

Strategies for maintaining and revitalizing Borneo indigenous minority languages: Evaluating multilingual education and online developments

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Abstract

Complex patterns of multilingualism are found throughout Borneo: in Indonesian Kalimantan, in the East Malaysian states of Sarawak and Sabah, and in Negara Brunei Darussalam. Indigenous minority languages in all these polities are perceived as being threatened with extinction as their speakers may be in the process of shifting towards more powerful languages, especially Malay (Bahasa Indonesia, Bahasa Malaysia, Bahasa Melayu) and English. It is these languages which are supported through national education systems, whilst indigenous languages tend to be marginalized.

However, three recent developments offer some possibilities for changing this situation:

- mother-tongue based multilingual education, supported by the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO)
- technological innovations leading to increased presence of indigenous languages in cyberspace and improved internet connectivity
- changing perceptions among language planners and the indigenous communities themselves about ethnolinguistic vitality

Discussion of these draws mainly on a case study of the Bidayuh community in Sarawak, with some reference to Kenayatin in Kalimantan Barat, Kadazandusun and Iranun in Sabah, and Dusun and Tutong in Brunei.

The conclusion considers the need for a paradigm shift based on the realization that the future of indigenous Borneo languages inevitably involves their use alongside the powerful languages, rather than in isolation as before.

Presenter's brief biodata

Dr James McLellan returned to UBD in 2011, having previously served as Lecturer and Senior Lecturer in English and Applied Linguistics from 1989 to 2002. He has also taught at secondary and tertiary levels in Brunei, the UK, France, Malaysia, Australia and Aotearoa (New Zealand). His research interests include Southeast Asian Englishes, Borneo indigenous languages, and Language Policy and Planning in Education. He has co-presented with Yvonne Campbell of UNIMAS Centre for Language Studies, and with Dr Alvin W Yeo of UNIMAS IT Faculty, at recent Borneo Research Council Conferences on topics covered in this proposed presentation.