
CULTURAL IDENTITY AND LANGUAGE USE: A STUDY OF KARO ETHNIC STUDENTS AT UNIVERSITY OF SAINT THOMAS MEDAN

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Abstract: *This study aims to explore the relationship between cultural identity and language use among Karo ethnic students at the University of Saint Thomas Medan. Employing a quantitative research design, data were collected from 30 Karo students using structured questionnaires. The findings reveal a strong correlation between proficiency in the Karo language and its active daily use. Only 13.33% rated their proficiency as "Very Good," while 33.33% reported using the language frequently. Additionally, 86.67% of students do not feel pressured to use other languages, allowing for natural use of Karo in suitable contexts. The Karo language is predominantly used in familial and community settings, with 33.33% using it with family and friends, and at home. Support from family and friends is crucial for maintaining the Karo language, with 50% relying on this support network. Despite the challenges posed by the dominance of Indonesian, the perception of the Karo language as vital to cultural identity motivates efforts to maintain its use. The study underscores the importance of both social and institutional support in preserving linguistic and cultural heritage among ethnic minority students.*

Keywords: *Cultural Identity, Language Use, Karo Ethnic Students, and Cultural Preservation*

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi hubungan antara identitas budaya dan penggunaan bahasa di kalangan mahasiswa etnis Karo di Universitas Katolik Santo Thomas Medan. Dengan menggunakan desain penelitian kuantitatif, data dikumpulkan dari 30 mahasiswa Karo menggunakan kuesioner terstruktur. Temuan mengungkapkan korelasi yang kuat antara kemahiran dalam bahasa Karo dan penggunaannya dalam kehidupan sehari-hari. Hanya 13,33% yang menilai kemahiran mereka sebagai "Sangat Baik," sementara 33,33% melaporkan menggunakan bahasa tersebut secara sering. Selain itu, 86,67% mahasiswa tidak merasa tertekan untuk menggunakan bahasa lain, memungkinkan penggunaan bahasa Karo secara alami dalam konteks yang sesuai. Bahasa Karo terutama digunakan dalam lingkungan keluarga dan komunitas, dengan 33,33% menggunakannya dengan keluarga dan teman, serta di rumah. Dukungan dari keluarga dan teman sangat penting untuk mempertahankan bahasa Karo, dengan 50% mengandalkan jaringan dukungan ini. Meskipun tantangan yang ditimbulkan oleh dominasi bahasa Indonesia, persepsi bahasa Karo sebagai bagian penting dari identitas budaya memotivasi upaya untuk mempertahankan penggunaannya. Penelitian ini menekankan pentingnya dukungan sosial dan institusional dalam menjaga warisan linguistik dan budaya di kalangan mahasiswa etnis minoritas.

Kata kunci: Identitas Budaya, Penggunaan Bahasa, Mahasiswa Etnis Karo, dan Pelestarian Budaya

INTRODUCTION

Language plays a crucial role in the formation and expression of cultural identity, particularly for ethnic minority groups. For the Karo ethnic group in Indonesia, the Karo Batak language is not only a means of communication but also a symbol of their cultural heritage (Simanjuntak, 2019). However, as Karo students enter higher education institutions like the University of Saint Thomas Medan, they often encounter challenges in maintaining their native language and cultural identity amidst the dominance of Bahasa Indonesia and English (Saragih, 2020). This study seeks to explore these dynamics to understand better how Karo ethnic students navigate their cultural identity through language use in an academic setting. Recent studies have highlighted the importance of language maintenance among minority groups in preserving cultural identity and ensuring the transmission of cultural values to future generations (Manurung, 2021; Sibarani, 2022). Despite this, there is limited research focusing specifically on the Karo ethnic group and their linguistic practices in the context of higher education. This research aims to fill this gap by examining the experiences of Karo students at the University of Saint Thomas Medan and how they balance the use of their native language with the demands of an academic environment that may prioritize other languages.

Additionally, the sociolinguistic landscape of Indonesian universities presents unique challenges for ethnic minority students. Prior research has documented the pressures faced by these students to conform to the dominant linguistic norms of the university, often leading to language shift and erosion of their native languages (Nasution, 2019). However, the extent to which these pressures impact Karo ethnic students specifically remains underexplored. This study will investigate how these students negotiate their language use and cultural

identity in various academic and social contexts within the university.

