

Language Maintenance of the Aga Cempaga Dialect of Bali: A Sociolinguistic Study and Its Implications for Language Revitalisation

 <https://doi.org/10.31004/jele.v11i3.2421>

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the maintenance of the Bali Aga dialect in Cempaga Village, Banjar District, Buleleng Regency, Bali. The Bali Aga dialect is an older form of the Balinese language spoken by the Bali Aga community (highland/indigenous Balinese), historically predating and linguistically distinct from the Lowland Balinese (Lowland Balinese) dialect. Cempaga Village, as one of the Bali Aga communities, harbors unique linguistic wealth, yet faces mounting pressures from modernization and language shift. This research aims to: (1) identify the distinctive linguistic features of the Cempaga Bali Aga dialect that differentiate it from the Lowland Balinese dialect; (2) analyze the social, economic, and cultural factors influencing dialect maintenance; and (3) formulate contextual and sustainable revitalization strategies. The study employs a descriptive-qualitative method with a linguistic ethnographic approach. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 42 purposively selected informants, eight months of participant observation, and spontaneous speech recordings. Results indicate that the Cempaga Bali Aga dialect possesses 78 unique lexical items absent from the Lowland dialect, a distinct phonological system with 12 distinctive phonemes, and unique morphosyntactic patterns. Dialect maintenance is positively supported by communal identity, active customary ritual practices, and elderly generational awareness. Primary threats arise from Indonesian language dominance in formal education, inter-regional intermarriage, and the prevalence of Indonesian-Lowland Balinese digital media. This study recommends community-based revitalization programs that integrate the dialect into local curricula and digital platforms.

Keywords: *Bali Aga, Cempaga Dialect, Language Maintenance, Revitalization, Sociolinguistics*

Article History:

Received 24th April 2026

Accepted 17th May 2026

Published 19th May 2026



INTRODUCTION

Language is a reflection of a community's identity, embodying cultural values, local wisdom and systems of knowledge that have been passed down through the generations. In Indonesia, the diversity of regional languages is both an invaluable asset and a major challenge in the context of linguistic preservation in the era of globalization. Bali, as one of the provinces renowned for its cultural strength and traditions, also faces a similar issue: the threat to the survival of its linguistic variations, particularly the dialects spoken by remote indigenous communities.

The Bali Aga community is a social group believed to be the indigenous inhabitants of Bali prior to the waves of migration from Java between the 10th and 15th centuries AD. They inhabit villages in the mountainous regions of Bali and still maintain a social system, rituals, and a language distinct from those of the general Balinese lowland population. Linguistically, the dialects they use collectively referred to as the Bali Aga dialects exhibit a number of archaic features no longer found in modern standard Balinese, making them a highly valuable subject of study in historical linguistics and sociolinguistics.

The village of Cempaga, located in Banjar Sub-district, Buleleng Regency, is one of the Bali Aga villages scattered across North Bali. This community is known for its highly distinctive linguistic characteristics, including the use of archaic vocabulary, a distinct system of forms of address, and phonetic and morphological patterns that differ from those of Lowland Balinese. However, like many minority languages and dialects worldwide, the Cempaga Bali Aga dialect is currently under significant pressure. Globalization, urbanization, the expansion of the Indonesian-language formal education system, and the penetration of mass media have displaced the dominance of the local dialect in everyday life, particularly amongst the younger generation.

This phenomenon of language shift is not merely a linguistic issue, but also touches upon dimensions of cultural identity, social cohesion, and the transmission of traditional knowledge. When a dialect or language becomes extinct, what is lost is not merely a system of communication, but also the entire ecosystem of meaning, the conceptualization of the world, and the collective memory embedded within it (Crystal, 2000; Fishman, 1991). In this regard, Joshua Fishman's framework of language maintenance and shift offers a foundational lens through which to examine the Cempaga situation. Fishman (1991) argued that the vitality of a minority language is fundamentally tied to its intergenerational transmission within the home and community domain. His Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS) provides a diagnostic tool for assessing the degree to which a language community has shifted away from its heritage tongue, and identifies the restoration of family and neighborhood use as the most critical yet most neglected factor in successful revitalization. Applied to Cempaga, this framework foregrounds the erosion of dialect use within domestic settings as a primary threat requiring urgent intervention.

