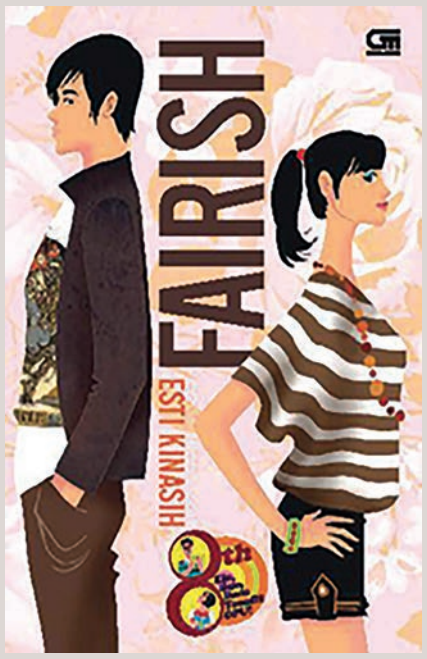
The nexus between language diversity and language education

Michael Ewing and Dwi Noverini Djenar

INDONESIAN IS TAUGHT in many primary and secondary schools across Australia, as well as most major universities in the country. Strengthening the nexus between research and teaching is important for keeping teaching methodologies and content up-to-date and engaging students. We present some findings from our research project on the language of young Indonesians, and explore some of the ways these findings can inform language learning and teaching.

Indonesia is a highly multilingual society and standard Indonesian (itself a variety of Malay), as promoted by the national language board and educational practices, exists in a complex sociolinguistic ecology. Indonesia's language diversity includes colloquial varieties of Indonesian, other varieties of Malay and hundreds of regional languages found across the archipelago. In the past the relationship between the different languages has been described in terms of diglossia, in which each language has a specific function within a particular domain. Standard Indonesian is considered the language of government and education, while regional languages or colloquial varieties of Indonesian are for family and personal relationships. In fiction, this divide can be seen when authors present narration in standard Indonesian, but allow colloquial forms to appear in dialogue. Examining recent genres of fiction aimed at young audiences, we found that this simplistic division is no longer operative.



Beginning in the 1990s, with democratisation and press freedom, there has been a dramatic increase in both numbers and kinds of Indonesian publications, including those aimed at a youth demographic. During the same period a newly recognised trendy, urban youth identity and its associated form of language called *bahasa gaul* [the language of sociability] became popular. These and the dramatic popularity of social media in Indonesia in recent years, correlate with a weakening of the divide that has officially separated standard and colloquial language, creating a more porous boundary between the two.[1] In an example from Fairish, a teen-lit novel written by Esti Kinasih,[2] the narrator describes how Irish, the protagonist, is surprised one morning to find she was not the first to arrive early at school.

> *Betapa kagetnya Irish begitu tiba di sekolah, karena dia pikir dia bakalan jadi orang pertama yang menginjakkan kakinya di sekolah. Tapi ternyata, boro-boro!*
> "Irish was so surprised when she arrived at school because she thought she was the first one to enter the school ground. But she was totally wrong!"

The narration begins with the standard style then moves to a more colloquial style before ending with the particularly colloquial expression *boro-boro* [let alone] (the translation above is adjusted for idiomaticity). In older teen fiction, this mixing of style is rare. Similar shifts occur in comics, on social media and in conversation. Our next example is from a recording of a group of university students sitting in a food court. They have been discussing economics in fairly standard Indonesian when Rini changes the topic and says that she hasn't yet decided what to order.

Rini: (while laughing) *Saya belum menemukan apa yang mau saya makan.*
"I have not yet discovered what it is that I want to eat."
Ini=. ... Hah. Itu teh cuma esnya aja?
"Here. Hah. That's just with ice?"

Ratih: *Minum aja Teh. ...Tapi nggak tau mau minum apa.*
"(I) am just going to have a drink. But (I) don't know what (I) want."

Rini begins in the standard style, indicated by saya for first person reference, the fully inflected verb *menemukan* [to discover] and a complex sentence structure. She also laughs, indicating the humorous incongruity between what she said and how she said it. Rini and Ratih then switch to a more colloquial style indicated by informal *aja* [just] and *nggak* [not], the use of ellipses and the incorporation of a Sundanese discourse marker *teh* and (coincidently homophonous) vocative *Teh* [older sister].[3] While the forces of conservative educators and government bureaucrats continue to promote standard Indonesian, the mixing of styles, registers and languages is in fact the lived reality of all Indonesian speakers, and youth enthusiastically celebrate this linguistic plurality.

What does this mean for language education? We feel that the love of language variation expressed by young Indonesians is something that needs to be shared with learners. We identify four ways that our research can inform the teaching of Indonesian. First, diversity is the reality. As educators, we must recognise and embrace linguistic and cultural diversity and can no longer teach only the standard language in isolation, because this would provide an unrealistic model for students. Second, narrative (in its myriad forms) is an extremely useful entry into the complex cultural and linguistic diversity found in Indonesia and so is valuable in language teaching. Third, for learners the key is flexibility. We cannot possibly teach all the different kinds of language and cultural variation students will encounter in Indonesia, but we can teach them skills, tools and strategies to deal with and embrace diversity. Finally, as educators we have to rise to this challenge. Rather than falling back on easy solutions that rely on a simplistic reading of register and language variation, we need to embrace difference, hybridity, and complexity.

