

Regional Languages under the Shadow of the National Language: Shifting Linguistic Identity among Indonesian Youth

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ABSTRACT

Regional language shift in Indonesia is often treated as a matter of declining speaker numbers, endangered linguistic diversity, or insufficient preservation. Such a view remains important, but it does not fully explain why many young Indonesians still feel attached to regional languages while using Bahasa Indonesia more comfortably in school, peer interaction, mobility, and digital communication. Drawing on secondary data from language policy documents, official vitality reports, prior academic studies, and publicly accessible digital discourse, this article examines regional language shift as a reconfiguration of youth linguistic identity. The analysis shows that Bahasa Indonesia gains social strength because it travels easily through institutions and mixed public settings, while regional languages are increasingly valued through family memory, cultural recognition, and selective performance. Among young speakers, attachment to regional language often survives, but ordinary usability becomes weaker when the language is no longer supported by daily family routines, peer legitimacy, and public confidence. Digital spaces renew regional linguistic identity by making local expressions visible and shareable, yet this renewal remains ambivalent when visibility depends on fragments rather than sustained use. The article argues that revitalization needs to move beyond symbolic pride and rebuild the social conditions that allow regional languages to function as ordinary media of youth interaction.



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INTRODUCTION

A young Indonesian may still call a regional language the language of family, elders, ceremonies, and hometown belonging, while relying on Bahasa Indonesia for schoolwork, peer interaction, online captions, and public self-presentation. The split is rarely a clean rejection of local identity. Regional language can remain emotionally close while becoming less usable in the domains where young people learn confidence, aspiration, and mobility. Indonesia's linguistic diversity is usually introduced through large numbers, but the sharper problem starts after diversity has been acknowledged. A language may continue to mark ancestry and affective belonging while losing its everyday force as a medium for study, friendship, work imagination, and digital visibility. The shift begins before silence, at the point where use becomes selective, hesitant, or socially risky (Pepinsky et al., 2024).

Recent official data give that problem a measurable surface. Badan Bahasa identifies 718 regional languages in Indonesia, and recent policy accounts classify many languages outside the safe category. State revitalization has also expanded, reaching all provinces and more than one hundred regional languages in the last few years. Such figures help policy identify urgent cases, allocate programs, and speak publicly about loss. Still, vitality data cannot fully explain why a young speaker may understand a regional language, feel proud of it, and avoid using it in daily interaction. Speaker numbers and vitality categories capture part of the decline, but they do not easily register embarrassment, reduced prestige, partial competence, or the quiet movement from habitual use to ceremonial display (Benu et al., 2023).

Language shift scholarship has long examined intergenerational transmission, domain loss, speaker competence, and the social conditions that push minority or local languages toward reduced use. Research on Indonesian regional languages has followed this concern through studies of family

language practice, local-content education, documentation, and revitalization programs. Such work remains necessary, especially where speaker communities are shrinking and written resources are limited. Yet the dominant emphasis on preservation can make the problem appear mainly technical, as if decline could be reversed through documentation, school exposure, and cultural events. Less attention is given to the stage at which a language is still present but has already lost part of its social credibility among young speakers (Grenoble & Osipov, 2023).

A second body of work, drawn from language ideology and youth sociolinguistics, offers a sharper entry point because language choice is never just a matter of competence (Gomashie, 2025). Young people learn which languages sound educated, rural, intimate, outdated, modern, funny, or marketable through family habits, peer correction, classroom norms, and platform culture. Digital sociolinguistic studies add another complication (Androutsopoulos & Lexander, 2021). A local language can circulate widely as a short comic fragment, a nostalgic slogan, or a marker of regional pride, while remaining weak as a medium of sustained conversation. This is where the Indonesian case needs closer treatment. Existing discussions often notice youth attitude, but they rarely treat the changing identity value of regional languages as the central analytical problem.

Bahasa Indonesia must be handled carefully within that problem. Its national role has enabled schooling, administration, literacy, and communication across ethnic boundaries, and that history cannot be reduced to a story of domination. The pressure comes from the hierarchy of value built around the national language. A language associated with examination, urban employment, official interaction, and wider intelligibility gradually becomes the safer option for young speakers who move between home background and broader publics. Regional languages then occupy a less secure position. Some are still strong in local communities, while others survive through older speakers or ritualized use. Across those differences, the recurring issue is the uneven social reward attached to speaking them in spaces shaped by mobility and public recognition (Poudel & Choi, 2022).

