Investigating the Language Choice of Acehnese Intermarriage Couples in the Home Domain

*Zulfadli A. Aziz, Bukhari Daud, Windasari

English Department, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Syiah Kuala University, Darussalam, Banda Aceh 23111, Indonesia;

*Corresponding Author: zulfadli.aziz@unsyiah.ac.id

Abstract

This study aimed at investigating Acehnese intermarriage couples choosing Bahasa Indonesia as medium of communication in the home domain and discovering the influences of their language choice on the survival of their mother tongues. Interview guide and questionnaire were applied as the instruments in this qualitative study which was conducted in Banda Aceh with five Acehnese intermarriage couples who use Bahasa Indonesia to interact in the home domain. Results of interview showed that there were some reasons those couples prefer to Bahasa Indonesia which are: (1) to accommodate spouse; (2) to be convenient; (3) to expand social network; (4) Bahasa Indonesia is community language; (5) Bahasa Indonesia is the national language; (6) Bahasa Indonesia is the medium of instruction; (7) Bahasa Indonesia is the dominant language; (8) Bahasa Indonesia is a neutral choice; (9) the couples are less motivated to use the indigenous languages. In addition, the results of questionnaire revealed that the intermarriage couples’ language choice might promote linguistic suicide; that is, the parents do not pass their mother tongues to the children. The linguistic suicide may cause the children to own Bahasa Indonesia as their first language or mother tongue resulting in an inability to own their parents’ mother tongues.

Key words: Intermarriage, language choice, language in home domain.

Introduction

Marriage is a relationship in which two people are allowed to be unified. Most of marriages are endogamous; that is, the marriage within the same ethnic, social, and religious group. However, there are also people who marry the members of different social group or community with different background. The difference between spouses can be in terms of ethnic or race, nationality, religion, socio-economy, etc. The different ethnic and nationality usually mean different culture and language. This situation then will result in the couple to be exogamous (Dow, Reed & Woodcock, 2013), which is known as the mixed marriage or intermarriage. The mixed marriage which is specifically referred to in this study is a marriage between two people coming from different ethnic groups with different indigenous languages as their mother tongues. Therefore, the variety which is focused in this study is on their mother tongues while the other diversities are not the concentration. These marriages are usually found in multilingual or multicultural sites as mentioned by Schmidt and Makey (1971).

Aceh is one of the provinces in Indonesia that may promote intermarriage since there are some indigenous languages which represent the various cultures exist. In other words, Aceh is a multilingual province that is also multicultural. Each spouse of an intermarriage couple brings their own background of language into the marriage while they need to understand each other in the new relationship. Therefore, it is necessary for them to choose the medium of their communication.

Such differences of the couple may provide the advantages and disadvantages as well. On the other hand, if that parent uses both of their mother tongues in the home domain, it will enrich their children to be bilingual, one person speaking one language (Bourguet & Plaha, 2016). Besides, if one of the two languages is neglected, it will cause that language to be shifted by the children. Moreover, there are the parents deciding not to expose both of them. It is the best chance of language shift to occur on the next generation.

Dumanig and David (2011) express that the mixed marriage couples which have different linguistic and cultural backgrounds usually implement such strategies to interact with their spouse and their children at home. One of the strategies which can be applied by the couple is selecting only one language which
is understandable for both wife and husband. The language selected then will also be the language taught to the children. This strategy is usually the most preferred one for especially the young couples.

Bahasa Indonesia has served as both national and official language, and it is a dominant language in Indonesia and important to be acquired. It has been selected by many Indonesian couples to be exposed to their children. This, therefore, may be an alarming condition in term of existence of their ability to use mother tongues which in turn will also threaten the survival of those indigenous languages in Aceh. The situation under which the children are not exposed to the parents’ mother tongues may end with an inability to own the languages. It means that the language will be shifted on their generation and so forth. The decrease of the number of speakers of a language may possibly put it under threat.

Indeed, this study attempted to investigate the reasons Acehnese intermarriage couples in Banda Aceh choose Bahasa Indonesia as the preferred means of communication in which they interact with family members in the home domain. In addition, it is also important to examine the effects of their decision to speak Bahasa Indonesia on their own mother tongues’ survival.

