

## Factors Related to Language Shift among the Tindal Population in Ratau, Kota Belud, Sabah

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### Abstract

This research serves as a preliminary analysis of the language situation of Tindal, a Dusunic language spoken in Kampung Ratau, Kota Belud, Sabah, Malaysia. For the past several years, it has been observed that the use of the mother tongue of the community, Tindal, has steadily declined while the domain of Bahasa Malaysia (BM), the national language, has increasingly widened.

A survey was administered to selected residents of Kampung Ratau to determine language use and their perception of the economic and social functionality of Tindal and Bahasa Malaysia. The results indicate that there is indeed a language shift between the older and younger residents of Kampung Ratau with the older ones predominantly using Tindal while the younger ones primarily use Bahasa Malaysia in their daily communication. Overall, the respondents think Tindal is an important cultural marker to preserve their identity, both in the present and for the future. They agree that the continuous use of Tindal will ensure the longevity of the language. Though the speakers of Tindal do acknowledge the vital role they play in preserving this minority language, they are also aware that a proficient grasp of Malay is necessary. Most respondents view BM as important since it is the accepted medium which allows them to fully function socially and economically.

The dilemma for the residents of Kampung Ratau is that they are being torn between preserving Tindal, their mother tongue, and subordinating it to the more dominant Bahasa Malaysia, the national language. This, unfortunately, is a shared concern affecting many other minor ethnic language communities in Malaysia.

**Key words:** language shift, Tindal, Sabah, Bahasa Malaysia

### Introduction

Malaysia has 139 languages of which 98 are spoken primarily in East Malaysia – Sabah and Sarawak (Ethnologue, 2009). The presence of varying tongues in the country led to the need for a selection of a *lingua franca* for communication. Since Malay has always been the *lingua franca* in the region, and the Malays have long held political dominance in the country, Malay was selected as the sole official language of the newly independent Malaysia (Wong & James, 2000). To achieve integration, the nation's policy makers decided on a National language. Malaysia's National Language Policy, as stated in Article 152 of the country's Constitution, positions Malay or BM as the only national language of the country from the time of Independence (Omar, 1985, p. 41).

After joining Malaya, Sarawak and Singapore in 1963 to form the Federation of Malaysia, Sabah placed emphasis on acquiring the national language. For the sake of social and economic progress, as well as assimilating into the fast-growing Malaysian culture, Kadazan/Dusun parents began to use BM in their homes (Lasimbang, 1996). According to Lasimbang and Kinajil (2000), by early 1980s, the Kadazan/Dusun community began to see telltale signs of language loss, an early sign of language shift. They attributed this shifting away of the the Kadasan/Dusun language chains to modernization and development (p. 416).

Language shift occurs when a particular linguistic community gradually replaces the local dialect with another language which is perceived as more prestigious or dominant (Lee, 2008; Trudgill, 2000). It is a linguistic event that has become a serious concern to sociolinguists and informed community members as it tends to signal eventual language loss and death (Mackey, 1980, p.68). Understanding what motivates such shift might give communities strategies for successful language revitalization efforts; or at the very least,

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assist them in recognizing when such efforts should be seriously considered and when language should be allowed its own course.

In the village of Ratau, in the District of Kota Belud, Sabah, Malaysia, the use of Tindal, the mother tongue of the community, appears to have declined over the years. Instead, the use of Bahasa Malaysia (BM), the *lingua franca* of Malaysia, has slowly gained dominance. In this paper, we report the findings of a study designed to examine the attitudes of selected residents of Kampung Ratau about their use of Tindal and BM to determine (a) if there is a language shift, and (b) the factors that may have influenced this language shift. It is hoped that this study will provide some understanding of the dynamics between the uses of BM and Tindal.

Tindal is a variety of the Dusunic language family, a subgroup of the Austronesian language family (Ethnologue, 2009). Tindal, which means “people who have come out from the earth,” is a coastal Dusunic language, where it is spoken along the west coast of Sabah, primarily in the Kota Belud area (Robinson, 2006). Tindal is often used interchangeably with the name Dusun. One should note here that “Kadazan” and “Dusun” are terms used by different groups of people who speak varieties of the Dusunic language. In fact, Kadazandusun has been used as a general term for all languages in the Dusunic language family (Lasimbang & Kinajil, 2000, p.415).

