

# Can We Save the Indigenous Minority Languages? The Case of the Remun Language of Sarawak, Malaysia

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## Introduction

Harubaru to	When distant minds
Kokoro tsudoite	come together
Hana sakaru	cherries blossom. (Cited in Salverda 2002:11)

The *haiku* inscription from Japan quoted above illustrates the importance of diversity in creating knowledge. We need this diversity at every level starting from language to culture. As far as language diversity is concerned, we find that it is coming under increasing pressure. This pressure comes, on the one hand, from nation states that often identify themselves with the language of the majority and powerful. On the other hand, it comes from the onslaught of globalization that involves the hegemony of one language over others. However, the presence of adverse forces on language diversity is not a recent phenomenon. We find numerous instances of language loss in the recorded human history as well. In the Roman Empire, for example, Latin replaced a large number of languages including Etruscan of pre-Roman Italy (Ridgway 1994; Swadesh 1994, quoted in Tsunoda 2005:4). In modern history, it is perhaps the European colonization that exerted the most damaging impact on language diversity in the world (Tsunoda 2005: 4). This historical and contemporary pressure on language diversity has now left us with only about 6,912 languages. If this trend persists, we are likely to lose half of our total living languages in the present century alone (Krauss 1992 cited in Hinton 2001). Can we afford to lose so many languages (and so soon)? Standing at this juncture of linguistic history, it is crucial for us to understand the conditions in which we lose our languages and then to take steps to reverse the situation. The present study, in this context, will take Malaysia's case of language endangerment into consideration. In doing so, it will look into the conditions of one of its relatively small indigenous languages named Remun. No doubt, a research of this magnitude will give us only a fragmentary picture of Malaysia's language endangerment. Nonetheless, it may provide us with an insight and understanding necessary for taking effective measures to revitalize a language that requires our attention.

## Ethnographic Background of Malaysia

Malaysia is a multiethnic, multilingual country with a population of about twenty million people. Of the total population, Malay ethnic group accounts for 50.4%, Chinese accounts for 23.7%, indigenous ethnic groups (except Malay) 11%, Indian 7.1%, and the rest account for 7.8%. The country comprises two areas-Peninsular Malaysia and Sabah and Sarawak. While ethnic Malays make up a majority of the population in West Malaysia, in East Malaysia, especially in Sarawak, divergent Dayak ethnic groups (namely, Iban, Kelabit, Bukar-Sadong, etc.) and Chinese constitute a sizable population.

In Malaysia, ethnic groups have significant differences in their social standing. While Malays are traditionally dominant in politics and government, ethnic Chinese and Indians are economically more successful.

Many indigenous ethnic groups, on the other hand, are based in rural areas and are marginalized both economically and politically. These groups include, among others, Iban, Bidayuh, and Kadazan, Penan, Kelabit, Bisaya, etc.

The estimated number of languages in Malaysia is 141 (Ethnologue.com). Of those, the number of languages listed for Sarawak is 47 of which 1 is already extinct. On the other hand, Sabah accounts for 54 and the Peninsular Malaysia accounts for 40 living languages. The National Language Policy of Malaysia establishes Malay as the only national language. The policy also has a provision for the education in some other dominant languages such as Chinese and Tamil. Parents in Malaysia may choose between Bahasa Malaysia, Chinese or Tamil as the language of instruction. However, Bahasa Malaysia is the primary language of instruction in all secondary schools while Chinese and Tamil are available for continued education. English is often offered as the compulsory language in school and university curricula.

### **The Remun Ethnolinguistic Group**

The Remun language, like other languages in Sarawak, belongs to Austronesian language stock. It is spoken by an ethnic group variously known as Remun, and Iban Remun. In the early colonial time, the Remun were officially classified as Milikin (*Sarawak Government Census* 1961). The Remun people live in a broad cluster of villages in Serian district located in Sarawak's Samarahan Division. The villages are spread along the Krang river and its tributaries between Serian and Balai Ringin. The Remun population now number around 7000 that inhabit 22 villages. (I should mention that I did not find the Remun ethnolinguistic group identified in the Sarawak's last population census of 2000 (Anggaran Penduduk 2006). Therefore, I collected the information from the headmen of the Remun villages I covered in my study.) With a few exceptions, they no longer live in the traditional longhouses (According to the Remun, such a tradition started to diminish from the mid 1970s). Surrounding the Remun villages live the demographically larger Bukar-Sadong Bidayuh, Malay, and Iban communities.

