

“BAHASA SIMALUNGUN ATAS” CURRENT EXISTENCE AND ITS REVITALIZATION

Willem Saragih
Fakultas Bahasa dan Seni
Universitas Negeri Medan

ABSTRACT

There are at least three categories of language in the world wide: local language, national language and international language. Of the three categories, the least attention paid by the government is to its nation's local languages. This lack of care results in language endangerment which has been the focus of much attention over the past few decades, and as a result a wide range of people are now working to revitalize and maintain local languages. Bahasa Simalungun Atas (BSA), a sub-dialect of Bahasa Simalungun which is used in the upper part of Simalungun territory, is endangered too. Despite the not too many native speakers of the language it is an important asset to Indonesian people as a nation of over six hundred local languages, though. Therefore, the language needs to be revitalized or it will gradually disappear. This paper attempts to provide some information about the situation and condition of Bahasa Simalungun Atas at present so as to draw more attention of the competent parties for its revitalization. For that purpose, current existence of the language, some factors causing the language endangerment, as well as well as how the language can be revitalized are presented.

Key Words: *language endangerment, Bahasa Simalungun Atas (BSA), existence, revitalization*

INTRODUCTION

All languages, regardless of their language status, international, national, local or even only pidgin languages, are primarily the same in terms of function, namely a tool for communication. What distinguishes one from another is the number of its speakers – some have a large number; some have an average and some others just have a few, its use and the range of purposes it has such as for academic, business and trade, diplomatic, socio economic purposes, etc. It is these factors that affect the amount and type of attention given by the ruling government of a country to its people's language(s). The more speakers of a language and the more influential and powerful its speakers, the more attention to the language concerned may be given and the chance for it to dominate other languages in that

country ought to be the greatest of all. It will become the nation's national language.

Further, with that status, such a language is to be developed and used more widely across time to convey and accommodate all sorts of information for all purposes needed by the nation and country. This implies that the national language of every nation is to be treated more greatly than its local language(s). Besides, every country also needs to provide its people with at least one language for international relation purposes. Therefore, there are at least three categories of language in the world wide: local language, national language and international language.

These categories of language contribute to the dynamic and development of language. In view of vocabulary, for instance, both national and international languages continue to

develop and increase in number steadily in line with science and technology advancement. The reason is because researchers in all countries always attempt to uncover the mystery of the world and this brings about new inventions and findings all of which produce new words stated in the most dominant language, the so called National Language in each country. And to enhance the promotion of such new inventions – to make them internationally recognized, words for naming things related to it will need to be written or stated in the most dominant international language – which is English. This may be the reason why English has become the most dynamic language and most expensive in the world till today.

On the contrary, much less attention is paid by the government to its nation's local languages. This lack of concern poses problems for the development and maintenance and even existence of local languages. This is a serious matter in deed because local languages are an important asset that needs saving. Not using is losing. Grenoble, L.A & Whaley, L.J., 2006: 6, for example, asserted that language is a visible and powerful indicator of group identity, and it has accurately been recognized as an important way to maintain links with one's cultural past and to protect one's cultural uniqueness in the present. Therefore, immediate and structured actions should be taken for their sake of survival; or otherwise, repentance will be unavoidable. More firmly, if this ignorance of local languages asset continued, the nation would lose its local languages gradually.

The writer opines that this language concern applies to Indonesia as a country which has such a huge number of local languages. According to the news paper "Kompas " (September 11, 2012) there are at least 546 local languages or vernaculars including their sub-

vernaculars in Indonesia. Even it is estimated that there can be 600 languages as the research was still limitedly done – only in 70 locations in Papua and Maluku. That area will be enlarged to 109 locations soon. Here is the statement given by Mahsun, the Head of Indonesian Language Development (KEMENDIKBUD) on Friday 31-08-2012 at the Language Centre Office-Jakarta, as cited in Kompas,(September 01-2012) "Sedikitnya ada 442 bahasa yang dimiliki Indonesia yang terungkap dalam Kongres Bahasa ke-9 yang digelar 2008 silam. Pada 2012, penelitian berlanjut dengan mengambil sampel di 70 lokasi di wilayah Maluku dan Papua. Hasil dari penelitian itu, jumlah bahasa dan sub bahasa di seluruh Indonesia mencapai 546 bahasa. Jumlahnya akan lebih banyak karena penelitian belum selesai."

