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The Identity Crisis of Local Languages in Intercultular Communication Practies (an Etnography of Communication Study of The Toli-Toli Tribe in Central Sulawesi)

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Abstract: This study aims to determine and analyze the phenomenon of intercultural communication in creating a local language identity crisis and the extent of the shift in the use of the Toli-Toli language in intercultural communication practices carried out by the Toli-Toli ethnic community in Central Sulawesi. Through a descriptive qualitative perspective, this study is expected to explain the research objectives in detail. Data collection techniques utilized observation, interview, and documentation techniques. Meanwhile, the methods used are Dell Hymes' ethnography of communication method and Stella Ting-Toomey's intercultural identity negotiation theory. The research findings show that the identity crisis of local languages, particularly the Toli-Toli language, amidst the tide of modernization and intercultural communication, is not simply a linguistic issue or loss of vocabulary. It is a complex sociocultural tragedy, in which a community is slowly losing its “home” for its soul and worldview. According to Hymes, the Toli-Toli language is experiencing a crisis because it loses in the ethnography of communication competition. Components of public space, intercultural politeness, and modern content no longer validate the use of the local language. This language is confined only to rigid customary scenes and narrow private spaces. Meanwhile, Ting-Toomey's perspective states that behind this structural shift, there is an inner struggle among young people. In intercultural identity negotiation, they feel culturally vulnerable. Therefore, to be accepted by immigrant groups and obtain a sense of security, they unintentionally sacrifice their local identity.

Keywords: Local Language Identity Crisis, Toli-Toli Tribe, Intercultural Communication.

INTRODUCTION

Language is a structured communication tool consisting of components such as words, word groups, phrases, and sentences presented vocally or in writing. Language is a communication system delivered through the arrangement of sounds or written expressions to build larger units, such as sentences. There are various languages, and each language has a unique grammatical system. In systemic functional linguistics, language as a type of social

semiotics operating within situational and cultural contexts is used orally and in writing (Hidayat & Husnul, 2023).

As one of the most important elements in human life, language functions not only as a means of communication, but also as a marker of cultural identity and selfhood of a community. In Indonesia, known as a multicultural country, there are more than 700 local languages coexisting with Indonesian as the national language. However, not all local languages are able to survive in the current wave of social, political, and cultural changes. Many local languages experience a shift in function and are even on the verge of extinction.

The Department of Education and Culture (Disdikbud) of Tolitoli Regency stated that the Tolitoli language is threatened with extinction. This is because speakers of the Tolitoli language are decreasing or have passed away (Ainun, 2024). The shift in the use of the Tolitoli language cannot be separated from the process of intercultural communication occurring in society. Inter-ethnic marriage, social interaction with immigrants, migration, and the development of communication technology such as social media have created an increasingly intense multicultural interaction space. Under these conditions, the local Toli-Toli language is displaced by other languages considered more practical, prestigious, or having higher economic and social value.

The communication problem occurring in Toli-Toli Regency cannot be understood merely as an ordinary linguistic phenomenon, but rather as a direct implication of a multicultural societal structure. The presence of historical migrant waves has formed a new social stratification that gives rise to majority and minority groups in public spaces. In this context, the culture and ethnic language of immigrants supported by the dominance of economic power and high social mobility—such as the Bugis ethnic group—indirectly position themselves as the "majority" group in daily interaction circulation. Conversely, the native Toli-Toli tribe, although culturally and historically the customary rights owners in the region, is slowly pushed into a linguistic "minority" group in their own land.

This bargaining position imbalance between majority and minority groups triggers serious intercultural communication issues. The adaptation process occurring in the field no longer runs in a balanced or equal manner. There is a subconscious sociopsychological pressure forcing the native Toli-Toli people to always "yield" and adapt to the linguistic code of immigrants or switch to using secular Indonesian for the sake of smooth social pragmatism. Consequently, the space for articulating the local language is increasingly constricted. When a regional language loses its public stage due to the dominance of social structures, it not only stops being produced orally, but also erodes the pride and emotional attachment of its users. This asymmetric dynamic between majority and minority in interaction spaces is the primary root of the collapse of cultural vitality and triggers a massive local language identity crisis among the Toli-Toli tribal community.

