

Language Change Among the Younger Generation of the Kensiu Indigenous Community: An Analysis of Educational and Social Mobility Factors

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ABSTRACT

This article examines language change among the younger generation of the Kensiu Orang Asli community in Malaysia, with particular emphasis on the roles of formal education and social mobility. The Kensiu language functions not only as a medium of communication but also as a key marker of identity, cultural continuity, and collective memory. However, increasing exposure to formal education and broader socio-economic opportunities has significantly reshaped patterns of language use. This study adopts a qualitative ethnographic approach based on six months of fieldwork in Kampung Ulu Lengong. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, and were analysed thematically using NVivo 15. The findings reveal a process of domain narrowing, in which Kensiu is largely confined to domestic and intra-community interactions, while Malay dominates educational, peer, and formal contexts. Education functions as an agent of linguistic socialization, reinforcing Malay as the dominant language, whereas social mobility influences language choice through its instrumental and symbolic value. The study demonstrates that language change among the Kensiu is not merely linguistic but reflects broader transformations in identity, aspiration, and social structure. The findings contribute to linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics by offering an integrated analysis of language, education, and mobility in a minority community context, while also highlighting the need for context-sensitive language preservation strategies.

Keywords: Language Change, Kensiu Orang Asli, Formal Education, and Social Mobility

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is distinguished by its ethnic diversity, encompassing a broad spectrum of social backgrounds, cultural traditions, and religious practices. Among its indigenous populations are the Orang Asli, a term referring specifically to the native peoples of Peninsular Malaysia. The Orang Asli are generally categorized into three principal groups: Negrito, Senoi, and Proto-Malay. According to Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli Malaysia (JAKOA), each group is further divided into several sub-ethnic categories, resulting in a total of 24 distinct sub-ethnic groups.

Within this ethnic diversity, each Orang Asli sub-ethnic group maintains its own language, cultural system, and traditional practices, contributing to the development of distinct community identities. The Kensiu community, a member of the Negrito group, exemplifies this diversity.

The Kensiu language, part of the Mon–Khmer linguistic family, is spoken by a small community in northern Peninsular Malaysia. As a minority language, Kensiu is vital for daily communication and is central to the preservation of community identity, oral history, and cultural values. However, modernization within the national education system, combined with rising social mobility, has significantly affected patterns of language use and the continuity of the Kensiu language, especially among younger generations.

In Malaysia, the National Education Policy prioritizes Malay as the main medium of instruction, while English exerts considerable influence as a global language, resulting in a bilingual environment among Orang Asli youth (Smith & Smith, 2017). Kensiu youths engaged in formal education are increasingly required to master these dominant languages. Consequently, reliance on their mother tongue diminishes in formal and semi-formal contexts, leading to changes in the Kensiu language's lexicon, syntax, and domains of use.

Furthermore, increased social mobility among segments of the Kensiu younger generation, evidenced by higher educational attainment, participation in diverse employment sectors, and broader social networks, has shaped their language attitudes. Aspirations for integration into mainstream society and the desire to avoid social stigma promote the adoption of more prestigious languages, further marginalizing Kensiu. This trend prompts critical questions about the continued role of Kensiu as a primary medium of communication and as a marker of identity among Kensiu youth.

In response to these developments, this article examines language change among the Kensiu younger generation, focusing on the roles of education and social mobility. Through qualitative analysis of the lived experiences and linguistic practices of young speakers, the study aims to clarify patterns of language shift and their implications for the future vitality of the Kensiu language.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language Shift in Minority Communities

Language shift in minority communities often occurs when dominant languages expand into key domains such as education, administration, and economic activity. As dominant languages gain institutional authority, minority languages experience domain reduction and declining intergenerational transmission (Muchena & Jakaza, 2022). This process is particularly evident among indigenous communities, where younger generations increasingly adopt languages associated with socio-economic advancement (Coluzzi et al., 2017; De La et al., 2021).

Such shifts are not purely linguistic but are deeply embedded in broader socio-cultural transformations. Minority languages often become confined to symbolic and cultural functions, while dominant languages take on instrumental roles in public and formal domains.

