

Language, Identity, and Belonging: The Struggle of Indonesian-Americans in Maintaining Native Linguistic Heritage

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**Abstrak**

Orang Indonesia telah bermigrasi ke Amerika Serikat untuk berbagai tujuan. Beberapa di antaranya datang untuk melanjutkan pendidikan dan akhirnya menetap setelah menyelesaikan pendidikan mereka. Sebagian lainnya bermigrasi untuk mencari peluang kerja yang lebih baik. Meskipun generasi pertama imigran masih memiliki hubungan yang kuat dengan Indonesia, masih belum dapat dipastikan apakah anak-anak mereka merasakan keterikatan yang sama dengan tanah air leluhur mereka. Tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah untuk memahami kompleksitas pemeliharaan bahasa dalam diaspora Indonesia-Amerika dan faktor-faktor yang mendasari penggunaan bahasa. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode penelitian kualitatif untuk mengumpulkan informasi dari beragam sampel orang Indonesia-Amerika. Temuan penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa masyarakat Indonesia-Amerika menghadapi berbagai tantangan dalam mempertahankan bahasa ibu mereka, termasuk terbatasnya kesempatan untuk transmisi bahasa, asimilasi budaya, dan prevalensi bahasa Inggris dalam kehidupan sehari-hari. Akibatnya, generasi berikutnya menunjukkan tingkat kemahiran bahasa yang berbeda-beda dan keterkaitan dengan warisan budaya Indonesia. Perjuangan untuk melestarikan bahasa ibu menimbulkan implikasi terhadap identitas individu dan kolektif, pelestarian budaya, dan komunikasi antargenerasi. Berdasarkan hasil penelitian, rekomendasi yang diberikan antara lain mendukung inisiatif pemeliharaan bahasa seperti program bahasa warisan, pelibatan masyarakat, dan memanfaatkan sumber daya digital untuk memastikan keberlangsungan vitalitas dan kekayaan budaya bahasa Indonesia dalam diaspora Indonesia-Amerika.

**Kata Kunci:** Pemeliharaan bahasa, diaspora, identitas, keberlanjutan, migrasi

**Abstract**

Indonesians have migrated to the United States for different purposes. Some initially arrived to pursue their studies and ended up staying after completing their education. Others migrated in search of improved job opportunities. While the first generation of immigrants still holds a strong connection to Indonesia, it remains uncertain whether their children feel the same sense of attachment to their ancestral homeland. The purpose of this research is aimed to understand the complexities of language maintenance within the Indonesian-American diaspora and the underlying factors influencing language use. This study employed qualitative research to gather insights from a diverse sample of Indonesian-Americans. The findings indicate that Indonesian-Americans encounter various challenges in sustaining their native language, including limited opportunities for language transmission, cultural assimilation, and the prevalence of English in their daily lives. Consequently, subsequent generations exhibit varying levels of language proficiency and connection to their Indonesian heritage. The struggle to preserve the native language raises implications for individual and collective identity, cultural preservation, and intergenerational communication. Based on the study's outcomes, recommendations include supporting language maintenance initiatives such as heritage language programs, community engagement, and leveraging digital resources to ensure the continued vitality and cultural richness of the Indonesian language within the Indonesian-American diaspora.

**Keyword:** Language maintenance, diaspora, identity, sustain, migration

**1. INTRODUCTION**

Indonesian-Americans are individuals who have migrated from Indonesia to the United States, along with their U.S.-born descendants (Yang, 2001). The first significant wave of migration began in the 1950s, driven by political instability and educational opportunities, followed by further immigration due to anti-Chinese sentiment in the 1960s and the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997. In recent years, many Indonesians have migrated for education and economic prospects. Despite their growing

presence, Indonesian-Americans remain a small minority among Asian-American populations, with communities concentrated in major cities like Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York, and Houston.

One of the major challenges facing this group is the maintenance of their native language. Previous studies (Lie, 2011; Wijaya, 2006, 2016) have documented heritage language loss among younger generations, who often adopt English as their dominant language. As Fishman (1991) and Hornberger (2012) explain, language

shift occurs when intergenerational transmission of the mother tongue ceases, often due to the dominance of socially prestigious languages like English.

