Vitality of the Orang Asli Languages in Gerik, Perak

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Language vitality can be defined as the power of a language to live or grow as a means of communication among members of the group who speak it. This paper evaluates the vitality of the Orang Asli languages in Gerik, Perak, Malaysia, based on the Major Evaluative Factors of Language Vitality outlined by the UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages in March, 2003. The factors identified are: (1) intergenerational language transmission; (2) absolute number of speakers; (3) proportion of speakers within the total population; (4) trends in existing language domains; (5) response to new domains and media; (6) materials for language education and literacy; (7) governmental and institutional attitudes and policies; (8) community members' attitudes toward their own language; and (9) amount and quality of documentation. The Orang Asli languages involved in this study are Temiar, Jahai, Kintaq, Kensiu, and Lanoh. Eighty-two questionnaires were administered, while observations and interviews were conducted with respondents from these communities. The results show that the Temiar language has higher vitality than any of the other languages. A number of reasons may be suggested to explain this, among them being the higher population of Temiar compared with other communities in the area. The lifestyle of the Temiar may be another reason, as is the function of Temiar as the lingua franca among the Orang Asli in the area.

1. INTRODUCTION. Malaysia, with a population of 30 million people (http://www.statistics.gov.my/), is relatively small in size but has a high density of indigenous languages, estimated at well over 100 languages (Asmah 2014). These indigenous languages, largely still "unknown" or undescribed in terms of systems and structures, are categorized into two different language families: Austronesian and Austroasiatic. Asmah (2014:1) contends that most of the languages are "linguistically Austroasiatic," while the "speech systems of the rest are more closely related to Malay or dialects of Malay. Malay is the official and national language of the country. Typically, speakers of Austronesian languages live mainly in the northern and central parts of Peninsular Malaysia, while speakers of Austroasiatic languages live in the central and southern part. In addition, a large number of indigenous languages are spoken in Sabah and Sarawak, East Malaysia.

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