Education as an Agent of Linguistic Socialization

Formal education plays a central role in shaping language use and preferences. Schools function as key sites of linguistic socialization, where standardized language norms are introduced and reinforced. The use of national languages as the medium of instruction compels students from minority communities to adapt in order to succeed academically and socially (Abdullah et al., 2013).

Continuous exposure to dominant languages within educational settings influences not only academic communication but also everyday interaction patterns. Over time, this leads to the reconfiguration of linguistic hierarchies, where the mother tongue becomes less relevant in domains associated with knowledge, authority, and progress.

Social Mobility and Linguistic Identity

In addition, social mobility plays a significant role in shaping the transformation of linguistic identity among younger generations. Increased access to employment opportunities, migration to urban areas, and interactions with multi-ethnic communities encourage individuals to adjust their language choices in accordance with new social demands (Tang et al., 2016). Younger individuals tend to use languages that enhance their social networks and economic prospects, thereby positioning language as a symbol of mobility and social status.

According to Safitri and Tamrin (2025), shifts in linguistic identity occur when language is no longer viewed merely as a tool of communication, but rather as a social strategy for gaining acceptance within a broader society. This process is further influenced by the expansion of digital media and communication technologies, which accelerate exposure to external cultures and languages. Consequently, the use of the mother tongue within

minority communities is increasingly declining, particularly in public domains and in communication among younger generations.

While previous studies have examined language shift, education, and social mobility as separate factors, there remains limited research that integrates these dimensions in explaining language change within specific indigenous communities such as the Kensiu. This study addresses this gap by examining how these factors interact dynamically in shaping linguistic practices and identity among the younger generation.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of the Kensiu language change among the younger generation. This approach is selected because language change is closely linked to social experiences, educational aspirations, and processes of social mobility, which cannot be adequately explained through quantitative measures alone.

Accordingly, an ethnographic approach is adopted to examine language practices within the context of the daily lives of the Kensiu Orang Asli community in Kampung Ulu Lengong. Fieldwork was conducted over a period of six months to enable the researcher to develop a comprehensive understanding of the community's social structure, interactional networks, and the dynamics of language use.

This study involved four primary informants who were selected through purposive sampling based on their relevance to the research focus, while the snowball sampling technique was employed to identify additional informants through recommendations from the community. Data collection methods included semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis.

Although this study involves four primary informants, the selection is grounded in purposive sampling aimed at obtaining in-depth and information-rich data. In qualitative ethnographic research, the emphasis is placed on depth rather than breadth, allowing for the development of thick description (Geertz, 1973) and nuanced understanding of social and linguistic practices. The informants were selected based on their active engagement in both community life and exposure to formal education and social mobility processes, ensuring that the data reflects critical dimensions of language change within the Kensiu community.

The data obtained were subsequently transcribed and analyzed thematically through processes of coding and theme development. Data analysis was conducted with the assistance of NVivo 15, which facilitated data management, code categorization, and the systematic generation of themes. The use of this software also enhanced the transparency and reliability of the analysis in identifying relationships between educational factors, social mobility, and language change among the Kensiu younger generation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Language Use Among the Younger Generation of the Kensiu Orang Asli

The findings indicate that patterns of the Kensiu language use among the younger generation have undergone significant changes, particularly in terms of domains and frequency of use. In general, the Kensiu language is still used within the community, especially when interacting with older family members and within local community contexts. This can be observed in excerpts from interviews with key informants, namely the Tok Batin (IU1) and the second informant, Mr Ubai (IU2):

“Majoritinya kita masih bercakap bahasa kensiu dalam keluarga tu” (IU1)

“The majority of us still speak the Kensiu language within the family.” (IU1)

“Fasih lagi, kami masing-masing keluarga kami tekankan percakapan kami lagi lah, sejak lahir macam ni.” (IU2)

“We are still fluent; each of our families continues to emphasize speaking it, since birth.” (IU2)

The interview findings indicate that the family continues to function as the primary domain for maintaining the use of the Kensiu language, serving as an initial sociolinguistic space for the younger generation. Nevertheless, the study also reveals that the use of Kensiu is increasingly confined to informal situations and interactions involving older generations.

