

BIAK LANGUAGE: TRACE BACK

Martha Betaubun¹, Adolfinia Krisifu², Ranta Butarbutar

¹English Education Study Program, Universitas Musamus, Merauke, Indonesia

²English Education Study Program, Universitas Cenderawasih, Jayapura, Indonesia
marthabetaubun@unmus.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

This paper was conducted by literature research, which is, firstly, aimed to describe the spread of Biak language as a lingua franca in the past in relation to its classification, users, domains, concurrent languages, internal varieties, spoken tradition and standardisation as well as the typology of the language. The language has been developed by its speakers throughout the bird's head peninsula of West Papua. Secondly, it intended to trace "who (ancestors) and where" the language has been used. It is believed that language provides clues to investigate the ancestors and the spread of a race.

Keywords: *Biak language, lingua franca, West Papua*

INTRODUCTION

New Guinea is the richest area of language diversity in the world. According to Aikhenvald and Stebbins (n.d.:239), there are more than a thousand languages spoken in the area of about 900,000km². The family divisions of the languages comprise into two categories namely the Austronesian language family and non-Austronesian language family or "Papuan languages" (Foley 1986; 1997a; Dixon 1991 cited in Aikhenvald and Stebbins n.d.:239). The map of these languages covers from the Halmahera and Timor islands in the west to the Solomon Islands in the east. This is because they share similar dialects, patterns of grammar and vocabulary. (Grimes 2000:469 and Wurm 2001 cited in Aikhenvald & Stebbins n.d.:242). In this paper, I will discuss on Austronesian languages particularly Biak language in its classification, users and their attitudes, domains, concurrent languages, internal varieties, spoken tradition and standardisation as well as the typology of the language.

The evidence shows that the ancestors of Austronesian people or known as Melanesians are from Madagascar, whom they traded, migrated and settled the islands of Pacific Ocean in thousand years ago (Comrie, Matthews & Polinsky 2003:93). Moreover, there are some similarities in types of canoes, cultural

emblems, and language patterns and vocabulary spreading among Austronesian societies.

Biak islands or known in the past as Schouthen Islands (consisting of Numfor, Biak, Supiori and Padaido islands) are located in the north of Geelvink Bay and face the Pacific Ocean that has population of over 100,000 and approximately 70,000 native speakers of Biak language (Mansoben 2003 in Houvel 2006:3). The latter number represents the speakers who settle in other small and big towns of West Papua (formerly known as Irian jaya) such as Raja Ampat islands, Sarmi, Yapen, Sorong, Manokwari, Merauke, and Jayapura (Steinhauer 1985:463). These islands are also rich in natural resources such as fishery, sago, cassava, sweet potatoes and variety of taro (Tebay 2005:13; Heuvel 2006:14).

Turning to regional divisions of Biak Numfor, it comprises 7 areas namely Biak Utara, Biak Selatan, Biak Timur, Biak Barat, Supiori, Padaido and Numfor. In addition, these islands have 10 dialects, which are known as Urmbor, Manwor, Sawias, Soweik, Korido, Sopen, Samber, Sorido, Mokmer and Wadivu (Steinhaur 1985:482; Houvel 2006). This vernacular is also spoken on the north coast of the Bird's head peninsula, West Waigeo, Salawati and Raja Ampat islands (Patz 1978:2; Houvel 2006:1). The spread of the language is believed because of trading and missionary. The reason for this is that in the past, Biak language was the *lingua franca* among places on the Bird's head Peninsula of West Papua (Wurm 1971:1018). Moreover, according to Rutherford (1998:256), Biak people were sailors and pirates who monopolized the trade in the West Papua. Therefore, they had an important role in cooperation with the empire of Tidore, which now has been represented in some of family names such as Kapitarauw, Korano and Mayor.

The most well-known of Biak customs is called wor – a song and dancing conducted on special occasions such as wedding, grievance and feast party known as barapen (Heuvel 2006). However, during Soeharto regime, the performances of Papuan traditional cultures were prohibited due to indicating separatism (Tebay 2005: 11; Glazebrook 2004). This situation had brought a fear to some popular local musicians and artists, so they sought asylum to other countries.

The Classification of Biak Language

There are some terms presented for classification of Biak language. According to linguists, Biak language is one of the Austronesian language families. This is due to the fact that it has similarity with language of Fiji (Kern 1885 in Steinhauer n.d.:793). Some scholars state it belongs to South Halmahera - West New Guinea Subgroup of the Austronesian language family (Blust 1978 in Steinhauer 1985:463) whereas others argue that this language is categorised into Eastern Malayo – Polynesian (Aikhenvald and Stebbins n.d.:244). Otherwise, the focus of the topic mentioned above represents similarity. To some previous linguists, this language has several heteronyms such as Mefoorsch, Myfoorsch, Noefoorsch and Nuefoorsch (Rutherford 2006:390), and then now it is mostly known as Wos Vyak or Biak (Van Hasselts 1876; Sollewijn cited in Heuvel 2006:1).

