the household. This finding corroborates the arguments of Smith & Tan (2018), who emphasize that intra-marriage fosters a natural linguistic environment where minority languages are actively spoken, reducing the likelihood of language attrition. However, intra-marriage alone is insufficient in preventing language decline if external sociopolitical factors do not support linguistic retention. In Excerpt Data 8, the informant highlights how the dominance of DMB in educational institutions limits opportunities for Belait language exposure among younger generations. This finding is consistent with Sercombe (2014), who asserts that language policies prioritizing national or majority languages contribute to the marginalization of

indigenous languages. Without formal institutional recognition, even communities that maintain strong internal language practices struggle to sustain linguistic vitality beyond domestic settings.

The study further underscores the role of economic factors in shaping language preferences within the Belait community. As highlighted in Excerpt Data 9, the increasing dominance of English in professional and commercial environments has reduced the practical utility of Belait. This aligns with Cleary et al. (1994), who argue that minority languages often face attrition when speakers perceive them as having limited economic value. The findings suggest that Belait speakers, particularly those engaged in the oil and gas industry in the Belait district, experience a linguistic shift driven by workplace requirements. This observation supports Mirolli & Parisi (2006), who highlight that language adaptation is often dictated by economic incentives, with speakers gravitating toward languages that provide greater access to professional opportunities and social mobility. The lack of institutional support for Belait in formal education exacerbates this linguistic shift. While community-driven efforts such as intra-marriage contribute to language maintenance, the absence of structured educational reinforcement limits the sustainability of these initiatives. As observed in previous studies, languages that lack formal integration into educational curricula often face accelerated decline, as younger generations prioritize languages that offer greater academic and professional advantages (Grenoble, 2021; Hamzah et al., 2022).

The findings of this study highlight the urgent need for policy interventions to support the Belait language. While intra-community efforts such as intra-marriage and familial language practices provide a foundation for language preservation, these strategies must be complemented by formal institutional support. The success of other minority language revitalization efforts, such as those implemented for the Welsh and Maori languages, demonstrates that integrating indigenous languages into education, media, and governmental platforms is crucial for long-term sustainability (Ting, 2023). A key recommendation is the incorporation of Belait into Brunei's educational system through bilingual programs or heritage language courses. As demonstrated in successful language maintenance programs worldwide, formal instruction enhances linguistic retention and fosters a sense of linguistic pride among younger speakers (Jones & Lim, 2019). Additionally, initiatives such as cultural events, media representation, and digital platforms can further promote Belait usage beyond domestic settings.

The importance of community engagement in language revitalization is also evident in this study. Grassroots movements that encourage intergenerational linguistic interactions, mentorship programs, and cultural preservation projects can strengthen Belait language retention efforts. Similar strategies have been effective in other minority language communities, where active speaker engagement has contributed to reversing language decline (Chaika et al., 2024). By fostering a positive linguistic environment that encourages Belait usage in both formal and informal settings, the community can work toward restoring the language's status and visibility.

This discussion contextualizes the findings within broader sociolinguistic frameworks, demonstrating that the decline of the Belait language is influenced by a combination of interethnic interactions, economic pressures, and sociopolitical structures. While intra-marriage remains a critical factor in language preservation, its effectiveness is limited without external institutional support. The preference for DMB and English in education and employment further accelerates linguistic shift, highlighting the need for comprehensive policy interventions to sustain Belait as a viable linguistic and cultural identity. Future research should explore the effectiveness of potential language revitalization strategies, particularly those that incorporate formal education and community-driven initiatives. By addressing both structural and attitudinal barriers to

language maintenance, policymakers and linguistic scholars can contribute to preserving the Belait language and ensuring its relevance for future generations.

In conclusion, this study offers an understanding of identity renegotiation in Belait Language. Based on the discussions, linguistic behavior shapes socio-political structures, economic factors, and intercultural interactions. Moreover, this study supports Fishman's (1991) theory of language maintenance that underscores the significance of family in keeping the vitality of minority languages, and at the same time implies the external influences such as education policies and economic interests that can intervene the passing down of languages through generations. Furthermore, Bourdieu's (1991) concept of linguistic capital favors languages which are keen on social mobility and economic benefits, as proven by the preference for DMB and English in professional settings. In Spolsky's (2004) language policy framework, showing the promotion of state policies on national or majority languages can contribute to the declination of minority language.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the complex dynamics of language shift and identity renegotiation among Belait speakers in Brunei. The findings reveal that while intra-marriage plays a crucial role in preserving the Belait language, external sociopolitical and economic pressures significantly contribute to its decline. The dominance of Dialek Melayu Brunei (DMB) and English in educational institutions and professional settings reduces the functional domains of Belait, leading to generational language attrition. Mixed marriages further accelerate this shift, as children in interethnic households tend to adopt the dominant languages spoken by their parents. The study underscores the necessity of comprehensive language revitalization strategies that go beyond familial language practices. While intra-marriage fosters linguistic continuity, institutional support, such as integrating Belait into the education system and promoting its use in public discourse, is essential for long-term sustainability.

From a theoretical perspective, this research contributes to the broader discourse on minority language preservation, reinforcing existing sociolinguistic theories on language adaptation and identity construction. It provides a deeper understanding of how sociopolitical, cultural, and cognitive factors interact to shape language use, particularly emphasizing the impact of intra- and mixed marriages on language transmission. Furthermore, the study enhances sociolinguistic models by integrating a sociocognitive perspective to examine how individuals navigate linguistic and cultural transformations. Practically, the research underscores the importance of implementing inclusive language policies and fostering community-led initiatives to promote the survival of the Belait language.

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