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LANGUAGE VITALITY AMONG THE YOUNG GENERATION OF A MINORITY ETHNIC GROUP IN SABAH

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Abstract:

This research paper assessed the vitality of the Bisaya language, spoken by a minority ethnic group in the Beaufort district of Sabah. The study utilized a field survey method, distributing questionnaires to participants, 205 upper secondary students from the Bisaya ethnicity representing three national secondary schools. The authors employed the UNESCO language vitality assessment model. The findings indicated that Bisaya speakers are at risk within the larger population. The intergenerational transmission of the Bisaya language between older and younger generations is under threat, and its use across various domains is declining. Although some written materials in Bisaya are available, they primarily serve only a portion of the community; for others, the language may hold merely symbolic significance. Notably, there is no literacy education in the Bisaya language in the school curriculum. Despite these challenges, community members generally express positive attitudes toward preserving the language. While the quality and type of documentation for the Bisaya language are reasonable, the influence of the Malay language has begun to impact the home environment. The status of the Bisaya language demonstrates a clear risk of endangerment, even though its speakers have not yet transitioned to using another language. The authors recommend that the Language Development Agency of the Ministry of Education, Malaysia, establish an ethnolinguistic framework for revitalizing the vitality of the Bisaya language.

Keywords:

Language Vitality, Bisaya Language, Minority Ethnic Group, Intergenerational Language Transmission

Introduction

The vitality of a language spans a spectrum from stability to extinction, with intergenerational language transmission being the most critical factor in this assessment. This concept, introduced by the renowned linguist Joshua Fishman in 1991, is recognized by UNESCO language experts as the ‘gold standard’ for measuring language vitality. In addition to intergenerational transmission, UNESCO (2003) has identified eight other essential factors that form a comprehensive model for evaluating language vitality across the globe. In this research, the authors applied the vitality assessment model led by Bezeniger, a respected member of the UNESCO group of language experts.

This study firmly establishes the vitality of the Bisaya language among the younger generation of Bisaya ethnic people in Beaufort, Sabah. There is significant uncertainty about whether the transmission of the Bisaya language from older to younger generations continues robustly. The findings from this study are essential for protecting minority languages. As Sallabank (2010, p. 55) asserts, “The most important factor is that the mother tongue is still used in the domains of family and friendship.” Even a language deemed ‘safe’ does not guarantee its vitality, as speakers can abruptly stop passing on their mother tongue to the next generation. Wibowo (2016, p. 148) emphasizes that “intergenerational language transmission barriers are the main cause of endangered languages.” Ultimately, the Bisaya speakers—rather than external influences—decide whether to sustain or abandon their mother tongue.

The National Language Policy in Malaysia firmly establishes Malay as the official national language. While there are provisions for using indigenous minority languages—such as those of the Bisaya ethnic group—parents must actively apply, and a minimum of fifteen learners is required to establish a mother tongue class. Only the Tamil and Mandarin communities have successfully utilized this provision for years. In recent years, several indigenous groups have rightly expressed concern over the alarming decline in the use of their mother tongues among younger generations. They are taking charge by initiating language development and mother tongue education programs. Four language groups—the Kadazandusun and Iranun in Sabah, the Iban in Sarawak, and the Semai in peninsular Malaysia—are successfully integrated into the formal education system (Smith, 2010). However, the Bisaya ethnic minority has yet to implement initial education programs for their language, leaving a significant gap that must be addressed.

Currently, documentation on the Bisaya language in the study area is scarce, primarily due to individual research efforts. Importantly, this existing documentation does not include the significant contributions made by the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) regarding the Bisaya language in Sabah. An in-depth examination of the vitality of the Bisaya language in Sabah is critical, as current information does not adequately illustrate how the dominant language, Malay, impacts the ethnic minority language within communities like the Beaufort district. Ali Ibrahim (2011, p. 47) asserts that “language vitality studies can show the relationship patterns between the movement of speakers in economic activities, education, types of work in the public sector, and language preservation schemes for the mother-tongue-speaking community.” This study employs the language vitality assessment model recommended by UNESCO (2003) to decisively ascertain whether the Bisaya community is inclined to maintain their mother tongue or shift away from it. Language maintenance and change are the long-term results of consistent language choice patterns among all speaker communities (Fasold, 1992). The authors assess the Bisaya community’s determination to

preserve their mother tongue against various positive and negative factors identified in this study.

Objective and Research Questions

This study decisively assesses nine crucial factors that influence the vitality of the Bisaya language among the younger generation of the Bisaya ethnic group, utilizing the UNESCO (2003) model as a framework. The research focuses on two essential questions:

1. What factors predict the vitality of the Bisaya language among the young generation of the Bisaya ethnic group?
2. Is the vitality of the Bisaya language among this younger generation secure, or is it facing a severe risk of endangerment?

