

MAINTAINING MINAHASAN LANGUAGES THROUGH ORAL TRADITION

Kevin Yeremia Robot
kevinrobot@live.com

Pascasarjana Program Studi Linguistik
Universitas Sam Ratulangi

Abstract

According to Ethnologue, Minahasan languages, such as Tontemboan, Tombulu, Tonsea, Tolour, Tonsawang, Ratahan, Ponosakan, and Bantik are categorized as threatened and even shifting. It means that if there are no actual measures to rejuvenate the languages, it could be foreseen that Minahasan languages will be left with no native speakers. Mainly treated as vernaculars, and with the internalization of Manado Malay as the lingua franca in Minahasa and Indonesian language as the sole official language in Indonesia, both factors gave impact to the condition of Minahasan languages. That being said, in general, Minahasan languages have less prestige than Manado Malay and Indonesian in daily communication in Minahasa.

Therefore, in this paper, I would like to argue the importance of language maintenance, especially for endangered languages in Minahasa that such languages should be learned and used by people in Minahasa according to their areas. Moreover, I would explain what are considered to be oral tradition and the previous examples of documented oral tradition in Minahasan languages, then the reason of the importance of oral tradition in language maintenance and language learning.

Keywords: Oral Tradition, Minahasan Languages, Language Maintenance

INTRODUCTION

According to Ethnologue, it is revealed that Minahasan languages, namely Tombulu, Tonsea, Toulour, Tontemboan, Tonsawang, Bantik and Ponosakan, are categorized as level 6b to 8a based on Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS). Also, it is said that languages that are included in level 6b and 7 are considered as endangered languages, and in level 8a through 9 are considered as dying languages. That being said, languages in Minahasa are facing their threats of endangerment and also extinction.

Based on EGIDS scale, endangered languages are languages that are facing the process of broken intergenerational transmission. It would mean that the native speakers of the child-bearing generation are able to speak the language, but not transmitting the language to their children. Rather, another more prestigious and/or lucrative languages are transmitted to their children. Furthermore, dying languages are languages which the fluent speakers are only

the generation above the present child-bearing generations. This means that native speakers of the child-bearing generation are not able to transmit the language to their children, due to the inability of the language. To put in the context of Minahasa, speakers of the Minahasan languages would prefer speaking Manado Malay to their children which serves as the lingua franca in the province of North Sulawesi (Najoan, 1981:5).

Language endangerment, according to Austin and Sallabank (2011:5), can be caused by natural catastrophe, famine, and disease; war and genocide; overt repression; and cultural/political/economic dominance. Furthermore, Grenoble and Whaley (2006:38-45) stated the micro-variables that would cause language endangerment, namely language attitude, human resources, religion, literacy, and financial resources. Based on the explanation above, the possible cause for language endangerment in Minahasa is mainly from dominance, specifically cultural dominance, i.e. from Manado Malay (Najoan, 1985) and/or Indonesian (Tondo, 2009:289-90). From the cause of language endangerment, it also influences the micro-variables of language endangerment in Minahasa. Thus, it cannot be denied that Minahasan languages are facing threats of extinction if there are no measures to maintain and revitalize the languages.

The impact of language extinction may harm the identity of the linguistic community. Languages do not 'die' or 'extinct' as they are not living organisms, but rather they are 'crowded out' by the bigger or more dominant languages. Speakers of the languages would prefer a more dominant, more prestigious, or more widely known tongue; hence the languages are being abandoned by their speakers (Harrison, 2007:5). When one loses a language, one also loses the culture, intellectual wealth, and a work of art (Hale in Harrison, 2007:7). Furthermore, when one loses a language, one also loses their cultural heritage which are traditional wisdom found in oral history, poetry, epic tales, creation stories, jokes, riddles, wise sayings, lullabies, etc (Harrison, 2007:17). Not only that, one would generally concur that when one loses a language, he also loses an identity of a community, whether a tribe or a nation, an identity that was constructed by their ancestries through the language they were speaking (Kamma, 2016:210). In other words, if one loses a language, he also loses the connection between him and his ancestors.

