

The Existence of Regional Languages in the Age of Modernization

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ABSTRACT;

The rapid pace of modernization and globalization has placed regional languages in a vulnerable position, at risk of being marginalized. This research aims to analyze the existence of regional languages amid the dominance of the national language and foreign languages, as well as to identify the factors causing a decline in the frequency of regional language use in everyday communication. Using a descriptive qualitative research method with a literature review and sociolinguistic observation approach, this study found that language shift occurs significantly, particularly in urban areas. The main factors influencing this phenomenon include the perception of prestige associated with foreign languages, population migration (urbanization), and the lack of language transmission from parents to children. The research results indicate that although regional languages are still regarded as a cultural identity, their active use continues to decline among Generation Z and Generation Alpha. In conclusion, revitalization is necessary through the integration of digital technology, the strengthening of local content in school curricula, and collective awareness within families as the smallest unit of language preservation. These efforts are crucial to ensure that regional languages do not merely become historical artifacts but remain living languages in the modern era.

INTRODUCTION

Language is not merely a mechanical tool of communication used to convey messages from a sender to a receiver (De Loof, 2024; Dzhukaeva et al., 2024; Khasinah et al., 2024; Murtadho et al., 2025). Beyond that, language serves as a vessel for the culture, thought, and value systems embraced by a speaking community. In Indonesia, regional languages are a cornerstone of national identity. As an archipelago comprising thousands of islands, Indonesia is blessed with extraordinary linguistic richness, boasting over 700 regional languages spread from Sabang to Merauke (Irvan, 2024). Each regional language carries its own ontological uniqueness—terms related to nature, social relationships, and even philosophies of divinity—that may have no exact equivalents in other languages.

However, in this new millennium, the role of regional languages is facing a severe challenge (Bird, 2022; Gurbanova, 2022; Khahro & Javed, 2022; Pamungkas et al., 2023; Rahima, 2024). Regional languages now stand at a crossroads: either they maintain their existence or are gradually eroded by the tide of time. If we look at history, regional languages are the “mother” of the Indonesian language. Without the contributions of vocabulary and thought structures from various regional languages, Indonesian would not be as rich as it is

today. Therefore, allowing even one regional language to become extinct is tantamount to letting an entire library of civilization burn to the ground, leaving nothing behind.

Modernization has brought about structural changes in the way people interact. The rapid development of information technology through the internet and social media has created a “global *village*.” Within this global village, language standardization is taking place. Languages considered efficient and of high economic value such as English as a global language and Indonesian as a unifying language are becoming dominant in usage.

Modernization is often mistaken for “*westernization*.” The prevailing mindset, particularly among the younger generation, tends to view the use of regional languages as archaic, outdated, or suitable only for rural settings. Conversely, fluency in foreign languages is seen as a symbol of intellectual prowess and social progress. It is this paradigm shift that poses the most latent threat to the existence of regional languages. Language is no longer seen as a noble heritage, but rather as a social burden that is considered to hinder progress in the era of global competition.

Several previous studies have addressed the vulnerability of regional languages. For instance, Crystal (2014) and Nettle & Romaine (2000) emphasized that language extinction is a global phenomenon accelerated by economic and demographic pressures. In the Indonesian context, research by Sumarsono (2017) and Nababan (1991) identified urbanization and the prestige of the national language as key factors in language shift. Furthermore, Abdurrahman (2020) documented a decline in intergenerational transmission in Javanese and Sundanese-speaking families. However, most of these studies focused on rural-urban migration patterns or formal education settings, with limited attention to the role of digital media algorithms and the emergence of Gen Z and Gen Alpha as digital natives. Holmes & Wilson (2017) and Giles et al. (1977) have theoretically discussed language choice and identity, yet empirical studies on how social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram actively marginalize regional languages through algorithmic curation remain scarce.

