

Simolol Language Maintenance Ethnographic Study in Simeulue Regency, Aceh Province

Hasanul Amri¹, Kristiawan Indriyanto², and Sartika Sari³

¹ Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Prima Indonesia, Medan, Indonesia

^{2,3} Prima Indonesia University, Medan, Indonesia

*Corresponding author: kristiawanindriyanto@unprimdn.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Simolol language is one of the regional languages that has important historical and cultural value for the Simeulue community, Aceh Province. However, its existence is now threatened by the dominance of the Indonesian language and the influence of globalization. This study aims to examine the level of preservation of the Simolol language and various preservation efforts made by the community. The approach used is a mixed method with a multilingual ethnographic framework, combining qualitative and quantitative data. Data were obtained through interviews, participatory observation, documentation, and open questionnaires with 60 respondents from three age groups: teenagers, adults, and parents. The results of the study showed that the highest level of language preservation was in the elderly group (70%), followed by adults (61.3%), and teenagers (38.15%). The family sphere is the main place where Simolol language is used, with the percentage of use reaching 100% in parents, 82% in adults, and 74% in teenagers. In contrast, the educational sphere shows very low use, especially in teenagers (5%). Oral traditions such as nanga-nanga (lullaby songs) and inafi (folk stories) still play an important role in language transmission between generations. In addition, the Simolol language is still used in traditional, religious, and social activities by the elderly and adults. In conclusion, although the Simolol language still survives among the older generation, serious challenges arise in language regeneration among teenagers. Therefore, a cross-generational preservation strategy and integration of cultural values in education are needed to maintain the sustainability of the Simolol language.

Keywords: Language Preservation; Simolol; Ethnography; regional languages; Simeulue

1. INTRODUCTION

Language plays a central role in human life, not only as a means of communication, but also as a marker of cultural identity and a means of transmitting social values between generations. Each linguistic community develops its own language system that reflects a unique perspective on the world, collective history, and distinctive local wisdom (Sain, 2020). However, in the current era of globalization, many regional languages, especially those with limited speakers, face serious threats of marginalization and extinction due to the dominance of majority languages (Salam & Ponto, 2021). This phenomenon is the background to the importance of studying language preservation, especially for minority languages such as the Simolol language in Simeulue Regency, Aceh Province. The Simolol language has a very important historical value because it not only functions as a means of daily communication, but is also closely related to the cultural identity of the Simeulue people. This language is a legacy of the Simolol Kingdom that once reigned in the region, and is even believed to be the origin of the name Simeulue, which means "a place to gather together."

However, in recent decades, the vitality of the Simolol language has shown worrying signs of decline. Field data shows a decline in the number of active speakers and

increasingly limited scope for use of this language, especially among the younger generation who prefer to use Indonesian or other dialects that are considered more prestigious. This study specifically aims to: (1) examine the level of preservation of the Simolol language among its speakers, and (2) document the various efforts made by the community to preserve the language. These two aspects are very crucial to study considering the increasingly pressing threat of language shift faced by the Simolol language. By understanding the dynamics of this language preservation, it is hoped that effective strategies can be formulated to maintain its sustainability.

Several previous studies have examined similar problems in various regional languages in Indonesia. Salam and Ponto (2021) found that the Minahasa language in Kaaruyan Village is only used by the older generation (50+ years) in a limited area, due to environmental influences and community preferences for Indonesian or Gorontalo (Salam & Ponto, 2021). Prasetya et al. (2020) studied the Dayak Kenyah language in Samarinda, showing that language preservation depends on the role of the family, social environment, and intensity of communication in the language (Prasetya et al., 2020). Mascita et al. (2021) studied the Sundanese Lea language in Indramayu which was formed from a mixture of Sundanese and Javanese, maintained through socio-religious activities and the role of local organizations such as the PKK and Karang Taruna (Mascita et al., 2021). Putra (2022) studied Sasak culture in Lombok, finding that despite strict rules on the use of polite language in the sorong serah tradition, the younger generation is starting to switch to foreign languages (Putra, 2022). Kurniawati (2020), through an ethnographic approach, found that Sundanese in Cianjur is still used in families and traditions, but faces the threat of globalization and weakening cultural transmission (Kurniawati, 2020). Then, Sukmayani (2021) showed the resilience of the Cirebon language in Islamic boarding schools and local communities, supported by community loyalty to language as a cultural identity (Nuniek Setya Sukmayani, 2021).

