

A Note on the Form and Use of the Language of Nias

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Abstract

Like other languages, the language of Nias is a system of communication, a tool for thought, a medium for self-expression, a social institution and ethnic pride among its native speakers. In spite of its important functions, the language Nias reveals some phenomena calling for attention. One of the phenomena has to do with the increase of education and language contact involving the speakers of the Nias language. Another phenomenon has to do with the attitudes of the speakers of the Nias language toward their native language and culture in general. Still another has to do with some government policies, whose significant positive contribution to the Nias language is still debatable. This short article is organized into four parts. The first part the introduction where the background of the writing the article is presented. The second part contains a short description of the form of the language of Nias. The third part is about the use of the language. The last part is the recommendation on preservation and revitalization of the Nias language.

Keywords: Agglutination, interference, language revitalization, Nias language

Introduction

In line with Fishman's idea (1985) concerning the relationship between language and culture, the Nias language is part, index, and symbolic of Nias culture. As part of the Nias culture, the Nias language is an inevitable component of the Nias culture. As index of the culture, the language is a window through which the culture can be seen. As symbolic of the culture, the language is something which represents the culture.

The Nias language serves various practical functions, depending on the people who need and use it. At one time it can be a means to express happiness, surprise, or sadness. At another time, the language possibly serves to impart information, to give essential commands, or to communicate requests. Still at another time, it may function to maintain social contact (phatic communion), to release tension or for aesthetic considerations (Aitchison, 1992).

In spite of its important functions, the Nias language has faced several challenges during the last four decades. The challenges, among other things, are the increase of education and language contact involving the speakers of the Nias language, the attitudes of the speakers of the Nias language toward their native language and culture in general, and the government policies, whose significant positive contribution to the Nias language is still debatable. This short paper will address these issues in brief.

The Form of the Language

The Nias language is a language whose most native speakers live on the island of Nias. The language belongs to western Malayo-Polynesian group of Austronesian languages (Brown, 2001). It is a vocalic language in that the words in the language, other than those borrowed lately from other languages such as Indonesian, end with vowels. *Mörö* 'sleep', *sökhi* 'good', and *manu* 'chicken' are three examples of the words in the Nias language.

The words *mörö* 'sleep', *sökhi* 'good', and *manu* 'chicken' are one morpheme each. Each of the three words is a free morpheme. However, this does not mean that the Nias

language is an isolating language. The Nias language is an agglutinating language. It is a language whose words are rich in affixes. The language has prefixes, suffixes, and infixes. One of the prefixes is *ma-*. In the word *mamazökhi* ‘make’, the *ma-* which is attached to the beginning of the word is a prefix, a bound morpheme attached to the beginning of the host. Infix is a bound morpheme which is inserted within a word. In the word *agalawa* ‘tall’, *-ga-* is an infix meaning ‘all’. A suffix is a dependent morpheme which is attached to end of a word. In the word *awaisi* ‘finish’, *-si*, which is attached to the end of the word *awai*, is a suffix.

The Nias language is a language whose word order in an intransitive sentence is VS. A sentence whose verb has a single valency in this language requires the verb to come before the argument required. This means that the only argument whose presence is required by the verb comes after, not before the verb, which is a sister to it). This is exemplified by the intransitive sentence *Mörö Döngöni* ‘Töngöni slept’. In this example, *mörö*, which is the verb, comes first; *Döngöni*, which is the only argument and functions as the subject, follows the verb.

The vocalic language belonging to western Malayo-Polynesian group of Austronesian languages exhibits word order VOS in a declarative sentence whose main verb has two valencies. A sentence whose verb subcategorizes for two arguments places the verb in the initial position. The verb precedes the second argument which functions as the object in the sentence. The first argument, which functions as the subject in the sentence, comes after the other argument, which functions as the logical object. In the sentence *Ibözi Döngöni Töngöni* ‘Töngöni hits Töngöni’, *ibözi* is the verb, *Döngöni* is the object (patient, the entity which is acted upon), *Töngöni* is the subject (agent, the doer of the action).

As shown by the sentences *Mörö Döngöni* ‘Töngöni slept’ and *Ibözi Döngöni Töngöni* ‘Töngöni hits Töngöni’, the Nias language seems to mark the subject of an intransitive verb in the same way as it marks the object of a transitive verb. The entity which is the subject the intransitive verb is mutated and so is the entity which is the object of the transitive verb. Such a language as this, according to Comrie (1989) and Song (2001), is a morphologically ergative language.