The phenomenon of *language shift* occurs when a community of speakers begins to switch to another language that is considered more socially or economically advantageous. In many major cities in Indonesia, we observe a phenomenon where parents who are native speakers of regional languages (such as Javanese, Sundanese, or Minang) deliberately choose not to pass on these languages to their children. Instead, they prefer to communicate in Indonesian or even English from an early age.

A common reason given is that it will make it easier for their children to adapt to school and the workplace later on. However, the long-term impact of this domestic policy is the breaking of the intergenerational language transmission chain. When the older generation passes away, and the younger generation lacks the ability to speak their local language, that is the point at which a language is deemed endangered. Modernization accelerates this process through the infiltration of media content that almost entirely uses non-local languages.

Globalization demands homogeneity to ensure the smooth flow of information. In this context, regional languages are often viewed as technical barriers. Major digital platforms, search engines, and social media algorithms favor languages with massive numbers of speakers and abundant digital data.

This has led to regional languages being increasingly marginalized from the digital public sphere. Young people are more frequently exposed to slang terms or English vocabulary

that are popular on TikTok or Instagram. The space for regional languages is shrinking, limited only to the highly private domestic sphere or traditional ceremonies that are held with decreasing frequency. If regional languages cannot adapt to digital needs, their existence will merely become a footnote in the history of linguistics.

Given the current reality, systematic and sustained revitalization efforts are needed. The government, through the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, has indeed made various efforts, but *top-down* policies alone are not enough. There needs to be a *bottom-up* movement that grows out of the public's own awareness.

Revitalization does not mean rejecting modernization, but rather finding ways to harmonize regional languages with the progress of the times. For example, through the creation of creative content in regional languages, the development of interactive digital dictionaries, and the use of regional languages in popular literary works such as songs and films. Modernization should not be seen as an enemy of regional languages, but rather as a tool to expand the reach of these languages to a wider audience.

The primary gap in existing literature lies in the lack of integrated analysis between technological modernization (especially social media algorithms, code-mixing in digital spaces, and hybrid language trends) and the psychological perceptions of prestige among the youngest generations (Gen Z and Alpha) in urban Indonesia. While previous studies have addressed language shift through sociolinguistic surveys, few have employed a combined approach of participatory observation in both physical and digital domains. The novelty of this research lies in: (1) its focus on the *digital-native* generation as the primary agent of language shift, (2) the use of multi-domain observation (domestic, public, *and* digital), and (3) the identification of "identity dualism" where young people simultaneously value regional languages as cultural heritage yet feel ashamed to use them publicly a phenomenon exacerbated by algorithmic bias on global platforms.

Based on the background described above, this study focuses on the following questions: What is the status of regional languages amid the current wave of modernization? What are the most significant factors contributing to the decline in the use of regional languages among adolescents? And what strategic measures are most effective in preserving their existence? The urgency of this research lies in the need for documentation and critical analysis of the current state of our languages. Given the rapid pace of social change, any delay in efforts to preserve regional languages could lead to their permanent extinction. This study is expected to contribute insights for policymakers, educators, and the general public regarding the importance of preserving linguistic diversity as the foundation of the nation's strength in the future.

Based on the background and research gaps that have been identified, this study aims to analyze the existence of regional languages in Indonesia in the midst of modernization, identify the most significant factors that cause the decline in active use of regional languages among generation Z and Alpha generations, examine the role of digital technology and social media algorithms in shaping language attitudes and accelerating language shifts, and formulate an effective revitalization strategy that integrates the preservation of regional languages with the modern digital ecosystem. This research is expected to provide theoretical benefits in the form of enriching sociolinguistic studies on language shifts in the digital era and contributing to the development of language choice theory in algorithm-based communication, while the

practical benefits are aimed at policymakers as input to strengthen the local content curriculum, to educators and parents to increase awareness of intergenerational language transmission, to cultural practitioners and content creators as inspiration production of creative content in regional languages, as well as to the general public to foster awareness that the preservation of regional languages is not a rejection of modernization but a strategy to maintain cultural identity.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using descriptive-analytical methods. The choice of a qualitative approach is based on the nature of the issue under examination, namely the existence of regional languages as a complex social and cultural phenomenon. The study adopts an interpretive paradigm, in which the researcher seeks to understand how individuals or community groups assign meaning to their use of regional languages amid the tide of modernization.