Literature Review

Language vitality refers to “the ability of a language to survive or develop” (Mohamed & Hashim, 2012, p. 59). It also signifies “the dynamism present in a given linguistic community” (Coluzzi et al., 2017, p. 139). According to SIL International (2018, p. 1), “Language vitality indicates the extent to which a language is used for communication in various social contexts and specific purposes. Daily use at home is the most important indicator of language vitality. A language with high vitality is widely used by all generations, both inside and outside the home, and for most, if not all, topics.” Studying language vitality is crucial in language development to determine the potential for language usage to continue. Therefore, efforts to promote and sustain the language can be more effective.

The attitudes of its speakers directly influence language vitality in society. The findings of Coluzzi et al. (2013) decisively highlight the gradual integration of Malay vocabulary into various ethnic languages. The participants preferred the standard language in high-variance contexts, while the mother tongue was predominantly used in low-variance situations. Furthermore, findings by Arun (2016) confirm that language use among friends sharing the same language indicated the presence of subtractive bilingualism. Kadir (2024) found similar results; the Gorontalo language in northern Sulawesi, Indonesia, is dwindling in the home domain. Parents and older community members tend to be actively bilingual in the dominant and minority languages, as they understand and speak both. The study by Mohamed & Hashim (2012) establishes the motivations of stable bilingual speakers. Alas (2019) asserts that the language and cultural challenges faced by minority communities are fundamentally linked to socioeconomic issues. The findings by Dani et al. (2019) show that the younger generation is abandoning their mother tongue as the primary language spoken at home. In his study, Alas (2019) asserts that intergenerational language transmission among Bisaya ethnic participants in Beaufort, Sabah, is endangered. Gomashie & Terborg (2021) also found that intergenerational language transmission in the Nahuatl community in Puebla, Mexico, was unsafe or at medium risk of endangerment because all did not speak it in the community and did not have enough young speakers. Additionally, the research conducted by Shin et al. (2018) demonstrates that language choice is inherently tied to Islamic identity. Hj. Awang Chuchu & Noorashid’s (2015) findings regarding the absolute number of speakers are examined. It is noted that mother tongues are often subject to adaptation and assimilation by more dominant languages. Wibowo’s (2016) study provides insights into language transmission between older and younger generations. Barriers to this transmission are identified as a primary cause of language endangerment. Furthermore, the research conducted by Coluzzi et al. (2017) helps

assess the relationship with dominant language variations. A language is considered endangered when its use declines in specific domains, and it may also be classified as endangered if more dominant languages gradually replace its vocabulary and structure.

The study on the shift in language use was conducted by Simanjuntak (2017). According to her research, one significant factor driving this shift among minority communities is the level of education. Findings from a survey by Mohamed & Hashim (2012) revealed that indigenous communities often lack traditional literacy materials. In this context, a study on the Mako language by Labrada Rosés (2017) noted that many policies supporting indigenous languages have not been implemented due to insufficient political will. Given that the home is considered a primary setting for language development, parents play a crucial role in shaping their children's language use (Ying et al., 2015). The findings from the study by Thomas & Erin (2016) provide insights into the importance of written language, the role of reading materials, and the need for specific orthography. Findings by Chen (2023) about speakers of the Dapeng dialect in Shenzhen and Guangdong, China, showed no new domains for the language. Regarding language education and literacy materials, no orthography is available to the community.

The diagnostic feedback on language vitality factors, as Obiero (2010) outlined, demands data gathered through a questionnaire that focuses on six essential factors, which serve as objectives in the current study. It is crucial to understand that these six factors of language vitality cannot be evaluated individually in any study concerning the Bisaya language. Furthermore, the survey results from Innocent (2014) demonstrated no significant difference in the mean scores between male and female participants after six weeks of instruction inside the language laboratory. The previous studies assessing the vitality of ethnic minority languages, based on the UNESCO (2003) model conducted from 2012 to 2024, clearly identify critical factors such as language transmission between generations, the availability of educational and literacy materials, and the languages that are categorized as being at 'unsafe' levels along with their underlying causes. The literature consistently shows that language shift occurs when a speech community decisively transitions to using another language over time. Higher-status languages actively suppress lower-status languages, placing these marginalized languages vulnerable. This dynamic is affecting the Bisaya-speaking community in the Beaufort district of Sabah.