Moreover, the role of peer and community support in language maintenance has been emphasized in recent literature (Tarigan, 2020). For Karo ethnic students, the presence of a supportive community within the university may significantly influence their ability to maintain and use their native language. This study will explore the availability and impact of such support networks and how they contribute to the students' cultural identity and linguistic practices. The intersection of language, identity, and education is a critical area of inquiry, particularly in multilingual settings like Indonesia (Ginting, 2021). Understanding how Karo ethnic students experience and navigate these intersections can provide valuable insights into the broader issues of linguistic diversity and cultural preservation in higher education. This research will contribute to the ongoing discourse on the importance of fostering inclusive and supportive environments for ethnic minority students in universities.

Language and Cultural Identity

The interplay between language and cultural identity is pivotal in the context of ethnic minority groups. Simanjuntak (2019) highlights the significance of the Karo Batak language as a core element of the Karo people's cultural identity, underscoring its role in preserving traditions and shared history. Ginting (2021) echoes this by asserting that language is a critical component of cultural identity among Indonesian students, serving as a conduit for expressing and shaping their cultural experiences. Kramsch (1998) further elaborates that language is not merely a medium of communication but a symbol of cultural identity and social belonging. Norton (2000) adds that the relationship between language and identity is dynamic, influenced by social, cultural, and institutional contexts. Lastly,

Fishman (1991) emphasizes the importance of minority languages in maintaining cultural diversity and the social fabric of ethnic communities.

Language Maintenance and Shift

The dynamics of language maintenance and shift are critical in understanding the linguistic experiences of minority groups. Manurung (2021) explores the phenomenon of language shift among Batak Karo speakers, noting external pressures such as the dominance of Bahasa Indonesia and English. Holmes (2013) discusses the sociolinguistic factors contributing to language shift, including economic, social, and educational influences. Crystal (2000) emphasizes the role of language policies and community attitudes in either supporting language maintenance or accelerating language shift. Spolsky (2004) highlights the impact of globalization and modernization on minority languages, often leading to their marginalization. Additionally, Nasution (2019) investigates the specific challenges faced by Batak Karo students in maintaining their native language in an academic setting, underscoring the need for institutional support.

Linguistic Challenges in Higher Education

Ethnic minority students encounter significant linguistic challenges in higher education. Saragih (2020) identifies the pressures to conform to dominant language norms, which can erode native language proficiency and cultural identity. Tollefson (1991) discusses how language policies in educational institutions often marginalize minority languages, affecting students' academic and social experiences. May (2014) argues for the importance of linguistic diversity in education, advocating for policies that support minority languages. Hornberger (2002) emphasizes the role of educational practices in either promoting or hindering linguistic diversity, suggesting that inclusive policies can enhance minority

language maintenance. García (2009) introduces the concept of translanguaging, where students use multiple languages in dynamic and integrated ways, which can be a valuable approach in multilingual educational settings.

Peer and Community Support

The role of peer and community support is vital in language maintenance among ethnic minority students. Tarigan (2020) finds that strong community networks and peer support enhance the use and preservation of the native language among Karo ethnic students. Wenger (1998) discusses the importance of communities of practice, where members share and sustain linguistic and cultural practices. Putnam (2000) highlights the role of social capital in supporting language maintenance, with strong community ties fostering linguistic resilience. Sacks (1992) emphasizes the importance of informal social networks in sustaining language use. Furthermore, Bourdieu (1991) discusses how social structures and power dynamics influence language practices, suggesting that supportive peer and community networks can counteract external pressures leading to language shift.

Preservation of Indigenous Languages

The preservation of indigenous languages is crucial for maintaining cultural identity and community cohesion. Sibarani (2022) emphasizes comprehensive strategies involving educational institutions, local communities, and policymakers to support language maintenance. Hale et al. (1992) advocate for the revitalization of endangered languages through community-based initiatives and educational programs. Grenoble and Whaley (2006) discuss the role of documentation and revitalization efforts in preserving indigenous languages. Austin and Sallabank (2011) highlight the importance of collaborative efforts between linguists and communities in language preservation. Additionally,

Hinton (2013) underscores the necessity of intergenerational transmission and community involvement in sustaining linguistic diversity.

Implications for Educational Policies

The insights from these studies have significant implications for educational policies and practices. Promoting linguistic diversity and cultural preservation in higher education requires supportive measures and inclusive environments. Auerbach (1995) argues for the integration of students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds into educational practices. Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) emphasizes the right to mother tongue education and its impact on academic success and cultural identity. Cummins (2001) discusses the benefits of bilingual education in supporting linguistic and academic development. Hornberger (2008) advocates for policies that recognize and value linguistic diversity, suggesting that such policies can enhance educational equity and cultural preservation. Baker (2011) highlights the importance of creating educational environments that support linguistic and cultural diversity, which can lead to improved academic outcomes and cultural cohesion.