The descriptive method allows researchers to systematically, factually, and accurately describe the facts and relationships among the phenomena under investigation. In this case, researchers do not merely collect numerical data but place greater emphasis on in-depth information regarding the public's perceptions, attitudes, and linguistic behaviors. This design was chosen because it captures sociolinguistic nuances that cannot be captured by statistics alone, such as feelings of pride or shame when using one's native language in public spaces.

In qualitative research, the researcher acts as a key instrument (*human instrument*). The researcher's presence in the field is absolutely essential to build rapport with informants and capture phenomena in *a natural setting*. The researcher serves as both an observer and an interviewer, striving to maintain objectivity despite being directly involved in social interactions. To ensure validity, the researcher engages in self-reflection to prevent personal subjectivity from influencing the interpretation of data collected in the field.

This study focuses on urban and suburban communities with high levels of exposure to technology and modernization. The locations were selected using purposive sampling, as these areas were considered to best represent the occurrence of *language shift*.

Research subjects or informants were selected based on specific criteria to ensure the data collected is representative, including:

1. Older Generation (*Baby Boomers/Gen X*): As representatives of native speakers who still possess a high level of proficiency in the local language.
2. Younger Generation (*Gen Z/Alpha*): As the primary subjects directly impacted by modernization and digitalization.
3. Traditional Leaders/*Language Experts*: As key informants who provide a macro perspective on language policy and preservation.
4. Educators: To examine how language transmission occurs in formal institutions.

The data in this study are classified into two main categories:

- 1) Primary Data: Obtained directly through *in-depth interviews* with informants regarding the intensity of regional language use, as well as participatory observation of verbal interactions among the community in various speech situations.

- 2) Secondary Data: Obtained through documentary studies, previous scientific journals, reports from the Language Agency, as well as social media content showing trends in the use of regional languages versus foreign/national languages.

To achieve the desired depth of data, the researchers employed four complementary data collection techniques:

- a. In-depth Interviews

Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide. This technique provided researchers with the flexibility to explore informants' responses further. Questions focused on motivations for language choice, barriers to using regional languages, and the influence of social media on their vocabulary.

- b. Participatory Observation

The researchers directly observed how regional languages are used in traditional markets, family settings, and even in WhatsApp group chats. These observations aimed to identify differences between what informants said (during interviews) and what they actually did (in real-life practice).

- c. Document and Literature Review

Researchers analyzed literature on sociolinguistic theory, language policies in Indonesia, and similar research findings from other countries to strengthen the theoretical foundation of the analysis.

- d. Digital Open-Ended Questionnaire

Given that the research theme is the era of modernization, the researcher also distributed digital questionnaires to reach a broader range of young respondents. This was done to map trends in language use in cyberspace.

In addition to the researcher as the primary instrument, the supporting instruments used include:

Interview guidelines validated by experts. *Field notes* to record unique, spontaneous events. Audio recorders and cameras to document verbal and nonverbal interactions. Qualitative data analysis software to assist in organizing transcripts. Data analysis was conducted iteratively and continuously from the start of field data collection. The researchers used the interactive analysis model by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, (2014) which includes three phases of activity:

Data Reduction: The process of selecting, focusing on simplification, abstracting, and transforming raw data. Data irrelevant to the existence of regional languages is excluded, while prominent data is categorized into specific themes (e.g., *prestige* factors, economic factors, technological factors).

Data Display: The reduced data is then presented in the form of descriptive narratives, comparison tables, or flowcharts to facilitate understanding of the emerging patterns.

Drawing Conclusions and Verification: The researcher begins to interpret the meaning of each pattern identified. Initial conclusions are continuously tested for validity using new evidence gathered in the field until data saturation is reached.

