

The Impact of Migration Language on Tolaki Linguistic Identity: A Case Study in Southeast Sulawesi

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the impact of migration-induced language contact on the linguistic identity of the Tolaki community in Moramo, Southeast Sulawesi. Employing a qualitative case study design, data were collected from 15 Tolaki participants through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and field notes. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that migration has intensified language contact and increased the use of the Indonesian language in public and interethnic communication. Although the Tolaki language remains an important marker of ethnic identity, its use among younger generations has declined. Nevertheless, the community continues to maintain its linguistic identity through family communication, cultural practices, and strategic bilingualism. The study concludes that migration reshapes language practices while linguistic identity remains resilient despite growing sociolinguistic challenges.

Keywords: *Tolaki Language, Linguistic Identity, Migration, Language Contact, Language Maintenance*

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INTRODUCTION

Language serves as a fundamental marker of cultural identity, collective memory, and social belonging. For indigenous communities, language is not merely a communication system but also a repository of traditional knowledge, values, histories, and worldviews that are transmitted across generations (Kroskrity, 2018). Linguistic identity refers to the sense of individual and collective identity that is constructed, expressed, and maintained through language use, language choice, and affiliation with a particular speech community. As language reflects membership within an ethnic group, changes in language use may also reshape how individuals perceive and express their cultural identity. However, rapid social transformations associated with globalization, urbanization, and large-scale development projects have increasingly threatened the vitality of indigenous languages worldwide. Recent studies indicate that the loss of intergenerational language transmission remains one of the most critical factors contributing to language endangerment and identity erosion among indigenous communities (Imbang et al., 2025). UNESCO reports that approximately 40% of the world's languages are endangered, with many indigenous languages experiencing declining transmission to younger generations as speakers increasingly shift toward dominant languages in response to changing socioeconomic environments (UNESCO, 2024). Among the factors contributing to this challenge, the expansion of extractive industries such as mining, accompanied by migration and intensified language contact, has emerged as a significant force reshaping linguistic landscapes and accelerating language shift, a process in which speakers gradually replace their heritage language with another language that has greater social or economic value (Nations, 2023).

At the global level, migration has been recognized as a major factor influencing language maintenance and language shift. Increased population mobility has created multilingual communities in which dominant languages frequently gain greater social

functions than indigenous or minority languages (Mouboua et al., 2024). In many regions, migration has transformed linguistic landscapes, resulting in the gradual weakening of local languages and cultural identities. Similar phenomena have been observed across Asia, where rapid social and demographic changes have intensified contact between indigenous populations and migrant communities. Studies in countries such as Malaysia, the Philippines, and India have reported that increased interaction among linguistically diverse groups often contributes to language shift, reduced intergenerational language transmission, and changes in speakers' perceptions of their heritage languages (David, 2014; Mohanty, 2019). These developments demonstrate that migration can significantly influence the sustainability of indigenous linguistic identities.

Indonesia is recognized as one of the world's most linguistically diverse countries, with more than 700 indigenous languages spoken across the archipelago (Eberhard et al., 2024). Despite this richness, many local languages are experiencing declining vitality because of urbanization, increased mobility, and migration-related language contact (Lauder, 2018). The Tolaki language, spoken primarily by the Tolaki ethnic community in Southeast Sulawesi, is one of the region's important indigenous languages and serves as a symbol of ethnic identity and cultural heritage. Although the language remains actively used in some family and cultural domains, recent studies have reported a gradual decline in its everyday use among younger generations, particularly in multilingual settings where Bahasa Indonesia dominates public communication (Sain, 2020). At the same time, Southeast Sulawesi has experienced rapid economic development through the expansion of nickel mining and related industries. These developments have attracted migrants from various regions of Indonesia, creating multilingual communities characterized by intensive language contact. As interaction among people from different linguistic backgrounds increases, Bahasa Indonesia increasingly functions as the common language for education, employment, business, and public communication. Consequently, indigenous languages such as Tolaki face growing pressure as speakers increasingly adopt the national language for everyday interactions, creating conditions that may accelerate language shift.