Certainly, this writer's mother tongue, called Bahasa Simalungun Atas (BSA) or Upper Simalungunese is one of those mentioned. This BSA is used in the of upper of Simalungun territory which borders on Tanah Karo to the West, lower part of Simalungun territory to the East, Samosir to the South. The Simalungun language spoken in this region is not purely like the Simalungun language in the lower part of Simalungun territory. The difference is not only dealing with the prosodic features such as intonation and tone, but also the lexicon. Perhaps this difference is due to the other three languages in the neighboring surroundings: Simalungun Bawah, Bahasa Karo, Bahasa Toba, Bahasa Meanwhile, bahasa Simalungun Bawah (Lower Simalungunese) is known as the standard Simalungun language meaning that the majority of Simalungunese people speak Bahasa Simalungun Bawah. Since no research has been conducted on the languages affecting the BSA, whether the language was at first truly a different language and later affected by Karonese, Bataknese or Lower Simalungunese then

it becomes as it is now, is not certain yet. More specifically, some of the villages that I am familiar with, where Bahasa Simalungun Atas (BSA) is spoken or used, are Dolok Mariah (my birth place), Bage, Baluhut, Soping, Huta Imbaru, Nagori Purba, Sibulangit, Sirpang Bage, Tappe-Tappe, Sippan, and Hampoan.

In this paper the writer will discuss about some important things with respect to the endangered condition and revitalization of Bahasa Simalungun Atas (BSA) as spoken throughout those villages, especially three villages: Dolok Mariah, Bage, and Baluhut which is under the authority of one Village Head or Kepala Desa whom the writer knows well. The discussion will include the the

DISCUSSION

1. Some Information about the Existence of Bahasa Simalungun Atas (BSA) at Present

As a small paper the information mentioned is generally based on the writer's experience as a native speaker of the language: Bahasa Simalungun Atas, who was born and grew up in one of

those villages mentioned: Dolok Mariah. This is to say that the writer has not done any field research or survey to get the language data that are made available in this paper. Nevertheless, there should not be any doubt about the authenticity of the lexicogrammatical things written in this paper since the writer's language maturity in the language was completely acquired in that village. Besides, as a village-born person, the writer cannot transform himself into a city person. This is evidenced by his regular visit to that village at least once a year and for social relation maintenance with his village mates and relatives. Furthermore, for the information about the number of Households and the population of the three villages, the writer has directly contacted Mr. Atur Girsang, the current Village Head of those three villages. Presently, the population of the three villages which have 215 households is 766 totally, consisting of 356 male and 410 female.

Surely, BSA is just a sub-local language or dialect yet unique. Its uniqueness makes it interesting to talk. The following list of words show its uniqueness:

No.	BSA	BS	BT	BK	Meaning
	Noun				
	sayur	lompah	sayur	Gulen	vegetable
	tano	tanoh	tano	Taneh	earth
	nae	nahei	pat	Nahei	foot
	mossi	bagundung	bagudung	Menci	Rat/mouse
	asu	baliang	biang	Biang	dog
	aek	bah	aek/mual	Lau	water
	pisang	galuh/gaol	pisang	Galuh	banana
	bana	Ia	ibana	Ia	He/she
	nasida	sidea	Nasida/halaki	Kalaka	they
	dalahi	dalahi	bawa	Dilaki	wear
	daboru	daboru	borua	Diberu	female
	Verb				
	laon	dokah	leleng	Ndekah	Long
	ungnga	domma	nungnga	Enggo	already
	makkorja	karejo	marhorja	Erdahin	Work
	pio	dilo	jou	Dilo	Call