Local or indigenous languages are seen to be valuable because they promote community cohesion, and vitality, foster pride in culture, and give self-confidence to the community (Crystal, 2003:31). Also, by learning local language, we also can learn from the speakers who use the language by learning their cultures through their ideas that are expressed linguistically

(Koentjaraningrat in Tondo, 2009:291). The ideas, then, become cultural value systems which guide speakers' system of thought (Tondo, 2009:291-2). Then, it is said to be possible to have a bilingual or even multilingual society, for example in a bilingual society, one language is used for identity and the other one for intelligibility (Crystal, 2003:29). Although, mostly in Indonesian society, people may be fluent in two or even three languages, which one local language for identity, a national language (Indonesian) for intelligibility in the area of Indonesia, and English for intelligibility outside Indonesia.

Therefore, to prevent the languages from extinction, measures in language maintenance is needed. In the context of Minahasa, such measures may benefit the speakers, such as to preserve identity, cultural wisdom, and ideology; as sources for the enrichment of Indonesian vocabulary and Indonesian literature; and for social stability (Kamma, 2016:216). There are several factors that should be considered in measuring language vitality for determining whether a language is in need of maintenance and revitalization. These factors are based on UNESCO's *Language Vitality and Endangerment* (2003), namely (a) intergenerational language transmission; (b) absolute number of speakers; (c) proportion of speakers within the total population; (d) trends in existing language domains; (e) response to new domains and media; (f) materials for language education and literacy; (g) governmental and institutional language attitudes and policies, including official status and use; (h) community members' attitudes toward their own language; and (i) amount and quality of documentation.

It is also interesting to know that coincidentally this year, 2019, is the International Year of The Indigenous Languages (IYIL 2019) which was proclaimed by the United Nations through the United Nations General Assembly (Geneva Office, 2016). The Year of Indigenous Languages will be lead by UNESCO. The celebration of IYIL 2019 intends to promote indigenous languages and to raise awareness about indigenous languages, especially which are facing extinction. The indigenous languages contribute to cultural diversity, and without them, the world would lose the culture and wisdom of certain communities.

In this paper, I would like to argue that oral tradition can be utilized as the tool or medium for language maintenance, especially in Minahasa. It is not remote from truth that Minahasan languages are transmitted orally, and there are numerous forms of oral tradition which are still practiced in the area of Minahasa, and using the local languages. Also, by using oral tradition, it would also help enhancing the factors of language vitality mentioned above, and

promoting Minahasan culture to Minahasan people. It would be agreeable that oral tradition might be one of the solutions to prevent Minahasan language from extinction. In this digital era, oral traditions can also be transmitted through internet and then may help the speakers to learn the local language. In the later sections, this paper would like to explain the oral tradition and its forms and examples in Minahasa, and to give an argument in how oral tradition may help in language maintenance in Minahasa by combining oral tradition with technology. Also, this paper would explain institutional roles in maintaining Minahasan languages through oral traditions.

In the next section, this paper will explain about oral tradition and its forms, and also the examples of oral tradition in Minahasa.

ORAL TRADITION

Vansina (1969:19; 1985:27-8) stated that oral traditions are verbal messages which are reported statements from the past beyond the present generation, and the transmission is done by word of mouth over at least a generation. Oral tradition is also defined as any kind of unwritten tradition and sometimes transmitted through words (Finnegan, 2005:5).

Vansina (1985:27), then, specifies the oral traditions which must be oral statements spoken, sung, or called out in a musical instruments only. Further, Vansina (1985:14-27) categorizes the oral tradition, namely memorized speeches, accounts (e.g., historical gossip, personal tradition, group account, traditions of origin and genesis, and cumulative accounts), epic, and tales, proverbs and sayings.

