

Ethnolinguistic Vitality of the Subanen Tribe in Barangay Sebasí, Clarín

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ABSTRACT

The Philippines is the home of 120-187 dialects by different indigenous groups of people. One of them is the Subanen language which is spoken in various areas of northern, western and southern portions of the Zamboanga peninsula. Many Subanen shows linguistic inadequacy in their own mother tongue-the Subanen language. This study aimed to identify the language vitality of the Subanen in Sebasí, Clarín. Specifically, this study seeks to determine the variables of ethnolinguistic vitality which are respondents' status, demography, and institutional support and to identify their skills in understanding, speaking, reading and writing in Subanen language. Through researcher-made instruments, the study conducted an actual test and an assessment of the ethnolinguistic vitality of the Subanen respondents. An observation checklist was used in assessing the respondents' linguistic competence of the Subanen language which catered to four language skills-comprehension, speaking, reading and writing. This was followed by series of interviews to determine the variables for ethnolinguistic vitality including status, demography, and institutional support. Using weighted mean and standard deviation, the researchers was able to determine the respondents' performance in all linguistic skills tested. Results revealed a weak vitality of the Subanen language in the city. The study revealed that intrinsic and extrinsic factors such as language contact, parental apathy, mixed marriages, and tribal discrimination are contributory factors affecting the language vitality. Further, the interviews revealed the major factors negatively affecting the vitality of the Subanen language in the tribal community in Barangay Sebasí. These factors include (1) language contact, specifically between the Subanen language and the Bisayan dialect, (2) mixed marriages between a Subanen and a "Bisaya," (3) apathy of Subanen parents to teach the language to their children, and (4) discrimination against the Subanen tribe. It is recommended that contemporary Subanen should take more decisive steps in revitalizing their first language for cultural preservation and tribal identity.

1. Introduction

Language is considered as a repository of identity, history and human knowledge (Sussex, 2002). It also holds traditional wisdom (Krauss, 1996). According to Trudgill, language can be an important or even essential part of ethnic group membership. He continues to assert that in many parts of the world, language is a defining part of ethnic identity. He maintains that individuals often identify themselves on the basis of what their mother tongue is. Furthermore, he asserts that ethnic groups construct their separateness and identity through language.

Maintaining a first language has become a problem when the use of another language is predominant in different speaking occasions and various communicative settings (Fishman, 1991). People tend to use the language of the majority group, and this

may eventually lead to cultural and language assimilation (Allard & Landry, 1992). A language can also experience loss, extinction or even death. Language death occurs when a language loses its last native speaker, while language extinction is when the language is no longer known, including by second-language speakers. Language death occurs in unstable bilingual or multilingual speech communities as a result of language shift from a regressive minority language to a dominant majority language (Dressler, 1988). The mainstream language takes the superior stance it being perceived to elevate social and economic status of the speakers, thus making the minority languages become devoid of use (Baker, 2011). Consequently, speakers of the minority languages decrease in number (Saarikivi & Marten, 2012).

The case of the Subanen language is fascinating. It used to be a language widely used by various areas of Zamboanga Peninsula namely the provinces of Zamboanga Sibugay, Zamboanga del Norte and Zamboanga del Sur, and in Misamis Occidental of Northern Mindanao. However, over the years, many Subanen stopped using the language due to different factors such as discrimination and intermarriage which resulted to small number of speakers. The researcher hoped to determine the ethnolinguistic vitality of the Subanen language and add new knowledge to limited literature of Subanen language and its people. Furthermore, previous study was conducted to assess the ethnolinguistic vitality of the Subanen communities in Ozamiz City. The study revealed an average vitality of the Subanen language in the city. A number can still speak the tribal language; however, many prove to be incapable of using it. Thus, the researcher replicated the same study in the neighboring municipality to find out if it would yield similar findings. Through this research a wider view of the ethnolinguistic vitality of the Subanens could be established.

