

Language, Culture, and Identity in a Borderland Context: A Preliminary Study of the Malay Community in Lawas, Sarawak

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ABSTRACT

The Lawas District of Sarawak constitutes a borderland region characterised by its distinctive dynamics of language, culture, and identity among the Malay community. Its direct geographical proximity to Brunei Darussalam has fostered long-standing historical, familial, and cultural ties which in turn have shaped local language practices and processes of social identity formation. Although Lawas has attracted scholarly attention in fields such as biodiversity, ecology, and selected social issues, sociolinguistic research examining the interrelationship between language, culture, and identity among the Malay community in this district remains limited. Accordingly, this study seeks to present a preliminary observation of the role of language and culture in shaping Malay identity in the Lawas District. The study addresses a gap in the existing literature by providing locally grounded empirical data within the context of a Bornean Malay borderland community. Theoretically, the study is examined by Fishman's (1972) Domain Analysis framework which emphasises the role of social domains in shaping language choice. Methodologically, the study adopts an exploratory qualitative approach. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with six informants in Kampung Trusan, Lawas complemented by participant observation and field notes. Preliminary findings indicate that Brunei Malay predominates in informal domains such as family and friendship, while Standard Malay and Sarawak Malay dialects are employed in institutional contexts. From an identity perspective, the Malay community in Lawas continues to align itself strongly with a Brunei Malay identity, a factor that contributes to the maintenance of both language and cultural practices. Further research is recommended to examine intergenerational shifts and transformations in greater depth.

Keyword: language and identity; borderland communities; Malay identity; Domain Analysis; social impact of language use

INTRODUCTION

Language, culture, and identity constitute three core and interrelated elements in the formation of a community's collective identity (Lut & Starenkova, 2022; Peter & Simatupang, 2022; Putri et al., 2025). In sociolinguistic scholarship, language is understood not merely as a means of communication but as a primary medium through which cultural values, customary practices, and social norms are transmitted. Language reflects a community's way of life, cultural orientation, and identity, and functions as a symbolic marker of ethnic affiliation in everyday social interaction. Previous studies have demonstrated that communities are often recognised by others through the languages they use as language develops within cultural contexts and constitutes the backbone of social relations. Through language, historical experiences, worldviews, and value systems are preserved and transmitted across generations. Consequently, the relationship between language and identity is inherently dynamic and continually shaped by social, historical, and local cultural contexts. For example, Labov's (1963) classic study illustrates this relationship, for example, Martha's Vineyard residents consciously exaggerated diphthong centralisation as a linguistic marker of "Vineyarder" identity, directly countering the social change brought by mainland tourists.

Research conducted within border community settings further confirms that such communities frequently exhibit high levels of linguistic flexibility and bilingual competence as strategies for maintaining linguistic identity amid sustained cross-border interaction (Lastouski & Zakharov, 2024; Pando, 2021; Yazan et al., 2019). This relationship becomes increasingly complex in borderland societies that are exposed to multiple cultural, linguistic, and political influences (Tuah et al., 2023). In such contexts, identity formation is not necessarily anchored in modern geopolitical boundaries, but rather in historical settlement patterns, kinship networks, and the continuity of cultural practices (Shin et al., 2022).

Studies on border communities in Borneo and its surrounding regions indicate that cross-border inhabitants experience significantly influence the formation of linguistic and cultural identities. The Lawas District in northern Sarawak (see Figure 1) shares a direct border with Brunei Darussalam and Sabah, providing a clear example of a borderland society characterised by a sustained linguistic and cultural interaction. This area is marked by cross-border kinship ties, social mobility, and a long-standing socio-cultural history. Such conditions have rendered Brunei Malay a significant influence in the daily lives of the Lawas Malay community contributing to the formation of a hybrid and layered linguistic and cultural identity. In the Lawas community, we can initially claim that their linguistic identity is formed through the interaction of Standard Malay, the Sarawak Malay dialect, Brunei Malay, and indigenous languages, including Lun Bawang.



Figure 1: Location of Lawas District

Problem Statement

The Lawas District of Sarawak has received considerable attention in academic research. Particularly in the fields of biodiversity, ecology, and environmental sustainability. Previous studies have largely focused on ecosystems such as seaweed communities, zooplankton, benthic macrofauna, fish diversity, mangrove forests, and highland environments (Al-Asif et al., 2020; Ismail et al., 2021; Johan et al., 2020; Rosli et al., 2023; Gandaseca et al., 2024). However, this body of research has remained predominantly biophysical in nature and has given limited attention to the social and cultural dimensions of the local population.

