



Linguistic Identity Transformation: An Empirical Study of Javanese Language Shift toward Indonesian

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Received: 2025-10-04 Accepted: 2025-11-02

DOI: 10.24256/ideas.v13i2.8120

Abstract

in recent years, there has been a significant decline in the use of the Javanese language, particularly among younger generations living in urban areas. This phenomenon is influenced by various factors, such as the dominance of the Indonesian language in the education system and media, the impact of social environments, and the decreasing role of families in transmitting local languages. This study aims to examine the language shift from Javanese to Indonesian and its impact on the linguistic identity of young people. A descriptive qualitative approach was employed, involving ten participants aged 20–25 years residing in Central Java and the Special Region of Yogyakarta. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and documentation, then analyzed thematically to identify patterns of language use and shifts in linguistic identity. The findings indicate that most participants prefer using Indonesian because it is perceived as more practical, modern, and suitable for cross-cultural communication. Javanese is still used, but it is limited to specific contexts, such as interactions with parents or traditional events. Nevertheless, participants continue to show emotional attachment to their Javanese identity. Their linguistic identity is flexible and constantly negotiated depending on the social context. This study concludes that language shift is a complex phenomenon that involves not only linguistic aspects but also reflects changing values, attitudes, and identities within society.

Keywords: Indonesian Language; Javanese language; Language shift; Linguistic identity transformation

Introduction

Language is one of the most powerful markers of social and cultural identity.

In Indonesia, the diversity of local languages reflects not only cultural richness but also provides the foundation for collective identity. Language shift has become one of the most pressing sociolinguistic issues in multilingual societies, particularly in Indonesia where local languages coexist with the national language, Indonesian. Javanese, the largest local language with millions of speakers, spoken by more than 82 million people, has traditionally functioned as a strong marker of cultural identity and heritage.

However, recent decades have witnessed a gradual yet significant decline in its intergenerational transmission, with younger speakers increasingly adopting Indonesian in both formal and informal domains. This phenomenon not only signals a linguistic transition but also a profound reconfiguration of speakers' linguistic identity, raising urgent concerns regarding language maintenance, cultural continuity, and social integration.

The urgency of this study lies in the need to understand how language shift shapes identity construction among Javanese speakers. Beyond being a matter of communication, language functions as a symbolic resource that anchors individuals to their cultural roots while also enabling participation in national and global contexts. The shift toward Indonesian, therefore, represents not merely a change in linguistic practice but also a negotiation of values, belonging, and identity (Andriyanti, 2020).

A number of studies have examined language shift in Indonesia. (Zen & Malang, 2021) found that the decline in the use of local languages, including Javanese, is closely tied to the increasing dominance of Indonesian in formal education. (Laila, 2013) emphasized the uniqueness of Javanese speech levels, which, however, are less frequently used among younger speakers. (Widianingsih, 2022) highlighted that local languages are increasingly marginalized due to social mobility, educational, and economic needs.

Although these studies provide valuable insights, they primarily describe language use and shift from a structural or sociolinguistic perspective, without sufficiently addressing the transformation of linguistic identity as a consequence of language shift. The novelty of this study lies in its integration of both quantitative and qualitative methods to analyze language shift not only as a sociolinguistic phenomenon but also as a process of identity transformation. This dual approach allows for a deeper understanding of how speakers negotiate cultural heritage and national identity in multilingual settings (Simorangkir & Jamiati, 2025).

The primary objectives of this research are threefold: (1) to investigate the motivations driving Javanese speakers to shift to Indonesian, including educational, economic, and sociocultural factors; (2) to analyze how this shift influences the construction and transformation of linguistic identity across generations. Ultimately, this research seeks to contribute to the broader field of sociolinguistics by demonstrating how local language decline interacts with national language expansion, reshaping the linguistic identity of speakers. The findings are expected

to provide valuable insights not only for scholars of language and identity but also for policymakers and educators concerned with sustaining linguistic diversity and cultural heritage in Indonesia.

Method

This study uses a qualitative research design to gain an in-depth understanding of the shifting linguistic identity of Javanese speakers who switch to Indonesian. In accordance with the definition proposed by (Creswell, 2009), qualitative research focuses on human behaviour, viewpoints, and individual experiences, thus allowing researchers to dive into the social, cultural, and psychological factors that shape a person's language choices and linguistic identity.