The Remun appear closer to the Iban than any other ethnic groups based on such factors as common ancestry, shared historical past (both migrating from the Kalimantan side), and a semblance in symbolic elements in terms of kinship patterns, physical contiguity, religious affiliation (Pagans and Christians), and language (70%-80% common vocabulary). The present day Remun settlements also reflect a heavy mix of Iban from other areas who have married into Remun communities. This has perhaps led the Remun to be officially subsumed under the Iban umbrella label. However, the elderly Remun show a strong sense of Remun identity (i.e. as opposed to Iban) centered mainly on language. Despite the fact that the Remun isolect is usually recognized as a dialect of Iban, the Iban invariably find the Remun language incomprehensible. This is not the case with other Iban communities and their dialects. Other than language, the Remun (especially the elderly ones) also distinguish

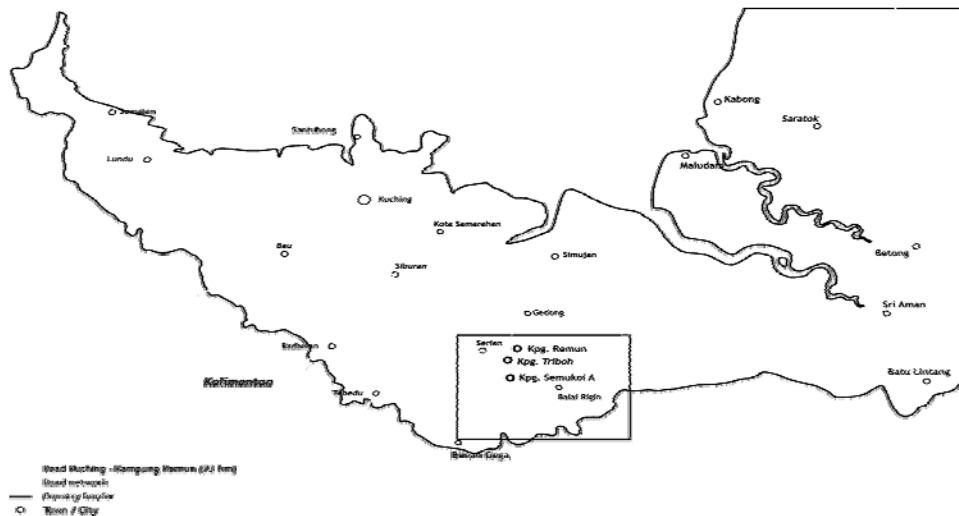
themselves from Iban based on certain historical as well as cultural grounds. The Remun people still recall the Iban invasion (that took place some time in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century) on their village that left a large number of their ancestors decimated. The shock of the genocide has influenced the perceptions of the Remun toward the Iban till the present day. The Remun also show certain elements in their culture that are distinct from that of Iban. For example, some of the gifts a Remun bridegroom gives to his bride in wedding ceremony are different from that of Iban . Another distinction is found in the shape of their machetes (called ‘Duku’ in Remun). The Remun machete for every day use is straight in shape, whereas, the Iban one is curved upward resembling a sword.

Kampong (Malay word for ‘village’) Remun is the oldest village among the twenty two Remun villages. The two other villages that were established immediately after it are Kampong Lebor, and Kampong Triboh. These three villages are located along the Gedong road within a 10 km stretch at the foot of the Ampungan range. These three villages are said to reflect the cultural core of the Remun community. The villages that were later established are located further south along Sri Aman road. They are reported to have experienced relatively more migration from other ethnic communities. All the Remun villages are connected to Gedong and Serian town by well paved roads. Most of the Remun live by farming. The major crops they grow are pepper, cocoa, paddy, and rubber. The younger Remun generations show an increasing tendency to go out to urban centers for jobs and education. Majority of the Remun are Christians with the exception of a very few who are Pagans. Most of the Remun people are literate in the Malay language. Almost every Remun village has a primary school, a community center, rice mills, and some sundry stores. They have also access to basic health facilities.

Table 1: Remun Villages (2007)

<b>No.</b>	<b>Village</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>Village</b>
1	Remun (First Remun Settlement) *	12	Junggu Mawang
2	Lebor	13	Linsat
3	Triboh *	14	Tepin
4	Belimbin	15	Batu Kudi
5	Entayan Kerupok	16	Tanah Mawang
6	Entayan Liun	17	Krangan Trusan
7	Entayan Sarawak	18	Krangan Engkatak
8	Entayan Kersik	19	Krangan Tekalung
9	Semukoi A *	20	Menyang
10	Semukoi B	21	Bayor
11	Meboi	22	Sepan

\* Villages Considered in the Study



**Map:** The Three Remun Villages in Sarawak, Malaysia

### Related Literature

Sarawak's indigenous languages have received relatively little research attention. Language research in Malaysia has predominantly focused on Bahasa Malaysia, the national language of Malaysia. One of the reasons for the absence of research on Sarawak's languages may lie in its reliance on researchers coming from outside such as Peninsular Malaysia and other parts of the world. Such a dependency of Sarawak on researchers from outside is clear from Asmah's (2003) observation. In accounting for the paucity of research on small indigenous languages of Sarawak, she notes, "Such research [requiring one to go to Sarawak] not only requires one to go geographically upstream but also to start from the hitherto unknown" (Asmah 2003:41). Research on the indigenous languages of other parts of Malaysia seems to have received more attention. For example, among other languages, research has been done, on the Mah Meri language of Western Malaysia from a sociolinguistic perspective (Ghazali 2004). Kadazandusun languages of Sabah, in particular, seems to have received a considerable research attention. The research that has so far been conducted on Sarawak's languages has mostly been confined to collecting basic wordlists aiming to gather structural characteristics in terms of phonology, morphology, and syntax. Among the indigenous languages of Sarawak, Iban has received considerable research attention. Asmah (1981) in her study of the language has described the grammar of the language with reference to phonology, morphology, and syntax.