## Literature Review

Most literature on language shift examines factors that motivate the shift, and those factors can basically be divided into two categories: internal and external. The internal factors refer to those elements that lie within the speech community while the external ones are those residing outside (David & Dealwis, 2008). In their report of a study on language shift in Sabah and Sarawak, David and Dealwis (2008) listed urbanization, increased mobility, and education as macro level language shift factors. Micro level language shift factors involve exogamous marriages, locality, network density, language attitudes, and the lack of a *lingua franca*. Crawford (1996), on the other hand, maintains that language shift is mainly internally directed and is reflective of changes in social and cultural values within the linguistic community. However, he readily acknowledges that the internal changes are often a reaction to external pressures, and refers to factors cited by Fishman (1991) as “dislocations”. Dislocations are caused by a number of factors such as demographic factors (mobility and intermarriages), economic factors (employment and commerce), mass media, social identifiers or role models for the young people (Crawford, 1996, pp. 57-58).

## Macro Level Language Shift Factors

### Urbanization and Increased Mobility

In general, movement from the rural to urban areas is seen as an act of increasing opportunities for better life. In an area where different languages are spoken, such movement usually affects the speakers’ choice of language. The movement is always toward one that is closely associated with socioeconomic progress (Abas, 2005; Borbely, 2000; Holmes, 2008; Morita, 2007). In order to fit into the new environment, ethnic minorities are compelled to adapt to a new *lingua franca*. This usually results in the narrowing of the use of the mother tongue to home domain only (David & Dealwis, 2008). Ultimately, those working and living in the urban areas find themselves using the dominant language in their social network at the expense of their mother tongue.

In relation to socioeconomic factors, Kershaw (1992), who conducted a study on the Dusuns in Brunei, attributed language shift to the changes in the socioeconomic landscape of a speech community. His study revealed that today’s younger generation is not exposed to the “elements” which require the use of the native language. These elements include an agrarian atmosphere in which agricultural occupation was the norm. With more career choices, many Dusuns in Brunei have progressed from being farmers to civil servants. The success of the pioneering Dusuns in ‘upgrading’ their lives is an encouragement to others to follow in their footsteps.

### Education

In a multilingual society, the language chosen as the medium of instructions in educational institutions will attract the efforts of non-native speakers to acquire it. The motivation for such behavior is obvious--to succeed in academics. Based on a study done in Sabah where the medium of instruction in school is BM,

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Lasimbang (1997) reported that parents, in efforts to ensure that their children will do well in schools, have resorted to communicating to their children in BM as a way to assist them master the language. Martin (2005) observed the same phenomenon in Brunei. Many parents admitted that they used Malay at home instead of their own mother tongue because Malay is the medium of instruction in schools. Other studies concur with this finding (Anonby, 1999; Borbely, 2000; David, 2003, 2008; Morita, 2007).

### Micro Level Language Shift

#### Exogamous Marriages

A number of research studies show that exogamous marriages are influential in shaping the linguistics environment at home. This leads to language shift (Borberly, 2000; David, 2003, 2008; Martin, 2008; Martin & Yen, 1992). In situations where spouses come from different linguistic background, there is a clear need to establish a common language for the home. In some situations, a linguistic compromise is made which often does not include the use of either spouse's mother tongue. In other situations, one of them will adopt the spouse's language if it is the dominant one in the society. Both situations involve a lack of mother tongue usage which discourages the maintenance of such language (Lasimbang, 1996).

In the case of mixed marriages among the Kelabits, Martin and Yen (1992) discovered that 65% communicated in English while 15% did so in Malay. Among all the respondents, regardless of the ethnicity of the spouses, 45% reported the use of English as a main means of communication, followed by 33% who used Kelabit and 15% who used Malay. In Martin's (2005) study on the Belait community in Brunei, findings indicated that 95% of the parents stated that Malay was used with their children. Even so, Martin (2005) points out that even though Belait-speaking parents do not transmit Belait to their children, the grandparents are countering these deliberate efforts. However, these efforts by the older generation are futile as the younger generation still lean towards the use of Malay even when comprehension of Belait is possible.

