

## Language use and sustainability status of indigenous languages in Sarawak, Malaysia

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The study examines the sustainability status of Sarawak indigenous languages through a survey on adolescents' language use using the Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS). The specific aspects examined were: the presence of ethnic languages in relation to other languages in selected domains of language use; the adolescents' use of the ethnic language across generations in the family domain; language use patterns of different indigenous groups; and demographic variables which influence use of the ethnic languages for the indigenous groups. The language use survey involved 568 indigenous adolescents in six schools in Sarawak, Malaysia. The results show that the domains of the ethnic language are shrinking because of the growing presence of Malay varieties (Standard Malay and Sarawak Malay), particularly for smaller groups. The ethnic language is still strong in the family and religious domains but has little place in the education and mass media domains. In the ethnically heterogeneous public domains of transaction and friendship, the ethnic language is for intra- and Malay varieties for inter-ethnic communication. The demographic characteristics which predict sustained use of the ethnic language are the vitality of the ethnic group, rural locality and lower socio-economic status.

**Keywords:** language use; indigenous languages; ethnic identity; ethnolinguistic vitality

### Introduction

In the area of language shift and maintenance, there has been a growing concern on the vitality of languages of smaller speech communities. For example, studies have found shrinking domains and functions of use for ethnic languages (e.g. Bissonauth 2011; Ting 2010; Zaidi 2010).

The information is usually obtained through language use surveys, with variability in the focus. The variability makes comparison of detailed descriptions across disparate settings difficult. For the data to be comparable across different regions and countries, a common framework is needed for data collection and comparison (Laitin 2000). For the purpose of assessing the vitality of languages, various frameworks have been used as the basis for work on language reversal and language revitalisation. Two, however, seem to have been employed the most.

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