

# MECHANISM ON THE ACQUISITION OF BALINESE LANGUAGE AS A MOTHER TONGUE IN THE MULTILINGUAL COMMUNITY OF DENPASAR

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**ABSTRACT** – This research focusses on the study of the acquisition of the Balinese language in the multilingual community in Denpasar. One of the most important aspects in biolinguistic diversity is the speakers' acquisition of their own language (Chomsky, 1965; McNeill 1966 in Brown 2000; Fry, 1979) as well as the surrounding environment of the speakers such as the strategies of the parents in transmitting the language to their children (Romaine, 1999). The speakers in the environment strongly determine and directly influence the acquisition, mastery, and the use of language (Holmes, 2001). This research is conducted to investigate: 1) the mastery and the acquisition of the Balinese language of the parents and that of the children at the pre operation period (Piaget, 1972 in Brown 2000:61) or at the level of "adult like grammar" (Fry, 1979), 2) the strategies used by parents to transmit language to their children, 3) the language/s used by the children in the domains of family, friendship, and education. The study was conducted in four main areas; in the North, South, West, and East Denpasar (see Suastra et al, 2017). The subjects were children between the ages of 4 to 6 years and were in kindergartens. The application of a number of theories such as language acquisition (Chomsky, 1965; McNeill, 1966 in Brown 2000; Fry, 1979), strategies of parents in transmitting language (Romaine, 1999), and language used in domains (Fishman, 1972; Holmes, 2001) are important in the analysis. The correlation of mastery, acquisition, and language use of Balinese by the children produces a model of language use in the multilingual community in Denpasar.

**Key words:** *Biolinguistic diversity, Language Acquisition, Language Transmission, Linguistics Domains.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

This study deals with the biolinguistic diversity on the acquisition of the Balinese language within a multilingual community. The basic tenets of bio-linguistic theory are the role of speakers in language acquisition and the role of the closest environment, especially that of parents, in transmitting the language in daily communication. These factors can be decisive and directly influence the mastery of the language.

Language acquisition research refers to the condition of the speakers from the time they are born until they can master the language in communication, in addition to the strategy that the closest environments, especially parents, have in transmitting the language in daily communication. The main parameter in first language acquisition in a multilingual community is the strategy the parents adopt in transmitting the language in their environment. Language acquisition theory captures two stages for a child to acquire his/her first language, namely (i) internal process that includes the language acquisition device (LAD)

(Chomsky 1965) and (ii) external process that refers to the way parents transmit the language to their children within a bilingual situation (Romaine, 1989).

Denpasar is the home of a multilingual society. Ethnic diversity automatically results in language diversity, capturing their tight interrelationship. Nevertheless, the mechanism by which language is acquired and transmitted in this multilingual context requires further investigation. This study aims to address this issue regarding its acquisition by children, parents' strategies in transmitting the language, and the use of child language in certain communicative domains.

## II. Literature Review

Denpasar is a multilingual city in Bali. Previous work (Suastra et al. 2016) on biolinguistics diversity in Denpasar, especially on the language and ethnicity mappings, indicates the mixture of various ethnic groups across the four districts of Denpasar, despite the concentration of Balinese residents. They include Balinese, Javanese, Sundanese, Madurese, Sasaknese, Manggrai, Bataknese, Buginese, and others. Each of these ethnic groups bring with them their own cultures and languages. This multilingual situation leads to possible interconnections between language and culture of the major language, namely Balinese, with the culture and language/s of the other ethnic groups and also from the Indonesian language.

Such a multilingual situation can also influence language choice, especially Indonesian (Suastra et al., 2016, 2017) because Indonesian is the official national language and can be used in a lingua franca context in general (Holmes, 2001). The choice to use Indonesian has had an impact on the decreasing use of Balinese (Suastra et al. 2016) and on the shift in the Balinese language (Suastra et al. 2017). The environment also plays a role in such a shift. Ecolinguistic research (Suastra et al. 2018) shows massive attrition or dwindling down of the use of the language and the adoption of vocabulary in the Balinese language in Denpasar in relation to the changing environment. The present research investigates the role of children's closest environment, especially parents, in transmitting language in the context of child language acquisition.

