

What does 'local language' mean in the context of Indonesia?

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Abstract - This paper has the modest aim of exploring and problematising the ways in which the terms *bahasa daerah* and *local language* are used. It does this at two levels: the societal and the individual. This brief discussion has examined some elements of the terminology employed at the societal and individual levels to talk about the languages used by communities and individual members of society respectively. We have seen that, although the term 'local language' is very widely used, it is also problematic. This is partly because it can be interpreted as being disrespectful and partly because it has no standard definition and is used with different senses in different contexts. In the Indonesian context, it is unclear whether the term *bahasa daerah* suffers from the same disadvantages as the English term 'local language'. Legislation makes unambiguous statements about the respective functions of *Bahasa Indonesia* ('*Bahasa Indonesia berfungsi sebagai pengantar pendidikan*' (Republik Indonesia 2009, Bab III, Pasal 25)) and *bahasa daerah* ('... sebagai kekayaan budaya negara' (Republik Indonesia 2002)).

Keywords: *local language, Bahasa, Indonesia*

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper has the modest aim of exploring and problematising the ways in which the terms *bahasa daerah* and *local language* are used. It does this at two levels: the societal and the individual. The principal focus is on the Indonesian context, but the discussion also draws on situations in other parts of the world: Afghanistan, Francophone Africa, India, and the UK.

II. THE SOCIETAL LEVEL: BAHASA DAERAH, LOCAL LANGUAGE AND NATIONAL LANGUAGE

The published theme of this conference is 'Kajian Mutakhir Bahasa, Sastra, dan Budaya Daerah' which the Conference Committee has translated into English as 'Recent Language, Literature, and Local Cultural Studies'. The term *bahasa daerah* is used in Indonesian legal documents, including the Constitution:

Negara menghormati dan memelihara bahasa daerah sebagai kekayaan budaya nasional. (Republik Indonesia 2002, Bab XIII, Pasal 32 (2))

The Constitution therefore makes a clear distinction between *bahasa daerah* and *bahasa negara* (state language):

Bahasa Negara ialah Bahasa Indonesia. (Republik Indonesia 1945, Bab XV, Pasal 36)

But is 'local language' really equivalent to *bahasa daerah*? In their introductory chapter to an important and influential book on teaching and learning in non-dominant languages (Benson & Kosonen 2013), the editors explain that they consider a 'local language' to be:

... [a language] spoken in a relatively restricted geographical area, and one not commonly learned as a second language by people outside the community ... Local languages are almost exclusively autochthonous, i.e. they originate from the place where they are spoken ... They tend to: (a) lack written form; (b) be in the early stages of linguistic development (i.e. not yet standardised); and/or (c) be considered unsuitable for use in education due to low status relative to the DL [dominant language] and/or small number of speakers. (Kosonen & Benson 2013, 6)

With this definition in mind, how appropriate is it to call Bahasa Jawa, for example, a ‘local language’? It is certainly the case that Javanese is not widely used in education, but is that because Javanese has ‘low status’ relative to the dominant language (Bahasa Indonesia, in this context)? It is certainly not the case that Javanese is used in a ‘relatively restricted geographical area’ or that it has a ‘small number of speakers’. Nor is it true that Javanese lacks a written form (although there is some evidence that the use of written Javanese in public places is declining; see Coleman 2017). And it cannot be said that Javanese is ‘in an early stage of development’. It is not even the case that Javanese is ‘not learned as a second language’; there are many examples of communities in Java where Bahasa Jawa functions as a lingua franca between native speakers of Javanese and people of other ethnic origins (Goebel 2010). So the term ‘local language’, as understood by Kosonen and Benson, cannot be applied meaningfully to Javanese, or to many other Indonesian languages.

In other contexts, it has been argued that the English term ‘local language’ is downgrading. In ‘Francophone’ West and Central Africa, according to Legère (2017), the label ‘local’ implies that a language has relatively few speakers and is used only in a restricted geographical area, whereas in fact many African languages are spoken by millions of people and are used in extensive areas and across national boundaries. This demeaning terminology can have a negative impact on the self-image of speakers of these languages.

Meanwhile, in the context of Afghanistan, the term ‘local language’ refers to ‘languages that go constitutionally unrecognised despite being used by a sizable population in a particular context’ (Bahry 2013, 5). Is this the sense with which the term ‘local language’ is employed in Indonesia? It is true that Javanese is not specifically mentioned in the Indonesian Constitution. It is also the case that Javanese has a ‘sizable population’; an analysis of population statistics from the 2010 Census found that more than 68 million people aged five years and above (34 per cent of the same age group) gave Bahasa Jawa as their home language (Ananta et al. 2015, 278). But then in contrast what about Bahasa Abun which, according to *Ethnologue* (Simons & Fennig 2018), is spoken in just 20 villages in Kabupaten Sorong, Papua Barat? It is a ‘language isolate’, meaning that it has no known connection with any other language in the world (like Basque), and it exists in three dialects: Abun Tat, Abun Ji and Abun Je. In 1995 it was estimated to have about 3,000 speakers. Like Javanese, the Abun language is not mentioned in the Indonesian Constitution – but it cannot be said to have a ‘sizable population’ of speakers. So, is it appropriate to put both Bahasa Jawa and Bahasa Abun in the same ‘local language’ category?

