

Navigating the Currents: The Language Ecology of Limbang Bisaya

Chong Shin^{1*}, Dilah bin Tuah², Yao Ling³, Pan Hui⁴, Ng Boon Sim⁵

^{1,3,4}Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

²Universiti Malaysia Sarawak

⁵Universiti Putra Malaysia

*Corresponding Author

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ABSTRACT:

The discipline of ecolinguistics, also known as language ecology, is a field pioneered by Haugen (1972). It uses environmental ecology as a metaphor for a language's environment, focusing on key topics such as language diversity, the challenges faced by minority languages, and language preservation and loss. This paper explores the language ecology of the Bisaya, a minority ethnic group in Limbang, Sarawak. A literature review reveals that studies on the Bisaya language are very limited, and the language's vitality status remains unknown. To identify this status, the study employs interviews and observation to understand the position of Bisaya within its multilingual environment. The findings indicate that the languages present in the Bisaya language ecology are Iban, the Sarawak Malay dialect, the Brunei Malay dialect, and Colloquial Malay. Within this linguistically diverse ecology, Bisaya speakers generally master these languages for various interactional purposes. They also maintain a good command of their native Bisaya language, although signs of decline are present. The survey confirms that the Bisaya mother tongue remains the primary language of interaction within the community. Ultimately, the choice of an external language is highly dependent on the domain and the interlocutor's background.

Keywords: Bisaya Language, Language Ecology, Iban, Malay dialects, Colloquial Malay

INTRODUCTION

According to Collins (2001), there are over 40 languages and dialects spoken in the state of Sarawak, Malaysia. Besides the two main languages, namely Iban and Sarawak Malay dialect, which are spoken as lingua francas, the languages/dialects of other ethnic groups with minority status, such as Penan, Punan, Selako, Narom, Bisaya, Kedayan, and others, are spoken in a limited manner according to their geographical distribution. As a consequence of social transformation and modernization, speakers of these minority languages have been found to experience effects in terms of language shift and transmission. This paper will present a study on the language ecology of the Bisaya language in Limbang, Sarawak (Figure 1), aiming to identify the linguistic environment of Bisaya and assess the language choices of its speakers towards the languages surrounding them.



Figure 1. The location of Limbang.

Problem Statement

In the context of Sarawak, due to the dominance of the Sarawak Malay dialect and Iban as the primary lingua francas, the status of minority languages within their ecological environment highlights two phenomena: languages that are endangered (such as Miriek, Kelabit, and Punan) and languages that are on the brink of extinction (such as Kiput, Narom, and Selakau); see (Mohd Roji 2023). As for the Bisaya language in Limbang, Sarawak, in a preliminary field survey conducted in Limbang in December 2023, it was observed that the Bisaya language is already showing signs of shift. Among the observed phenomena of language shift is the fact that many younger generations are no longer familiar with terms related to traditional culture. However, to date, no intensive study has been conducted on this matter. Existing research, such as that by Md. Roslan (2020), is found to focus on the Muslim Bisaya community in Beaufort, Sabah. His study indicates that the Bisaya language in Beaufort faces a serious level of endangerment and is susceptible to adaptation and assimilation with the Malay language. This finding aligns with the report from Ethnologue (<https://www.ethnologue.com/language/bsy/>), which states that the vitality of the Bisaya language in Sabah is at the "endangered" level, meaning "it is no longer the norm that children learn and use this language." From the perspective of language ecology, the Bisaya community of Limbang, Sarawak exists within a multilingual environment, coexisting with other ethnic groups such as the Iban, local Malays, Brunei Malays, Lun Bawang, Chinese, and others. Within this multi-ethnic and multilingual setting, a language hierarchy exists, featuring dominant languages that influence the perceptions and attitudes of Bisaya speakers. However, due to the limited scope of previous studies on the Bisaya language, information regarding the linguistic ecology and language choices of the Bisaya community in Limbang has yet to be identified. Currently, there is no formal record of the vitality of the Bisaya language in Limbang. The report cited on Ethnologue (<https://www.ethnologue.com/language/bsb/>) pertains only to the Bisaya community in Brunei; see <https://www.ethnologue.com/language/bsb/>. It states that the Bisaya language in Brunei is at a "Stable" level, meaning that "the language is not being sustained by formal institutions, but it is still the norm in the home and community that all children learn and use the language." For the Limbang Bisaya community in Sarawak (see Figure 1), our latest fieldwork suggests that, if using the UNESCO language endangerment classification scale, it can be assessed as "vulnerable." This classification indicates that most children speak the language, but its use may be restricted to certain domains, such as the home. This assessment is supported by the findings of Chong (2025), who states: "The young informants studied consider the Bisaya language important because it represents the identity of the Bisaya community. Although they remain loyal to the Bisaya language, its use is limited to the village environment and interactions within the family. In broader social contexts, other languages such as Malay and Iban increasingly take over the role as the languages of interaction." Arising from this research gap, an intensive study was conducted to address the lack of research on the language ecology of the Bisaya people.