This study offers several important novelties. First, it focuses on the Simolol language, which has received very little academic attention. Second, the use of an ethnographic approach allows for a holistic and contextual understanding of language maintenance practices in specific socio-cultural settings. Third, the findings of this study are expected to contribute both theoretically to the development of sociolinguistic studies, and practically as a consideration for the formulation of regional language preservation policies. The significance of this study lies in its efforts to document and analyze the Simolol language, which is part of Indonesia's endangered linguistic and cultural wealth. In a broader context, this study is also relevant to efforts to protect language diversity as part of human cultural heritage that must be preserved for future generations.

2. METHODS

This study uses a mixed method approach within the framework of multilingual ethnography, which combines qualitative and quantitative methods to gain a deep understanding of the practice of using and sustaining the Simolol language in Simeulue Regency. This approach allows researchers to understand the socio-cultural meaning behind linguistic practices and measure how widely the Simolol language is used between

generations and in various social domains. The objects of study cover three main domains, namely the family domain, social environment, and educational institutions, with the research location focused on three sub-districts: Simeulue Tengah, Simeulue Cut, and Teluk Dalam. The sample was selected purposively as many as 60 respondents consisting of various age groups and socio-cultural backgrounds.

Data collection was conducted using two main techniques: qualitatively through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation of cultural narratives; and quantitatively through an open questionnaire to measure the frequency of Simolol language use. The instruments used were an open questionnaire and a flexible interview guide, adapted to the local cultural context of Simeulue. The validity and reliability of the data were maintained through triangulation of methods and instruments. Data analysis was carried out in stages: qualitative data were analyzed through data reduction, thematic categorization, and interpretation of social meaning, while quantitative data were analyzed using percentage and average calculations. The percentage formula used to calculate the level of language use is:

$$P = \frac{f}{x} \times 100\%$$

Where P is the percentage of answers, f is the frequency of a particular answer, and x is the total number of respondents. Meanwhile, to calculate the general trend of the level of use in various domains, the following average formula is used:

$$X = \frac{\sum x}{n}$$

Where $\sum x$ is the total percentage of language use in each domain, n is the number of domains studied, and X is the average value. The results of the study are presented narratively to describe the socio-cultural dynamics and visually in the form of tables, diagrams, and graphs to facilitate understanding of the level of vitality of the Simolol language. This combination strengthens the analysis and produces a complete picture of the linguistic conditions of the Simeulue community.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Level of Preservation of Simolol Language in the Speaker Community in Simeulue Regency

3.1.1. Integrated Analysis of Simolol Language Retention Level in Adolescents

The results of the study showed that the maintenance of Simolol language among adolescents is at a fairly worrying level. Of the five main domains of family, education, neighborhood, religion, and customs, only the family domain still shows dominant use, which is 74%, especially in communication with siblings (90%) and with fathers, grandfathers, and grandmothers (80%). However, use decreases when interacting with mothers (60%), which is thought to be due to the influence of Indonesian in the context of parenting. The education domain recorded the lowest level, which is only 5%, because adolescents almost entirely use Indonesian, even with fellow ethnic groups. This shows that the educational environment is not conducive to the preservation of regional languages. In

the neighborhood domain, the level of use is at 53.75%, which indicates a condition of persistence even though it is starting to weaken. Simolol is still used with neighbors of the same tribe and in ethnic groups, but is not used at all with neighbors or sellers from other ethnic groups (0%). Use in religious and customary domains is only 30% each, with a tendency to use Indonesian as the main language, especially in cross-ethnic and formal contexts such as religious studies or traditional events.