	naho	Barah*	naho	Kujenda	Come here
	lao	Laho/misir	lao	Laos/mulih	Go
	roha	uhur	roha	Ukur	feeling
	mardia	mangaha	marhua	Erkai	Doing what
	Marabit**	marmandar	Marabit**	Erkampuh	Wearing sarong
	Adjective				
	male	loheian	male	Malihei	hungry
	las	malas	las	Meriah	happy
	milas	milas	mohop	Melas	hot
	maborgo	maborgohi	ngali	mbergeh	cold
	dohor	Barah*	jonok	Ndeher	near
	male	lohean	male	Malihei	hungry
	jenges	jenges	jeges/bagak	Majilei	beautiful
	Adverb of Time				
	nakkin	nokkan	nakkiningan	Ndai	just now
	nadari	nantuari	nantuari	Derbi	yesterday
	assogot	patar	marsogot	Pagi	tomorrow

Remarks:

BSA = Bahasa Simalungun Atas

BS = Standard Bahasa Simalungun

BT = Batak Toba

BK = Bahasa Karo

As a matter of fact, the difference between BSA and each of the three other languages is not only at lexical item level but also at the prosodic features, namely accent and intonation. But the difference explaining last two aspects are not given in this paper. What can be seen from the example words is that there are words in BSA which are similar in form to that in BS, and in BK, but not even one is found the same form in all three of them. Three are two points which are unique based on the corpora:

1. That the same word 'marabit' which is rooted from 'abit' means a different thing in the two languages (BSA and BT). In BSA it means to wear a kind 'sarong' around the waist functioning like a skirt, but in BT, it means to get dressed.
2. Most of the words have similarity partly in form, be it at the initial, in the medial or final position. For instance, nadari (BSA), nantuari (BS), nantuari (BT).

2. Some Factors Causing BSA Endangerment

Language endangerment has been the focus of much attention over the past few decades, and as a result a wide range of people are now working to revitalize and maintain local languages. Its primary goal is to provide the essential tools for a successful language revitalization program, such as setting and achieving realistic goals, and anticipating and resolving common obstacles. Grenoble, L.A & Whaley, L.J (2006:1) stated that over the past fifty years and with increasing frequency, innovative programs have appeared around the world with the aim of revitalizing languages that are at risk of disappearing due to declining numbers of native speakers. What happens to BSA seems to be very in line with this statement as explained below.

The original inhabitants of BSA in the region of Simalungun Atas have been decreasing in number significantly from year to year. This is because parents in the villages have a principle that their children should live a better life. In order to happen so, they never wish their children to be farmers or 'peasants' as I would rather term it. Their generations should not choose to live in the village. Such a principle is continually exposed to the children since they are at young age - that they should strive for a better living in the city. This principle is, of course, welcomed by most children. The result is that 95% of the people of my age in my village, for example, do not live in Dolok Mariah, where I was born and grew up. This condition poses a problem to the survival of the language used in the village. It is being endangered and needs paying serious attention to. Revitalization of the language is urgent. Otherwise, the BSA may be extinct soon. In this paper I should mention three major factors causing the language (BSA) endangerment:

1. The migration of villagers to other places, mostly to cities

That the younger people choose to leave their own native villages and move to the cities to work and live in is certainly very positive. They are making progress and improvement in terms of living standard. Their parents feel the pride of it. Parents whose children do not come back to live in their own village are regarded as successful parents. Having no children living in the village is a symbol of SUCCESS. Such a situation and condition causes a threat of language loss.