Methodology

Population and Sampling

The Bisaya ethnic is a minority group in Sabah. The term 'minority ethnic group' refers to "people who are not native descendants of the dominant ethnic group in a country" (McMillan, 2006, p.21). According to Dunn (1984, p.245), "the Bisaya community in Sabah primarily resides west of Beaufort town, along the Padas Damit, and south of the Padas River. They are also located in settlement areas within the Kuala Penyu district." The distribution of the Bisaya language in Sabah is concentrated in the interior region, specifically west of Beaufort, with geographical coordinates of 5° 20' 0'' North and 115° 45' 0'' East. The Bisaya language belongs to the North Borneo language family, practices Islam and resides along the riverbanks. Their houses are typically built close together, reflecting strong family ties within the community.

The authors employed purposive sampling. According to Saunders et al. (2012, p. 288), “purposive sampling is a form of non-probability sampling. This method requires researchers to know about the studied population to select and approach eligible participants.” For this study, the researcher selected participants from three secondary schools in the Beaufort district of Sabah, explicitly targeting Form 4, 5, and 6 students who represent the younger generation of the Bisaya ethnic group. A total of 205 participants were chosen for this research, comprising 115 females (56.1%) and 90 males (43.9%), indicating more female participants than male participants.

Research Design

This research makes use of a field survey method that involves distributing questionnaires. The study employs a quantitative approach using a graduated scale ranging from Grade 5 to Grade 0 and frequency, percentage, and mean calculations. The authors applied the UNESCO Language Vitality Assessment (2003, p.8-17), which includes nine key factors:

1. Intergenerational Language Transmission
2. Absolute Number of Speakers
3. Proportion of Speakers within the Total Population
4. Trends in Existing Language Domains
5. Response to New Domains and Media
6. Materials for Language Education and Literacy
7. Governmental and Institutional Language Attitudes and Policies, including Official Status and Use
8. Community Members' Attitudes toward Their Own Language
9. Amount and Quality of Documentation

“Note that none of these factors should be used alone. A language ranked highly according to one criterion may deserve immediate and urgent attention due to other factors” (Bezeniger et al., 2003, p. 7).

Findings and Discussion

Intergenerational Language Transmission

The data presented in Table 1 indicates that the transmission of the Bisaya language between older and younger generations is at significant risk, classified as Grade 3, which is ‘definitely endangered.’ The responses from the Boys (B) and Girls (G) groups were 46 (51.06%) and 70 (60.9%), underscoring the severity of the situation. This Grade 3 classification confirms that while most parents and older generations still use the Bisaya language, their children predominantly respond in Malay. The study’s findings firmly indicate that students predominantly use Malay over Bisaya in family settings at home. The use of their mother tongue has significantly declined, becoming a rare practice, even among students in their households, as confirmed by Dani and Kining (2016). This trend supports Seruji’s (2014) assertion that the language shift among the younger generation is directly attributable to Malay evolving into their first language. Moreover, the study decisively shows that the average usage of both languages is notably higher among girls than boys. This trend directly contradicts the conclusions of Coluzzi et al. (2013), who reported that the mother tongue remains resilient in ethnic villages where it is actively spoken. Malay vocabulary has infiltrated the Bisaya language, especially regarding modern concepts that lack directly equivalent terms in Bisaya. In this light, the finding strongly aligns with Arun (2016), arguing that among friends who

share the same language, individuals display characteristics of subtractive bilingualism. Subtractive bilinguals will likely become monolingual, prioritizing the dominant language over their mother tongue. This finding challenges Mohamed & Hashim's (2012) claim that bilingual speakers' language stability remains intact when the mother tongue is robust. In contrast, the Bisaya ethnic boys and girls in this study actively employ Malay for integrative motivations.

Table 1: Factor 1. Intergenerational Language Transmission

Degree of Endangerment	Grade	Speaker Population	B	%	G	%
<i>safe</i>	5	The language is used by all ages, from children up.				
<i>unsafe</i>	4	The language is used by some children in all domains; it is used by all children in limited domains.	22	24.4	20	17.4
<i>definitively endangered</i>	3	The language is used mostly by the parental generation and up.	46	51.06	70	60.9
<i>severely endangered</i>	2	The language is used mostly by the grandparental generation and up.	22	24.42	21	18.27
<i>critically endangered</i>	1	The language is used mostly by very few speakers of great-grandparental generation.			4	3.48
<i>extinct</i>	0	There exists no speaker.				
			90	100	115	100