Policy responses have increasingly placed young speakers at the centre of regional language maintenance. Revitalization programs use schools, community activities, and creative media to strengthen pride and encourage active use. The underlying assumption deserves closer scrutiny. Visibility does not always rebuild the ecology of use. A student may perform a regional-language poem, join a festival, or produce a short video in a local language, yet still switch to Indonesian with siblings, classmates, and online friends. Such practices matter, but they may produce a language that is publicly celebrated without becoming socially ordinary. Revitalization becomes more fragile when it raises symbolic recognition while leaving the everyday conditions of use mostly unchanged (Senen & M. Aboe, 2026).

Youth linguistic identity is used here to refer to the way young people attach social value to the languages they use, avoid, display, or retain only in partial form. The concept points to a relation between language and self-positioning rather than to a fixed ethnic essence. A young speaker may inherit a regional language as intimacy, soften it in formal settings, stylize it online, or keep it for jokes and family talk (Rusdiansyah et al., 2024). Those choices are shaped by unequal linguistic markets, where some languages ease movement through school and work while others require explanation or a protected setting. Regional language shift, viewed from this angle, concerns the redistribution of value across domains of life.

The study aims to examine how regional language shift among Indonesian youth is constructed as a problem of linguistic identity rather than only as a problem of language loss. It analyzes policy documents, official vitality reports, previous academic studies, and publicly accessible digital texts as secondary data that record how regional languages are valued, protected, performed, and problematized. The analysis does not claim to represent every youth community or every regional language in Indonesia. Its purpose is more specific, namely to trace how national language dominance, education, mobility, family transmission, and digital visibility reshape the social value of regional languages among younger speakers. The expected contribution lies in moving the discussion from preservation as survival toward language shift as a reordering of identity, prestige, and everyday usability (Chimbutane & Gonçalves, 2023).

RESEARCH METHODS

A qualitative documentary design is used to examine regional language shift among Indonesian youth through secondary data. The material consists of language policy documents, official language

vitality reports, published academic studies, and publicly accessible digital texts that discuss regional languages, youth language practices, and the social position of Bahasa Indonesia. These sources are treated as textual evidence of how regional languages are valued, protected, performed, and problematized across policy, academic, and public digital discourse. The study does not use interviews, surveys, or field observation, since its concern is not to measure language attitudes statistically. The focus lies on the discursive patterns through which regional languages are associated with heritage, intimacy, pride, embarrassment, schooling, mobility, and digital visibility among younger speakers.

The data were selected purposively based on their relevance to three analytical concerns. First, policy and official reports were used to trace how the state defines the relation between Bahasa Indonesia, regional languages, revitalization, and young speakers. Second, academic studies were reviewed to identify recurring findings on transmission, language attitude, education, family language practice, and youth participation in language maintenance. Third, public digital texts were used as traces of everyday discourse rather than as representative samples of all Indonesian youth. Captions, comments, short public posts, and online discussions were considered relevant only when they explicitly referred to regional language use, language shame, local pride, language loss, or the place of regional languages in school, family, and youth communication. Private accounts, closed groups, and unverifiable claims were excluded to reduce ethical and interpretive risk.

The analysis combines qualitative content analysis and critical discourse analysis. Qualitative content analysis was used to organize recurring meanings across the data, especially patterns related to language pride, partial competence, intergenerational transmission, school-based exposure, mobility, and digital stylization. Critical discourse analysis was then used to examine how Bahasa Indonesia and regional languages are positioned within broader hierarchies of value..

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. National Language Dominance and the Symbolic Reordering of Regional Languages

The first pattern drawn from the secondary data is not a direct clash between Bahasa Indonesia and regional languages, but a quieter reallocation of linguistic value. Policy texts, vitality reports, academic studies, and public digital discourse repeatedly allow both language categories to appear important, although they are not important in the same way. Bahasa Indonesia is tied to the routes through which young people move across school, bureaucracy, higher education, and wider publics. Regional languages are more often framed through protection, inheritance, cultural memory, and local belonging. Formal recognition therefore produces an uneven balance. The national language is made useful across institutions, while regional languages are made meaningful within identity, affect, and preservation (Lumbanbatu, 2024).