**Literature Review**

**Language Choice of Intermarriage Couples in Home Domain**

Language choice in this study refers to the preferred languages of mixed marriage couples in the home domain. One of the studies about language choice of intermarriage couples was carried on by Dumanig (2010). He examined the language choice in mixed marriages of Malaysians and Filipinos in term of the couples’ language choice in interactions in the home domain and investigated the reasons of it. Each spouse speaks two or more languages such as the mother tongue, English, Malay and other languages. The result of the study showed that the dominant language used by intermarriage couples was English with some switching to local language and Filipino. They had some reasons to select English. First, it is to accommodate spouse. The couples need to understand each other by using the understandable language for both of husband and wife. Second, it is to be convenient. The couples try to speak in a language they feel most proficient in. This helps them to provide the clear message they would like to convey and prevent the misunderstanding. Last, using dominant language helps the couples to expand their social network. The couples usually choose the language that may benefit them and the family.

Those intermarriage couples of Acehnese people also need to select certain language to interact with each other at home. They need to compromise the languages they have to expose to the children as well. The difference of couple’s mother tongues actually is not an obstacle to run their household since they tended to use Bahasa Indonesia to interact with each other in the home domain.

Bahasa Indonesia which is a dominant language is an inevitably preferred language. The study of Alamsyah *et al.* (2011) has shown that the parents of Acehnese who are the native speakers of Acehnese tend to use Bahasa Indonesia at home. The finding of the research showed that the role of Bahasa Indonesia which is not only used as the community language, but also as the medium of instructional process at schools, lets the parents believe in the significance of acquiring it. Bahasa Indonesia seems very important for the children that could help them comprehend the school courses well. Besides, those children might interact and communicate well with others by using this national language. Then according to the participants of the research, Bahasa Indonesia is considered more trendy and modern than Acehnese. It helps people show prestige and financial advance or success. In addition, Bahasa Indonesia acts as the neutral choice of various dialects of Acehnese. It functions as the neutral language to prevent the misunderstanding of differences among Acehnese dialects.

**The Effect of Preferring to Use Dominant Language in Mixed Family Homes**

What are the influences of using dominant language on the survival of indigenous languages in mixed family homes? The intermarriage couples decide not to use their mother tongue anymore in a family when they engage in a new relationship with spouses coming from different linguistic background. It means that they select another language as a result of linguistic compromise, whether consciously or unconsciously. This situation can inevitably facilitate the language shift although there is no guarantee that the endogamous marriage may always save the couple’s mother tongue. In short, most frequently, intermarriage results in language shift of the couples (David & Daelwis, 2011).

In addition, intermarriage parents not only tend to use dominant language to interact with spouse, but they also expose only that language to the children. Thus, the parents stop passing their each mother tongue to the children. This phenomenon is known as “Linguistic Suicide” (Beck & Lam, 2006). In short, the speakers’ need of gaining better life and prestige which is usually affected by the empowerment of dominant language is one big reason behind their effort to move from their indigenous languages to this...
dominant one. Linguistic suicide results in an inability of the children to own their parents mother tongues, thus, the shift of those languages may occur in the children’s generation that promote them to be monolingual.

Besides, the continuous increase of speakers of dominant language may in turn result in language loss of minority languages by the mixed marriage couples. Therefore, the choice of the dominant language to be used at home can be a significant factor towards the abandonment of indigenous or minority languages (Dumanig, 2010).

Threatening the Survival of Indigenous Language
Crawford (1995) classifies some criteria of endangered language. First, the number of language speakers is declining. When speakers keep decreasing in number, it means that the language is under threat, meanwhile; if the speakers number is stable, then the language still survive. Second, fluency in the language increases with age, as younger generations prefer to speak another, usually, a more dominant prestigious language. The children tend to be reluctant to speak indigenous language. Third, usage declines in “domains” where the language was secure, for example, in religious places, cultural observances, schools, and most important is at home. The numbers of parents that fail to teach the language to their children keep growing. The parents should be aware of the importance of maintaining their indigenous languages instead of passing only the dominant language to the children.