In this study, the researcher specifically wants to understand how the process of shifting from Javanese to Indonesian occurs in the lives of the younger generation, and how this shift affects the way they perceive their linguistic identity. This research seeks to explore the experiences, attitudes and perceptions of young speakers towards the local and national languages, taking into account various factors such as the influence of family, media, social environment and education. All these elements will be analysed in depth through a qualitative approach in order to obtain a descriptive, reflective and interpretative picture of the dynamics of linguistic identity in the midst of ongoing socio-cultural changes.

The subjects in this study are the younger generation of Javanese speakers, especially those in the age range of 20-25 years. The subjects were chosen based on the consideration that this age group is the most active group experiencing linguistic identity transition, either through formal education, social media, or social environment. The determination of the subjects was carried out by purposive sampling, which is a sampling technique by considering certain characteristics that are relevant to the research objectives.

Data collection techniques in this study include in-depth interviews used to explore the subject's experiences, attitudes, and views on the use of Javanese and Indonesian, and documentation to collect secondary data in the form of comments and chats on social media.

Results

This study involved 10 young Javanese-speaking participants living in Central Java and Yogyakarta. Data were obtained through in-depth interviews and observations regarding their daily language use, attitudes towards Javanese and Indonesian, and their views on linguistic identity. From the results of data analysis, it was found that most participants prefer to use Indonesian over Javanese in daily conversation. Indonesian is considered more practical, modern and neutral to communicate, especially in school and social settings.

The findings of this study reveal significant evidence of a language shift among younger generations of Javanese speakers, who increasingly prioritise Indonesian over their local mother tongue. This shift is shaped by multiple,

interrelated factors, including the symbolic value of Indonesian, institutional practices in education, exposure to digital media, and intergenerational family language transmission. In this section, these findings are discussed in relation to the research questions and situated within broader sociolinguistic theories.

Excerpt 1

"Aku lebih suka pakai bahasa Indonesia, karena di sini bahasa Indonesia lebih umum dipakai sama banyak orang." – (P1, 20 year).

This choice shows a change in language tendencies among the younger generation driven by functional and symbolic factors. This phenomenon is in line with Holmes' (2017) view that language shift often occurs when one language is perceived to have higher economic, social, or symbolic value than another. In this case, Indonesian is seen as more favourable for building broad social relationships, accessing education, and showing a modern and intelligent image. Javanese, while still recognised as a mother tongue, is beginning to lose its function in the public and informal domains.

The first finding shows that participants often prefer Indonesian because it is perceived as more socially acceptable and functional in daily life. This reflects (Prosper, 2025) argument that language shift occurs when one language is associated with greater social, economic, or symbolic capital. Indonesian, in this context, is not only the national lingua franca but also a marker of modernity, intelligence, and inclusivity. (Poetri et al., 2023) further explains that language choice is central to identity construction; participants' preference for Indonesian demonstrates a desire to be perceived as "modern," "common," and "nationalistic," which aligns with broader social norms and expectations.

In addition, participants reported their immersion in digital platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram, where Indonesian and English dominate. This confirms the role of globalised media in reinforcing language preferences, as younger generations internalise Indonesian as the "default" mode of interaction not just in formal contexts, but also in everyday informal communication. The diminishing role of Javanese in public and peer interactions highlights how language prestige and symbolic identity intertwine to drive linguistic change.

Excerpt 2

"Hampir semua konten yang aku tonton pakai bahasa Indonesia, selama pembelajaran di sekolah hingga bangku perkuliahan juga seringnya pakai Bahasa Indonesia, jadi terbiasa juga ngomongnya begitu." – (P4, 23 tahun)

The second finding emphasises the powerful role of education in shaping linguistic practices. As Setyawati (2022) notes, the dominance of Indonesian within the national education system has contributed directly to the decline of local languages. Indonesian is the language of instruction from primary to higher education, positioning it as the legitimate and superior linguistic norm. This

institutional reinforcement habituates young people to communicate in Indonesian across multiple domains, both formal and informal.

On the other hand, intensive exposure to Indonesian and English digital media also accelerates the language shift process, as explained by Coulmas (2018). He states that the development of technology and global media often leads to the marginalisation of local languages due to lack of representation in the digital realm. When younger generations consume more content in more dominant and globalised languages, local languages lose their space, even in informal contexts.