#### Locality

Geographical context affects the linguistic ecology of ethnic minorities as well. Close proximity with speakers of other languages forces community members to reach a compromise. Often, this compromise is made at the expense of abandoning the native language for one that is understood by the general public. In other words, changes in the environment could be part of a broader shifting process, as discovered by Kershaw (1992) in his studies of the Brunei Dusuns' adaptation of Brunei Malay culture and identity.

#### Language Attitudes and Prestige

Language is a social trend that is closely linked to a community's social structure and value system. A language, or a dialect, will be held prestigious if it proves economically, politically, or socially beneficial (Trudgill, 2000). A language's prestige can also be evaluated by taking into account the community's language attitudes. Kershaw (1992) considered the youth's attitudes as well as the elders' choice of response as two elements of prestige. Based on a study done in Brunei, he reports that the youth consider *Brunei Dusun* as archaic while the elders make compromises in their choice of language when responding to the younger generation.

Similar observations can be made on the Orang Miriek of Sarawak, where the younger generation is losing their sense of pride in being Miriek (Ghani and Ridzuan, 1992). Ghani and Ridzuan (1992) report that the Orang Miriek is economically disadvantaged in comparison to most groups in the Miri area. To make matters worse, they are perceived as backwards by their immediate surroundings (p. 135). Furthermore, in a personal communication with a Miriek local, Ghani and Ridzuan (1992) learned that some of the new generation experience some sense of embarrassment in using Miriek because they perceive it as "bahasa kuno" [primitive language]. They prefer to use Malay as they think it is modern, "so they want to learn and use that only." (p. 134).

In a study on language attitudes in a multi-ethnic organization in Kuching, Sarawak, Ting (2003) revealed that attitudes can be explained in terms of the importance of English in various contexts and the affective dimension of the use of English and BM. Ting discovered that participants believed that a good command of English would ensure a good educational future for their family (children). Furthermore, a high percentage of

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the respondents (96.48%) indicated that they wanted their children to be proficient in both English and BM. Ting also concluded that about half of the participants felt positively about using English as a language for wider communication. In a study of language acquisition among the Punjabi community of West Malaysia, David (2003) reported that a person who uses English is seen as educated while a person who uses Punjabi is seen as having a lower education. She further observed that the Portuguese community communicates in English so as to appear sophisticated when their relatives visit from abroad.

These studies appear to suggest that changes experienced by a speech community, whether internal or external, impact the communities' attitudes toward language preferences. Though these factors may be prevalent across generations, there are certain aspects which may be relevant to a particular age generation, for example, the use of language as shown in Martin's (2005) study. Taking this into account, this study aims to discover whether there is a difference in terms of language use between age groups, as well as whether or not there is a different perception towards factors linked with language shift discussed in the literature.

## Methodology

Participants for this study were selected, using purposeful sampling, from a population of Tindal speaking residents in the village of Ratau in the District of Kota Belud, Sabah, Malaysia. To determine whether or not language shift affected a particular age group, we separated the participants to those who were under 25 years old (younger participants) and those who were over 30 years old (older participants). In addition, this study was delimited to only literate members of the village. Subjects who agreed to participate in this study were given a survey questionnaire consisting of 36 items: 8 items on demographic characteristics, 26 items on factors related to the use of Tindal and BM, and 2 open-ended items on reasons why they believe parents do not speak Tindal to their children, and, if they were married, why they don't speak Tindal to their children. The 26 items, designed to measure attitude about the use of Tindal and BM, were scaled along a 5-point Likert Scale from 1-Strongly Disagree to 5-Strongly Agree. These items were constructed based on a comprehensive review of the literature and feedback from parents and students who had personal experience with language shift.

