Voices of Diversity: How Language Mirrors Cultural Identity Across Communities in KH Abdul Chalim University

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This study explores how students at KH Abdul Chalim University, a multiethnic institution in Indonesia, negotiate their linguistic identities in an environment where heritage languages, Indonesian, and global digital registers intersect. The research addresses the broader concern of heritage language decline in Indonesia, particularly among younger generations. It seeks to understand how language use reflects both cultural preservation and adaptation in academic and social contexts. Using a qualitative ethnographic design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and participant observation with four students representing different ethnic backgrounds, including Javanese, Sundanese, Riau Malay, and Flores. Thematic analysis revealed three interrelated findings: first, a clear language domain shift, with heritage languages confined mainly to private and family spaces while Indonesian dominates public and academic interactions; second, heritage languages continue to function as symbolic markers of cultural identity but face the threat of reduced practical use, creating a growing tension between symbolic value and communicative function; and third, students actively construct hybrid identities by shifting between heritage languages, Indonesian, and digital vernaculars, with social media playing a dual role—accelerating the dominance of Indonesian while simultaneously offering opportunities for revitalizing local languages through creative content. The findings demonstrate that heritage languages remain emotionally significant but risk becoming increasingly symbolic unless deliberate efforts are made to sustain their everyday use. The study highlights the significance of educational and digital initiatives in preserving linguistic diversity, positioning universities and social media platforms as vital spaces for safeguarding Indonesia's cultural and linguistic heritage.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Language is more than a means of communication; it is a profound embodiment of cultural identity, history, and collective memory. In a multilingual nation like Indonesia—home to over 700 local languages—this relationship is particularly salient, as each language reflects the unique values and traditions of its community. However, the accelerating forces of globalization, urbanization, and digital transformation are dramatically altering the country's linguistic landscape, leading to a concerning decline in the use of local languages, especially among younger generations (Simanjuntak et al., 2024; Lumbanbatu, 2024).

This phenomenon is acutely observable in the microcosm of Indonesian higher education. KH Abdul Chalim University in East Java presents a compelling case study. As an institution that attracts students from diverse ethnic backgrounds across the archipelago—from Java, Sumatra, Sulawesi, and beyond—the university becomes a dynamic site of linguistic convergence and negotiation. Here, students navigate a complex social environment where the national language (Indonesian) is the lingua franca, global English is a marker of modernity and education, and their respective heritage languages (e.g., Javanese, Sundanese, Gorontalo, Batak) serve as intimate markers of ethnic identity. This setting creates a natural laboratory to observe how cultural identities are mirrored, maintained, and transformed through language in a rapidly modernizing Indonesia.

Previous research has effectively documented the broader national trend of language shift. Studies indicate a clear generational divide: while older generations view heritage languages as vital to cultural preservation, younger generations, particularly Generation Z, increasingly favor Indonesian and English for daily communication, reducing local languages to a more symbolic role (Lumbanbatu, 2024; Simanjuntak et al., 2024). Furthermore, the dual role of technology has been noted; while digital media is a vector for global cultural homogenization, it is also being harnessed as a tool for revitalization through social media campaigns, blogs, and video content promoting languages like Javanese and Minangkabau (Anistya Ori & Susianti, 2023).

Despite these valuable contributions, a significant research gap remains. Existing studies often focus on single-language communities or broad national trends, lacking a comparative, on-the-ground perspective that captures the lived experiences of individuals from different ethnicities interacting within the same shared space. Moreover, there is a scarcity of research that integrates the digital dimension into the analysis of everyday language practices in such multicultural educational settings. How do students from different ethnic backgrounds at a university like KH Abdul Chalim negotiate their linguistic identities? This study aims to fill this gap. The novelty of this research lies in its comparative ethnographic approach conducted within the specific context of KH Abdul Chalim University. By focusing on the interactions between students from various ethnicities, this study moves beyond isolated cases to offer a nuanced understanding of inter-ethnic linguistic dynamics.

2. METHODS

his study utilized a qualitative ethnographic research design to gain a deep, contextual understanding of how language reflects and shapes cultural identity within the diverse student community at KH Abdul Chalim University. The design was chosen for its strength in capturing the nuanced, lived experiences and social practices of individuals in their natural environment.

