
Remun Language Use and Maintenance

Peter F. Cullip
Centre for Language Studies
Universiti Malaysia Sarawak
94300 Kota Samarahan
Sarawak
pcullip@cls.unimas.my

Abstract

The Remun Iban community of Sarawak speak a dialect of Iban which is said to be unintelligible to other Iban. Generally, they possess a strong identity as Remun and this code is the essence of their community identity *vis-a-vis* the Iban and neighbouring ethnic groups. For many Remun villages, this situation is changing. As a relatively small and linguistically isolated group, the multilingual Remun are facing strong macro-pressure which could be expected to lead to language shift to Iban. This is indeed happening in peripheral villages. This paper reports on the linguistic situation in the original, core Remun settlement of Kampung Remun and concludes that micro-level factors are operating to maintain the use and inter-generational transmission of Remun in this village.

Introduction

The Remun community of Sarawak may be likened to a small linguistic fish in a big linguistic pond. They are surrounded by linguistically and demographically more powerful groups and, as multi-lingual members of the Sarawakian and Malaysian states, are subject to political, socio-economic and linguistic pressures which are moving them towards new patterns of language use. These pressures have the potential to reconfigure patterns of language use to such a degree that language shift – in this case to Iban – is the result. In many Remun villages, this seems to be what is happening to various degrees. In Kampong Remun, however, language maintenance factors seem to be holding out against pressures for language shift.

Data for the study of language use and attitudes in Kampong Remun (Cullip, 2000: 1-44) was gathered in 1999 through structured, open-ended interviews and participant observation in a large variety of domains over a period of some 40 days and many nights. Approximately 50% of all households are represented by the 45 adult participants. Sampling was somewhat selective in order to recognise a range of respondents in terms of sex, age, educational levels and marital status. A Remun research assistant played a key role in the gathering and interpretation of the data.

The interview schedule contained four major sections: demographics and family language proficiency, language use in family domains, language use in community and town domains, and language attitudes (towards Remun and other languages spoken in the community).

In the following sections, I hope to:

1. contextualise the Remun community and their language;
2. outline the macro-pressures operating on language use patterns, and
3. sketch some areas of the data which demonstrate changing patterns of language use and the maintenance of Remun *vis-à-vis* Iban.

The Remun and Their Language

The Remun currently occupy thirteen villages along the Krang river and its tributaries between Serian and Balai Ringin, south to south-east of Kuching. This little-known group of some 3,600 inhabitants are surrounded by larger Bukar-Sadong Bidayuh, Iban and Malay communities. The original Remun settlement is Kampong Remun (see Maps 1 and 2), which was settled by a sub-group of the first wave of Iban migrants from West Kalimantan, who are

estimated to have entered what is now Sarawak in the mid-sixteenth century (Sandin, 1994: 1, King, 1993: 49).

Since that time, Remun settlement has spread to the south and south-east. Inter-marriage and migration have significantly changed the demographics of these villages over the years – with the peripheral villages being affected more than the core settlements (Kpg. Remun, Kpg. Lebor and Kpg. Treboh). The major linguistic infusion into these outer villages has been Iban.

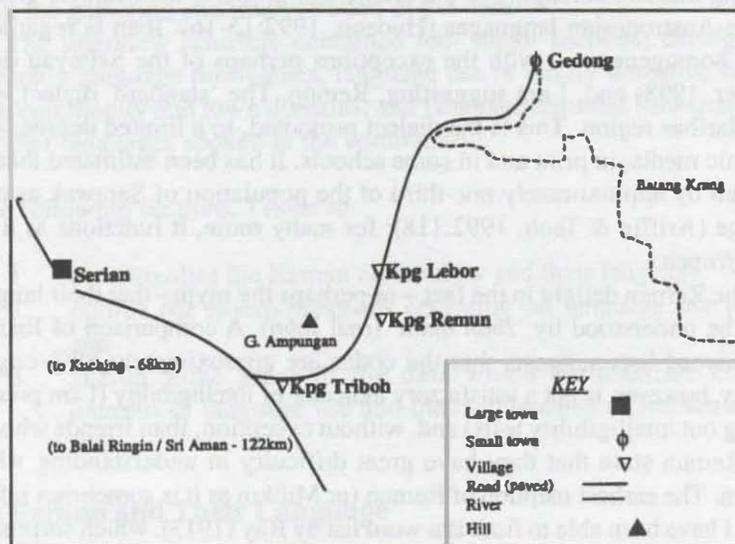
Kampung Remun has a population of approximately 600, the majority of whom are Christian (Anglican). The Remun are both subsistence and commercial farmers, growing paddy (both wet and dry), pepper and some cocoa. Fruit trees are maintained and fish are reared in fishponds. More traditional hunting and fishing activities supplement the diet. A significant number of the adult population (approximately 30% at any time) work in town, or a nearby oil-palm plantation for wages – though much of this employment is intermittent. School children attend the government primary school, a short distance from the village, or government secondary schools at Gedong (with a largely Malay school population) or Serian (with a largely Bidayuh school population).