This phenomenon also shows how a linguistic environment dominated by one particular language shapes participants' linguistic habits, as explained by Block (2017) in the context of linguistic identity. The social and media environment that a person is in will greatly determine how linguistic identity is constructed and negotiated. In this case, Indonesian is the dominant linguistic identity associated with access to information, education and digital communication.

On the other hand, participants mentioned that their parents use Indonesian more in household communication, due to the differences between the father's and the mother's regions of origin.

Excerpt 3

"Orang tuaku dari dulu ngajarin pakai bahasa Indonesia untuk komunikasi sehari-hari di rumah. Karena orang tuaku berasal dari background daerah yang berbeda. Tapi terkadang aku juga ngobrol pakai Bahasa Jawa dengan orang tua, walaupun itu jarang banget" – (P2, 23 tahun)

This finding reflects one of the important causes of language shift mentioned by Fishman (1991) and updated by Holmes (2017), which is that when families no longer use the mother tongue for functional or social reasons, the process of language shift accelerates. In this case, Indonesian was chosen as a practical solution to bridge ethnic or linguistic differences between married couples, which indirectly replaced the role of local language as the main communication tool in the household.

This also supports the findings of Mufidah and Yuliana (2021) which state that intergenerational transmission is the key to the sustainability of local languages. When parents do not pass on local languages to their children, whether due to inter-regional marriage, the desire to facilitate access to education, or the perception of the prestige of Indonesian, then children will grow up in a linguistic environment that prioritises the national language, not the mother tongue.

From Joseph's (2017) and Block's (2017) perspective on linguistic identity, the family's decision to use Indonesian also has an impact on children's identity formation. Children's linguistic identity is no longer associated with one particular regional language, but develops in a more inclusive national context. Indonesian in this case is not only a means of communication, but also part of a new identity construction that incorporates hybrid elements between cultures.

Taken together, these findings highlight that the language shift among

younger generations is not driven by a single factor but by the convergence of symbolic, institutional, media, and familial influences. Indonesian is perceived as more valuable because it : Symbolically that means represents modernity, intelligence, and national unity (Excerpt 1). Institutionally that dominates educational contexts, reinforcing its legitimacy and prestige (Excerpt 2). Mediatically which saturates the digital landscape, pushing local languages further to the margins (Excerpt 2). Familially that replaces local languages in intergenerational transmission, particularly in inter-ethnic households (Excerpt 3).

This convergence reflects a broader sociolinguistic trend in multilingual societies, where local languages often lose their communicative functions in favour of dominant national or global codes. While Javanese continues to hold cultural and symbolic value, its role in everyday communication is narrowing. Without conscious revitalisation strategies, such as integrating Javanese into digital media, formal education, or family practices, the sustainability of the language will remain at risk.

Conclusion

The findings indicate that most young Javanese speakers prefer Indonesian for everyday communication because it is more practical, modern, and socially accepted, especially in schools, peer groups, and digital media. Javanese, while still valued as cultural heritage, is increasingly confined to limited contexts such as communication with parents or traditional events. This reflects a tension between maintaining ethnic identity and adapting to broader social expectations. In line with Fishman (1991) and Holmes (2013), this language shift is driven by multiple factors, including the dominance of Indonesian in education, the influence of digital media, urbanization, negative attitudes toward local languages, and the weakening of intergenerational transmission within families.

From the perspective of linguistic identity (Bayyinah et al., 2024), identity among young speakers is fluid and constructed through social and linguistic experiences. Although Javanese is rarely used actively, emotional attachment to ethnic identity persists, showing that identity is shaped not only by language use but also by symbolic and cultural values. While the shift to Indonesian appears inevitable in the modern era, the study also highlights opportunities for revitalization, where families, communities, and technology can play vital roles in ensuring the survival of local languages as a key part of cultural identity.

Future studies should explore language shift more broadly by comparing different ethnic groups in Indonesia to see whether similar patterns occur. It would also be useful to investigate how digital media and technology, which currently strengthen the use of Indonesian and English, might also support the revitalization of local languages. Research on family language practices, especially in urban or mixed-ethnic households, could give deeper insights into intergenerational transmission. In addition, examining the role of education policy and community

initiatives would help identify strategies to balance the use of Indonesian with the preservation of regional languages as part of Indonesia's cultural identity.

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