

Gebe Language usage in Central Halmahera: A Sociolinguistic Study

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Abstract : This study aims to study the pattern of use of the Gebe language on Gebe Island, Central Halmahera, North Maluku. Gebe Island is a multi-ethnic island located in Central Halmahera, which was originally an island with a single ethnicity, namely the Gebe ethnicity itself. Over time, social, economic, and cultural dynamics have brought about rapid changes in the linguistic life of the Gebe native people. The establishment of a nickel mine on the island in 1978 invited immigrants from various linguistic backgrounds to come to the island. Designed as a descriptive qualitative study, we identified at least seven domains of language use where the local Gebe language experienced a rapid decline. The causative factors include mobility, inter-ethnic marriage, and minimal effort to transfer this language from the older generation to the younger generation as an effort to preserve the language. Our study has come to the conclusion that the Gebe local language currently requires attention from both its speakers and the government.

Keywords : *Gebe language, nickel mining, sociolinguistic studies, regional language extinction*

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1. Introduction

Language is a very important intermediary medium in human life. With language, humans as social beings can exchange information with one another. The use of language is very important in a society so that the information or message to be conveyed can be well received and does not cause misunderstandings about the content or message of the information to be conveyed. According to Mulyana and Rakhmat (in Prathiwi, 2020), "language is a tool for people to interact with other people and also as a tool for thinking; Therefore, language functions as a mechanism for communicating and at the same time as a guide for viewing social reality. Language then has a function as a guide for society. Language exists in one society and becomes part of the culture of that society. Language is the hallmark and pride of the speaking community. Chaer (still in Prathiwi, 2020) says that language is unique and has a very close relationship with the culture of the people who use it. For example, the use of language towards older people will look different from speaking to younger people. In other words, thinking that language is an element of culture is not an exaggeration.

As one of the elements of culture, language needs to be maintained in order to maintain its sustainability, especially in the current era of globalization, especially regional languages. In several places, the dynamics of society have begun to erode the defenses of certain regional languages. One of the dynamics of society that we mean here is the increasing level of pluralism in society; for example, the presence of immigrants with different linguistic backgrounds. Under these conditions, language contact is unavoidable, and gradually, the frequency of using the local language (native language) begins to decrease and may even be threatened with extinction.

One of the reasons for increasing linguistic pluralism in a region is due to the opening of employment opportunities which has consequences for the arrival of immigrants to the region. Although economically the local people in the area have been helped, linguistically they have "sacrificed". Like it or not, the increasing level of linguistic pluralism in the region has contributed to the cultural life of the people, and because language is one of the elements of culture, it is only natural that there will be changes in the language used in the region.

Gebe Island, where native Gebe speakers live, is one of the areas in Central Halmahera (North Maluku) with a high degree of pluralism. At first, Gebe Island was only inhabited by one ethnic group. However, the changes in socio-economic dynamics that occurred on the island have enriched the cultural heritage of the island, which is now a multi-ethnic island. One of the contributing factors was the establishment of a nickel mining company in 1978.

The establishment of a nickel mining company on Gebe Island invited residents from other areas, even from outside North Maluku, to raffle their destiny on the island. Their presence, by bringing a number of cultural elements from their respective regions, triggers changes in the sociocultural dynamics of the island. Gebe Island, which initially had a homogeneous linguistic character, has now become an island with a heterogeneous speaking community. In 2004, the contract for a nickel mining company on Gebe Island was declared complete. Although not expected to happen, there is an assumption that the closure of the mine could "purify" the island's linguistic character. Unfortunately, the stretching of the mines is still visible, and migrants seem reluctant to leave the island. The logical consequence is that the newcomers come one after another, bringing a number of different regional languages, which are used and even learned by the children of native Gebe speakers. This linguistic phenomenon is in line with Wahyudi and Wibowo's statement (in Wawan et al, 2008) that

"Society is always heterogeneous, both ethnically and linguistically. Community members are able to live socially and interact with each other in that society." The same thing was also expressed by Gumperz (in Widiyanto, 2018) that in an area it is possible to live with several language variations side by side so that the forms of interaction are code-switching and code-mixing. The people of Gebe Island are now a multilingual society, and this kind of communication activity certainly does not only rely on local cultural values, so it is feared that it will have an impact on reducing the use of their native language.

The Gebe language (this is a regional language) is the original language of the people on the island of Gebe. This language is related to several other regional languages in Central Halmahera (North Maluku), such as Sawai and Patani (both of which are local languages), as well as Maba in East Halmahera. Research on the Gebe language has been carried out, one of which was by Kamholz. Kamholz (in Burhanuddin et al, 2017) makes a kind of new branching regarding the position of the Gebe language. Kamholz places Gebe as a cognate language with other languages in East, Central, and South Halmahera based on morphological evidence in the form of inalienable possessive marking to the first-person plural (equivalent to the word "we, our", inclusively), namely with the ending -r or -d. This language kinship also influences the use of language in Gebe.

