

Language shift and linguistic insecurity

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Perceptions of variation

In all speech communities linguistic variation is constant and inevitable. Some variation disappears as speakers age, and some results in long-term change, but all change will be preceded by a period of variation (Weinreich et al. 1968). Yet people tend to believe that languages should be static objects within which any change is inherently undesirable. In endangered language communities, this may: i) contribute to negative evaluations of young people's speech by older speakers; ii) exacerbate the linguistic insecurity of younger speakers and heritage L2 learners; and iii) hinder maintenance and revitalization.

Language ideologies

Modern language ideology: “a belief that language is separable from interaction and from people, that languages are complete structures that have inherent characteristics, and that they can...be easy or difficult to learn” (Zentz 2014:341 citing Bauman and Briggs 2003, Kulick 1992)

Ideology of purism: “[P]urism involves conservative attitudes to the minority language and rejection of any effect of language contact or other change” (Bradley 2002:2), even though what some call loss, others call change, transformation, or the development of something new (Odango 2015)

Three generations of ‘language shame’

In many indigenous language loss scenarios, we may see three generations of language shame:

1. The shame of speakers who were punished for speaking their native languages.
2. The shame of the next generation for not using or not being speakers of their heritage language (the pivot generation)
3. The shame placed on young speakers by older fluent speakers for not speaking the language ‘correctly’ (McCarty et al. 2009)

These last two groups have been under-recognized in discussions of language maintenance.

Implications for documentation/revitalization

- Corpora tend to consist of the speech of older, fluent speakers; few if any include samples of children's ordinary language use (Austin, to appear: 11), further devaluing young people's speech
- Educators value adherence to the most traditional variants
 - Maliseet L2 learner-teachers (and even native speakers) frequently ask the documentary linguist to weigh in on the “correctness” of variants offered by students with some home knowledge of the language
- Normal L2-learner anxiety can be multiplied by the special emotional and social pressures of endangered heritage-language learning and by school-based norms of language performance:

“The biggest thing [that helped our program] was [you suggesting] that we didn't have to have tests.” – Maliseet language revitalization activist; program director and L1 speaker

Garifuna in Hopkins, Belize: Maintenance and relative security

- In a situation of perceived language maintenance, Garifuna of Belize (Ravindranath 2009), we also see relative language *security* (i.e. even speakers who are not very good at the language claiming it as their first language).
- Two documented sound changes in progress did not elicit much commentary from speakers (Ravindranath 2009), although the observation that young people are no longer frequent users of Garifuna was common, as exemplified by the following interaction:

Mother: I don't like my kids to play with them. [indicating the neighbor's house]
MA: Why?

Mother: They always talk Kriol. [My daughter] has a friend there, and when they play here I tell them they have to talk Garifuna. They talk it a little, but when they think I'm not listening anymore they go back to Kriol.