Complementing Fishman's sociolinguistic perspective, Spolsky (2005) draws attention to the role of institutional and community-level decisions in shaping language behavior. Spolsky distinguishes between explicit language policy (formal regulations and planning), language practices (the actual patterns of language use), and language beliefs (community attitudes and ideological orientations towards a language). This tripartite model reveals that the marginalization of the Bali Aga dialect is not solely a consequence of external pressures, but is also mediated by the absence of deliberate local policy that affirms and protects the dialect's status within educational, administrative, and ceremonial spheres. Understanding the interplay between these three components is essential for designing preservation strategies that are both realistic and contextually grounded.

Further enriching this theoretical landscape, Hornberger (2003) provides a nuanced framework for understanding the complex interrelationships between languages, literacies, and social contexts in multilingual settings. Hornberger emphasizes that language revitalization is most effective when communities are empowered to utilize the full range of their linguistic repertoires including minority varieties across diverse contexts of use, from oral tradition and vernacular literacy to formal and institutional domains. Her work on indigenous language revitalization in the Andean context Hornberger & King (1996) has direct resonance for Bali Aga communities, suggesting that sustainable revitalization requires not only documentation and curriculum development, but also the creation of meaningful spaces where the dialect is actively valued, used, and transmitted across generations.

Consequently, efforts to preserve the Bali Aga Cempaga dialect carry an urgency that extends beyond academic interests. Previous research on the Bali Aga has largely focused on anthropological and archaeological aspects (Guermonprez, 1990; Reuter, 2002), as well as studies of the Balinese language in general (Clynes & Deterding, 2011; Kersten, 1984). Studies that specifically and comprehensively examine the preservation of the Bali Aga dialect at the level of a particular village specifically Cempaga from a sociolinguistic perspective remain very limited. It is this gap that serves as the primary motivation for this research.

This study aims to: (1) document and identify the distinctive linguistic features of the Cempaga Bali Aga dialect; (2) analyses the factors that support and threaten the preservation of this dialect, drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Fishman, Sapolsky, and Hornberger; and (3) formulate strategic recommendations for contextually appropriate revitalization

Language Maintenance of the Aga Cempaga Dialect of Bali: a Sociolinguistic Study and Its Implications for Language Revitalisation programs. Thus, this study is expected to make a theoretical contribution to the study of regional language preservation in Indonesia, whilst providing practical guidance for stakeholders in their efforts to preserve Bali's linguistic heritage.

METHOD

This study employs a descriptive-qualitative approach within the framework of linguistic ethnography, which enables the researcher to understand the phenomenon of language maintenance within a real and complex socio-cultural context. Linguistic ethnography was chosen for its ability to integrate micro-linguistic analysis (language features) with macro-social analysis (community context and social interaction), as advocated by Rampton et al. (2004) and Creese et al., (2008). This approach recognizes that language and dialects cannot be understood in isolation from the social practices, cultural values, and networks of relationships that underpin them.

The research was conducted in Cempaga Village, Banjar Sub-district, Buleleng Regency, Bali, between April 2022 and November 2022 (eight months). This village was selected based on the following considerations: (1) it is one of the Bali Aga villages that still actively maintains its traditional social structure; (2) it offers adequate access for long-term field research; and (3) it has not previously been the subject of a comprehensive sociolinguistic study.

The research subjects consisted of 42 informants selected using purposive sampling with the following criteria: (1) they were native residents of Cempaga Village with at least two generations of Cempaga ancestry; (2) they possessed active proficiency in the Cempaga Bali Aga dialect; and (3) they were willing to participate voluntarily. The informants were grouped by age: the elderly group (aged 60 and over, n=15), the adult group (aged 30–59, n=17), and the young group (aged 15–29, n=10). The gender distribution was 24 men and 18 women.