Language holds an important position as a symbol of identity. According to Fishman (1991), the loss of a regional language means the loss of traditions, ways of thinking, and unique cultural value systems. Thus, the Toli-Toli language crisis is not merely a linguistic problem, but also a crisis of cultural identity for the Toli-Toli community.

Intercultural communication in the context of a multi-ethnic society like Toli-Toli brings a dual impact. On one hand, it can enrich the experience of social interaction, open space for social integration, and strengthen cohesion among ethnic groups. On the other hand, intercultural communication can also cause cultural dominance processes, which in the case of Toli-Toli is visible through the shift from using the local language toward dominant ethnic languages such as Indonesian and Bugis.

Indonesia as a multicultural country possesses local language diversity. This diversity is a national wealth that must be preserved, because every regional language holds a distinct worldview, history, values, and local knowledge. However, in an increasingly open, modern, and interconnected society, many local languages experience functional shifts. Regional

languages previously used in family, social, and customary life are gradually replaced by Indonesian or other languages considered more dominant, more practical, and more advantageous socially and economically.

One regional language facing this issue is the Toli-Toli language. The use of the local language is diminishing in Toli-Toli community life, especially among the younger generation. The Toli-Toli language is no longer used fully in everyday conversation; even in several social interaction spaces, it appears only in specific situations, such as customary ceremonies, family gatherings, or ceremonial activities. Meanwhile, in inter-ethnic interactions, trade, education, and work environments, people more frequently use Indonesian or other languages that dominate the public sphere.

This shift cannot be separated from the social and economic changes occurring in society. Toli-Toli as an area with intense inter-ethnic interaction makes cross-cultural communication a part of daily life. Trade activities, employment relationships, population movement, inter-ethnic marriages, and the need to adjust to broader social environments encourage the Toli-Toli community to use languages considered easier for all parties to understand. In this context, dominant languages such as Bugis or Indonesian are often prioritized because they are viewed as more effective in economic activities and social transactions.

This situation shows that the local language is not only experiencing a decline in usage, but also a weakening of its identity function. A language that should serve as a symbol of pride and ethnic membership is instead positioned as less relevant in modern life. In the long run, this condition can trigger a local language identity crisis—a situation where a community no longer regards its own language as an essential part of its identity. This crisis impacts not only linguistic aspects, but also cultural continuity, social solidarity, and the transmission of local values to subsequent generations.

This phenomenon is compelling to study deeply through an ethnography of communication approach. This approach enables researchers to understand how the Toli-Toli community interprets their own language, how intercultural communication practices affect language choices, and how economic factors, trade, and social interaction shape changes in local language identity. Thus, this study is essential to uncover more deeply why the Tolitoli language experiences functional decline and how society responds to this condition in daily life.

The research questions in this study include: (1) How can the phenomenon of intercultural communication create a local language identity crisis in the Toli-Toli tribe? (2) To what extent is the shift in the use of the Toli-Toli language in intercultural communication practices carried out by the Toli-Toli community? (3) What factors cause the local language identity crisis in the Toli-Toli tribe within a multicultural environment? The purpose of this study is to answer all research questions deeply to enrich intercultural communication and sociolinguistic studies.

METHODS

This study was designed with an interpretative qualitative perspective emphasizing the understanding of meaning behind social phenomena. This perspective was chosen because the study does not aim to measure or count symptoms, but rather to explore the experiences, views, and meanings living within the consciousness of the Toli-Toli community regarding their local language. Language in this study is viewed not merely as a communication tool, but as a cultural symbol closely linked to community identity and selfhood.

Within the philosophical framework of science, this research is grounded in the constructivist paradigm. This paradigm believes that social reality is not single and objective, but formed through human experience and interaction. Therefore, the Toli-Toli language identity crisis is understood not simply as a linguistic fact or statistical decline in speaker

numbers, but as a reality constructed through intercultural communication and interpreted differently across generations and social groups.