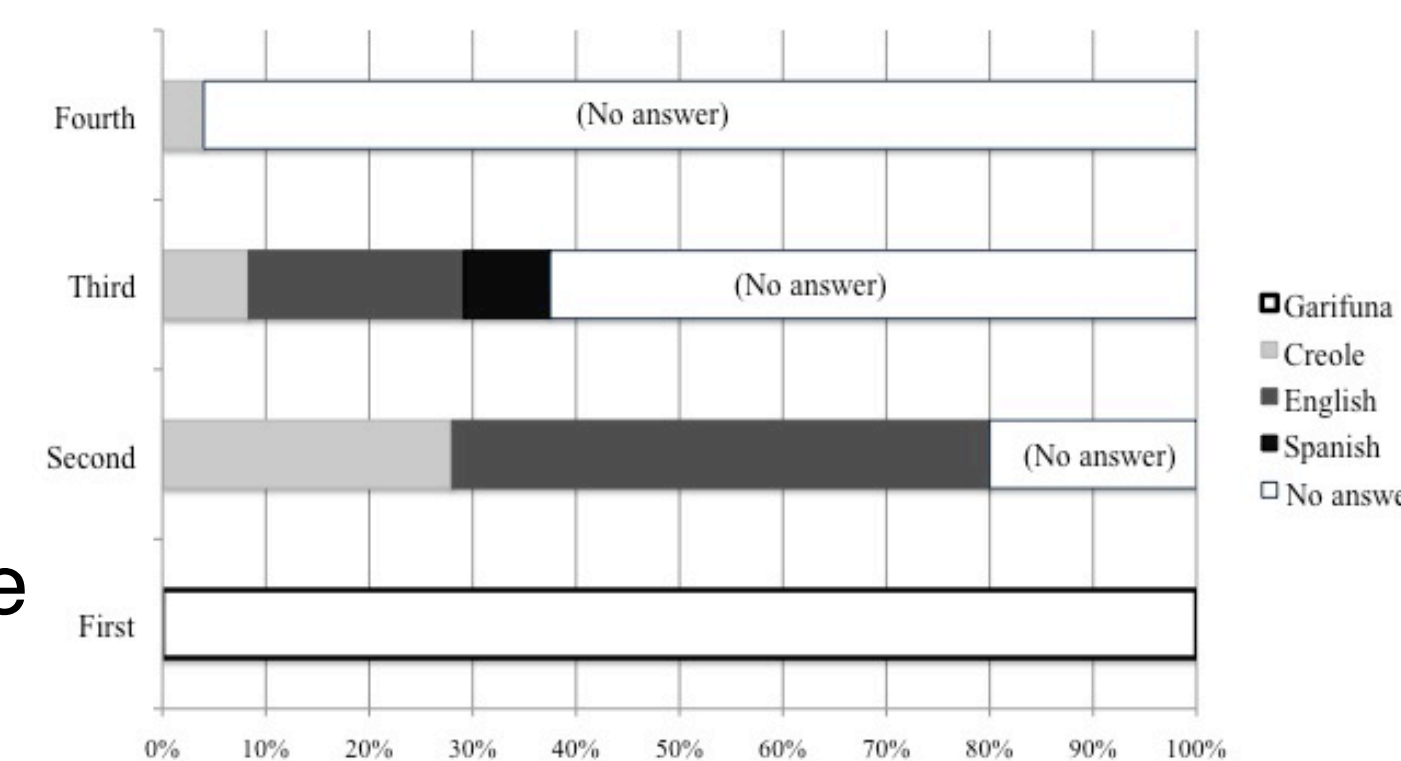


Figure 1. Answer to the question “What is your first language?” by 25 members of the Hopkins (Garifuna) speech community with varying levels of competence

Javanese in Indonesia: speech levels and linguistic insecurity

- Despite large speaker populations, languages like Javanese, Sundanese, and Madurese are losing domains of use to Indonesian (Errington 1998, Adelaar 2010: 25)