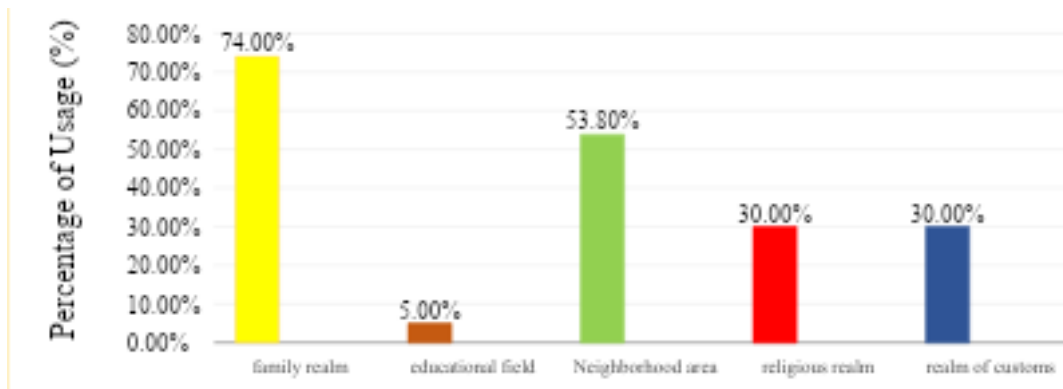


Figure 1. Percentage of Simolol Language Use at Teen Level

Overall, of the five domains of language use, only the family domain showed real strength in maintaining the Simolol language. Meanwhile, the other four domains experienced a significant decline, indicating that the maintenance of this language is not yet optimal among teenagers. Strategic efforts are needed from the speaker community and educational institutions to expand the space for using the Simolol language outside the family environment, so that it does not experience a more serious decline in function in the future.

3.1.2. Integrated Analysis of Simolol Language Retention Level at Adult Level

At the adult level, the use of Simolol language shows a tendency that is still quite strong in various areas of life, with an average use reaching 61.3%, a figure that is above the threshold of survival (51%). The family realm is the main place for language maintenance, with the highest level of use reaching 82%, especially in communication with siblings (100%), grandparents, and fathers. Although use with mothers is slightly lower (60%), this still confirms that the family plays a role as the main agent in transmitting the mother tongue to the younger generation. In the neighborhood realm, the use of Simolol language is at 53%, reflecting that social interactions at the local level, especially with neighbors of the same tribe or in ethnic groups, still support the existence of this language. However, Simolol language is not used in cross-ethnic interactions, where languages such as Sigulai and Jame are more dominant, indicating a limitation in the scope of its use. The religious realm shows use of 60% among adults, especially in interactions with fellow ethnic groups, but has decreased in inter-ethnic communication which only reaches 30%. Likewise in the realm of customs, usage reaches 90% between tribes, but drops drastically to 25% in cross-tribal interactions, so that the average is only 50.5%. This indicates a serious challenge in preserving the Simolol language in the context of cross-group culture. Nevertheless, the positive attitude of adults towards the Simolol language is still high and is an important

asset in preservation efforts. Therefore, the strategy to strengthen the use of the Simolol language needs to be directed at creating a more inclusive communication space, especially in cross ethnic areas such as religion and customs, so that the vitality of this language is maintained in a multicultural society.