Several studies have examined language attitudes and identity within immigrant communities. For example, Lie (2018) explored cultural identity among second-generation Indonesian-Americans, while Lasagabaster (2008) studied language proficiency in Basque-Americans. Research by Vaughan (2014), Abdelhadi (2017), and others further highlights the challenges of language maintenance across Arabic diasporas. However, few have focused on the lived experiences of Indonesian-Americans using firsthand narratives.

This study seeks to fill that gap by analyzing personal reflections from Indonesian-Americans shared via digital platforms. It explores the complexities of language maintenance and its connection to identity and belonging within a multicultural context.

#### LANGUAGE SHIFT

According to the research conducted by Anne Kandler and James Steele (2017), the concept of language shift refers to the phenomenon wherein individuals within a multilingual community abandon their native language in favor of another. This process is particularly prominent in situations where languages come into contact. In a rapidly globalizing world characterized by urbanization and long-distance economic migration, diverse linguistic groups interact more frequently, creating a demand for a shared language of communication. Language shift, which refers to the loss of a language at the societal level, plays a significant role in the decreasing linguistic diversity observed globally. Consequently, language shift occurs as a collective change in language preferences, driven by disruptions in the socio-political and economic dynamics within communities. It involves the dominance of one language over another, with the retreating language being replaced. It is important to note that language shift is primarily observed in communities that are under the influence and control of more powerful groups (Wendel and Heinrich, 2012).

#### LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE

Language maintenance refers to the preservation of a minority language among its speakers despite continuous contact with a majority language. According to Baker (2011), language maintenance refers to the relative stability of a language in terms of its speakers, their proficiency across different age groups, and its retention in specific domains such as home, school, and religion. These factors are diverse and include political, social,

demographic, economic, cultural, linguistic, psychological and institutional support factors. The maintenance of the Indonesian language by Indonesian-Americans can be affected either positively or negatively by these factors.

#### LINGUISTIC IDENTITY

Linguistic identity pertains to an individual's recognition as a speaker of one or multiple languages, which holds significant importance within their overall identity. This is particularly true for individuals who are multilingual. Factors such as linguistic expertise, affiliation, and familial inheritance contribute to shaping linguistic identity (Leung C., Harris R, Rampton B, 1997). In essence, an individual's linguistic code serves as a means of transmitting information about their community and social status in society. James Gee (2001) proposed the existence of four major components to identity. Gee's identity theory offers a valuable framework for understanding individuals' self-perceptions and the role of identity within dynamic social interactions. While not a rigid template, Gee's conceptualization serves as a helpful guide for empirical research. The identity framework proposed by Gee encompasses four key components: nature, institutional, affinity, and discourse. Nature identity refers to inherent characteristics that are generally unchangeable, such as gender and skin color, and hold significance for both the individual and others who perceive these traits as meaningful. Institutional identity, on the other hand, relates to activities and responsibilities conferred by formal institutions. Institutional identities are not self-derived but are bestowed by official organizations, such as being a licensed science teacher, a high school graduate, or a tenured professor. Gee suggests that institutional identity can be a vocation actively pursued and embraced, but the degree of active engagement with the associated role or duties can vary. Affinity identity distinguishes itself by individuals aligning with the practices of a group based on shared goals, values, or beliefs, independent of formal organizational membership. The decision to affiliate oneself with a group is largely discretionary and may not necessarily relate to other components of identity. For instance, a biology teacher may participate in a church group that opposes teachings of Darwinian evolution, potentially causing tension with the institutional values of their workplace. These positions appear to conflict, and they may cause a tension with the institutional values of this person's place of employment. Another important distinction is that decisions to align oneself to a group do not require a formal sanctioning of this label by an authority. Gee suggests that one of the key differences between affinity and institutional identities is in the power that does the assigning. Institutional identity is authorized by a formal organization while affinity

identity is found through one's alignment with a shared set of practices. The final identity component is discourse, and it manifests itself in the dialogue and discussion in which an individual participates. Lastly, discourse identity encompasses an individual's expression and participation in dialogue and discussions. It reflects unique aspects of a person's personality and can be observed through their speech and actions. Like the other components, discourse identity relies on recognition by others and derives its power from discourse and interactions with individuals in social settings.

