



Attitudes and Language Identity of the Acehnese Language Across Generations in a Multi-Ethnic Environment in Aceh, Indonesia

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Abstract. This study examines the attitudes and language identity of the Acehnese language among three generations (elderly, middle-aged, and youth) living in multi-ethnic environments in Aceh, Indonesia. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected through surveys, interviews, and participant observation. The findings reveal significant generational differences in language use, attitudes toward the Acehnese language, and its role in shaping cultural identity. While older generations exhibit strong attachment to the Acehnese language as a marker of cultural identity, younger generations show a shift toward Indonesian and other dominant languages. This study highlights the need for revitalization efforts to preserve the Acehnese language amidst globalization and cultural integration.

Keywords: Acehnese language; language identity; generational attitudes; multi-ethnic environment; language preservation.

1 Introduction

Language is not merely a tool for communication but also a crucial component of cultural identity. It serves as a vessel for transmitting traditions, values, and collective memory across generations [1–3]. In Aceh, Indonesia, the Acehnese language holds profound significance because it is deeply embedded in the region's historical, cultural, and religious fabric [4, 5]. As one of the oldest languages in the Malay Archipelago, Acehnese reflects the unique identity of its people and serves as a marker of their distinctiveness within the broader Indonesian context [6].

However, with increasing globalization, urbanization, and the presence of multiple ethnic groups, the use of the Acehnese language has faced significant challenges [7–10]. The dominance of Indonesian as the national language, coupled with the influence of English and other international languages, has contributed to a gradual decline in the intergenerational transmission of Acehnese [11–13]. This shift raises critical questions regarding the future of the language and its role in shaping cultural identity, particularly among younger generations [14].

Previous studies on the Acehese language have primarily focused on language maintenance, language attitudes, dialect variation, and language shift among specific communities [15–17]. However, limited research has examined how language attitudes and language identity differ across generations within multi-ethnic environments [18,19]. Given the increasing influence of globalization, urbanization, and interethnic interaction, understanding intergenerational language dynamics is essential for evaluating the future vitality of the Acehese language [20]. This study addresses this gap by investigating language attitudes and language identity among three generations of Acehese speakers living in multicultural settings. Unlike previous studies that focused on a single age group or a specific linguistic phenomenon, this research compares elderly, middle-aged, and younger speakers to identify patterns of language maintenance and language shift across generations.

This study aims to explore how attitudes toward the Acehese language and its role in shaping identity vary across three generations: the elderly, middle-aged adults, and youth. These generational cohorts have experienced different socio-political and cultural contexts, which are likely to influence their perceptions and use of the Acehese language [21,22]. By examining these dynamics within multi-ethnic communities, this research seeks to identify the factors contributing to language maintenance and language shift in multicultural settings.

Specifically, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do attitudes toward the Acehese language differ across three generations?
2. What role does the Acehese language play in shaping cultural identity among these generations?
3. How do multi-ethnic environments influence the use and preservation of the Acehese language?

Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing effective strategies to preserve and revitalize the Acehese language [23]. Language loss affects not only communication but also cultural heritage, social cohesion, and community identity [24,25]. By examining the relationship between generational language attitudes, language identity, and multi-ethnic interaction, this study contributes to broader discussions on linguistic diversity and cultural sustainability in Indonesia and beyond [26].

2 Literature Review

2.1 Language Identity and Cultural Preservation

Language identity refers to the ways individuals and groups define themselves through linguistic practices and affiliations [27]. Language functions not only as a medium of communication but also as a symbol of ethnicity, social belonging, and cultural continuity [24, 9].

Scholars have emphasized that language plays a fundamental role in preserving collective memory and transmitting cultural values across generations [28, 25]. Through

language, communities maintain their traditions, social norms, and historical narratives, thereby reinforcing their sense of identity.

