



## The Sarawak Museum Journal

Vol. XLIV No. 65

December 1993



ISSN: 0375-3050

E-ISSN: 3036-0188

Citation: Teoh Boon Seong. (1993). "Jako Kelaung" - An Iban Secret Language. The Sarawak Museum Journal, XLIV (65): 227-224

### "JAKO KELAUNG"—AN IBAN SECRET LANGUAGE

**Teoh Boon Seong**

(University of Science Malaysia, Penang)

#### INTRODUCTION

Iban, a Bornean language, of Sarawak, Malaysia has a form of disguised speech called *Jako Kelaung* (literally translated as 'speech which is disguised/indirect/diverted'). This paper provides a description of *jako kelaung* of the Iban of the Rejang basin, Sarawak. Disguised speech or secret languages [e.g. *baliktad* (Tagalog), *bahasa rahsia* (Malay)], as they are sometimes called, are found in almost all languages and are usually employed by youngsters in attempting to conceal speech from adults. *Jako kelaung*, however, is a dying art among young Iban and is known mainly to the elderly.

Secret languages, like language production errors or "spoonerisms" provide an important source of corpus-external evidence to bear upon the psychological reality of phonological descriptions about the internalized grammar of the native speakers. Secret languages are usually based on one or sometimes a combination of two general principles of insertion of a sound or sound segments in the base word or the transposition of syllables within a word. Such strategies create sound combinations or sound segments that may not exist in the regular or non-disguised form of the language. However such combinations are often modified to the phonological system/rules of the language: this provides evidence for the productivity and psychological reality of the sound system and constraints which operate within the language (Kenstowicz & Kisseberth 1979).

*Jako kelaung* employs the strategy of transposing syllables/sound sequences or moras of the word. Data obtained from *jako kelaung* will be used as corpus-external evidence in supporting the description of the psychological reality of the sound system and constraints of Iban language, a western Austronesian language spoken in Sarawak, Borneo. It will be used to support the phonological representation proposed by Sagey (1986).

# “JAKO KELAUNG” — AN IBAN SECRET LANGUAGE

by

Teoh Boon Seong

(University of Science Malaysia, Penang)

## INTRODUCTION

Iban, a Bornean language, of Sarawak, Malaysia has a form of disguised speech called *Jako Kelaung* (literally translated as ‘speech which is disguised/indirect/diverted’). This paper provides a description of *jako kelaung* of the Iban of the Rejang basin, Sarawak. Disguised speech or secret languages [e.g. *baliktad* (Tagalog), *bahasa rahsia* (Malay)], as they are sometimes called, are found in almost all languages and are usually employed by youngsters in attempting to conceal speech from adults. *Jako kelaung*, however, is a dying art among young Iban and is known mainly to the elderly.

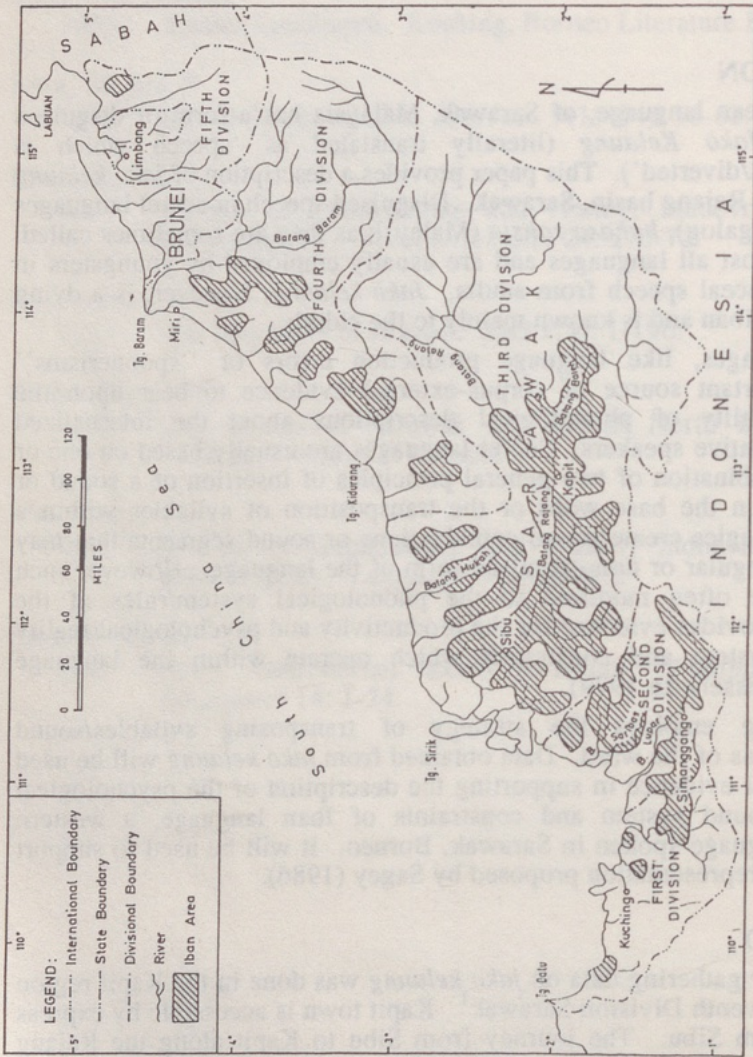
Secret languages, like language production errors or “spoonerisms” provide an important source of corpus-external evidence to bear upon the psychological reality of phonological descriptions about the internalized grammar of the native speakers. Secret languages are usually based on one or sometimes a combination of two general principles of insertion of a sound or sound segments in the base word or the transposition of syllables within a word. Such strategies create sound combinations or sound segments that may not exist in the regular or non-disguised form of the language. However such combinations are often modified to the phonological system/rules of the language: this provides evidence for the productivity and psychological reality of the sound system and constraints which operate within the language (Kenstowicz & Kisseberth 1979).

*Jako kelaung* employs the strategy of transposing syllables/sound sequences or moras of the word. Data obtained from *jako kelaung* will be used as corpus-external evidence in supporting the description of the psychological reality of the sound system and constraints of Iban language, a western Austronesian language spoken in Sarawak, Borneo. It will be used to support the phonological representation proposed by Sagey (1986).

## BACKGROUND

Fieldwork for gathering data on *jako kelaung* was done in the Kapit region of the Rejang, Seventh Division Sarawak<sup>1</sup>. Kapit town is accessible by express boat services from Sibü. The journey from Sibü to Kapit along the Rejang takes three hours when a decade ago would have taken eight by long boats powered by outboard motor. The area was chosen because the Rejang basin has the largest concentration of Iban in Sarawak (refer to map). According to Freeman (1970) about 60% of the Iban population is settled in this region<sup>2</sup>.





Source: Derek Freeman, 1981

**FIGURE 1:** MAP SHOWING THE SARIBAS AND BALEH REGIONS, AND THE DISTRIBUTION OF THE IBAN IN SARAWAK, circa 1950