2. Literature Review

The key concept for the study is ethnolinguistic vitality, the strength of life force of a language within a community. Giles et al. (1977) proposed a construct called ethnolinguistic vitality to develop a framework for the role of socio-structural variables in inter-group relations, cross-cultural communication, second-language learning, mother-tongue maintenance, and language shift and loss. They first introduced the taxonomy of structural variables affecting ethnolinguistic groups and then presented an integration of Tajfel's theory of intergroup relations and Giles's theory of speech accommodation.

The vitality of an ethnolinguistic group is defined as "that [which] makes a group likely to behave as a distinctive and active collective entity in intergroup situations" (Giles et al., 1977, p 308) According to Giles et al. (1977), if ethnolinguistic minorities have little or no group identity, they would eventually cease to exist as distinctive groups. Ethnolinguistic vitality is influenced by geographical, historical, demographic and socio-linguistic factors, in addition to socio-economic and socio-political factors (Landweer, 2000). Other factors, such as religion, are emerging from the first phase of the project.

According to Giles et al. (1977), status, demographic, and institutional support factors combine to make up the vitality of an ethnolinguistic group. A group's strengths and weaknesses in each of these domains could be assessed so as to provide a rough classification of ethnolinguistic groups as having low, medium, or high vitality. Low vitality groups are most likely to go through linguistic assimilation and would, in the end, not be considered a distinctive collective group (Bourhis, Giles and Rosenthal, 1981). In contrast, high vitality groups are likely to maintain their language and distinctive cultural traits in multilingual settings. It is argued, however, that if the group members identify strongly with their community, in spite of low ethnolinguistic vitality perceptions, a minority group might find an adequate strategy for the survival of the group (Giles & Johnson, 1987; Giles & Viladot, 1994).

Ethnolinguistic vitality can also be measured subjectively by investigating a group's perceptions of and attitudes towards its own vitality. Nowadays, many researchers argue the perceived ethnolinguistic vitality by speakers of a minority group is more important for maintaining its language and its culture (Giles, 2001). There seems to be a consensus that a reliable assessment of a linguistic group's vitality is perhaps best achieved by combining objective information obtained through secondary research and subjective data acquired through empirical research. On the basis of Giles et al.'s (1977) model, Bourhis et al. (1981, 51-155) developed a 'Subjective Vitality Questionnaire' (SVQ) for their empirical investigation into the vitality of a group of Greek descent living in Melbourne, focusing on their perceptions of and attitudes towards their own vitality. In the past few decades, researchers in many parts of the world have followed the same or similar procedure to conduct studies into the vitality of different ethnolinguistic groups (e.g., Aitchison & Carter, 2000, Johnson, 2009, Kindell & Lewis, 2000; Kraemer & Olshtain, 1989, Kraemer et al., 1994; Pierson et al. 1987, Pierson, 1994).

3. Methodology

This study used the survey type of research using quantitative and qualitative designs. Researcher-made instruments were used in the study based on the insights gained from the previous studies on ethnolinguistic vitality (Shaaban & Ghaith, 2002;

Mufwene, 2004). The first instrument required interviews in determining the variables for ethnolinguistic vitality as to the status, demography, and institutional support. The second instrument was an observation checklist used in assessing the respondents' linguistic competence of the Subanen language. The actual assessment catered to four linguistic skills: understanding, a test which required the respondents to give the meaning of the Subanen words, phrases, and statements spoken by the research assistants; speaking, the test which required the respondents to speak the Subanen equivalents of the 'Bisayan' set of words, phrases, and sentences listed; reading, the test part which required the respondents to read the set of Subanen words, phrases, and sentences in Subanen-like manner, and; writing, the test which required the respondents to write into Subanen expression the 'Bisayan' set of words, phrases, and sentences given. The respondents who had limited or no formal education readily admitted inability to respond to the writing test notwithstanding their knowledge of the expected answers. Three Subanen research assistants acted as co-raters in determining the correctness of the respondents' performances. Each area for language test contained three words, three phrases, and three sentences deemed answerable using a basic knowledge of the Subanen language. Nine was the highest score that the respondents could obtain for each skill tested. The research instruments used had undergone a pilot test before they were administered to the actual respondents of the study.