The work that is nearest in kind and scope to this research is the one that done by Cullip (2000:1). In his study of the Remun language, he found the language to be well maintained when it came to the oldest Remun village of Kampong Remun. On the other hand, when other Remun villages were concerned, he found that the language was shifting toward Iban. It should be noted that Cullip's study was based on only one village namely Kampong Remun. The Remun's language's purported shift to Iban came from Cullip's cursory observation of the phenomena.

## **Purpose**

The primary goal of this study is to measure the extent to which the Remun language is threatened with extinction. By way of doing so, it will also identify the reasons that are responsible for the endangerment of the language. The study will conclude by discussing the language preservation measures that may fit the Remun context. Thus, the study will explore the following questions:

- a) Is the Remun language endangered? If yes, to what extent?
- b) If the Remun language is endangered, what are the factors that are responsible for it?
- c) What can we do to revitalize the Remun language?

## **Methodology**

It has been difficult to provide a succinct and generalizable model to measure the endangerment of a language. The reason for this lies in the complexity of the phenomena involved in the dynamic relationship between language and society. Keeping this mind, I will apply a model that is relatively recently developed taking cues from the shortcomings of earlier models of language endangerment. The model was proposed by the UNESCO Experts Meeting on Safeguarding Endangered Languages (March 2003) (Brenzinger et al. 2003). Though it does not guarantee complete accuracy, its quantitative nature has the advantage of precisely determining the level of endangerment of a language. The model has already been experimented (Lewis 2005), to measure the vitality of 100 languages from all parts of the world and has been found to be ‘reasonable’ and ‘feasible’.

The model uses nine factors to measure language endangerment. They are:

1. Intergenerational language transmission;
2. Absolute numbers of speakers;
3. Proportion of speakers within the total population;
4. Loss of existing language domains;
5. Response to new domains and media;
6. Materials for language education and literacy;
7. Governmental and institutional language attitudes and policies;
8. Community members’ attitudes towards their own language; and
9. Amount and quality of documentation.

As per the proposal, a score will be assigned to each of the nine factors. The combined scores of the factors will then provide a measure of the level of endangerment that the Remun language is facing. It should be noted that no single factor should be considered in isolation since a language that seems relatively secure in terms of one factor may require “immediate and urgent attention due to other factors” (Brenzinger, Yamamoto et al. 2003:10).

## The Evaluation Framework

The framework proposed by the UNESCO experts group assesses the level of language endangerment using nine factors. For eight of the factors a scale is proposed which allows the evaluator to assign a score (from 0 to 5) for each factor. The only factor for which such a scale is not provided is Factor 2, the Absolute Population Number. The evaluation framework is described and justified in (Brenzinger, Yamamoto et al. 2003). A detailed description of the scoring mechanism is given below:

Table 2 – Factor 1: Intergenerational Language Transmission Scale

<b>Degree of Endangerment</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Speaker Population</b>
<i>Safe</i>	5	The language is used by all ages, from children up.
<i>Unsafe</i>	4	The language is used by some children in all domains; it is used by all children in limited domains.
<i>Definitively endangered</i>	3	The language is used mostly by the parental generation and up.
<i>Severely endangered</i>	2	The language is used mostly by the grandparental generation and up.
<i>Critically endangered</i>	1	The language is used mostly by very few speakers, of great-grandparental generation.
<i>Extinct</i>	0	There exists no speaker.

Table 3 – Factor 3: Proportion of Speakers Within the Total Reference Group

Degree of Endangerment	Grade	Proportion of Speakers Within the Total Reference Population
<i>Safe</i>	5	All speak the language.
<i>Unsafe</i>	4	Nearly all speak the language.
<i>Definitively endangered</i>	3	A majority speak the language
<i>Severely endangered</i>	2	A minority speak the language
<i>Critically endangered</i>	1	Very few speak the language.
<i>Extinct</i>	0	None speak the language.

Table 4-Factor 4: Loss of Existing Language Domains

<b>Degree of Endangerment</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Domains and Functions</b>
<i>Universal use</i>	5	The language is used in all domains and for all functions.
<i>Multilingual parity</i>	4	Two or more languages may be used in most social domains and for most functions.
<i>Dwindling domains</i>	3	The language is in home domains and for many functions, but the dominant language begins to penetrate even home domains.
<i>Limited or formal domains</i>	2	The language is used in limited social domains and for several functions.
<i>Highly limited domains</i>	1	The language is used only in a very restricted domains and for a very few functions.
<i>Extinct</i>	0	The language is not used in any domain and for any function.

Table 5 – Factor 5: Response to New Domains and Media

<b>Degree of Endangerment</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>New Domains and Media Accepted by the Endangered Language</b>
<i>Dynamic</i>	5	The language is used in all new domains.
<i>Robust/active</i>	4	The language is used in most new domains.
<i>Receptive</i>	3	The language is used in many domains.
<i>Coping</i>	2	The language is used in some new domains.
<i>Minimal</i>	1	The language is used only in a few new domains.
<i>Inactive</i>	0	The language is not used in any new domains.