Conceptual Framework

This study employs an ecolinguistic or language ecology approach to describe the multilingual situation of the Bisaya community in Limbang. This approach was pioneered by Haugen (1972) by applying the metaphor of natural ecology to language, particularly the social and psychological aspects of language use. In other words, this discipline examines the dynamic relationship between a language and the environment in which it is used. When interpreted literally, it is equivalent to the degradation of the physical natural environment, which subsequently has negative effects in terms of threats to the survival of natural species. These effects are found to also impact human languages. According to Yu, Ng & Roslina (2023), within the term "language ecology," there is an analogy between elements of biological ecology and linguistics. Specifically, in biology, organisms interact with the natural environment; similarly, from a linguistic perspective, languages interact with the speakers who use them within a community.

Haugen (1972) stated that a language is like a living organism with a lifespan, undergoing birth, growth, and eventually death. Consequently, a language is intrinsically linked to its use within a social and cultural context. This approach focuses on several key topics, including language diversity, the challenges faced by minority languages, and language maintenance and extinction. By using the ecosystem metaphor, language extinction can be compared to the extinction of living species (Stanlaw 2020). According to Wendel (2005), languages share several characteristics with biological species, for example:

a) Transmission – Living species inherit biological genetics from previous generations; similarly, a mother tongue is inherited.

b) Rate of Change – Both of these elements undergo change. The rate of change in living species occurs gradually across generations, whereas change in language can happen drastically, even within a single generation.

In terms of categories, language ecology can be divided into two parts: external ecology and internal ecology. External ecology encompasses the natural human and social environment. It studies how language is used in interactions between people within their environment. Internal ecology, on the other hand, examines the relationship between specific linguistic units and the principles of the linguistic system (Mufwene 2014). This paper focuses on the aspect of external ecology, specifically on the multilingual ecology of the Bisaya language by analyzing the interaction between dominant and minority languages and the phenomenon of language change.

METHODOLOGY

This study is a qualitative investigation, with data obtained through interviews and participant observation. The research was conducted under a grant sponsored by the *Kementerian Pertanian dan Industri Asas Tani* of Malaysia (II-2023-001). The process of conducting this study was also approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the National University of Malaysia (Ethics Approval Reference: JEP-2023-570).

The interview method was conducted with the village head and residents of Batu Danau in a casual manner, focusing on discussions about language use and choices among them. This study also involved a focus group discussion with selected informants (both young and elderly). In terms of observation techniques, while in the field, the researcher observed language use and interactions among three age categories of speakers: adolescents, adults, and the elderly. Observations were carried out not only in Batu Danau village but also in Limbang town. The locations focused on for observation in Limbang town were areas frequented by residents, such as the market, the weekly market (*Pasar Tamu*), food courts, and shops. To obtain representative observational data, the researcher made frequent visits to the village. All results from the interviews and observations were noted down immediately.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the perspective of the metaphorical nature of language ecology as proposed by Haugen (1972), field research indicates that the Bisaya language is spoken within a multilingual linguistic ecology. There are four main languages spoken in their environment: Iban, Malay dialects (Brunei and Sarawak Malay), standard and colloquial Malay. The following subsection provides a general presentation of the role each of these languages plays within the Bisaya community.

Iban Language

In the context of Sarawak, the Iban language serves as a lingua franca and plays a primary role in inter-ethnic interaction. Although the Sarawak Malay dialect serves a similar function, the role of Iban as a language for inter-ethnic communication is particularly prominent in rural areas, such as the towns of Kapit, Kanowit, Betong, Sri Aman, etc.. In terms of geographical distribution, Iban is a language widely spread across the entire state of Sarawak, extending to Brunei and around the Sabah-Sarawak border region (Chong 2018). The spread of the Iban language began with the migration of Ibanic tribes to Sarawak from West Kalimantan starting in the 18th century (Chong 2021). From the Batang Lupar-Saribas basin, these tribes gradually spread to the Southwest region and further to the northern and eastern parts of Sarawak (Pringle 1970). The Iban population residing around the Limbang area are part of the group involved in the final wave of Iban migration history (early to mid-20th century). The interviewed Bisaya informants acknowledged fluency in Iban, having learned the language in workplaces, through social interactions, or from Iban friends at school. Consequently, they frequently use this language when the interlocutor is Iban. In fact, even before knowing a person's ethnic background, Iban is often chosen as the language to initiate a conversation between two unfamiliar speakers.

Malay Dialects

In addition to Iban, the Sarawak Malay dialect is also a primary lingua franca in Sarawak. In other words, there are two main languages of interaction for the multilingual population of Sarawak (Mohammed Azlan 2022). The Sarawak Malay dialect generally functions as the lingua franca in urban areas. In rural areas, Iban takes on this role. According to Chong (2009), in earlier times (probably before the development of the petroleum industry), the Sarawak Malay dialect had not yet spread to northern Sarawak. The local lingua francas in the Baram and Kemena River valleys were sub-variants of Brunei Malay and the Bintulu language, respectively. The economic factors such as the petroleum industry and government sector employment have driven the presence of Sarawak Malay dialect speakers into these areas. In the town of Limbang, the Sarawak Malay dialect also functions as a medium of interaction. It has been observed that at food stalls, this dialect is used by stall owners when interacting with strangers. The Bisaya informants who were interviewed acknowledged that they are fluent in the Sarawak Malay dialect because it is commonly used throughout Sarawak. As for the older generation who have less contact with outsiders, they stated that they understand the dialect.