Moramo Subdistrict represents one of the areas where these changes are becoming increasingly visible. Located within Southeast Sulawesi, Moramo has experienced intensified interaction between the indigenous Tolaki community and migrants associated with mining activities in surrounding areas. The expansion of mining has generated new economic opportunities that attract workers from different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, thereby increasing multilingual communication in neighborhoods, workplaces, schools, and public spaces. Although the Tolaki language continues to symbolize ethnic identity, concerns have emerged regarding its decreasing use in daily communication, particularly among younger speakers who interact more frequently in Bahasa Indonesia. This situation raises concerns that prolonged language contact may gradually shift language practices and weaken the intergenerational transmission of the Tolaki language.

Several studies have investigated related issues. Sain, (2020) found that the Tolaki language continues to function as a marker of ethnic identity, particularly in family interactions, communication among Tolaki people, and traditional ceremonies. However, the study also reported increasing use of Bahasa Indonesia across education, employment, government, and interethnic communication, resulting in younger generations relying more heavily on Bahasa Indonesia in everyday life. Likewise, (Hasnain et al., 2025) demonstrated that migration significantly influences language behavior, with migrants gradually adopting dominant languages as their length of residence increases. Educational opportunities, occupational demands, social integration, and daily communication needs all contribute to this language shift.

Despite these contributions, important research gaps remain. Most previous studies concerning mining-affected communities have concentrated on environmental, economic, or demographic consequences, while the sociolinguistic impacts of migration have received relatively little attention. Likewise, research on indigenous languages in Indonesia has largely examined language maintenance and language vitality without specifically exploring

how migration-driven language contact contributes to language shift and reshapes linguistic identity. Consequently, little is known about how members of the Tolaki community negotiate, preserve, or transform their linguistic identity amid increasing multilingual interaction in mining-affected areas. Addressing this gap is important because language shift not only changes communication patterns but may also influence the continuity of indigenous cultural identity. Therefore, this study seeks to answer the following research question: How does migration-induced language contact affect the linguistic identity of the Tolaki community in Moramo, Southeast Sulawesi? By examining the relationship between migration, language contact, language shift, and linguistic identity, this study contributes to a better understanding of how indigenous communities respond to sociolinguistic changes driven by population mobility and regional economic development.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study design to investigate the impact of migration-induced language contact on the linguistic identity of the Tolaki people in Moramo, Southeast Sulawesi. A qualitative approach was selected because it enables an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, perceptions, and language practices within their natural social context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The case study design was appropriate because the research focused on a specific indigenous community experiencing increasing language contact resulting from migration associated with mining expansion. Through this approach, the study explored how Tolaki speakers perceive, maintain, and negotiate their linguistic identity amid interactions with speakers of other languages.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, as the study specifically sought individuals who could provide rich information regarding the use of the Tolaki language and the effects of migration on their linguistic identity (Patton, 2015). A total of 15 Tolaki participants were recruited based on three criteria: (1) they identified themselves as members of the Tolaki ethnic group, (2) they had lived in Moramo for at least five years, and (3) they had regular interactions with migrants from different linguistic backgrounds. The participants represented a range of demographic backgrounds, including young adults (18–30 years), middle-aged adults (31–50 years), and older adults (over 50 years). Their occupations included farmers, traders, teachers, village officials, homemakers, and university students. Most participants were bilingual, using both Tolaki and Indonesian in daily communication, while several also reported basic proficiency in other local languages acquired through interaction with migrant communities.

Fieldwork was conducted over three months, allowing the researcher to establish rapport with participants, observe everyday language practices, and collect comprehensive qualitative data. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and field notes. The interviews were conducted primarily in Indonesian, with participants encouraged to use Tolaki expressions or code-switch whenever they felt more comfortable expressing their experiences. This flexible approach helped capture authentic language practices while ensuring participants could communicate their perspectives naturally. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was conducted face-to-face at locations chosen by the participants, such as their homes, workplaces, or community meeting places. With participants' informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded using a digital voice recorder, and additional observational notes were documented immediately after each interview to record contextual information, non-verbal communication, and language use during interactions.