In everyday communication among peers, particularly among adolescents and youths, the use of Malay is found to be more dominant, either in its full form or through code-mixing practices. For instance, the second informant (IU2) stated:

“Dia cakap hmmm dia jadi macam kalu hat yang sekolah kecik-kecik tu...dia jadi macam kensiu melayu bercampur aduk kadang2 dia jadi macam tu.” (IU2)

“He said, hmm, it becomes like for the younger school kids it turns into a mix of Kensiu and Malay; sometimes it ends up like that.” (IU2)

This phenomenon of code-mixing not only reflects the linguistic flexibility among the younger generation but also signals an ongoing shift in language functions within specific social domains. Malay, as the dominant language in the education system and in formal communication, has assumed a central role in peer interactions, thereby reducing reliance on the Kensiu language within these contexts.

Therefore, these findings indicate a process of domain narrowing in the use of the Kensiu language, alongside an expansion in the use of Malay among the younger generation. While Kensiu continues to function as a symbol of ethnic identity and as a medium of communication within the community, its position is no longer as comprehensive as it was in previous generations.

This change can be understood as part of a broader social transformation, in which pressures from the education system, interactions with external communities, and social mobility have reshaped the linguistic priorities of younger individuals. In this context, language change does not merely reflect a shift in communicative preference but also represents identity formation and adaptation to an increasingly complex social reality.

Education as a Factor of Language Change

Furthermore, formal education plays a significant role in shaping the language-use patterns of the Kensiu younger generation. The education system, which employs Malay as the primary medium of instruction, has a direct impact on the dominance of Malay in both academic domains and students' daily interactions. Younger individuals who attend school tend to prioritize Malay when discussing topics related to learning or experiences beyond the community. This indicates that education functions not only as a medium for knowledge transmission but also as a social agent that influences the formation of linguistic identity and everyday language choices (Yurfadilah et al., 2025).

In addition, the schooling experiences of Kensiu youths foster an awareness of the value and functions of Malay in facilitating social mobility. Aspirations to achieve higher levels of education and to pursue careers that require proficiency in Malay encourage younger individuals to use the language in both formal and informal interactions. The existing education system and curriculum exert pressure toward the use of dominant languages and, indirectly, affect both the ability and motivation of the younger generation to maintain their mother tongue. This point was also highlighted by the key informant (IU1) during the interview session:

“Cuma kita galakkan anak-anak bila macam ke sekolah tu lah cakap melayu sebab hak tu penting untuk dia jugak sebab dia nak bergaul dengan orang luar.” (IU1)

“We just encourage the children, especially when they go to school, to speak Malay because that's important for them, as they need it to interact with people outside.” (IU1)

The findings also indicate that the level of Malay language proficiency among Kensiu students influences their language choices in interaction. Younger individuals who are more proficient in Malay tend to use it when communicating with peers, teachers, and external parties, while the use of Kensiu is more selective. This suggests

that education acts as a catalyst for language change through repeated exposure, formal language training, and the institutional emphasis on the official language. This observation is further supported by an interview with the third informant, Puan Samsiah (IU3):

“Daripada start tadika, bahasa melayu, mai ke peringkat rendah, peringkat menengah dan keluar pekerjaan.” (IU3)

“Starting from kindergarten, it’s Malay then continuing through primary school, secondary school, and into employment.” (IU3)

“Sekolah sebab dia dia pendedahan tu dari sekolah, cikgu duk... Sebab bagi saya dia wajib benda tu sebab untuk dia jugak.” (IU3)

“School because that exposure comes from school, with the teachers... For me, it’s something necessary, because it’s also for their own benefit.” (IU3)

Overall, formal education not only shapes the linguistic competencies of the younger generation but also functions as a social mechanism that drives changes in language practices. The findings indicate that the role of education in the transformation of the Kensiu language lies not only in enhancing proficiency in Malay but also in influencing the domains of mother tongue use and expanding the functional space of the dominant language.