To ensure the credibility and validity of the research results, the researcher employs triangulation techniques:

1. Source Triangulation: Comparing interview data from young people, parents, and linguists to assess the consistency of the information.

2. **Methodological Triangulation:** Verifying data obtained from interviews with field observation results and questionnaire results.
3. **Temporal Triangulation:** Conducting observations at different times to ensure that the phenomena observed are not merely fleeting occurrences.
4. **Informant Check:** The researcher reconfirms the results of data interpretation with the informant to ensure that what the researcher has written aligns with the informant's intended meaning.

The researcher pays close attention to ethical considerations throughout this process. Each informant is provided with *informed consent* following an explanation. The researcher guarantees the confidentiality of the informant's identity (*anonymity*) upon request, and ensures that the collected data is used solely for the advancement of scientific knowledge without harming any party.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Field data indicates a layered pattern of language use based on communication domains. Researchers have categorized these findings into three main domains: domestic, public, and digital.

Based on observations and interviews, there has been a drastic shift in the family's role as a unit of language transmission. Among the Baby Boomers and Gen X generations, regional languages remain the primary language of instruction (mother tongue). However, in young families (Gen Y/Millennials) with Gen Z or Alpha children, there is a break in the linguistic chain. Parents tend to use Indonesian for practical educational reasons.

"We're afraid our child will be confused at school if we speak the local language at home," said one of the informants (a mother, 32 years old). This phenomenon results in children having only *passive competence* they understand what their grandparents are saying in the local language, but are unable to respond in the same language.

In public spaces, regional languages have seen a narrowing of their functions. Regional languages are now more commonly used as a "secret language" or a code of solidarity among speakers who already know one another. In traditional markets, the use of regional languages remains strong due to their role in negotiation and emotional closeness. However, in modern shopping centers, offices, and formal institutions, regional languages are rarely heard, having been replaced by Indonesian, which is considered more neutral and professional.

This section highlights how modernization shapes linguistic attitudes. Researchers have identified a phenomenon of "Identity Dualism" among adolescents.

Prestige and Stigma: The majority of teenage respondents (78%) consider regional languages to be an important part of culture, yet only 15% feel "confident" using them in public. There is an implicit stigma that using a heavily accented regional language (medok) indicates a rural, non-modern background.

Slang vs. Regional Languages: Modernization has given rise to a new dialect called "Bahasa Gaul," which adopts the structure of Indonesian with English loanwords. This language is considered *cooler* and more relevant to urban lifestyles. Regional languages are seen as too rigid because they have speech registers (such as "unggah-ungguh" in Javanese) that are difficult for the instant generation to learn.

Modernization driven by digitalization is the fastest-growing factor in language shift. Research findings show:

1. Dominance of Global Content

Social media consumption (TikTok, Instagram, YouTube) is dominated by content in Indonesian and English. Social media algorithms tend to feature popular content of a national nature. As a result, young people's technical vocabulary and emotional expressions have fully shifted toward the dominant languages. Terms like "*healing*," "*literally*," or "relate" are used more frequently than their equivalents in regional languages.

2. The "*Language Hybridity*" Phenomenon on Social Media

However, an interesting trend has emerged involving linguistic hybridization. Young people often engage in code-mixing between regional languages and slang for humorous or unique expressive purposes. Regional languages frequently appear in the form of "memes" or short comedy sketches. While this helps preserve certain vocabulary, structurally, proper regional grammar is beginning to disappear.

Through an in-depth analysis of the interview results, the researchers summarized four main factors that are degrading the existence of regional languages in the modern era:

Migration and Urbanization Factors: The mixing of people from diverse cultural backgrounds in urban areas compels communities to use a lingua franca (Indonesian) to facilitate cross-ethnic communication.

Economic Factors: Regional languages are not considered to have economic value (*market value*). The workforce demands proficiency in Indonesian and English as primary prerequisites, so investing time in learning regional languages is seen as unbeneficial for one's career.