Table 6 – Factor 6: Materials for Language Education and Literacy

<b>Grade</b>	<b>Accessibility of Written Materials</b>
5	There is an established orthography, literacy tradition with grammars, dictionaries, texts, literature, and everyday media. Writing in the language is used in administration and education.
4	Written materials exist, and at school, children are developing literacy in the language. Writing in the language is not used in administration.
3	Written materials exist and children may be exposed to the written form at school. Literacy is not promoted through print media.
2	Written materials exist, but they may only be useful for some members of the community; and for others, they may have a symbolic significance. Literacy education in the language is not a part of the school curriculum.
1	A practical orthography is known to the community and some material is being written.
0	No orthography available to the community.

Table 7 – Factor 7: Governmental and Institutional Language Attitudes and Policies

<b>Degree of Support</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Official Attitudes Toward Language</b>
<i>Equal support</i>	5	All languages are protected.
<i>Differentiated Support</i>	4	Minority languages are protected primarily as the language of the private domains. The use of the language is prestigious.
<i>Passive assimilation</i>	3	No explicit policy exists for minority languages; the dominant language prevails in the public domain.
<i>Active assimilation</i>	2	Government encourages assimilation to the dominant language. There is no protection for minority languages.
<i>Forced assimilation</i>	1	The dominant language is the sole official language, while non-dominant languages are neither recognized or protected.



<i>Prohibition</i>	0	Minority languages are prohibited.
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Table 8 – Factor 8: Community Members’ Attitudes toward Their Own Language

<b>Grade</b>	<b>Community Members’ Attitudes toward Language</b>
5	<i>All</i> members value their language and wish to see it promoted.
4	<i>Most</i> members support language maintenance.
3	<i>Many</i> members support language maintenance; others are indifferent or may even support language loss.
2	<i>Some</i> members support language maintenance; others are indifferent or may even support language loss.
1	Only <i>a few</i> members support language maintenance; others are indifferent or may even support language loss.
0	<i>No one</i> cares if the language is lost; all prefer to use a dominant language.

Table 13 – Factor 9: Amount and Quality of Documentation

<b>Nature of Documentation</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Language Documentation</b>
<i>Superlative</i>	5	There are comprehensive grammars and dictionaries, extensive texts; constant flow of language materials. Abundant annotated highquality audio and video recordings exist.
<i>Good</i>	4	There is one good grammar and a number of adequate grammars, dictionaries, texts, literature, and occasionally-updated everyday media; adequate annotated high-quality audio and video recordings.
<i>Fair</i>	3	There may be an adequate grammar or sufficient amount of grammars, dictionaries, and texts, but no everyday media; audio and video recordings may exist in varying quality or degree of annotation.
<i>Fragmentary</i>	2	There are some grammatical sketches, word-lists, and texts useful for limited linguistic research but with inadequate coverage. Audio and video recordings may exist in varying quality, with or without any annotation.
<i>Inadequate</i>	1	Only a few grammatical sketches, short wordlists, and fragmentary texts. Audio and video recordings do not exist, are of unusable

		quality, or are completely un-annotated.
<i>Undocumented</i>	0	No material exists.

The framework, as given above, is quantitative in nature and will try to pinpoint the level of endangerment the Remun language is facing now. To complement this, I will also use qualitative data that will provide us with an overall picture of the situations that surround the Remun language. The advantage a quantitative research offers is it may give us a precise idea about the level of endangerment that is facing the language. Based on this, we can decide whether we need to go for immediate actions or not. However, it may also be noted that the picture provided by quantitative research may not always be accurate. Therefore, it is best to combine the findings of both the kind of research and take actions as appropriate.

### **Data Elicitation**

I used structured interviews and participant observations in eliciting data for my research. The structured interviews contained 27 questions written in both English and Bahasa Malaysia. The questions were divided into four major sections. The first section elicited demographic information including language proficiency of the respondents and their spouses, children and other family members. The second section dealt with the respondent's language use in a variety of domains such as home, school, work place, etc. The next section concerned the respondent's attitudes to his/her language and its use. The final section asked questions regarding the respondent's level of awareness about the endangerment of his/her language.

I selected 37 respondents from three Remun villages, namely Remun, Triboh, and Semukoi-A. Each village represented about 12/13 respondents. In selecting respondents, care was taken to ensure a cross-section of respondents in terms of sex, educational levels, and marital status. When age was concerned, I preferred younger respondents to the older ones. In administering the questionnaires, I took help of a Remun native speaker who also spoke good English. I administered the questionnaire throughout the month of June, 2007.

I stayed with a Remun family during my research that spanned two months. The stay allowed me to closely mix with the Remun people and observe their use of and attitude to their language. During my stay, I tried to be a part of their day-to-day lives and took part in their religious and cultural festivals. I also took interest in watching how language defined their cultural cores and how it fared on their livelihoods.