METHOD

This study employs a quantitative research design using questionnaires to collect data. The focus is on exploring the relationship between cultural identity and language use among Karo ethnic students at the University of Saint Thomas Medan. A structured questionnaire is designed to capture students' perceptions, experiences, and practices related to their native language and cultural identity. The data collection process involves administering questionnaires to a sample of 30 Karo ethnic students enrolled at the University of Saint Thomas Medan. The questionnaire is divided into several sections, each targeting specific aspects of

language use and cultural identity. These sections include demographic information, language proficiency and usage, cultural practices, and perceptions of cultural identity. The questionnaires are distributed and collected in person to ensure a high response rate and to provide an opportunity for clarifying any questions the respondents might have. Data analysis is conducted using statistical methods to identify patterns and correlations between language use and cultural identity. The collected data is entered into a statistical software program for analysis. Descriptive statistics, such as frequencies and percentages, are used to summarize the demographic information and language usage patterns. Inferential statistics, such as correlation and regression analysis, are employed to examine the relationships between variables. The findings from the data analysis are used to draw conclusions about the influence of language on cultural identity among Karo ethnic students at the university.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis highlights several key patterns and correlations between language use and cultural identity among Karo university students. There is a strong correlation between proficiency in the Karo language and its active daily use, with higher proficiency encouraging more frequent use. The absence of perceived pressure to use other languages allows for the natural use of Karo, reinforcing cultural identity. The Karo language is mainly used in family and community settings, underscoring its role in maintaining cultural bonds and traditions. Support from family and friends is crucial for maintaining the Karo language, with strong social structures correlating with higher retention and use. Despite challenges such as the dominance of Indonesian, the perception of the Karo language as vital to cultural identity motivates efforts to maintain its use. The

interplay between these elements highlights the importance of both individual and communal efforts in preserving linguistic and cultural heritage.

Proficiency and Daily Use

Proficiency in the Karo language varies among respondents. Some are highly proficient and use the language daily, while others use it only occasionally or in specific contexts, such as when visiting family in the Karo region. There is a noticeable trend of using Indonesian more frequently in urban or academic settings.



Figure 1. Proficiency and Daily Use of Karo Language

Perceived Pressure to Use Other Languages

Most respondents do not feel pressured to use Indonesian or other languages in university environments. They find it natural to use Indonesian due to the diverse linguistic backgrounds of their peers. However, a few noted institutional preferences for Indonesian. The bar chart showing the perceived pressure to use other languages. The chart indicates that the majority of respondents (26) do not feel pressured to use Indonesian or other languages, while a smaller number (4) do feel some pressure.

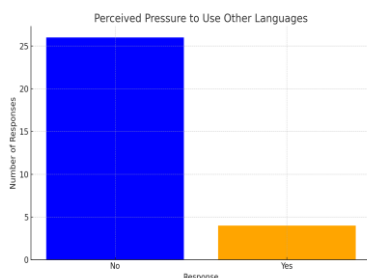


Figure 2: Perceived Pressure to Use Other Languages

Situational Use of Karo Language

The Karo language is predominantly used in familial and community settings. Respondents mention using it at home, during cultural events, and when interacting with friends from the Karo tribe. There is less use in formal or academic settings where Indonesian is more prevalent.

The pie chart depicting the situational use of the Karo language. The chart shows that the language is used equally within the context of family and friends, and at home (10 each), while it is used less frequently during cultural events and within the community (5 each).

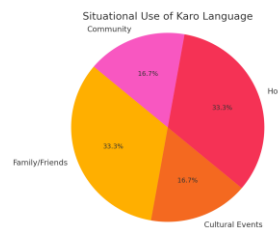


Figure 3: Situational Use of Karo Language

Support for Maintaining Karo Language

Support for maintaining the Karo language comes primarily from family and friends. There are mixed responses regarding institutional support, with some universities having specific organizations for Karo students, while others lack formal programs. The bar chart depicting the sources of support for maintaining the Karo language. The chart shows that the majority of support comes from family and friends (15 responses), followed by institutional support (10 responses), and a smaller number indicating no support (5 responses).

