

# Indigenous Language Diversity on Simeulue Island

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to describe the diversity of indigenous languages that exist on the island of Simeulue. This island is often also called Simalur Island which is located on the west coast of Aceh province. Administratively the island itself is a district, namely Simeulue district which consists of 10 districts. This research was conducted using a qualitative approach using field investigation and document review methods. Interviews were conducted with the chairman of the Aceh Traditional Council of Simeulue district as well as community leaders and traditional elders in the city of Sinabang. The results of the study show that on this island there are 3 native languages of Simeulue Island, namely Devayan, Sigulai, and Leukon. The Devayan language is spoken in the widest area, covering the districts of East Simeulue, West Teupah, South Teupah, Central Teupah and Teluk Dalam. The Sigulai language is spoken in the West Simeulue, Alafan, and Salang sub-districts. Meanwhile, the Leukon language is only spoken in 2 villages in the Alafan sub-district, namely Langi and Lafakha villages.

**Keywords:** *Indigenous Language, Simeulue Island, Diversity*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The diversity of languages on Simeulue island is very interesting to study, as it is just a small island in the province of Aceh, but it has at least 3 native languages which are very different from the official regional languages in the province of Aceh. Another big island in Aceh Province is Pulau Weh but it has one only one language which is the same as the majority language in the province of mainland Aceh. Documentation of languages on Simeulue Island has not been well coordinated; one of the proofs is an evident that there are various opinions both regarding the number of languages or the name of the language. The Language Center, in a book entitled *These Are the Languages of Aceh "Inilah Bahasa-bahasa Aceh"* [1]. states that in Aceh Province there are 7 languages, namely Acehnese, Batak, Devayan, Gayo, Javanese, Minangkabau (*Aneuk Jamee*), and Sigulai. It is stated that the Devayan language and the Sigulai language are in the Simeulue island region. However, in previous research [2]. It was stated that there was only 1 language on Simeulue Island, namely Simeulue language.

The division of the Simeulue area in the past, when it was still subject to the Aceh sultanate in Kuta Raja. The government is royal in nature which is divided into 5 kingdoms, namely the Tapah kingdom, the Simulul Kingdom, the Sigulai Kingdom, the Alang Kingdom, and the Leukon Kingdom. This division really determines the map of the distribution of native speech areas on Simeulue Island [3]. The Tapah Kingdom, which in its present territory includes the areas of South Teupah, West Teupah, Central Teupah and East Simeulue. The Simulul Kingdom which includes the Simeulue Tengah, Simeulue Cut, and Teluk Dalam areas. The Sigulai Kingdom which includes West Simeulue. The Alang kingdom covered the Salang area, and the Leukon kingdom covered the Alafan area today.

## 2. METHOD

The research approach is a qualitative one applying deep interviews to some traditional leaders, head of official position in government conducting language and culture, and some natives in speech community. The main areas of research are districts of East Simeulue, Central Simeulue, and Alafan.

So far, the people of Aceh only know the Simeulue language, while the Aceh Province Language Center mentions it as the Devayan language. From interviews conducted with traditional leaders, in this case Drs. Samsul Rizal, Chair of the Simelue Traditional Council, Mr. Azharuddin Agur, S.Pd, Member of the Simeulue DPRD, Mr. Chairil Anwar, S.Pd M.Pd Principal of SMA Negeri 2 Sinabang, explained that Simeulue and Devayan languages are linguistically the same language, differing only in some vocabulary and cadence of pronunciation. Uniquely the denominator of the Simeulue language who lives in the Simeulue Tengah region does not know the Devayan language. On the other hand, residents who live in East Simeulue say that Simeulue's language is Devayan. These two areas are no more than 30 km apart but rarely communicate with each other due to limited hills which impede transportation so residents going to other areas must turn around following the coastal route, so based on the distance it becomes farther.

### 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

According to the head of *Majelis Adat Aceh (MAA)* in Simeulue regency, Mr. Azharuddin Agur, S.Pd, the language diversity on this island is very interesting to study, given the relatively small island of Simeulue in the province of Aceh, it still has at least 3 native languages which are very different from the official regional languages in the province of Aceh.

When the island of Simeulue is divided into language mapping, it can be grouped as follows:

**Table 1**  
Language Use Mapping

NO	DISTRICT	INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE
1.	Simeulue Timur	Devayan
2.	Teupah Selatan	Devayan
3.	Teupah Tengah	Devayan
4.	Teupah Barat	Devayan
5.	Simeulue Tengah	Simalul/Simalur/Simeulue
6.	Teluk Dalam	Simalul/Simalur/Simeulue
7.	Simeulue Cut	Simalul/Simalur/Simeulue
8.	Simeulue Barat	Sigulai/Sibigo/Lamamek
9.	Alafan	Sigulai dan Leukon (2 desa)
10.	Salang	Sigulai/Sibigo/Lamamek

Sumber: Interview with Azharuddin, S.Pd (Head of *Majelis Adat Aceh kabupaten Simeuleu*)

The Banda Aceh Language Center (2008) conducted research on the grouping of language variations on Simeulue Island with dialect geography analysis, with 200 Swadesh words, with 5 observation areas, namely Langi Village in Alafan sub-district for Leukon language, Malasin Village in Salang sub-district for Sigulai language, Ujung Salang village in the Salang sub-district for the Salang language, Kampung Ai Village in the Simeulue Tengah sub-district for the Devayan language, and Lugu Village in the East Simeulue sub-district also for the Devayan language.