Oral tradition contains message, which is information that has been interpreted by one or more persons, contemporary to the particular events or situations, and has to be interpreted by the hearer (Vansina, 1985:194). In addition, oral tradition may help a speech community reconstruct their past (Vansina, 1985:199). However, not only to reconstruct the past, oral tradition may also help in constructing the identity of a speech community (cf. Supriatin, 2012). It might be thought of the nature of language, which also to construct an identity by the cultural heritage contained in oral tradition, i.e. language, for instance, oral history, poetry, epic tales, creation stories, jokes, riddles, wise sayings, lullabies, etc (Harrison, 2007; Kamma, 2016).

Thus, it would not be exaggerating to say that oral tradition has its importance in culture and language of a community. Sapir (1921:221) said that language has a setting, and the people that speak it belong to a group, and it does not exist apart from culture. Then, oral tradition may

reflect a part of the culture of a community because it employs language which shows identity of anyone or group who uses language to communicate.

In the earlier period, a document of oral tradition in Minahasa, particularly of Tontemboan speech community, was compiled by a missionary named Johann Albert Schwarz. The documentation was named *Tontemboansche Teksten* “Tontemboan Texts” which consists of various forms of oral tradition in Tontemboan language, e.g. histories of villages, legends, riddles, poetries, and songs. Schwarz (1907) collected the oral tradition of Tontemboan, and the documentation was made in three volumes, namely (i) the oral traditions in Tontemboan language; (ii) the Dutch translation of (i); and (iii) several annotations of (i). Such documentation helps people in searching for the cultures, especially from the earlier periods because it also reflect the cultural system of the people.

In some areas of Minahasa, oral traditions are still being done by the community, e.g. the speakers of Tontemboan language which has the tradition of *kumantar* “singing” (Pua, 2012). *Kumantar* is done by the people every year through singing several songs in Tontemboan language while walking around the village as a form of gratefulness to the deity, (Pua, 2012:29). Also, it is found that several songs in Tontemboan language show similarity with the philosophy of existentialism which describes life as a vanity (cf. Pua, 2012). Thus, we may see how a form of tradition is able to show the system of thought of its people, hence the importance of oral tradition in the context of language and culture. In addition, Sigarlaki (2016) also shows the songs in Minahasa language, mainly in Tonsea language, and its cultural meaning which mainly shows the value of family, the unity of community, and the spirit of work of Minahasan people. The cultural meaning of songs can reflect the cultural system of the people in general.

Thus, it can be concurred that oral tradition and its forms are significant in the construction of the culture of a community. In the next section, this paper will explain how oral tradition may help in language maintenance, especially in maintaining Minahasan languages which are facing the threats of endangerment.

ORAL TRADITION AND LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE IN MINAHASA

Based on the explanation above, it is evident that Minahasan languages are in need of measures to maintain the language and to prevent the languages from the threat of endangerment. Languages are a part of identity of its speakers and of the culture.

Also, recently, we are now beginning to be familiar with term ‘Industrial Revolution 4.0’ (hereafter IR 4.0). IR 4.0 is the era of the new industrialization that employs technology, which can be characterized as the digitalization, the use of smart technology in distribution and product manufacturing and development (Lasi et al, 2014:240). All of this may be caused by the internet and globalization. The IR 4.0 not only benefits industrial sectors, but also cultural sectors which enable them to promote their cultures not only locally, but also globally.

1. Technology and Corpus of Oral Tradition

Nowadays, technology has begun to be a part of our daily life. Ordering food and ride now are available online which helps us in eating and commuting. The procurement of information, references, and books are also available online. Technology also paved the way of globalization which enables us to be connected with the world, meaning that we are now able to be informed what is happening in the other parts of the world. Thus, it can be agreed that now technology has influenced our life.