The Remun islect is a dialect of Iban. Iban itself is a cluster of narrowly diverging dialects belonging to the Ibanic sub-group of the Malayic group of Western-Austronesian languages (Hudson, 1992:15-16). Iban is regarded as largely homogeneous – with the exceptions perhaps of the Sebuyau dialect (Kroeger, 1998) and, I am suggesting, Remun. The ‘standard’ dialect is that of the Saribas region. This is the dialect promoted, to a limited degree, in the electronic media, in print and in some schools. It has been estimated that Iban is spoken by approximately one-third of the population of Sarawak as a first language (Ariffin & Teoh, 1992:118); for many more, it functions as a *Low lingua franca*.

The Remun delight in the fact – or perhaps the myth - that their language cannot be understood by ‘*Iban amat*’ (real Iban). A comparison of Iban and Remun word lists suggests that the codes are approximately 88% cognate. Cognacy, however, is not a satisfactory indicator of intelligibility (I am presently carrying out intelligibility tests) and, without exception, Iban friends who have heard Remun state that they have great difficulty in understanding what is going on. The earliest mention of Remun (or Milikin as it is sometimes referred to) that I have been able to find, is a word list by Ray (1913), which surprisingly classifies Milikin as a Land Dayak (Bidayuh) language and reports that the Milikin are a mixture of Iban and Bidayuh. While there is evidence of some lexical borrowing from Bidayuh to Remun, the language is almost certainly related to another Ibanic code – Bugau. The Remun themselves recognize this connection.



Map 1 Sarawak, Malaysia



Map 2: The location of the core Remun villages of Kpg Remun, Kpg Lebor and Kpg Triboh in relation to larger surrounding settlements.

Typically for this part of the world, the Remun are a multilingual, polyglossic community. Given the size of the Remun community relative to that of their neighbours, it is not surprising that they rely on a variety of codes to communicate and identify themselves. Just over 50% of Remun from Kampong Remun report being proficient ('proficient' is taken here to mean how well they can converse with native-speakers on everyday topics) in five languages in addition to Remun. Iban, Sarawak Malay (Gedong), Bahasa Malaysia, English and Bidayuh. The High languages – those used in formal, or public domains – are Bahasa Malaysia and English, with Iban taking on this status in a small number of formal, local domains. At a village football, prize-giving ceremony, for example, the more formal parts of the speech-making were in Iban even though the audience were exclusively (except for the researcher) Remun. Generally, however, Iban functions alongside Sarawak Malay as a Low *lingua franca*. The other Low code is Remun.

Pressures for Language Shift

The literature on language change and shift makes one thing very clear – conditions favourable to language shift in one situation may not have any predictive significance in another (Fasold, 1984:240). A complex ecological perspective is more realistic than a simple causal one. An ecological perspective foregrounds the functioning and status of the language of interest in its wider linguistic, socio-economic, political, religious and psychological environments (cf. Mühlhäusler, 1998). Such studies also suggest the value in recognizing both global (macro – beyond the community) and local (micro – within the community) variables, and the interaction of these factors. Edwards (1992, discussed in Grenoble & Whaley, 1998) includes demography, politics, economics, religion and education among the macro-variables he identifies, and language and speaker characteristics as micro-variables. He relates these two sets of variables in a matrix-like manner, producing a vast number of factors which may influence language choice.

