

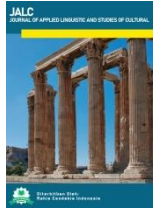


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EXPLORING LINGUISTICS IDENTITY FROM BRUNEI TO MEDAN: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY VIEW

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ABSTRACT

This study uses an autoethnographic approach to investigate the role that language plays in the formation of linguistic identity between Brunei Darussalam and Medan, Indonesia. It investigates how speakers adjust across multilingual and cultural borders, drawing on Decolonial Linguistics (Kelley, 2020) and Linguistic Identity Theory (Pavlenko & Norton, 2020). Self-interview data from a qualitative introspective case study highlight significant variations in pragmatics (*kita, jua*), pronunciation (A/E sounds), and vocabulary (*kereta, lalu*). Although these differences first led to misunderstanding, they eventually promoted linguistic awareness and identity negotiation. The results demonstrate that the speaker preserved cultural roots while creating a hybrid language identity that combined aspects of Indonesian and Bruneian. The research emphasizes autoethnography as an introspective method for comprehending the intersections of language, power, and belonging in Southeast Asia.

INTRODUCTION

In multilingual cultures like Brunei Darussalam and Indonesia, the worldwide problem of linguistic identity has emerged as a major focus of sociolinguistics and language instruction. Language practices have changed as a result of globalization and academic mobility, and discussions on the construction, negotiation, and maintenance of linguistic identity in transnational contexts have become more heated (Le Ha, 2025). According to Moosavi (2022), personal experiences and social representations arising from cross-cultural encounters also have an impact on the dynamics of linguistic identity, in addition to national language regulations. The usage of Malay and its regional dialects in Brunei and Medan within the ASEAN region demonstrates the complex connections between colonial history and language globalization, resulting in multiple and flexible linguistic identities (Nilan & Maunati, 2025).

Recent developments suggest that language serves as a symbolic indicator of social belonging and the expression of hybrid identities in addition to being a tool for communication (Mikal, 2025). Personal narratives become crucial in comprehending the interconnections of language, power, and self-representation, according to Buensuceso (2021), who contends that diplomacy and educational practices in Southeast Asia incorporate autoethnographic features of regional identity construction. The growing popularity of autoethnographic linguistics approaches worldwide is indicative of a larger effort to decolonize knowledge, especially in Asian contexts where Western perspectives have long held sway (Wan et al., 2025). Thus, research on Southeast Asian linguistic identity adds to global conversations about linguistic diversity and conceptual fairness.

In terms of theory, this study is based on postcolonial autoethnography and linguistic identity theory. Linguistic identity is a socially produced phenomenon that is continuously debated through language practices that are intertwined in historical, social, and ideological frame works, claim Pavlenko and Norton (2020). This theory's development signifies a move away from fundamentalist interpretations and toward intersectional viewpoints that take class, gender, and ethnicity into account (Kelley, 2020). Suoc et al. (2025) suggest that the autoethnographic approach is extremely relevant in Brunei and Medan because it captures the lived experiences of speakers that cross symbolic boundaries between national, local, and global languages.

Personal narratives are often overlooked in Southeast Asian language identity studies, which is a serious issue. Individual experiences of bilingual or multilingual speakers are still not well studied, with the majority of studies concentrating on institutional or policy representations (Pandian et al., 2021). This study is urgently needed to close that gap using reflective autoethnography, which offers a more contextualized and human-centered view of linguistic identity over the Brunei-Medan spectrum. This study's local context centers on two interconnected but different sociocultural contexts. While Medan, an urban, multiethnic city in Indonesia, illustrates linguistic variation and intricate identity discussions, Brunei Darussalam presents the Malay language as a powerful national identity symbol (Crosling et al., 2024). These traits make it possible to tell a story about how people negotiate their linguistic identities in constantly shifting social settings.

Instead of focusing on subjective experiences that reflect the shift in linguistic identity from Brunei to Medan, the majority of previous research highlight language policy or group attitudes (Nilan & Maunati, 2025; Le Ha, 2025). In order to comprehend how language becomes a site of internal negotiation throughout linguistic globalization, this study offers a reflective autoethnographic approach that concentrates the researcher's lived experiences as primary data.