This pattern matters because policy recognition can hide a practical narrowing of use. Regional languages are not absent from state discourse. They are named, categorized, revitalized, and celebrated as part of national diversity. Yet the grammar of that recognition tends to cast them as languages in need of rescue rather than as ordinary media through which young people negotiate school, work, friendship, and public voice. A language repeatedly described through protection begins to occupy a fragile position, even when the intention is supportive. It becomes a valued object of cultural care, while Bahasa Indonesia continues to function as the unmarked medium of formal competence and public intelligibility.

Official revitalization discourse gives young speakers a central role, but the role is often imagined through participation rather than through sustained linguistic practice. Students are invited to perform, create, compete, and show pride in regional languages, which can be useful when shame or indifference has already weakened attachment. A critical reading still has to ask what kind of speaker is being produced by this arrangement. The young person appears as an inheritor who must be reconnected to a cultural asset, not always as an everyday user whose ordinary relationships need a living medium. This distinction matters because a language can be successfully displayed without becoming socially necessary again.

Vitality reports sharpen this tension by making language risk administratively visible. Categories such as safe, vulnerable, declining, endangered, and extinct give government agencies a way to map urgency and distribute revitalization efforts. The problem is that these categories describe the condition of languages more easily than the changing confidence of speakers. A young person may still know a regional language, recognize its emotional value, and use it in a family setting, yet hesitate when the

same language enters a classroom, campus, or mixed online audience. That hesitation is difficult to classify. The language has not disappeared, but its social ease has already weakened.

Academic studies on family transmission and local-content education help explain why this weakening cannot be reduced to lack of exposure (Pramuniati et al., 2025). Parents who shift to Indonesian with children may do so because Indonesian is imagined as preparation for schooling. Teachers who include regional languages in local-content lessons may still rely on Indonesian as the language of correction, assessment, and intellectual authority. Young speakers then learn a hierarchy without anyone openly saying that one language is superior. Regional language becomes associated with closeness and origin, while Indonesian becomes the language through which explanation, achievement, and self-presentation are more securely organized. The shift takes shape through routine choices that seem practical rather than ideological.

Public digital discourse gives the same hierarchy a different texture. Regional languages appear in captions, comments, and short video speech, but their appearance often depends on stylized use. A local phrase may create humor, mark hometown identity, or signal warmth among people who share the same background. The surrounding narration, however, frequently moves back into Indonesian because the imagined audience is broader and less predictable (Kadir, 2026a). Digital visibility can therefore produce a misleading sense of renewal. Regional languages are present, sometimes lively, but their presence is often fragmentary and performative. They travel well as signs of identity while remaining less stable as languages of extended explanation (Kendrick et al., 2022).

The contrast between visibility and habitual use becomes central here. Revitalization programs can increase the public appearance of a regional language through school activities, competitions, and creative media. Online users can also make local speech look fashionable for a moment. Neither form of visibility is irrelevant, since both can reduce shame and give younger speakers a socially acceptable entry point. Still, visibility does not automatically rebuild the small routines that keep a language alive across siblings, neighbours, classmates, and intergenerational conversation. A language can be praised on stage, captioned online, and still be avoided in ordinary talk because the social conditions for unscripted use remain weak (Wulandari et al., 2025).

Bahasa Indonesia gains its dominance precisely because it does not need such justification. Young speakers do not usually have to explain why they use Indonesian in school, on campus, in public services, or in mixed digital spaces. The language already carries the background legitimacy of national communication. Regional languages, by contrast, often require a marked setting before their use feels safe. Family gatherings, local ceremonies, regional jokes, or cultural programs may authorize them, but authorization is a sign of unequal normality. A language that needs a special occasion to appear is already positioned differently from a language that can enter nearly any public domain without comment.