### A. Language acquisition and language transmission

The theory of language acquisition emerges from interdisciplinary research between psychology and linguistics. The psychological research focuses on the classical Behavioural theory (Skinner 1957) and Cognitive and Constructive Theory (Piaget, Jean and Inhelder 1969; Vygotsky, 1978). Meanwhile, the linguistic aspect of the

research is based on Chomsky's (1965) Nativistic Language Acquisition Device (LAD), and Hymes' (1971) Functionalism.

According to Chomsky (1965) and McNeill (1966) (cited from Brown 2000: 24-25), in order to learn language, children have an innate language learning device since they are born, which is called the Language Acquisition Device (LAD). A child already has the ability to (i) distinguish one sound over the other sounds in the environment, (ii) construct simple linguistic items, (iii) distinguish language systems and (iv) independently develop their language system. Fry (1979:31) proposes the language development stages for children. They start from Irregular sounds, Regular sounds, Syllable repetition, Syllable formation, Irregular words combination, Child's/Vipot grammar, Vocabulary development and Adult-like grammatical structures. In the process, a child can reach a more perfect stage of language mastery if (s)he is endowed with the ability to adapt to h(er/is) closest environment in which the language is acquired (Skinner, 1957; Bruner, 1966).

According to the above theories, language acquisition is a process for children to learn language naturally using their innate, in-born capacity and ability to adapt to their surrounding environment. This suggests that a child may have innate language-learning capacity but the success to learn the language will also be influenced by h(er/is) immediate environment, especially that of their parents. Recognising the central role parents play in a child's first language acquisition process, it is important to devise strategies in transmitting the language from the parents to their children in a multilingual setting.

A well-known theory regarding parents' strategies in transmitting language to their children in a bilingual situation is called the One Parent One Language (OPOL) (Saunders, 1988; Romaine, 1995). OPOL proposes that in a bilingual situation, parents transmit language to their children differently: (i) the mothers may transmit language A and the fathers transmit language B, or (ii) the mothers may use language A in a given situation while the fathers may use language B in other situations.

Much research on child language acquisition focused on monolingual children rather than on bilingual children, both of which require longitudinal studies. Different contexts can influence the process through which children learn two languages. The continuing use of language has implications for the acquisition of better mastery and pronunciation by children rather than on adults depending on the environment or linguistic situation where language acquisition occurs.

Romaine (1995: 181-182) classifies strategies for language use to bilingual children from an early age into five (5) strategies. This strategy also depends on the mother tongue (L1) of each parent, the dominant environmental language, and the parents' strategy when talking to children (the language used by parents to their children). Romaine (1995) added one more strategy used by parents to children, namely using a mixed language (mixed code) (Romaine, 1995: 183). The strategies are as follows: (1) One person uses one language, (2) Language used at home is not dominant in the society, (3) Language used at home is different from the language in the environment, (4) Two home languages are not supported by the language used in the environment, (5) Different language from the parents' L1, and (6) Mixed language (i.e. code mixing). In a stable bilingual situation like in Bali, during the course of his/her development, the child will tend to switch codes and will even mix codes (Holmes, 2001). Code switching means the child will use language A in certain situations and conditions and will switch to other languages in different situations. Children even mix some of the languages they master, both in sound, words or sentences.

The attitude of parents and their environment is supportive of children's success in mastering a language. The positive attitude of the parents in transferring their native/regional/ethnic language to their children as the first language, helps in the initial process of language acquisition in a bilingual situation.

