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**NOTIONS OF COMMUNITY AND *INTISARI*:
REFLECTIONS ON RESEARCHING LANGUAGE
IDEOLOGIES IN MULTILINGUAL EASTERN INDONESIA**

Abstract:

This autoethnographic account draws on observations and reflections about the process of conducting research in Nusa Tenggara Timur Province (Indonesia) with a multilingual research team, the negotiations that went into translating and refining the survey and interview protocols, and the substantive discussions that emerged about community and *intisari*, or essence. The research process reveals that the study of language ideologies brings its own set of methodological tensions, as researchers' own language ideologies emerged during the translation process.

Keywords: multilingual research methods ♦ language ideologies ♦ translation

Introduction

Midway through carrying out a research project on language ideologies in Nusa Tenggara Timur Province (NTT), in eastern Indonesia, we realized that we had two projects on our hands: one focusing on language ideologies, and the second on methodologies for multilingual research. The first follows social-science norms in its pursuit of “scientific” knowledge: some objective account of attitudes and linguistic practices regarding eight local languages in NTT. Ostensibly, this *is* the study. We created a survey that was administered orally to 30 respondents in each language group, for a total of 240 responses from eight different language groups. The results of those surveys will be averaged, plugged into SPSS, and some significance of results will be established. We also have a total of 40 in-depth interview transcripts. From this data corpus, we aim to tell a story about language ideologies in NTT.

The second, unexpected project (represented in the current paper) is predicated on notions of reflexivity. Here, we aim to examine the actual process of research, interrogating data collection processes, and the relationships inhered among researchers and between research subjects and researchers. This autoethnographic account does not venture into the findings from the surveys or interviews. Instead, it draws on observations and reflections about the process of conducting research with a multilingual team, the negotiations that went into translating and refining the survey and interview protocols, and the substantive discussions that emerged about community and *intisari*, or essence.

Background and context

We initially conceived of the language ideologies project because of our involvement with other research projects in NTT. Starting in 2015, Zhang has conducted research on literacy interventions targeting early-elementary students and their communities in Belu Regency, NTT. Since 2014, Yanti has been active in language documentation trainings in Indonesia, together with linguists from Tokyo University of Foreign Studies and from other foreign universities, as well as with local linguists. The documentation trainings aim to raise the awareness about the importance of language documentation among local communities, and to provide practical, hands-on training to do so. Yanti and her collaborators have provided language documentation seminars and workshops in Kupang once a year since 2015. In both of our research milieus, local languages were perceived

as linguistic facts – stable, whole, and defined objects of research – and there was also little acknowledgement of how multilingualism could in fact be related to identity formation and expression (Kramsch 2009).



Figure 1: The eight languages represented are: Leti, Kupang Malay, Tetum Belu, Helong Bolok, Li'o, Sikka, Rote Lole, and Dawan.

In our joint project, we explore local language ideologies in NTT as a way to understand the role of language in society. Drawing on Woolard (1992: 236), who wrote that “language ideology is a mediating link between social structures and forms of talk,” we aim to understand how language use and language ideologies structure and condition interactions and relationships, and index power, authority, and tradition (Errington 1998; Gal & Irvine 2000; Kurniasih 2006; Smith-Hefner 2009). There is rich work on language ideologies in Indonesia (Errington 2000; Goebel 2018; Maier 1993; and Zentz 2017), and we aim to extend this research by examining language ideologies in linguistically hyperdiverse Eastern Indonesia (Fox 1988; Kuipers 1998). In our project, we also hone in on how metalinguistic awareness and sociolinguistic knowledge (Bucholtz & Hall 2005) does, or does not, affect personal convictions and linguistic practice. Thus, the study does not only document existing, prevalent attitudes towards local languages, but also examines the factors and mechanisms by which those attitudes undergo change.

A multilingual research team

Initially, the biggest question we had was whether data collection should be conducted in Indonesian, Kupang Malay (the lingua franca in NTT), or in local languages. Because we wanted

to ensure maximal ease of communication between researcher and respondent, and because we expected that the respondents would feel more comfortable speaking in their home language, ultimately we decided to gather both the survey and interview data in local languages. Our target respondents spanned several generations¹ and were people who regularly used their local language for daily communication.