This uneven normality should not be flattened into a single national story. A large regional language with strong intergenerational use, a smaller language with few young speakers, and a local language maintained through dense rural networks do not face the same level of pressure. The secondary data still reveal a common discursive movement. Across different materials, regional languages are more easily defended as identity than described as practical instruments for youth mobility. This does not mean that identity is weak. The problem is that identity becomes detached from routine communicative need, and once that separation grows, the language may remain respected while its everyday range keeps narrowing.

Young people do not merely abandon regional languages because they lack respect for local culture. Their choices are made inside a linguistic market where the practical benefits of Indonesian are immediate, while the benefits of regional languages are more uneven and relational. Pride can coexist with avoidance because the two respond to different pressures. Pride affirms ancestry and belonging, while avoidance manages intelligibility, peer acceptance, and the fear of sounding out of place. This ambivalence appears across policy concerns about revitalization, academic discussions of transmission, and digital performances of regional identity (Idaryani & Fidyati, 2022).

So, regional language shift among Indonesian youth begins as a symbolic reordering before it becomes a measurable loss. Bahasa Indonesia carries institutional density because education, administration, and public communication continually renew its value. Regional languages retain affective and cultural force, but they are increasingly pushed toward protected, staged, or intimate domains unless local community conditions keep them necessary for daily interaction. This pattern does

not operate evenly across all Indonesian languages, and stronger regional languages still have social resources that smaller languages lack. The broader tension remains visible in the way young speakers learn which language can travel with them across institutions, and which one must wait for a setting that permits it.

2. Youth Mobility, Education, and the Weakening of Intergenerational Language Attachment

Across the reviewed studies, policy materials, and public digital traces, youth language attachment appears less as a stable inheritance than as a relation constantly tested by usability. Regional languages remain close to family memory and local belonging, yet closeness does not always provide enough social ground for active use (N. Ismail et al., 2024). The pattern is visible in studies on family transmission that describe children who understand a local language but answer in Indonesian, and in public discussions where young users express affection for a regional language while treating Indonesian as the safer medium for explanation. The relevant shift is therefore not a clean movement from loyalty to abandonment. A more precise reading sees young speakers holding on to symbolic attachment while losing the everyday conditions that allow the language to function without hesitation.

Family language practice gives this tension its earliest form. The home is usually treated in language maintenance studies as the primary site of transmission, but the data suggest that family choice cannot be reduced to loyalty or neglect. Parents who speak Indonesian with children may be trying to prepare them for school, reduce communicative friction, or protect them from being treated as too local in wider settings. Such decisions weaken regional language attachment precisely because they are framed as care. A language may still be heard from grandparents, used by parents with older relatives, or remembered as the sound of home, while children learn that their own route toward school readiness and social ease runs through Indonesian (Fitriati, 2023).

Passive competence becomes a crucial marker of that shift. Young speakers who understand a regional language but rarely speak it are not outside the language community, yet their position is no longer the same as that of habitual users. Reviewed studies often name this condition as interrupted transmission, while public discourse tends to treat it through embarrassment, joking self-recognition, or regret over not being fluent enough (F. Ismail et al., 2021). The identity effect is sharper than a simple skills deficit. A young person can claim the language as heritage but hesitate to use it because speaking invites correction, exposes limited fluency, or risks sounding awkward among peers. Attachment then survives as recognition, while active participation becomes conditional.

Young people are frequently described as the generation expected to continue regional languages, yet the same materials suggest that many are given few ordinary spaces in which to become confident users. Family members may still assign the language emotional worth, schools may validate it as local culture, and online users may celebrate it as a marker of origin. None of these positions automatically produces daily fluency. The young speaker is repeatedly addressed as someone who should care, remember, and perform belonging, while the conditions that would allow regular use remain thinner than the moral expectation placed on them. Schooling hardens the same conditionality. Policy discourse gives regional languages a place through local-content subjects and revitalization activities, but that place is rarely equivalent to the authority carried by Indonesian in ordinary school life. Indonesian is the language through which students write answers, receive correction, follow official instructions, and demonstrate academic seriousness. Regional language enters school more often as content to be learned, performed, or appreciated. This arrangement is not meaningless; school exposure may strengthen pride where home transmission has weakened. Yet a critical reading shows how the student is positioned as a learner of heritage rather than as a full user of a language capable of carrying academic confidence.