Since its inception, Gebe Island has been inhabited by several tribes such as the Patani, Maba, Tidore, Ternate, Ambon, Gorontalo, and Bugis. In 2016, the percentage of the Gebe tribe on the island only reached 62% (Hardyansha, 2016). With a percentage of less than 100%, it is very possible that there will be a change in the use of language on the island.

We have presented several views on the dynamics of language in a heterogeneous society on the island of Gebe and its influence on the use of the Gebe language. Based on these conditions, we formulated two research questions as follows: (1) what are the patterns of use of the Gebe language by native speakers, especially in the "mine circle" area of the island? and (2) what factors influence the pattern of use of the Gebe language on the island?

This study is expected to be able to describe the recent condition of the use of the Gebe language by native speakers and the factors that influence it. Practically, this study is expected to be a reference in studying the Gebe language which in our view is still outnumbered by studies of other languages in North Maluku.

2. Method

This study is qualitative and descriptive and designed in the form of a field study. Sociolinguistically, this study can be called a correlation study (not in a quantitative sense), but a study based on the correlation between language and non-language elements such as culture, in a natural context. This is in line with what was stated by Lindolf (in Wawan et al, 2018) that qualitative descriptive research is a type of research with a natural context.

This study was initiated by preparing a research plan and studying the relevant literature. Data were then collected in the field by observing and interviewing. The informants were selected using the snowball technique so that we did not limit the number but according to data needs. Speakers of the language, as the primary data source, have also been categorized by age. In addition, we have codified the languages we studied, namely Gebe (abbreviated as BG) and Ternate Malay, a lingua franca in North Maluku (abbreviated as MT).

3. Result and Discussion

Based on the field data we have collected, we identified patterns of use of BG and MT in seven domains, namely the family domain, the neighborhood domain, the market domain, the government domain, the educational domain, the religious domain, and the customary domain. Meanwhile, we found at least three factors that influence patterns of BG use, namely mobility, marriage, and education. In the following, we discuss each of the domains and factors mentioned.

3.1. The pattern of Gebe language use

In this study, we divide patterns of use of the Gebe language (hereinafter referred to as BG) based on the domains of language use identified in the field. Speakers are also divided by age, namely ages 6 to 13, ages 14 to 20 years, ages 21 to 40 years, and ages 41 to 59 years.

Children aged 6 to 13 years were found to use MT more frequently in daily communication. This is caused by the lack of BG vocabulary that they have learned as a result of the lack of using BG in their environment.

Speakers aged 14-20 years, even though they already have a lot of vocabulary in BG, still use MT more often than BG. In this case, BG is only used in short communication.

Speakers aged 21-40, 41-59, and older are found to use BG as their primary language but in daily communication, there is still code switching and code mixing between BG and MT.

The following is an analysis based on the domain of language use.

3.1.1. Family Domain

In studying patterns of language use, the family domain (nuclear family and extended family) is the closest area that can be used as an indicator, because communication in this domain occurs intensely. In relation to this study, we found that communication within the family domain was dominated by MT, even though family members (especially husband and wife) were native speakers of BG. The majority of family members in a household use MT compared to BG, especially in Elfanun village, Kapaleo Yam, and Kacepi, which are multi-ethnic villages.

We have also found that there is another variable that influences the use of BG and MT languages in the family domain, namely the age of the husband and wife when they marry (especially in same-ethnic marriages). Married couples who are married at the age of at least 35 years tend to use BG in their daily communication. Meanwhile, younger married couples tend to use MT as their primary language; BG is only used in the context of very personal conversations.

The majority of conversations between children and parents are dominated by MT, except in the context of special conversations such as parents advising children and so on. In this particular context, we found BG to be used more frequently than MT, particularly in the village of Sanafi. Even though communication between children and parents occurs in MT, children are known to be able to understand the expressions in BG.

In the communication between the siblings, we identified that MT has predominated. Even though BG is still used, the use of BG is only limited to joking expressions or angry expressions, or swearing.

In the extended family domain, where there are grandparents for several families, the conversation is dominated by BG. Grandparents use BG even in conversations with grandchildren. The use of BG in the extended family domain seems to be based on the principle of courtesy.

Meanwhile, in households where the husband and wife are not of the same ethnicity, the use of BG is hardly identified at all.

3.1.2. Neighborhood Domain

We have seen that Gebe islanders communicate with their neighbors using both BG and MT. Adults, in communicating, tend to use BG. Meanwhile, the children communicate using the MT.