Most Austronesian languages are spoken in New Guinea and certain places in Indonesia. Such languages initially started from Taiwan and South-East Asia to Hawaii and Madagascar (Comrie et al 2003:92; Aikhenvald and Stebbins n.d.:243). Thus, this has created a similarity in some lexis of the Austronesian languages. For example, chicken in Biak language is *mangkoko(r)* almost similar to that in Bantu language in the South Africa, *akoko*.

There are ten dialects of Biak language spoken in Biak Numfor and some dialects spoken in the areas of Bird's head peninsula of West New Guinea including in Raja Ampat, Waigeo and Salawati as well as a few dialects conversed in Halmahera islands Steinhauer 1985:483; Patz 1978:2).

The Users of Biak Language

As discussed above, this language is spoken mostly by older people today and number of population living in villages which it is shown by the number of native speakers. The language is more commonly used in the villages where people share the same dialects Heuvel 2006:5). Moreover, this language has been spread and spoken by people in North and South Halmahera, Raja Ampat islands and Cenderawasih bay (Miedema, Ode and Dam 2000:178). Rutherford points out that Biak language was a language universally used in trade and missionary (2006:405).

The evidence shows that there are some publications dated in the 1920s such as dictionaries, bibles and textbooks translating in Biak language.

Nowadays, such publications are no longer in use. This is because the Indonesian government has promoted the use of Bahasa Indonesia as lingua franca in terms of language of unity on its territory (Bertrand 2003:263). Moreover, new generations (from indigenous marriages) who live in urban areas around Papua always communicate with others at home in Bahasa Indonesia or Indonesian dialect of Papua instead of local tongues. Even in Biak town, local people use local Malay to interact with others (Heuvel 2006:5). Therefore, the language is often spoken by older people living in Biak or other places that they communicate actively and have been grown up in Biak speaking environment.

Domains of Biak Language

As Fishman (2000:89-106) discusses the various settings of language usage in consideration of people, topics, places, time and media. Nowadays, Biak language is used only among relatives and acquaintances from other parts of Papua, who speak the same language. It is mostly spoken at home, local gathering, rituals/ceremonials and in churches. However, it is uncommon to have liturgy in Biak language in comparison to church services in the past (Heuvel 2006:5). It is believed that this language used to communicate with ancestors that most of them are in the appearances of reptiles, statues and other strange creatures (Rutherford 1998:258).

Native speakers usually use the language to talk about many things such as informal and formal situations. Take wedding for example, the older people from bride and groom families may be intermediary for both by using Biak language in order to unite them. These people will use metaphors of personification. In mourning situation, they will use a different style of customs; people will cry and sing telling the life of the dead or in Biak language known as *wor*. *Wor* is sung to express sadness and happiness, which is usually performed with dancing. The language performing in these rituals has a magic power so as to communicate intimately with ancestors.

In the past, people used to carve wood becoming a statue called *karwar*, in order to remember a dead family. Relatives sometimes used to communicate with the statue for medication if there was someone ill.

Another reason using the language is not only to show intimacy but also formality, solidarity and equality. These are presented in local custom gathering such as meeting after church service, everyone is allowed to contribute in a discussion.

Concurrent Languages

As Rutherford (2006) and Wurm (1971) claim that Biak language used to be a lingua franca along north coast of Bird's head peninsula and Cenderawasih Bay (or known as Geelvink Bay) for trade and missionary. It, therefore, has been influenced by Malay and Dutch. This is due to the fact that the Dutch colonised the West New Guinea in the 18th century and spread the religion of Christianity. Furthermore, the publications of books also have an impact on the vernacular. This is because this language has no written tradition, so foreign books were translated into Biak applying some vocabulary from other languages Rutherford 2006:391; Patz 1978:142). Biak language itself is used based on human's daily activity with the nature. It also does not have passive voice so as to focus on the importance. Today, the vocabularies of Malay and Dutch still exist in Biak language such as *kadera* for a chair and *pasiar* for travel.

Internal Varieties

Soeparno (1983 in Steinhauer 1985:464) claims that Biak language has several dialects but he does not provide information about the causes of dialect divisions. The assumption is put forward to dialectical differences as a consequence of ethnography, areas where group of people inhabit. For example, people in North Biak speak loudly and quickly because geographically, their location lies facing the Pacific Ocean, which has big waves. This may influence the accent of the language used by people in the north area.