In the linguistic condition and situation in Indonesia which is multilingual in which the Indonesian language is the state language (majority) and hundreds of languages of various ethnicities are minority languages, it is clear that each speaker masters more than one language. This is especially so in the urban area of Bali, where there is clearly no limit to the use of Indonesian and Balinese. Language acquisition is a hard task for a child, but children if given the opportunity will be able to master more than one language.

### **B. Domain of child language use**

A domain is the constellation between the topic, the participants, and the place of a conversation that occurs in every speech. Fishman (1972) distinguishes the domains into several elements, namely family, environment, market, education, etc. However, each researcher defines domain differently depending on the situation and conditions of each speech community. This study simplifies Fishman's framework in the scope of domain on the use of children's language. The domains in this study can be categorized as follows: family, neighbours and education. These three

domains are important to classify the use of children's language, especially children who have just reached (6 years) which is the stage of complete sentence mastery (Fry, 1979).

### **III. Research Method.**

This study uses a combination of quantitative and qualitative research by applying sequential explanatory strategy (Creswell, 2009). The main data were obtained through observation, interviews, and surveys. Quantitative data analysis is strengthened by qualitative data analysis. The field work was conducted in Denpasar, which is divided into four regions, namely East, West, South and North Denpasar. Specifically, the targeted villages were Kesiman Kertalangu in East Denpasar, Padangsambian Kaja in West Denpasar, Sesetan in South Denpasar, and Ubung Kaja in North Denpasar. The places targeted in these villages were 1) Pre-schools and Kindergartens (children at the level of pre-operation period (Piaget, 1972 in Brown 2000:61) located in banjar (the name of the location in the smallest unit of local community organization) or managed by banjar in each sub-district. 2) multi-ethnic settlement but with the dominant use of Balinese. Purposive sampling was applied in this study. From the four areas of Denpasar mentioned above, there were 200 children and 40 teachers from 20 Pre-Schools/Kindergartens who were the subject of this study.

Research instruments for the study consisted of 1) a check list about the use of children's language in each domain of observation, 2) questionnaires about the mastery and acquisition of parent and child languages, parental strategies for transmitting language to children, and 3) unstructured interview guidelines about strategies for triangulation. To maintain the validity and reliability of the data and to make the research run on the path that is in accordance with the objectives, a list of specific, concrete, and contextual questions was compiled. The sources of these questions were modified and adapted bearing in mind the objectives of this study. Data consisted of both written and oral data. Written data were taken from the respondents (parents of children) by using surveys. The survey focussed on the mastery and acquisition of parent and child language, parent's language transmission strategies to their children, and the oral data came from interviews which contained the strategies parents used in transmitting their language. The subjects (children and teachers) were also observed using a check list instrument which focussed on the use of language in the specified domain. This observation was used to triangulate the data obtained from surveys. Secondary data were a) the results of a sociolinguistic survey and b) information about the current

situation of language, culture and traditions of the Balinese people.

#### IV. Analysis and Discussion

This section discusses the results of fieldwork including, a). Mastery and language acquisition of parents and children; b). Parents' strategies in transmitting language to children and c). The use of children's language in the domains of family, education and friendship.

##### A. Mastery and language acquisition

Both internal and external aspects of child language acquisition theory must be studied. Internally Chomsky (1965) and McNeill (1966) (in Brown 2000: 24-25) state that a child has been given the gift of acquiring language from birth (Language Acquisition Device) whereas externally a child will achieve more perfect language mastery if this is coupled with the child's ability to adapt to the nearest environment the language is obtained (Skinner, 1957; Bruner, 1966). Based on this theory, the results of this study first focus on the language mastery of parents. This is important because without the mastery of good language from parents, it is impossible for children to absorb and obtain good language. Parental language mastery and the child's family environment are the most determining factors for children's language acquisition from birth.

The results of this study indicate that predominantly Balinese parents (father, mother) mastered Balinese in the multilingual community in the city of Denpasar. The results showed a significant number of parents (89.6%) had mastered and could speak Balinese from birth (see Figure 1), and only 4.7% and 5.7% said they did not master the language and could not speak Balinese.