3.1.3. Market Domain

The market area is an area with a high degree of heterogeneity on Gebe Island. The market on Gebe island is located in the village of Kapaleo. The majority of transactions in the market have taken place in MT but we have found that buyers and sellers who know each other, especially those who are native to the island of Gebe, tend to use BG in their transactions rather than MT.

3.1.4. Government Domain

One of the government areas on Gebe Island that we visited was several village offices. During our visit, BG was very rarely used by employees in daily communication. In internal meetings, employees use Indonesian and MT.

Nonetheless, we see the potential for using BG during wider community meetings, especially if there are elderly residents. The use of BG in community meetings is intended so that the message of the meeting can be conveyed by all meeting participants at all age levels.

At the population health service posts, we found MT to be the dominant language used by the community and health workers. The use of BG is found in private communication between a mother (who brings her child) and a health worker when her child's illness does not want to be known except by the person she is talking to.

3.1.5. Educational Domain

In the school environment, interaction in the classroom between students and teachers is dominated by MT. In elementary schools, we found that the use of BG was seldom used between teachers and students, and between students. The same thing is also found in junior high schools, but at this level, teachers often use BG with students when giving advice. Meanwhile, at the senior high school level, we found BG to be more dominant than MT; the use of BG by students and teachers in senior high schools on Gebe island is higher than at the other two school levels.

3.1.6. Religious Domain

In the religious domain, the use of MT predominates. The majority of the native people of Gebe Island are Muslims. Interaction in a religious context can only be monitored at the mosque. For example, on Friday, the preacher uses MT in delivering his sermon. The reason is that most of the congregation of the mosque are immigrants who only understand MT and do not understand BG except for a small number.

3.1.7. Customary Domain

In the customary domain, we have the opportunity to collect data on traditional ceremonies. In traditional rituals, especially marriages, MT and BG are used together. Meanwhile, in the marriage sermon, BG is used exclusively.

Based on the description above, we can tentatively conclude that age influences language use. Children in Gebe Island are generally not introduced to BG intensely by their parents. Their parents tend to use MT when communicating with them. This fact is also influenced by the time of data collection. Children, at the time of data collection for this study, still had relatively few BG vocabularies because age determines the experience of learning a language.

In addition, we also find that the use of BG is increasingly being eroded by the high pluralism of languages on the island of Gebe. This is in line with Marlina and Payerli (2020) that the symptoms of a decrease in the use of local languages can be caused by the sociocultural dynamics of a multi-ethnic region. Meanwhile, BG tends to be found to be more dominant in the context of extended family communication and traditional ceremonies. This is in line with Fishman (in Maricar and Duwila, 2017) which reveals that a language may be seen as more appropriate to use in a context than another language.

3.2. Factors that influence the decrease in the frequency of use of the Gebe language on Gebe Island

3.2.1. Mobility

Gebe sub-district is a sub-district with a high level of population movement. 7 (seven) of the 8 villages in the sub-district are already connected by road. Road access, access to economic needs, access to education, and access to other needs can be more fulfilled. Communities have often left their villages to meet their basic needs and social needs. In addition to the movement of people who left their villages, there have been many other residents who have moved in and out of other residents' villages. For example, vegetable sellers, children's snack sellers, and grocery sellers, even in one village, namely Sanafi village, we met medicine sellers. This mobility in and out of the village contributes to the use of BG which is starting to be rarely used.

3.2.2. Inter-marriage

With the existence of a nickel mining company on Gebe Island, immigrants from various areas then settled on the island. Inter-ethnic marriages are inevitable. We see that one of the factors for the decline in the use of BG is inter-ethnic marriage. With partners who do not understand BG, communication within the household or family or neighbors tends to use MT. Thus, the frequency of using BG has decreased.

3.2.3. Education

The last factor that we think plays an important role both in language maintenance and vice versa is the educational factor. A language should be transferred from one generation to the next as a community heritage. Local language education, which in this case is carried out in daily interactions using that language, gets too little attention on Gebe Island. Parents rarely use BG in interactions with their children. Between older and younger people, the use of BG is also decreasing as part of the factors we have described above.

4. Conclusion

Our study indicates that the use of the Gebe language on Gebe Island has experienced a rapid qualitative decline. In various domains of language use, we found that the use of the lingua franca is more dominant than the use of the Gebe language itself. Even though in certain linguistic interaction contexts Gebe is still used, the high degree of heterogeneity and mobility, combined with small attention to the transfer of language from older to younger generations, the frequency of use of Gebe is a few steps away from entering a state of concern. The speakers of the Gebe language who are elderly seem to be still loyal to the language. However, as stated by David Crystal that "language death follows the death of its speakers," the Gebe language should get the attention of its users and the government in order to strengthen its resilience from the threat of extinction.

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