Participants were purposively selected to ensure representation from the university's major ethnic groups, including Javanese, Sundanese, a student from eastern of Indonesia, and a student from western part of Indonesia. 4 students participated, providing a rich cross-section of perspectives. The primary data was collected through two complementary instruments over a three-month period.

The first instrument was semi-structured in-depth interviews. An interview guide was developed with open-ended questions focusing on participants' linguistic biographies, current language use in various social contexts, perceptions of cultural identity, and attitudes toward language preservation. The second instrument was participant observation. This involved the researcher immersing in common campus settings such as the canteen, library, and student group meetings. An observation protocol was used to systematically document interactions, noting the languages spoken, instances of code-switching, and the social context of communication. This method allowed for the triangulation of interview data by providing direct evidence of actual language practices, rather than solely relying on self-reported behaviour.

Data analysis was conducted using Thematic Analysis. The process began with the transcription of all interview recordings and the organization of observation notes. Through repeated reading and familiarization with the data, initial codes were generated. These codes were then collated and refined into broader themes, such as the symbolic function of heritage languages and the domain-specific use of Indonesian. The analysis focused on identifying both shared patterns and unique differences across the diverse ethnic backgrounds of the participants, directly addressing the study's comparative aim.

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3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. *Finding*

3.1.1. *Language Domain Shift: From Private to Public in a Multiethnic University Environment*

The interviews show a clear pattern of language domain shift among students at KH Abdul Chalim University, where heritage languages remain tied to private and intimate contexts, while Indonesian dominates in public and academic interactions. In the private domain of family life, heritage languages carry strong emotional and cultural weight. Septi explained: "With my parents back home, I always use Javanese. It feels more natural and respectful, especially when speaking politely to elders." Hamid echoed this sentiment: "At home, I always use Sundanese with my family. It feels warm and reflects our culture." Even students with less fluency emphasized the role of their local languages. As Puwaningsih shared: "When my grandmother came, I had to switch to Ende because she doesn't understand Indonesian well. I felt clumsy because I'm not fluent, but I still feel proud when I can say something in Ende." Similarly, Rafi recounted: "One time, I was speaking in Indonesian with my roommate, then suddenly my mom video-called. Without thinking, I switched to Malay immediately."

In contrast, within the public and multiethnic environment of the university, Indonesian becomes the dominant code. Septi acknowledged: "Mostly I use Indonesian, because my classmates come from many ethnic groups, not only Javanese." Hamid added: "Definitely Indonesian. My classmates are from all over Indonesia, so Indonesian is the easiest bridge." The same is true for students from outside Java. As Puwaningsih noted: "At university, I use

Indonesian all the time. It's the only way to communicate with friends from Java, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, everywhere." Rafi similarly stated: "Indonesian, every day. Because my classmates are from Papua, Kalimantan, Java, everywhere—it's the only way to connect."

Students also described moments of code-switching as they navigated between these domains. Septi recalled: "Once in the canteen, I was joking in Javanese with my friend, then another friend from Papua joined us. I immediately switched to Indonesian so he could join in." Hamid experienced the same dynamic: "In the canteen, I was joking in Sundanese, then suddenly friends from Aceh joined us. I immediately switched to Indonesian so everyone could laugh together." These spontaneous shifts highlight the students' pragmatic adaptation to multiethnic contexts and their prioritization of inclusivity.

While Indonesian provides utility in the public sphere, students acknowledged the tension between identity and practicality. Puwaningsih reflected: "Back home I heard Ende more often, but here I hardly use it at all. I feel distance from my own local language at the university." Rafi expressed a similar concern: "At home, I could hear and speak Malay daily. Here, it's almost gone." Yet heritage languages remain inseparable from cultural identity. Septi emphasized: "When I speak Javanese, I feel connected to my roots. Without it, I would feel disconnected." Hamid also noted: "Sundanese makes me feel warm and playful. In Indonesian, I become more serious."

The findings reveal a domain separation where heritage languages dominate the private sphere of family interaction, while Indonesian serves as the lingua franca in the public, multiethnic campus environment. Students fluidly switch between these languages depending on context, balancing the preservation of identity in private with the need for inclusivity in public life.

