



Local Language as Social Capital: A Sociolinguistic Study in Building the Cohesion of a Multicultural Society

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Abstract

Local languages are one of the important instruments in building social cohesion in a multicultural society. In Indonesia, regional language diversity not only functions as a means of communication, but also as social capital that strengthens social ties, collective identity, and solidarity between citizens. This study aims to analyze the role of local languages in building the cohesion of multicultural communities through a sociolinguistic perspective. The research was conducted with a qualitative approach through literature studies, text analysis, and comparative studies of several practices of using local languages in social interactions. The results of the study show that local language is a symbol of identity that strengthens a sense of belonging in a certain community as well as a means of identity negotiation in a multicultural context. On the other hand, local languages play a role in building social networks based on common beliefs and norms that strengthen social solidarity. However, challenges arise when local languages experience a decline in function due to the dominance of national and global languages. Therefore, the preservation of local languages through education, media, and cultural activities needs to be strengthened to maintain its role as social capital. This study emphasizes that local languages are not only cultural heritage, but also a strategic instrument to strengthen social cohesion in the midst of the plurality of Indonesian society.

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Introduction

Indonesia is one of the countries with the largest diversity of regional languages in the world. It is estimated that there are more than 700 regional languages spread across thousands of different islands, tribes, and cultural groups (Paauw, 2009; Arka, 2013). This diversity is not only a cultural aspect, but also a social aspect that greatly determines identity, intergroup relationships, and social cohesion in a multicultural society (Syam et al., 2023; Ahmad & Sabri, 2022). Local languages, namely varieties of languages used in certain communities, can be a strong social capital, if maintained and used in various domains of people's lives (Arka, 2013; Kolaka, 2021).

In social capital theory, social cohesion is described through aspects of beliefs, shared norms, social networks, and interactions that allow cooperation between members of society (Putnam, 1995; Claridge, 2018). Local language can strengthen these dimensions because it is a symbol of cultural identity and as a means of direct and intimate communication between community members (Reflection on Social Cohesion of Sasak Speakers, 2013; Syam et al., 2023). For example, research on the Sasak people shows that a number of traditional linguistic expressions are still used in everyday social situations, thus reinforcing the values of norms and behaviors that create community cohesion.

However, globalization, urbanization, and the dominance of national languages (Indonesian) and foreign languages (especially English) have put significant pressure on the survival of local languages. Many regional languages have experienced a decline in active users, especially among the younger generation, who tend to choose languages that are considered more "prestigious" or have higher economic opportunities (Saepulmilah et al., 2025; Arka, 2013).

The study "Dynamics of Language Interaction in Multicultural Urban Communities" by Syam, Seli, and Abdu (2023) highlights how citizens in multicultural urban communities navigate the use of local languages, national languages, and foreign languages based on identity factors, social power, stereotypes, and cultural norms. They found that despite the pressure on local languages, there is still room to preserve them through cultural activities, intergenerational communication, and local media.

In addition, other local research such as the study on the preservation of the Mekongga language in Kolaka shows that folklore and language use in family and school environments are important pathways in keeping the local language alive.

Furthermore, research on Indonesia's pluralism and multiculturalism reveals that regional languages should not be considered as a barrier to national unity, but rather as part of a local identity that gives color and richness to the nation's shared experience (Saepulmilah et al., 2025). In the context of language policy, debates continue on how to maintain a balance between the use of Indonesian as a unifier and regional languages as an expression of local identity without marginalization.

An empirical study in Karimunjawa (in the study "Navigating Interethnic Harmony and Social Cohesion in Indonesia") shows that despite linguistic assimilation into majority languages such as Javanese or Indonesian, minority groups such as Bugis still retain their mother tongue in their families and local traditions as a form of cultural identity. The role of the head of the family, cultural rituals, and oral traditions are important factors in the preservation of the local language.

In addition to identity and togetherness, local languages also play a role in building trust between community members and shared social norms. Through local languages, communication becomes more familiar, cultural nuances can be conveyed, and community members can feel that they are understood in depth. The expression of local language in rituals, expressions of kinship, rhymes, proverbs, and informal contexts reinforces a sense of solidarity. Studies of Sasak, Mekongga, and other areas show that local vocabulary and expressions related to social values (such as gotong royong, mutual respect, please help) are still widely used and seen as markers of community membership (Reflection on Social Cohesion of Sasak Speakers, 2013; Mekongga Local Language Maintenance, 2021).

However, there are also challenges: changes in lifestyles, migration of people to cities, as well as the existence of mass media and formal education that use Indonesian or foreign languages as the main language, have also caused local languages to lose space in formal communication, education, and employment. Many young people perceive local languages as impractical or associated with negative stereotypes. The research "Pluralism and Multiculturalism in Indonesia" by Saepulmilah et al. (2025) states that many regional languages are potentially threatened due to the lack of support from school curricula and the lack of local materials in popular media.

