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# Early Documentation of the Orang Seletar and Sugut Sungai Languages

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## Kevin Blissett and Dr. Dirk Elzinga, Linguistics

The Orang Seletar and Sugut Sungai languages are endangered languages indigenous to Malaysia. With every generation there are fewer speakers of the language, and, perhaps more worryingly, the language is less frequently taught to children. It is increasingly urgent for linguists to document the languages before they vanish completely. The purpose of this project was to begin that documentation effort by translating a list of common vocabulary, known as the Swadesh list, into each of these two languages.

The data for this study was collected through face-to-face interviews with native speakers in their homes throughout Malaysia. Target words for the interviews were collected from a Swadesh list (translated into Malay). Interviewees were then guided through the process of translating this vocabulary list into their own languages. Responses from the interviewees were recorded on a digital audio recorder and then transcribed using the International Phonetic Alphabet. Interviews also included brief conversations about the linguistic genealogies of the speakers. Participants were recruited by direct contact and word of mouth and signed an informed consent document before participating in the study. For the Orang Seletar language, the subject pool included four speakers from two families living in the same village on the coast of Johor Bahru, Malaysia. The Sugut Sungai data was collected from four speakers in one family living in the city of Sandakan, Malaysia.

The vocabulary data collected is too large to be included in the body of the paper, but is attached it as an appendix. Because some participants were unable to translate every word on the Swadesh list into their language, one list may contain some vocabulary the other list does not.

To evaluate the health and future prospects of the languages, the second part of the study involved speaking to my study participants about their use of their language, such as how often the language was spoken to them as children, how much they are speaking it to their children, how much their parents spoke it, and so forth. This type of data is largely anecdotal, but is illuminating. While the parents and grandparents of study participants spoke their languages exclusively or most often, many of the study participants spoke Malay more often. Endangered languages were spoken frequently within their communities, but participants spent the majority of their time outside of the community speaking Malay. Additionally, while the children of study participants spoke their endangered languages with at least some degree of competency, almost all of them were more comfortable in Malay. Due to their limited competency, it seems unlikely future generations will continue to teach their endangered languages to their own children.

Many question whether Orang Seletar is a distinct language of its own or whether it is merely a dialect of Malay. Looking strictly at the vocabulary list, a strong case can be made that Orang Seletar is simply a dialect of Malay. Many of the words are exactly the same as the corresponding words in Malay; others appear to be derived through simple phonological processes from Malay words. A small group of words appears to be unique to the language with no obvious connection to Malay. These characteristics suggest a dialect of Malay and not an entirely independent language. However, there are valid counterpoints as well. For example, the language is not mutually intelligible with Malay and Malay and Orang Seletar speakers refer to them as separate languages. Additionally, there appear to be significant grammatical disparities between the two languages. At least some of the affixes critical to the Malay language do not appear in Orang Seletar. One example of this is the active *meN-* prefix in Malay. Many Orang Seletar verbs strip this prefix for their form of corresponding verbs. More compelling is the nominalizing *-an* suffix

which does not appear in the language at all. As a final example, Orang Seletar appears to have a unique method of negating verbs that varies significantly from the strategy used in Malay.

After collecting the data for Sugut Sungai and leaving the city, I discovered a book on the Sugut Sungai language published by a small museum in the Malaysian state of Sabah. As far as I am aware this other project (including a vocabulary list, a phrasebook and one other work) is the only other published work on this language. I was unaware of the book before collecting my own data, so the data from this study was entirely independent. Upon comparison, the data in this study was an almost perfect match to the earlier published data, strong evidence that both sets of data are reliable.

While the data in the published collection is spelled out according to a system that seemed logical to the transcribers, the current study data has been transcribed using the International Phonetic Alphabet. Therefore, this data is a closer transcription and gives more information about the language as it is actually pronounced.

The work here is just a start. These two languages still require an enormous amount more study and recording before they will be preserved in a meaningful way. Every project has to start somewhere, however, and the work done here has moved the preservation project forward.