In the field of social sciences and humanities, research conducted in Lawas has tended to concentrate on selected issues such as drug abuse, informal sector employment relations, education, religious practices, and ethnic arts

and crafts (Bahar & Salleh, 2024; Hasbullah et al., 2020; Hazman et al., 2020; Mohd Zaini Samad & Mohd Isa Hamzah, 2020; Ng & Yunus, 2021; Suut et al., 2022).). While these studies contribute to a broader social understanding of the Lawas community, the role of language as a central element in the formation of identity and social structure among the Malay population has not been examined in a focused or systematic manner.

Overall, the literature review reveals a notable absence of sociolinguistic studies specifically in the Lawas District. The interrelationship between language, culture, and identity among the Lawas Malay community remains under-analysed. This research gap constrains scholarly understanding of linguistic identity dynamics within a borderland context and accordingly, this study seeks to address this gap by examining the relationship between language, culture, and identity among the Malay community in the Lawas District. By providing locally grounded empirical data, this study contributes to the enrichment of sociolinguistic discourse on Bornean Malay communities.

Conceptual Framework

This study adopts Fishman's (1972) Domain Analysis framework as its conceptual foundation. Fishman posits that language use is determined by specific social contexts, or domains, including family, friendship, religion, education, and occupation. Each domain is governed by distinct linguistic norms that reflect the values, social structures, and collective identity of a community. Within the context of the Lawas Malay community, this framework enables a systematic examination of how Brunei Malay, Standard Malay, and the Sarawak Malay dialect are functionally distributed across different domains, as well as how these patterns of language use are intrinsically linked to local cultural practices and identity construction.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs an exploratory qualitative approach (Stebbins, 2001) as a preliminary investigation into language use and its relationship with culture and identity among the Malay community in Kampung Trusan, Lawas District, Sarawak. The research design is intended to provide an initial understanding of linguistic and socio-cultural phenomena prior to the implementation of more in-depth and comprehensive studies. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with six (6) key informants, including community leaders and religious figures, as well as through participant observation of the community's daily life. In qualitative research, key informants are crucial, as they provide implicit, nuanced information unavailable in secondary sources, along with a broader perspective on the research problem (Pahwa et al., 2023). The informants in this study fulfilled the key criteria outlined by Pahwa et al. (2023): (a) Knowledge and Synthesis: They were highly knowledgeable and demonstrated the ability to meaningfully synthesize their experiences to provide elaborate insights. (b) Willingness and Communicative Capacity: They exhibited a strong willingness to engage and the capacity to communicate with "intelligibility," enabling effective communication and complete collaboration throughout the data collection process. Selected conversational recordings and field notes were utilised to capture language use in naturalistic settings. The data were analysed using descriptive qualitative methods in line with the exploratory nature of the study as an initial observation preceding more detailed and systematic research. IPA transcriptions reflect surface phonetic realisations as perceived by speakers during field observation rather than instrumentally measured phonetic values.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

This section synthesises key patterns of language use, cultural continuity, and identity orientation among the Lawas Malay community, foregrounding how linguistic choices are strategically differentiated across social domains rather than uniformly distributed.

Patterns of Language Choice across Social Domains

Preliminary findings based on interviews with six (6) informants in the Trusan area of Lawas reveal clear patterns of language choice across social domains, consistent with Fishman's (1972) Domain Analysis framework. Within the family domain, all informants (100%; $n = 6$) reported that Brunei Malay is the primary language used in daily interaction. This language is widely employed in intergenerational communication and functions as a

language of intimacy and group belonging. This underscores its central role in the maintenance of ethnic identity among the Lawas Malay community.

In the friendship domain, the findings indicate that 66.7% of informants ($n = 4$) use Brunei Malay as the main medium of communication with the community. Meanwhile, 33.3% of informants ($n = 2$) reported using a combination of Brunei Malay and the Sarawak Malay dialect particularly when interacting with friends from other ethnic backgrounds. This pattern reflects situational linguistic accommodation where language choice is influenced by the ethnic background of interlocutors. Nevertheless, Brunei Malay continues to function as a salient marker of social solidarity and local identity.

In the religious domain, the findings reveal a more structured functional distribution of languages. All informants (100%) agree that Standard Malay is used in Friday sermons as sermon texts prepared by the Sarawak Islamic Religious Department. At the same time, informants noted that the Sarawak Malay dialect is employed in certain religious events particularly those involving the presence of non-residents. In addition, Arabic is used in core ritual practices such as prayer and supplication. This pattern reflects a clear form of linguistic stratification in the religious practices of the Lawas Malay community.