The performance of each respondent was rated based on the following scale: 0-1 (very poor/very weak vitality), 2-3 (poor/weak vitality), 4-5 (satisfactory/average vitality), 6-7 (very satisfactory/strong vitality), 8-9 (excellent / very strong vitality). The weighted mean and standard deviation were used in determining the respondents' performance in all linguistic skills tested. The t-test was used in determining the significant difference in the respondents' performance as to geographical location; the Pearson-r correlation in determining the significant relationship between the respondents' linguistic performance and Subanen lineage.

The study was conducted in Barangay Sebasí, one of the twenty-nine barangays in the Municipality of Clarín, a fourth class municipality in the province Misamis Occidental, Philippines. Five barangays in the municipality have Subanen communities.

A prior informed consent was sought from the Timuay in the barangay. Permission was also sought from the barangay captain of Sebasí. The study used Subanen household heads as respondents and were identified through a convenient sampling. A total of twenty-five Subanens participated in the study, three of whom are incumbent barangay councilors.

4. Results and Discussion

A recurrent remark from many respondents on their failure to achieve proficiency in their native tongue is the unfavorable attitude of the non-tribal people around them. Though the undue indifference toward the Subanens before is no longer severe as of the present, they still carry with them the stigma against the tribe. Thus, many opted to conceal their identity and avoided the use of their tribal language. Grenoble and Whaley (1998) cited that minority language speakers who are accorded with low regard eventually adopt a prestigious language if it would mean a higher social status and a better attitude toward them by the majority group. Consequently, the undesirable experiences of indigenous children like being punished in school for speaking their language have blinded tribal language speakers about the endangerment of their languages (Krauss, 1996). This implies that even academic institutions can serve as an avenue for language prejudice wherein bilingual minority language speakers are viewed as inferior (McCarty, 2003). Consequently, the superiority of another language and culture has blurred the existence of the long been marginalized minority group (Sissel & Sheared, 2001).

The findings (Table 1) showed the respondents' four language skills—understanding, speaking, reading and writing. As shown from the data, understanding got the highest score, followed by speaking, reading and writing. The data revealed that writing was the skill least performed by the respondents. This writing performance could be attributed to the complexity of the skill and low academic background of the respondents. Few had never gone to school. Four percent (4%) has never attended school, sixty-eight percent (68%) finished elementary, twenty-four percent (24%) had entered high school, and only four percent (4%) obtained college education. This low educational accomplishment could have contributed to the low performance of the respondents in reading and writing the words, phrases and sentences in their tribal language. Their limited formal education may have affected their reading and writing of the distinctive features of their tribal language in addition to the weak transmission of the intended meanings, translations and expression of ideas. According to Coulmas (1989), while speech may be more important than writing, it is a generally agreed notion that the latter is an artefact; writing is a cultural achievement. Writing reveals so much of people and the world around them (Barnes & Duncan, 2013).

The overall performance reveals a weak vitality of the Subanen language in the area. This finding is different from the study conducted by Villanueva and Baluyos (2014) who conducted similar study in Aguada, Malaubang, Bongbong, Kinuman Sur, Guimad, Trigos, Gala, Guingona, and Sitio Tipan in Stimson Abordo. Their earlier study revealed that the vitality of the Subanen language in the city is average. This implies that the vitality of the Subanen language in one place may not be true in other places. Though a number can still understand, a great majority cannot especially in the areas of reading and writing. Many respondents claimed that they have very limited exposure to the tribal language because even those who can speak well the

mother tongue of the tribe still use the Bisayan language predominantly. This revelation may mean that the vitality of the Subanen language may erode over time since even the conversant ones do not use the language regularly, nor do they teach it to their children. Thus, the few who claimed able to speak the Subanen language before admitted that they have forgotten completely the little knowledge they once knew; the condition of language loss has occurred.