Based on the phenomenon of declining local language usage in daily life, this study applies the Ethnography of Communication method pioneered by Dell Hymes. This approach is used to examine how language is practiced, negotiated, or abandoned in cross-generational and cross-cultural social interactions. To analyze communication activities in detail, this study outlines discrete communication units through the SPEAKING components (Setting and Scene, Participants, Ends, Act Sequence, Key, Instrumentalities, Norms, and Genre). Furthermore, to analyze individual psychological and social struggles in maintaining or relinquishing linguistic identity, this study utilizes the Intercultural Identity Negotiation Theory developed by Stella Ting-Toomey, focusing on three layers of identity: personal identity, relational identity, and cultural identity.

The research location was situated in Toli-Toli Regency, Central Sulawesi Province, a strategic coastal area possessing a complex history of multiculturalism due to migration flows and intense inter-ethnic interactions. Research subjects were selected using a purposive sampling technique to obtain deep information from key stakeholders understanding the phenomenon. Research informants included native Toli-Toli people (older generation or elderly), Toli-Toli youth, traditional leaders (as social actors providing comparative data regarding ideal value structures), as well as immigrants from the Bugis and Manado ethnic groups who influence daily communication dynamics.

Data sources in this study were classified into two types:

1. Primary Data: Obtained directly in the field through three primary data collection techniques:

a. Participant Observation: The researcher directly observed daily interactions in family, social, market, and customary settings to observe language used in specific situations.
b. In-depth Interviews: Conducted face to face using semi structured guidelines with open-ended questions to explore informants' subjective experiences, views, and meanings regarding the language identity crisis.
c. Documentation: Covered historical records of the Toli-Toli language, relevant agency archives, local regulations, cultural manuscripts, photographs, and field notes.

2. Secondary Data: Supporting data obtained from literature, textbooks, scientific journals, theses, and official documents related to the research focus. Data analysis techniques followed Miles and Huberman’s interactive model through three main stages:

a. Data Reduction: The process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, and organizing raw data from observations, interviews, and documentations relevant to intercultural communication and language identity crisis, while setting aside irrelevant data.
b. Data Display: Organizing reduced data into descriptive narratives and systematic presentations so that patterns among actors, situations, and language shifts are clearly visible.
c. Conclusion Drawing and Verification: Formulating initial conclusions continuously verified throughout the research using source triangulation, member checks, and deep reflection to ensure finding validity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

General Overview Of Research Location: Georaphic, Demographic, And Multicultural Profile Of Toli-Toli Regency

Toli-Toli Regency, situated in the northern coastal region of Central Sulawesi Province, is a strategic area dominated by coastline and hilly terrain, making it a magnet for maritime trade activities since ancient times. Demographically, this region has developed into a

multicultural ecosystem inhabited by diverse ethnic groups such as Bugis, Makassar, Javanese, Balinese, Mandar, Gorontalo, and local tribes like Lauje. The regional characteristics are mapped into three main typologies:

1. Coastal and Urban Center Areas (such as Baolan District): Dominated by immigrants and serving as economic hubs, resulting in the total marginalization of the mother tongue (Toli-Toli language) in public spaces.
2. Lowland and Agricultural Areas: Serving as transmigrant residential pockets where selective assimilation occurs and the local language survives limitedly within native households.
3. Mountainous and Hinterland Areas: Relatively isolated, where mother tongue usage persists as a pillar of cultural identity.

Linguistic Dynamic Composition in Toli-Toli Public Spaces

The name Toli-Toli originates from the word "Totolu" (three) from the legend of three heavenly humans (Olisan Bulan, Bumbung Lanjat, and Ue Saka). The linguistic landscape in urban public spaces of Toli-Toli, such as store signs, advertising billboards, and government offices, almost entirely uses formal Indonesian or popular slang. In formal and informal sectors (such as ports and markets), Indonesian and Bugis dominate as lingua franca, pushing the Toli-Toli language to the periphery and triggering a massive linguistic crisis.

