

Prospects of a Community Based Language Project in the Nasal Speech Community

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Abstract

This paper discusses the prospects of developing a community-based effort during the very initial stages of documentation of the Nasal language, one that represents the needs and desires of the community and one that hopefully leads to sustained language use among Nasal speakers. It does so by reporting on both formal and informal discussions that the author had with Nasal community members in July 2017. In many ways, this sort of project is uncharted territory in Sumatra where there are currently no models for community-based language documentation, and the development of one would be breaking new ground in western Indonesia.

Introduction

The past decade has seen important developments in notions of collaboration and community-based research that have led to more nuanced understandings of the relationship between outsider linguists and communities. There have been reports of collaborative models that empower communities (e.g., Yamada 2007) alongside those that call for a more nuanced understanding of the role the language documenter in light of earlier discussions of collaboration (e.g., Brooks 2013), each from different parts of the world. These studies exemplify what is crucial to community-based or even community-driven language projects, an understanding that there is a diversity of approaches to collaboration and/or the community-researcher relationship based upon the different histories, needs, and cultural expectations of different speech communities (see Dobrin & Schwartz (2016) for an overview of these issues).

In the case of Indonesia, there have been a number of scholars who (directly or indirectly) discuss the nature of collaboration and community-based language documentation and revitalization (e.g., Arka 2007; Florey 2008; Holton 2009; Florey & Himmelmann 2010). These scholars touch upon topics from ethical issues in community-based research to training and capacity building in endangered language communities of Indonesia. Written primarily by outsider linguists who have conducted fieldwork in these communities, these papers have focused on endangered language communities in eastern Indonesia (i.e., Sulawesi and islands east of Lombok). This is not at all surprising given that language communities in eastern Indonesia have smaller speaker populations and their languages are much more likely to be endangered (Florey 2005).

This paper presents a case study of the Nasal speech community, an endangered language community that represents a unique situation in western Indonesia—an

area not known to have a large number of endangered languages—and finds itself in a very different situation than what has been described in eastern Indonesia. More specifically, the paper describes the Nasal speech community and reports on the early interactions between me (the researcher) and members of the Nasal speech community about developing a community-based language project during the very initial stages of documentation.

The paper is organized as follows. It begins with the background of the project, including brief presentations of previous research of the Nasal language and why and how I became interested in documenting the linguistic practices of the Nasal speech community. Then, the paper zooms out to provide a very brief sketch of language ecology and language documentation in Sumatra. Next, within this context in Sumatra, the following section shows how Nasal language ecology is quite different than other languages of Sumatra. Finally, the last section looks at the prospects of a Nasal community in control and is followed by some concluding remarks.

Background

The Nasal [nasal] language (ISO 639-3: nsy, Glottolog: nasa1239), a Malayo-Polynesian isolate spoken by approximately 3,000 people in the southernmost reaches of Bengkulu province in southwest Sumatra, Indonesia, has until recently been overlooked by linguists and remains today the least documented language of Sumatra and its outer islands. The language was first mentioned in Dutch colonial documents as early as 1887 but has been absent from any survey of Austronesian languages in the last century (e.g., Voorhoeve 1955; Foley 1983; Tryon 1995; Adelaar 2010). It was only with the publication of Anderbeck & Aprilani (2013) that Nasal came to be known to linguists. Anderbeck & Aprilani's report, based upon a survey they conducted

in 2007, quite convincingly demonstrates that, despite a large number of apparent loanwords from Lampungic and Malayic languages, Nasal does *not* subgroup with either language group. Rather, Nasal should be classified as a Malayo-Polynesian isolate, at least for the time being.

Having conducted fieldwork in the region where Nasal is spoken since 2007 on Besemah, a dialect of South Barisan Malay¹ (SBM; McDonnell 2016; ISO 639-3: pse, Glottolog: cent2053), I visited the Nasal speech community in November 2014 to seek permission from the community to conduct fieldwork there and in July 2017 began exploratory fieldwork and documentation of the Nasal language. An important component of this exploratory field trip was for me to seek out relationships with key stakeholders in the community that would hopefully lead to a community-based language project. Before embarking on this field trip, I was quite optimistic about the prospects of such a project for the following reasons:

1. I was previously involved in the documentation of Besemah, a dialect with over 500,000 speakers. This large community of speakers proved challenging when attempting to develop a community-based documentation project. This is largely because it was difficult to identify appropriate stakeholders. In some cases, there were well-respected Besemah people who had prestigious positions in the government or at universities, but lived outside of the Besemah community and lacked close connections with community members living in Besemah villages. Nasal, on the other hand, is a much smaller community that covers a much smaller geographical area. Therefore, it would seem to follow that identifying appropriate stakeholders would be much more straightforward.
2. With very similar elements in the cultures of both Besemah and Nasal, I felt that I would be able to draw on my knowledge of Besemah culture to build relationships more quickly and avoid some of the missteps that I took in documenting Besemah. In turn, this knowledge would allow me to begin collaboration from the very initial stages of a Nasal documentation project.

