

Post-Tsunami Language Transformation: Redefining Aceh's Linguistic Identity

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Abstract

The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami profoundly reshaped Aceh's linguistic and cultural landscape, accelerating a shift toward the Indonesian language and impacting Acehese cultural identity. This study examines the factors contributing to this linguistic transformation, including disrupted intergenerational transmission, generational language attitudes, and the socio-economic aftermath of the tsunami. Efforts to preserve the Acehese language, such as its inclusion in educational curricula and public spaces, have faced significant challenges, including inadequate government support and resource limitations. This article highlights the urgent need for strategic language policies, community engagement, and cultural preservation initiatives to mitigate language shift and maintain linguistic resilience. By addressing these challenges, Aceh can safeguard its rich cultural heritage and ensure the survival of the Acehese language for future generations.

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1. Introduction

This article explores how the 2004 tsunami prompted a profound linguistic transformation in Aceh, reshaping its cultural identity. By examining the linguistic shifts that occurred in the aftermath, it aims to uncover the factors contributing to the decline of the Acehese language and emphasise the importance of preservation efforts in maintaining cultural resilience. Known for its rich heritage and linguistic diversity, Aceh has long been a melting pot of languages and cultures. However, the 2004 tsunami left lasting scars—not only on Aceh's communities and cultural fabric but also on its economy, infrastructure, and agricultural foundations (Azis et al., 2023).

Historically, the Acehese language has been a cornerstone of the region's cultural identity, reflecting its unique history and traditions. The tsunami, however, brought about significant changes. It is important to understand that language shift is also affected by the attitudes of the community. Aziz, Yusuf, and Aulia (2021) highlight the generational differences in attitudes towards the Acehese language, with a noticeable decline in usage and positive attitudes among the younger generation. Despite this, there is a shared awareness of the importance of maintaining the heritage language, emphasising the need for efforts to preserve Acehese for future generations.

In the immediate aftermath of the tsunami, the Acehese community faced the dual challenge of rebuilding their lives and preserving their linguistic heritage. The disaster not only disrupted daily communication but also led to a blending of languages as survivors from different regions came together. Amid the ruins, the interplay of survival and cultural shifts revealed how deeply intertwined language is with identity and recovery. The 2004 tsunami not only reshaped Aceh's landscape but also

altered its linguistic fabric, sparking a shift in cultural identity that continues to evolve.

2. Literature Review

Historical Context and the Current State of Acehese Language

Indonesia is home to over 580 languages and dialects, with Acehese being the most widely spoken language in Aceh (Seifart, Evans, Hammarström, & Levinson, 2018). Acehese is the dominant local language in Banda Aceh. Tracing the history of language in Aceh, A. Hasjmy in Darwis (2003) noted that the official languages used in the Kingdom of Aceh Darussalam in the 16th century were Acehese, Malay, and Arabic. These languages served as widely used communication tools, each with its own distinct dialects.

According to Idaryani and Fidyati (2022), the current state of the Acehese language reflects significant challenges. While it remains a vital heritage language with strong cultural ties, its usage is diminishing. In certain domains, such as traditional markets and among older generations, Acehese continues to be spoken. However, the language faces a decline in the family domain, as many parents prioritise Indonesian for communication with their children (Zulfadli & Amery, 2016). Aziz and Amery (2016) emphasise that without proactive preservation efforts, the vitality of Acehese is at risk, potentially leading to its classification as an endangered language in the future.

Impact of the 2004 Tsunami

According to Srinivas (2025), the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami caused widespread devastation across many countries, including Indonesia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, India, Somalia, and Yemen. The disaster resulted in a massive loss of life, extensive destruction of infrastructure, and significant environmental damage. Coastal ecosystems such as coral reefs and mangroves were severely affected, and livelihoods in tourism, agriculture, and fishing were disrupted. In Aceh alone, the recorded death toll reached 130,013 people, with 37,066 reported missing. The region was thrown into chaos, with many buildings destroyed and the devastation of agriculture and plantations further exacerbating the economic situation (Azis et al., 2023).