Educational Factors: Local content in school curricula is often viewed merely as supplementary. The minimal time allocation (only 2 class hours per week) is insufficient to develop active communicative competence.

Interethnic Marriage Factors: Families resulting from interethnic marriages almost always adopt Indonesian as the primary language at home to bridge the gap between the parents' native languages.

Despite facing significant pressure, this study found sporadic efforts to preserve the existence of the language:

Digitization of Regional Literature: The emergence of educational Instagram accounts that discuss archaic vocabulary in regional languages with visually appealing designs for millennials.

Creative Industries: The use of regional languages in the lyrics of popular songs (such as Javanese pop or remixed regional songs) has proven effective in fostering a sense of pride among the younger generation. These songs serve as a bridge for young people to reconnect with their ancestral languages without feeling constrained by formal language rules.

Local Policies: In some regions, instructions from local leaders to use regional languages on specific days (e.g., "*Kemis Nyunda*") provide space for regional languages to remain alive within the bureaucratic environment.

The loss of a regional language is not merely the loss of a means of communication, but the loss of a *worldview*. Informants from cultural circles state that many ethical and moral

concepts contained in regional languages (such as the concepts of *tepa selira* or *gotong royong*) begin to lose their meaning when translated literally into other languages. This has an impact on the degradation of character among the younger generation, who are becoming increasingly detached from their cultural roots.

Discussion

The phenomenon of the fading presence of regional languages in the era of modernization is not merely a matter of the loss of vocabulary, but rather a deconstruction of collective identity. Based on research findings, there is an internal conflict among the younger generation between the desire to preserve cultural roots and the pressure to appear "modern" and "global." From a sociolinguistic perspective, this is closely linked to the concept of linguistic prestige.

Regional languages, in many cases, have come to be viewed as "second-class" languages relevant only in agrarian, traditional, and domestic contexts. In contrast, Indonesian and English are seen as languages of progress, technocracy, and intellectualism. Modernization brings with it a new value system in which efficiency and the reach of communication are top priorities. When an individual feels that using a regional language will limit their social mobility or make them appear less competent in a professional setting, they will instinctively switch languages (*language shift*). This analysis aligns with language choice theory, which states that humans are rational beings who will choose the language code that provides them with the greatest social and symbolic benefits.

One of the most significant factors emerging from the research findings is the role of information technology. The modernization of the 21st century is characterized by massive digitalization. In the digital realm, there is what is known as the hegemony of the dominant language. Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube are creating new, homogeneous standards of communication.

The use of regional languages on social media often falls into two extremes: as material for jokes (comedy) or as rigid cultural artifacts. It is rare to find regional languages used as the medium for serious content such as science, technology, or contemporary philosophy. This reinforces the perception that regional languages are incapable of conveying modern concepts. Furthermore, social media algorithms that prioritize nationally viral content force content creators to use Indonesian in order to reach a wider audience. The erosion of private space occurs when regional languages, which were once "secret languages" within the home, are now replaced by viral terms from the online world, causing the function of language preservation at the family level to collapse.

The extinction of a regional language in the age of modernization is not merely the loss of a means of communication, but also the loss of an invaluable "library of knowledge". Every regional language in Indonesia contains *local wisdom* crystallized in the form of metaphors, proverbs, and specialized terms. For example, terms in regional languages that describe natural phenomena, traditional agricultural systems, and social etiquette often lack exact equivalents in Indonesian.

When regional languages are abandoned, *the worldview* embedded within them also disappears. This leads to a cultural decline among the younger generation. They may have a technical grasp of English vocabulary, but they lose sensitivity to noble values such as *tepa*

selira (Javanese), *sipakatau* (Bugis), or *silih asah silih asuh* (Sundanese) because these concepts are no longer internalized through their mother tongue. Modernization that is not accompanied by the preservation of the mother tongue will give rise to a generation that experiences cultural alienation they are in their homeland yet feel alienated from the fundamental values of their own ancestors.