## **METHOD**

Due to the data of this study being in the form of several videos, the research design will use a qualitative multiple-case study design. When conducting a study that involves multiple cases, a qualitative multiple-case study design is employed. This design is particularly suitable when the data is in the form of several videos. Unlike a single case study, which focuses on a single instance, a multiple case study examines multiple cases to discern differences and similarities between them (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Stake, 1995). This approach allows the researcher to analyze the data within each situation as well as across situations (Yin, 2003). Multiple case studies can yield contrasting or similar results, thereby offering insights into the value of the findings (Eisenhardt, 1991). By comparing the case studies, the researcher can also contribute to the existing literature by highlighting the contrasts and similarities that emerge (Vannoni, 2014; 2015). It is worth noting that evidence generated from a multiple case study is considered robust and reliable (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Moreover, multiple case studies facilitate the development of more compelling theories grounded in diverse empirical evidence, enabling broader exploration of research questions and theoretical advancements (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). The data collected for the study will be taken from five videos on Youtube and Tiktok about personal experiences of being Indonesian-American. These videos are by following: "INDONESIAN AMERICANS CAN'T SPEAK INDONESIAN" by Michael Hermanto from Youtube, "My niche experience growing up Indonesian American in socal" by George Welly from Tiktok, "growing up indonesian american mc us | orang indonesia besar di amrik | karen supandi" by Karen Supandi from Youtube, "Identity Crisis of an Indonesian-American [Bahasa Subtitle]" by Lusi Lin from Youtube, "Growing Up Indonesian in the US" by tanhoney from Youtube. The researcher transcribes and analyzes the video recordings, examining the verbal and nonverbal interactions between the participants in each video, the researcher presents the findings in a report, describing the

interactions observed in each video. The report focuses on the language struggles and identity formation among Indonesian-Americans as depicted in the videos. It highlights common themes and variations in the participants' experiences and reflections on language use and maintenance. Additionally, the report provides insights into the impact of language struggles on the participants' cultural identity and the challenges they face in maintaining their native language.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **LANGUAGE SHIFT**

According to Kandler & Steele (2017), language shift refers to the process whereby a community gradually abandons its native language in favor of a dominant one, often due to socio-political pressures or assimilation within the host country. This phenomenon is evident in the case of Michael Hermanto, an Indonesian-American of Chinese descent and YouTuber, who expresses concern about the fading use of the Indonesian language among his peers. He states, "You have the Chinese-American speaking Chinese, you have Mexican-American speaking Spanish, and you have Korean-American speaking Korean but where is the Indonesian representation?... they can't speak." His reflection reveals how English dominance, coupled with a lack of community support, contributes to the diminishing use of Indonesian. Michael's observation aligns with the theory of language shift, where external social environments pressure minority communities to adapt to the dominant linguistic norm, in this case, English. His concluding remark, "kultur kita di Amerika hampir nggak ada," underscores the threat to both language and cultural identity, illustrating how the erosion of native language disrupts heritage transmission and weakens community cohesion.

### **LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE**

According to Baker (2011), language maintenance involves the continuous use of a minority language despite pressures from a dominant language, often supported by cultural practices and community reinforcement. In this case, George Welly, an Indonesian-American of Manadoese and Sundanese descent, shared his personal experience growing up in the United States. In his video, George shares his upbringing in Southern California and the presence of a niche Indonesian-American community. He reflects, "There were so many Indonesians coming in... some of the documents in my high school... one of them are actually Indonesian and I never see something like that before." This quote illustrates a localized form of language visibility and suggests a partial attempt at institutional support. Additionally, George discusses internal cultural dynamics and colorism, noting, "Brown is beautiful... it doesn't matter what shade brown you are." His engagement with identity within the Indonesian-American community indicates an awareness of shared heritage that may indirectly support language maintenance.