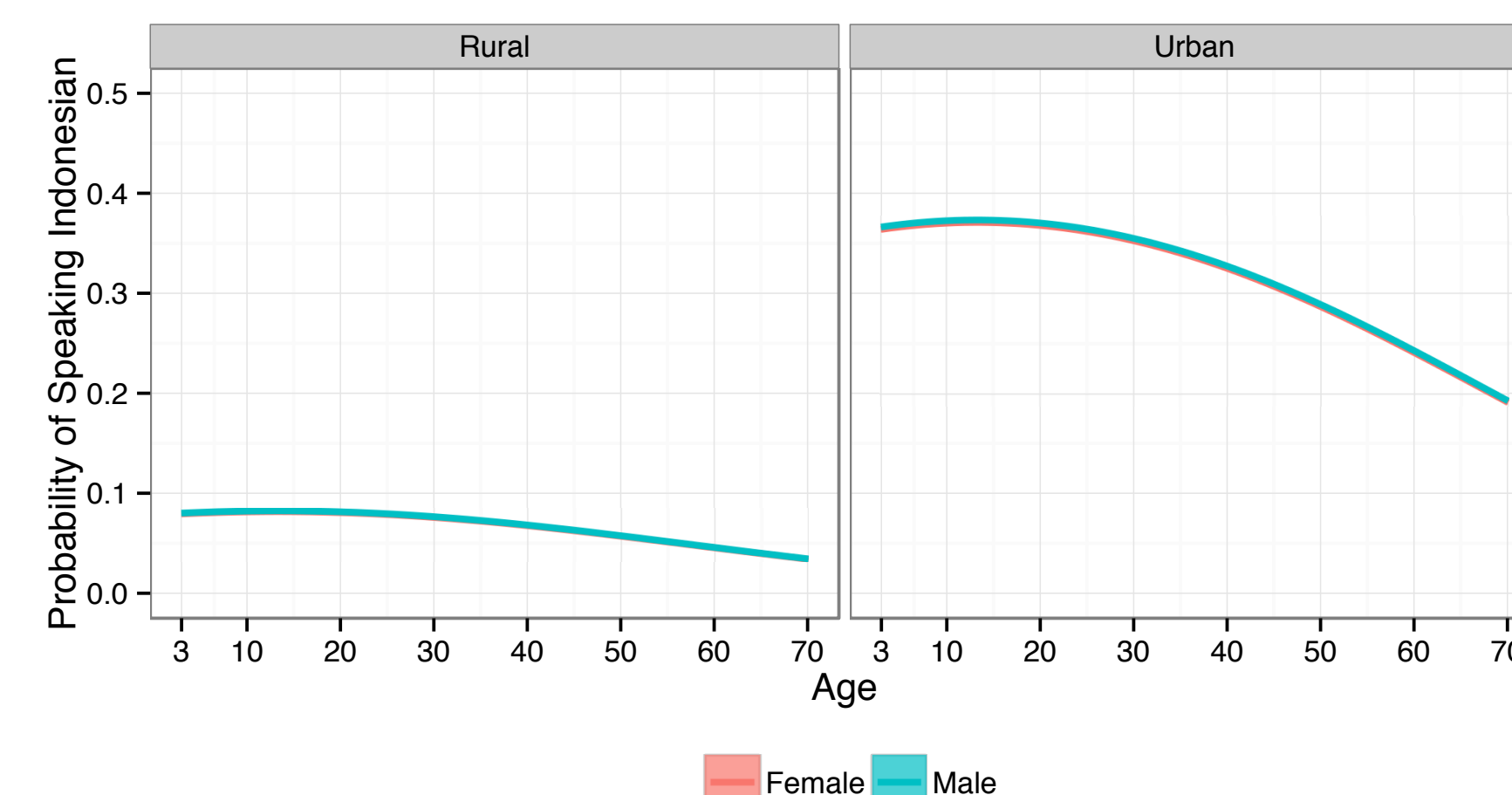


Figure 2. Expected probability of speaking Indonesian instead of local language at home in 10 provinces of Indonesia, including Java, Sunda, and Madura (Ravindranath, Cohn and Pepinsky 2015)

- Insecurity with speech levels given as a reason for shifting to Indonesian:
 - Young people commonly cite a fear of making mistakes and laziness (Smith-Hefner 2009, Setiawan 2012) as reasons for abandoning the use of the high register in favor of either low Javanese (*ngoko*) or Indonesian, both of which are also seen as both “more communicative” and more egalitarian.
 - “[M]any people, aware that they are not very competent at manipulating the levels, simply use the Indonesian language instead of Javanese in contexts where it is necessary to be formal and polite.” (Poedjosoedarmo 2006:117)
 - Young people state that their lack of proficiency in Javanese (*krama*) contributes to a lack of motivation to learn it (Zentz 2014)

Reflections

1. Language revitalization/maintenance depends on communication between different generations of speakers (Fishman 1991). *But* the problem of linguistic insecurity can interfere with intergenerational communication.
2. Documentary linguistics has ‘a concern for supporting speakers and communities who wish to retrieve, revitalize or maintain their languages’ (Austin, to appear: 1-2). *But* documentation often prioritizes the “best” speakers, and so can add to the insecurity of “lesser” speakers.
3. Documenting variation and ***explicitly addressing the perception of variation in endangered language communities*** is a necessary part of documentation and revitalization efforts.
4. The most effective strategy is likely to be explicit discussion about variation & linguistic insecurity among speakers, among learners, and between both groups:

“I didn't realize how much anxiety affected the learning of the language until we started to address the issue [directly]” – Maliseet language revitalization activist; teacher, and L2 learner

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