Returning to West and Central Africa, the French term ‘national language’ (*langue nationale*) is used ‘to refer to African languages which may or may not have been granted some degree of recognition by the state’ (Coleman 2013, 16). In other words, all African languages are ‘national languages’. Meanwhile, a language which is specifically mentioned in constitutional documents as a language of government – whether the language is of African, European or other origin – is referred to as an ‘official language’ (*langue officielle*). Outside Francophone Africa, however, applying the term ‘national language’ to every language that originates in a particular nation would lead to misunderstanding. In the Indonesian context, for instance, would it be appropriate to refer to Bahasa Aceh as a ‘national language’?

The issue remains unresolved. Kosonen and Benson (2013) conclude that, so far, there is no universal agreement about the use of these terms. It is therefore important that they be clearly defined in the specific contexts in which they are being employed.

III. THE INDIVIDUAL LEVEL: FIRST LANGUAGE, MOTHER TONGUE AND HOME LANGUAGE

When we talk of local, national and official languages we are talking about the languages of groups, societies and nations. But what about the languages spoken by individuals? One frequently used term here is ‘first language’ or ‘L1’; this is the preference of Benson (forthcoming) and other specialists in the field. But it must be remembered that ‘bi- or multilingual people may consider several languages their ... first languages’ (Kosonen & Benson 2013, 6).

It has also been argued that the idea that people possess a number of discrete and compartmentalised languages is an artificial and unrealistic idealisation. Instead, it is more useful to think in terms of individuals possessing a ‘linguistic repertoire’; this refers to:

... individuals’ very variable (and often rather fragmentary) grasp of a plurality of differentially shared styles, registers and genres, which are picked up (and maybe then partially forgotten) within biographical trajectories that develop in actual histories and topographies. (Blommaert & Rampton 2011, 3-4)

Possessing and employing a linguistic repertoire which includes components from several different languages has come to be known as ‘translanguaging’. Simpson illustrates this phenomenon with the case of a family of Czech origin, resident in the UK, who shift backwards and forwards between Czech and English in their interactions over the dinner table and also intersperse some elements of French, German and Spanish:

Even as the family are talking about – and playing with – a range of features from different societally-recognised languages, there is fluid movement between them. (Simpson 2017, 218)

Another widely employed term is ‘mother tongue’, but this too is problematic, as Rukmini Banerji has observed in the crowded multilingual slums of Mumbai in India:

[T]here is certainly a mother tongue, the language the mother speaks. But sometimes the mother tongue and the father tongue are different as the mother and the father speak different languages. Sometimes older brother and older sister tongues are also different because they have different kinds of friends. Therefore the children that we saw in the lanes, at least orally, might not have been adept at any one language but they seemed to navigate easily between the many languages that they heard in their densely crowded slum environment. (Banerji 2017, 37-38)

In work with which I am currently involved in Afghanistan (Coleman, in process), we have decided to make a distinction between the ‘home language(s)’ which respondents speak and the ‘other languages’ which they know. Individuals speak one or more home languages and at the same time they may know several other languages (or none at all). Banerji (2017), for unexplained reasons, is unhappy with the term ‘home language’, while Benson (forthcoming) sometimes combines two terms as in ‘the learner’s home language (L1)’.

Finally, in an attempt to avoid altogether the difficult problem of labelling, some writers talk of an individual’s ‘strongest’ language (Benson forthcoming), or the language with which they ‘feel most comfortable’, or the language which they ‘know best’ or ‘speak proficiently’ (Kosonen & Benson 2013, 6).

IV. CONCLUSIONS

This brief discussion has examined some elements of the terminology employed at the societal and individual levels to talk about the languages used by communities and individual members of society respectively.

We have seen that, although the term ‘local language’ is very widely used, it is also problematic. This is partly because it can be interpreted as being disrespectful and partly because it has no standard definition and is used with different senses in different contexts. In the Indonesian context, it is unclear whether the term *bahasa daerah* suffers from the same disadvantages as the English term ‘local language’. Legislation makes unambiguous statements about the respective functions of Bahasa Indonesia (‘Bahasa Indonesia berfungsi sebagai pengantar pendidikan’ (Republik Indonesia 2009, Bab III, Pasal 25)) and *bahasa daerah* (‘... sebagai kekayaan budaya negara’ (Republik Indonesia 2002)). Does this differentiation in functions imply that the *bahasa daerah* have ‘low status’ (in Kosonen and Benson’s definition)?

Meanwhile, we have found, at the individual level, that English terms such as ‘first language’ and ‘mother tongue’ are equally problematic. The author has tentatively offered ‘home language’ as an unambiguous alternative. Are there similar problems with the Bahasa Indonesia equivalents *bahasa ibu* and *bahasa pertama*? Or could *bahasa rumah tangga* or *bahasa keluarga* be adopted as equivalents to ‘home language’?

The purpose of this paper has been simply to disambiguate terminology so as to facilitate discussion. The more pressing question concerns how children’s home languages should be used in education.

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Biodata

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