The curent linguistic dynamics in the public sphere of Toli-Toli Regency reveal a clear phenomenon of the marginalization of the local language (the Toli-Toli language). If one travels along the main thoroughfares, through government centers, educational institutions, or even traditional markets, the languages that dominate the auditory landscape are Indonesian, spoken with a distinct local Sulawesi dialect, or the Bugis language. The Toli-Toli language, as a mother tongue, appears to be "submerged", having lost its primary stage in its own native land, it has been displaced by the languages of the majority or by those perceived to be more functional.

Intercultural Communication Phenomena Creating Local Language Identity Crisis

Political and historical transformations from kingdom systems to the regional autonomy era inherited a hierarchical social structure where Indonesian and immigrant languages are associated with modernity and progress, while the Toli-Toli language is identified as peripheral. Long term migration flows and interethnic marriages (exogamy) demand native communities perform pragmatic adaptation, voluntarily relinquishing their linguistic code for smooth social interaction with economic dominating immigrant groups.

Factors Influencing Communication Practies In Toli-Toli Multicultural Society

Intercultural communication practices in Toli-Toli are shaped by five crucial factors:

1. Customary Factor: Customary rules and local language politeness (tuntung) are confined only to formal rituals, losing binding power in public spaces.
2. Language Factor: Linguistic asymmetry where external languages carry higher prestige value.
3. Historical Factor: Collective memory of sea trade forms an accommodative attitude among natives who often sacrifice linguistic defense.
4. Cultural Factor: The influx of popular culture and peer interaction fosters a stigma that the local language is "outdated".
5. Religious Factor: Religious institutions use Indonesian to embrace heterogeneous congregations, separating spiritual values from the mother tongue.

Language Use Practies Across Various Domains

Domestic Domain (Family and Neighbors): Young families tend to habituate children to use Indonesian early on for smooth formal education, breaking mother tongue transmission and creating intergenerational communication gaps.

Public Domain and Economic Activities: In traditional markets and workplaces, Indonesian and Bugis become rational choices to facilitate economic transactions and social mobility.

Ritual, Customary, and Religious Domains: Customary domains remain the sole refuge for refined Toli-Toli language, yet its nature is limited and purely ceremonial, where young generations become passive spectators without understanding its philosophical meaning.

Implications of Language Identity Crisis on The Preservation of Toli-Toli Cultural Values

The long term implications of this linguistic identity crisis pose a severe threat to the survival of the Toli-Toli culture as a whole, given that language serves as the primary vessel for an entire cultural system. Should the Toli-Toli language go extinct, the full array of local wisdom, value systems, and philosophies of life, all embedded within its vocabulary, will vanish along with it. The future of the Toli-Toli culture is at risk of losing its soul, leaving behind nothing more than an empty shell, such as traditional dances or attire, stripped of any profound philosophical meaning.

Furthermore, one of the primary implications of a language identity crisis is the weakening of the intergenerational transmission of culture. When a regional language is no longer used within a family, the process of passing down cultural values becomes increasingly limited. This language identity crisis also results in a diminished understanding of oral traditions among the younger generation. Oral traditions, such a folklore, customary expressions, and ancestral wisdom, constitute an essential part of cultural heritage. Most of these traditions are conveyed through regional languages, and their original meaning is often lost or altered when translated into another language. Consequently, the younger generation tends to perceive these traditions merely as ordinary stories, failing to grasp the moral values embedded within them.

DISCUSSION

When analyzed using Dell Hymes SPEAKING model, it is found that Setting and Scene restrict the Toli-Toli language strictly to private or rigid ceremonial spheres, while multicultural public spaces are controlled by external languages. In the Participants component, immigrant involvement forces native speakers to yield (Ends pragmatic goals) to achieve mutual understanding without conflict. Instrumentalities show that digital media entirely uses national/global language, while Norms and Key record social stigma making youth embarrassed to speak the local language openly.