Natural disasters can significantly impact language shift and death by displacing communities and forcing them to migrate to areas where their native language is not spoken. This displacement often leads to a decline in the use of the native language as the community adapts to the new linguistic environment (Hamza, Safari, & Rafat, 2021). Such events highlight the importance of implementing culturally protective public policies alongside climate policies to support endangered languages and cultures (Isa, Ahmed, & Grema, 2014).

Language Shift, Death, and Attitude

Language shift, as described by Fasold (1984, p. 213), occurs when a community transitions from using one language to another in specific contexts and functions, leading to a reduction in the number of speakers of the original language. This phenomenon reflects a significant change in linguistic practices within a group, often influenced by social, cultural, or environmental factors. Language death occurs when a community progressively stops using their native language in favour of another language. Over time, the younger generation may become more proficient in the dominant language and less fluent in their native language, leading to language extinction. According to a study by Isa, Ahmed, and Grema (2014), this often occurs in multilingual societies where a dominant language exerts pressure on minority languages. Other contributing factors include cultural changes, bilingualism, migration, and natural disasters.

As mentioned by Zulfadli and Amery (2016), the preference for Bahasa Indonesia over Acehese and other local languages has led to a significant linguistic shift in Aceh. Many children are now being raised in households where Bahasa Indonesia is their primary language (Idaryani & Fidyati, 2022). This trend underscores the need for deliberate efforts to preserve the Acehese language and safeguard its cultural significance (Aziz & Amery, 2016). Rahmatillah, Syahputri, Rahma, and Fajrita (2021) encourage parents to prioritise using Acehese with their children at home to ensure intergenerational transmission and foster a positive attitude toward the language.

Preservation Efforts and Cultural Resilience

Language preservation is essential because it represents a community's cultural heritage and identity.

As emphasised by Yulia, Jumadiah, and Nasrianti (2019), it plays a crucial role in safeguarding distinctive values and traditions from the impacts of globalisation and modernisation.

Efforts to preserve Acehese, such as teaching it in schools and promoting its use in public, have been largely ineffective due to inadequate support from the government, poorly developed language resources, and a lack of standardisation (Rahmatillah, Syahputri, Rahma, & Fajrita, 2021). For this reason, Idaryani and Fidyati (2022) suggested improving language policies, promoting Acehese in schools and public spaces, and increasing the availability of reading and listening materials in Acehese to strengthen its cultural resilience. While Aziz and Amery (2016) also stress the urgent need for language policies to preserve Acehese, Rahmatillah et al. (2021) focus on the inadequacies in government support and educational resources. These educational sources include an emphasis on competent teachers, relevant materials, and a focus on writing skills.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach to explore the impact of the 2004 tsunami on language shift and the preservation of Acehese. The methodology includes the following components:

i. Research Design:

- i. A case study design was adopted to investigate how natural disasters influence language transformation and cultural resilience in Aceh. This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of the socio-linguistic and cultural dynamics unique to this region.

ii. Data Collection:

- i. Secondary Data: The study relied on existing literature, including historical accounts, government reports, and academic studies, to provide context and support for the findings. Key references include works by Aziz and Amery (2016), Rahmatillah et al. (2021), and Idaryani and Fidyati (2022).

iii. Data Analysis:

- i. Thematic Analysis: Thematic analysis was applied to identify recurring themes in the data, such as attitudes towards the Acehese language, challenges in preservation efforts, and the influence of post-tsunami recovery on cultural identity.
- ii. Comparative Analysis: Comparative analysis was used to examine pre- and post- tsunami linguistic trends, highlighting significant shifts in language use and attitudes.

iv. Ethical Considerations:

- i. As this study is based solely on secondary data, no ethical concerns related to human subjects are applicable. However, efforts were made to accurately represent and credit all sources.