The Nias language is a language whose question words each begins with the glottal fricative consonant /h/. The question word *hadia* ‘what’ begins with the consonant /h/. *Haniha* ‘who’ also commences with *h*. *Ha’uga* ‘how many/much’, *hamega* ‘when’, *hezo* ‘where’, *hana* ‘why’, and *hewisa* ‘how’ begin with /h/. These question words appear at the beginning of the sentences requiring them. The sentences *Hadia döimö?* ‘What is your name?’ and *Haniha namau?* ‘Who is your father?’ are two examples showing that the consonant *h* comes at the beginning of an interrogative sentence.

The Nias language is a language whose relative pronoun may be overtly realized in different forms. The full form of the relative pronoun is probably *si* ‘who/which’. This can be seen in the sentence *Omasido niha si so ba nomo da’ö* ‘I like person who is in the house’. However, in the sentence *Omasido niha soya ana’a* ‘I like the person who has a lot of money’, the relative pronoun *si* is realized as *s-* and it is attached to the word *oya* ‘a lot’. Such a phenomenon is quite challenging for people who are learning the language.

Different forms are also encountered in personal pronouns in the Nias language. Three personal pronouns have free forms and bound forms when are the subjects of intransitive verbs. The three pronouns are *ndra’odo/-do* ‘I’, *ndra’aga/-ga* ‘we’, and *ndra’ugö/-ö* ‘you’ referring to the second person singular. For instance, the sentences *Mangado* and *Manga ndra’odo* both have the same meaning ‘I eat’. Four personal pronouns only have free forms when are the subjects of intransitive verbs. The four pronouns are *ita* ‘we’ referring to the

first person plural inclusive, *ami* ‘you’ denoting the second person plural, *ia* ‘he/she’, and *ira* ‘they’.

The three personal pronouns having free and bound forms when they are the subjects of intransitive verbs also have free and bound forms when they are the logical objects or patients of transitive verbs. For instance, the sentences *Igohido Ina Gadi’a* and *Igohi ndra’odo Ina Gadi’a* both mean ‘Ina Gadi’a ran after me’. The four pronouns having no bound forms when they are the subjects of the intransitive verbs do not have bound forms when they are the logical objects or patients of transitive verbs. The four pronouns consistently have only one form each either when they are the subjects of intransitive verbs or when they are the logical objects or patients of transitive verbs.

Personal pronouns which are the agents of transitive verbs all have two forms each: free forms and bound forms. All of the free forms begin with *ya*. The free forms are *ya’odo* ‘I’, *ya’ita* ‘we’ denoting the first person plural inclusive, *ya’aga* ‘we’ referring to the first person plural exclusive, *ya’ugö* ‘you’ referring to the second person singular, *ya’ami* ‘you’ referring to the second person plural, *ya’ia* ‘him/her’, and *ya’ira* ‘them’ respectively. The bound forms are {*u-*} as the first person singular, *ta-* as the first person plural inclusive, {*ma-*} as the first person plural exclusive, {*ö-*} as the second person singular, {*mi-*} as the second person plural, {*i-*} as the third person singular, and *la-* as the third person plural. These bound forms are pronominal copies which serve as proclitics. For efficiency consideration, the free forms of the pronouns are generally not overtly expressed when they are coreferenced with the bound forms.

Pronouns expressing possession in the Nias language are endclitics. They are {-*gu*} ‘my’, {-*da*} ‘our’ referring to the first person plural inclusive, {-*ma*} ‘our’ referring to the first person plural exclusive, {-*mö/-u*} ‘your’ referring to the second person singular, {-*mi*} ‘your’ referring to the second person plural, {-*nia*} ‘his/her’, and {-*ra*} ‘their’. Unlike other bound possessive pronouns, {-*u*} cannot be used with a noun ending with the vowel {*u*}. Therefore, attaching the possessive pronoun {-*u*} to the end of the noun *manu* ‘chicken’ makes the sentence *Tenga manuu da’a* ‘This is not your chicken’ unacceptable. The word *manu*, which ends with the vowel /*u*/, subcategorizes for the possessive pronoun {-*mö*}, not {-*u*}.

The Use of the Language

Until around five decades ago, most of the speakers of the Nias language were monolingual speakers. Very few of them spoke a language besides their native language. The few speakers who spoke one or more than one language besides the Nias language were those who learned the other language(s) at school and/or acquired it/them through informal learning. Very few people went to school and not many of them had opportunities to get in touch with people who spoke the Nias and other languages. The speakers of the Nias language did not seem proactive enough to be bilingual speakers.

Around the years indicated above, traditional festivals were frequently held by many speakers of the Nias language. The language used in the festivals was generally the Nias language. Rituals, discussions, and addresses were all in the Nias language. Such a situation made it conducive for the speakers to speak the Nias language. The situation made the people whose native language was Nias learn the importance of their language. People’s mastery and fluency in using the their native language was considered success and pride. This triggered some of them to learn the language on purpose. They learned the language, especially the sentences generally used in the festivals, from the elder(s).