Research Method
A qualitative approach was used in this study with the participants were five Acehnese intermarriage couples who already had children. They were selected as the participants as they are mixed marriage couples coming from different speech communities with different first languages or mother tongues. Meanwhile, they decided to use Bahasa Indonesia as the means of communication at home. Here is the table showing the couples’ mother tongues (L1):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Couples</th>
<th>1st couple</th>
<th>2nd couple</th>
<th>3rd couple</th>
<th>4th couple</th>
<th>5th couple</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Husband’s mother tongue</td>
<td>Aneuk Jamee</td>
<td>Gayonese</td>
<td>North Acehnese</td>
<td>Aneuk Jamee</td>
<td>Gayonese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife’s mother tongue</td>
<td>North Acehnese</td>
<td>Greater Acehnese</td>
<td>Tamiang</td>
<td>West Acehnese</td>
<td>Greater Acehnese</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interview guide and questionnaire were the instruments used to obtain the data. All of the participants were firstly distributed questionnaire regarding their first language and language use to examine the effects of their decision to speak Bahasa Indonesia on their own mother tongues’ survival. The following day, they were interviewed in term of their views of why they prefer Bahasa Indonesia as the medium of communication at home. This process of data collection was conducted in about two weeks long from July 19-August 1, 2016. To analyze the collected data, this study utilized the process suggested by Miles, Huberman and Saldana (2013) involving three steps: data condensation, data display, and drawing conclusion.

Results and Discussion
The Reasons of Preferring Bahasa Indonesia
Based on the data obtained from the interview, it shows that there are some reasons of why Bahasa Indonesia is preferred by Acehnese mixed marriage couples in home domain. The first one is that the couples decide to use Bahasa Indonesia in order to accommodate spouse. The differences of their linguistic backgrounds result in the couples deciding to implement such strategy to accommodate spouse; that is, those spouses determine the language which is understandable for both husband and wife. Holmes (2001) revealed that Bahasa Indonesia spreads well all over Indonesia as the neutral choice to unite people from various cultures with different mother tongues.

Second, Bahasa Indonesia is preferred since the couples feel more proficient in it. Thus, the mixed marriage couples keep using Bahasa Indonesia in home domain because they have good proficiency in it to be more convenient. By communicating in Bahasa, they prevent the family members from being confused with the message they need to convey. Besides, Bahasa was the language with which they communicated when they (the husband and wife) firstly met. Thus, it can be summarized that the language they usually used before getting married also influence the language choice to interact in home domain in addition to the fact that Bahasa Indonesia is the community language. As Paauw (2009) stated that Bahasa Indonesia is a standard language which is used in government, education, and mass
media. Thus, Bahasa Indonesia is mostly used and spoken that in return may let people feel more convenient and confident to use it in daily life.

Third, Bahasa Indonesia may help the couples to expand their social network. The couples imply that everywhere their children later will be they absolutely need Bahasa Indonesia to speak with others. Those three reasons were summarized by Dumanig (2010) of why the intermarriage couples in Malaysia preferred English which is dominant language there.

In addition, the couples live in urban area and in a community where Bahasa Indonesia is the medium of communication. Besides, the children need to be able to speak Bahasa Indonesia since they have to interact with their friends and neighbors who come from different speaking communities. In short, Bahasa Indonesia is the community language. Dumanig (2010) argued that people determine one language as the identity in their community; thus, it unavoidably influences the language choice of intermarriage couple living neither in husband’s nor wife’s speech communities.

Next, Bahasa Indonesia is national language which has been promoted as the medium of instructional process at school as well. Therefore, the intermarriage couples tend to expose only Bahasa Indonesia at home to the children regarding its significance. The previous study of Alamsyah et al. in 2011 also found out this reason behind the preference of Bahasa Indonesia by Acehnese parents.

The sixth reason is that Bahasa Indonesia is dominant language. Among other languages, Bahasa Indonesia is the most influential one in Indonesia. It is used everywhere, especially in formal activities. Thus, the status of one language determines whether or not it is chosen and used as Dumanig (2010) states that, whether it is dominant or weak, the language status influences the speakers to speak it or not.