As indicated earlier, the participants were selected using purposeful sampling. They were selected by virtue of their being residents of Kampung Ratau; that they met our age group criterion for inclusion (25 and younger and 30 and older); and they were willing to engage in the study. The survey was conducted in BM. In the preface or introductory part of the questionnaire, a brief explanation of the purpose of the study was given. In addition, respondents were assured that their participation in the research would not harm them in any way. They were not required to disclose their identity, thus assuring them of anonymity. A research assistant was recruited to give the survey at the homes of some of village residents. Some were also administered at small social gatherings by one of the researchers. It took about two weeks to complete the study before it was decided that there was no one else to approach. Some of them handed the questionnaire directly to the researcher. Others were returned through the assigned person. Although the registered population was about 350, the population residing at the village at the time the survey was conducted was much smaller due to migration motivated by career, education and marriages.

## Result

The demographic characteristics of the participants are summarized in Table 1. Thirty-eight persons participated in this study. Of these, 24 (63.2%) were married, and mostly male (60.5%). Only 5 (13.2%) of the participants had college degrees. All participants considered themselves as Dusuns. Approximately 30% of them were employed by the government or the private sector. Another 34% reported they were self-employed. The average age of the participants was 34 years old (SD=11.77). Seventy-four percent of the respondents reported using Tindal always or all the time, while 72% indicated they spoke BM always or all the time. A cross-tabulation indicates that everyone spoke both languages sometime to all the time. Thus, the subjects in this study were clearly bilingual. Only 11% of them spoke English regularly. The mean age of the older participants was 41.72 (SD=5.95) while the average age of the younger ones was 19.77 (SD=3.42).

Table 1. Participants' Characteristics (N=38)

Variable	n	%
Gender		
Male	23	60.5
Female	15	39.5
Marital Status		
Married	24	63.2
Single	14	36.8
Educational Level		
Bachelors	5	13.2
SPM/STPM	22	57.9
SRP	10	26.3
Other	1	2.6
Occupation		
Public Sector	9	23.7
Private Sector	2	5.3
Farmer	2	5.3
Self-employed	13	34.2
Other	12	31.6

In Table 2, the percent of younger or older participants using Tindal, Bahasa Malaysia or English are shown. Ninety percent of the older participants use Tindal almost always or all the time compared to only 30.8% among the younger participants. Bahasa Malaysia was used almost always or all the time by 100% of the younger participants compared to only 56.5% among the older participants. These group differences in the usage of Tindal and BM are statistically significant ( $p>0.01$ ). The use of English is minimal at 15.4% for the younger participants and 8.7% among the older participants. These results appear to suggest that there is a language shift among the Dusuns of Kampung Ratau with the older ones using Tindal while the younger ones use predominantly Bahasa Malaysia in their daily communication routines.

Table 2. Use of Tindal, Bahasa Malaysia and English by Age Group.

Language	Age Group*		$\chi^2$	p
	Younger (n=13)	Older (n=24)		
Tindal	30.8	96.0	18.77	0.001
Bahasa Malaysia	100.0	56.5	7.83	0.005
English	15.4	8.7	0.38	0.540

\*Percent reporting 'Almost always or all the time'.

Table 3 shows item mean and standard deviation as well as the percentage of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed to the respective statement. For the purpose of this study, items with mean responses of 3.5 or higher are considered important reasons for the use of Tindal or BM. In defense of the use of Tindal, the participants reported that (a) knowing Tindal is important for cultural identity (4.74); (b) the future of Tindal is important (4.44); and (c) that the Tindal language will die if the current generation does not know it (4.61). To be sure Tindal does not die, the participants reported they must use and know it (4.37) and that it would be embarrassing not to know Tindal (4.18). While it is apparent that Tindal is important, the use of BM is equally essential. For example, knowing BM is important for (a) school success (4.42), (b) dealing with the government (4.18), (c) getting good jobs (4.00) and (d) communication and interaction with the general population (4.26). A series of t-tests for independent samples using 0.01 as the level of significance were conducted to determine if there were gender or marital status differences on subjects' attitudes toward the use of Tindal and BM. No statistically significant differences were found between male and female. There were also no statistically significant differences between older and younger participants. There were also no significant differences in attitudes between self-employed (farmer/self-employed) and those employed by government (public) or private sectors. These results suggest that there is consensus among the participants



of the importance of using Tindal and Bahasa Malaysia, regardless of their gender, work situations, or age group.