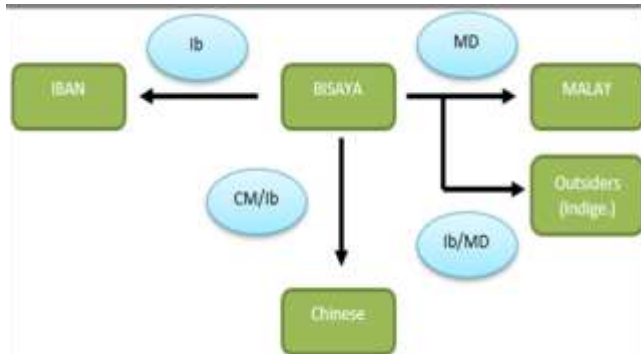
For interactions among the local residents, the most frequently used Malay variety is the Brunei Malay dialect. According to Chong (2009), this dialect is spoken not only in Brunei Darussalam but also spills across the border into Sabah and Sarawak. Indeed, in the town of Limbang, the Brunei Malay dialect is widely spoken. In the visited market and *Pasar Tamu*, besides hearing the Bisaya language, the Brunei Malay dialect is the most frequently heard language. Geographically, Limbang is located between the two parts of Brunei (approximately a half-hour drive away). Consequently, the relationship between the populations of Brunei and Limbang is very close. Many Bisaya people have relatives living in Brunei, and vice versa. In addition to these familial ties, residents of Brunei frequently visit Limbang for business, leisure, or shopping. Therefore, the Brunei Malay dialect is one of the languages most frequently used by the Bisaya community.

Standard Malay

In the Bisaya region, Standard Malay (*Bahasa Melayu baku*) is largely confined to formal education, where it serves as the medium of instruction in primary and secondary schools. In practice, teachers use Standard Malay for instruction within the school domain. However, in informal interactions among classmates or Bisaya friends at school, the Bisaya language remains actively used. Standard Malay is acquired almost as a "foreign language" by Bisaya students because the Bisaya language and Standard Malay are not mutually intelligible. This is due to the fact that they belong to two different language branches: Standard Malay (a Malayic language) is a standardized variety of Koiné Malay (Collins, 2018), while Bisaya belongs to the Dusunic language family (Yabit, 2004). Besides exposure through formal education, Bisaya people also encounter Standard Malay through traditional media such as newspapers and television broadcasts, as well as through social media like Facebook and YouTube. In terms of its function, Standard Malay is generally not used in informal interaction.

Colloquial Malay

The term "colloquial Malay" refers to the variety of Malay spoken in everyday social interactions. This variety diverges from the formal rules of Standard Malay, often omitting affixes, incorporating foreign vocabulary, and using simplified or divergent syntactic structures. This language variety is most frequently used when interacting with the Chinese community. Due to the diverse economy of the Limbang area (e.g., oil palm plantations, construction, and commerce), many Chinese from various places have moved to this area. When interacting with Chinese individuals, the interviewed Bisaya informants admitted that they frequently use colloquial Malay. However, if they find that a Chinese interlocutor is proficient in Iban, they will switch to Iban. In summary, besides their native Bisaya language, the Bisaya community is surrounded by four other main languages or dialects. By applying Sercombe's (2010) model of language use patterns from the Penan community in Sukang, the linguistic interactions of the Bisaya speakers can be sketched as follows:



Abbreviations:

Ib = Iban language

CM = Colloquial Malay Variety

MD = Malay dialects

Indige. = Indigenous

Figure 2. The Pattern of Language Use Among the Bisaya Community

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this preliminary study finds that, apart from their native Bisaya language, the community uses at least four other main languages: Iban, two Malay dialects (Brunei Malay and Sarawak Malay), Standard Malay, and Colloquial Malay. Each of these languages plays a distinct role according to the domain. Iban and the Malay dialects function as the primary languages for wider social interaction. Standard Malay is confined to the educational domain, while Colloquial Malay is used for interaction with the Chinese community, particularly with those who are not fluent in Iban. The survey confirms that the Bisaya mother tongue remains the primary language of interaction within the community itself. Ultimately, the choice of an external language is highly dependent on the domain and the interlocutor's background. Finally, supporting Chong's (2025) preliminary finding, this paper provides further confirmation that the Bisaya language is at a vulnerable level of vitality. Although it is reported that Bisaya youth frequently use their native language, another of our projects—which studied the community's indigenous knowledge of traditional plant uses and cultural terms related to the plants in their environment—revealed a significant lack of this traditional wisdom among them (Dilah 2025). The loss of the youth's knowledge of cultural terms related to their local flora can be interpreted as a sign of language shift. As this study employed a qualitative data collection method, it is suggested that future research should focus on quantitative studies that measure aspects such as intergenerational transmission rates or generational proficiency metrics.

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