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THE INFLUENCES OF THE SOCIOCULTURAL ENVIRONMENT AND OTHER LANGUAGES ON THE BINTULU DIALECT: AN OVERVIEW**Aishah Edris and Bibi Aminah Abdul Ghani**

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In the context of this paper, the phonological correspondence between the Bintulu dialect and (i) Standard Malay (the National Language) and (ii) Sarawak Malay (the local Linguafranca) define, in some important ways, the influence of sociocultural environment and other languages on the Bintulu dialect.

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by

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In the context of this paper, the phonological correspondence between the Bintulu dialect and (i) Standard Malay (the National Language) and (ii) Sarawak Malay (the local *Linguafranca*) define, in some important ways, the influence of sociocultural environment and other languages on the Bintulu dialect.

The Conceptual Framework

The theoretical premise of this paper is that a dialect or language is influenced to some extent by changes in the sociocultural environment. It is, therefore, necessary to look into the relationship between society and language, particularly, how a change in one affects the other.

In order to understand the influences of the sociocultural environment and other languages on the development and transformation of the Bintulu dialect, this paper brings together ideas from various disciplines. These includes sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, sociology and social anthropology, all of which have made important contributions in terms of social change and language change.

Linguistic influence represents one type of evidence of sociocultural adaptation brought about by cultural contact and exchanges that have taken place between societies or communities. The dialect or language is the source of data which reveals these cross-currents/exchange between cultures. In the context of this paper, linguistic influence is evident in the Bintulu dialect which can be observed at the phonological level. The phonological correspondence between the Bintulu dialect and the two stated Malay dialects reflect this point rather well. This will be discussed further in the linguistic section of this paper.

Scope of the study

In trying to further understand the relationship between society and language and how a change in one would affect the other, one has to come to terms with the limitation of the nature of this type of inquiry. How sociocultural change results in dialect or language change involves a dynamic-interactive process that spreads across time. Many factors (social, political, economic, cultural and technological) that fabricate the social life of society interact in a dynamic way and this makes the task of tracing the initial causes of change in the dialect or language, a challenging one. We feel it is beyond the scope of this paper

to unravel the intricacies and complexities which have evolved with the social and historical development of the Bintulu people, and the development and transformation of the Bintulu dialect (the chain of linguistic evolution) associated with it. But this paper, at a very general theoretical level, merely defines some of the important ways in which the sociocultural environment and other languages have influenced the Bintulu dialect at the phonological level.

The Background of Bintulu Speakers:

The Problem of a Lack of Historical and Ethnographical Materials

A number of authors have referred to the similarities in the cultural traits and historical ties of the coastal people of Sarawak to other ethnic communities of the interiors (Morris in King: 1978; Nicolaisen: 1977/1978; Charles Tenggoi Aseng and Zaini Oje: 1988; and Aloysius Janalak Dris, 1990).

The term "Melanau" was commonly used by the people of Brunei in the 16th century to refer to the indigenous coastal people of Sarawak (Morris in King, 1978: 39; and Blust, 1988: 152) which encompasses Bintulu speakers. Up to this time, few studies have been done on this particular group, except for the linguistic works of Blust (1973: 603–620, 1974: 81–90) and Asmah (1983: 608–631). There are still large gaps in the historical, sociological, cultural and linguistic knowledge on this group. At this stage, this paper will merely provide glimpses of the background of the Bintulu speakers based on information from Ibrahim's *KISAH BINTULU* (1971) and our Bintulu informants.

Who are the Bintulu speakers?

The Bintulu speakers usually refer themselves as '*the Segan people*' or in their dialect as the '*Ba'ie Segan*'. Further differentiation occurs when they wish to differentiate between the people by their specific localities. For example, someone from Pandan would be commonly referred to as '*Ba'ie Pandan*' or from Labang as '*Ba'ie Labang*' and so forth. The term '*Ba'ie*' itself means 'people'. Nicolaisen (1976: 70) and C. Hose (in Ray, 1913: 4) used the term '*Segaan*'² for the Bintulu speakers. According to Nicolaisen, the term originally applied only to a Melanau group living around Bintulu, but today it seems to apply to natives of the Kemena who are Muslims and speak the Bintulu dialect.

Due to a lack of written records it is difficult to determine the place of origin of Bintulu native speakers³ and much is left to speculation, namely, their earliest settlements. But there are folk versions which are difficult to ascertain their authenticity. According to Ibrahim (1971) there was a migration of Bintulu native speakers from *Kuala Silas* and *Sepadok* (tributaries of the Kemena river) to the lower reaches (the location of the present Bintulu town) between 1861–1867. The reasons for this migration to the lower reaches are difficult to trace, again, due to a lack of written records. There is a folk version (in Ibrahim (1971) which refers to the flight of the early generation of Bintulu speakers to other places.) He mentioned that it was due to an epidemic of some kind which he called as '*serang tahi*'. Ibrahim mentioned that those who fled to *Kuala Silas* and *Sepadok* returned to settle in Bintulu.