

## **The Iban of Sarawak, Malaysia: Ethnic Language Losing Ground to English and Sarawak Malay<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

Language use by the Iban people in Sarawak, Malaysia, was studied and the focus was on the following specific objectives: (a) to describe the language use patterns of the Iban people in Iban dominant and non-Iban dominant areas in nine domains and (b) to identify the stable domains of language use for the Iban language. The data were from 84 Iban respondents, elicited using a questionnaire designed based on the UNESCO framework. The percentage of Iban usage was higher in Iban-dominant areas (30%–70%) than in non-Iban dominant areas (10%–60%). The results revealed that there was intergenerational language transmission but English was encroaching into family communications involving spouse and children. Furthermore, the usage of Iban was dwindling outside the family domain. In particular, Iban was losing ground to English in four domains (friends, classmates, workmates, and prayers) and to Sarawak Malay in two domains (public places, and market). In non-Iban dominant areas, the results on languages used in public places and in new domains (social media communication) indicate that domains of language use currently occupied by Iban may be taken over by English and Malay in the future with more ethnically-mixed family, friendship, work, and public spaces.

**Keywords:** *Iban use, domain dominance, social media communication*

### **Introduction**

In the complex multilingual ecosystem of Malaysia, indigenous languages are gradually losing their domains to other more dominant languages (Brenzinger et al., 2003). These languages are under the threat of economically and politically powerful languages, namely, Malay and English (McLellan, 2014). Research has shown a shift in indigenous language use towards Malay and English among the various minority groups in Malaysia, such as the Tindal in Sabah (Kijai et al., 2012), Mah Meri in Selangor (Coluzzi et al., 2017), and the Kejaman (Joan & Ting, 2016), Kayan (Wan et al., 2015), Bidayuh (Coluzzi, 2016), and Sihan (Mohamed & Hashim, 2012) in Sarawak. In neighbouring Brunei, the same language shift patterns can be seen among the Lun Bawang (Coluzzi, 2010) and Dusun (Chuchu & Noorashid, 2015). Given that the indigenous groups have small populations, the shift away from their ethnic language is expected.

A question arises whether numerically dominant indigenous groups also experience a shift away from their indigenous language. Sociolinguistic studies on numerically large groups, such as the Iban in Sarawak, are rather limited. Thus far, only Ting et al. (2020) have studied the language use of Iban in an Iban-dominant town, Song, located on the upper reaches of the Rejang River. In Song, where 87.18% of the population is Iban, the Iban language has medium vitality, measured using objective indicators (population, institutional support, and status) and subjective ethnolinguistic vitality from the Iban people's perspective.

The concept of ethnolinguistic vitality (ELV) was first proposed by Giles et al. (1977, p. 308), and groups with strong ELV are "likely to behave as a distinctive and collective entity within the inter-group setting." A group's vitality can be objectively measured based on these three main factors: demographic variables, institutional support, and status (Giles et al., 1977). A group with low vitality

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