2. Inter-tribal Marriage Families

As has been mentioned that children born in those villages, particularly in Dolok Mariah and in Bage that I know quite well, have been determined to leave their village as they grow up and finish their education. And practically, their dream is about 90 to 95 per cent realized in the sense that they, most of whom are male, will manage to find a job and live out of their village. So, the young generation who stay in the village are commonly female ones. Speaking of male, however, there are also quite a number of young men from other parts of Sumatera, for instance, Nias, coming to the villages to be hired farm workers. Surprisingly, some of these workers get married with girls of the village. Despite the difficult life situations these families choose to live and do farming there. For their continuity of life, they also practice what the older parents in the village do, namely pushing their children to study hard and find a job in the city, and not be a peasant or farmer. This life and living condition also lead to the BSA endangerment. For example, in a family with a man from Nias as the husband – and the wife is a local resident, they actually do not fully talk in BSA, but in Bahasa Indonesia for the ease of communication or they mix both Indonesian and BSA as the wife does not speak her husband's language. Surely, this language practice, linguistically speaking, will affect their children's language. There exists a shift of language practice of the younger villagers, in lexical items and prosodic features. Thus, it is not surprising to hear the young children in the village are able to speak Indonesian which children of their age did not during my childhood. This language use

situation causes a low frequency of using the BSA.

3. Farming Condition

It is true that all people in those villages still do farming to make a living. And the kinds of plants they grow are still the same, too; except for the kind of plant priority. During and before my childhood it was onion and garlic that became the priority; whereas, corn, tomato, potato, and chilly as well as rice were just secondary. But now, it is not certain – they grow all kinds, depending on the appropriateness of season for the type of plant which they learn from generation to generation's experience as traditional farmers or peasants. They do so due to the unpredictability of the weather lately, as well as the quality of the soil which is getting worse, meaning that the land is not as fertile as it used to be. In the past the times of rainy season and dry season could be predicted accurately; likewise, the quantity of harvest or crops was also predictable. In another word, the idea of the proverb "He who sows will reap" did come true for the farmers at that time, but not for the present farmers. This forces them to make a turning point in order to survive but it is so hard. They have got to change the prioritized plant to grow but until now they have not got one to permanently use as their main source of earning for a living. Unfortunately, there is no sign of hope for a better condition yet so far. What a pity!

That unexpected condition of farming which has resulted in the change of plants to grow and the method of farming, certainly, also has an impact on language existence. Words that collocate with the kinds of plants and their method

of planting and growing will not be used since they are already absent from the repertoire of the farmers' interaction among them. The longer they do not use the words, the greater the possibility of losing the words. This is another thing that needs to be considered by the competent people in this country with regards to the maintenance of local languages.

How BSA Can Be Revitalized

Saving Languages will be an invaluable resource for all those interested in the fate of small language communities around the globe. Although tremendous variety characterizes the methods of and motives for reinvigorating languages, revitalization, as a general phenomenon, is growing and has become an issue of global proportion. Further, Whaley (2003) predicted that at least half of the world's 6,000–7,000 languages will disappear (or be on the verge of disappearing) in the next century. More specifically about this language loss possibility, Crystal (2000:19) at least one language must die, on average, every two weeks or so," a startling fact, to say the least. A seemingly supporting statement was also voiced out by Hans-Jürgen Sasse (1992: 7) that in the last five hundred years about half the known languages of the world have disappeared. Furthermore, the most optimistic prognoses of what is happening to the world's languages suggest that around the year 2100 at least 50% of today's close to 7,000 spoken languages may be extinct or very seriously endangered (with elderly speakers only and no children learning them). The accuracy of the information could be of some doubt. Nevertheless, the writer of this paper

sees that this global idea of revitalization is urgent and is very relevant to the condition of languages in Indonesia, particularly its local and sub-local languages like BSA mentioned above. Despite its small number of speakers, say only between 1000 and 1500 people, and not like the speakers of the top ten countries in the world whose speakers are more than 100 million people like Chinese, Hindi, Spanish, English, Bengali, Portuguese, Arabic, Russian, Japanese and German (Kangas & Phillipson (2003), yet this BSA is a vital asset that needs revitalization. The question is what can be done to revitalize this language?