In preserving oral tradition with the context of technology and IR 4.0, we can help the oral tradition to be documented not only through books, but also in a form of recording, and now can be disseminated through internet. Therefore, it is now important to create a corpus of oral tradition which contains every form of oral tradition to be recorded, i.e. in a form of video or audio. Corpus itself is similar to the corpus linguistics which consists of a collection of linguistic materials, whether written or spoken or both, which are appropriate for specific purposes of research (Bergmann et al,2007:607).

However, prior to the making of a corpus of oral tradition, it is imperative to document and collect the data of oral traditions. Oral traditions in a form of stories must be recorded and stored to a corpus. It is synonymous with Schwarz’s *Tontemboansche Teksten*, but in a digital form, thus we can hear and/or see the oral traditions being transmitted to us orally. Not only the raw form of oral traditions, but also we can make an annotated corpus, meaning that the corpus is also accompanied with linguistic information (McEnery and Wilson, 2001:32). Then, the corpus itself is best made in a website which can be accessed online, and also may be downloaded by users in order to be used offline for research and language learning purposes.

An example that can be seen is a website about the people of Sedoa, in Central Sulawesi, <https://www.tosedoa.com/id/selamat-datang>. This website contains the information about the

Sedoa tribe and also the oral traditions of Sedoa people, such as songs, stories, even the Bible and the order of worship in Sedoa language. Although mainly contained religious oral traditions, this website serves as the example of a corpus of oral tradition. Now, because of the internet, the documentation of oral tradition is not only limited through books, but also in a form of visual and audio recordings. Also, the website can also be shared through social media in order for the website to be known by people and to be used by them.

The collection of oral tradition, especially with form of video and audio recordings will help facilitating language learning and acquisition, mainly in listening comprehension. Vandergrift (1999:174) stated that listening strategies will help the texts of certain language to be accessible and interesting for learners. He also stated that the learners must be given abundant opportunities to conduct listening practice outside class and exams. It is also argued that listening is the natural form of language learning and the learners must be taught to listen first, and then to speak (Gary in Vandergrift, 1999:169-70). It is understandably so because it is synonymous with how man firstly acquire language, i.e. through auditory perception from their parents and families. The corpus of oral tradition, then, will give opportunity for language learners to practice their listening ability and also are able to be informed about the culture of the language they are learning.

It also may be added that the recordings, if possible, can be supplemented with transcription of the data and/or subtitle in the video recording of the oral tradition. Mitterer and McQueen (2009) argued that in language learning, mainly by listening or watching films, if supplemented with foreign language subtitles will help to improve language acquisition. It is thought that foreign language subtitle in foreign films will help indicate the words which are being spoken and will assist the language learner in listening and speaking the word in particular foreign language. Thus, the corpus, if necessary, should put the subtitle and/or transcription in order to enhance language learning, especially local languages.

2. Governmental Roles

Every provincial government in Indonesia must preserve the local languages in their province. Such role is regulated in Peraturan Menteri Dalam Negeri No. 40 Tahun 2007 regarding the role of regional government in local language preservation and development. Thus, it can be said that

it is imperative for regional governments to preserve local languages, especially the government of North Sulawesi Province in preserving Minahasan languages.

Based on the cause of language endangerment, the government can help preserving local language by providing financial resources for researchers and educators to design local language learning with combining oral traditions in language teaching materials. Not only teaching materials, the government may help in giving access to researchers to collect Minahasan oral traditions in the area of Minahasa. The collection of oral traditions may help in making a corpus of oral tradition, especially a corpus of Minahasan oral traditions. The financial resources from the government can also be utilized in the website development for the corpus of Minahasan oral tradition.

In the 80s and 90s, there are several researches sponsored by the Ministry of Education and Culture of Indonesia which concerned about local languages in Minahasa. There are, for instance, researches about the structure of Tontemboan oral literature (Apituley et al., 1991), Tontemboan language structure (Ticoalu et al., 1984) and morphology and syntax (Rattu et al., 1993), Toulour language structure (Watupongoh et al., 1992), Tombulu language structure (Sahulata et al., 1993), Ponosakan phonology (Danie et al., 1991) and other researches.