In the Acehnese context, language serves as an important marker of ethnic identity and cultural heritage. Traditional expressions, oral literature, religious teachings, and customary laws are predominantly transmitted through the Acehnese language [18]. Consequently, a decline in language use may weaken cultural continuity and reduce opportunities for younger generations to engage with their cultural heritage.

Language loss often results in the erosion of cultural identity because linguistic knowledge is closely linked to collective memory and social values [34]. Similar concerns have been raised by UNESCO regarding endangered languages, emphasizing that preserving minority languages contributes significantly to maintaining cultural diversity and social cohesion [10].

2.2 Generational Differences in Language Use

Research on language attitudes consistently demonstrates that language preferences vary across generations due to differences in socialization, educational experiences, and exposure to dominant languages [21, 23].

Older generations often demonstrate stronger attachment to heritage languages because these languages are closely associated with family traditions and ethnic identity. In contrast, younger generations may prioritize national or international languages that provide access to education, employment, and social mobility [27].

Studies conducted in Indonesia reveal similar patterns. Marnita observed language shift among younger speakers in urban environments [30], while Ginting found that language attitudes significantly influence language maintenance among minority language communities [40].

Within Aceh, Al-Auwal reported a growing reluctance among younger speakers to use Acehnese in daily communication, indicating a gradual shift toward Indonesian [3]. Such trends highlight the importance of examining intergenerational language attitudes in contemporary multilingual societies.

2.3 Language in Multi-Ethnic Environments

Multi-ethnic societies provide opportunities for intercultural interaction while simultaneously creating challenges for minority language preservation [15]. Speakers in such environments frequently negotiate linguistic choices according to social context, ethnic affiliation, and communicative goals.

Bailey argues that language choice often reflects social positioning and identity negotiation within multicultural settings [6]. Likewise, Noels, Pon, and Clément emphasize that language use contributes to psychological adjustment and group membership [31].

Research involving bilingual and multilingual communities further demonstrates that language serves as a resource for expressing belonging and social identity [8, 37,

38]. Consequently, language maintenance in multi-ethnic settings depends not only on individual attitudes but also on broader social and cultural factors.

3 Method

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to provide a comprehensive understanding of the attitudes and language identity of the Acehnese language across three generations. The mixed-methods design allows for the triangulation of data, ensuring that both numerical trends and in-depth narratives are captured. Data were collected from three districts in Aceh Banda Aceh, Aceh Besar, and Pidie selected for their diverse ethnic compositions and varying levels of cultural integration. These districts represent urban, semi-urban, and rural settings, providing a broad spectrum of linguistic and cultural dynamics [13, 14].

3.2 Participants

Participants were divided into three generational groups based on age cohorts, reflecting differing socio-historical contexts and experiences: Elderly (60 years and above): Individuals who grew up during the pre-globalization era, when the Acehnese language was predominantly used in daily life. Middle-aged (35–59 years): Individuals who experienced both traditional and modern influences, serving as a bridge between older and younger generations. Youth (15–34 years): Individuals influenced by globalization, digital media, and increased exposure to Indonesian and English.

A total of 300 participants were recruited, with 100 individuals from each generational group, ensuring equal representation across the three research locations.

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected using three complementary techniques: Survey: Structured questionnaires measured language use, language proficiency, and language attitudes through Likert-scale and open-ended questions. Interviews: Semi-structured interviews with 30 selected participants (10 from each generation) explored language identity, emotional attachment, and language experiences. Participant Observation: Observations were conducted in homes, markets, schools, and community gatherings to validate self-reported language behavior.

3.4 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using complementary quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitative data were processed using SPSS to generate descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) and inferential statistics (Chi-square and ANOVA) to identify significant differences among the three generations.

Qualitative interview transcripts and field notes were analyzed thematically using NVivo, generating themes such as language pride, cultural identity, and language shift.

Integrating both analyses provided a comprehensive understanding of the intergenerational dynamics of the Acehnese language in multi-ethnic environments.