METHOD

This study employs a Qualitative Introspective Case Study design to analyze the linguistic adaptation experienced by a single multilingual speaker transitioning between two distinct language varieties: *Bahasa Melayu* in Brunei and *Bahasa Indonesia* in the Medan context. The qualitative methodology was selected to provide a thorough examination of individual language experiences, emphasizing

the participant's cognitive adaptations, meaning negotiation, and specific areas of linguistic friction. Using the participant's special position as an expert informant on their own dialectal adaptation process, the case study framework offers extensive detail.

An organized self-interview with three main analytical questions that catered to varying linguistic levels served as the main tool for gathering data. The participant's internal thought processes and particular anecdotal instances of language use were directly accessible with this strategy. Question (1) focused on lexical and semantic shifts (vocabulary) through the identification of false cognates (words with similar form but different meaning). Question (2) targeted phonological friction and fusion (sound and pronunciation). Question (3) investigated lexical contrast and grammatical function (the function of specific words like *kita* and *jua*).

Thematic coding was used to analyze the data from the participant's introspective answers. Every response was grouped and examined based on its linguistic focus. The analysis went beyond merely listing vocabulary differences (e.g., *kereta*, *lalu*) to identify the participant's adaptation strategies (e.g., relying on friends for help, conscious pronunciation adjustment) and the perceived level of difficulty. The data analysis that resulted concentrated on giving a narrative description that compares the linguistic structures that were encountered and assesses the modifications needed to attain consistent fluency and grammatical precision.

In conclusion, our approach produced rich, anecdotal data that successfully analyzed language difficulties at three important levels: word function (functional semantics), sound (phonological), and vocabulary (lexical/semantic). The technique offers a strong basis for a theme discussion on dialect adaptation by concentrating the analysis solely on the language features and the participant's internal linguistic adjustment process. This is in complete accordance with the study's primary research goals.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

According to the research, there are significant linguistic differences between Bahasa Indonesia in Medan and Bahasa Melayu in Brunei, which frequently cause initial misunderstandings and communication difficulties. Words such as *kereta* (car in Brunei, motorcycle in Medan), *lalu* (past in Brunei, then in Indonesia), and *muka surat* (page in Brunei, *halaman* in Indonesia) illustrate how identical forms carry distinct meanings across contexts. The participant had to constantly modify as a result of these gaps, mostly depending on peer support and social cues to make sense of their intentions. Examples of misunderstandings that are followed by self-correction or laughter show how emotional experience was included into language learning. The speaker gradually became mindful of lexical flexibility and started deliberately observing word choice to preserve intelligibility in various social contexts.

An additional significant obstacle in the move from Brunei to Medan was phonological adaptation. The participant struggled to distinguish vowel sounds, especially between A and E, because they were used to pronouncing the alphabet with an English influence. For example, phonological norms in Brunei, Indonesia,

and English were found to differ in how acronyms like ATM and MRT were pronounced. Ironically, certain terms maintained their English pronunciation, which left the speaker perplexed even though Indonesians were expecting a more regional articulation. The participant gradually evolved a hybridized phonological system, alternating between Indonesian and English pronunciation based on context and audience. Gradual phonological adaptation and increasing awareness of listener expectations were reflected in this "fusion."

Beyond vocabulary, the data revealed subtle grammatical and pragmatic differences that influenced interactional meaning. Several cognates showed minor variation (*polis-polisi*, *beza-beda*, *askar-tentara*), while other terms shifted in social function. A striking example is *kita*, which in Bruneian Malay operates as a respectful or polite address form ("Kita kan buat surat pasal apa ah?"), whereas in Indonesian it simply means "we." Such differences illustrate how grammar and pragmatics intertwine with social hierarchy and politeness norms. Additionally, regional markers such as *inda* (tidak), *ani* (ini), and *jua* (juga) signaled Bruneian dialect identity, sometimes making the participant's speech distinctly foreign in Medan. This created moments of both cultural pride and linguistic otherness.

