

# Countering Purism

## The Revitalization of Moluccan Languages

Research >  
Southeast Asia

In minority indigenous communities where languages are endangered, people are adopting more dominant or prestigious languages, introduced through colonization, trade, and evangelization, as a national language, or as a language of wider communication. Among the remaining speakers of the endangered language, levels of fluency vary considerably. As knowledge and use diminish among younger speakers, linguists commonly observe widespread grammatical restructuring and the emergence of new varieties. These processes may lead to a 'language shift cycle'.

By Margaret Florey

The language shift cycle begins with extensive variation flourishing in the endangered language. Variation is evident in the lexicon, with greater use of loanwords from the encroaching language. More significant is the grammatical restructuring which commonly accompanies language shift. Speakers of various ages and levels of fluency reanalyse the grammatical features of the indigenous language in different ways, resulting in different grammars of the language existing side-by-side in one community. Such lexical and grammatical variation commonly triggers reactions among older people who wish to maintain a 'pure' or more conservative form of the language. These puristic attitudes may result in older fluent speakers restricting their use of the language with non-fluent speakers. Decreased transmission and lack of access to a fluent speaker model lead to imperfect learning among younger speakers, which then gives rise to greater variation. And so begins a cycle in which the drive for purism is itself implicated in language obsolescence.

The challenge for linguists wishing to respond to the voiced desires of communities to maintain or renew endangered languages, lies with developing tools to intervene in the language shift cycle. For a start, this means countering puristic attitudes by working with community members to increase linguistic tolerance and compromise. Ultimately, the goal is to support language revitalization by rebuilding an environment where varieties of the lan-

guage are again spoken across generations. An innovative training programme being developed among speakers of Moluccan languages and their descendents, both in the eastern Indonesian homeland and in the Dutch diaspora, hopes to meet this challenge.

A high level of linguistic diversity characterizes the 14 Central Moluccan Islands in eastern Indonesia: no less than 42 Austronesian languages are spoken in the region. The greatest diversity is found on Seram Island with 21 extant languages and Ambon Island with six. Language endangerment in the Central Moluccan Islands is attributable to a cluster of factors: a long history of contact with non-indigenous peoples, colonization, intensive trade, and conversion to non-indigenous religions. These factors have all contributed to the widespread use of the contact language Ambonese Malay. It is furthermore well documented that languages in Christian villages in Maluku are becoming obsolescent more rapidly than languages spoken in villages that have converted to Islam. In the postcolonial era, the national language, Indonesian, has impacted on the linguistic ecology through its status as the language of education, media, and government. Against this background, a recent analysis of linguistic vitality among Austronesian languages (Florey forthcoming) shows that Maluku has the highest level of language endangerment in Indonesia. Six languages are known to have become extinct in recent times, and seven of the 19 seriously endangered languages have fewer than 50 speakers.

Although endangered languages are

spoken by very few people in Maluku, speakers remain among Moluccan residents in the Netherlands. In 1950, when many Moluccans were unwilling to join the newly formed Republic of Indonesia against which they had fought, some 12,500 soldiers and their families accepted an opportunity to demobilize in the Netherlands. The vast majority of them continue to live in exile, and among the 50,000 Dutch Moluccans there may be speakers of as many as ten Central Moluccan languages (Florey and Van Engelenhoven 2001).

It is within this framework of high linguistic diversity, serious endangerment, and poor documentation that a project is being undertaken to document four previously undescribed Central Moluccan languages. Research team members Florey, Ewing, Litamahuputy, and Musgrave are working in both the Indonesian homeland and in the Dutch diaspora with speakers of languages indigenous to Amahai and Soahuku villages (Seram Island), Aboru (Haruku Island), Tulehu (Ambon Island), and Allang (Ambon Island).

Models for working with community members are being developed, for example, in the network of Aboriginal Language Centres in Australia, and in the Master-Apprentice scheme established by Hinton for indigenous Californian languages (Hinton and Hale 2001). These models aim to empower communities through training programmes that facilitate community ownership of language activities.

In the Netherlands, the past decade has witnessed a revival of interest in ethnolinguistic identity and *bahasa*



Haruku teachers Daan Saija (left) and Robert Akihary (right) teaching in workshop level 1

Both photos by Margaret Florey

*tanah* (indigenous languages) among second- and third-generation Dutch Moluccans. Aspirations for language use range from incorporating a few words into speech as markers of identity to writing songs, poetry, and literature in *bahasa tanah*, and in some cases, to becoming speakers of ancestral languages. Elderly first generation Dutch Moluccans, encouraged by this interest, wish to share their residual knowledge of *bahasa tanah*. However, community members have been uncertain about how to teach and learn the languages, and have seen their efforts frustrated by a lack of materials.

The research team responded to community aspirations for language awareness and renewal activities by offering a series of *bahasa tanah* workshops in three language groups: Koako (Amahai/Soahuku), Haruku, and Allang. The training philosophy aims to demystify linguistics and linguistic fieldwork and empower individuals and communities to undertake language documentation, which they can use for either revitalization or maintenance of the language at the grassroots level. Furthermore, it aims to counter the perceived need for the involvement of professionals in all language activities and to confront the issue of language variation and change in order to counter puristic attitudes and intervene in the language shift cycle.

Three workshops were held at the Moluks Historisch Museum, Utrecht, in September 2003. The goal of level 1 *Getting to know bahasa tanah* and level 2 *Developing community programs for bahasa tanah* was to teach participants how they can work with language teachers to learn more about their ancestral languages, and to develop language programmes in their communities. Widespread linguistic variation will be encountered in communities undergoing rapid language shift, and trainee linguists and community language workers will need tools to work with it. Thus at level 3 *Learning about language change*, the workshop focused on cross-linguistic comparison and, through a process of discovery, awareness developed of the extent of variation in speech communities. Through 50 years of living in the Dutch diaspora, many Moluccan speakers and their descendents have maintained strong links to their villages of origin. Activities commonly take place within *kumpulan*: 'gathering' groups organized around village-level communities. At the same time, the belief has persisted that Moluccan languages, be it with some lexical differences, are essentially the same, and that differences between Moluccan groups primarily lie in the socio-political realm.

Among the participants who took part in all three workshops, we observed the socio-political boundaries between ethnolinguistic groups begin to break down. At level 3, as students discussed and planned future language activities, they began to see the larger cross-linguistic group as a broader base for language maintenance activities.

Confronting language variation and change appears to have challenged a long-standing belief system and aided in establishing a more informed and secure sociolinguistic identity based on an understanding that ancestral languages are related yet different. A promising start towards an approach that fosters a higher level of linguistic tolerance has already been made. These are important developments from the perspectives both of language revitalization and of capacity building in endangered language communities. In fieldwork practice, particularly in the documentation of endangered languages, greater tolerance and compromise may be attained if linguists play a greater role in educating and training communities about language variation so as to create awareness about the issues, and about change and variation as the norm in every speech community. ◀

### References

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Students in the Bahasa Koako group in workshop level 2 practising a song they have written in their language. Seated: Sergio Risamasu (back to camera) and Marcus Tamaela (facing camera); standing left to right: Mr L. Manusama, Frida Pasanea, Heidi Holle, Djak Tamaela, and Atef Sitanala