Based on Intercultural Identity Negotiation Theory by Stella Ting-Toomey, native speakers, especially the youth, face a psychological dilemma between maintaining cultural identity or adopting a new social identity for security, self esteem, and inclusive inclusion. Speaking local language is often stigmatized as “country bumpkin”, whereas Indonesian or modern dialects provide social prestige. This negotiation involves three layers: personal identity (self-view of language), relational identity (language in family/social relations), and cultural identity (ethnic group belonging). Due to cultural vulnerability, negotiations consistently favor adopting dominant languages to avoid social exclusion.

There is a linear correlation between regional multicultural conditions, immigrant dominance, and daily language shifts. Heterogeneous structures demand pragmatic unifying tools, where economically stronger immigrant groups hold high bargaining power to maintain their original speech codes. Consequently, intercultural communication in Toli-Toli is

functionally pragmatically effective (smooth economic and bureaucratic transactions without conflict), but socioculturally ineffective as it sacrifices local language existence and triggers mindless communication among youth.

These two approaches, those of Dell Hymes and Stella Ting Toomey, complement each other in analyzing the identity crisis surrounding the local language of Toli-Toli. The etnography of communication sheds light on how the Toli-Toli community uses it language, the contexts in which it is employed, and how communications patterns have evolved over time. Meanwhile, the intercultural identity negotiation theory explains why such changes occur. In this study, these shifts take place because individuals continuosly adjust their cultural identities to meet the demands of a broader social environment. Consequently, the identity crisis concerning the local language of Toli-Toli can be understood not merely as a decline in language usage, but as a process of cultural identity transformation resulting from the interplay between local values and the influence of more dominant cultures.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

The local language identity crisis, specifically the Toli-Toli language, amidst modernization and intercultural communication is not merely a linguistic issue or loss of vocabulary, but a complex sociocultural tragedy where a community gradually loses the "home" for its soul and worldview. Based on Dell Hymes ethnography of communication analysis, the Toli-Toli language experiences a crisis because it loses in public space competition, intercultural politeness, and modern content, remaining confined to rigid customary domains and narrow private spaces. Meanwhile, through Stella Ting-Toomey's Identity Negotiation Theory, behind this structural shift lies an inner struggle of the younger generation feeling culturally vulnerable, sacrificing their local identity without full awareness to gain security and acceptance from immigrants. Preserving the Toli-Toli language does not mean closing off from immigrants, but firmly asserting that local cultural roots must remain alive as the breath and soul of the community.

Limitations

This study is limited in scope to inter-ethnic communication dynamics and language identity crisis within Toli-Toli Regency, findings cannot be fully generalized to other multicultural contexts outside the region. Additionally, the qualitative ethnography of communication method focuses on depth of subjective meaning and daily social interaction, not covering statistical measurement of vocabulary extinction rates.

Recommendations

1. For Families: The home must serve as the final fortress for the mother tongue. Parents should consistently use the Toli-Toli language in daily domestic communication as a sacred space for cultural value transmission.
2. For Youth and Society: Campaign that speaking Toli-Toli in public is not "uncouth", but a proud symbol of tribal identity. When interacting with immigrants, locals can introduce basic Toli-Toli vocabulary to foster equal cultural dialogue.
3. For Government and Stakeholders: Strengthen implementation of Toli-Toli Regency Local Regulations through institutional infrastructure support, local content teacher training, and public space provision validating regional languages.

Author Contributions

The author independently and systematically compiled the entire substance of this research, including problem formulation, data collection via observation and interviews, data analysis using Dell Hymes and Stella Ting Toomey frameworks, and drafting the manuscript.

AI Disclosure Statement

The author declares that Artificial Intelligence was used purely as a technical tool for refining grammar, aligning writing structure with the IJAM journal template, and translating/summarizing thesis content into scientific article format. The author thoroughly reviewed and revised all content and takes full responsibility for the publication.

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