Table 1. Mean of the Respondents’ Skills of the Subanen Language

	Understanding	Speaking	Reading	Writing	Overall
	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean
	Scores	Scores	Scores	Scores	Scores
Sebasí	4	3	2	1	2

Note: Scale: Excellent/Very Strong Vitality (8-9); Very Satisfactory/Strong Vitality (6-7); Satisfactory/Average Vitality (4-5); Poor/Weak Vitality(2-3); Very Poor/Very Weak Vitality(0-1)

The regular use of the first language is paramount for its transmission. However, a number of those who know the language withhold themselves from speaking it even with their family members. They are hesitant if not unwilling to use the language for fear of being ridiculed by other people around them. Evans (1996) stipulates that ethnolinguistic vitality reflects the transmission efforts that originate in the family domain of speakers and that clinging to a perceived prejudice of the society would lead to language loss if not language shift. However, languages that are oftentimes used in private and familial contexts, as well as in public settings hold a greater chance of vitality (Barni & Bagna, 2010).

Table 2 shows the rarity of use of the Subanen language especially outside the home domain. Those who can still speak the language use it intermittently or selectively and only when they are certain that only Subanens are present. However, when a Bisaya is present, the Subanens outrightly shift to the Bisayan language out of fear of being laughed at or belittled. Baker (2011) claims that an individual switches to a language one believes is preferable or acceptable to the other. In the case of the Subanens, this inhibition results in the reduction of the number of proficient speakers of the language. As Garcia (2003) cites, ethnic languages need to be used in family and friendship domains for transgenerational transmission to occur leading to linguistic viability. Inadequate exposure to and use of the mother tongue while constant exposure to and use of the other language affects the authenticity of the native language spoken (Maher, 1991). Thus, the Subanens need to be conscious and cautious of the changes occurring in their language if they are to ensure distinctness of their tribal language.

Table 2. Self-Assessment of the Respondents in the Language Domains

Language Domains	Frequency	Percentage
Home	10	40
Tribal Meetings	3	12
Neighborhood	5	20
Church	2	8
School	2	8
Workplace/Farm	2	8

(n=180)

The interviews revealed the major factors negatively affecting the vitality of the Subanen language in the tribal community in Barangay Sebasí. These factors include (1) **language contact**, specifically between the Subanen language and the Bisayan dialect, (2) **mixed marriages between a Subanen and a “Bisaya,”** (3) **apathy of Subanen parents to teach the language to their children**, and (4) **discrimination against the Subanen tribe**. These findings are similar to those given by the respondents in Ozamiz City.

Allard and Landry (1992) stipulate that language contact may have a negative impact on ethnolinguistic vitality. Mufwene (2004) asserts that learning other languages is a necessity for minority cultures to live. However, it is imperative that minority people keep their linguistic ethnic identity amidst coexistence with the majority group (Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz, 1982). Though grammar of a language is maintained, people can change the lexicon and phonology of their language as they gain knowledge and skill of the other languages (Heine & Kuteva, 2005). This claim may mean that when other sources of vocabulary and linguistic elements are present, it is very likely that competency and frequency in the use of the first language decline. A number

of respondents admitted that their knowledge of the Subanen language is confined to basic greetings and terms, the level of knowledge that is inadequate for spontaneous and native-like proficiency. This linguistic inadequacy resulted in the feeling of inferiority by the non-proficient or less proficient speakers when compared to the linguistically adept speakers. Nevertheless, Evans (1996) and Barni and Bagna (2010) state that the vitality of a language is largely dependent on the determination and positive regard of the speakers toward their language. According to Fishman (1991), the need to reverse language shift must be done primarily by the minorities themselves. With respect to the Subanen respondents of the study, they are interested and determined to regain their language even through informal classes wherein the language is taught. This positive attitude is suggestive of a language revitalization though the process may not be fast nor easy.

Based on the interviews and tests conducted, the respondents with parents who are both Subanens are better in the tribal language compared to those born in mixed marriages. Marriage with a non-Subanen can then be a reason for the infrequent use of the language leading to language loss or language shift. Subanens with spouses who cannot speak the language opt to use the language of the latter to facilitate communication. In Ozamiz City, few of the respondents refrained from speaking the Subanen language because their spouses expressed unfavorable attitude toward its use.