Based on the dialectological study above, the diversity of languages in Simeulue shows closeness and differences from one another. The results of the analysis of sound differences at the phonological level between languages show that there are 27 sound correspondences with the percentage of sounds between the three languages between 55% -57%. While the difference achieved through dielectric calculations between the Leukon and Sigulai languages is 65%, the Leukon and Salang languages are 65%, and the Leukon and Devayan languages are 25.5%. Then between Sigulai and Devayan it is 67%. Following is the picture of Language mapping:

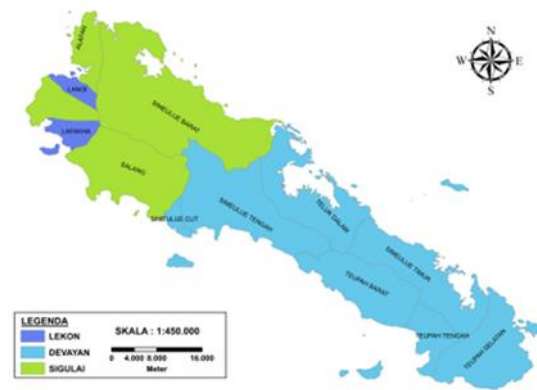


Figure 1: Language mapping in Simeulue

#### 3.1 The Devayan Language

Devayan language is one of the languages that are feared to be in the endangered language category, although so far there has been no in-depth research on which Aceh regional languages are included in the endangered language category. However, judging from the number of speakers of the Devayan language, which tends to decrease in number every year, and is used only on Simeulue Island, and even then not in all areas, and if most Acehnese people in particular are asked about the Devayan language, they tend to answer that they do not know this language, because the speakers are isolated in the island of Simeulue, while people who have migrated to the mainland province of Aceh because they go to school and even settle down because they work, many people in these overseas areas use the Acehnese and Indonesian languages.

The Devayan language has become a language that has become well-known in the world since the 2004 tsunami that hit most of Aceh, with the epicenter in the Indonesian ocean, to be precise around the island of Simeulue. The Devayan language already has a vocabulary for the word tsunami, namely smong, while other regional languages in Aceh do not recognize a vocabulary about tsunamis. The word smong is used in saga or poetry as advice which can be categorized as local wisdom because the poem is advice from ancestors that was passed on to their children and grandchildren about the tsunami.

In addition, the Simeulue district head received an award in Korea because the number of tsunami victims was very small compared to other areas, even though it was included in the epicenter, because the people already knew the signs of a tsunami which were passed down in culture, so the Simeulue people immediately ran to the highlands when they saw signs of an impending tsunami, namely by receding sea water after the earthquake [4]. Therefore, research on this language will add to the repertoire of documentation of the Devayan language, which in the end will be able to support the existence of this language. In addition, it is hoped that through inherited language the characters can form a nation, such as the concept expressed which says that character is interpreted as the operational realization of the identity and identity of a person or a nation if a person or a nation is faced with a problem that must be resolved. or overcome to achieve his well-being [5].

However, in reality there is concern that the Devayan language on Simeulue Island tends to become unpopular, especially among the younger generation in the local speech community, due to various factors including: (1) mixed marriages with the majority ethnic group so that they tend to use the majority language, namely Acehese, (2) more and more young people are leaving Simeulue Island to work and continue their higher education, most of them go to Banda Aceh, and when they are in outside communities they tend to use Indonesian and Acehese. (3) the openness of the social system in social relations after communication lines in and out of the island were improved not only by waterways but also by air to facilitate contacts in the form of trade and tourism. So that the unpopular Devayan language is increasingly being pressured by the language of immigrants in their own area, especially when the conflict in mainland Aceh was raging, many migrated to Simeulue Island which was very conducive because the Free Aceh Movement did not reach the island [6].

According to the EGIDS (Ethnologue's Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale) measurement of language vitality proposed [7], which was then developed into the measurement called EGIDS scale, it is shown that the Devayan language the Simeulue language, this language belongs to the Austronesian, Malayo-Polynesian, Northwest Sumatra, Barrier Island families. The language is still spoken by about 30,000 people. The status of a language belonging to the "6a Vigorous" category is illustrated with a green dot (Figure 2), with the criteria "The language is unstandardized and in vigorous use among all generations". From the classification according to the Ethnologue, the Devayan language is still strong but there is no language standardization. The following is a picture of a cloud version of the Ethnologue (2023) which is called the Simeulue language, but what is meant is the Devayan language.