Assuming the importance of the language in connection to the customs, the speakers of the Nias language hardly ever used language other than the Nias language to name their

children. They proudly used the Nias language to name their children. Then the names using the Nias language were very common. The words used to name the children were usually selected in such a way to mirror either the social status and/or the expectation of the families involved. Names reflected the positions of the families of the owners of the names in the community and/or their dreams. A person named *Ki'ogulö*, for example, was probably from the lower social class (Nazara, 2011).

Around four decades ago, interactions of the speakers of the Nias language with those speaking Indonesian and/or other language(s) began to drastically increase. A few people who were aware of the problematic phenomena faced by the Nias language worried that the Nias language would face a serious problem. One of the people was P.R. Telaumbanua, who—at the time—was the governor of North Sumatera. He testified that many young people who continued their education overseas came up with interference. He said then, "Ba da'e göi ufaduhu'ö wa ato ndraonoda si no möi manohugö sekolara misijefo no faruka fakhöjö Li Niha ni'oguna'öra" (Harefa, 1970).

Then vocabularies (words) of Indonesian such as *sekolah*, *pensil*, *gambar* and *kursi* had entered the Nias language. The words of Indonesian entering the Nias language underwent adaptation. They operated by the grammar rules of the Nias language, whose words never ended with consonants. The word *sekolah* became *sekola*, *pensil* became *fese*, *gambar* became *gambara*, and *kursi* became *kurusi*. These words also obeyed syntactic rules when they appeared in sentences. The fact that some words of a language are borrowed by other languages can be considered normal, since vocabulary is an element of the language which is frequently coined by other languages (Schendl, 2001).

At present, the condition of the Nias language seems to get worse. Interference occurs more frequently. The percentage of words of other languages coined into the Nias language tends to increase drastically. The words coined tend to refuse to obey the morphological rules of the Nias language. Instead of adapting themselves to the rules of the language into which they enter, they keep their own grammar rules. The words of Indonesian in the sentences "Telpon lö lancar" and "Bantu sekedar pulsa ga'a" are examples. This gives evidence that the Nias language is going to surrender. If such a situation continues, it is likely that in just a few years ahead the lexicon of the Nias language will be dominated by that of other language(s). If the situation gets worse, such an interfering phenomenon will probably occur sooner. If the situation is getting worst, language shift/death is likely to occur.

Some words of the Nias language are on the way to extinction. They are not (frequently) used any more. Probably, they are only in the memory of people who are senior citizen. Very few young people of Nias—if any—know words such as *saiwa*, *embua*, and *soso*. These traditional products have disappeared from the speakers of the Nias language. Nias people who were born in the last two decades might have never seen these objects. As Duha in *Omo Niha – Perahu Darat di Pulau Bergoyang* (2012:253) states, "*Sekarang ini, ... setiap acara di desa selalu didominasi oleh keyboard dan lagu-lagu dangdut yang sama sekali tidak ada hubungannya dengan identitas orang Nias. ... Demikian juga berbagai peralatan yang dipakai dalam upacara-upacara*". Language, among other things, is an essential medium to name, describe, and/or express cultural products. If the cultural products are no more in practice, what does language name, describe, and/or express?

Interference is not limited to the vocabularies as cited above. It also occurs in the area of syntax. A few decades ago, sentences such as *Mofanöga mahemolu* and *Mofanö ndra'aga mahemolu* 'We will leave tomorrow' were spoken not only by adults. Children of the native speakers of the Nias language also used them. Notice that the argument which is the agent in each of these sentences comes after the verb adjacent to it. The constituent order of each of the sentences is SV. At present, the speakers of the Nias language, especially youngsters

who can speak a language besides that of Nias, have been tempted to place the argument, whose semantic role in each of the two sentences is agent, before the verb. Construction such as *Ya'odo mofanö mahemolu* 'I will leave tomorrow', where the subject precedes the predicate, is commonly found in Indonesian sentences. This reveals that the national language has interfered the sentence construction of the Nias language.

One influencing factor contributing to interference to the Nias language has to do with formal education. As a matter of fact, it has been compulsory for young people of school age to attend formal education from elementary to high school. Formal education gives advantages as well as disadvantages to local language development. This is quite problematic. On the one hand, formal education enhances people's knowledge. It widens people's horizon. It triggers people's awareness and creativity, and so on. On the other hand, formal education introduces students to at least one language which is potential competitor to local language to develop. For instance, at school the students are required to learn and speak Indonesian, the national language. As a result, they have to learn the new language. They become bilingual speakers: They speak the Nias language and Indonesian. Ability to speak more than one language gives advantages. One of the advantages is that the bilingual speakers are able to perform language functions in more than one language.

