

An Overview of the Status of the Balinese Language amidst Language Change in Indonesia

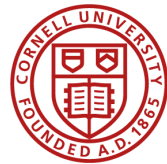
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Sustaining Paradise: Sacred Landscapes and Ecological Restoration in Bali, Indonesia

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Abstract

The Balinese language exists in the context of a strong shift away from local languages to the official language of Indonesia, Indonesian. However, compared to other cases, the usage of Balinese appears to remain relatively stable amidst these shifts. Previous research has studied and elicited the variables that likely influence its vitality as well as the causes of language endangerment in general. Through targeted searches in scholarly databases, this article offers a literature review of these relevant sources and unites their findings to offer a more comprehensive overview of the state of the Balinese language, the factors influencing it, and the language's importance to Balinese culture. Searches reveal that the language's embeddedness across traditional and modern usage domains, government policy, intergenerational language transmission, and tourism are likely important contributing factors to Balinese' continued use. Having a better understanding of what influences Balinese' relative success compared to other regional languages will aid leaders in developing and implementing policies which ensure that Balinese, a vessel for transmitting local knowledge, remains in use and help other language communities can engage in language revitalization if they so choose.

1. Research Context

This research emerged from the *Sustaining Paradise* project, spearheaded by Professor Chiara Formichi, in the Asian Studies Department at Cornell University. With its booming tourism industry, Bali faces growing environmental degradation. The project examines how Balinese spiritual beliefs and understandings of nature can be used to promote ecological restoration on the island. As local language is a key tool for maintaining and transmitting these beliefs and knowledge, it is important to consider the trends in the usage of *Basa Bali* (herein referred to as "Balinese"). With an enhanced awareness of Balinese language trends, the *Sustaining Paradise* project can have a more informed understanding of the future of the Balinese peoples' belief and knowledge systems that underpin ecological repair.

2. Introduction

Language Obsolescence is commonly understood as "...the process by which a language ceases to be actively used and is abandoned by its native speakers in favour of another language/other languages..." (Swiggers 1). Particularly with the establishment of nation-states, the incorporation of national language policies, regional and local languages have come under increasing threat to more global ones (Bradley and Bradley 10-11). According to linguist Michael Krauss, 95 per cent of human languages are endangered to some extent (Krauss 3).

Indonesian languages have been no exception to this trend. As noted by authors Maya Ravindranath and Abigail Cohn, "rapid changes to intergenerational transmission patterns suggest that even the largest local languages in Indonesia may be at risk..." (64). Could Balinese, with its three million speakers in 2025 (Luardini and Sutarna 1337), densely packed on a small tourism-driven island, fall prey to Indonesian and international languages like English?

The report combines articles, studies, and interviews related to the Balinese language, Indonesian language policy, tourism in Bali, and language endangerment more broadly to investigate the current vitality of the language in light of shifts toward Indonesian, the country's official language. While much work has been done on the topic, this article proposes preliminary findings for *why* the language is in the state that it is in, how one can reconcile scholarly observations with Balinese speakers' personal observations, and the language's importance in preserving Balinese beliefs and knowledge. Understanding which factors contribute to language obsolescence, and which contribute to language maintenance will be vital to promoting effective policies and practices that preserve Balinese, and other local languages, well into the future. Moreover, the loss of local languages results in the destruction of local knowledge and cultural richness both to the community and to humanity (Sallabank). Such knowledge can be vital in working towards SDG 17, "partnerships for the [UN sustainable development] goals", where local knowledge systems energize, inform, and enhance our approaches to the other goals. Having a better understanding of when and why language obsolescence occurs can help us ensure communities can bring their knowledge to the partnership table.

3. Methods

3.1 Study Area

The literature compiled in this paper focuses on the island of Bali, its culture, language, and policies, as well as greater Indonesia, with a specific focus on its national language policies, and trends in language shift throughout the country. Several sources also provide general information on language endangerment and shift outside the Indonesian or Balinese context.

3.2. Search Strategies

From June 24th to July 21st, I used the Cornell Library Catalog, Proquest Dissertations and theses, the Bibliography of Asian studies (EBSCO), the worldwide web, and resources provided by Cornell's strong network of Southeast Asian scholars (including Professors Formichi, Cohn, and Pepinsky) to find relevant English-language scholarly articles and book chapters related to Indonesian language policy, language shift in Indonesia, language endangerment, and trends in the usage of Balinese.

I used the following search terms to elicit results:

- Bibliography OR companion reader OR handbook AND Indonesia
- Language Preservation AND Balinese
- (Language AND Bali*) NOT SU (Language AND Bali*)
- Language Maintenance AND Bali*
- (su= "Balinese language") AND (su= "Social aspects.")
- Bali* AND Education
- Bali* AND Language Instruction

- Bali* AND Education AND "Language Instruction"
- Indonesia AND Decentralization

From these results, I identified twenty-one sources appropriate for this review.