## LINGUISTIC IDENTITY

Leung, Harris, & Rampton (1997) mentioned that linguistic identity refers to the way individuals see themselves and are recognized by others as speakers of a particular language, shaped by personal, familial, and societal factors. Karen Supandi, an Indonesian-American of Chinese descent offers a nuanced view of bilingualism shaped by her migration experience. She states, “Aku tuh ga tau bahasa Inggris sama sekali... semua lingkungan aku itu semuanya pada ngomong bahasa Inggris... jadi aku setelah satu tahun udah mulai lancar.” This demonstrates how environmental immersion in English led to the acquisition of the dominant language at the expense of her native fluency. However, her parents’ insistence on speaking Indonesian at home. “my parents would actually block their ears and they’d be like ‘ga ngerti, ga ngerti, ngomong bahasa Indo’” This utterance marked a key role in maintaining her heritage language. Karen’s experience embodies a case of partial language maintenance through parental enforcement. Her involvement in the Berkeley Indonesian Student Association (BISA) further reinforced her linguistic identity and facilitated re-connection with her cultural roots. This is proven by the transcript when she recalled her experience meeting and interacting with Indonesian students for the first time during college, “Nah, di Berkeley itu ada club namanya Berkeley Indonesian Student Association (BISA). Juga aku ketemu temen-temen Indo baik di dalam taun pertama aku dan itu aku pertama kali ketemu komunitas Indonesia yang terbesar yang aku ngalamin di dalam hidup aku. Itu pertama kali aku bisa ngobrol sama orang yang seumur aku pake bahasa Indo.” Moreover, she explained how she felt comfortable with the BISA community which made her feel closer to her Indonesian heritage, “kita bisa ngobrol-ngobrol pake Indo, terus aku bisa belajar tentang slang-slang indo yang aku ga pernah ngomongin ke orang tua aku. Akhir-akhirnya rasanya enak banget sama aku rasanya senang banget soalnya akhirnya aku ketemu kayak tengahan antara identitas aku di rumah dan identitas aku di sekolah kayak akhirnya bisa nyatu, pas di titik situ, pas aku kuliah”. While Karen admits she is not “100% fluent,” her effort reflects how community and familial influence contribute to sustaining language use in diaspora settings.

## INTEGRATING AMONG LANGUAGE SHIFT, LANGUAGE MAINTAINANCE, AND LINGUISTIC IDENTITY.

Both Lusi Lin and Nikki, in their respective transcripts, share their experiences that resonate with the theories of language shift, language maintenance, and linguistic identity. Lusi Lin, an Indonesian-American of Chinese descent who migrated to the U.S. at age ten, recalls, “Even though I was learning all these traditional Indonesian dances, I still spoke Indonesian fluently, deep inside... I did not want to be Indonesian.” Her narrative reflects Gee’s (2000) theory of discourse identity, where individual alignment with or rejection of cultural identity is shaped through social discourse. Lusi internalized societal norms from her predominantly white school, which devalued her ethnic background. This early

rejection aligns with language shift pressures, where assimilation is seen as a path to acceptance. However, her story evolves during college: “It was them who showed me that it’s okay to take some of the Asian cultures... and at the same time take the American culture that I grew up with.” This turning point demonstrates a conscious effort to reclaim and maintain her Indonesian identity, merging it with her American experience. Lusi’s transformation illustrates how peer support and cultural communities can reverse the effects of language shift and re-establish linguistic and cultural pride. Meanwhile, Nikki, an Indonesian-American of Batak descent, shared her similar experience in her Youtube channel goes by “tanhoney” highlights the emotional complexity of linguistic identity and the impact of internalized discrimination. Language shift occurs when immigrant children reject their heritage language due to perceived stigma or desire for social conformity (Wendel & Heinrich, 2012). She confesses, “I didn’t want to eat Indo food... I would get mad at my parents for not speaking English... I felt like being whitewashed was more superior.” Her rejection of her roots illustrates a form of internalized cultural erasure, aligning with linguistic identity loss. However, this narrative shifts toward reconciliation when she states, “I probably could speak like... three words which I am NOT proud of... I want to speak it more to connect with my parents.” This desire to reconnect with her language signifies a late but meaningful movement toward language maintenance. Nikki’s experience shows that linguistic identity can evolve through emotional growth, community exposure, and personal reflection, especially in the face of bicultural tension.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis conducted, the research presents a comprehensive understanding of language shift, language maintenance, and linguistic identity among Indonesian-Americans. The narratives shared by Lusi Lin, Nikki, Michael Hermanto, George Welly, and Karen Supandi offer valuable insights into the complexities of navigating dual cultural identities and the role of language in shaping one’s sense of self. These individuals experienced varying degrees of language shift, with some initially rejecting their Indonesian heritage but later embracing it, while others maintained a strong connection to their language and cultural roots from the start. The influence of social factors, such as exposure to diverse cultural environments, interactions with individuals from similar backgrounds, and the desire to connect with their heritage, played a significant role in their language choices and linguistic identity formation. The research underscores the importance of recognizing the diverse experiences and influences that contribute to language shift or maintenance among Indonesian-Americans, emphasizing the need for further exploration of linguistic dynamics within immigrant communities.

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