Unfortunately, ability to speak more than one language can also give disadvantages. One of the advantages is that the bilingual speakers can be like a field where the languages they are able to speak grow together. Here competition has potential to occur. One of the languages which the same persons speak may grow better than the other. There is no guarantee that the two or more languages grow in the same way. It is generally acknowledged that when two languages are in contact, they influence each other. In such a situation, it is very possible that one of the languages becomes more dominant than the other. If the domination of one language over the other increases continuously, the language which is pushed down can be permissive. Concerning the present landscape of the Nias language, Indonesian seems to increasingly dominate. This means that there is no reason not to worry about the future story of the Nias language.

Some government policies tend to foster domination of Indonesian over the local languages like that of Nias. As the national language, Indonesian receives some advantageous treatment. This brings some impacts to the local languages such as the Nias language. With more facilities and supports, Indonesian has become very dominant compared with the local languages like that of Nias. As a result, the local languages such as that of Nias get weaker. The supports and facilities which make the national language much more dominant compared with local languages may bring some negative impacts to the speakers of the local languages. One of the negative impacts is that the native speakers of the local languages may falsely be triggered to think that their languages are ignored. They may further be tempted to pursue the language which they considered favored by the authority.

The attitudes of the speakers of the Nias language contribute significantly to present and future conditions of the Nias language. If the speakers of the language are aware of the importance of preserving their language, the language is likely to survive. Unfortunately, there has been no convincing indication that the attitude of every speaker of the Nias language is positive. This is found not only among those living on the island of Nias, but also among those living in other places such as Padang. Among tens of families from Nias ethnic group observed in Padang (Nazara, 2008), none of their children used the Nias language. Adults such as parents and grandparents were no exception when they communicated with their children and/or grandchildren.

All languages change over time (Aitchison, 1985, 1992; Murray, 2001) and any aspect of a language can change over time. "Language change is ubiquitous." (McGregor, 2009). Not only aspects such as phonetics and phonology change. Other aspects such as morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, and lexicon also change. Language change normally takes a long time. Change which has occurred to English, for instance, takes hundreds of years. Compared with English, the Nias language has changed much faster in the last few years. English spoken around five hundred years ago is not so different from English spoken nowadays. How about the Nias language? Is the Nias language spoken around five hundred years ago not so different from the Nias language spoken today either?

Needs for Preservation and Revitalization of the Language

Conducive environments, integrated and sustainable programs, and continuous supports for preservation and revitalization of the Nias language are of paramount importance. In the first place, adult speakers of the Nias language, especially parents and grandparents, should be (more) aware that local languages such as that of Nias are essential parts, indexes, and symbolics of local cultures which hold local geniuses both tangibles and intangibles, which are valuable to transmit from one generation to the next. Language is, as Grimes (2002) indicates, a medium to narrate yesterday's success and failure, to shape today's stories and dramas, and to propose tomorrow's fictions and nonfictions.

Families should be a fertile soil for local language to grow. Adults, especially parents and grandparents who are the native speakers of the Nias language, are highly urged to provide their children and grandchildren with sufficient local language inputs. They should not only help but also struggle hard to make their children and grandchildren well exposed to the language they have inherited from their parents and grandparents (ancestors). They may start the valuable and heroic struggles by communicating using their local language with their (grand-) sons/daughters more frequently and interestingly.

Religion institutions, education institutions, and local governments should also be more aware of the importance of local language preservation and revitalization. The awareness of the importance of the preservation and revitalization of the local language should be made concrete through various cultural programs and tangible products. These include, but not limited to, workshops and regular and need-based training as well as facilities or media such as books, dictionaries, magazines, newspapers, TV, and others. Can such programs and facilities be realized? They depend on several parties, institutions, groups, and individuals. Through these programs and products, the Nias language is empowered and functional. These programs and products are likely to be successful since they mean that the (expected) speakers of the Nias language are scaffolded to get sufficient exposure to the language they are supposed to learn and/or acquire.

Conclusion

In spite of its unique forms and its paramount roles, the language of Nias indicates that it has lower frequency of use and less attention and support. Seeing such ironic phenomena, I would like to voice that increasing people's awareness of the importance of local languages such as that of Nias may trigger them to undertake more integrated and sustainable programs which may preserve and revitalize local cultures (both intangibles and tangibles) which in turn scaffold the local languages to be powerful and functional. Without integrated, simultaneous, and sustainable programs made and supported by several parties, institutions, groups, and individuals, the Nias language will possibly be like a foreign language for the next generation of the present speakers of the language.

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