Written/Spoken Traditions and Standardisation

Biak language actually has no standard of writing, however, since the Dutch missionaries occupied, they published dictionaries, bibles and textbooks in the 1920s. These publications were used only during the Dutch colonialism. They had arranged the language policy of Biak use as a language of unity in the West New Guinea but it failed because of World War II. Indonesia took over this island from Dutch and introduced Bahasa Indonesia to the indigenous people (Rutherford 2006:405). Now, it has an adverse impact on not only Biak language but also local languages in West Papua. Some of them become endangered and even lost.

Indonesian's language policy and planning emphasises only on five local languages taught at primary schools namely Balinese, Batak, Buginese, Javanese and Sundanese. These languages are implemented in the local curriculum of these five areas whereas other provinces are obliged to use bahasa Indonesia in education (Bertrand 2003:279; Tebay 2005). Due to unfairness, Papuan people fight for freedom after the fall of Soeharto regime. Therefore, the government has offered special autonomy for Indonesian province of Papua in Laws No. 21 year 2001.

In addition to the regulation of special autonomy, there is a chapter 16 on education, which is emphasised on international, national and local language (Undang Undang Otonomi Khusus No. 21 Tahun 2001). To clarify, the international language is English, which is used as instructional language in all levels of education as well as Indonesian. Local languages are used only at elementary schools. This may have not been applied yet because of limitation of qualified educators and textbooks. Thus, it needs a follow-up discussion and action.

Institutional Support

There are various ways conducted in order to promote Biak language in Biak Numfor such as liturgies, hymns, bibles translated in Biak language. There is also a broadcasting program in Biak language (Heuvel 2006:6). According to Heuvel (2006), the promotion of teaching Biak language at schools was discussed at a conference conducted in 2002; however, there is no realisation of what had been convened. This might be because of lack of financial support from the government and related institutions.

Although Indonesian language policy promotes the maintenance of local languages through education, this may be far from expectation. During Soeharto administration, all kinds of Papuan cultures were prohibited due to encouragement of local spirit for freedom (Tebay 2005:11). If songs and dancing were done, actors would be killed brutally by the military of Indonesia.

Additionally, the lack of the government support results in the limitation of up-to-date publications. This is because all teaching materials and tests are published in Jakarta. Hence, the teaching of Biak language probably will not appropriate to the context of Java. For example, local students might not have a description of a train and paddy field.

The Attitudes of Users

The language is mostly used by the indigenous people who live in Biak Numfor and other parts of areas, which use as diglossia. Because of the influx migration from other parts of Indonesia, the language may not be used as daily conversation instead of Malay or Indonesian (Tebay 2005:13-14). Furthermore, more people (indigenous) migrate and commute to other places for jobs and education so as to adapt with the environment they have to communicate with others and access information in Bahasa Indonesia. Today generation from indigenous and mixed marriages who live in urban areas are not able to speak their mother tongues. Most of them learn Bahasa Indonesia as their first language at home.

The Status of Biak Language in a Typology

As can be seen on the number of native speakers, the percentage shows relatively high in comparison to other languages in West Papua, however, it may become endangered language. This is due to the fact that only older people have better knowledge of the language; otherwise, young generation have passive knowledge of the language (Heuvel 2006:5). Therefore, the ratio of native speakers diminishes.

Additionally, the use of mass media has an impact on local vernacular. In clarification, most media are printed and broadcasted in Bahasa Indonesia. In this respect, this forces local societies to learn Bahasa Indonesia without considering local tongues.

The programs of Indonesian government such as transmigration and family planning also have an adverse impact indirectly to the use of local dialect and culture. For example, our traditional clothes are transformed to 'batik Irian'. The family planning programs may reduce the population of the indigenous people; otherwise, their lands are wider enough to be settled. Transmigration program will probably benefit the Javanese. They have free settlements while the indigenous people have to pay for a small house.

CONCLUSION

Biak language used to be a lingua franca because Biak people had a crucial role in trade and navigation in the 18th century. They migrated around the New Guinea. However, this language is threatened to endangerment due to the use of Bahasa Indonesia and the reduction of the ratio of native speakers. Moreover, this local language is not longer taught at schools anymore because it is considered separatism, there are no up-to-date teaching materials and this language teaching is not included in the local curriculum as well as teaching staff may not be adequate qualified.

To prevent the language from extinction, it should bring into discussion and realisation of action. The regulation of special autonomy must be done properly in order to develop and maintain the languages, cultures, and natural resources of Papuans. The reason for this is that West Papuans are now marginalised on their land since the influx of migration from Java and other populated areas in Indonesia. Thus, the encouragement of Papuans' identity and rights should be made realistically and established into regional government policies so as to prevent not only Biak language but also other languages in West New Guinea from shifting and disappearance. By doing so, the rights of Papuans will probably be respected in their land in terms of not only being multilingualism and multiculturalism but also possessing biodiversity and natural resources over their homeland.

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