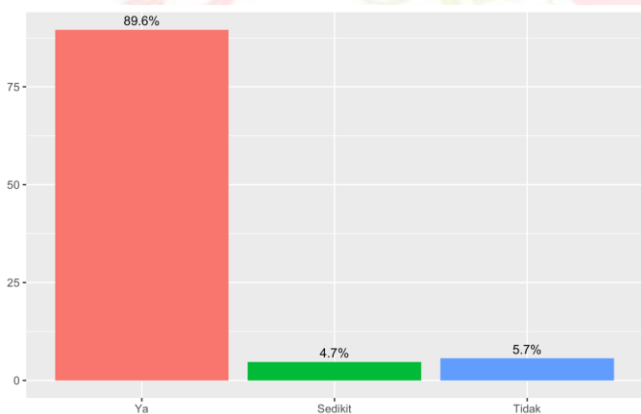


Figure 1: Balinese language mastery by parents in the multilingual community of Denpasar City

The result suggests that from the linguistic perspective, parents are very suitable as a source of language for their children.

The theory of language acquisition proposed by Fry (1979) illustrates the development of children's language from birth. However, in this study the scope of the discussion is limited to children who have reached the final stage of the stages of child language development proposed by Fry (1979), namely the stage of mastery of "standard grammar". That is why the subjects examined in this study are children aged 4 to 6 years whose capacity in the world of education is classified as Early Childhood Education and Kindergarten. The results of research on language acquisition of children at this age show variations. In children compared to parents' responses above, the result shows a different tendency: Balinese language has been mastered only by 53% of the children, 27.7% speak very little Balinese, and 18.6% cannot speak Balinese at all (see Figure 2).

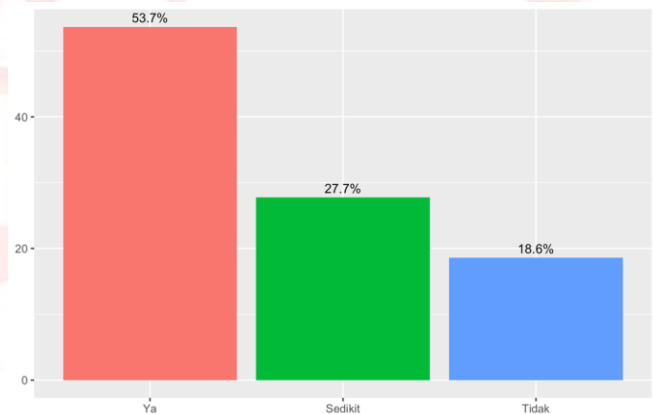
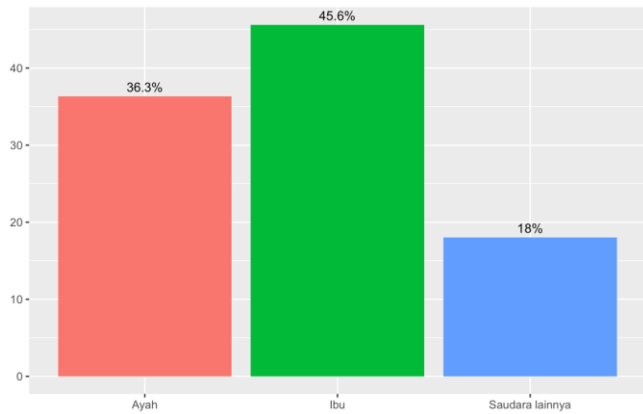


Figure 2: The mastery and acquisition of Balinese by Children in the multilingual community of Denpasar City

The results in Figure 1 and Figure 2 show that parents being in the closest environment to children did not transmit the Balinese language well to their children. As a result, the children cannot acquire and at the same time master the Balinese language fully. Despite this Balinese is still the main language of communication in the family.