Database/Source	Number of Sources Included in Write Up
Cornell Library Catalog	10
Proquest Dissertations and theses	0
Bibliograhpy of Asian studies (EBSCO)	2
Cornell's Network of Southeast Asian Scholars	5
Worldwide Web	4

4. Findings

4.1 Overview of Indonesian Language Policies

Indonesian is a variety of the Malay language and was officially chosen as the future national language in 1928 by a group of nationalist youth, who understood that they required a language to unite the archipelago if they wished to succeed in their struggle against Dutch occupation (Kaplan and Baldauf 84). Since then, it has become the sole official language of Indonesia and has been promoted as the country's *lingua franca*, bringing success in cultivating a more unified nation-state (Ravindranath and Cohn 66). Fluency in the language is cultivated in school, where it is a compulsory subject and the main medium of instruction (Sneddon 205). It is also the official language in government documents, speeches by authorities, public facilities, conferences, and building signage. While local languages and scripts can be placed on signs, government regulations require that they be placed below the Indonesian version (Mulyawan 489). Indonesian also serves as the primary language in mass media (television, radio, newspapers, and magazines) (Paauw 6).

4.2 Impact on Local/Regional Languages

In light of this widespread promotion of the national language, many local and regional languages (defined by Abtahian et al. as the “...languages of Indonesia that are not Indonesian...” (143)) have suffered. Even Javanese, claiming over 68 million speakers, has seen language shifts, with its high register (*krama*) experiencing a dramatic decrease in usage, particularly among young people. Moreover, in a survey of university students, 62% percent of respondents indicated that they plan to use Indonesian, rather than Javanese, with their children. As Ravindaranath and Cohn note, several studies indicate how the speakers of Javanese hold negative attitudes towards their mother tongue, seeing it as “old-fashioned” (72). Such a decline is indicative of general trends in Indonesian languages, where those spoken locally or regionally have the potential to become dead languages (qtd. in Luardini and Utama 1332).

4.3 Status of the Balinese Language

In interviews collected for the project, some Balinese people expressed concern over the state of their language. One informant noted that parents “...speak Balinese to [their] children, and they [the children] respond in Indonesian. In the end, the parents give in and answer in Indonesian. They [their children] are more proficient in English than in Balinese.” Surprisingly, though, as dire as the situation might appear to some in the most urbanized areas of Bali (such as the famous tourist spots of Kuta and Legian), scholarly studies on the subject indicate that Balinese has fared relatively well. Though researchers do find fewer Balinese speakers in younger age groups than in older ones (Abtahian et al. 142), indicating that speakership is declining, Balinese appears to face less of an impact from language shift than many other local Indonesian languages.

Work by professors Abtahian, Cohn, and Pepinsky reflects this finding. Using 2010 census data on the language one speaks in the home, they “...document[ed] how factors such as urbanization, ethnicity, economic development, gender, and religion correlate with...” language shift (Abtahian et al. 139). In testing for relationships between religion and language choice, they found that “Hindus...are much *less* likely to speak Indonesian than Muslims” (Abtahian et al. 155). “94.9 percent of Balinese are Hindu” and “...92.6 percent of Hindus in Indonesia are Balinese”, indicating that the Balinese have been significantly less impacted by the language shift to Indonesian than other populations (Abtahian et al. 155). Moreover, Luardini and Utama characterize Balinese as “...a major local language, widely used across various social domains by the majority of the community in Bali” (1337). According to scholarship, then, it seems that Balinese, used throughout the island by a concentrated population of Balinese Hindus, and grounded in traditional and modern usage domains, have not followed the shift towards Indonesian as strongly as other cases.

4.4 Factors Impacting the Vitality of the Balinese Language

The factors contributing to Balinese’ survival are multifaceted. Nonetheless, we can identify several possible influences contributing to Balinese’ relative stability. The embeddedness of local language in religion, social structures, and overall “culture”, its usage in

digital, public, and private spaces, as well as the effects of tourism, and government policies all point to the language's continuance. When applicable, the factors will be aligned with UNESCO's Language Vitality and Endangerment Framework, (hence referred to as LVEF) a list of nine criteria for measuring language vitality (Sallabank):

1. Intergenerational language transmission
2. Absolute number of speakers
3. Proportion of speakers within the local population
4. Trends in existing language domains
5. Response to new domains and media
6. Materials for language education and literacy
7. Governmental and institutional language policies, including official status and use
8. Community members' attitudes toward their own language
9. Amount and quality of documentation.

(UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group)

4.4.1 Embeddedness across usage domains

As the vast majority of Balinese are Hindu, the "...unity of area and identity, culture, and ethnicity" (Luardini and Utama 1337) facilitates the continued usage of the language in Bali-Hindu practices and daily life across the island. Accordingly, Balinese shows strength in factor three of the LVEF: "proportion of speakers within the local population". Unlike some local languages, the Balinese language is reinforced by an established script (Luardini and Utama 1337), which is typically used in religious texts (Eiseman 131). However, as discussed further below, officials have also made pushes to incorporate Balinese script into public signage. With the presence of such a script, Balinese benefits from increased documentation, benefiting the "amount and quality of documentation" of the language (LVEF nine). Beyond the religious domain, Balinese is employed in the arts, in daily life, various social systems (i.e. *Banjar* kinships, Customary Councils etc.), naming equipment and technology, and in the Balinese knowledge system (Luardini and Utama 1339-1342). Moreover, it is increasingly used online. Internet users can find the [*BasaBali*](#) Wiki dictionary, and its script is compatible with computers via Unicode (Zein 148). Per factors four and five of the LVEF, Balinese exhibits stable "trends in existing language domains" and positive "response[s] to new domains and media". Thus, the language's presence in a variety of spheres, both traditional and modern, appears to make the language more resilient in the face of language shifts.

4.4.2 National Government Policy

The national government permits regional languages to be a medium of instruction for the first three years of primary school and as a school subject, allowing Balinese to be reinforced early, outside the home (Zein 174). Moreover, the Interior Ministry Regulation, No. 40/2007 provides for a regional head to implement maintenance of Indigenous languages (Zein).

The decentralization of government after the collapse of the New Order in 1998 has “...brought some fresh air in terms of mother tongue education...” (Zein 175). For example, “...Article 21 of the Government Decree No. 57/2014 on the Development, Cultivation, and Maintenance of Language and Literature and the Increased Function of Indonesian...” supported Indigenous languages by permitting them to be taught in primary and secondary education. While the decentralization scheme is not without its flaws, the greater power afforded provincial governments could serve as a lever for protecting regional languages like Balinese. Factor six of the LVEF accounts for the availability of “materials for language education and literacy”. With the implementation of these governmental policies, Indonesia has shown positive strides in providing such learning materials. Furthermore, LVEF seven, “governmental and institutional language policies,” is also captured here. While Indonesia still promotes the use of Indonesian, the above guidelines claim support for Balinese and local languages in the realm of language policy.

4.4.3 Provincial Government Policy

At the provincial level, the Balinese governor enacted a policy in 2018, requiring a “...Balinese script transliteration on all government and private signs in public space” (Mulyawan). While the policy was controversial in the face of the State Constitution, requiring the use of Indonesian in public spaces, and Presidential Regulation no. 63/2019, requiring Indonesian to be “...the official language in public space...” (Mulyawan), the policy proved successful in increasing the presence of Balinese in public spaces, particularly around tourism facilities (Mulyawan). Such work illustrates that the Balinese leaders still value and rely on their local language and script, and aim to maintain its usage in modern domains, such as on public signage. In addition to providing “materials for language education and literacy” (LVEF six) and positive governmental language policies (LVEF seven), these policies demonstrate that community members and leaders exhibit positive “...attitudes towards their own language” (LVEF eight), making its usage more likely.

4.4.4 Intergenerational Language Transmission

Per UNESCO’s Language Vitality and Endangerment framework, intergenerational language transmission is one of the nine factors in language vitality (Sallabank). The census question analyzed in the work by Professors Abtahian, Cohn, and Pepinsky, asked what language the respondent speaks *at home*. The results indicate that the Balinese are speaking their local

language more than Indonesian in this space (163). It is likely, then, that Balinese is being transmitted to children during their early, “linguistically formative years” (Caldas) in which they spend a large portion of their time with their parents in the home. This is not to say that speakership remains completely steady. On the contrary, Abtahian, Cohn, and Pepinsky note that there “...were fewer speakers of every local language we studied in younger age groups than in older ones” (142). Thus, while intergenerational language transmission may be higher than with other local languages, it is still an ongoing concern for the Balinese.

4.4.5 *Tourism*

Interestingly, and perhaps counterintuitively, it seems that tourism may have some preserving effects on the language, too. As articulated by Maria Luardini and Putu Sutama “...global exposure, particularly when tourists encounter Balinese culture and rituals [...], elevates the Balinese language’s status, making it a prestigious language in international contexts” (1346). Michel Picard, in *Bali: Cultural Tourism and Touristic Culture*, remarks that “...it is as if tourism had convinced the Balinese that they were inheritors of something at once precious and perishable called ‘culture’, which they perceived as a value to be conserved and promoted (Picard 198). Still, tourism has modified how the Balinese conceive of that culture. As Picard argues, “...the Balinese end up taking the brand image of their tourist product for the identity marker of their cultural productions” (Picard 197). While tourism influenced the Balinese to concentrate on a superficial definition of their heritage, Picard still observes that tourism has made the Balinese hyper-aware of its value. This may have pushed the Balinese to work harder to maintain their language, a key part of Balinese culture, than they would have otherwise. With increased exposure to the international community, Balinese has also become relatively well-documented by visitors to the island, contributing to LVEF nine (amount and quality of documentation).