## References

King, John Wayne., and Julie K. King. Sungai/Tombonuwo (Labuk Sugut) Bahasa Malaysia English Vocabulary. Kota Kinabalu: Sabah Museum State Archives Department, 1990. Print.

Swadesh, Morris. (1952). Lexicostatistic dating of prehistoric ethnic contacts. *Proceedings American Philosophical Society*, 96, 452–463.

## Vocabulary List

English	Malay	Orang Seletar	Sugut Sungai	animal	binatang	bənatəŋ	binatəŋ
and	dan	dan	om	ash	abu	abu	
because	kerana	ŋak		back	belakang	bəlakaŋ	likud
if	jika/kalau	kalau		bark	kulit kayu	kulif kaiju?	kulit kaju
all	semua	səmun	kiawi	stomach	perut	puʔ	tijen
rotten	buruk	katja?	ətəpujo	bird	burung	buŋ	buruŋ
big	besar	bəsəy	ajo?	blood	darah	dah	ra?a
black	hitam	itam	itom	bone	tulang	tulaŋ	tulaŋ
cold	sejuk	səjo?	asagif	child	anak	ana?	əna?
dirty	kotor	kotou	osem	cloud	awan	asap	awan
dry	kering	kiŋ	kəriŋ	day	hari	ai?	runaf
far	jauh	dʒuh	arau	dust	debu		dəbu
good	baik	bə?	awaron	ear	telinga	təliŋə	təliŋə
green	hijau	ijau	okuniŋ	earth	bumi	bumi	wənuwə
heavy	berat	bəyat	awagaʔ	egg	telur	təlo	əntaulu?
left	kiri	ki:	əbəliŋi?	eye	mata	mata	mato?
long	panjang	pandʒaŋ	əlanau	fat	gemuk	gəmo?	
a lot	banyak	bapa?	asuaŋ	father	bapa	pa?	amo?
narrow	sempit	səmpəʔ	aparu	fur	bulu	bulu?	bulu
close	dekati	dəkəʔ	arani?	fire	api	api	apoi
new	baru	bau	awagu	fish	ikan	ikan	pəʔ
old	tua	tua	tuo	flower	bunga	buŋə	buŋə
other	lain	len	səndian	fog	kabus	gabus	kabus
red	merah	miəh	amian	foot	kaki	kaki	akəd
correct	betul	bətul	bəna?	fruit	buah	bʰəh	buah
right	kanan	kanan	sədipau	grass	rumput	lalaŋ	kumpai
sharp	tajam	tadʒum	tərəm	hair	rambut	gamut	əbu?
short	pendek	pəndə?	əpa?	hand	tangan	kokof	loruŋ
small	kecil	kətʃi?	awaros	head	kepala	kəpala?	ulu
smooth	lancar	lantʃay		heart	jantung	dʒanton	dʒanton
straight	lurus	lus	lurus	husband	suami	laki?	sawo
that	itu	dʒə	itu	ice	ais	ay batu?	ais
thick	tebal	təbal	əkəpal	lake	tasik	kolam	tasi?
this	ini	ŋka?		leaf	daun	dan	ron
warm	hangat	anʃaf		heart	hati	ati?	inawo
wet	basah	basah	əjəpəs	lice	kutu	utu?	kutu
white	putih	putəh	putih	man	orang lelaki	dʒantaŋ	kusei
wide	lebar	lebay		meat	daging	dəgiŋ	dagiŋ
yellow	kuning	kuniŋ	kuniŋ	mother	ibu	ma?	ino?
not	bukan	bukən	əkənə	mountain	gunung	bukit	gunuŋ