Parental apathy emerged as another factor for the inability of the present Subanen generation to speak the tribal language. Though a number are still conversant of the Subanen language, many had or have chosen not to transmit it to their children since speaking the language often caused the latter of bullying in school and even in the surrounding community. Thus, the parents did not see the value of the language for the young ones to inherit; they deemed it a source of discrimination and indifference. They thought it practical to inhibit themselves from exposing their children to the language which other people viewed as inferior and insignificant. Hence, it is not necessarily the unwillingness of the children to acquire or learn the tribal language which caused their inability to speak it; their parents chose not to teach them.

The respondents claimed that the discrimination against the Subanen tribe by the mainstream society resulted in their loss of self-esteem and pride in their tribal language. They have been ridiculed simply because they are Subanens. Thus, the stigma attached to being a tribesman has prompted a number of them to conceal their tribal identity by avoiding the use of their mother tongue, especially when non-tribal people like the "Bisaya" are present. This avoidance in the use of one's first language indicates a rejection of a speaker's identity and culture (Kramsch, 2009) and learning a second language that results in the loss of the speaker's linguistic identity exemplifies a subtractive bilingualism (Gaudet & Clement, 2005). Kramsch (2009) states that "group identity is not a natural fact, but a cultural perception."

Status

Amidst the unfavorable experiences the tribesmen once had, and contrary to the general performance of the respondents in the linguistic test conducted, they unanimously claimed that they are proud of their mother tongue and that preserving it is paramount. They claimed that their language is a mark of their tribal identity and a repository of their Subanen culture. This conviction of the contemporary Subanens signifies that their outlook toward their native language as their tribal identity has never waned through generations. The only barrier is on deciding whether or not to preserve the language by speaking it amidst all negative connotations by non-tribal people. Contrary to preceding generations' views, ethnic groups have to decide for themselves whether to maintain their native tongue or to let it erode (Giles & Johnson, 1987; Hornberger & King, 1996).

Mufwene (2004) states that the vitality of languages may be influenced by the socioeconomic status and activities of the speakers. Similarly, Saarikivi and Marten (2012) state that changes in the ways of life of the minority cultures like in livelihood practices have implication on the language vitality. The findings (Table 3) show that the respondents rely on farming as the primary means of income. The harvests they obtain from tilling the land like planting corn and vegetables are intended to sustain the daily needs of their respective families. Some also raise backyard and farm animals such as pigs and chickens, cows and carabaos, respectively. Other respondents render farm labors and services to supplement household income. Except for a handful, the data show that the majority earn an estimated income of P1,000.00 - P3,000.00 per month, one less than P1,000.00. This finding is the same for the economic status of most respondents in Ozamiz City.

As shown from the data, sixty-eight percent (68%) of the respondents finished elementary level and only one or four percent (4%) of the total respondents finished college level. This low academic attainment explains why the few respondents who are conversant of the Subanen language are incapable of reading and writing. This inadequacy or even a lack of education presumably impedes the respective tribal communities from improving in their socio-economic status. Anastasia (2011) states that socio-cultural and economic factors affect formal education. Schooling is conceived as a burden on the family because of the expenditures associated with schooling and the loss of child's contribution to household production and income

(Chernichovsky, 1985). Appel and Muysken (2005) state that when groups of minority language speakers have a relatively low economic status, there is strong tendency to shift toward the majority language. Thus, though economic condition may not be sufficient to ensure language maintenance, it can be a necessary element (Edwards, 1992). However, indigenous people lack access to higher education and the availability of job and work opportunities (Wotherspoon, 2012, Dockery, 2009). In this regard, the economic condition of the Subanen tribal communities needs a close attention and evaluation especially that it affects educational attainment and it influences language vitality.