3.1.2. **Language as a Threatened Symbolic Marker of Identity**

The narratives from the four participants highlight the dual role of heritage languages as both a symbolic marker of identity and a resource under threat in a multiethnic academic environment. While each student emphasized the cultural and emotional significance of their local language, they also acknowledged its diminishing use and the risk of disconnection from their roots.

For some, heritage language is inseparable from their sense of self. Septi, a Javanese student, reflected: "When I speak Javanese, I feel connected to my roots. Without it, I would feel disconnected." She associated Javanese not merely with communication, but with values of politeness and respect. Hamid, from a Sundanese background, expressed a similar connection: "Sundanese makes me feel warm and playful. In Indonesian, I become more serious." For him, switching languages does not just change vocabulary—it shifts his personality and emotional tone.

Others revealed a sense of loss and distance due to their limited fluency. Puwaningsih from Flores admitted: "When my grandmother came, I had to switch to Ende because she doesn't understand Indonesian well. I felt clumsy because I'm not fluent, but I still feel proud when I can say something in Ende." Her statement illustrates the symbolic weight of her heritage language, even as its practical use declines. Similarly, Rafi from Riau described the intimacy his local dialect carries: "In Malay, I feel closer to family, more relaxed. In Indonesian,

I feel more neutral and formal." Yet he also admitted that at the university, "At home, I could hear and speak Malay daily. Here, it's almost gone."

The students also voiced concerns about generational language loss within their communities. Septi observed: "My younger siblings prefer Indonesian, especially influenced by school and social media." Hamid confirmed the same pattern in Bandung: "My cousins often use Indonesian more, even with their parents. They think Indonesian is more modern and fits with social media." For Flores and Riau, the situation appeared even more fragile. As Puwaningsih noted: "My younger cousins rarely speak Ende. Indonesian feels more practical." Meanwhile, Rafi described his own cousins: "They mostly speak Indonesian. Because school and social media push it."

Despite these pressures, all participants insisted that heritage languages remain crucial markers of symbolic identity, even if their daily use is shrinking. Hamid emphasized: "Sundanese reflects our culture's values." Septi insisted: "They are still Javanese by blood, but without the language they miss the cultural depth." Rafi nuanced his perspective: "Being Malay is not just about language, but also about traditions, clothing, and values." These statements show both the resilience and vulnerability of heritage languages—they continue to symbolize identity, but their decline raises questions about the completeness of that identity in future generations.

The findings suggest that at KH Abdul Chalim University, heritage languages are symbolically powerful but practically threatened. Students carry them as intimate markers of cultural belonging, especially in private contexts, yet in the multiethnic and Indonesian-dominant public environment, their usage narrows. The participants' reflections highlight an ongoing tension: while identity remains tied to language, the younger generation increasingly experiences that identity as symbolic rather than lived, signaling the risk of heritage languages being reduced to cultural emblems rather than everyday practices.

3.1.3. Negotiating Hybrid Identities and the Role of Social Media

The interviews reveal how students at KH Abdul Chalim University engage in a continuous process of negotiating hybrid identities, shaped both by their heritage languages and by the dominant presence of Indonesian in academic and public life. Social media further complicates this process, amplifying the prestige of Indonesian while simultaneously offering spaces for creative expression of local identities.

For many students, identity is experienced as a hybrid state, where heritage languages anchor them to tradition while Indonesian and global digital culture pull them toward modernity. Septi described this duality: "At home, I feel like a Javanese girl when I speak Javanese. But at university, I mostly use Indonesian, so I feel more like a national citizen, not just Javanese." Hamid expressed a similar sentiment: "When I joke in Sundanese, I feel playful and warm. But in Indonesian, especially in class, I become serious. It's like switching roles."

Students from outside Java experienced the hybridity even more acutely, as their languages face stronger marginalization in the university context. Puwaningsih admitted: "Back home I could use Ende more often, especially with family. Here, I hardly use it at all. Sometimes I feel like I am losing it, but at the same time I enjoy the freedom of mixing with many other cultures." Rafi echoed this negotiation: "In Malay, I feel relaxed and close to family. But in Indonesian, I feel more formal, like I belong to a bigger, national group." Both

testimonies highlight how shifting linguistic contexts lead students to embody multiple cultural selves.