The following macro-variables mentioned by Fasold (1984:217) represent relatively recent macro-pressures on the language use patterns of the Remun.

- 1 migration
2. industrialization and economic change
- 3 urbanization
4. improved transportation and communication
- 5 school language and other government policies
6. higher prestige of 'shifted to' language
- 7 small population of language shifted from

Variables 1 and 6 merit some comment. In-migration of Iban from other regions and intermarriage seem to have influenced language patterns in the peripheral Remun-speaking villages; in at least one case, so much so that the shift to Iban is almost complete. In Kampong Remun, the incidence of intermarriage is relatively high. Survey data indicates that 68% of married respondents are married to non-Remun. Informants and observation, however, suggest that this figure is somewhat inflated with the actual percentage being closer to 30% (48% of whom have an Iban spouse). Still, this figure is significantly high. The relatively higher prestige of Iban in relation to Remun derives largely from its much greater number of speakers, its role as *lingua franca*, radio language, Bible language and, more recently, school-subject language.

Studies of language use change among the communities of Sarawak are few, and those that have been done have focused on clear cases of language shift, or shifting (e.g. Bibi Aminah & Abang Ahmad Ridzuan, 1992, Martin & Yen, 1992). Yet cases of language maintenance against macro-odds are also obviously of interest. I believe that the situation in Kampong Remun represents one such case. Evidence from a word list, informal observation and discussions with numerous residents of the peripheral Remun villages strongly suggest that shift to Iban is taking place, mainly through loans, but also in terms of inter-generational transmission. A large sprinkling of Malay loans is also characteristic of the 'Remun' of these outer villages. A formal language use survey is needed to confirm these claims of course. The evidence from Kampong Remun, however, presents a different picture.

Language Use and Maintenance in Kampong Remun

The Home

The intergenerational transmission of Remun is the key to language maintenance. Research data indicates that Remun parents and their children speak little else but Remun. On occasion Malay or English may be used for disciplinary or formal educational (especially homework help) purposes.

Fasold (1984:203) notes that High languages are used for disciplinary purposes to exert authority in that 'the speaker is invoking the values and status of the wider community'

While Remun respondents almost exclusively speak Remun with their spouses (Remun and non-Remun) [always or mostly: 91%; n=35], non-Remun spouses mostly speak their mother-tongue to their Remun partners [a/m: 68%; n=25]. Only 52% [n=35] of spouses typically speak Remun to their children.

Non-Remun spouses typically make an effort to pass on their mother-tongue to their children. For example, two-thirds of Iban parents always or mostly speak Iban to their off-spring, regardless of how long they have been married or have resided in Kampong Remun. In contrast, 94% of respondents reported that their children always or mostly speak to their non-Remun spouse in Remun. There were no cases reported of children speaking mainly Iban to an Iban spouse.

Thus, even with such a high incidence of intermarriage, family language use in the village would seem to be supporting community maintenance of Remun. The potential for exogenous marriages to contribute to language shift is being checked by the maintenance of Remun by children. The role of the extended family and community support for the use of Remun would appear to be important in this respect.

Other Domains

The study also examined language use in twenty-four village, community and town domains. These domains varied along three major continua: private-public, informal-formal, and Remun interlocutors-non-Remun interlocutors. A list of these domains is provided in table 1

In village and community domains involving Remun interlocutors, Remun, the unmarked code, is nearly always the language of choice, irrespective of setting or topic. Language use in two such domains invites some comment.

In relation to religious domains, Fasold (1984:199) argues that 'religious speech activity will be carried out in the highest language variety relevant to the speech community in which the religion is situated'. The relatively high institutional status of Iban is reflected in its role and acceptance as the language of private and public prayer. As the code of the Anglican church and bible in Remun areas, Iban is the language of church services – although sermons are commonly delivered, or partly delivered, in Remun when the local pastor rather than a visiting Anglican priest conducts the service. While the intimacy of private prayer may suggest the appropriacy of Remun, 88% [n=36] of respondents report using Iban in this domain. The explanation may be that the largely formulaic, ritualistic public discourse of the church is conveniently appropriated, and perceived as fitting, for private communication with God.