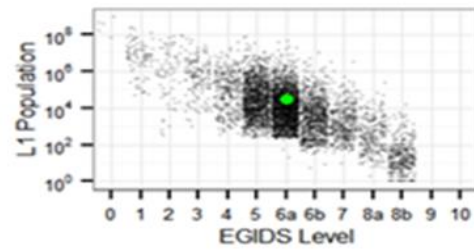


Figure 2. The Vitality of Simeulue (EGIDS)

### 3.2 The Sigulai Language

The Sigulai language is one of the 3 original languages on the island of Simeulue, namely the Devayan language and the Leukon language. The spoken community covers 3 sub-districts, namely Alafan, Salang, and Simeulue Barat, but there are 2 villages in the Alafan area that speak Leukon, namely Lafakha and Langi villages. This language is one of the minority languages with speakers of no more than 20,000 people (Wikipedia: 2023).

Along with the development of the Simeulue era, Simeulue became an open area and received immigrants well, besides that many residents left the island by going to school or working. Of course, social dynamics greatly affect the continuity of a culture and language, as well as the Sigulai language which is showing a rapid decline because this language has been very marginalized from other languages on the island, namely Devayan, Leukon, and Jamee.

Speech communities are responsible for the survival of their own language, so it is important for a community. The use of the Sigulai language in speech communities is more widely used at lower levels, for example in family and neighbors, and this more dominant language takes over several functions, including in the realms of education, government, transactions, and even the realm of religion [8].

Many parents still transmit the language to their children but a significant number of generations of parents do not do so, so intergenerational transmission is weak, this is evidenced by the percentage of Sigulai language use in the family domain by children up to 10 years old which only reaches 55, 24%, while the family realm is the realm that serves as the last bastion. Likewise for the ability to use language in fluency in the TL (Not Fluent) category or with an average score of 2.42 and for the ability to get an average score of 2.32 in the TM (Not Mastering) category. This proves that transmission between generations is weaker in the generation of children aged 10 and under [9].

The use of Sigulai language is only as spoken language, there is no written language in the form of books or literary works. But found in the form of SMS media. In use in unofficial domains such as family and neighbours, the Sigulai language is still actively used, but in the realm of public communication many people use Indonesian.

Language attitudes at G1 and G2 show a positive attitude towards the future of the Sigulai language, but at G3 and G4 they show concern because they plan to teach Indonesian as the first language to their children when they have a family.

According to the conversion with the criteria for the level of vitality of the Leukon language according to the EGIDS Ethnologue's Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale) is at level 6b (beginning of the language shift).

### 3.3 The Leukon Language

The Leukon speaking community includes 2 villages, namely Lafakha and Langi, while in the sub-district there are 4 villages located between the two. Even though the locations are separated, the two villages still use the Leukon language as the language of community communication, especially when meeting fellow Leukon descendants, bearing in mind that many migrants from the surrounding sub-districts speak Sibigo, most of the people of these two villages master the Sibigo language, but this is not the case with other sub-districts who speak Sibigo. cannot speak Leukon. The Leukon language map can be seen in the picture.

From field observations it was found that the Leukon language was positioned as the mother tongue or first language for the ethnic natives of Langi and Lafakha villages. The Leukon language as the first language shows a percentage of 100% only in the G1 and G2 generations, while the percentage of G4 is 100%, the first language or mother tongue is Indonesian. The use of Leukon language is only as spoken language, there is no written language in book form or literary works. But found in the form of SMS media. In use in unofficial domains such as family and neighbours, the Leukon language is still actively used, but in the realm of public communication many people use Indonesian.

From the measurement of language attitudes, it was found that the speech community has a positive attitude towards the future of the Leukon language, but in the Adolescents and Children generation they show concern because they plan to teach Indonesian as the first language to their children when they are married, just as parents do. them now. From the EGIDS (Ethnologue's Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale) scale, the conversion of the criteria for the level of vitality of the Leukon Language was obtained at level 6b (beginning of the language shift).

From the description above the Leukon language must be improved from spoken language to written language with various efforts, namely by increasing the documentation of the language in written form, such as poetry collections, fairy tales, textbooks, magazines, or Leukon language dictionaries. This needs to be done considering that the Leukon language is no longer the mother tongue of the Leukon children. Activities are needed to stimulate the younger generation to use Leukon as their mother tongue, namely as the first language they have acquired since they were born, or since they have known the language.

## 4. CONCLUSION

The small island of Simeuleu has 3 native languages, namely Devayan, Leukon and Sigulai. The western part uses Sigulai language, while the eastern and central parts use Devayan language. The uniqueness is that the Leukon language only lives in two separate villages in Alafan sub-district, namely Langi village and Lafakha village.

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