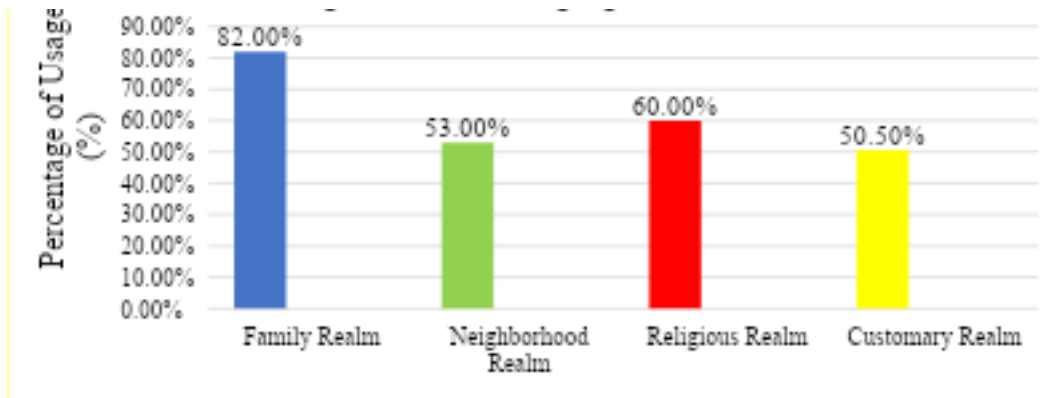


Figure 2. Percentage of Simolol Language Use at Adult Level

Adults play an important role in preserving the Simolol language, especially in the context of family and social life within the tribe. However, the decline in use in cross-ethnic interactions and formal religious and customary realms indicates the need for a more inclusive and sustainable preservation strategy. Encouraging the habit of using Simolol in public spaces across groups will be key to maintaining the vitality of this language to the next generation.

3.1.3. Integrated Analysis of Simolol Language Retention Level at Parent Level

The level of Simolol language maintenance in the elderly age group is relatively high and shows strong loyalty to the use of this regional language in various areas of life. In the neighborhood realm, the use of Simolol language reaches 58%, with the dominance of use in communication with fellow ethnic groups (100%) and a decrease in cross-ethnic interactions, which prefer Sigulai or Jamu. In the religious realm, the maintenance of this language is very strong, reaching an average of 80%, especially in informal interactions between ethnic groups, although in formal religious forums it is still dominated by Indonesian. The realm of customs also shows a high maintenance rate, namely 70%, indicating that Simolol language remains the main medium in traditions and traditional ceremonies. The average of these three realms produces a maintenance rate of 69.3%, confirming the strategic role of the elderly group as the main guardians of the existence of the Simolol language amidst social change.

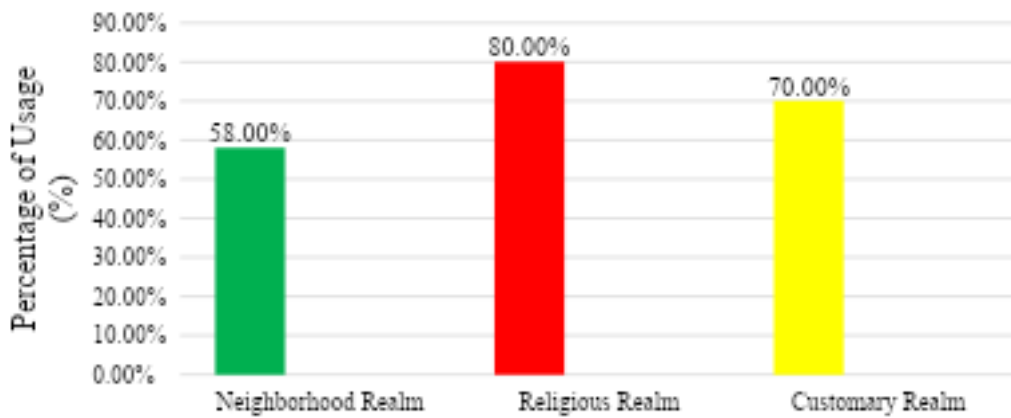


Figure 3. Percentage of Simolol Language Use at Parental Level

The elderly play a central role in maintaining the continuity of Simolol, with relatively high levels of use in all major social domains. However, involvement of the younger generation and formal preservation efforts remain an urgent need to ensure the continuity of the language across generations and across communication situations.

3.2. Efforts of the Speaker Community to Preserve the Simolol Language

3.2.1. Nanga-nanga

Nanga-Nanga is an oral tradition of the Simolol people in the form of a soft song sung by mothers, grandmothers, or adult women when lulling children or babies in a swing to sleep. This song not only functions as a lullaby, but also contains moral messages, life advice, and cultural values conveyed in the Simolol language. Through nanga-nanga, children are naturally introduced to the vocabulary, intonation, and structure of the Simolol language from an early age, so that they are accustomed to hearing and understanding their mother tongue before being able to speak fluently. In addition, this tradition strengthens the emotional bond between children and caregivers and creates a loving language learning environment. The sustainability of nanga-nanga is one real form of efforts to preserve the Simolol language amidst the influence of modernization and language shifts, because it is able to pass on language and culture from generation to generation through daily activities that are full of meaning (Trianov et al., 2018).