With regard to the educational domain, all informants (100%) reported that Standard Malay and English serve as the primary languages of instruction and learning. However, in informal interactions—such as school events involving parents or community activities—the Sarawak Malay dialect is commonly used between teachers and members of the local community. Brunei Malay is used more selectively and primarily used in interactions with teachers originating from Lawas or Limbang. This indicates a high level of linguistic sensitivity to the speakers' geographical and social backgrounds within educational settings.

In the occupational domain, particularly within government office environments, all informants (100%) indicated that the Sarawak Malay dialect is widely used in everyday conversation and informal workplace interactions. While Standard Malay remains the language of formal communication and official documentation, Brunei Malay is used selectively when interacting with colleagues originating from Lawas. These findings suggest that the Sarawak Malay dialect functions as a local workplace lingua franca whereas Brunei Malay continues to serve as a marker of local identity in specific situational contexts. A detailed summary of language use patterns among the Lawas Malay community is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Patterns of Language Use Across Social Domains in Trusan, Lawas

Domain	Language(s) Used	Distribution / Pattern	Sociolinguistic Function
Family	Brunei Malay	100% (6/6)	Intimacy, in-group solidarity, ethnic identity
Friendship	Brunei Malay	66.7% (4/6)	Social solidarity, local identity
	Brunei Malay + Sarawak Malay dialect	33.3% (2/6)	Situational linguistic accommodation
Religion	Standard Malay	100%	Friday sermons (official texts)
	Sarawak Malay dialect	Used	Religious events involving external guests
	Arabic	Used	Core rituals (prayers and supplications)
Education	Standard Malay	100%	Formal teaching and learning

	English	100%	Formal teaching and learning
	Sarawak Malay dialect	Used	Informal school–community interactions
	Brunei Malay	Limited	Interaction with teachers from Lawas/Limbang
Workplace	Sarawak Malay dialect	100%	Daily communication, informal interaction
	Standard Malay	Used	Official communication and documentation
	Brunei Malay	Selective	Local identity marker among Malay Lawas

To further illustrate the functional differentiation of Malay varieties discussed above, selected lexical comparisons between Standard Malay, Sarawak Malay dialect, and Brunei Malay are presented below.

Table 2. Selected Lexical Comparisons between Standard Malay, Sarawak Malay Dialect, and Brunei Malay

Meaning	Standard Malay	Sarawak Malay Dialect	Brunei Malay
no	tidak	sik [siʔ]	inda [indaʔ]
already	sudah	dah [dah]	sudah [sudah]
I / me	saya / aku	kamek [kameʔ]	aku [akuʔ]
you	kamu	kitak [kitaʔ]	kamu [kamuʔ]
why	mengapa	kenak [kenaʔ]	mengapa [menapaʔ]
now	sekarang	kinek [kineʔ]	karang ani [karaŋ ani]
later	nanti	kelak [kelaʔ]	karang [karaŋ]
return	pulang	balit [balit]	mulih [mulih]
this	ini	tok [toʔ]	ani [aniʔ]
foot	kaki	kaki [kaki]	batis [batis]
dog	anjing	asuk [asuʔ]	kuyuk [kujuʔ]

Cultural Dimensions: Continuity of Brunei Malay Customs

From a cultural perspective, all informants reported the continued practice of customs closely associated with Brunei Malay culture. These practices are evident in family organisation, kinship relations, interpersonal norms,

patterns of respect, and ritual life, indicating the enduring influence of Brunei Malay heritage in shaping the social organisation of the Lawas Malay community. Brunei Malay culture functions not merely as a symbolic reference but as a normative framework that guides values, expectations, and everyday social behaviour. Cultural continuity is sustained primarily through informal and routine interaction, enabling intergenerational transmission to occur outside formal or ceremonial contexts. In this sense, culture operates as an ongoing and dynamic process rather than a static inheritance. Within the borderland context of Lawas, such everyday cultural reproduction plays a crucial role in anchoring community identity amid social mobility and cross-border interaction. Despite administrative incorporation into Sarawak, Brunei Malay cultural practices remain resilient, highlighting the capacity of habitual social practice to sustain a coherent sense of identity beyond geopolitical boundaries.

