

The status of Remun language in Iban speaking environment, Sarawak

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Abstract

In Sarawak, Remun and Iban language exhibits high linguistic similarity. Sometimes, Remun tribe is also labelled as “Remun Iban” by the locals. Previous linguistic research on Remun were merely focused on the elaboration of its language attitude and choices by the villagers. This study applied comparative method to identify the linguistic differences among the Remun and Iban. The results of analysis show that the Remun and Iban exhibited the differences of consonant “-r” and “-s”, particularly at the word final position, as well as several remarkable vocabulary differences. This study also found that the Remun is gradually levelled by the Iban. Nevertheless, they still try to maintain their identity as “Remun” rather than as “Iban”. The authors used the Iban migration history and the “masuk Melayu” (embrace Islam and become “Malay”) phenomenon in Western Borneo to discuss this issue.

Key words: Remun, Iban, Ibanic, language, identity.

Introduction

In Sarawak, the Remun tribe settled at the Serian area (Fig. 1). According to statistics, the population of Remun is approximately 7000 people. Since the Remun and Iban languages shared certain linguistic similarities, sometimes they are labelled as Iban by the locals. In other words, there are two ethnic terminologies or terms for this tribe, namely the “Iban Remun” or “Remun”. Three previous studies relating to Remun language, i.e. Cullips^{11,12} and Zahid²¹ seemed to have paid more attention on its sociolinguistic issues (such as identity, language attitudes, and choices). The description of its linguistic structure, on the other hand, has been overlooked. Furthermore, the ignorance of intensive linguistic structure comparison raises the question on the relationship and status between these two languages; for instance, is Remuna subdialect of Iban or an Ibanic language?

Previous Related Researches

This part reviews three previous works on the Remun linguistic study. The article published by Cullip¹² seems revised from his own study in 2000¹¹. Both studies pointed out the issues of the Remuns in terms of their language changes, maintenance, shift and choices. In discussing the language changes, he stated that due to the expansion of Iban language and its speakers, the Remuns have changed their language into Iban, gradually. The main factor that propelled the change is intermarriages (according to him, 68% of the Remun informants are intermarried with Iban). In terms of language use, the Remun who married with outsider (esp. with the Iban) seems to have a tendency to speak in Iban rather than Remun. Cullip also observed the language used in several domains. He found that Iban language was used broadly in the Remun community, for example in praying ceremony, formal and informal speeches etc. Nevertheless, since Remun language is the ethnic identity marker for the Remuns, they have positive attitude towards their own mother tongue.

The paper published by Zahid²¹ focused on the issue of the language extinction of the Remuns due to the decreasing of speakers. The author used UNESCO's Experts Meeting on Safeguarding Endangerment Language model to discuss the degree of language extinction. To obtain the data, he practiced structured questionnaire interviews and participant observation methods. The prominent results of this survey is the Remun youth (15-30 years old) has less knowledge about their mother tongue. Only the adults and elderly villagers are still competent in Remun. In terms of language use, it exhibited similarity with Cullip's study, namely Iban language plays important roles in their daily life - the villagers preferred to use Iban, (as well as Sarawak Malay dialect and English) rather than Remun in their daily activities.

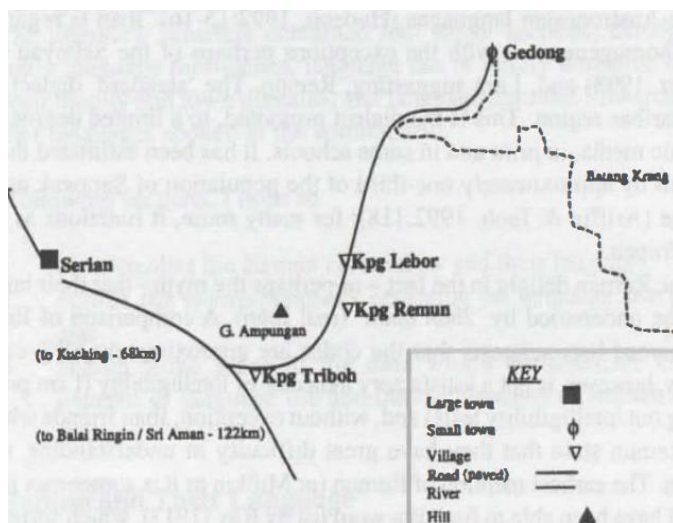


Figure 1. The map of Remun settlement in Serian, Sarawak¹¹.