In the domain of public speech-making in the village, 17% of respondents reported using Iban all of the time, with another 17% reporting occasional use. Again, the high status of Iban *vis-à-vis* Remun may determine the appropriacy of Iban on many of such formal, public occasions. As many of such occasions are wedding or engagement ceremonies however, the possible presence of non-Remun visitors most likely affects the choice of

No	DOMAIN	No		No	DOMAIN
1	Neighbours (village)	9	Angry or fighting	17	Private prayer
2	Remun friends/rel. in the village	10	Remun friends/rel in a supermarket	18	Government office
3	Remun friends/rel. in town	11	Public speech in the village	19	Public prayer
4	Remun friends/rel in a coffee shop	12	Village clinic	20	Ordering in a coffee shop
5	Village store	13	Work peers	21	Buying in a supermarket
6	Remun friends/rel. in a pub	14	Non-Remun/Iban friends/rel.	22	Ordering in a pub
7	Remun friends/rel. in a mixed group	15	Market	23	Work supervisor
8	(Disciplining children)	16	Town Hospital	24	Private office

Table 1 Non-family Domains

Iban as the Low *lingua franca*. Bahasa Malaysia is almost exclusively used for public speeches and announcements on official government, or political, village occasions regardless of the audience. At a recent annual primary school sports meet, for example, Bahasa Malaysia took centre stage for amplified announcements and speeches although almost all participants and spectators were Remun.

Iban has not made any headway into other village or community domains studied. The domains of public and private prayer are relatively heavily bounded domains involving a very specialised type of discourse, imposed – as it were – from above. Spill over effects into other domains are unlikely.

In the case of more public, town domains which involve interaction with non-Remun interlocutors, the *lingua francas*, with the exception of Iban, are strongly foregrounded as the languages of choice.

The less formal of such domains, such as communication with peers at work, with non-Remun/Iban friends or relatives, and ‘market talk’ - while predominantly Bahasa Malaysia domains - are also characterized by the relatively high use of the Low *lingua franca*, Sarawak Malay. As the domains grow more formal (e.g. hospital, government office, supermarket) Sarawak Malay falls into disuse and Bahasa Malaysia and English assert their status. In these domains, it is the younger, Bahasa Malaysia-educated age-group (16-35)

that prefers to use a high variety of the national language. The middle, English-educated age-group (36-45) is clearly willing to use more English, while the older group (46+) relies on an eclectic mix which includes all the *lingua franca*, Remun and Bidayuh. While Iban has a somewhat specialised place in certain village domains, it plays no significant communicative role in the more sophisticated domains of town.

Language Attitudes

The Remun hold very positive attitudes towards their language and largely pragmatic attitudes towards others.

All respondents reported that they felt Remun to be a 'special' language in that it was different from Iban and other languages, and provided them with a unique identity. However, 18% said that they felt uncomfortable or embarrassed when speaking Remun in the presence of non-Remun because of this very difference. Respondents were unanimous in their agreement that it is important for their children to be proficient in Remun and English. Almost all felt that proficiency in Bahasa Malaysia (97%) and Iban (94%) was also important. Slightly fewer attached such value to Bidayuh (81%) and Sarawak Malay (75%).

English and Bahasa Malaysia are valued as the keys to education and employment, and the others as necessary for interethnic communication. Nearly all respondents agreed that it is important to teach English (98%) and Bahasa Malaysia (89%) in school. Most (58%) felt that school instruction in Iban is important and a quarter would like to see Remun taught in schools. Enthusiasm for the learning of Iban in schools may result from a perception that Remun students should have some advantage in this subject in examinations given that the two codes are highly cognate.

To a question which asked whether respondents were 'bothered' by having to use particular languages, replies indicate that perceptions of lack of proficiency, and the 'shame' that may ensue, are the primary bothersome factors. In the case of Iban [20%; n=44], the sole reason offered was that Iban is not their language, or the Iban not their people. Similar sentiments were expressed in relation to Bahasa Malaysia and Sarawak Malay, but not in relation to Bidayuh or English.