This finding supports the results of Alas's (2019) study, which indicates that most of the third generation of the Bisaya community speaks Malay and practices Malay culture. When examining the changing trends, it is evident that the younger generation is beginning to adopt aspects of other communities to establish a new identity. Alas (2019) contends that the challenges regarding language and culture in minority communities are primarily driven by necessity, particularly those related to socioeconomic factors. Typically, the languages and cultures of these communities lack significant commercial value, discouraging them from practising their ancestors' language and culture. The results of this study also align with those of Dani et al. (2019), who found that the mother tongue has lost its status as the primary home language among the younger generation. While the language has not reached the point of extinction, its daily usage is declining as the speaking community gradually shifts to using Malay. External factors, such as social needs, have prompted changes beyond simply incorporating Malay vocabulary into the mother tongue. These findings have important implications, as highlighted by Shin et al. (2018), who state that language choice is closely associated with Islam. It is common for non-Malay communities who convert to Islam to adopt the local Malay dialect as their mother tongue, as there is a perception that the Malay dialect reflects the identity of Muslim individuals.

A crucial factor in assessing language vitality is the transmission of a language from one generation to the next. This concept, introduced by Fishman in 1991, is recognized as the ‘gold standard’ of language vitality by the UNESCO language expert group in 2003. Wibowo (2016) clearly states that intergenerational transmission barriers cause language endangerment. The findings of this study unequivocally demonstrate that Bisaya is an endangered language, facing a severe risk of extinction if there are no proactive measures to reverse the ongoing shift towards Malay among the younger generation. Coluzzi et al. (2017) highlight the importance of considering the level of contact with the dominant language variety. A language is undeniably endangered when its usage diminishes in increasingly limited contexts, and it becomes even more vulnerable as the dominant language progressively replaces its vocabulary and structure. The authors have noted a significant influence of Malay on the Bisaya language, particularly from a linguistic standpoint. In his study, Alas (2019) found that the Bisaya language spoken in Sabah is related to the Dusun language. However, the transmission of the Bisaya language across generations among Boys and Girls groups in Beaufort, Sabah, is comparatively better than the findings of Dani et al. (2019) regarding the Dusun language in Grade 2. Their research indicates that the Dusun language is ‘severely endangered,’ meaning that the grandparental generation and older people primarily use it.

Absolute Number of Bisaya Language Speakers

Factor 2, which pertains to the absolute number of speakers, is declining. The Bisaya language has dwindled to fewer than 10,000 speakers (Eberhard et al., 2019). There are no monolingual speakers in the Beaufort and Kuala Penyu districts, particularly along the coastal areas of North Brunei Bay, specifically the Klias and Padas Rivers south of Weston. This reality demonstrates that the Bisaya ethnic group in these regions is bilingual, actively using both Bisaya and Malay.

Table 2: Factor 2. Absolute Number of Bisaya Language Speakers

Bisaya Language	Description
ISO 639-3	Bys
Other Names	Basaya, Besaya, Bisaia, Bisayah, Jilama Bawang, Jilama Sungai
Population	Small - This language has fewer than 10,000 speakers. There are no monolingual speakers.
Location	Sabah: Beaufort and Kuala Penyu districts, coastal areas of the Gulf of Brunei, especially along the Klias and Padas Rivers, south of Weston; Sarawak: Batu Danau, Limbang.
Language Status	6b (<i>threatened</i>)
Classification	Austronesian, Malayo-Polynesian, North Borneo, language in Malay, Dusunik, Bisaya-Lotud.
Dialect	Bisaya Klias, Bisaya Kuala Penyu, Bisaya Padas, Bisaya Beaufort, Bisaya Limbang. 70% intelligibility with Bisaya dialects Sabah and Tatana. Lexical similarity: 53% similar to Brunei Bisaya (Sarawak dialect), 52% to Brunei Bisaya (Brunei dialect).
Language Use	Mixed: At home, Friends, Religion, Work, Education. Among the younger speakers, all adults. Positive attitude. All use Sabah Malay as well. Many use Brunei Malay.
Language Development	Literacy rate in B1: 40%. Literacy rate in B2: 70% in standard Malay.

Writing	Latin script
Others	Muslim

Source: (Eberhard et al., 2019)

The Bisaya language is classified as status 6b, indicating it is threatened. This classification is based on data from Eberhard et al. (2019) in Ethnologue (2019). One key indicator of the threat level for the Bisaya language in Sabah is that 11% of its intergenerational transmission has been interrupted. As a result, the Bisaya language is at risk of being adapted and assimilated by more dominant languages.