Because neither of us is from NTT and neither of us speaks any of the minority languages of NTT, we decided to build a multilingual research team.² We recruited eight research assistants, each of whom is a native speaker of a local language in NTT Province (with the exception of the Leti language³). The choice of languages selected for the study was inextricably bound to that of the selection of research assistants. Finding dependable research assistants was crucial – especially those with some background in linguistics, education, and / or qualitative research. We recruited research assistants through June Jacob, a lecturer in sociolinguistics at Universitas Kristian Artha Wacana in Kupang. Yanti also recruited several collaborators through her ongoing work in organizing language documentation workshops in Kupang. Though we wished to have data for other languages of NTT such as Bunak, Kemak, or Lamaholot, without a collaborator for those languages it simply was not possible. The eight languages we chose were the following⁴ (with approximate number of living speakers following each entry):

Dawan: 700,000
 Helong: 14,000–17,000
 Kupang Malay: 350,000 (all users), 200,000 (native speakers)
 Leti: 7,500
 Li'o: 105,000
 Lole: 20,000
 Sikka: 175,000
 Tetun Belu: 400,000

¹ We aimed to see if there were trends in responses according to age group. Our age groups were: ages 20–35, 36–55, and 56 and over.

² Our linguistic repertoires are as follows: Zhang (L1 English and Mandarin Chinese as a heritage language, L2 Indonesian) and Yanti (L1 Malay and Teochew, L2 Indonesian, L3 English). All others on the research team have an L1 local language(s) and Kupang Malay, L2 Indonesian, and L3 English (and other languages). Four members of the team had already finished their undergraduate degrees in linguistics (with one finishing his PhD dissertation in linguistics), three were in their final year of the linguistics doctoral program, and the last member was an education and literacy activist.

³ Leti is spoken on Leti island, an outer island located in the Timor Sea. The island was previously part of Nusa Tenggara Timur province, but it is currently part of Maluku Barat Daya Province.

⁴ These figures all come from www.ethnologue.com, but some of the figures are outdated and possibly inaccurate.

Though Dawan is the most widely-spoken language of the eight selected languages, Kupang Malay is considered the lingua franca of the NTT region, and may have higher numbers of speakers than indicated here. As such, Kupang Malay is used widely across NTT Province (Jacob & Grimes 2000), whereas other languages such as Dawan are used primarily in their associated geographic regions (in this case, Timor Island). Other languages, such as Helong, have an even more restricted geographic spread.

The case of Dawan is representative of the difficulty of establishing accurate numbers of speakers. What may seem to be the same language to outside observers may not be recognized as such by Dawan speakers themselves. Zhang observed that when presented with what seemed to be standardized Dawan-language children's books, some Dawan speakers rejected those books, saying that they were incomprehensible and not actually in their Dawan language. There is enough significant variability within each of these languages to destabilize the veracity of the official counts of number of speakers.

The survey questions were compiled and adapted from the Language Attitude Survey by First Peoples' Cultural Council⁵, which is written in English, and the *Kuesioner Penggunaan Bahasa Sehari-hari* (The Survey on Everyday Language Use, Cohn et al. 2013), which is available in Indonesian.⁶ All of the survey questions were presented in Indonesian to our research team, and then the research assistants were asked to translate them into the local languages. The research assistants looked for respondents based on the criteria we set for them; they collected the data from the respondents, entered the survey data into a spreadsheet, transcribed the data, and translated the data into Indonesian.

To ensure that the all of the research assistants follow the same procedures in selecting participants, collecting, and processing the data, we convened for a two-day workshop and several follow-up meetings in Kupang in 2017, and continue to regularly communicate via WhatsApp. Throughout the process, we offered training in areas of linguistic fieldwork methods, transcription, and translation, qualitative research methods, language ideologies, and discourse analysis. Both the configuration of our study team – the two of us with our eight research assistants across their eight languages – and its research focus and process raise theoretical, empirical, and logistical questions about multilingual research methodologies. Chief among these was the question of translation.