A profile of respondents is given in Table-2 below:

**Table-2:** Social Profile of Respondents

Age	15-30	31-45
n=34	18	16

%	53	47
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Occupation	Public/Private Service	Self-employed	Unemployed
n=34	11	11	12
%	32	32	36

Male/Female	M	F
n=34	20	14
%	59	41

Marital Status	Married	Endogamous	Exogamous	Single
n=34	17	6	11	17
%	50	35	65	50

Education	Primary	Secondary	Post Secondary
n=34	3	23	8
%	9	67	24

## Analysis and Discussion

In this section, I will present the findings of my research and analyze their significance from the perspective of language endangerment. I will discuss the findings based on the evaluation framework mentioned above.

### Intergenerational Language Transmission and the Proportion of Speakers

The Remun settlements are closely surrounded by a variety of demographically more dominant ethnic groups such as Iban, Bidayuh, and Malay. Apart from that the English and the Chinese languages also exert considerable power in the area due to their commercial and global significance. Consequently, the Remun people are prone to being multilingual and their language choice at any given moment is constrained by such factors as place, interlocutor, and situation. Though it is pragmatic for Remun people to be multilingual, it is important to examine if such a situation stands in their way to mother tongue transmission to

the younger generation. In this regard, Table-3 below lists the languages the respondents report they can speak. In the study, ‘speaking ability’ was defined as the ability to communicate comfortably with native speakers in daily affairs.

**Table-10:** The Languages the Remun People Can Speak  
(Kpg. Remun+Triboh+Semukoi)

Languages	R	I	B	SM	M	E	C	L
All age groups (n=34)	33	13	16	7	30	20	1	1
%	97	38	47	21	88	59	3	3
Age: (15-30)	17	7	5	3	15	5	0	1
% (out of the above age group)	94	39	28	17	83	28	0	6
Age: 31-60	16	6	11	4	15	15	1	0
% (out of the above age group)	100	37	69	25	94	94	6	0

**Table-11:** Languages the Remun Children Mostly Use

Languages	R	I	M	E	B
n=18	14	10	11	2	2
%	78	56	61	11	11

R=Remun, I=Iban, B=Bidayuh, SM=Sarawak Malay, M=Bahasa Malaysia, E=English, C=Chinese, L=Lahanan

As indicated in the table-10 above, while all the respondents of the 31-60 age group are able to speak their mother tongue, all of their younger counterparts of the 15-30 age group are not found capable to speak the language. Similarly, the table-11 shows a significant portion of the Remun children use Bahasa Malaysia mostly. This shows the discontinuity of intergenerational transmission of the Remun language to some extent. In addition, we will find later that the respondents, particularly the younger ones, who speak the Remun language, do not use it in all the domains. As regards the Factor-1, we can assign the score 4 (that corresponds to the category ‘unsafe’) to the Remun language based on the condition of its intergenerational transmission. On the other hand, based on the Factor-3 that looks into the proportion of speakers within the total reference group, we can also assign the score 4 to the language. The score corresponds to the category of ‘unsafe’ that says ‘Nearly all speak the language’ which is reflected in the table above. As for the other languages the Remun People speak, Bahasa Malaysia is the language that most of them identifies. A significant number of respondents are able to speak the English language. Between the two dominant neighboring languages (Bidayuh and Iban), more respondents reported to be able to speak Bidayuh than Iban.

The fact that some of the younger Remun respondents are not able to speak their mother tongue can be explained by their parents' migration to cities. As I found in my observation, an increasing number of Remun people are migrating to big Sarawakian cities such as Kuching, Miri, and Bintulu for livelihood. The children whom I found unable to speak the Remun language spoke Bahasa Malaysia and English for communication. They were living mostly outside the Remun settlements since their birth and their parents decided to speak English and Bahasa Malaysia to them considering the utilitarian value of the languages. That a relatively higher percentage of respondents are able to speak Bahasa Malaysia lies in its status as a national language which the Remun people encounter in most of the domains ranging from educational institutions to supermarkets. The finding that more people were proficient in Bidayuh than Iban may be misleading as I found many Remun people thought Iban and Remun to be the same language. This might have led them not to consider Iban as a separate language they are proficient in.

#### Absolute numbers of speakers

Though absolute population numbers alone are not enough for a clear indication of the relative endangerment of a language, a smaller group is likely to be under greater pressure than a larger group. In view of the numerical strength, the Remun language seems to be in a weaker position than 10 other Sarawakian languages that have more than 10,000 speakers. On the other hand, the language appears to be in a better position than 16 other Sarawakian languages that have 400 speakers on average. However, as strength of number is relative, we are unable to assign any score to the language based on the factor.