Government and community policies are also beginning to realize the importance of preserving local languages. Several efforts have been made such as including regional languages in the local curriculum (local content), documenting languages and folklore, encouraging the use of local languages in cultural festivals, local media, and integrating local languages in informal education in the community. For example, research on Mekongga language maintenance shows that folklore is used in family environments, children's associations, and schools as a means of maintaining the local language (Mekongga Local Language Maintenance, 2021).

One of the relevant conceptual frameworks is social identity theory and social capital theory. According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), individuals tend to identify with groups that they consider themselves part of, and language is one of these elements of identity. Local language allows individuals to build a strong group identity, which in many cases helps to strengthen the group's internal bonds and sense of solidarity with other group members (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Syam et al., 2023).

Social capital theory (Putnam, 1995; Claridge, 2018) then links networks of beliefs and norms built through local languages as a means of building social cohesion and cooperation, especially in communities with different ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. Local languages, as social capital, are not only cultural heritage but also assets that can be used to strengthen social bonds in multicultural societies.

Empirical studies show that in some areas, local languages are still actively used in informal domains such as in homes, markets, traditional rituals, and cultural festivals, but are almost never used in formal domains such as government or higher education institutions except as local materials. For example, a study in Kolaka shows that the Mekongga language is used as folklore in family and school settings, but is rarely used in the teaching and learning process in formal schools except as local content.

Thus, it is important to further research how local languages can function as social capital in building the cohesion of a multicultural society. The questions include: How is the

practice of using local languages in interactions between ethnic groups and generations? How do local languages contribute to collective identity and shared social norms? What is the role of formal (schools, local governments) and non-formal institutions (families, indigenous communities, local media) in supporting local languages to remain a means of cohesion? And how do external factors such as migration, urbanization, and digital media affect these dynamics?

This study aims to answer these questions through a sociolinguistic perspective, focusing on the use of local languages as social capital in building cohesion in Indonesia's multicultural society. With a deeper understanding, it is hoped that effective policy and practice recommendations will be obtained for the preservation of local languages and the strengthening of social cohesion in this global and digital era.

Methods

This study uses a qualitative approach with literature study methods and sociolinguistic analysis. The main data sources come from academic literature, research reports, and journal articles that discuss local languages, social capital, and the cohesion of multicultural communities. The analysis was carried out through a systematic search of key concepts, local language use practices in various communities, and challenges that arise in the context of globalization.

The research stage begins with the identification of problems, namely the reduced function of local languages in daily life and its impact on social ties. Furthermore, secondary data collection from relevant publications was carried out, including sociolinguistic research in various regions in Indonesia. The collected data was then analyzed using a thematic approach, focusing on three main dimensions: (1) local language as a collective identity, (2) local language as an instrument for building social networks and beliefs, and (3) local language as a medium for preserving cultural values.

The validity of the study was strengthened through triangulation of literature from various disciplines, such as sociology, anthropology, and linguistics. In this way, the analysis is not only limited to linguistic aspects, but also includes the social dynamics that surround the use of local languages. This method was chosen so that the results of the study were able to provide a comprehensive picture of the strategic role of local languages as social capital in building the cohesion of multicultural communities in Indonesia.

Results and Discussions

The results of the study show that local languages have a strategic position in building the cohesion of multicultural communities, both through the dimensions of identity, social networks, and the inheritance of cultural values. Analysis of various literature and empirical research shows that local languages are still an important instrument in strengthening a sense of togetherness, trust, and solidarity among diverse groups of people. However, the position of local languages is currently facing serious challenges due to the dominance of national languages, globalization, and changes in the lifestyles of the younger generation. Therefore, the discussion was directed to three main themes: (1) local languages as a symbol of identity and social cohesion, (2) local languages as social capital in networks of

trust and collaboration, and (3) challenges and strategies for preserving local languages in the midst of globalization.

First, local languages serve as a symbol of collective identity that strengthens social cohesion. Linguistic identity has an important role in building group awareness and emphasizing a sense of belonging. For example, the Bugis, Javanese, Batak, or Sasak people still associate the local language with their cultural identity. Language is not only a means of communication, but also a marker of who they are and what community they come from. In sociolinguistic contexts, local languages are often seen as "boundary markers" that distinguish one group from another as well as a bridge in multicultural interactions. Studies of the Sasak people in Lombok show that distinctive linguistic expressions, such as proverbs and traditional expressions, are still used in traditional events to affirm social norms and strengthen community cohesion. This confirms that local language is not just a symbol, but also a medium for internalizing values.

An identity built through the local language creates a sense of pride and solidarity among community members. In cultural events, traditional ceremonies, or everyday interactions, the use of local languages signals membership in a particular community. The more often the local language is used in diverse social domains, the stronger the social bonds form. This linguistic identity also serves as a mechanism of resistance to cultural homogenization due to globalization. Thus, local languages can be seen as a fortress of identity defense in an increasingly pluralistic society.

Second, local languages play a role as social capital that strengthens networks of trust, collaboration, and solidarity. Social capital theory emphasizes the importance of networks, norms, and shared trust in facilitating social cooperation. Local languages, as a more intimate and familiar means of communication, allow for the formation of social relationships based on trust. In many communities, the use of regional languages shows emotional closeness, openness, and trust, which is different from interactions using more formal and distant national or international languages.