⁵ The survey can be found at:

http://www.fpcc.ca/files/PDF/Language_Policy_Guide/Template_2_Language_Attitudes_Survey.pdf

⁶ We piloted the Indonesian survey instrument with university students in Kupang in 2016. Based on the results, we designed our interview protocol and then conducted pilot interviews with several students who had participated in the pilot survey in early 2017. The results of the pilot study were presented at Konferensi Linguistik Tahunan Atma Jaya 15 (Zhang & Yanti 2017).

Translating the untranslatable: “community”

Although we were confident in the researcher assistants’ competence in translating the survey questions from Indonesian into local languages, we were also aware that the assistants were not trained translators. Thus, for each language, another native speaker of the language was asked to translate the survey questions. The research assistant and the second native speaker were not allowed to consult each other as they translated the questions. The research assistants were then asked to compare the two translated versions and check for differences. These differences then became the basis for negotiating the translations. When differences between the two versions were found, research assistants were to reevaluate their translation, decide on the best version, and justify that decision to the group. In our group discussions, research assistants spoke about contextual cues and degrees of politeness as key factors in their decision-making.

Even prosaic terms were the source of disagreement between different translated versions. For example, the survey features a Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. There is also an option for “no opinion” or “neutral.” When testing the instrument in Helong, however, research assistant Dominikus found that respondents preferred to respond “sort of,” rather than “neutral,” “no opinion,” or “agree.” He explained that “sort of” was a preferable term for Helong speakers, because it indicated some degree of politeness; speakers could refrain from expressing strong opinions, and from possibly offending their interlocutors. For Renhard who worked in Leti, there were also differences between the two translated versions, and it was important to identify the precise phrase or term that would elicit responses that were relevant to the study. Thus, in translation the research assistants not only had to draw upon sociocultural contextual cues, but also a strong grasp of theories of language ideology and the study purpose.

A central question that arose was about how to translate the concept and word *komunitas*, or community. The first half of our survey was about language use in the family and home setting, while the second half focused on language use in the community (“*dalam komunitas*”). Family, though often featuring different configurations across the language groups we surveyed, was a familiar concept, and the translation process was not as fraught. This was the case even though, undoubtedly, the meaning of “family” in each language had vastly different referents.

In contrast, the research assistants had divergent ideas about how to draw boundaries around the idea of community. Early in the discussion, several pointed out that *komunitas* sounded like the label for a student group or some other civic organization. Others raised the idea that community should be understood as a substitute for *suku*, roughly equivalent to “tribe.” In some cases, the overlay between *suku* and language may fit snugly. However, it is also common for members of a *suku* to not speak the language of the *suku*. More critical voices also raised the important point that *suku* is one of many defining labels, but certainly not an exclusive one, for most Indonesians. The

amount of mixing, intermarriage, and migration endemic not only to contemporary Indonesia but throughout history renders *suku* a salient political and cultural concept, if not an accurate or straightforward category for classifying ethnolinguistic groups. For example, many Indonesians belong to several *suku*, and may speak the language of another *suku* altogether because of family, work, academic, or other demands. The term *suku* also slightly evokes the sense of ethnolinguistic groups as linked to a particular geographic area. Thus, if we used *suku* in the Indonesian version of our survey protocol, it would carry specific social, cultural, and political valences beyond what we intended with “community.”

Together with the research team, we then brainstormed other possibilities for a translation of “community”: *etnis* (ethnic group), *wilayah* (area), *daerah* (region), *perkumpulan orang* (a gathering of people), and *kelompok* (group). Each of these terms carried its own bundle of connotations. *Etnis* carried some of the same thorny valences as *suku* but with the added problem that *etnis* is a wider category that potentially includes multiple language groups. For example, *Cina* (Chinese-Indonesian) can be considered an *etnis* in Indonesia, but this “ethnic group” spans multiple languages, including Teochew, Hokkien, and Hakka, and also includes many members who speak no languages affiliated with the *etnis Cina* category. The terms *wilayah* and *daerah*⁷, used most often in geographic reference, have the problem that multiple languages often are spoken within that area (either by separate groups or in overlapping patterns across *suku* and space), thereby potentially creating confusion. Imagine living in any multilingual area, let’s say a district on Flores Island in NTT, and being asked to comment on whether “People in my region should know our language.” This would naturally lead to questions about which language is *our* language.