Table 3. Respondents’ Socio-economic Profile
(n = 180)

Profile	Frequency	Percentage
Age		
20 - 30 years old	3	12
31-40-years old	3	12
41-50 years old	10	40
51-60	5	20
61-70	3	12
years old or above	1	4
Sex		
Male	7	28
Female	18	72
Subanen Lineage		
100 %	8	32
75 %	3	12
50 %	7	28
25 % or below	7	28
Educational Attainment		
College	1	4
High School	6	24
Elementary	17	68
Unschoolled	1	4
Estimated Monthly Income		
P 6,001.0 - above	1	4
P 3,001.00 – P 6,000.00	3	12
P 1,000.00- P 3,000.00	20	80
Below P 1,000.00	1	4
Sources of Income		
Farming	24	96
Employment	1	4
4 P’s	2	8
Others	3	12

Demography

The Subanens are a minority group in the Municipality of Clarín. Five of the twenty-nine barangays have Subanen communities. Their origins were traceable to migration of Subanens from various origins in the Zamboanga Peninsula. The Subanens in the municipality compose one group of the twenty-four subgroups of the Subanen tribe. This explains the variation in lexis and phonology and the complexity and uniqueness of the language of each subgroup. The respondents identified themselves as belonging to the “Salugnon” subgroup. The term “Salugnon” originated in Salug Valley in Zamboanga del Sur – the place where the early Subanens were said to have first established a tribal settlement (Imbing, 2002).

Institutional Support

The Subanens in the Municipality of Clarín receive support from the government through the programs launched for indigenous people like hospitalization benefits and employment priorities as mandated by law; they have become integrated in the political and social mainstream of society. In fact, three incumbent councilors in the barangay have Subanen ancestry. However, the respondents claimed that the support the local or national government seems not enough to alleviate their economic and social

conditions. While a number of them avail of the conditional cash transfer (4Ps) program launched by the Aquino administration, a greater number are unable to do so despite the equally struggling condition on a daily basis. Many still remain deprived of material comfort making a number of them unable to establish competitive social standing with the Bisayan residents in the area.

The research revealed that there are no classes or programs held in the barangay intended to teach the Subanen language. Unlike in Ozamiz City, a number of barangays with Subanen communities hold language lessons facilitated by the Alternative Learning System (ALS). Thus, the respondents of the present study claimed that if the same class will be held in the barangay, it would certainly help in reviving the Subanen language among them.

5. Conclusion

Potent and evident factors do exist and hold influence on the generational waning of transmission of the Subanen language. The dominant use of the mainstream language in the area where the cultural minority lives poses a threat to the mother tongue of the tribe. Moreover, outgroup members compel the tribesmen to lose their language, especially that the latter have been subjected to undue prejudice and discrimination starting in the early times though no longer profound as of the present. Thus, if no intervention is made by the tribal community and no assistance is given to the tribesmen by the leaders in the barangay and the rest of the constituents, it is imminent that the subsequent Subanen generations in the locality may not inherit anymore the language of their predecessors. Thus, the tribal members need to undertake a decisive move for the revitalization of their language.

The tribal members with the leadership of their Timuay have to exhort one another in reclaiming their linguistic legacy. A regular monthly tribal meeting is recommended to re-established and be used as an avenue for the teaching and learning of the Subanen language. Those who cannot speak the language, parents and children alike, be taught diligently so that revitalization effort can start in the family domain. In this regard, local authorities appoint proficient speakers of the Subanen language as mentors for their linguistically struggling tribesmen. Moreover, government agencies such as academic institutions must extend help through collaboration with the Subanens in the making of language materials in response to the mother-tongue based (MTB) program that has been launched by the government. Through a visibility of the Subanen language in schools and immediate mainstream community, school-age children and adults develop a positive attitude toward their identity and develop the genuine interest to regain their mother tongue.

This study has many limitations including the coverage and number of the respondents. The study covered only Barangay Sebas, one of the twenty-nine barangays in the Municipality of Clarin, a fourth-class municipality in the province Misamis Occidental, Philippines. Five barangays in the municipality have Subanen communities. Thus, inclusion of the other four barangays will make the findings more accurate. Future researchers may include the other barangays excluded in the study to compare the findings to the present study.

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