Good and correct language acquisition will be obtained from competent sources. The results showed that from the parents and other close relatives, Mother became the main source (45.6%) in the acquisition of children's language followed by Fathers (36.3%) and other relatives (18%) (see Figure 3). This means that the source closest to the child becomes very dominant in influencing children's language mastery.



**Figure 3: The source of Balinese language acquisition by children in the multilingual community of Denpasar City**

**B. Parents’ strategies in transmitting Balinese**

Language policy in Indonesia places Indonesian as the official language in the day-to-day life of the country (Law No. 20 of 2003 and Indonesian President Regulation No. 63 of 2019). This has a major impact on the use of ethnic languages in various fields. Indonesia is a multilingual society and every Indonesian masters at least two languages. In Denpasar in Bali in daily life there is no limit to the use of Indonesian with Balinese. However, there are still areas where the Balinese language is dominant within the speech community. This is because the social conditions of the speech community are different from the other regions in Indonesia. The linguistic situation in Bali shows interconnectedness between the social conditions of Balinese speakers and national language policies that provide opportunities for local languages to develop. In Bali especially in Denpasar, Balinese is still used as the majority language for the Balinese ethnic community despite the onslaught of Indonesian and other foreign languages.

In this study there is a tendency for parents to apply the sixth strategy formulated by Romaine (1995), namely:

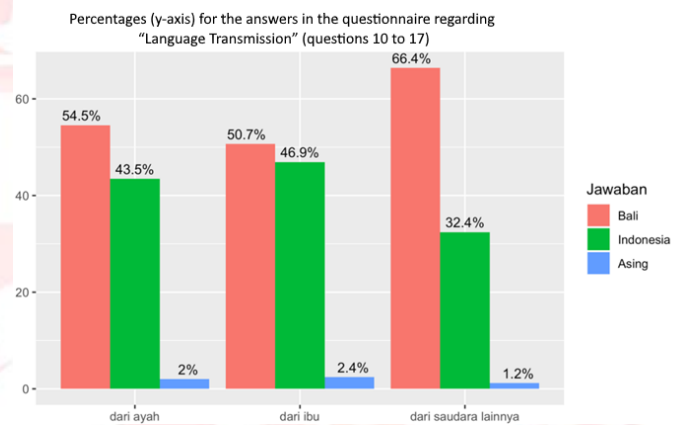
**Table 1: Sixth strategy: Romaine (1995:183)**

Language Situation	Mixed: Balinese, Indonesian, Foreign languages
Parents (Mother & Father)	Bilingual
Environment	Multilingual society
Parents’ transmission strategy	Mixed: Balinese–Indonesian and foreign language(s)

The result shows that parents used mixed languages. Consequently, the Balinese language was not fully transmitted

to their children. This is because the parents are equally bilingual, in the sense that both fathers and mothers master the Balinese and Indonesian languages equally well. Consequently, they can no longer distinguish whether they are using Balinese or Indonesian in their daily conversation. Furthermore, the environment is supportive of this use of a mixed discourse because the speech community is multilingual. This results in parents not being able to transmit only Balinese.

The results of the study show that father and mother are clearly using strategy number six proposed by Romaine (1989). This is evident from the strategy of Father 54.5% using Balinese and 43.5% Indonesian (see Figure 4). There is not a big difference (11%) between the use of Balinese and Indonesian. The mother's strategy shows a smaller difference than the father's strategy which is only 3.8%. In short, the use of Balinese and Indonesian languages respectively is 50.7% and 46.9%.