Proportion of Speakers within the Total Population

The proportion of Bisaya speakers in the population, as reported by the Girls group, is classified as Grade 4, which indicates an ‘unsafe’ status. Factor 3 received 49 responses, representing 42.63% of the participants. The responses mean that while nearly all speakers communicate in Bisaya, Grade 4 suggests that most, but not all, children or families within the Bisaya community use the language as their first language. Additionally, the community may restrict the use of Bisaya to specific social settings, such as at home when children interact with their parents and grandparents. In contrast, the Boys group rated the situation as Grade 3, classified as ‘definitively endangered’, with 44 responses, accounting for 48.84%. This result implies that a majority of the boys speak the language.

Table 3: Factor 3. Proportion of Speakers within the Total Population

Degree of Endangerment	Grade		B	%	G	%
<i>safe</i>	5	All speak the language.			1	0.87
<i>unsafe</i>	4	Nearly all speak the language.	27	29.97	49	42.63
<i>definitively endangered</i>	3	A majority speak the language.	44	48.84	47	40.89
<i>severely endangered</i>	2	A minority speak the language.	16	17.76	15	13.05
<i>critically endangered</i>	1	Very few speak the language.	3	3.33	3	2.61
<i>extinct</i>	0	None speak the language.				
			90	100	115	100

Trends in Existing Language Domains

The choice of where and with whom to speak Bisaya and the topics discussed are crucial in determining whether parents will successfully pass down the language to their children. As shown in Table 4, the Boys group has identified Grade 3 as a critical point of ‘dwindling domains,’ with 41 respondents accounting for 45.51%. The percentage demonstrates that, although the Bisaya language retains some usage within the home for various functions, the dominant Malay language is increasingly encroaching upon everyday conversations. The Girls’ group further corroborates this trend, with 60 respondents (52.2%) also identifying Grade 3. The numbers reveal that the Bisaya language is losing its stronghold in the home environment as parents opt to communicate primarily in Malay. As a result, children are evolving into semi-

speakers of Bisaya, a phenomenon known as receptive bilingualism. The decline in the active use of Bisaya must be addressed to preserve its viability for future generations.

Table 4: Factor 4. Trends in Existing Language Domains

Degree of Endangerment	Proportion of Speakers Within the Total					
	Grade	Reference Population	B	%	G	%
<i>universal use</i>	5	The language is used in all domains and for all functions.				
<i>multilingual parity</i>	4	Two or more languages may be used in most social domains and for most functions.	10	11.1	15	13.05
<i>dwindling domains</i>	3	The language is used in home domains and for many functions, but the dominant language begins to penetrate even home domains.	41	45.51	60	52.2
<i>limited or formal domains</i>	2	The language is used in limited social domains and for several functions.	25	27.75	28	24.36
<i>highly limited domains</i>	1	The language is used only in very restricted domains and for very few functions.	12	13.32	12	10.44
<i>extinct</i>	0	The language is not used in any domain and for any function.	2	2.22		
			90	100	115	100

Parents and older community members are typically bilingual, speaking the dominant Malay language alongside Bisaya as their mother tongue. They have a good understanding of and proficiency in both languages. Bilingual children may be found in families that actively use Bisaya. Researcher such as Simanjuntak (2017, p. 285) suggest that “one of the reasons driving language shift towards another language among minority communities is the educational level of community members.” According to data from her study, the primary cause of mother tongue shift is rooted in internal community factors, including family dynamics, religious practices, and ceremonies. The current study’s findings further support Coluzzi et al.’s (2017, p. 139) conclusions, which state that “the use of Orang Asli languages within families seems to indicate the level of transition to Malay.”

Response to New Domains and Media

New opportunities for using the Bisaya language must arise as the community’s circumstances evolve. While some language communities in Sabah have successfully expanded into new domains, many others have fallen behind. Schools, new environments, and modern media, including broadcast, have significantly bolstered the influence of the Malay language.

Although existing Bisaya language domains remain intact, the dominance of Malay and English in emerging platforms such as television cannot be ignored. The Bisaya community must confront the challenges of modern media and electronic platforms; otherwise, the language risks becoming increasingly irrelevant.

Table 5: Factor 5. Response to New Domains and Media

Degree of Endangerment	Grade	Response	B	%	G	%
<i>dynamic</i>	5	The language is used in all new domains.				
<i>Robust/active</i>	4	The language is used in most new domains.	4	4.44	7	6.09
<i>receptive</i>	3	The language is used in many domains.	26	28.86	33	28.71
<i>coping</i>	2	The language is used in some new domains.	30	33.3	46	40.02
<i>minimal</i>	1	The language is used only in a few new domains.	28	31.08	25	21.75
<i>inactive</i>	0	The language is not used in any new domains.	2	2.22	4	3.48
			90	100	115	100

The data in Table 5 clearly shows that the Boys' group responded with 30 participants (33.33%) regarding new domains and media, particularly in Grade 2 'coping' with the Bisaya language used in various new contexts. In contrast, the Girls' group had a more robust response, with 46 participants (40.02%) in the same category. The result illustrates a notable difference in engagement between the two groups.