Table 3. Item mean, standard deviation and percent of 'agree/strongly agree' (N=38)

Item	M	SD	%
Tindal language is important for the identity of the Tindal people	4.74	0.72	97.4
Tindal (language) will die if the new generation does not know it.	4.61	0.64	92.1
The future of Tindal is important.	4.44	0.68	89.5
Knowledge of Bahasa Malaysia helps one study effectively in school.	4.42	0.50	100.0
I can make sure that Tindal does not die by knowing/using it.	4.37	0.67	89.5
Bahasa Malaysia helps one to mix around with people from all walks of life.	4.26	0.68	92.1
Bahasa Malaysia helps one to deal with the government.	4.18	0.56	92.1
It will be embarrassing not to know the mother tongue, Tindal.	4.18	0.95	78.9
One can learn Bahasa Malaysia even Tindal is spoken at home.	4.13	0.74	89.5
Bahasa Malaysia can help one get a good job in Malaysia.	4.00	0.46	89.5
It will be difficult to get a good job if one does not know Bahasa Malaysia.	3.89	1.08	76.3
The future is brighter for those who know Bahasa Malaysia.	3.63	0.88	68.4
Knowledge of Tindal helps one to study effectively in school.	3.31	0.84	44.7
Tindal can help one to mix around with people from all walks of life.	3.29	1.11	50.0
The future is brighter for those who know Tindal.	3.18	0.80	31.6
The ability to use Tindal well is a sign of being educated.	2.95	0.96	31.6
The ability to use Bahasa Malaysia well is a sign of being educated.	2.95	1.04	36.8
Tindal can help one get a good job in Malaysia.	2.95	0.73	15.8
Tindal helps one when dealing with the government.	2.74	0.89	15.8
Bahasa Malaysia can be used as an identity for the Tindal people.	2.50	1.08	15.8
If one does not know Tindal, it will be difficult to get a job.	2.47	0.76	5.3
Bahasa Malaysia is more beautiful than Tindal.	2.42	1.03	15.8
It is not embarrassing not to know Tindal.	2.39	1.05	13.2
It is not embarrassing not to know Bahasa Malaysia.	2.37	0.82	13.2
Not proud of Tindal.	1.82	1.20	15.8
Tindal is not relevant at this stage.	1.63	0.88	2.6

## Discussion

In this study, we found that over 70% of the subjects speak Tindal or BM always or all the time. Additionally, we found that all (100%) speak both Tindal and BM, clearly suggesting that they are bilingual. When disaggregated by age group, a majority of the older participants use Tindal while all of the younger ones use BM almost always or all the time in daily communication. This result points to a possible language shift. On the one hand, Tindal is important for maintaining cultural identity and therefore, the younger generation should learn it. On the other, the use of BM is equally important. It is, after all, the national language. Therefore, one should know BM for school success, dealing with government, getting good jobs, and communicating and interacting with the general population.

Closer analysis of the results show that the respondents, regardless of age, seem to be at two opposite ends, where they claim Tindal as their identity marker but seemingly value BM for practical purposes. At one end, the respondents acknowledge the socioeconomic benefits BM offers. On the other, they also realize that Tindal is a major indicator of their ethnic identity. A majority of the participants in this study are conversant in both BM and Tindal. The necessity to converse in BM becomes even more evident as two thirds of these respondents are working in the private or public sectors. Being employed requires the use of BM as a practical means to interact with members external to the Tindal community. Hence, in pursuing their social and economic aspirations, these respondents deem the use of BM as practically valuable. They know that being functionally literate in BM is important since Tindal does not guarantee them a good job in

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Malaysia. The participants in this study recognize that career prospects in Malaysia become better with the knowledge of the working language. This is consistent with David (2003) who observed that the Punjabi Sikhs in the Klang Valley of Malaysia chose to learn both BM and English because it is crucial for their economic well-being. Trudgill (2000) also suggested that many minority languages in Malaysia are giving way to BM and English, the former and latter being national and international languages, respectively, for economic reasons.