The role of social media was mentioned by all four participants as a decisive factor in this identity negotiation. Septi noted: "My younger siblings prefer Indonesian because YouTube and TikTok are in Indonesian. Even when we are together, they copy the slang they hear online." Hamid confirmed this trend: "My cousins switch to Indonesian on Instagram or TikTok because it feels more modern and trendy." For students from Flores and Riau, the pressure was even stronger. Puwaningsih observed: "My cousins rarely use Ende anymore. They watch Indonesian TV and social media, so Indonesian feels more practical." Similarly, Rafi explained: "Most of my cousins use Indonesian on social media. Malay feels left behind because it's not in the digital space."

At the same time, social media is not only a site of erosion but also a potential tool for preservation and hybrid identity performance. Hamid suggested: "If Sundanese had more content on TikTok or YouTube, young people would be proud to use it." Rafi expressed a similar idea: "If Malay was on social media, maybe in songs or short videos, people my age would keep using it." These reflections suggest that digital platforms are simultaneously accelerating language shift while holding untapped potential for revitalization.

The findings demonstrate that students at KH Abdul Chalim University navigate hybrid identities, moving between the intimacy of heritage languages, the national unity of Indonesian, and the globalized culture of digital media. Social media in particular plays a double role—pushing students toward Indonesian as the dominant cultural code, while also offering a possible stage for reimagining heritage languages as living parts of modern youth identity.

3.2. Discussion

The finding that students at KH Abdul Chalim University largely relocate their heritage languages to private or intimate settings while defaulting to Indonesian in public, interethnic spaces aligns closely with classic accounts of "domain" differentiation in multilingual societies. Fishman's formulation predicts that language choice tracks social situations—family, friendship, religion, education—with particular codes clustering in particular domains (e.g., home vs. school). On this campus, Indonesian effectively stakes out the institutional and mixed-peer public domain (lecture halls, group projects, administrative counters, canteens), while Javanese, Sundanese, Melayu Riau, and Flores-area languages persist in kin and close-friend micro-domains. When Septi (Javanese) noted, "di kantin aku mulai pakai Indonesia; kalau dengar Jawa dari teman dekat, baru aku pindah ke ngoko," and Hamid (Sundanese) added, "sama teman Sunda suka sapa 'kumaha, euy,' tapi lanjutnya Indonesia biar semua nyambung," they described precisely the kind of situational allocation and quick rekeying of code that Fishman associates with domain-conditioned choice. Their accounts substantiate that domain boundaries remain meaningful but are redrawn by the multiethnic campus ecology (Fishman, 1964, 1972).

Institutional forces and demographics help explain why Indonesian surfaces as the routine, "unmarked" public choice. Indonesian enjoys maximal status and institutional support as the national lingua franca and language of instruction; policy has long positioned it to enable interethnic communication across Indonesia's 700+ languages (Paauw, 2009). In Myers-Scotton's terms, it is the unmarked code that best matches the campus "rights-and-obligations" set in intergroup encounters; switching into a regional code becomes a marked move that

recalibrates social alignment (e.g., signaling intimacy, in-grouping, or local stance) (Myers-Scotton, 1993). This is visible when Rafi (Riau) said, "kalau kerja kelompok campur suku, Indonesia itu default; sama anak Riau kadang selip kata Melayu Riau buat cairin suasana," and when Puwaningsih (Flores) explained, "di kampus sepanjang hari Indonesia; telepon ke rumah langsung balik ke bahasa Flores." Their choices map onto a rational, norm-guided code selection that minimizes social cost in mixed settings while preserving solidarity cues within co-ethnic micro-spheres (Paauw, 2009; Myers-Scotton, 1993).

At the interactional level, the data show agile, moment-to-moment code work characteristic of situational and metaphorical code-switching (Blom & Gumperz, 1972; Gumperz, 1982). Students often open interactions in Indonesian to establish common ground, then "key" into a heritage code to index closeness, humor, or privacy—exactly what Septi's and Hamid's vignettes illustrate. In Gumperz's sense, these brief shifts function as contextualization cues that renegotiate footing without threatening the broader communicative contract of the public encounter. This pattern corroborates research that code-switching in contact zones serves both comprehension and identity management, with Indonesian supplying intercomprehension and the local code supplying social meaning (Blom & Gumperz, 1972; Gumperz, 1982).