In the end, the research team members each negotiated their translations (English glosses below):

Indonesian

<i>Anggota-anggota</i>	<i>komunitas perlu mengetahui</i>	<i>bahasanya.</i>
members (of my)	community should know	our language

Kupang Malay

<i>Katong satu kampong musti bisa katong.pung</i>	<i>bahasa dar kampong.</i>
we (in) one village should use our	language of the village

Helong

<i>Hut mamo</i>	<i>kia (ATUIL HELONG) musti</i>	<i>tan un dehet.</i>
a.lot	this person Helong must	know his/her language

⁷ The category *daerah* is not bound to the New Order era, and the term *bahasa daerah* (local language) has been used since before the New Order era.

Leti

Ina nara amasyali la nyawoka-nyaleu
 married.woman HON.EPIT the.public.and.adat⁸.leader in community

musti iratu ira.lime nyawlne.
 must they.know their.language how.to.speak

Tetum Belu

Ita kan renu musti hatene ita kan lia fuan.
 we the people should know our language of.our.area

Several research assistants drew upon distinct vocabulary or pronoun deictics to indicate group belonging and reference. The assumption for the latter, of course, is that if the question had been spoken in Indonesian, with a direct translation, the meanings would be different and the deictics would lose some of their meaning. While the Kupang Malay version uses *katong satu kampong* (we in this one village) for “community,” the Helong version uses direct reference (*ATUIL HELONG*) to clarify the subjects in question. The Leti version uses *ina nara anasyali la nyawoka-nyaleu*, which can be glossed as “married.woman HON.EPIT the.public.and.adat.leader in community,” which can also broadly mean “community.” Finally, the Tetum Belu version drew strongly on pronoun deictics to convey group membership, using “*ita*” or (us / we) to reference Tetum Belu speakers.

In Kupang Malay, research assistant Jacklin decided to use *kelompok*, rather than *komunitas* as suggested by her colleague in their second translation. According to Jacklin, in Kupang Malay *kelompok* (often glossed as “group”) is more commonly used, particularly in the context of talking about language, it indicates a group of people that speak and understand the same language (as a native language) and live in one area. Jacklin also thought that *komunitas* sounded more Indonesian than Kupang Malay.

In Leti, Renhard chose between the two following versions:

Version 1

Ina nara amasyali la nyawoka-nyaleu
 married.woman HON.EPIT.public.and.adat.leader in in community

musti iratu ira lirne nyawalne
 must they.know their.language how.they.speak

⁸ *Adat* means tradition or custom.

Version 2

Pwata	mwani	la nyawoke	idde	musti
woman	male.for.herbivore	in community	one	must

ratu	nyawokde lirne
they.know	that.group their.language

Ultimately he chose the first version; it seemed more polite and thus could be used when collecting data from people of various ages. *Pwata mwani*, as in version 2, is generally used to distinguish gender for both humans and animals, whereas *ina nara amasyali* can be glossed in Indonesian as *bapak*, *ibu* – terms of respect that can mean either “Father” and “Mother” or “Sir” and “Ma’am.” Furthermore, according to Renhard, *pwata mwani* is rarely used as a subject, and when it is used, listeners consider the speaker to be arrogant and impolite. Thus, sociocultural considerations about politeness were central to determining the appropriate translation in Leti.

Discussion: Notions of intisari and essence

From this exercise, several paradoxes emerged. One was that the surveys were all administered orally, and thus the questioner was already speaking in the language that was being referenced. Thus, it was possible for a translation like the Tetum Belu one to rely wholly on the deictic “we / us” (*ita*) to reference the “community” of Tetum Belu speakers. Thus researchers could skirt the issue of how to define “community” (whether in relation to language, geography, ethnicity, or other parameters) nearly completely, and thereby eliding an area of focus we are interested in. A second paradox was raised by many of the researchers, who felt that this was a roundabout discussion; for them, local language is precisely the common denominator of an ethnolinguistic group. To define a group without using the *bahasa daerah* as the central organizing concept would, of course then, be an impossible task. For them, even if someone does not speak the language of their *suku* (tribe), she still understands it is the language that is partly what qualifies her as a member of that *suku*. For one researcher, this was precisely her situation: her parents were both Sabu, making her Sabu. However, as she did not grow up speaking Sabu, she possessed limited Sabunese language competency. However, she saw no contradiction between her position that Sabu people speak Sabunese, and the fact that she herself was a Sabu who did not speak Sabunese.