The participant's experience demonstrated a sophisticated process of negotiation and adaptation at all linguistic levels, including lexical, phonological, and grammatical. Initially causing conflict, misinterpretation and self-correction eventually developed into tools for self-reflection and linguistic awareness. A growing hybrid language identity influenced by both local and cross-cultural factors is demonstrated by the speaker's flexibility in modifying meaning, pronunciation, and social expression. This adaptive process was further enhanced by emotional reactions that ranged from bewilderment to amusement, underscoring the human aspect of dialectal shift. These results lay the groundwork for understanding how social interaction and individual experience combine to create linguistic identity, a topic that will be covered in more detail in the discussion session.

Discussion

The results strongly show that language use is essential to the formation of social and personal identity. Linguistic identity is a dynamic process that is shaped by everyday speech and interaction, according to Pavlenko and Norton (2020). The participant's lexical adaptation, such as replacing *muka surat* with *halaman* or adjusting *kereta* based on context, shows how self-perception evolves with linguistic experience. These alterations show a continuous balancing act between Bruneian and Indonesian conventions, which goes beyond merely reflecting vocabulary development. The premise that identity creation is both cognitive and affective is supported by the emotional responses that lead to miscommunication, such as laughter or humiliation. Essentially, each language adjustment act turns into a tiny self-definition performance under new sociolinguistic parameters.

As suggested by Le Ha (2025) and Suoc et al. (2025), language identity and international experience and mobility are closely related. This is best illustrated by the participant's move from Brunei to Medan, where multilingual contact produced hybrid speech patterns that combine exposure to other languages with local adaptation. The mixing of phonological features which is the transition between the

pronunciations of English, Malay, and Indonesian shows how mobility promotes adaptability in language practice. This process is consistent with the concept of "negotiated identity," in which speakers constantly adjust their language use to strike a balance between self-authenticity and social acceptance. Instead of substituting one identity for another, the resulting language repertoire forges a transnational self that is positioned between Indonesian communicative standards and Bruneian cultural foundations. In a globalized ASEAN setting, this kind of adaptability shows how language identity becomes a living response to mobility and belonging.

Kelley's (2020) Decolonial Linguistics Framework explains how the participant's experience also reflects underlying power relations ingrained in language use. While localized expressions from Brunei were frequently viewed as casual or less accurate, navigating between local and global variants demonstrated the subtle dominance of "standard" Indonesian and English as linguistic authority. However, by retaining Bruneian words such as *inda*, *ani*, and *jua* in casual communication, the speaker resisted complete linguistic assimilation. By recognizing local speech as an integral component of valid knowledge and identity, this resistance exemplifies a decolonial perspective. As a result, the participant's deliberate code-switching preserves individual voice within prevailing linguistic systems while simultaneously fulfilling communicative and ideological goals. This pattern demonstrates how linguistic adaptation can serve as a covert form of opposition to power structures as well as accommodation.

The results demonstrate the usefulness of autoethnography as a method for investigating the relationship between linguistic theory and firsthand experience. The participant relates personal adaptation to more general issues of culture, power, and identity creation through reflective narrative. The findings support the idea that self-narrative research might reveal subtleties that policy-based studies frequently miss, particularly those pertaining to the emotional and reflective aspects of language use. This supports the demand made by Wan et al. (2025) to use lived experience to decolonize linguistic research. Furthermore, by placing them in a genuine, human-centered context, the autoethnographic approach unites academic frameworks such as Decolonial Linguistics, Negotiation Theory, and Linguistic Identity Theory. By doing thus, this study advances a broader conception of linguistic identity as an ongoing process of negotiation influenced by both introspection and interpersonal communication.

CONCLUSION

This research comes to the conclusion that linguistic identity is a dynamic and changing concept that is influenced by social interaction, personal experience, and international travel. The participant's move from Brunei to Medan serves as an example of how language adaptation goes beyond simple communication and serves as a means of self-negotiation within a changing cultural and ideological context. The speaker created a hybrid identity that connects local belonging with global knowledge through lexical, phonological, and grammatical adaptation. The results confirm that autoethnography offers a potent lens through which to view the political, reflective, and emotional aspects of language acquisition that are frequently obscured in policy-based studies. This study emphasizes how people

actively challenge language hierarchies while establishing new platforms for cultural expression by fusing language Identity Theory and Decolonial Linguistics. Ultimately, it contributes to a broader understanding of how Southeast Asian speakers construct identity across borders, emphasizing the human dimension of linguistic diversity in a globalized world.

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