3.2.2. Inafi

Inafi is a form of oral tradition that lives in the Simolol community, in the form of a storytelling habit carried out by parents, especially grandparents, to their grandchildren or children. The stories told in inafi generally contain stories of the life struggles of ancestors, local folk legends, fairy tales, and local customs and cultural values that are passed down from generation to generation. This tradition is usually carried out spontaneously in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere, such as when resting in the rice fields, fields, gardens, or when sitting together at home after daily activities. Through inafi activities, children not only get entertainment and moral education, but also learn to recognize and understand their history and cultural identity in the Simolol language. Moreover, this tradition provides an

opportunity for children to passively absorb language through hearing, while encouraging their active ability in language when responding to or imitating stories they hear. Thus, inaf becomes an important means of preserving the Simolol language because it strengthens the transmission of language between generations in a natural and meaningful way.

3.2.3. Use of Simolol Language in Social Environment

The use of Simolol language in social environment is still quite strong, especially in the family, customs, religion, and neighborhood circles. In the family environment, Simolol language remains the main communication tool used between parents and children, as well as between family members who come from the same ethnicity. This use not only strengthens emotional relationships in the family, but also plays an important role in the process of naturally passing on the mother tongue from generation to generation. In the realm of customs and religion, Simolol language is used in various activities such as traditional ceremonies, delivering traditional prayers, and daily conversations in religious events involving people from the same tribe (Yusri & Amri, 2018). This language is a symbol of identity and sacredness that binds the community culturally and spiritually. Meanwhile, in the neighborhood environment, Simolol language is still maintained in informal communication, especially by groups of parents and adults. They use this language in everyday light conversation, community discussions, and other social activities, which reflects their loyalty to their ancestral language and their enthusiasm to maintain it even though the current of modernization is getting stronger (Harefa & Harefa, 2024).

3.2.4. Limited Mastery of Indonesian by Parents

Based on findings in the field, many respondents from among the parents of the Simolol community showed limitations in mastery of Indonesian. They are not very fluent in speaking or understanding Indonesian well, so that in everyday life they prefer to use Simolol when interacting, both in the family environment and in social communication. This condition is not an obstacle, but rather a positive opportunity for the survival of regional languages. This limitation indirectly makes Simolol the main means of communication, so that its existence remains alive and is actively used by the older generation. In the context of language preservation, this situation makes an important contribution because it ensures that Simolol continues to be used in domestic and social spheres (Yusri & Amri, 2018).

3.2.5. Positive Community Language Attitude

The Simolol community's view of their regional language shows a positive and appreciative attitude, although there are differences in awareness between generations. From teenagers to parents, most stated that the Simolol language is an ancestral heritage that must be maintained and preserved. They see this language not just as a means of communication, but also as a means of cultural expression and a symbol of ethnic identity that distinguishes them from other communities. In addition, the Simolol language is seen as an important bridge connecting the younger generation with the older generation in the extended family, strengthening family ties and local values. This positive attitude is a very important social capital in supporting the process of language revitalization naturally and sustainably. When the community still views the existence of their mother tongue as important, then the hope