At the heart of the issue was a conflicting set of assumptions about language and essentialism. Part of what motivated our desire to have a survey section about language use “In the Community” stemmed from our skepticism about the perfect boundaries drawn around ethnolinguistic groups. We did not want to assume that the notion of community is organized around the use of a unified, local language in NTT; we were curious about all the moments when the *ethnos* and language did

not match perfectly. This anti-essentialist critique has been widely articulated by sociolinguistics and language ideology scholars (for example, Bauman & Briggs 2003; Blommaert & Rampton 2011; Zentz 2014), who note how language mixing, codeswitching, register shifts, language shifts, migration and linguistic hyperdiversity, sampling, and other linguistic phenomena render the notion of neatly-bound ethnolinguistic groups the exception rather than the norm. In this literature, this postmodern perspective was foundational to further research, rather than an arena of contestation. With our research team, however, it was terms like “language repertoires” and “translanguaging” that were received skeptically.

For many on our team, anti-essentialist critiques directly contradicted what they saw as realities: that their languages are ancient, direct inheritances from their *nenek moyang* (ancestors), and that *intisari* (the essence of something) is a positive quality and source of pride. Our group grappled with questions like, “What do you mean: if *budaya Rote* (the culture of Rote) is this way, why should we say there’s no *intisari* (essence)?” We were unprepared for the debates about essentialism partly because the research team we recruited hailed from largely academic circles. Thus, we assumed that everyone was familiar with these postmodern and poststructuralist critiques of bounded ethnolinguistic groups. Our assumption about a shared intellectual foundations paradoxically proves exactly the dissenting researchers’ points. Perhaps because the researchers were from and lived in Nusa Tenggara Timur (NTT), they held a different set of viewpoints – equally real and valid – about the neat boundedness of ethnolinguistic groups. In this way, these debates denaturalized what previously felt like a certainty – that languages are malleable and ever-shifting.

Concluding thoughts

The process of and issues arising from translation in our study may bear useful findings for other researchers of multilingualism. Researchers need to not only accept but also acknowledge the central role of translation in their methodology, as well as the fact that the findings are contingent on these variable translations. As such, the choice of research assistants was all-important; we relied on their expertise in not only their language, but their judgement about how best to translate the research instruments into their language, and then also the respondents’ answers into Indonesian. The process of negotiating the translation of the research instruments – and how we got to particular versions – taught us to accept variation between the different versions. The fact that we do not speak the languages that we are researching lays bare the knowledge differential that often (or always) exists between researchers and research subjects. However, because of our subject matter – language ideologies – such a knowledge differential is more explicit in our study.

There of course occurs degrees of variability across interviews – depending on, for example, dispositions of both interviewer and interviewee, the context of the interview, and so on (Briggs

1989) – but variability, particularly across different language groups, was drawn into sharp relief when the focus of the interviews was language itself. Thus, there was an overlap between the content and the method that complicated the findings. Ultimately, we concede that there are not standard versions of the interview tools that have the same exact referents across languages, nor is there perfect commensurability in meanings (for “community” or many other terms) across the languages. The decision to translate the survey and interview instruments, rather than to solely use Indonesian language in the research process, heightened our awareness of this variability across languages.

Finally, the findings from the research are derived not only from the survey and interview responses, but from the process of conducting research itself. Through a series of dialogues and exchanges with the research collaborators, we – together with the collaborators – got to many tensions and issues at the heart of language ideology research. In this way, the research was both reflexive and iterative, and the methodology was as significant as were our data corpus of survey and interview responses.

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