Then the characteristic of Bahasa Indonesia which may neutralize the varieties of regional languages in Indonesia becomes one of the reasons of why it is preferred to be used in mixed family homes. Alamsyah et al. (2011) also found out that Bahasa Indonesia is a neutral choice among various dialects of Acehnese. In this case, it acts as one that may neutralize the different mother tongues of the mixed couples. Holmes (2001) also argued that Bahasa Indonesia may be the neutral choice for those whose mother tongues are different. Thus, the couples do not need to learn and acquire new languages to be united with spouses.

Last, Acehnese mixed marriage couples are less motivated to use the indigenous languages or their mother tongues. As aforementioned that intermarriage couples tend to select the languages that benefit them, they do not see any advantages of using their first languages at home. For example, Gayonese is not either used as a medium of instruction or when someone looking for job. Therefore, Bahasa Indonesia that plays those roles is preferred, especially by intermarriage couples. Moreover, all the family and relatives, whether husband’s family or wife’s family, are able to speak Bahasa Indonesia. This situation facilitates both of spouses to keep on using Bahasa Indonesia although they are in indigenous language speaking community. It is unnecessary for them to master the spouse’s language because their relatives and in laws use Bahasa Indonesia with them. Thus, what Dumanig and David (2011) state “the presence in laws influences the language choice of the son or daughter in law” does not make any sense in this case.

The Influences of Bahasa Indonesia on the Survival of Acehnese Indigenous Languages

The results of questionnaire showed that there was a visible indication of the influences of Bahasa Indonesia preferred by Acehnese intermarriage couples toward the survival of local languages. The phenomenon of ‘linguistic tsunami’ (Aziz & Amery, 2015), the situation when dominant language, in this case national language, affects the indigenous language speakers to prefer using dominant language at home resulting in threatening the survival of their own languages, is found in this study.

What David and Daelwis (2011) concluded in their research that intermarriage may facilitate language shift plays no role in this study. Here, instead of shifting to Bahasa Indonesia, those spouses of Acehnese intermarriage couples decided to be bilingual or multilingual. They still use their mother tongues in daily life with their friends or colleague and relatives. It means that their first language ability is not either influenced by their language choice at home, Bahasa Indonesia. Hence, they may also avoid the language loss. Keeping in touch with homeland is one of the factors that prevent them from losing mother tongue as revealed by Holmes (2001).
On the contrary, unfortunately, those couples decided to expose only Bahasa Indonesia to their children that promote them to be monolingual. This linguistic suicide phenomenon, the situation when the parents stop passing their mother tongues and prefer another dominant language to their children, is in line with the explanation of Majidi (2013) that mentioned a number of influential factors of shifting to dominant language such as Bahasa Indonesia has the values which other indigenous languages do not have: economic and social ones. In this case, it may be implied that the intermarriage couples do not shift from the beginning of marriage; however, they move to dominant Bahasa Indonesia to be exposed to the children. This decision results their children to own Bahasa Indonesia as their mother tongue without any knowledge and skill of parents’ mother tongue.

Another finding of questionnaire is that Acehnese intermarriage couples have positive attitude toward their mother tongues that those indigenous languages must be preserved, on one hand. On the other hand, they do not pass those languages to the children. There is a gap between what those participants state and what they act. This result supports what Aziz and Amery (2015) revealed “But positive attitudes alone may not be sufficient to save a language because sometimes there might be a sizeable gap between what people say and what they do.” In fact, the language choice of Acehnese intermarriage couples whose domiciles are in Banda Aceh may endanger those indigenous languages serving as their mother tongues since the children are unable to speak them which results in decreasing number of younger speakers that put those languages under threat.

**Conclusion**

It has shown that the Acehnese mixed marriage couples prefer to use Bahasa Indonesia in home domain. By using Bahasa Indonesia in Acehnese mixed family homes may facilitate linguistic suicide and language shift on children’s generation that of indirectly may put the local languages in Aceh under threat. Indeed, intermarriage is not the only factor that may threaten indigenous languages; however, it is one of the ways that may lead people to promote the endangered languages. At the end, it is the individuals’ choice to whether preserve or endanger the indigenous languages.

**References**