When population strength is concerned, the Remun language appears to be vulnerable as their surrounding ethnic groups are demographically larger than them. In particular, frequent intermarriages with their big neighboring ethnic group Iban often lead to the sole use of the Iban language in the family as Iban is a lingua franca in the region. Moreover, the Remun language may also turn out to be unstable if their current tendency of migration to big cities continues. The Remun are increasingly finding it difficult to sustain in their settlements due to massive urbanization resulting in loss of land and forest, a means of their traditional lives for

Loss of	<b>Languages</b>	<b>R</b>	<b>I</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>L</b>	ages. Existing
		<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	

#### Language Domains

**Table-12:** Language Use in the Home Domain

Spouse	53	47	29	18	41	0
Children	47	47	6	18	24	0
Siblings	91	21	6	3	3	0
Parents	94	9	3	6	0	3
Grandparents	94	15	0	9	0	3

### Language Use in the Home Domain

Home is a core and often the last domain where a language manages to exist. The use of a language in this domain provides an indication about the level of endangerment of a language. When a language encounters adversarial situations in a country, home becomes the last place where the speakers can create a meaningful resistance.

Regarding the Remun language use in the home domain, Table-12 shows a significant portion of respondents (53%) do not speak the Remun language to their children. A relatively good number of respondents (47%) are also found not to speak the Remun language to their spouses. However, the use of the language largely increases with siblings and reaches the highest level when parents and grand parents are concerned. As for other languages, Iban plays the most significant role in the Remun households. Like that of the Remun language, the language is used equally frequently with children. It plays a vital role when communication with spouse (47%) is concerned but plays the least significant role in the communication with parents (9%) and grandparents (15%). Other significant languages that play an important role in the Remun's domestic lives include Bahasa Malaysia, Bidayuh, and English. English's use in the communication with spouse (41%) is quite notable.

The use of the Remun language fares poorly in the communication of households. This comes as a big difference from the study done by Cullip (2000) who found only a few respondents (5%) not to speak Remun to their children. A possible reason for the difference in this study may lie in the fact that it covers three villages as opposed to Cullip's one. Secondly, people's attitude to their language use might have changed over this period. However, as home is the last ideal resort for mother tongue with children, the finding that a large number of Remun Respondents do not speak their language to their children does not portend well for the Remun language. The languages that are taking over the Remun households include Iban, Bahasa Malaysia, and English. In particular, Iban's domination in the Remun home domain is noticeable. The Iban infiltration, as I found, may be attributed to a heavy Remun intermarriage with Iban people. Moreover, Remun people cannot avoid the Iban language as Ibans are the closest and largest neighbors whose language is also used as a lingua franca in communication in Sarawak. As for the English's relative edge over Bahasa Malaysia (national language), one may investigate if Malaysia's inter-ethnic tension has anything to do with it. Overall, it is clear that the Remun language does not have a complete hold over communication when the households are concerned.

### Language Use in the Non-home Domain

The Remun, like any other ethnic communities, no longer confine their lives merely into the households and forests that they did for ages. With the change of paradigm of the

meaning of life triggered by such elements as communication, religion, and new economic needs, the Remun are increasingly going out and coming into contact with speakers of a variety of languages. Such increased contacts with divergent linguistic communities reconfigure the linguistic ecology of the Remun people calling for new language choices to be made. The language choices are constrained sometimes by education (e.g. school), sometimes by livelihood (e.g. supermarket), and sometimes by religion (e.g. church). In most cases, however, language choice is determined by less clear and more complex sociolinguistic variables.

To account for the Remun people’s language choice in the non-home domain, Table-13 provides a list of domains for reported language use that ranges from private to public spheres. Remuns’ language use data in the external domains clearly shows the polyglossic nature of their communication. The highest amount of their mother-tongue use is found in the interaction with their friends. Their mother-tongue use is relatively little in workplace. As for supermarket, they don’t use their mother-tongue at all. Regarding the use of other languages, Iban and Bahasa Malaysia fare significantly in school whereas in workplace and supermarket Bahasa Malaysia and English are largely used.

The frequent use of the Remun language with friends may be explained by the fact that their friends also hail from their own language communities speaking the same language. On the contrary, the reason for the least and zero use of the language at workplace and supermarket respectively may lie in the fact that these places are dominated by other

Older Generation	Younger Generation	Languages the Words Borrowed From
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language communities such as the Chinese and the Iban where Bahasa Malaysia plays the role of lingua franca. That Bahasa Malaysia is the sole medium of instruction at school accounts for its overwhelming use (100%) there. However, the considerable use (93%) of Iban at school is also noteworthy. This may be attributed to the presence of a large number of Iban children at school as well as to the teaching of Iban as a subject at school. That English is used to a large extent at workplace and supermarket may lie in its status as a ‘high-language’ in Sarawak.

Kelatang (Dress)	Baju	Bahasa Malaysia
Ngatong (Later)	Nanti	Bahasa Malaysia
Ngilau (See)	Meda	Iban main
Kayu (Food)	Lauk	Bahasa Malaysia/Iban Main
Tegeran lengan (Eat)	Makai	Iban main
Ngitung atap/rasau (Sleep)	Tidur	Bahasa Malaysia
Besulu (Lover/Friend)	Beciuta	Bahasa Malaysia
Reti (Meaning)	Maksud	Bahasa Malaysia
Pangin (Room)	Bilik	Bahasa Malaysia
Lebulan (Stupid)	Bodoh	Bahasa Malaysia
Entau Medak (I Don't Know)	Enda Nemu	Iban Main
anteh (Quick)	Cepat	Bahasa Malaysia
Tanchut (Trousers)	Tanchut (Trousers)	Bahasa Malaysia

**Table-14: Some Lexical Differences of the Remun Language Use between the Younger and the Older Generations**

Based on the Factor-4 as presented in the Table-4, we may assign at best the score 3 to the Remun language that corresponds to 'dwindling domains'. This reflects the fact that the Remun language is gradually losing its domains and that other languages have already begun to 'penetrate even [the] home domains'.