While it is still unclear if the former of these two factors will have an impact on developing a community-based language project, the latter factor did turn out to significantly impact my ability to quickly build collaborative relationships with key stakeholders. However, upon commencing fieldwork, there were

other unforeseeable factors that presented challenges to developing a community-based language project. This will be discussed in the section on “Prospects of Nasal Community in Control”. The next section takes a step back to look at the larger Sumatran context in which Nasal is embedded.

Context

In order to understand the broader context of Nasal, this section presents a very brief discussion of language ecology and language documentation in Sumatra.

Language Ecology in Sumatra

The vast majority of languages spoken in western Indonesia—including Sumatra, Kalimantan, Java, Bali, and Lombok (Himmelmann 2005: 111)—are considered vital (Florey 2005). This is no less true for Sumatra and its outer islands. These languages are typically spoken by large populations of speakers numbering in the tens of thousands (e.g., Kaur), hundreds of thousands (e.g., Gayo), or even millions (e.g., Toba Batak). Aside from Nasal, Florey (2005) notes that a divergent dialect of Malay known as Lom spoken on Bangka island is severely endangered and Enggano—an aberrant Austro-nesian language with an uncertain position within the family (cf. Edwards 2015)—has a small speaker population of 1,500 people and is possibly endangered (Yoder 2011). Additionally, the sociolinguistic situations found in many languages of Sumatra are quite complex; these languages are typically diglossic with Standard Indonesian and other varieties of Malay-Indonesian that serve as regional *lingua franca* (e.g., McDonnell 2008).

However, characterizations of Sumatra—such as the one above—may not fully capture the complexities of the linguistic situations in this region, and despite the appearance of large, vital languages, there appear to be (arguably widespread) processes of dialect flattening and shift to varieties of Indonesian that radiate out from urban centers (e.g., Riau Indonesian; Gil 2010).

Language Documentation in Sumatra

The efforts under a modern language documentation paradigm (i.e., a focus on creating long lasting multi-purpose documentary corpora) to document languages of Sumatra² have primarily been conducted by linguists and community members who have been directly or indirectly associated with the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology Padang Field Station under the leadership of David Gil.³ The model for

¹This group of related dialects have traditionally been referred to as Middle Malay or Central Malay. I have shown that these names are confusing and inaccurate. I thus advocate for the name South Barisan Malay (McDonnell 2016: 12).

²Adelaar (2010) provides an overview of modern descriptive work that has been conducted in Sumatra, and Voorhoeve (1955) provides an overview of earlier work that was conducted primarily by the Dutch during colonial times.

³The Padang Field Station was housed at Universitas Bung Hatta in Padang, West Sumatra Province; it was an extension

documentation at this field station was to employ students at the local university in Padang who come from various areas in Sumatra to collect recordings of speech events in their respective language communities and transcribe, translate, and gloss these recordings at the field station. These students received fairly extensive training and consistent support in linguistic analysis and language documentation. In some cases, students would work with expat linguists who have conducted fieldwork in the community for longer stretches of time (e.g., McKinnon 2011, McDonnell 2016). The impressive amount of data that these projects produced is archived with The Language Archive (Gil *et al.* 2015).⁴ It is noteworthy that only a modest number of these documentation projects appear to be a direct response to language endangerment (e.g., the documentation of Traditional Jambi Malay⁵) and to my knowledge did not have a large community-based component in the documentation. As we will see below, any language project on Nasal will need to take a quite different form.

Language Ecology in Nasal

There is a stark contrast between the Nasal speech community and other language communities in Sumatra and the characteristics that lead to this stark contrast demonstrate the reasons that Nasal should be considered endangered.