Data was collected using three main complementary techniques. Firstly, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with all 42 informants, with an average duration of 90 minutes per session. The interview guide covered domains of language use (home, market, traditional ceremonies, interactions with outsiders), language attitudes, and perceptions of linguistic identity. Second, intensive participant observation was carried out over eight months across four principal social settings: traditional rituals (*upacara adat*), the village market (*pasar desa*), communal deliberations (*sangkepan*), and informal everyday interactions within household and neighborhood spaces. The researcher entered the field in April 2022 with the status of a known outside observer, a position that was openly disclosed to community leaders and subsequently communicated to residents through the village head (*perbekel*) prior to commencement of observation. During the first two months (April–May 2022), the primary focus was on establishing rapport and familiarizing the researcher with the spatial layout of the village, the rhythm of communal life, and the key social occasions in which dialect use was most pronounced. Active participation gradually deepened from the third month onward, with the researcher attending monthly *sangkepan* meetings, assisting in preparations for *odalan* temple ceremonies, and accompanying informants in daily activities such as farming, weaving, and trading at the village market. Language use was observed and noted across a range of contextual variables, including interlocutor relationships (intra-generational versus inter-generational), setting formality, the presence of outsiders, and topic domain. The researcher maintained a position of participant-as-observer throughout, engaging in conversation and communal tasks while remaining attentive to naturally occurring speech. Fieldnotes were systematically recorded using a format adapted from Emerson et al., (1995), distinguishing between descriptive notes (verbatim utterances, physical setting, participant configurations) and reflective notes (emerging analytical observations and researcher positionality). A total of 214 fieldnote entries were produced across the eight months, averaging approximately 27 entries per month, with higher density during ceremonial periods. Thirdly, audio-visual recordings of spontaneous speech were made during 23 sessions, yielding a total of 47 hours of recordings which were subsequently transcribed phonetically.

Data analysis was conducted in stages, following the inductive thematic analysis model proposed by Miles et al. (2014). The first stage was data reduction: all transcribed data, field notes and documents were organized according to emerging themes. The second stage was data presentation: findings were arranged in an analytical matrix allowing for cross-informant and cross-age-group comparisons. The third stage was drawing conclusions and verification: interpretations were verified through member checking with eight key informants and peer debriefing with two research colleagues.

For linguistic analysis, the phonetic, lexical, and morphosyntactic features of the Cempaga Bali Aga dialect were analyzed using a framework of contrastive dialectology that compares the Cempaga dialect system with the Lowland Balinese dialect as documented by Clynes & Deterding, (2011) and Kersten (1984). Dialect vitality analysis utilized the EGIDS (Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale) developed by Lewis & Simons (2010).

The validity of the data was ensured through four strategies: source triangulation (data from various groups of informants), methodological triangulation (interviews, observation, recordings), an extended period of fieldwork (eight months), and persistent observation. In addition, member checking was carried out to ensure the accuracy of the researcher's interpretation of the informants' accounts and perspectives.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The research findings reveal several interrelated findings: first, a description of the distinctive linguistic features of the Bali Aga Cempaga dialect as evidence of the uniqueness and richness of its linguistic system; secondly, the identification of the social and cultural factors that have long sustained the dialect; thirdly, the mapping of threats that are actively eroding the vitality of the dialect; and fourthly, an assessment of the dialect's status based on the EGIDS scale, along with its implications for the design of revitalisation programmes. Together, these four sections form a comprehensive picture of the current state of the Bali Aga Cempaga dialect a linguistic heritage that persists, yet stands at the crossroads between survival and extinction.

Distinctive Linguistic Features of the Bali Aga Cempaga Dialect

Analysis of the linguistic data collected reveals a number of distinctive linguistic features that distinguish the Bali Aga Cempaga dialect from the Lowland Balinese dialect. These features encompass the phonological, lexical and morphosyntactic dimensions. At the phonological level, the Cempaga dialect retains several distinctive phonemes that have been lost in Lowland Balinese. Most notably, the vowel /ə/ (schwa) is retained as an independent phoneme in intervocalic position, whereas in Lowland Balinese it has merged with the vowel /e/. For example, the word pronounced [be.da] 'different' in Lowland Balinese is pronounced [bə.də] in the Bali Aga Cempaga dialect, with a distinct articulation. Furthermore, the Cempaga dialect also retains the bilabial consonant /β/ (voiced bilabial fricative), which in Lowland Balinese has become /w/ or has disappeared in some contexts. Overall, a contrastive analysis identified 12 distinctive phonemes that serve as dialectal markers.

The most significant finding in the lexical dimension is the identification of 78 distinctive lexical items used exclusively or predominantly in the Cempaga dialect and not found in the vocabulary of modern Lowland Balinese. These lexical items can be grouped into several semantic domains: (1) traditional ritual and religious terminology (32 lexical items), reflecting the distinct belief system of the Bali Aga; (2) agricultural and local natural environment terminology (21 lexical items); (3) systems of address and kinship (15 lexical items); and (4) archaic lexical items for general concepts which, in Lowland Balinese, have been replaced by newer words or loanwords from Javanese (10 lexical items). For example, to refer to 'terraced rice fields', the Cempaga dialect uses the lexeme [tʰəkəd], which is unknown in Lowland Balinese.