The emotional cost of that arrangement appears in small classroom and peer interactions. A student who speaks with a strong local accent may not be formally punished, but correction, laughter, or the desire to sound more polished can redirect linguistic behaviour over time. Regional language becomes associated with warmth and origin, while Indonesian is linked to clarity, seriousness, and the ability to move through formal settings with less risk (Kadir, 2026b). Such associations are produced through ordinary routines, not through explicit bans. By the time young speakers reach university or early work settings, many have already learned to separate the language that feels intimate from the language that feels professionally portable.

Mobility widens the separation between attachment and usability. Movement to district schools, provincial universities, urban employment, or online peer networks places young people in settings

where shared regional background cannot be assumed. Indonesian becomes useful because it reduces the need to explain oneself. Regional languages still matter, but their use is more likely to depend on recognition by a specific interlocutor or on a setting that has already been marked as local. A young migrant may keep a regional language for calls home and moments of ethnic closeness, yet the rhythm of everyday interaction gradually shifts toward Indonesian. The change is practical before it becomes ideological, which makes it difficult to contest.

Digital discourse adds another layer to this weakened attachment. Public posts and comment threads often present regional languages as signs of authenticity, humor, or local pride, but the surrounding narration frequently returns to Indonesian so that a wider audience can follow the exchange. The pattern does not prove that young people are indifferent to regional languages. It suggests that digital spaces reward recognizable fragments more easily than sustained local-language interaction. A regional phrase can circulate because it is funny, emotionally dense, or immediately indexical of origin. Longer explanation, argument, and self-description often remain in Indonesian, leaving regional language visible as identity while less available as the medium of extended participation (Nurhayati & Putri, 2024).

Variation across regional languages complicates the picture. Larger languages with dense speaker populations and strong local media can still provide young people with settings where local speech remains ordinary. Smaller languages, especially where home transmission has weakened, face a thinner social base for producing confident young speakers. The secondary data do not support a single decline story across Indonesia, and a careful analysis should resist that temptation. The shared pattern lies elsewhere. Across different materials, youth attachment is repeatedly described or implied as something that can persist after active use has narrowed. Regional language remains part of who young people are said to be, while Indonesian increasingly mediates where they can go and how they can speak there.

Blaming young speakers obscures the social logic of the shift. Their choices are made within institutions and peer environments where Indonesian carries immediate advantages and regional languages depend more heavily on supportive local routines. Pride-based revitalization may help reduce shame, but pride alone cannot create the daily need that makes a language feel effortless. A student may value a regional language, understand its emotional weight, and still lack the confidence to use it beyond family talk, staged activities, or short online fragments. The second finding therefore reframes intergenerational weakening as attachment without usability, a condition shaped by family care, school authority, mobility, and platform visibility that prepares the ground for a more ambivalent digital renewal.

3. Digital Visibility and the Ambivalent Renewal of Regional Linguistic Identity

After language attachment has weakened in the family and school, digital spaces seem to give regional languages another route into youth life. The route is real, but it is uneven. Public digital traces reviewed for this study show regional languages appearing through short insertions in Indonesian-dominant captions, comments that recognize a shared place of origin, playful accent references, and brief expressions of local pride (Mappaselleng & Kadir, 2025). These forms are socially meaningful because they let young users bring regional identity into wider publics without leaving the communicative safety of Bahasa Indonesia. Yet the same pattern also limits what the language is allowed to do. Regional language becomes highly visible at the surface of interaction, while Indonesian keeps organizing longer narration, explanation, and cross-regional address (Sihite & Sibarani, 2024).

A local phrase can work quickly online because it carries social recognition in compressed form. A few words may identify a speaker as belonging to a particular region, invite laughter from those who know the expression, or create warmth among users who share a linguistic background. Platform communication favours this kind of compact sign because it can be repeated, liked, quoted, and understood even by users who only partially know the language. The problem is not that such use is false. Rather, regional language is being valued for its indexical force more than for its capacity to sustain interaction. A young user can perform belonging through a phrase while remaining unable, or unwilling, to continue the conversation in that language.