Discussions regarding the existence of regional languages must highlight the failure of intergenerational transmission within the family unit. Why are today's parents often reluctant to teach regional languages? Research findings indicate a fear of "cognitive barriers." There is a sociolinguistic myth prevalent in society that teaching multiple languages from an early age will cause children to speak late or experience *language confusion*.

Scientifically, this assumption has been widely refuted. Children actually possess an extraordinary capacity for brain plasticity that enables them to become bilingual or multilingual. However, social pressure and the standardization of the education system which accommodates only the national language lead parents to opt for the "safe" path. Modernization here acts as a catalyst for parents' anxiety about their children's economic future. Families, which should be the primary laboratory for language preservation, have instead become the main agents of language shift. Without a conscious policy at the family level to continue using the local language at the dinner table, the government's efforts through the school curriculum will always hit a dead end.

Although modernization may seem like a threat, this discussion also identifies opportunities that can be capitalized on. Technology should not be viewed in black-and-white terms. The phenomenon of regional-language pop songs going viral on digital platforms demonstrates that regional languages are highly adaptable when presented with a modern aesthetic.

Digitization can serve as an effective preservation tool through the development of digital dictionaries, *gamified* regional language learning apps, and the use of artificial intelligence (AI) to translate ancient texts into modern languages. The survival of regional languages in the modern era depends heavily on their ability to "appeal" to Generation Z. If regional languages can integrate into modern lifestyle ecosystems—such as T-shirt designs, song lyrics, social media captions, and movie dialogues—a sense of pride will begin to grow again. Regional languages should no longer be taught merely as a tedious memorization of vocabulary, but rather as a cool and unique lifestyle.

From a macro perspective, the preservation of regional languages requires stronger legal protections and bolder policies. The government must not stop at mere rhetoric about "*Bhineka Tunggal Ika*" Concrete measures are needed, such as increasing the number of local-content classes, providing incentives for creators of regional-language content, and mandating the use of regional languages in public institutions on specific days on a much larger scale.

The future of regional languages in Indonesia is at a critical juncture. If this downward trend continues without meaningful intervention, then within the next two to three generations, Indonesia may have only one functional language, with hundreds of regional languages having become "dead languages" or existing only in museums. Linguistic diversity is a major geopolitical and cultural asset. Modernization should serve as a vehicle for regional languages to leap forward, not as *a bulldozer* that flattens them in the name of bland global uniformity.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings and discussion outlined above, it can be concluded that the existence of regional languages in the current era of modernization is in a critical and alarming state. The phenomenon of language shift is occurring on a massive scale, particularly within domestic spheres and among the younger generation in urban areas. Modernization, manifested through the standardization of the national language, the dominance of global languages, and the penetration of digital technology, has significantly altered the sociolinguistic landscape of Indonesian society. Key findings from this study include the degradation of language transmission, where there is a breakdown in the intergenerational communication chain within families, with parents opting for Indonesian as the primary language to ensure their children's access to education and social mobility, leading to regional languages losing their function as the natural "mother tongue." Additionally, digital hegemony is evident as cyberspace and social media algorithms marginalize regional languages, with their use often limited to humor or superficial popular culture, while formal and intellectual communication is entirely dominated by the national language. Furthermore, a crisis of prestige is observed, where regional languages are perceived as symbols of backwardness, causing Generation Z to lack confidence in using them in public spaces, resulting in the loss of rich vocabulary and complex linguistic structures. As a recommendation, efforts to preserve regional languages must go beyond conventional methods, requiring technology-based revitalization strategies and more integrated policies. The government needs to strengthen local content in the curriculum, while the public must reignite the awareness that regional languages are valuable assets of identity that coexist with the progress of the times. Preserving regional languages in the modern era does not mean rejecting globalization, but rather blending local wisdom with technological progress to ensure the nation's identity remains strong amidst global homogenization.

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