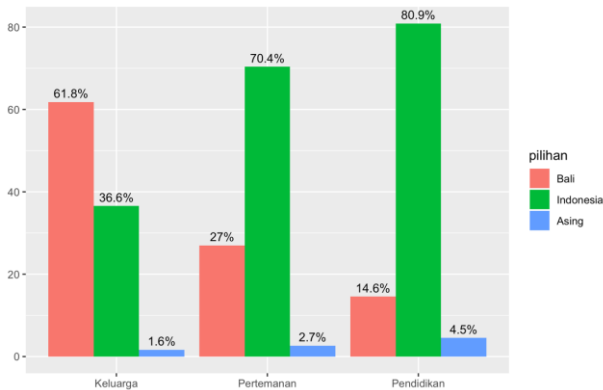


**Figure 4: Patterns of language transmission to children in multilingual family of Denpasar**

What is interesting is the involvement of other relatives or siblings who use the same strategy of a mixed discourse. However, the tendency to use Balinese is more dominant (66.4%) as compared to the use of the Balinese language by the parents, and the use of the Indonesian language by the relatives is only 32.4%.

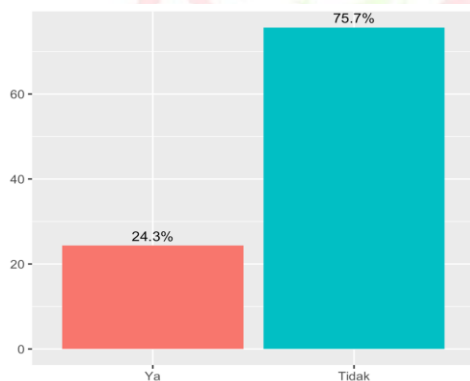
As mentioned earlier, this study develops the framework of Fishman (1972) and Holmes (2001) with necessary adjustments. The domains that are discussed are the domains of family, friendship, and education. The results indicate variations in the use of Balinese in these three domains. Only in the domain of family does the use of Balinese show a high tendency (61.8%), whereas in the other two domains namely the friendship and education domains, Balinese only reaches

27% and 14.6% (see Figure 5). The use of Indonesian is very dominant in these two domains, 70.4% in friendship and 80.9% in education. Therefore, the Balinese language is used in the domain of family while in the other two domains the Indonesian language is widely used.



**Figure 5: The use of Balinese in the domains of family, friendship, and education in multilingual society of Denpasar**

The above results show that there is a contradiction between language mastery, language acquisition, and language use. Parents who master Balinese suggests that Balinese can be used as a model of inheritance although children do not master the Balinese language. Contradictions began to be seen from the inconsistency of parents when transmitting the language to their children. Parents cannot be relied upon for the survival of the Balinese language because they choose a mixed language strategy in the family domain and this can cause language shift. Furthermore, in other domains such as friendship and education, Indonesian rather than Balinese is dominant. Consequently, the child's acquisition and use of Balinese in the three domains are adversely affected. This analysis is justified by the results of the triangulation which was carried out by observation where the use of the Indonesian language was dominant in all domains (75.7 % in Figure 6). This is also confirmed by the results of interviews with selected subjects.



**Figure 6: Triangulation towards the use of Balinese in the domain of family, friendship, and education**

## V. Conclusion

The analysis of the data which focusses on the mechanism of the acquisition of the Balinese language and parent's strategies in transmitting the language within the multilingual community setting in Denpasar, shows that 1) Predominantly, Balinese parents (father, and mother) in the multilingual community in the city of Denpasar have mastered Balinese. This means that from a linguistic perspective, parents can be a source of language acquisition for their children. 2) In general, the mastery of the children's Balinese language seems to be good but not as good as the parents. 3) Parents (father and mother) are clearly using strategy six proposed by Romaine (1989). Parents use mixed languages; Mother and father did not fully transmit the Balinese language to their children. This is because the parents are equally bilingual and have mastered the Balinese and Indonesian languages equally well and tend to use both languages. 4) Contradictions began to be seen from the strategies of parents who cannot be relied upon for the survival of the Balinese language because they choose a mixed language strategy. This could cause language shift. Furthermore, in domains such as friendship and education parents do not use Balinese. This too could cause language shift. It is clear then that Balinese is not the first language (mother language) for Balinese children in Denpasar.

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