The recent developments in new domains related to the Bisaya ethnic group in Sabah are closely tied to their culture. A notable example is the publication of a book titled "Inventori Budaya Etnik Negeri Sabah: Etnik Bisaya" by the Lembaga Kebudayaan Negeri Sabah (2017). Additionally, the Bisaya Cultural and Arts Center, managed by the Sabah United Bisaya Association (PBBS) in Beaufort, serves as a community hub for various cultural activities to introduce and promote the unique aspects of the Bisaya ethnic group. However, efforts to encourage the Bisaya language through media outlets such as radio and television have yet to work through. Currently, the TV OKEY channel 109 features programs in other local languages, including I - Dusun, I - Kadazan, I - Bajau, and I - Murut, but has not yet introduced a program for the Bisaya language.

Materials for Language Education and Literacy

Education in the Bisaya language is vital to its continued vitality. Although some Bisaya-speaking communities excel in oral traditions, the lack of emphasis on the written form is a significant concern. This undervaluation of literacy undermines its potential as a source of pride and advancement. Literacy is undeniably linked to social and economic development, which makes it essential for the Bisaya-speaking community to invest in books and materials that cover a wide range of topics for all age groups and language abilities. The data in Table 6 clearly illustrates the need for educational resources for Bisaya language education and literacy

among the respondents. The boys' group showed 31 responses, which accounted for 34.41%, while the girls' group had 46 responses, representing 40.02% for Grade 2. The materials presented in Grade 2 are written resources; however, their usefulness may vary among community members, with some finding them symbolic. Additionally, the school curriculum does not include literacy education in this language.

Table 6: Factor 6. Materials for Language Education and Literacy

Grade	Accessibility of Written Materials	B	%	G	%
5	There is an established orthography, literacy tradition with grammars, dictionaries, texts, literature, and everyday media. Writing in the language is used in administration and education.	7	7.77		
4	Written material exists, and at school, children are developing literacy in the language. Writing in the language is not used in administration.	14	15.54	10	8.7
3	Written materials exist and children may be exposed to the written form at school. Literacy is not promoted through print media.	23	25.53	36	31.32
2	Written materials exist, but they may only be useful for some members of the community; and for others, they may have a symbolic significance. Literacy education in the language is not a part of the school curriculum.	31	34.41	46	40.02
1	A practical orthography is known to the community and some material is being written.	12	13.32	22	19.14
0	No orthography available to the community.	3	3.33	1	0.87
		90	100	115	100

The current study's data supports Mohamed & Hashim's (2012, p. 75) findings, which assert that "Indigenous communities lack traditional literacy materials. This situation leads to Indigenous languages ranked at the lowest level, Grade 0, where no orthography exists for the community." Furthermore, the researcher cites the study on the Mako language by Labrada Rosés (2017) to emphasize that many crucial policies have not been appropriately implemented due to insufficient political will to champion the interests of Indigenous languages. The weaknesses in Language Education and Literacy policies, including a lack of awareness regarding dialect differences and significant challenges in material development, persist even though the government is responsible for protecting indigenous languages.

Governmental and Institutional Language Attitudes And Policies, Including Official Status and Use

The Boys' group selected Grade 3 with a total response of 41, representing 45.51%. This response indicates no explicit policy regarding minority languages, and the dominant language

remains prevalent in the public domain. However, using the Bisaya language in private settings, such as ritual ceremonies, continues to hold prestige. Similarly, the Girls' group also chose Grade 3, with a response of 44, accounting for 38.28%.

The dominant group is indifferent to whether they speak the minority language as long as their language remains the primary means of communication. Although this situation is not formalized as an explicit language policy in Malaysia, the language of the dominant group functions as the de facto official language. Most non-dominant languages do not enjoy the same level of prestige as Malay across various domains of use. Although the government encourages ethnolinguistic groups to preserve and use their languages, this encouragement is typically directed toward private settings, such as within the home, rather than public contexts, like schools.