First, compared to large language communities of Sumatra discussed above, Nasal has the smallest population of any language community on Sumatra. If Sumatra's outer islands are considered, Nasal is second only to Enggano (see above). Furthermore, Nasal differs from these other endangered language communities because Nasal has not been isolated geographically like Enggano or culturally like Lom (Nothofer 1997). Instead, Nasal finds itself in a more precarious position because it has long been in contact with regionally important Lampungic and Malayic languages. These languages are spoken by communities that combined have more than 1,000 times the number of speakers. Historically, Nasal had been in close contact with the Lampungic languages to the south, and even up until the 1970s Nasal community members traveled to Lampung by boat to attend boarding schools. Presently, intense

contact comes from two Malayic languages, Kaur and SBM. Kaur, the larger of the two, flanks Nasal to the north and south, while SBM flanks Nasal to the west and is additionally interspersed between Nasal villages. This intense contact is exhibited in the fact that an estimated 20 percent of Nasal villages are made up of outsiders (Anderbeck & Aprilani 2013), and I even suspect that this number is much higher in some villages.

Second, compared to other speech communities of western Indonesia, the larger sociolinguistic contexts in which Nasal is spoken and the nature of multilingualism among Nasal speakers is exceptional (cf. Errington 1998). Native speakers of Nasal are universally bilingual in at least one Malayic language. Based on conversations that I had in Nasal in July 2017, Nasal speakers are at the very least bilingual in Kaur, but are most commonly trilingual in Kaur and SBM with various levels of proficiency in Standard Indonesian, which is learned in school and used in formal settings. From a language endangerment perspective, what is concerning is the fact that Nasal appears to be losing ground to these languages through a combination of intermarriage and language shift (see Himmelmann (2010) for a similar scenario in Sulawesi). I routinely came across families where only one parent spoke Nasal. In these situations, children appear to speak to both parents in Kaur. When asked, several parents remarked that these children understood Nasal, but could not speak it. For other Nasal speakers, Nasal is used in the home, Kaur and SBM for interethnic communication, and Standard Indonesian in formal settings. In only exceptional cases is Nasal learned or even understood by outsiders. Those who marry into a Nasal family may understand the language, but it is rare that they ever speak it. Nasal speakers also reported that when a single outsider is in a conversation, they switch to Kaur or SBM. I have not witnessed this sort of accommodation in other communities in southern Sumatra (McDonnell 2008). This is compounded by the fact that Nasal children learn Kaur and/or SBM before attending school. Children in other rural areas in this region typically learn the *lingua franca* during their school years.

Finally, the contexts in which Nasal is spoken appear to be shrinking, and whole genres of traditional songs and stories are no longer known. For example, a specialized genre of storytelling, *Mudo Bemban*, has all but disappeared. Some reported that they are not known by any living speakers, while others guessed that there are a handful of speakers who can recite these stories. I was not able to locate any speakers who knew these stories. This means that there appears to be no traditional songs or stories in the language, and there also appears to be no translations of such songs or stories either.

of the Jakarta Field Station housed at Universitas Katolik Indonesia Atma Jaya. Both field stations have since closed, but information on them and many of the documentation projects that came out these field stations can be found on their website (<https://jakarta.shh.mpg.de/>; last accessed 10 September 2017).

⁴<https://hdl.handle.net/1839/00-0000-0000-0021-10DE-A@view>

⁵https://www.nsf.gov/awardsearch/showAward?AWD_ID=0444649

Prospects of a Nasal Community in Control

This section discusses the prospects of a Nasal community in control based upon my experiences and community members' reactions during an exploratory month-long field trip to Nasal in July 2017. It is obviously too early to draw too many conclusions about the possibilities of a community driven language project in Nasal and often such reflections on work within a community come after years of working in the community (e.g., Dobrin 2008).⁶ However, discussion in the early days of a language project provides a unique opportunity for me as the researcher to be reflexive and lay out the challenges to a community-based or community-driven language project before they reach some sort of resolution. It also lays the foundation for a path moving forward in my efforts to spark community interest and ownership in their language.

Establishing Collaborative Relationships

From the very beginning I sought to develop relationships with key community members that would lead to fruitful collaborations, following the lead of linguists who advocate that collaborative relationships should be worked out from the very beginning of a project (e.g., Leonard & Haynes, 2010). Without a committee on language and/or culture or discernable leaders who could be involved in a language project, I sought to develop collaborative relationships with the community through unplanned, informal interactions at community events and planned meetings with several village leaders. It became immediately clear that it was probably too lofty a goal to expect to start a Nasal language project in which the Nasal community is in control (i.e., a community-driven project). The reason for this stance is that there are to my knowledge no Nasal community members who have either attempted or expressed interest in carrying out language work. I inquired about such community members during my initial visit in November 2014 and found none. In July 2017, I continued to look but again found no one. A more realistic expectation was to begin developing a community-based language project that under the right circumstances may lead to a community-driven project.