Identity Orientation: Reinforcement Through Strategic Practice

All informants explicitly align themselves with a Brunei Malay identity, grounded in shared ancestry, kinship networks, and collective historical memory. However, this identity affiliation is not merely discursive. It is actively enacted through language choice, cultural practice, and patterned interaction. Crucially, Brunei Malay identity in Lawas is not expressed uniformly across all domains. Instead, it is strategically foregrounded in intimate and intra-community contexts while being selectively backgrounded in institutional or heterogeneous settings. This pattern indicates strategic compartmentalisation of identity rather than identity dilution or hybridity. Language choice thus functions not only as a communicative tool but as an identity-regulating mechanism, allowing speakers to navigate institutional demands while preserving a coherent sense of ethnic belonging. This highlights the mutually constitutive relationship between language practice and identity maintenance in borderland communities.

DISCUSSION

This study conceptualises language, culture, and identity among the Malay community in the Lawas District as an integrated and adaptive social system rather than as isolated linguistic variables. While the observed patterns broadly align with Fishman's Domain Analysis, the Lawas case contributes theoretically by clarifying how social domains function not merely as sites of language allocation, but as contexts in which ethnic identity is strategically regulated. Specifically, the findings indicate that Lawas does not exemplify linguistic hybridisation in the sense of identity blending, nor does it reflect simple language maintenance across all domains. Instead, the evidence points to strategic compartmentalisation accompanied by identity reinforcement. Brunei Malay retains strong symbolic and affective value particularly within intimate and intra-community domains, while other languages are selectively employed in institutional and heterogeneous settings. Reduced use of Brunei Malay in public or formal domains therefore does not signal identity erosion but rather reflects a conscious recalibration of linguistic practice in response to institutional expectations. This extends Fishman's framework by demonstrating that domains also operate as spaces where ethnic identity may be foregrounded or backgrounded without being diluted.

From a cultural perspective, the findings further show that continuity of Brunei Malay customs in Lawas is sustained primarily through everyday practice rather than formal institutionalisation. Cultural norms are reproduced through habitual interaction, kinship relations, and shared expectations, allowing them to remain resilient despite administrative incorporation into Sarawak. In this sense, culture functions not as a static inheritance but as a dynamic and continually enacted framework that shapes both linguistic behaviour and identity orientation. At the same time, closer examination of the data reveals subtle tensions and emerging shifts that complicate an otherwise stable picture. While Brunei Malay remains dominant in familial and close social networks, its increasingly selective use in education and the workplace suggests an ongoing negotiation between local identity and broader regional or institutional alignment. The growing functional prominence of the Sarawak Malay dialect in public-facing domains may indicate an incipient rebalancing of linguistic repertoires, particularly among younger speakers even though this does not yet translate into explicit identity realignment. At the same time, these patterns may signal the early stages of tension between institutional linguistic alignment and the intergenerational transmission of Brunei Malay, a dynamic that warrants closer longitudinal attention.

Importantly, the study's claims must be interpreted with analytical restraint. The very small sample size and exploratory design limit the extent to which broader generalisations can be made about the Lawas Malay

community as a whole. The data captures a snapshot of current practices rather than longitudinal change, and do not allow for systematic comparison across generations, social classes, or levels of mobility. As such, the findings should be understood as indicative rather than conclusive, highlighting patterns and possibilities that warrant further investigation rather than definitive trajectories of language and identity change. Nonetheless, the Lawas case offers an important contribution to borderland sociolinguistics by challenging state-centric and linear models of linguistic assimilation. Rather than functioning as zones of inevitable convergence, border regions such as Lawas may also operate as sites where ethnic identity is sharpened through contrast and strategic differentiation. The ability of the Lawas Malay community to navigate multiple linguistic regimes while maintaining a coherent sense of Brunei Malay identity underscores the capacity of borderland communities to sustain stability through flexibility rather than through uniformity.

CONCLUSION

As an exploratory study, this paper does not seek to offer definitive claims. Instead, it makes three focused contributions. First, it demonstrates that language use in the Lawas Malay community is characterised by strategic differentiation across domains rather than uniform maintenance or shift. Second, it shows that borderland contexts can function as spaces of identity reinforcement where cultural and linguistic practices remain resilient. Third, it extends Fishman's Domain Analysis by highlighting the role of domains as contexts for identity regulation rather than merely functional language choice. Future research should build on these preliminary findings by expanding the sample size, incorporating intergenerational and longitudinal perspectives, and examining the influence of education, policy, and mobility on evolving identity practices in the border regions of Sarawak.

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