4 Results and Discussion

4.1 Generational Differences in Language Use

The results indicate that elderly participants predominantly use Acehnese in all contexts, whereas middle-aged participants use it primarily in family settings. Youth participants reported limited use of Acehnese, preferring Indonesian in school, work, and social media. The findings support Fishman's theory of language shift, which suggests that weakening intergenerational transmission is a primary indicator of declining language vitality [21]. The lower frequency of Acehnese language use among younger participants indicates a potential shift toward Indonesian as the dominant language. Furthermore, the findings align with Garrett's argument that language attitudes strongly influence language behavior [23]. Participants who expressed stronger pride in the Acehnese language were more likely to use it in daily interactions. The role of language in shaping cultural identity observed in this study is consistent with the Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory proposed by Giles and Johnson, which emphasizes that language functions as a symbolic marker of group identity and belonging [24].

4.2 Attitudes Toward the Acehnese Language

Older generations expressed strong pride in the Acehnese language, viewing it as a symbol of cultural heritage. Middle-aged participants acknowledged its importance but recognized the practical benefits of mastering Indonesian. Youth participants showed ambivalence, often associating Acehnese with outdated traditions. These findings are consistent with previous studies indicating that language attitudes influence language maintenance and intergenerational language transmission [3, 21, 23].

4.3 Language Identity in Multi-Ethnic Settings

In multi-ethnic environments, the Acehnese language faces competition from other languages, particularly Indonesian and English. However, some participants noted that Acehnese remains a unifying factor among Acehnese communities, fostering a sense of belonging. This finding supports previous studies that emphasize the role of language as a marker of ethnic identity and social cohesion in multilingual societies [6, 24, 31, 37, 38].

4 Conclusions

This study highlights the complex interplay of generational attitudes, language identity, and multi-ethnic dynamics in shaping the future of the Acehnese language. The findings underscore a significant generational divide in language use and attitudes. Older generations exhibit a strong attachment to the Acehnese language, viewing it as an integral part of their cultural heritage and identity, whereas younger generations demonstrate a

growing preference for dominant languages such as Indonesian and English, influenced by globalization, education, and digital media [3, 21, 23]. This shift raises concerns about the potential erosion of the Acehese language and the cultural knowledge embedded within it.

The study also reveals that multi-ethnic environments play a dual role in influencing language dynamics. On one hand, they create opportunities for cultural exchange and linguistic diversity. On the other hand, they pose challenges to the preservation of minority languages such as Acehese, as speakers often adopt more widely spoken languages to facilitate communication and social mobility [15, 31]. Despite these challenges, the Acehese language continues to serve as a unifying factor among Acehese communities, fostering a sense of belonging and shared identity [24].

To ensure the survival of the Acehese language, targeted interventions are essential. Educational programs should incorporate the teaching of Acehese language and culture into school curricula, emphasizing its historical and cultural significance. Media representation, including television programs, radio broadcasts, and online content in Acehese, can help normalize its use and appeal to younger audiences. Community initiatives, such as language workshops, cultural festivals, and storytelling sessions, can also play a pivotal role in revitalizing the language and strengthening intergenerational transmission [10, 15, 39].

Future research should explore the impact of digital technologies on language revitalization efforts. With the increasing influence of social media and digital platforms, there is considerable potential to leverage these tools to promote the Acehese language among younger generations. Additionally, longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into the long-term effects of language policies and community-based initiatives on language maintenance and language shift [21, 39].

In conclusion, preserving the Acehese language is not only about safeguarding linguistic diversity but also about maintaining the cultural integrity and identity of the Acehese people. By addressing the challenges posed by globalization and multi-ethnic interactions, this study contributes to broader discussions on the importance of language preservation in multicultural societies. It calls for collective action from policymakers, educators, and communities to ensure that the Acehese language remains a vibrant and living part of Indonesia's rich cultural tapestry [10, 24, 39].

Authors' Contributions

Attitudes and Language Identity of the Acehese Language Across Three Generations in a Multi-Ethnic Environment in Aceh, Indonesia.

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