Respondents were asked how they identify themselves – as Remun (or Milikin), Remun Iban or Iban. Most [53%] identified themselves as Remun Iban. While this may suggest acknowledgment of their cultural and linguistic relations with this group, it is also likely to be reflective of the power of official government classifications. Nearly half [45%] identified themselves as Remun or Milikin. Only one person identified himself as Iban. The Remun-Iban

distinction is clearly considered important, and, I would argue, is linguistically focused.

These positive attitudes towards Remun bode well for the vitality of the language in the community

Remun Maintenance Factors

While the linguistic landscape is changing and ecological relationships are being reconfigured, language shift, in the sense of loss of Remun in traditionally Remun domains, appears minimal. Importantly, intergenerational language transmission of Remun is being strongly maintained. Nevertheless, given the apparent trends in peripheral Remun villages, pressure from Iban would appear to represent a long-term threat to Remun in Kampong Remun. I would like to suggest that three main factors are currently at work in checking this threat.

Firstly, interview data and observation point to a strong sense of Remun identity among members of the Kampong Remun community. Culturally and historically, the Remun are very closely linked with other Iban. In order to construct a Remun identity, they take some pride in focusing on linguistic distinctions with Iban, placing language at the core of this identity. Initial research data from an on-going study suggests that Iban intelligibility of Remun may be so low as to qualify Remun, by this criterion at least, as a different language.

Secondly, Remun attitudes towards Iban are commonly characterized by distrust and apprehension. There is very little contact, for example, between Kampong Remun and the nearby Iban kampong, Senyabah. Social contact is much more frequent with nearby Bidayuh villages, and relationships much more cordial. One possible reason for such attitudes is lingering transmitted memories of the last recalled Iban raid on the Remun, some time in the middle of the nineteenth century. The attack occurred while the men were away from the settlement, leaving women and children unprotected. Currently, Iban migration to Kampong Remun is actively discouraged. Should oral transmission of the event weaken and attitudes change, greater tolerance may result.

A final contributing language maintenance factor is an educational arrangement in which all Remun primary school students study at the local government primary (non-boarding) school. The school population is exclusively Remun. Secondary school students attend either the Gedong or Serian government boarding schools. While the former is largely Malay in terms of enrolment and the latter is mostly Bidayuh, both support significant Remun-speaking populations. This is very different from the situation in many of the peripheral villages where both primary and secondary students board at Balai Ringin. These schools have large Iban populations.

The Remun are for the time being maintaining their linguistic identity. Giles and Johnson (1981, in Edwards, 1985: 153) argue that this happens when people:

- a. identify strongly with an ethnic group which has language as an important dimension,
- b. are aware of alternatives to their own language status,
- c. consider their group to have high vitality,
- d. see their group boundaries as hard and closed, and
- e. identify strongly with few other social categories.

These conditions apply to a considerable degree to the Remun of Kampong Remun.

Conclusion

The Remun of Kampong Remun live in a complex, polyglossic linguistic environment. Their language is strongly cognate with Iban but largely incomprehensible to Iban speakers. As a relatively small community with a high incidence of intermarriage with the Iban, and a host of macro-pressures pressing for changes in language choices, it could be reasonably expected that language shift to Iban would be evident – as appears to be happening in the peripheral Remun villages. This however does not seem to be the case in Kampong Remun, where traditional family and community Remun language domains have essentially remained such. Of course, evidence of language shift may also be found in rates and patterns of ‘borrowing’. Given the closeness of Remun and Iban, determining this information is problematic, although age-related studies may shed some light on the matter.

Three factors are identified as contributing to this maintenance of Remun: the celebration of the Remun language as the centre of Remun identity, a long-time, historically rooted distrust of the Iban and active discouragement of Iban migration, and educational arrangements which provide some support for the informal use of Remun in schools. In the longer term, these conditions are, of course, at risk. Nevertheless, for the immediate future, the *status quo* of Remun in Kampong Remun seems assured.

What is not so clear is the status of Remun in the peripheral villages. A language use survey is planned for one of these villages and word lists for Kampong Remun and Kampong Tanah Mawang (peripheral) are in preparation. As mentioned above, future research should also consider the extent and patterns of Iban ‘borrowing’ in both core and peripheral villages.

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