mouth	mulut	mat	kabanj	1sg	saya	am	aku
name	nama	nama?	naran	3sg	dia	na?	io
neck	leher	gonggong	lio	3pl	mereka	dʒampa? na?	nəsiro
night	malam	malam	awi	1pl (inclusive)	kita	kita?	kito
nose	hidung	hidong	əndun	1pl (exclusive)	kami	kami?	me
person	orang	kon (orang selet)	ləbo	2sg	kamu	aih	ikau
river	sungai	sunjai	sunjoi	how?	macam mana	matjam ma?	ənuko
road	jalan	dʒan	məmpano	what?	apa	əna?	anu
root	akar	akay	akar	when?	bila	bila?	səmbijə
rope	tali	tali?	tali	where?	di mana	dəma?	səmbə
salt	garam	gam	asin	who?	siapa	sa?	isai
sand	pasir	pase	pantai	bite	menggigit	gigiʔ	məŋokof
ocean	laut	loʔ	laut	blow	meniup	tiup	məniup
seed	benih	bəneh	bənih	breath	bernafas	ti? napas	inawo
skin	kulit	kulitʔ		burn	membakar	bəkʌ	məpusul
sky	langit (sky)	lanjit	lanjit	come	datang	kian	lumagə
smoke	asap	asap	lisun	count	mengira	kia?	mənjijap
snake	ular	ulay	lopun	cut	potong	keæt	mənoto?
snow	salji	sadʒi		die	mati	mati?	minatoi
star	bintang	bintan	bintan	dig	menggali	gali?	məŋukud
wood	kayu	kaju?		drink	minum	inum	məninum
rock	batu	batu?	bʷatu	eat	makan	man	monkan
sun	matahari	mataai	runat	fall	jatuh	jetuh	nəratu?
tail	ekor	eko	iko	fight	bergaduh	kəlaif	montagah
tongue	lidah	lideh	dile?	flow	mengalir	aleh	inobə
tooth	gigi	gigi?	nipun	fly	terbang	təban	təmulud
tree	pokok	poko?	pun	give	memberi	bi?	məna?
water	air	ay	sunjoi	hear	dengar	dəŋə	məraŋow
wife	isteri	bini?	sawo	hit	pukul	bantai	məluba?
wind	angin	aŋin	aŋin	hold	memegang	pegan	məŋkujut
wing	sayap	sajəp	sajəp	hunt	memburu	bubu?	məmburu
woman	orang perempuan	tina	ləbo wənoi	kill	membunuh	bunuh	mənobo?
forest	hutan	utan	gəwutən	know	tahu	tau	elan
worm	ulat	ulat	ulaʔ	laugh	terketawa	tə?	moaijə
year	tahun	taun	ton	lay	berbaring	berj	kumili
one	satu	satu?	ido	live	hidup	idupʔ	miau
two	dua	duə	duo	play	bermain	mān	mulilan
three	tiga	tigə?	tolu	pull	menarik	ti?	məmədi?
four	empat	əmpaʔ	opat	push	menolak	tola?	mənola?
five	lima	lima?	limo	scrub	menggosok	guso?	

talk	bercakap	tʃap̃	montanjar
scratch	calar	tʃalay	tʃalar
see	nampak	nampaʔ	osio
sew	menjahit	jət	məmiliʔ
sing	bernyanyi	ɲɛniʔ	məɲani
sit	duduk	dudoʔ	mogəm
sleep	tidur	tidu	
smell	menghidu	cium bau	
spit	meludah	ludəh	məɲəduraʔ
split	membelah	bələh	məɲinjan
stab	menikam	tikam	məɲimpasuʔ
stand	berdiri	diʔ	mondii
suck	menhisap	isap	məɲosop
swell	membengkak	bəŋkaʔ	ma:
swim	berenang	benan	tumojə
think	berfikir	pike	məmikir
throw	membuang	buan	podəʔ
tie	mengikat	ikaʔ	məɲonkos
turn	membelok	beləʔ	lumikul
vomit	muntah	muntah	luaʔ
walk	berjalan	dʒan	məmpanau
wash	mencuci	cuciʔ	məmpot
wipe	mengesat	kəsaf̃	

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