Michael Ewing, Asia Institute, The University of Melbourne (m.ewing@unimelb.edu.au)
Dwi Noverini Djenar, School of Languages and Cultures, The University of Sydney (novi.djenar@usyd.edu.au)

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The Tai-Kadai languages and their genetic affiliation

Yongxian Luo

TAI-KADAI is a family of diverse languages found in southern China, northeast India and much of Southeast Asia, with a diaspora in North America and Europe. It is one of the major language families in East and Southeast Asia. The number of the Tai-Kadai languages is estimated to be close to one hundred, with approximately 100 million speakers who are spread across six countries: China, Thailand, Laos, Myanmar, India and Vietnam. Tai-Kadai is a well-established family in its own right. However, its genetic affiliation remains open.

As the name itself suggests, Tai-Kadai is made up of two major groups: Tai and Kadai. Tai, also known as Kam-Tai, comprises the best known members of the family: Thai and Lao, the national languages of Thailand and Laos, whose speakers alone account for over half of the Tai-Kadai population. Thai and Lao are closely related to Zhuang, the language of the largest minority group in China. Other important members within the Tai group include Kam and Sui, with several million speakers.

Kadai refers to a number of lesser-known languages, some of which have only a few hundred fluent speakers or even less.[1] The majority of Tai-Kadai languages have no writing systems of their own, particularly Kadai languages. Those with writing systems include Thai, Lao, Sipsongpanna Dai and Tai Nua. These use the Indic-based scripts. Others use Chinese character-based scripts, such as the Zhuang and Kam-Sui in southern China and surrounding regions. Romanized scripts were also introduced in the 1950s by the Chinese government for the Zhuang and the Kam-Sui languages. Almost each group within Tai-Kadai has a rich oral history tradition.

In the early days of Sino-Tibetan studies, Tai was assumed to be a member of the Sino-Tibetan family. This theory was challenged by Paul Benedict, who put forward the hypothesis of a Tai-Austronesian alliance.[2] Benedict's position has gained increasing acceptance among Western scholars. Benedict made the links between Kam-Tai and a number of lesser known languages such as Gelao, Lachi and Laqua, for which the term Kadai was coined. More recently, terms like Kra and Kra-dai have been proposed for these latter languages.

While there is no question about the status of Tai as a distinct language family, the genetic affiliation of Tai-Kadai remains controversial. Opinions are divided into three camps: (1) Sino-Tai; (2) Austro-Tai; (3) Sino-Tibetan-Austronesian. The Sino-Tai hypothesis assumes the membership of Tai under Sino-Tibetan while the Austro-Tai theory argues for a genetic relationship between Tai and Austronesian. The Sino-Tibetan-Austronesian hypothesis proposes a super phylum that includes Chinese, Tai-Kadai, Miao-Yao, and Austronesian.

Today western researchers generally embrace the Austro-Tai theory while the majority of Chinese scholars still uphold the traditional hypothesis for a Sino-Tai alliance. A number of Chinese scholars, however, are siding with Benedict in linking Tai-Kadai with Austronesian, excluding Tai-Kadai from Sino-Tibetan.[3] The advancement in the phylogenetic study of Kam-Tai and Austronesian peoples, along with several anthropological traits such as face-tattooing and teeth-blackening, lend support to this view.

On the basis of comparison between Kam-Tai and Austronesian, Deng and Wang believe that Kam-Tai and Austronesian are genetically related.[4] Their conclusion is arrived at through solid evidence: some 40 basic vocabulary items in Swadesh's list are found to be shared by Kam-Tai and Austronesian. These include several items from Yakhontov's list – a 35-word subset of the Swadesh list posited as especially stable by Russian linguist Sergei Yakhontov for calculating the genetic relationships between languages. However, not all Austronesianists are convinced; for them, the evidence cited proof is in fact far from consistent, and should be considered as result of contact rather than genetic link.

On the other hand, recent research provides evidence from Kam-Tai and Chinese showing that the two languages share basic vocabulary and morphological processes.[5] Little parallel development can be observed between Kam-Tai and Austronesian in this regard. This is at variance with Benedict's claims that Tai and Chinese share little in basic vocabulary and morphology. Since basic vocabulary and morphology is relatively stable and resistant to borrowing, this finding is worth considering.

For now, evidence from both sides is contested. The Sino-Tai hypothesis needs to be revisited, as does the Austro-Tai hypothesis. Since Kadai languages may hold a key to the genetic position of Tai-Kadai, good descriptive and comparative work needs to be done to unveil key aspects of historical connection.[6] The issue of genetic affiliation of Tai-Kadai remains a fascinating topic of academic pursuit.

Yongxian Luo, Associate Professor, Asia Institute, The University of Melbourne (yongxian@unimelb.edu.au).

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