This pattern sharpens the difference between digital pride and communicative depth. Public posts may celebrate regional speech, joke about imperfect fluency, or turn a local expression into a badge of authenticity. These gestures can reduce shame, especially for young speakers who have been taught to hear regional language as too local for formal or urban settings. Still, digital pride does not automatically

rebuild the routine conditions through which fluent speakers are formed. A comment thread can normalize an expression, but it cannot replace the slow repetition of family talk and peer interaction. Online circulation may reopen symbolic access, while the habits needed for ordinary use remain fragile (Ariyani et al., 2022).

The position of the young speaker also changes under platform conditions. Young users are not simply choosing freely between Bahasa Indonesia and a regional language. They are writing for audiences whose linguistic background is uncertain, and they are doing so in spaces where visibility depends on being understandable beyond a local group. Bahasa Indonesia becomes the default medium because it keeps the exchange open. Regional language enters more often as marked speech, added where emotional density or local recognition is needed. The hierarchy is therefore reproduced through communicative convenience. Bahasa Indonesia carries continuity across the post, while regional language carries a sharper but narrower identity charge.

Policy discourse on revitalization increasingly treats creative media as a promising way to reach young speakers, and that emphasis is reasonable where formal preservation campaigns feel distant from youth culture. The difficulty lies in how participation is interpreted. A student who appears in a regional-language video, a school performance, or a digital campaign may demonstrate recognition and pride, but these appearances say little about whether the language has re-entered ordinary peer life. Revitalization through digital creativity can easily count the presence of youth bodies and voices without asking whether those same young people use the language when no event, task, or audience expectation authorizes it. Digital visibility also risks making partial competence look more secure than it is. A familiar phrase can circulate widely even when many users know only its emotional tone and not the wider linguistic system behind it. Some young users acknowledge this gap through self-mockery or regret, treating their limited fluency as both a personal shortcoming and a common generational condition. Such discourse is important because it shows that weakened competence is not always hidden. Young people may publicly recognize their distance from the language, yet recognition alone does not restore active command. The regional language remains available for identity display while its deeper communicative resources stay unevenly distributed.

So, digital spaces can make regional languages sound current again, especially when young users adapt them to humour, intimacy, and local self-positioning. They can also loosen the association between regional language and older generations by letting youth circulate fragments in contemporary formats. Even so, platform visibility tends to reward language that is brief, recognizable, and easy to detach from a full speech situation. Regional language travels as a sign of belonging more easily than as a medium for extended disagreement, explanation, or collaborative thinking. The earlier problem of attachment without usability is not solved; it is given a more public and visually persuasive form.

Digital renewal becomes more consequential only when online display is connected to offline domains where the language remains necessary. A phrase learned from a video may invite curiosity, but sustained use still depends on family response, peer legitimacy, and community settings where young speakers can make mistakes without embarrassment. Without those conditions, the digital return of regional languages may expand symbolic confidence while leaving everyday practice mostly unchanged. The final pattern from the data is therefore ambivalent. Regional languages are not absent from youth digital life, and their presence should not be dismissed as empty performance. Their renewed visibility, however, still depends on a broader social ecology capable of turning recognizable fragments back into ordinary speech.

CONCLUSION

Regional language shift among Indonesian youth is best understood as a change in the social life of language. Bahasa Indonesia does not simply replace regional languages through direct pressure; it becomes the safer and more portable choice because young people meet it in the institutions and interactions that shape their movement beyond local communities. Regional languages still matter as sources of intimacy, ancestry, and local recognition, but their place becomes narrower when they are used only in settings already marked as cultural or familiar. The central problem, then, is not that young speakers no longer care. Many still care, but care alone cannot sustain a language that no longer feels easy to use in ordinary conversation.

Revitalization needs to respond to this gap between attachment and use. Public performances, school activities, and digital content can make regional languages visible again, and that visibility may

reduce shame among young speakers with partial competence. Yet a language becomes more secure when young people can use it without feeling corrected, unusual, or socially out of place. Stronger policy and community work should connect symbolic pride with everyday conditions of speaking, especially in families, peer relations, and local public life. Future research should move closer to specific language communities because the pressures faced by large regional languages and smaller vulnerable languages are not identical, even though both are shaped by the same national and digital order.

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