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Curtin and Unimas develop world's first language index



**BREAKTHROUGH:** (From left) Syafitri, Bibi Aminah, Dr Balisoamanandray, Professor Goh and Dr Franco of the research team.

**MIRI:** Researchers from Curtin University, Sarawak and Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (Unimas) have developed the world's first index to assess traditional knowledge and language vitality simultaneously.

Various researchers have suggested that both language and biological diversity are intricately linked to each other, especially in a human influenced landscape, said Curtin in a press statement yesterday.

In a much celebrated paper published in the reputed journal Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of USA (PNAS), Gorenflo and his co-workers have proven the fact that 70 per cent of the world's linguistic diversity exists in biodiversity hotspots and wilderness rich areas.

Alarmed by the pace at which both languages and biodiversity are being lost, both linguists and ecologists have been trying to salvage the world's existing languages and biodiversity.

Languages are repositories of traditional knowledge which in turn influence the biodiversity existing in the tropical regions of the world. This index aims to provide a rapid assessment of the status of traditional knowledge and languages of indigenous communities.

Research on real world linkage between biodiversity, culture and language is one stream of research being developed at Curtin Sarawak Research Institute (CSRI) at the university by its ethnobiologist Dr Merlin Franco.

He first came across the interdependent nature of culture, language and traditional knowledge during his research on indigenous communities of India in 2003.

Also on board the research project are team members Curtin Sarawak's dean of School of Continuing Studies Bibi Aminah Abdul Ghani, Associate Professor from the Department of Information Systems Dr Balisoamanandray Ranaivo Malancon and a PhD student at CSRI, Syafitri Hidayati.

In the next two years, the team will be collaborating with indigenous communities throughout South East Asia to pilot test the index, and the results would be used to refine it.

The TraLavi index has been designed to be applicable at the ecosystem level and would naturally complement the existing linguistic vitality indices such as the Language Vitality Index of Unesco and other traditional knowledge indices.

The development of the index is supported by a grant from the Firebird Foundation for Anthropological Research based in the United States.

The research team acknowledges the director of Firebird Foundation Dr George N Appell and director of CSRI Professor Aaron Goh for their special interest in the project.

For more information on the project, contact Dr Merlin Franco at 085-443939 ext 5039 or [emailmfranco@curtin.edu.my](mailto:emailmfranco@curtin.edu.my).

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