As Sneddon notes, “...the only realistic way of preserving the regional languages as living languages of communities would be for a genuine attempt to be made to maintain the traditional cultures in which the languages are used” (209). In some ways, the Balinese tourism sector has worked to maintain a *version* of Balinese culture, offering another partial explanation for the language’s survival.

4.4.6 *Individual Concerns over Language Decline*

Nevertheless, as found in our research, Balinese people themselves express concern over the decline of the language. Differences between rural and urban populations may help to reconcile this discrepancy, as there is a stronger perception of economic and socio-economic value in mastering the dominant languages, Indonesian and English, in metropolitan zones. As such, urban men and women are much more likely to speak Indonesian than their peers in rural

areas (Abtahian et al. 149). The informant that expressed his concern for the future of Balinese was living in Legian, a hyper-urbanized area of South Bali where tourists started flocking in large numbers as early as the 1980s. Although the probability of speaking Indonesian in urban areas across Bali is still very low (Abtahian et al. 162), differences occur depending on the depth of foreigners' presence, causing anxiety for the future of the language in hyper-touristic areas. Author I Wayan Mulyawan even addresses this possibility, remarking that "...in Kuta, which is one of the main tourist destinations in Bali, [...] [researchers] found that the local language [...] was marginalised by English in public spaces as a result of tourism". Additionally, because of ever shifting social norms, it is possible that new speakers are losing proficiency in using the various levels of the language, particularly High Balinese, causing people to express concern for the language's overall integrity (Eiseman 136). Thus, while Balinese still fares well, individuals' concerns over its future are founded, especially in urban centers.

5. Discussion

"The consistent use of language is essential for preserving values, character, and cultural identity, allowing them to thrive even when a community is immersed in cultural diversity" (Luardini and Sutama 1335). For the Balinese, many religious and cultural practices encourage land stewardship and environmental restoration. If Balinese were to become endangered, these important cultural values, traditions, and knowledge would also be in jeopardy. Thus, understanding the factors motivating language shift both globally as well as those specific to the Indonesian context will help leaders to better advocate for policies and initiatives that effectively maintain the Balinese language. In doing so, we encourage increased "partnerships for the goals" (SDG 17). By sustaining the language, the local knowledge surrounding environmental stewardship can persist, and permit the Balinese to participate in a network of communities working to advance restorative (sustainable) development. While declines in the use of Balinese won't immediately result in the loss of local knowledge, it could erode the knowledge system over time.

Still, this work aggravates other challenges. In promoting Balinese, which integrates the caste system into its linguistic structure, social inequalities are actively reinforced, undermining other SDGs, like reducing inequalities (SDG 10). Thus, while language maintenance offers upsides to sustainable tourism, it cannot be a catch-all solution to a whole host of problems.

Moreover, examining the state of the Balinese language is important for language documentation efforts in general, as it offers greater insight into the factors contributing to a language's vitality. The integration of the language into local social and governmental structures, its usage in Bali-Hindu practices across the island, its script, online presence, use in the home, and the prestige accorded to it by tourism helps researchers, officials, and policymakers understand why Balinese is surviving and why other Indonesian languages may be faring worse. Admittedly, many of these variables are unique to Bali and cannot simply be transplanted to

other communities. Nevertheless, the work done by local leaders provides valuable inspiration for other communities that wish to maintain their local language.

Finally, this review helps us think about Bali's tourism, one of its major economic sectors, in a nuanced way. Evidently, the rapid touristic development has been detrimental to the environment of Bali and has impacted how the Balinese perceive their own culture. At the same time, Picard's, Luardini's and Sutama's observations about tourism indicate that it may elevate the perceived prestige of the language at the international level. For example, the script's presence in Unicode would likely not have occurred without the recognition that tourism has given to Bali. Yet, other scholars, such as Mulyawan, identify tourism as exerting a marginalizing effect on the language. As we continue to examine touristic build up on the island, the multi-faceted, mixed effects of such tourism remind us that policymakers must think beyond curbing the sector completely. Rather, they challenge us to consider strong, principle-driven tourism policies that benefit Balinese society, language, and culture while minimizing environmental, societal, and cultural harms to the island.

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