Social Mobility and Language Choice

Social mobility constitutes a significant factor influencing language choice among the Kensiu younger generation. The aspiration to attain a higher social status through education, employment, and interaction with wider society encourages younger Kensiu individuals to prioritize the use of Malay in daily communication. In this context, Malay is perceived as an important instrument for accessing educational and occupational opportunities, whereas Kensiu, although still used within the community, is increasingly confined to domestic interactions and informal situations. This phenomenon indicates that social mobility acts as a catalyst for language change, whereby language choice is closely associated with strategies of adaptation to a broader social environment.

In addition, interactions between younger generations and peers from outside the Orang Asli community, as well as exposure to social media, further accelerate the process of language shift. Language choice in this context is not merely functional, but also reflects adaptation to wider social norms and the desire to gain acceptance within more heterogeneous social groups. Social mobility, therefore, encompasses not only changes in economic status but also the formation of a more dynamic linguistic identity, in which language is selected based on contextual appropriateness and available social opportunities.

The findings also reveal a strong relationship between educational attainment and social mobility. Younger individuals with higher academic achievement demonstrate a stronger tendency to prioritize Malay, while the use of Kensiu becomes more selective. This suggests that social mobility not only facilitates material advancement but also shapes linguistic patterns and communication strategies among the younger generation.

Overall, these findings underscore that social mobility is a key factor driving language change among the Kensiu younger generation. Malay functions as an instrument for accessing social and economic mobility, whereas Kensiu continues to serve as a marker of identity within the community domain. This situation demonstrates that language change should not be understood solely as a linguistic phenomenon, but rather as a reflection of social realities, educational aspirations, and the interaction of younger generations with broader social structures.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the examination of the Kensiu language change among the younger generation of the Kensiu Orang Asli community, through the lenses of education and social mobility, reveals that linguistic transformation does not occur in isolation from social structures. This study concludes that language shift within the Kensiu Orang Asli community is not merely a communicative phenomenon, but rather reflects broader changes in

values, aspirations, and the future orientations of younger generations. The findings indicate that the use of Kensiu is increasingly confined to family and cultural domains, while Malay has assumed dominant functions in education, employment, and wider social networks.

The synthesis of findings and key discussions highlights three important dimensions. First, in terms of language use among the Kensiu younger generation, an imbalanced bilingual pattern is evident, where Kensiu is used in a limited and largely symbolic capacity within domestic interactions, whereas Malay dominates peer communication, education, and formal domains. This situation reflects a gradual yet consistent trend of language shift. Second, education emerges as a primary factor driving language change. The schooling system, oriented around the national curriculum, has reinforced the position of Malay as the principal medium of instruction, thereby shaping language attitudes that perceive Kensiu as less relevant for academic and economic mobility. Third, social mobility—through employment opportunities, urban migration, and exposure to media—has encouraged the selection of languages perceived to have higher instrumental value. Younger individuals tend to align their language choices with the demands of the labor market and emerging social networks, resulting in the increasing marginalization of Kensiu in public domains. These three dimensions are interrelated and demonstrate that language change is not spontaneous, but rather guided by structures of opportunity and evolving language ideologies within society.

In light of these findings, several strategies can be considered to support the preservation of the Kensiu language. First, the integration of bilingual education that includes Kensiu alongside Malay could help maintain intergenerational transmission while supporting academic development. Second, community-based initiatives such as oral documentation, storytelling practices, and cultural programmes may strengthen the functional domains of the language. Third, institutional support through agencies such as JAKOA is essential in developing language preservation policies that align with the socio-economic aspirations of the community. These efforts must acknowledge that language preservation cannot be separated from broader issues of education, identity, and social mobility.

Finally, this article establishes a clearer connection between everyday language use and broader structural factors such as education and social mobility. It demonstrates that language change in minority communities does not occur in isolation, but is closely intertwined with educational pathways, employment opportunities, and patterns of social mobility. Education and mobility not only influence language proficiency but also shape how younger generations perceive their identity and future trajectories. By examining language use across multiple contexts and linking it to social structures, this study reinforces the understanding that language shift must be interpreted within its real social and economic contexts. This approach further underscores that efforts to preserve minority languages cannot rely solely on the preservation of tradition, but must also take into account the aspirations and contemporary needs of younger generations. Overall, research in this field is essential for informing more balanced language and education policies, ensuring that societal development does not come at the expense of linguistic sustainability and community identity.

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