Research Setting

This study was conducted in Moramo Sub-district, South Konawe Regency, Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia. Moramo was chosen because the area has experienced an increasing influx of migrants over the past two years, in line with mining activities in the surrounding region, which have led to frequent interaction between the indigenous Tolaki

community and migrants from various linguistic backgrounds. This setting provided a relevant context for examining changes in language use and linguistic identity among Tolaki speakers.

Respondents

The respondents consisted of 15 members of the Tolaki community residing in Moramo. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who met specific criteria: (1) identifying themselves as members of the Tolaki ethnic group, (2) having lived in Moramo for at least five years, (3) regularly interacting with migrant communities, and (4) being willing to participate in the study. The participants represented different age groups, including young adults, middle-aged adults, and community elders, to capture diverse perspectives on language use and linguistic identity.

Table 1. Participants Profile

Participants Code	Gender	Age	Occupation	Length of Residence in Moramo	Frequency of Interaction with Migrants
P 1	Female	24 Years old	Student	24 Years	High
P 2	Female	23 Years old	Student	23 Years	High
P 3	Male	30 Years old	Teacher	7 Years	Moderate
P 4	Female	28 Years old	Teacher	28 Years	High
P 5	Male	37 Years old	Farmer	20 Years	Moderate
P 6	Male	25 Years old	Community Leader	25 Years	High
P 7	Female	30 Years old	Housewife	14 Years	Moderate
P 8	Male	29 Years old	Entrepreneur	5 Years	High
P 9	Female	22 Years old	Student	22 Years	Moderate
P 10	Female	23 Years old	Student	23 Years	Moderate
P 11	Female	33 Years old	Housewife	13 Years	Moderate
P 12	Female	27 Years old	Farmer	27 Years	Moderate
Pt 13	Male	40 Years old	Traditional Leader	30 Years	High
P 14	Female	22 Years old	Student	22 Years	High
P 15	Male	24 Years old	Privat Employee	10 Years	High

Instruments

The Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and field notes. The semi-structured interview guide consisted of open-ended questions addressing participants' language use, perceptions of the Tolaki language, experiences interacting with migrants, and views regarding changes in linguistic identity. Participant observation was conducted to document language practices in various social settings, including family interactions, community gatherings, and public spaces. Field notes were used to record contextual information and researchers' reflections during data collection.

Procedures

Data collection took place over two months. Before data collection, permission was obtained from the local authorities and community leaders. Participants were contacted individually and explained the purpose of the study. After obtaining written consent, semi-structured interviews were conducted in Indonesian. Each interview lasted approximately 30–60 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' permission. In addition, observations were carried out in community settings to examine patterns of language use and interaction. All interviews were transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the procedures proposed by Braun and Clarke (2021). First, the interview transcripts and field notes were read repeatedly to gain familiarity with the data. Second, meaningful statements related to

language use, migration, language contact, and linguistic identity were coded. Third, similar codes were grouped into broader themes. Fourth, the themes were reviewed and refined to ensure consistency with the data. Finally, the themes were interpreted to explain how migration language influences the linguistic identity of the Tolaki people in Moramo.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study presents and discusses the findings derived from semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and field notes collected from members of the Tolaki community in Moramo. The analysis examines how migration-induced language contact influences patterns of language use, shapes perceptions of linguistic identity, and informs language maintenance strategies within the community. Guided by the theoretical perspectives of language shift, ethnolinguistic vitality, and identity negotiation, the findings illustrate how increased interaction with migrant communities has encouraged greater use of Bahasa Indonesia while simultaneously challenging the intergenerational transmission of the Tolaki language.

At the same time, the findings demonstrate that the Tolaki community continues to negotiate and reaffirm its linguistic identity through bilingual practices, family communication, and cultural traditions, reflecting the resilience of indigenous identity despite changing sociolinguistic conditions. Through thematic analysis, three major themes emerged from the data, each corresponding to the study's research questions. Together, these themes provide a deeper understanding of the dynamic relationship between migration, multilingual interaction, language shift, and the preservation of indigenous linguistic identity in a mining-affected community.

Q1: How does migration-induced language contact influence language use among the Tolaki community in Moramo?