Also, the government may help in raising awareness of local language by holding celebrations and competitions involving Minahasan languages. We need to motivate the younger generations and the language activists to speak and to learn local languages. People need to be reminded the importance of preserving local languages because it is also the part of their identity and culture. They can help preserving it by using the language in daily life, especially toward younger generation.

3. Ecclesiastical Roles

The area of Minahasa is widely known as predominantly Protestant. Among the denominations of Protestant, Presbyterianism is the prevailing denomination in the area, with The Christian Evangelical Church in Minahasa (GMIM) as the biggest church in Minahasa in terms of population, it is said that the congregants of GMIM consists of 32 percent of the population of North Sulawesi Province (Trensulut.com, 2018). Thus, it can be said that the church has its influence on Minahasa people, mainly in spiritual aspect.

However, besides from spiritual aspect, the church can enhance its cultural aspects that may influence congregants to preserve local languages in Minahasa. In order to increase their role in cultural aspect, the church, especially GMIM should establish a Minahasan cultural research institute that independently research Minahasan culture and tradition, e.g. oral traditions of Minahasa. Such institute has been established by other major churches, such as Javanese Christian Church (GKJ) with its *Lembaga Kajian Budaya Jawa GKJ* and Batak Christian Protestant Church (HKBP) with its *Pusat Studi dan Kajian Budaya Batak Lembaga Raja Pontas Lumbantobing*.

The establishment of such institute may help in the making of the identity of Minahasa. Also, the institute can help in collecting the oral tradition in Minahasa, such as history of the Christian congregation of a certain village, wisdoms, and even the philosophy of Minahasa people. Such cultural institute, supposedly, may help in constructing the cultural system and system of thought of Minahasa people by researching the tradition, especially the oral tradition of Minahasa. By doing so, the church also will consolidate the identity of Minahasa, especially the Minahasan Christians.

Not only cultural research institutes, the church may also help in translating religious oral traditions, e.g. memorized speeches, into Minahasan languages. Ecclesiastical forms of memorized speeches, such as the Apostolic Creed, The Lord's Prayer, and even the order of worship. The memorized speech must be translated in all Minahasan languages, which actually will cost numerous amounts of financial expenses, but it will help the congregants to be aware of their identity as Minahasan people. Recently, GMIM alongside with Indonesian Bible Society (LAI) have published New Testament in the languages of Tombulu and Tontemboan (Berita Manado, 2018; Berita Manado, 2019). These two biblical texts in indigenous languages may be said as an effort to maintain Minahasan languages through religion, and they will help the people in the area of Tombulu and Tontemboan language community to utilize the language in the religious sphere, i.e., church services, house meetings, bible study, self-devotions, etc. Besides religious purposes, the texts also will help the language learners to study the language due to more references.

CONCLUSION

The local languages in Minahasa are undoubtedly facing the threats of endangerment with the decrease of the speakers. Several measures to preserve the local languages are important to be

done. The loss of a language means the loss of a culture, and the identity of a community. Oral traditions can be a new way to preserve the local languages, especially in Minahasa, as to increase the awareness of the importance of local language and identity of Minahasa which should not be lost by younger generation.

The oral tradition should be collected by stakeholders in order to make a corpus of Minahasan oral tradition. The development of a corpus of oral tradition may cause the younger generation to be interested in learning their local language. Through listening and watching the oral tradition of the language, it will also inform the learners not only the language but also the culture of the language. With the advent of IR 4.0, the corpus of oral tradition can be possible to be shared not only locally, but also globally.

Also, the church and state have their role in preserving local language in Minahasa. Both of it are able to help the speech community to preserve their language, especially in Minahasa, because language is a form of identity.

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