Table 7: Factor 7. Governmental and Institutional Language Attitudes And Policies, Including Official Status and Use

Degree of Support	Grade	Official Attitudes Toward Language	B	%	G	%
<i>dynamic</i>	5	All languages are protected.	21	23.31	24	20.88
<i>Robust/active</i>	4	Minority languages are protected primarily as the language of the private domains. The use of the language is prestigious.	23	25.53	42	36.54
<i>receptive</i>	3	No explicit policy exists for minority languages; the dominant language prevails in the public domain.	41	45.51	44	38.28
<i>coping</i>	2	Government encourages assimilation to the dominant language. There is no protection for minority languages.	2	2.22	5	4.35
<i>minimal</i>	1	The dominant language is the sole official language, while non-dominant languages are neither recognized nor protected.	3	3.33		
<i>inactive</i>	0	Minority languages are prohibited.				
			90	100	115	100

Community Members' Attitudes Toward Their Own Language

Members of a language community usually hold significant views about their language for various compelling reasons. Many understand the crucial role of their mother tongue in shaping community identity and actively work to promote it, while some may use it without formal promotion. Conversely, some feel ashamed of their mother tongue and resist promoting it.

Others perceive it as a nuisance and deliberately avoid using it. The attitudes towards a mother tongue can vary widely within a community. In Table 8, the Boys group decisively selected Grade 4 with 55 responses (61.05%), while 54 responses (46.98%) in the Girls group. This study's findings demonstrate that most Bisaya community members are committed to preserving the Bisaya language. This strong support reflects a robust, positive attitude toward their mother tongue, which they acknowledge as a vital symbol of their group identity. Just as people place high value on family traditions, festivals, and community events, they equally regard their language as an essential cultural value integral to their ethnic identity. However, negative attitudes toward their mother tongue can emerge when individuals see their language as an obstacle to economic mobility and integration into mainstream society. The home remains a crucial space for nurturing language, with parents playing an instrumental role in establishing language norms for their children (Ying et al., 2015). The dominance of a particular language culture indisputably influences the preservation, promotion, or abandonment of non-dominant languages nationally. The prevailing language ideology in Malaysia urges ethnic minority groups to affirm and embrace their respective mother tongues. This strong linguistic attitude is essential for effectively promoting the Bisaya ethnic language.

Table 8: Factor 8. Community Members' Attitudes Toward Their Own Language

Grade	Community Member's Attitudes	B	%	G	%
5	<i>All</i> members value their language and wish to see it promoted.	13	14.43	22	19.14
4	<i>Most</i> members support language maintenance.	55	61.05	54	46.98
3	<i>Many</i> members support language maintenance; others are indifferent or may even support language loss.	16	17.76	26	22.62
2	<i>Some</i> members support language maintenance; others are indifferent or may even support language loss.	6	6.66	10	8.7
1	<i>Only</i> a few members support language maintenance; others are indifferent or may even support language loss.			3	2.61
0	<i>No one</i> cares if the language is lost; all prefer to use a dominant language.				
		90	100	115	100

Members of the dominant language community influence the ideological environment by promoting a value system that views their language as a positive asset and a symbol of national and racial unity. When multiple more prominent language communities compete for the same political or social space, they may opt to use their language. This competition can lead to a perception that linguistic diversity creates division, ultimately threatening national unity. Introducing a more dominant language is one strategy to address this perceived threat. By implementing this change, the government can endorse using the dominant language. However, such national policies significantly impact ethnic minority languages, including those of the Bisaya community. While the Malaysian government has an apparent policy supporting language diversity, the current framework does not ensure the long-term preservation and vitality of these ethnic minority languages.

*Amount and Quality of Documentation***Table 9: Factor 9. Amount and Quality of Documentation**

Nature of Documentation	Grade	Language Documentation	B	%	G	%
<i>superlative</i>	5	There are comprehensive grammars and dictionaries, extensive texts; constant flow of language materials. Abundant annotated high-quality audio and video recordings exist.				
<i>good</i>	4	There is one good grammar and a number of adequate grammars, dictionaries, texts, literature, and occasionally updated everyday media; adequate annotated high-quality audio and video recordings.	6	6.66	9	7.83
<i>fair</i>	3	There may be an adequate grammar or sufficient amount of grammars, dictionaries, and texts, but no everyday media; audio and video recordings may exist in varying quality or degree of annotation.	44	48.8	52	45.2
<i>fragmentary</i>	2	There are some grammatical sketches, word lists, and texts useful for limited linguistic research but with inadequate coverage. Audio and video recordings may exist in varying quality, with or without any annotation.	27	29.9	45	39.1
<i>inadequate</i>	1	Only a few grammatical sketches, short word lists, and fragmentary texts. Audio and video recordings do not exist, are of unusable quality, or are completely unannotated.	13	14.4	9	7.83
<i>undocumented</i>	0	No material exists.				
			90	100	115	100

To thoroughly evaluate the effectiveness of Bisaya language documentation, it is imperative to identify the types and quality of existing language materials. The most essential resources are textbooks, translated audiovisual recordings, and naturally recorded Bisaya language speech.