The findings revealed that migration associated with mining expansion has significantly intensified language contact between the Tolaki community and migrants from various linguistic backgrounds. As a result, participants consistently reported that Bahasa Indonesia has become the dominant language for communication in public spaces, workplaces, markets, schools, and other interethnic interactions. Although the Tolaki language continues to be used within family settings and among fellow Tolaki speakers, its functional domains have become increasingly limited compared to previous generations. Younger participants, in particular, acknowledged that they preferred using Indonesian because it enabled more effective communication with migrants and non-Tolaki residents.

One participant explained:

"When I talk to people from outside Moramo, I automatically use Indonesian because not everyone understands Tolaki. Even with my friends, we often speak Indonesian although we are all Tolaki." (P2)

Similarly, another participant stated:

"At home we still speak Tolaki with our parents, but outside the house Indonesian is much more practical because many newcomers work here." (P8)

Participant observation further supported these interview findings. During community gatherings, local markets, and public meetings, conversations frequently shifted between Tolaki and Indonesian depending on the linguistic backgrounds of those present. Indonesian consistently functioned as the common language in multilingual interactions, whereas Tolaki was primarily reserved for communication among members of the same ethnic group. These observations suggest that migration has expanded the communicative functions of Indonesian while simultaneously narrowing the social domains in which Tolaki is regularly used.

From the perspective of Language Shift Theory, these findings indicate an ongoing domain-specific language shift rather than a complete replacement of the indigenous language. According to Fishman (1991), language shift commonly begins when speakers gradually adopt a dominant language in public domains such as education, employment, and commerce while continuing to use their heritage language within the family. The present findings demonstrate a similar pattern, where Indonesian increasingly dominates wider communication whereas Tolaki remains largely confined to private and cultural settings.

The findings also reflect changes in the community's ethnolinguistic vitality (Giles et al., 1977). Increased migration and multilingual interaction have strengthened the social and economic value of Indonesian, particularly because it serves as the language of employment, education, and communication among diverse ethnic groups. Consequently, the perceived functional importance of Tolaki has diminished in public contexts despite its continuing symbolic value within the indigenous community.

Moreover, the participants' language choices illustrate a process of identity negotiation Kroskrity (2018). Rather than abandoning their ethnic identity, Tolaki speakers strategically alternate between Indonesian and Tolaki depending on the communicative context. Indonesian is employed to facilitate social integration and interaction with migrants, whereas Tolaki continues to express ethnic belonging, family solidarity, and cultural continuity. This bilingual practice demonstrates that linguistic identity is actively negotiated rather than passively lost in response to migration-induced sociolinguistic change.

Q2: How do Tolaki speakers perceive the impact of migration on their linguistic identity?

The interviews demonstrated that most participants continue to regard the Tolaki language as a central marker of ethnic identity. Respondents emphasized that speaking Tolaki represents membership in the Tolaki community and serves as a means of preserving cultural traditions, ancestral values, and social solidarity. As one participant explained:

For me, speaking Tolaki is more than just using a language. It shows that I am Tolaki and reminds me of our traditions and ancestors. Even if we use Indonesian outside, Tolaki is still our identity." (P4)

Similarly, another participant stated:

"When we gather with family or attend traditional ceremonies, we always use Tolaki. That is how we show respect for our culture and maintain our identity." (P13)

Community elders particularly stressed the importance of maintaining the language because it reflects the history and cultural heritage of the Tolaki people. However, participants also expressed concerns regarding the declining use of Tolaki among younger generations. Several respondents observed that young people increasingly use Bahasa Indonesia in daily interactions, even within family settings. One young participant admitted:

I understand Tolaki because my parents speak it, but I usually answer in Indonesian. It feels easier since most of my friends also use Indonesian." (P9)

These responses suggest that ethnic identity remains strong while language competence gradually weakens among younger generations. The findings indicate that linguistic identity among the Tolaki community is currently undergoing a process of negotiation. While participants maintain a strong emotional attachment to the Tolaki language, practical communication needs have encouraged greater reliance on Bahasa Indonesia.