4. Results

The findings indicate that the 2004 tsunami significantly reshaped Aceh's linguistic landscape, accelerating the decline of the Acehese language. This natural disaster disrupted traditional communication practices and social structures, leading to a linguistic shift towards Indonesian. The tsunami not only affected language use but also had broader cultural implications, altering the intergenerational transmission of Acehese and contributing to changes in cultural identity.

Key Outcomes:

- i. **Language Shift** The disaster highlighted a noticeable shift in linguistic preferences, particularly among the younger generation, who increasingly favoured Indonesian over Acehese. The use of Acehese declined in family and social domains, further threatening its vitality.
- ii. **Generational Attitudes** Research revealed generational differences in attitudes toward the

Acehnese language. While older generations continue to value the language as a cultural cornerstone, younger individuals exhibit a decline in both usage and positive attitudes, exacerbating the language shift.

- iii. **Challenges in Preservation Efforts** Despite attempts to preserve the Acehnese language, such as its inclusion in school curricula and promotion in public spaces, these efforts have been largely ineffective. Factors such as inadequate government support, lack of standardization, and limited resources hinder the success of preservation initiatives.
- iv. **Cultural Resilience** Amidst these challenges, there remains a shared awareness of the importance of preserving Acehnese as a key aspect of cultural identity. Efforts to maintain the language are seen as essential to fostering community resilience and ensuring the survival of Acehnese heritage.

5. Conclusion

The 2004 tsunami significantly transformed Aceh's linguistic landscape by disrupting traditional communication patterns and accelerating the shift towards Indonesian. This devastating event not only impacted daily language practices but also altered cultural identity, highlighting the deep connection between language, community resilience, and recovery. In response to the aftermath, strategic efforts were initiated to focus on rehabilitation and reconstruction. These initiatives aimed to restore Aceh's social and economic conditions while preserving its cultural identity and traditional practices, which were essential for fostering recovery and strengthening community resilience (Azis, Nurasiah, Zulfan, Kusnafizal, Fahmi, & Abdar, 2023).

Although the younger generation has a positive attitude towards the Acehnese language, measured and considered steps are necessary to avoid language death due to the shift caused by multiple factors. The post-tsunami period may have contributed to the language shift in Aceh, Indonesia. Research by Isa, Ahmed, and Grema (2014) outlines several steps to prevent languages from dying:

1. **Improving the Living Standard of Rural Areas:** Enhancing the quality of life in rural areas can help maintain the use of local languages by making it more attractive for communities to remain in these areas.
2. **Improving the Living Standard of Poor People:** Raising the living standards of impoverished communities in both developing and developed countries can contribute to language preservation.
3. **Empowering Local People:** Empowering local communities to govern themselves and maintain their way of life can help preserve their languages.

Aziz and Amery (2016) emphasise that efforts to promote and preserve Acehnese require deliberate language policies. Recommendations include integrating Acehnese into education, media, and public spaces, while also developing resources such as storybooks and digital tools to support the language's use.

Implementing these steps can significantly reduce language loss and preserve the unique cultures and knowledge of endangered languages, emphasising the importance of documentation, education, and policy support. In the aftermath of the tsunami, Acehnese resilience emerged not just in rebuilding homes but also in preserving their language and identity. The tsunami's impact on Aceh's linguistic fabric underscores the deep ties between survival, cultural shifts, and identity—an evolving story still being written today.

"Language is not just a body of vocabulary or a set of grammatical rules. A language is a flash of human spirit. It is a vehicle through which the soul of each particular culture comes into the material world. Every language is an old-growth forest of the mind, a watershed, a thought, an ecosystem of spiritual possibilities." (Wade Davis, TED Talks, 2003). This is why preservation efforts to avoid language death are crucial, as languages are more than just tools for communication—they embody unique cultural identities, knowledge systems, and ways of thinking.

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