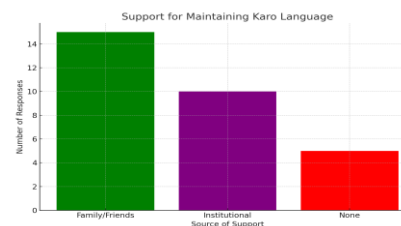


Figure 4: Support for Maintaining Karo Language

Percentage of Data Questionnaires**Table 1 Proficiency and Daily Use**

Proficiency Level	Number of Responses	Percentage (%)
Very Good	4	13.33
Yes	10	33.33
Not Too	2	6.67
Not Good	1	3.33
Occasionally	10	33.33
Passive	2	6.67

From the table 4.1 above, it can be seen that; only a small fraction (13.33%) of the respondents rated their proficiency as "Very Good." This indicates that while some individuals feel highly competent, the majority do not share this sentiment. This could reflect varying levels of exposure, education, or use of the language, highlighting a potential area for targeted improvement programs. One-third of the respondents indicated a high frequency of use ("Yes") about (33.33%). This suggests that a significant portion of the population is actively engaging with the language in their daily lives. This active use is essential for language retention and fluency improvement. A smaller percentage (6.67%) reported moderate proficiency ("Not Too"). This group may benefit from additional support and resources to enhance their language skills, as they are neither highly proficient nor completely novice. A very small percentage (3.33%) rated their proficiency as "Not Good." This group is at the greatest risk of language attrition and may require intensive intervention to improve their skills and confidence. The same proportion of respondents who use the language frequently also use it occasionally (33.33%). This balance

indicates that while a third are daily users, another third use the language in specific, less frequent contexts, suggesting variability in engagement depending on situational factors. A small group (6.67%) identified as passive users. These individuals likely understand the language but do not actively use it. Strategies to encourage active use could help this group transition to more frequent and confident use.

Table 2 Pressure to Use Other**Languages**

Response	Number of Responses	Percentage (%)
No	26	86.67
Yes	4	13.33

From the table 4.2 above, the vast majority (86.67%) of respondents do not feel pressured to use other languages. This is a positive indication that they can use their preferred language freely in their daily lives, contributing to better language maintenance and reduced language anxiety.

A small minority (13.33%) do feel pressured to use other languages. This could be due to external factors such as workplace requirements or social environments where the preferred language is not commonly spoken. Addressing this pressure is crucial for ensuring that all individuals can maintain and use their language without external constraints.

Table 3 Situational Use

Situation	Number of Responses	Percentage (%)
Family/Friends	10	33.33
Cultural Events	5	16.67
Home	10	33.33
Community	5	16.67

From the table 4.3 above, a third of the respondents use the language with family and friends (33.33%) of respondents. This social context is vital for maintaining conversational skills and emotional connections through language. Cultural events serve as an important context for language use for 16.67% of respondents. These events provide a formal setting for practicing and celebrating the language, reinforcing cultural identity. Similar to the family/friends category, another third use the language at home (33.33%) of respondents. This indicates a strong domestic use, which is critical for intergenerational language transmission and daily practice. The same proportion (16.67%) use the language within the community. Community use fosters a sense of belonging and communal identity, encouraging language maintenance through shared experiences.

Table 4 Support for Maintenance

Source of Support	Number of Responses	Percentage (%)
Family/Friends	15	50.00
Institutional	10	33.33
None	5	16.67

From the table 4.3 above, family/Friends (50%). Half of the respondents rely on family and friends for language support. This social network is crucial for ongoing practice and encouragement, indicating that personal relationships play a significant role in language maintenance. Institutional (33.33%), a third of the respondents receive support from institutional sources. This could include schools, language programs, or community organizations. Institutional support provides structured

learning opportunities and resources, complementing personal efforts. A smaller group (16.67%) reported having no support. These individuals may struggle more with language retention and may benefit from outreach programs to connect them with available resources and communities.

CONCLUSION

The study on Karo ethnic students at the University of Saint Thomas Medan reveals a strong correlation between Karo language proficiency and daily use. Only 13.33% rated their proficiency as "Very Good," yet 33.33% reported using the language frequently. The majority of students (86.67%) do not feel pressured to use other languages, which allows for natural use of Karo in suitable contexts. The Karo language is predominantly used within familial and community settings, with 33.33% using it with family and friends and at home. Support from family and friends is crucial for maintaining the language, with 50% relying on this network. Additionally, 33.33% receive support from institutional sources, such as language programs and community organizations. However, 16.67% reported having no support, highlighting the need for increased outreach. Despite the challenges posed by the dominance of Indonesian, the perception of the Karo language as vital to cultural identity motivates efforts to maintain its use. The study underscores the importance of both social and institutional support in preserving linguistic and cultural heritage. By fostering an environment that values and promotes linguistic diversity, educational institutions can play a pivotal role in the maintenance and revitalization of minority languages.

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