

Dialects and Varieties in a Situation of Language Endangerment

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This paper examines the relation between some language varieties in the northern part of Ambon Island in the Maluku province of East Indonesia. According to Collins (1982:90):

the language spoken along the north coast [of Ambon Island - SM] from Seit to Tial and in Laha on Ambon Bay is called Hitu after its most prestigious village. There are three main dialects: Hitu-Tulehu, Seit-Kaitetu, and Laha.

In another publication, Collins (1983:100) treats the languages of Seit, Kaitetu, Laha, Hitu and Tulehu as distinct. All of these languages are assigned to the Proto-Ambon group, but there is sub-grouping within that group.

In this paper I examine contemporary data from the varieties which Collins (1983) assigns to the N.E. Ambon group, Tulehu and Hitu. I compare the varieties spoken in Tulehu and its two adjoining villages (Tial and Tengah-tengah) with the variety spoken in the village of Hitu, and also the varieties spoken in two intervening villages, Liang and Mamala. The data used in this study are wordlists and translations of a standard elicitation text.

Phonological and morphological features of the data show that there are differences between the language of Hitu and that of Tulehu, and that the Liang variety is clearly a dialect of the Tulehu language. The status of the Mamala variety is not so clear; it shares phonological features with both the Hitu variety and the Liang variety, but has a morphological feature which sets it apart from all the other varieties. Therefore it probably has a status equal to that of the Hitu and Tulehu languages. However, these conclusions must be taken to be very tentative, in view of the type of problems which arise in attempting a dialect survey when a language is losing vitality. Reliable data can be very hard to find with older speakers often already having begun to forget their language, and younger speakers having never learned the language fully. Also, many scholars have claimed that higher than usual levels of variation are common in speech communities which are losing vitality (Wolfram 2002). It is therefore difficult to know how much variation within and between varieties should be discounted as an epiphenomenon of the process of language loss.

References

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