**Table-13: Language Use in the Non-home Domain**

Languages	R %	I %	M %	B %	E %	SM %
Friends	82	62	71	41	26	18
Workplace	13	25	88		56	13
School	33	93	100	47	0	20
Supermarket	0	18	94	24	26	12

Response to New Domains and Media



The Remun language has, my observations say, practically little chance of responding to new domains and media. The language is not used at any domains that establish their contact with the outside world. It is used neither in media nor in education. There is also no effort in sight on part of the government or the local community to extend the use of the language in such domains. Rather, the fact that the existing domains of the language are diminishing is clear from the table below. It shows that a good number of words are used in everyday affairs are giving way to such dominant languages as Bahasa Malaysia and Iban. Such words include, among others, dress, food, eat, see, friend, later, quick, stupid, trousers, etc. Besides lexicon, the Remun idioms are also being replaced by simpler and literal expressions (given below) a symptom that shows the decay of a language. Based on the Factor-5 (Table-5), we may assign Zero (0) to the Remun language that corresponds to the term 'inactive'. This corresponds to the fact that 'the language is not used in any new domains'.

#### A Syntactic Difference between the Language Use of the Younger and the Older Generations

##### Older Generation

Nang ngamba pangan ngau lunga ngai ka selalu antu.  
(Don't) (play) (friends) (with) (knife) (it'll harm you)

##### Younger Generation

Nang pia ngai salu antu  
(Don't do) (like that) (it may harm you)

#### Materials for Language Education and Literacy

The Remun language has yet to have a written form. As Iban has a written form having a relatively long tradition of corpus used to a large extent at school and public places, the Remun people often emulate the Iban alphabet in writing Remun. What one needs to investigate is whether the Iban alphabet, or for that matter the Roman alphabet as devised for Iban, is able to indicate all Remun sounds retaining their nuances. In consideration of the fact that no orthography is available to the Remun community of their language, we can assign the score zero (0) to the language on the Factor-6 (Table-6) that assesses the existence of materials available for language education and literacy.

#### Governmental and Institutional Language Attitudes and Policies

In Malaysia, governmental and institutional language attitudes to indigenous languages in general, and to the Remun language in particular, appear to be neither much protective nor much repressive. Since 19<sup>th</sup> century British colonial time in Peninsular Malaysia, the languages that received governmental attention for education were Malay and English. While English was taught to a handful number of privileged elites, Malay was offered to the mass (Pennycook 1998). After the independence of Malaysia in 1957, English gradually gave way to Malay as a medium of instruction. However, questions of educating

children through their respective mother tongues were raised from time to time which led to the development policy documents from time to time. For example, the Cheesman Plan in 1946 stipulated “the provision of free primary education through the use of the mother tongue” (Puteh 2006:68) Later, the Communities Liaison Committee of 1949 also made provision “for teaching children other languages, like their respective mother tongues” (Puteh 2006: 70). But neither of the policies could be brought into effect due to the absence of power to enforce it. A number of education policies then followed with none effectively enforcing the use of the children’s mother tongues in their schools. At present, Malay is the national and official language of Malaysia and by that fact it is the main language of instruction in the country. Officially other languages can also be used as a medium of instruction. This can be done in the form of national schools through POL (Pupils’ Own Language) in classes. However, when the de facto language teaching practice is concerned, the reflection of such official provision is restricted mainly to the Chinese and Tamil languages both of which are non-indigenous languages in Malaysia. The indigenous languages that have so far received some governmental attention are Iban (Omar 1981) and Kadazandusun. The fact that governmental attention to the small indigenous languages is dwindling is clear from the gradual governmental withdrawal of support for the indigenous languages (Omar 2006: 113). For instance, the government transformed the Borneo Literature Bureau responsible for collecting the oral traditions of the indigenous peoples of Sabah and Sarawak into Sarawak branch of the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka that promotes only the national language Malay. In accordance with the overall government attitude and language policy, the Remun language, as my observation says, receives hardly any notable support. The language is used neither in media nor in schools. The local government offices do not recognize it as a language distinct from Iban.