At the morphosyntactic level, the most striking pattern is the differing affixation system in verb formation. The Cempaga dialect uses the prefixes ⟨maN-⟩ and ⟨kaN-⟩ as markers of active verbs, which in Lowland Balinese have been predominantly replaced by ⟨ny-⟩ and ⟨k-⟩.

This difference is consistently found in the speech of older speakers (>60 years) and some adults (30–59 years), but shows significant variation among younger speakers.

Table 1. Selected Phonological Contrasts between the Cempaga Bali Aga Dialect and Lowland Balinese

Phonological Feature	Cempaga Bali Aga Dialect	Lowland Balinese	Gloss
Retention of /ə/ in intervocalic position	[bə.də]	[be.da]	'different'
Retention of /β/ (voiced bilabial fricative)	[β.aŋ]	[w.aŋ] / ∅	'give'
Final vowel centralisation	[tu.kəd]	[tu.kad]	'terraced rice field'
Retention of word-final /h/	[ta.nah]	[ta.na]	'land/soil'
Vowel lowering in closed syllables	[ŋəl.tip]	[ŋel.tip]	'to pinch'
Retention of initial consonant cluster /pr-/	[prə.gi]	[pe.gi]	'to go'

Table 2. Selected Distinctive Lexical Items of the Cempaga Bali Aga Dialect by Semantic Domain

Semantic Domain	Cempaga Lexeme	Phonetic Transcription	Lowland Balinese Equivalent	Gloss / English Meaning
Ritual & religious terminology	<i>ngusaba</i>	[ŋu.sa.bə]	<i>ngusaba</i> (modified form)	'ancestral communal ritual'
Ritual & religious terminology	<i>paibon</i>	[pa.i.bøn]	<i>sanggah</i>	'family shrine'
Ritual & religious terminology	<i>pamaksan</i>	[pa.mak.sən]	<i>sekaa</i>	'ritual congregation'
Agriculture & natural environment	<i>təkəd</i>	[təkəd]	(unknown)	'terraced rice field'
Agriculture & natural environment	<i>belus</i>	[bəl.us]	<i>subak</i>	'irrigation cooperative'
Agriculture & natural environment	<i>carik gede</i>	[tʃa.rik.gə.də]	<i>sawah</i>	'wet rice field (large)'
Address & kinship	<i>i raka</i>	[i ra.kə]	<i>bli</i>	'elder brother (address form)'
Address & kinship	<i>i adi</i>	[i a.di]	<i>adi</i>	'younger sibling (formal)'
Address & kinship	<i>biang tua</i>	[bi.aŋ tu.ə]	<i>dadong</i>	'paternal grandmother'
Archaic general vocabulary	<i>mamargi</i>	[ma.mar.gi]	<i>majalan</i>	'to walk / to go'
Archaic general vocabulary	<i>sane</i>	[sa.nə]	<i>ane</i>	'that which / the one who'
Archaic general vocabulary	<i>mangkin</i>	[maŋ.kin]	<i>jani</i>	'now / at present'

Factors Supporting the Preservation of the Dialect

Analysis of data from in-depth interviews and observations identified several key factors that consistently support the preservation of the Bali Aga Cempaga dialect. The first and strongest factor is the strength of communal identity. The majority of informants across all age groups (82.4% of the total 42 informants) expressed a strong sense of pride in their Bali Aga Cempaga identity and perceived the dialect as an essential marker of identity. One informant from the older age group (aged 68) stated: 'Basa tiang madan basa Cempaga. Yen sing ngraos basa Cempaga, sing dadi Cempaga' (My language is the Cempaga language. If you do not speak the Cempaga language, you cannot be a Cempaga person). This statement reflects the strong link between language and ethno-local identity, which is also confirmed by Fishman (1999) as the strongest foundation for language preservation.

The second factor is the continued prevalence of traditional ritual practices. The village of Cempaga has a very busy ritual calendar, with an average of 14 major ceremonies per year,

all of which use the Cempaga dialect as the medium of ritual communication. This finding is consistent with Spolsky (2005) argument that the religious/ritual domain is one of the strongest spheres for preserving a particular language or dialect, as it contains a dimension of sacredness that makes the community reluctant to replace it with another language. The use of the dialect in rituals creates a context of regular and culturally meaningful usage for all age groups.