In economic contexts, local languages are often used in community-based transactions. For example, traditional traders trust partners who speak the local language because they are perceived to have a higher emotional bond and sense of responsibility. In the context of local politics, regional languages can be used to rally community support, as local languages create a sense of familiarity and closeness that is difficult to obtain through official languages. Meanwhile, in the social context, local languages strengthen the practice of mutual cooperation, village deliberation, and other collective work, because the same language facilitates coordination and fosters a sense of togetherness.

In addition to strengthening internal social networks, local languages also play a role in building bridges between ethnic groups in multicultural societies. In everyday interactions, groups of different languages often negotiate their identities through the use of code-switching or language borrowing. This practice is not just a linguistic phenomenon, but also a social strategy to strengthen integration. Multicultural societies in urban areas, such as those in Makassar, Medan, or Jakarta, show that interactions between ethnic groups still leave room for local languages to be used as a sign of solidarity or as a form of respect for the identity of communication partners. Thus, local languages not only strengthen the internal cohesion of groups, but can also serve as a bridge of integration between groups.

Third, although local languages have great potential as social capital, the challenges faced in maintaining them are considerable. Globalization and the development of digital technology have expanded the dominance of national and international languages in various domains of life. The younger generation more often interacts in Indonesian and English through social media, education, and digital entertainment. As a result, many regional languages have declined in function and are no longer actively transmitted in families. This shift in language poses a serious threat to local language-based social cohesion, as the weakening of language means the weakening of the collective identity and social networks formed through it.

Another challenge is the negative perception of the local language. Some communities consider regional languages to be less prestigious or do not provide added value in social and economic mobility. In this situation, local languages are marginalized because they are considered irrelevant to modern needs. On the other hand, the national language policy that emphasizes the use of Indonesian as the unifying language of the nation also contributes to the marginalization of regional languages, although normatively the government also recognizes the importance of preserving local languages.

To overcome these challenges, a local language preservation strategy that is integrated with social and cultural development is needed. Education is one of the main ways to keep the regional language alive. Local content curricula that include regional languages as subjects in schools need to be strengthened not only in formal aspects, but also in creative activities such as performing arts, literature, and extracurricular activities. In this way, the local language is not only learned as a subject, but also experienced as part of social life.

In addition to education, the role of the media is also very important. Local media that produce regional-language content can help maintain local language exposure in public spaces. Community radio, local television, and even social media can be a means to popularize regional languages in a form that is attractive to the younger generation. For example, regional songs packed with modern genres, entertainment content on YouTube in local languages, or the use of regional languages in comedy and digital dramas can be effective means of revitalization.

Cultural activities also have a great contribution to preserving the local language. Language festivals, speech or storytelling competitions in regional languages, and traditional ceremonies that prioritize the use of local languages can strengthen people's pride in their language. In the context of a multicultural society, this kind of cultural activity can also be a place to introduce the language identity of one group to another, thereby strengthening integration and cohesion across communities.

Furthermore, governments, academics, and civil society need to work together on language documentation programs. Many local languages are not well documented, making them vulnerable to extinction without a trace. Documentation in the form of dictionaries, literary texts, oral recordings, or linguistic research is essential to preserve the heritage of these languages and cultures.

The results of this study as a whole confirm that local languages are not only a means of communication, but also a social asset that strengthens the cohesion of multicultural societies. Local languages bind identities, strengthen social networks, and become a

medium for preserving values. Despite facing challenges, local languages still have great potential to play a strategic role in the nation's social and cultural development. Preserving regional languages means maintaining diversity of identities, strengthening social capital, and ensuring that the cohesion of multicultural communities remains strong in the midst of global dynamics.

Conclusion

This study confirms that local languages are an integral part of social capital which is very important in building the cohesion of a multicultural society. As a symbol of collective identity, local language serves to strengthen a sense of belonging and attachment within a particular community. This identity in turn becomes the foundation for the formation of social solidarity and a sense of community that is essential for diverse societies.

Local languages also play a role in creating social networks based on shared beliefs, norms, and values. The use of regional languages in daily interactions facilitates communication, strengthens interpersonal relationships, and facilitates cross-group cooperation. In a multicultural context, the role of local languages is increasingly important because it is able to be a bridge of identity, not only as a means of communication, but also as a medium to negotiate differences.

However, real challenges arise as national and international language dominance grows. Language shifts, especially among the younger generation, are an indicator of the weakening of the function of local languages in social life. If this is left unchecked, social cohesion based on linguistic identity can be eroded. Therefore, strategic steps are needed in the preservation of local languages.

These efforts can be carried out through education that integrates regional languages in the curriculum, support for local media that produce regional language content, and strengthening cultural activities that encourage the use of local languages in public spaces. Furthermore, the government, academics, and the community need to work together in maintaining the sustainability of local languages as social and cultural assets. Thus, local languages not only function as cultural heritage that must be preserved, but also as a strategic instrument in building social cohesion in a multicultural society. Strengthening local languages means strengthening social capital, which will ultimately strengthen the foundation of national unity and diversity.

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