In the end, I found the most success in developing collaborative relationships with the community through documenting the language. I found a number of community members who were willing and even enthusiastic at times to assist in the documentation of their language by participating in recordings of everyday speech events and transcription or elicitation tasks. Through their participation in these activities, I had more opportunities for in-depth conversations concerning language work, and more importantly community members had opportunities to see various

aspects of documenting the language and the possible products that could result from this documentation. As mentioned in the "Background" section above, the level of success I achieved in discussing collaborative relationships was only possible because of my experiences documenting Besemah and my knowledge of general cultural factors in southern Sumatra.

Reactions to Inquiries about Language Work

By the end of the field trip, I estimate that I had in-depth conversations with approximately 20 community members, including a formal meeting at the end of my trip with a group of respected Nasal community members. These discussions largely revolved around my questions about what documentary products the community might want or find useful. I proposed ideas like a multilingual dictionary and a 'hub and spokes' model archive where community members could access recordings and associated annotations of speech events and other culturally important events. The reactions to these inquiries were interestingly similar and can be summarized as follows: *we are happy to help you in whatever you would like create*. The most common reaction I received from those with whom I worked most closely was similar; they are interested in joining or following (i.e., expressed as *ikut* 'join, follow' in SBM) whatever I decided to do. Furthermore, I found that Nasal community members were generally very excited to have their recordings archived in England at the Endangered Language Archive (ELAR) and the US at Kaipuleohone Digital Archive, but showed little enthusiasm for a 'hub and spokes' model archive and moderate interest in a Nasal dictionary. This reaction needs further investigation, but on the surface it makes sense in that community members appreciate the prestige that comes from international recognition (i.e., archives) and not necessarily the opportunity to use recordings of speech events to which they already have everyday access.

Challenges to a Nasal Community in Control

There are a number challenges for the Nasal community to create a language project that represents the needs and desires of the community. Some of these challenges are expected in Indonesia, while other challenges are more nuanced and specific to Nasal. The biggest barrier appears to simply be that there is little awareness of the importance of the issue of language endangerment. There is a recognition that Nasal is shifting, but I have not come across community members who are actively engaging in efforts to reverse this change. To compound this issue, Nasal is the only endangered language community in the region, which means that there is not an existing model of a language documentation or language maintenance project. This situation also leaves little opportunity for synergy between endangered language communities. It is noteworthy that many efforts to mentor and build capacity for endangered language communities in eastern Indonesia have found

⁶ My situation may be a bit different since I have extensive experience in this region that began in 2007.

synergistic relationships with surrounding communities, although this is not without its own challenges (Florey 2008: 217).

In my goal to spark interest in this language project, I was not able to identify speech genres of cultural significance, such as traditional stories or songs, that would draw community interest in documentation. In documenting Besemah, I found that there was a turning point in the level of community interest when I discovered a culturally important and disappearing genre of fairy tales called *andai-andai*. When I began to record and transcribe these narratives, I found Besemah community members expressed more interest in the documentation of the language. There were no such opportunities in Nasal.

Finally, a lack of training and capacity that is common for communities in a low resource country such as Indonesia provides a number of challenges that will eventually present themselves in any effort to create a community-based project.

Laying the Foundation for Future Work

To conclude this paper, I would like to mention possible solutions that might spark more community interest in documenting, maintaining, and/or revitalizing Nasal. First, as a number of studies on collaboration have discussed, there are two important ingredients in any language project involving an outside researcher and a community, time and trust (Leonard & Haynes, 2010). Thus, my continued involvement with the community is already a step forward. Second, showing Nasal community members successful documentation projects from Indonesia and elsewhere could potentially spark more interest because it shows what is possible and give community members a better understanding of the usefulness of language documentations. Third, continued evaluation of speech genres of possible interest, such as oral history, could spark considerable interest as it did in the Besemah community when I stumbled upon *andai-andai*, Besemah fairy tales.⁷

It appears to be a consensus that efforts at language maintenance or revitalization depend upon a foundation of the documentation of the endangered language. With little existent documentation, work towards creating solid documentation of Nasal is important for any future projects that seek to maintain or revitalize the language. From this it follows that in the process of documentation, continued community involvement, capacity building, and training will hopefully lead to a more aware and active community that takes ownership over any language project.

⁷ I would like to thank Sebastian Drude for pointing out these latter two points to me.

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