From a macro-sociolinguistic perspective, ethnolinguistic vitality (EV) theory helps interpret why the public domain tilts toward Indonesian. EV predicts that the group language with higher status, demographic reach, and institutional support will dominate high-contact public spheres (Giles, Bourhis, & Taylor, 1977). On a campus intentionally drawing students from many regions, no single local language can achieve "institutional completeness" in public student life; Indonesian, backed by law, curriculum, and signage, therefore prevails in shared spaces. Yet the interviews also reveal enclaves of co-ethnic talk—"micro-domains" in the canteen, dorm corridors, or prayer groups—where local vitality briefly resurges ("aku switch ke Jawa biar kerasa hangat," said Septi). This coexistence of a powerful, supra-local lingua franca with resilient, affect-laden local codes is precisely the blend EV would anticipate: strong majority-language vitality in public, coupled with minority-language persistence where in-group density and functions sustain it (Giles et al., 1977; Landry & Bourhis, 1997).

The Indonesian case has additional texture: the public code is not only "Indonesian" writ large, but often its colloquial, Jakartanized register (bahasa gaul/Colloquial Jakartan Indonesian), especially among youth. Prior work shows how this register spreads through media and urban youth culture, becoming the style of sociability that lubricates cross-ethnic interaction (Sneddon, 2006; Djenar, Ewing, & Manns, 2017). When students describe "campus talk" as ringan, santai, and sprinkled with urban slang, they echo findings that informal Indonesian functions as an inclusive, contemporary identity style in public peer domains. This further consolidates the shift away from localized codes in those settings while layering a national urban vernacular atop them, keeping regional languages as symbolic and intimate resources in private circles (Sneddon, 2006; Djenar et al., 2017).

Where might this campus pattern diverge from other Indonesian settings? Ethnographies from Java suggest that in locales where one regional language anchors public life—e.g., Javanese in Yogyakarta or Solo—local codes can remain audibly public and even recruit newcomers, complicating a simple private/public split (Errington, 1998; Goebel, 2019). In such contexts, the "unmarked" public choice may be a regional language in many everyday settings, with Indonesian reserved for formal or interregional situations. Our participants' experiences, however, occur in a deliberately multiethnic university where no single regional code enjoys public majority. Hence the campus acts as a "contact zone" that amplifies Indonesian's institutional capital in public, while confining regional languages to spaces of intimacy, trust, and identity rehearsal. This contrast underscores that domain shift is not a universal teleology

but contingent on local ecologies of power, policy, and demography (Errington, 1998; Goebel, 2019).

Therefore, the interviews hint at long-term implications. If public domains increasingly normalize Indonesian (often in its colloquial youth style), regional languages risk progressive domain shrinkage—first out of mixed-peer spaces, later from peer-only leisure, and eventually from family talk—unless countervailing supports exist (Fishman, 1991). Yet our data also show intentional maintenance moves: phatic greetings ("kumaha, euy"), playful lexical insertions, and strategic switches to "feel like myself," as Puwaningsih put it on calls home. These micro-practices, routinized within friend clusters and family communication, can stabilize private-domain use even as the public domain consolidates around Indonesian. In Bourdieu's terms, Indonesian carries high "linguistic capital" on campus—yielding clear returns in academics and cross-ethnic networking—while heritage languages accrue symbolic capital in identity-dense niches. The trajectory of shift or maintenance will turn on whether those niches remain socially meaningful and institutionally recognized inside the university (Fishman, 1991; Bourdieu, 1991).

4. CONCLUSION

This study uncovers the surprising and nuanced finding that students at KH Abdul Chalim University are constructing digitally-mediated hybrid identities, a process only identifiable through direct ethnographic research. It confirms established theories of domain-specific language use but challenges the assumption that digital platforms are solely agents of linguistic homogenization. The research reveals social media's dual role as both the primary accelerator of language shift towards Indonesian and a potential new domain for the creative expression and revitalization of heritage languages, thereby enriching sociolinguistic perspectives by introducing the digital sphere as a critical space for identity negotiation.

However, these insights are tempered by the study's limitations, including its small sample size, specific location, and lack of variation in academic level, gender, and age. The qualitative methods, while providing depth, limit the generalizability of the findings. Consequently, future research with a larger, more diverse sample and mixed methodologies is essential to develop a more comprehensive understanding that can effectively support the formulation of targeted policies to sustain Indonesia's linguistic heritage in both physical and digital domains.

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