In order to answer this question and to take effective measures for its solution all competent parties involved need to be well informed about this matter. This should be the concern of all before it is too late. language revitalization. For its realization, skilled language teachers, expert linguists and the ministry of education through central and regional language centers have got to sit together. More particularly, the district government of Simalungun needs to initiate a formal meeting to discuss this endangered language. There can be other sub-local languages in the district itself too which are potentially extinct. They should find out the causes of the language threat or endangerment. According to the writer the above factors are the major causes of the language endangerment. He is not saying that finding other factors are no longer needed. Also, he is saying that upon acceptance of them as the major causes of the BSA endangerment, solution to its revitalization is not easy for sure. Because outsiders cannot be prohibited to come and get married with girls of the villages. Next, the children or villagers's rights to move

to other places leaving their village also cannot be prohibited.

However, one thing that is certainly important is that research on the codification of the language (BSA) should be conducted, at least to list down all the words that have ever been used in the region of Upper Simalungun. Besides that, the voices of some older people – 50 years up should be recorded for the genuineness of the prosody of the language attainment and maintenance. Such recording is urgently done since there are not more than ten oldest people as parents of people at the writer's age living now. In the writer's native village, Dolok Mariah, for instance, as far as he is concerned, there is only one woman left, who is now around 90 years old.. So, the respondents or informants that can be used for achieving the research goal are just the second older people who are between 50 and 65 years of age. Also, the language should be taught at the Elementary School which is the only school available for mainly the children in the three villages: Bage, Baluhut and Dolok Mariah, located in Bage. This could also be an effective way for revitalizing the language.

CONCLUSION

All languages, regardless of their status, are the same in function that is a tool for communication. No matter how few the speakers of a language, it is an important asset though. There are a lot of languages, particularly local languages which are under a threat of extinction. Bahasa Simalungun Atas (BSA) as a sub-local language or dialect of Simalungunese is endangered too, due to three major factors, namely : 1.The migration of villagers to other places, mostly to cities; 2. Inter-tribal Marriage

Families; and 3. Farming Condition. This is a concern of all, especially the ministry of education of Indonesia, c.q. local language center of the North Sumatera or District of Simalungun. It is predicted that the language will disappear gradually but certainly based on the situation and condition of the speakers living in the several villages where the language has been used for five generations. Revitalization seems to be urgent; however, it is not easy to do. Living too hard in those villages has forced the younger generation to move out of the villages for a better living, of course. This cannot be stopped. For its revitalization, research activities have got to be done such as to codify the lexical items and record the native villagers's spoken language so as to help keep the original prosodic features of the language. Hopefully, this article can help readers, especially the local government and competent people in this matter see the condition of this local language and do something for its revitalization.

REFERENCES

- Crystal, David.2000. Language death. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Grenoble, L.A & Whaley, L.J (2006). Saving Languages: In Introduction to Language Revitalization. Cambridge University Press.
- Phillipson. R. & Skutnabb-Kangas. T. (1996). English Only worldwide or language ecology? TESOL Quarterly, 30(3), 429-452.
- SASSE, H.-J. (1992) Theory of Language Death. In Brenzinger, Matthias (ed.). Language death:

factual and theoretical
explorations with special
reference to East Africa. Mouton
de Gruyter: 7-30.

KRAUSS, M. (1992) The world's
languages in crisis. *Language*
68:1, 4-10.

Kangas, T.S & Phillipson, R. (2003)

LANGUAGE ECOLOGY.
Cambridge; Cambridge
University Press.

Kompas (September 11, 2012)

Sekilas tentang penulis : Drs. Willem
Saragih, M.Pd., adalah dosen pada Jurusan
Bahasa dan Sastra Inggris FBS Unimed.