for the survival of the language amidst the flow of globalization and language shifts will remain wide open.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the results of research on the maintenance of the Simolol language in Simeulue Regency, it can be concluded that the level of maintenance of this language shows a pattern that varies between age groups and life domains. The elderly and adult groups tend to still use the Simolol language actively, especially in the family, customs, and religious domains, which shows a fairly strong level of maintenance. However, the adolescent group shows a significant decline, especially in the realm of education and cross-ethnic interactions, where the use of Indonesian is more dominant. This indicates that intergenerational transmission is starting to weaken, especially in broader formal and social contexts. Therefore, the overall level of maintenance of the Simolol language can be categorized as still surviving, but facing major challenges from language shifts due to modernization factors and the dominance of the national language. The efforts of the speaking community to maintain the Simolol language have proven to be deeply rooted in local traditions and culture. Cultural practices such as *nanga-nanga* (lullaby songs) and *inafi* (storytelling traditions) are effective means of introducing the Simolol language to children from an early age in a natural and meaningful way. In addition, the use of this language in traditional, religious activities, and daily conversations in the family and neighborhood environment shows a high level of linguistic loyalty, especially among parents and adults. The positive attitude of the community towards their mother tongue, which is seen as a symbol of identity and cultural heritage, also becomes a strong social capital in this preservation process. The limited mastery of Indonesian by some parents indirectly strengthens the active use of the Simolol language in everyday life.

However, challenges remain, especially in encouraging the younger generation to continue using the Simolol language in various contexts, including education and cross-ethnic interactions. Therefore, the preservation of the Simolol language requires a more inclusive and transformative strategy, such as strengthening the role of the family, increasing pride in language through community activities, and integrating cultural values into the school curriculum. Local governments and educational institutions are also expected to take a more active role in supporting the revitalization of the Simolol language, so that this language not only survives in traditional spaces, but can also coexist in more modern and dynamic social spaces. With a sustainable and community-based approach, the Simolol language has a great opportunity to remain sustainable as part of the cultural identity of the Simeulue people.

REFERENCES

- Harefa, K. R., & Harefa, K. H. (2024). Peran Bahasa Dalam Pembentukan Identitas Budaya di Indonesia. *Jurnal Ilmu Ekonomi, Pendidikan Dan Teknik*, 1(3), Article 3. <https://doi.org/10.70134/identik.v2i4.150>
- Kurniawati, W. (2020). *Pemertahanan Bahasa Sunda di Kota Cianjur (Penelitian Etnografi)*. [PhD Thesis, Universitas Negeri Jakarta]. <http://repository.unj.ac.id/10078/>

- Mascita, D. E., Sariah, S., & Susilowati, S. (2021). Strategi Pemertahanan Bahasa Sunda Lea Indramayu. *Ranah: Jurnal Kajian Bahasa*, 10(1), 182–195.
- Nuniek Setya Sukmayani. (2021). *Pemertahanan Bahasa Cirebon di Kota Cirebon (studi Etnografi)* [PhD Thesis, Universitas Negeri Jakarta]. <http://repository.unj.ac.id/15833/>
- Prasetya, K. H., Subakti, H., & Septika, H. D. (2020). Pemertahanan Bahasa Dayak Kenyah di Kota Samarinda. *Diglosia: Jurnal Kajian Bahasa, Sastra, Dan Pengajarannya*, 3(3), 295–304.
- Putra, A. D. (2022). Analisis Pemertahanan Bahasa Halus Dalam Budaya Sorong Serah di Suku Sasak (Lombok). *Tut Wuri Handayani: Jurnal Keguruan Dan Ilmu Pendidikan*, 1(2), 96–100.
- Sain, Y. (2020). Language Shift and the Linguistic Maintenance: A Study of Tolaki Language in Kendari City Southeast Sulawesi. *International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology*, 5(12), 2020.
- Salam, S., & Ponto, D. (2021). Pemertahanan Bahasa Minahasa di Desa Kaaruyan. *Ideas: Jurnal Pendidikan, Sosial, Dan Budaya*, 7(3), Article 3.
- Trianov, R., Ramdiana, R., & Lindawati, L. (2018). Seni Tutar Nanga-nanga di Desa Kampung Aie Kecamatan Simeulue Tengah Kabupaten Simeulue. *Jurnal Ilmiah Mahasiswa Program Studi Pendidikan Seni Drama, Tari Dan Musik*, 3(4), 386–395.
- Yusri, Y., & Amri, H. (2018). Pemertahanan Bahasa Leukon di Kabupaten Simeulue. *Jurnal Dedikasi Pendidikan*, 2(1), Article 1. <https://doi.org/10.30601/dedikasi.v2i1.94>