This finding reflects the concept of identity negotiation, in which individuals continuously reconstruct and express their identities in response to changing social contexts

(Kroskrity, 2018). Rather than abandoning their ethnic identity, Tolaki speakers adapt their language choices according to different communicative situations while continuing to regard Tolaki as a symbol of their cultural heritage. This also reflects the community's ethnolinguistic vitality, where the symbolic value of the heritage language remains strong despite reduced use in broader social domains (Giles et al., 1977). Furthermore, the findings align with (Litaay & Rahawarin, 2023), who found that minority language speakers may continue to identify strongly with their ethnic heritage despite reduced language use. Therefore, migration has not eliminated Tolaki linguistic identity but has transformed the ways in which that identity is expressed, negotiated, and maintained.

Q3: How do Tolaki speakers negotiate and maintain their linguistic identity amid increasing language contact?

The study found several strategies employed by Tolaki speakers to maintain their linguistic identity despite increasing language contact. One common strategy was the continued use of the Tolaki language within family environments. Many participants stated that they intentionally use Tolaki when communicating with parents, grandparents, and relatives to ensure that younger family members remain familiar with the language. As one participant explained:

"At home, I always speak Tolaki with my parents and children because I want my children to know our language. If we stop using it in the family, they will eventually forget it." (P5)

Traditional ceremonies, cultural events, and community gatherings were also identified as important domains where the Tolaki language remains actively used. In addition, participants described the practice of code-switching between Tolaki and Bahasa Indonesia depending on the social context. Rather than completely abandoning their indigenous language, many speakers selectively used Tolaki in situations that reinforced ethnic solidarity while utilizing Bahasa Indonesia for broader communication purposes. One participant described this practice by saying:

"When I meet fellow Tolaki people, I prefer to speak Tolaki because it feels closer and shows our identity. But when migrants or people from different ethnic groups join the conversation, I switch to Indonesian so everyone can understand." (P11)

This bilingual practice demonstrates a flexible adaptation to multilingual realities without necessarily abandoning ethnic identity. From the perspective of Ethnolinguistic Vitality Theory (Giles et al., 1977), these strategies indicate that although Indonesian has gained greater functional value in wider communication, the Tolaki language continues to possess strong symbolic value within the community. Likewise, the participants' strategic use of both languages reflects a process of identity negotiation (Kroskrity, 2018), in which speakers actively adjust their language choices according to social contexts while maintaining a strong sense of ethnic belonging.

Nevertheless, participants acknowledged several challenges to language maintenance, including reduced intergenerational transmission, increasing exposure to Indonesian-language media, and the growing presence of migrant communities. Younger speakers were found to have fewer opportunities to use Tolaki regularly, which may contribute to a gradual language shift if current trends continue.

These findings support previous research on indigenous language maintenance in multilingual societies. According to Mohanty (2019), multilingual communities often develop adaptive linguistic practices that balance heritage language preservation with socioeconomic communication needs. Similarly, UNESCO (2024) emphasizes that intergenerational language transmission remains essential for sustaining indigenous languages. The findings suggest that while migration-induced language contact has introduced pressures toward greater use of Bahasa Indonesia, the Tolaki community

continues to employ various cultural and linguistic strategies to preserve its linguistic identity. Consequently, linguistic identity in Moramo can be characterized as resilient but increasingly challenged by changing sociolinguistic conditions (Zoumpalidis & Bergelson, 2026).

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that migration-induced language contact has transformed the sociolinguistic environment of the Tolaki community in Moramo, Southeast Sulawesi, by encouraging functional bilingualism rather than complete language shift. Bahasa Indonesia dominates public and interethnic communication, while Tolaki remains important for cultural, familial, and identity-related functions. The findings contribute theoretically by highlighting the interconnectedness of language shift, ethnolinguistic vitality, and identity negotiation, showing that linguistic change can represent adaptation rather than simply language loss. Practically, the study emphasizes collaboration among families, schools, community leaders, and local governments to strengthen intergenerational transmission through local curricula, cultural activities, and traditional ceremonies. Language policies should also recognize bilingualism as a resource supporting both Indonesian and Tolaki. However, the study is limited to one Moramo community and a relatively small participant group. Future research should compare urban and rural Tolaki communities, examine other indigenous groups, and employ longitudinal approaches to investigate language maintenance across generations.

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