The third factor is relative geographical isolation. Although this factor is sociologically viewed as a limitation, in the context of language preservation, the geographical isolation of Cempaga Village located 24 km from the center of Singaraja and lacking regular public transport has created a 'protective space' that minimizes pressure from more dominant languages. This finding supports the linguistic ecology perspective (Haugen, 1972), which emphasizes the importance of the geographical environment in shaping language dynamics.

Threats to Dialect Preservation

On the other hand, this study also identified several significant threats that have the potential to accelerate dialect shift. The greatest threat comes from the formal education system. All schools in Cempaga Village and the surrounding area use Indonesian as the primary language of instruction, whilst Lowland Balinese (where taught) is taught as a local content subject. The Cempaga dialect is entirely absent from the formal education system. Analysis of observational data indicates that school-age children (7–15 years) not included in the main sample have shown a significant decline in their command of vocabulary specific to the Cempaga dialect compared to their parents' generation.

The second threat is exogamous marriage with communities outside Cempaga Village. Demographic data collected shows that of the 85 marriages that took place between 2012 and 2022, 31 (36.5%) were to individuals from outside the Cempaga Bali Aga community. Partners from outside the community generally use Indonesian or Lowland Balinese as the medium of communication within the household, which directly reduces the transmission of the dialect to children. This finding is consistent with Suparwa's (2010) study on the shift in the Balinese language in urban communities, which also identified mixed marriages as an accelerating factor.

The third threat is the penetration of digital media. Observations show that 91.4% of informants from the younger generation own a smartphone and actively use social media (Instagram, TikTok, YouTube), the content of which is dominated by Indonesian, followed by Lowland Balinese and English. No digital content was found that made significant use of the Cempaga dialect. This situation places pressure on the values of the Cempaga dialect in the minds of the younger generation. These results reinforce Moseley (2010) findings regarding the relationship between the dominance of digital media in the majority language and the acceleration of the shift in minority languages.

The Vitality Status of the Dialect and Implications for Revitalization

Based on the EGIDS analysis (Lewis & Simons, 2010), the Bali Aga Cempaga dialect is currently at level 7 (Shifting), which means that the older generation still uses it actively, but the younger generation no longer uses it as their first language in all domains. This position signals the urgency of revitalization intervention, as disrupted intergenerational transmission is the most critical symptom of ongoing language extinction.

This study formulates three complementary revitalization strategies. The first strategy is comprehensive linguistic documentation as a foundation: the creation of a Cempaga dialect dictionary, large-scale oral corpus recordings, and a digital archive accessible to the community. The second strategy is integration into community-based education through a locally tailored curriculum for schools in Cempaga, as well as language programs based on apprenticeships with elderly speakers. The third strategy is revitalization through digital media by creating platforms and creative content in the Cempaga dialect that appeal to the younger generation, including podcasts, cultural videos, and interactive linguistic games.

CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that the Bali Aga Cempaga dialect represents a linguistically rich and historically significant variety characterized by distinctive phonological, lexical, and morphosyntactic features, yet its survival is increasingly threatened by modernization, educational marginalization, interregional intermarriage, and the dominance of Indonesian and Lowland Balinese in digital and public domains. Although the dialect continues to be sustained through strong communal identity, ritual traditions, and geographical isolation, its classification at EGIDS Level 7 (Shifting) indicates an urgent need for systematic revitalization efforts involving comprehensive documentation, community-based educational integration, and the expansion of the dialect into digital media spaces. Beyond the local context, the case of Cempaga reflects broader patterns of language endangerment across Indonesia, where many minority languages face structural exclusion from education, governance, and contemporary communication systems. Drawing on the perspectives of Fishman, Spolsky, and Hornberger, this study emphasizes that language loss is not merely a natural process but a consequence of policy and institutional neglect, requiring coordinated intervention at national, regional, and community levels through legal protection, cultural planning, and grassroots revitalization initiatives. Ultimately, the preservation of the Bali Aga Cempaga dialect is not only essential for safeguarding Balinese cultural identity but also for protecting Indonesia's and humanity's broader linguistic and cultural heritage, while future research should focus on intergenerational transmission, comparative vitality among Bali Aga communities, and the effectiveness of revitalization programs.

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