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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
and	dan	dan	om
because	kerana	ŋak	
if	jika/kalau	kalau	
all	semua	səmən	kiawi
rotten	buruk	katʃa?	ətəpujo
big	besar	bəsay	ajo?
black	hitam	itam	itom
cold	sejuk	sejo?	asagif
dirty	kotor	kotou	osem
dry	kering	kiŋ	kəriŋ
far	jauh	dʒuh	arau
good	baik	be?	awaron
green	hijau	ijau	okunij
heavy	berat	bəyat	awagaʃ
left	kiri	ki:	əbəlinj?
long	panjang	pandʒaŋ	əlanjau
a lot	banyak	baja?	asuan
narrow	sempit	səmpetʃ	aparu
close	dekat	dəkəf	arani?
new	baru	bau	awagu
old	tua	tua	tuo
other	lain	len	səndianj
red	merah	mieh	amiarj
correct	betul	bətul	bəna?
right	kanan	kanan	sədipau
sharp	tajam	tadʒum	tarəm
short	pendek	pende?	epa?
small	kecil	kətʃi?	awaros
smooth	lancar	lantʃay	
straight	lurus	lus	lurus
that	itu	dʒia	itu
thick	tebal	təbal	əkəpal
this	ini	ŋka?	
warm	hangat	aŋaʃ	
wet	basah	basah	əjəpəs
white	putih	puteh	putih
wide	lebar	lebay	
yellow	kuning	kunij	kunij
not	bukan	bukən	əkənə

animal	binatang	bənatəŋ	binataŋ
ash	abu	abu	
back	belakang	bəlakəŋ	likud
bark	kulit kayu	kulif'kaiju?	kulit kaju
stomach	perut	puʃ	tijen
bird	burung	buŋ	buruŋ
blood	darah	dah	ra?a
bone	tulang	tulaŋ	tulaŋ
child	anak	ana?	ana?
cloud	awan	asap̄	awan
day	hari	ai?	rūnaʃ
dust	debu		dəbu
ear	telinga	təliŋa	teliŋe
earth	bumi	bumi	wənuwa
egg	telur	təlo	əntaulu?
eye	mata	mata	mato?
fat	gemuk	gəmo?	
father	bapa	pa?	amo?
fur	bulu	bulu?	bulu
fire	api	api	apoi
fish	ikan	ikan	pəf
flower	bunga	buŋə	buŋa
fog	kabus	gabus	kabus
foot	kaki	kaki	akəd
fruit	buah	bwəh	buah
grass	rumput	lalaŋ	kumpai
hair	rambut	gamut	əbu?
hand	tangan	kokof	loŋun
head	kepala	kəpala?	ulu
heart	jantung	dʒəntorŋ	dʒəntorŋ
husband	suami	laki?	sawo
ice	ais	ay batu?	ais
lake	tasik	kolam	tasi?
leaf	daun	dan	ron
heart	hati	ati?	inawo
lice	kutu	utu?	kutu
man	orang lelaki	dʒəntarŋ	kusei
meat	daging	dəgiŋ	dagiŋ
mother	ibu	ma?	ino?
mountain	gunung	bukit	gunurŋ

mouth	mulut	mat	kabarj	1sg	saya	am	aku
name	nama	nama?	naran	3sg	dia	na?	io
neck	leher	gongonj	lio	3pl	mereka	dʒampa? na?	nəsiro
night	malam	malam	awi	1pl (inclusive)	kita	kita?	kito
nose	hidung	hidonj	əndunj	1pl (exclusive)	kami	kami?	me
person	orang	kon (orang selet	ləbo	2sg	kamu	aih	ikau
river	sungai	suŋai	sunoi	how?	macam mana	matʃam 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?	səmbo
salt	garam	gam	asin	who?	siapa	sa?	isai
sand	pasir	pase	pantai	bite	menggigit	gigif	mənjokof
ocean	laut	lof	laut	blow	meniup	tiup	məniup
seed	benih	bənəh	banih	breath	bernaſas	ti? napas	inawo
skin	kulit	kulit		burn	membakar	bəkl	mənusul
sky	langit (sky)	lanjɪt	lanjɪt	come	datang	kian	lumage
smoke	asap	asap	lisun	count	mengira	kia?	mənjap
snake	ular	uləy	lopunj	cut	potong	keæt	mənoto?
snow	salji	sadʒi		die	mati	mati?	minatoi
star	bintang	bintaŋ	bintanj	dig	menggali	gali?	məjukud
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	əko	iko	fight	bergaduh	kalai?	montagah
tongue	lidah	lidəh	dile?	flow	mengalir	aleh	inobə
tooth	gigi	gigi?	nipun	fly	terbang	təbaŋ	temulud
tree	pokok	poko?	pun	give	memberi	bi?	məna?
water	air	ay	sunoi	hear	dengar	deŋə	məraŋow
wife	isteri	bini?	sawo	hit	pukul	bantai	meluba?
wind	angin	ənjin	ənjin	hold	memegang	pegarj	mənkujut
wing	sayap	sajəp	sajæp	hunt	memburu	bubu?	məmburu
woman	orang perempu	tina	ləbo wenoi	kill	membunuh	bunuh	mənobo?
forest	hutan	utan	gəwutən	know	tahu	tau	elan
worm	ulat	ulat	ulaf	laugh	terketawa	to?	moaijə
year	tahun	taun	ton	lay	berbaring	beŋ	kumili
one	satu	satu?	ido	live	hidup	idup?	miau
two	dua	duə	duo	play	bermain	män	mulilaj
three	tiga	tigə?	tolu	pull	menarik	ti?	məmudi?
four	empat	əmpat?	opat	push	menolak	tola?	mənola?
five	lima	lima?	limo	scrub	menggosok	guso?	

talk	bercakap	tʃap̚	montanjar
scratch	calar	tʃalay	tʃalar
see	nampak	nampa?	osio
sew	menjahit	jēt	məmilič
sing	bermyanyi	ŋeŋi?	məŋajni
sit	duduk	dudo?	mogəm
sleep	tidur	tidu	
smell	menghidu	cium bau	
spit	meludah	ludəh	məŋədure?
split	membelah	bəlah	məŋijalan
stab	menikam	tikam	mənímpasu?
stand	berdiri	di?	mondii
suck	menhisap	isap	mənosop
swell	membengkak	bəŋka?	ma:
swim	berenang	benəŋ	tumojo
think	berfikir	pike	məmikir
throw	membuang	buaŋ	poda?
tie	mengikat	ikař	məŋonkos
turn	membelok	belo?	lumikul
vomit	muntah	muntah	lua?
walk	berjalan	dʒan	məmpanau
wash	mencuci	cuciř	məmɔput
wipe	mengesat	kəsař	

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