This information is crucial for members of the Bisaya language community to formulate specific tasks and for linguists to plan research projects in collaboration with these community members effectively. Table 9 clearly outlines the types and quality of Bisaya language documentation. The data indicates that the Boys' group rated the type and quality of Bisaya language documentation as Grade 3, with 44 responses (48.8%). Similarly, the Girls' group also selected Grade 3, with 52 responses (45.2%). Both groups expressed that adequate grammar, dictionaries, and texts may be available but noted a lack of everyday media. Additionally, they observed that audio and video recordings might exist, albeit with varying quality or levels of annotation. In line with Thomas & Erin's study (2016), nearly all respondents expressed interest in reading materials written in their mother tongue if such materials were available. Some participants also wanted ethnic groups to develop a written language to preserve their linguistic heritage, acknowledging that their language currently lacks a standardized orthography.

Implication

Except for Factor 2, the Absolute Number of Speakers and Factor 8, Community Members' Attitudes toward Their Own Language, the other seven factors predicted the vitality of the Bisaya language among the young generation of the Bisaya ethnic group. The result of this study shows that the vitality of the Bisaya language among this younger generation is not secure. The mother tongue is facing a severe risk of endangerment. The rapid decline of the Bisaya language in Sabah is not just a linguistic crisis; it is a clear reflection of the socio-economic challenges that ethnic minorities face. This issue underscores their isolation, powerlessness, relentless struggle against poverty, efforts to combat underdevelopment and the overwhelming dominance of more widely spoken languages. Allowing a language with few speakers to become extinct contradicts Shared Prosperity Vision 2030 principles. The Language Development Agency of the Ministry of Education in Malaysia must take immediate action by implementing a robust preservation program to protect ethnic minority languages before they are lost forever. According to Fishman (1997), languages face threats when intergenerational transmission in informal settings and daily life support are lacking.

Similarly, Fishman (1991) noted that the difficulty ethnic minorities experience in maintaining the home or family as a space for using their mother tongue results from language change. In the current study, the younger generation is shifting towards the Malay language. The influence of the Malay language has even extended into intimate domains, such as the family environment. The findings indicate that Malay has also permeated other lower-register contexts, including neighbourhoods and friendships. External factors, such as political and socio-economic influences, primarily trigger the language shift occurring in the Bisaya language. These powers often come with specific attitudes and ideologies that encourage changes in the linguistic behaviour of the Bisaya ethnic group, leading to a decreased attachment to their language. Although the Bisaya community remains optimistic about preserving their language, there have not been significant initiatives to protect it. Therefore, establishing an ethnolinguistic framework for revitalizing the vitality of the Bisaya language is crucial.

Community initiatives can include organizing a competition for writing academic essays, short stories, poems, and other works in the Bisaya language. Additionally, a Bisaya Language Month could encourage the use of the Bisaya language among teenagers and children, as their proficiency is concerning. Promoting the Bisaya language will require support from local

leaders, as these activities will need funding. Currently, the Bisaya language has not been incorporated into the primary school curriculum in Sabah. In contrast, the Kadazandusun language was introduced into the national school curriculum in April 1995. Following this, various studies were conducted to enhance the mechanisms and content of the Kadazandusun language curriculum. By February 1997, the Kadazandusun language was officially taught as part of the national school curriculum. If the Bisaya language were elevated to the same status, it would mark a historic moment for the Bisaya ethnic community in Sabah. Revitalization initiatives for the Bisaya language require support and involvement from influential members of the Bisaya community in politics, culture, and language. Without active participation from the Bisaya community, efforts to reverse the language shift are unlikely to succeed.

Conclusion

The number of Bisaya speakers in Sabah is small, with fewer than 10,000 individuals speaking the language. No monolingual speakers exist, and the proportion of Bisaya speakers within the total population is at risk. The transmission of the Bisaya language between older and younger generations is also facing challenges. The use of the language in various domains is declining, although ongoing efforts to adapt to new areas and media exist. While written materials are available in Bisaya, they benefit only some community members. For others, the language may hold symbolic significance. Literacy education in Bisaya is not included in the school curriculum. However, community members generally express a positive attitude towards preserving the Bisaya language. The quality and type of documentation available for the Bisaya language are reasonable and may include grammar books, dictionaries, and texts. However, there is a lack of daily media available in the language. Furthermore, there are no explicit policies from the government or institutions concerning minority languages. As a result, the dominant language, Malay, prevails in the public domain.

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