Our study indicates that a major reason for learning BM is that it is the medium of instruction in all national schools. Education plays a vital role in determining the preferred language of communication. Since schools in Malaysia are operated in the national language, the community is compelled to ensure a linguistic environment that facilitates the learning of Bahasa Malaysia, the school's medium of instruction. This is consistent with Martin (2005) who reported that parents of the Belait community in Brunei chose to speak Malay with their children. David (2003) reported that the Punjabi community in Peninsular Malaysia associated the use of English with higher education, while the native language is associated with low education. Tindal, and many native languages of Sabah, may be viewed by some as 'lacking' in authority, perhaps because they are vernacular languages that have not developed into *lingua franca* languages. Bahasa Malaysia, on the other hand, has become the *lingua franca* at all levels of the Malaysian society. Whether or not knowing BM can be validly associated with levels of education is, however, debatable. Further research need to be conducted to provide empirical evidence for such a notion.

Participants in this study regard Tindal as a distinguishing trait for the community of Kampung Ratau. Though the use of BM is predominant in the socioeconomic and education domains, the respondents generally agree that Tindal has higher aesthetic value. This may stem from the respondents' sense of belongingness to their linguistic group. Even though BM is a practical language to know, it functions only as a bridge for the cultural and linguistic gaps. Tindal, on the other hand, is a unique trait which only the speakers possess.

From the researchers' personal observation, locality does not appear to be a factor in the language shift experience among the Tindal speakers. Tindal is a common tongue for many villages in the inland area of the Kota Belud district. The presence of other ethnic groups like the Bajaus, who reside along the coast line, does not appear to have any immediate impact on the language shift. Although Tindal is a common Dusunic variation spoken in the Kota Belud district, it is not widely used. Perhaps this is because educational opportunities and social mobility have presented BM as an essential language since it is the national language.

Four of the older respondents have spouses of another race. It is possible that for these respondents, exogamous marriage may be a factor in the language shift phenomenon. As Borberly (2000), David (2003, 2008) and Martin (2008) seem to suggest, exogamous couples tend to seek comprises in terms of lexical items and linguistic structure that may eventually lead to the adoption of a third language that is more widely used. Perhaps this is the case for some the respondents in our study. However, data collected from the research is not sufficient to clarify this matter.

Our data indicates that all of the participants are bilingual. However, when the data was disaggregated by age group, the older respondents almost always use Tindal while the younger ones almost always use BM for their communication routines. The results of our study appear to suggest that language shift has occurred. Bilingualism, in an environment where a minor language co-exists with a major one, is often a precursor to language shift. Such a phenomenon occurs because parents and children need to have a common language. If the mother tongue is a minority language, the younger generation will eventually adopt the more powerful language while maintaining adequate fluency of the mother tongue for communication with the older folks. When the older generation is gone, there is a high possibility that the younger generation will not continue maintaining their mother tongue. Moelleken (1983) suggested that language shift tends to increase bilingualism in various domains before a complete shift occurs. What happened to the Maori people in New Zealand testifies to this possibility. They moved from monolingualism in Maori in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to bilingualism in their mother tongue and English. After a period of bilingualism in Moari and English, they gradually became monolingual English-speakers in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Holmes, 2008, p. 57).

## Conclusion

Our study indicates that the participants from both of the age groups are bilingual. Nevertheless, there is some evidence of a language shift with older respondents using Tindal and the younger ones using BM almost all the time. This shift may be due to the necessity of knowing BM since it is the medium of instruction in all national schools as well as the official language for use in most government communications. If Moelleken's (1983) and Holmes' (2008) observations generalize to the Tindal of Kampung Ratau, it is possible that within

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the next one or two generations, *Tindal* will be no more. Thus, if the use of *Tindal* is to be preserved in the backdrop of BM as the *lingua franca* of Malaysia, serious efforts must be taken to increase intergeneration transmission of the language.

We recognize several limitations in this study. First, the sample size is quite small and therefore, may not have adequate statistical power for any hypothesis testing. Second, the subjects were not selected using random sampling procedure and therefore, the result may not necessarily generalize to the population of Ratau Village. Third, the participants were delimited to only those who were literate. Thus, those less educated, but nonetheless speakers of both Tindal and BM were not represented. Future study should consider these limitations.

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