The government’s language policy and attitude to the small indigenous languages of Malaysia in general, and to the Remun language in particular, appears to be ambiguous. While on the one hand, the law approves of the small indigenous languages and their use as a medium of instruction; on the other hand, there are almost no visible governmental efforts to translate the law into practice. In consideration of the situations in terms of government’s language policy and attitude, it is very difficult to locate the language in table-7 and rate its level of endangerment precisely. Based on Malaysia’s de facto language scenario, it is clear that all languages are not equally protected and that they do not carry an equal prestige. Though an explicit policy is there for the minority languages, the dominant language prevails in the public domain leading to a pressure on the minority language speakers to assimilate with the majority. We can therefore assign the score ‘three’ (3) to the Remun language in relation to the factor-7 (table-7) that explains and labels the government language policy and attitude as ‘passive assimilation’.

#### Community Members’ Attitudes towards Their Own Language

In this research, I did not attempt a comprehensive assessment of the Remun community’s attitude toward their language. My analysis of their attitude to their language was restricted mainly to two crucial areas of their lives, namely, in their livelihoods and in school. Though perception of a language’s importance for maintaining livelihood implies an

instrumental view of language extracting it from its symbolic value, it is true that need of a language for livelihood has far-reaching ramifications for value development. Apart from that, perception of the importance of a language in school sends the message of a language's potential for survival. In addition, I wanted to measure the community's perception of language endangerment as well as their perception of their language's potential for survival.

Table-14: Languages Most Important for Livelihood

Table-15: Languages Children Should be Taught in School

Languages	R	I	M	E	C	B
n=34	7	9	14	30	1	1
%	21	26	41	88	3	3

R=Remun, I=Iban, M=Bahasa Malaysia, E=English, C=Chinese, B=Bidayuh

Table-16: Perception of the Language Endangerment

Languages	R	I	M	E	C	B
n=34	7	8	14	22	1	2
%	21	24	41	65	3	6

Do You Think Your Native Language is Under Threat?		
	Yes	No
All Age n=34	19	15
%	56	44
15-30	8	10
%	44	56
31-60	11	5
%	69	31

Table-17: Perception of the Language's Potential for Survival

Do You Think Your Next Generation Will Speak the Remun Language?		
	Yes	No
All Age n=34	26	8
%	76	24
15-30	13	5

% (out of the above age group)	72	28
31-60	13	3
% (out of the above age group)	81	19

Respondents were asked four questions concerning attitude. The first question asked about the languages the Remun community considered to be most important in their livelihoods. Though feedback in this regard reflects the existing reality rather than the reality the community cherishes, it has a chance to ultimately affect their attitude to language. As for the languages the Remun people thought important in their lives, English found to occupy the highest position which was immediately followed by Malay. Iban was placed the third position followed by their mother tongue, Remun. As for the languages the Remun community thought should be taught in their schools, English was judged by far (88%) to be the most preferred language followed by Malay, Iban, and Remun. This finding correlates with the finding shown earlier that listed the languages playing an important role in their lives.

With reference to the question that asked whether the community thought their language was under threat, a relatively larger portion of respondents (56%) answered in the affirmative. The number of older generation was far higher (69%) than the younger generation (44%) in their perception of the threat. As for the language's potential for survival, most respondents (76%) were optimistic. However, in comparison to the younger generation, the older generation showed more optimism (80% as opposed to 76%) about the future of their language. However, all Remun people were in favor of supporting their language. In consideration of such a popular intent, I assign the score five (5) to the language corresponding to 'equal support' according to Factor-8 as shown in Table-8.

#### Amount and Quality of Documentation

The Remun language has not yet been systematically alphabetized. In case an occasion arises, the language is written in the Roman script like many of its neighboring languages such as Iban, Bidayuh, and Malay. But the language does not boast an extensive corpus that is able to provide a reliable picture about the language's syntax, morphology, and phonology. When lexicon is concerned, a number of studies have recorded scores of characteristic Remun words in order to build a comparative word list which usually included Iban (Ray 1913). However, such a limited word list fails to reveal the phonological, syntactic, and even lexical variations of the language. Given the fact that the language fares poorly in terms of documentation, one may assume that it can have a fair chance of survival as long as Iban exists as Remun is reported to have 88% cognates with Iban (Cullip 2000). But such an assumption should not be indicative of interchangeability of the two languages as Iban people generally consider Remun to be unintelligible (Cullip 2000). As for the storage in other forms, the language is not also recorded in the audio and video system barring it from a future chance of documentation. In light of the Remun language's amount and quality of documentation, I assign it the score one (1) that corresponds to an 'inadequate' documentation of the language.

#### Determining the Level of Endangerment of the Remun Language

Table-18 below shows the overall level of the Remun language’s endangerment in consideration of the eight factors against which I assigned the language a score. As we know, the number in each factor ranged from 0 to 5 that corresponded to different levels of endangerment of a language. While I was able to assign a grade to the Remun language in relation to most of the factors, I could not determine a score for the language in terms of the factor-2 that considered the strength absolute population of a linguistic group.

**Table-18:** Overall Level of Endangerment of the Remun Language

<b>Factor</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Median Grade</b>
Factor-1	4	<b>2.5</b>
Factor-3	4	
Fadtor-4	3	
Factor-5	0	
Factor-6	0	
Factor-7	3	
Factor-8	5	
Factor-9	1	

If we place the Remun language’s median grade in Table-19 below taken from UNESCO’s model of language endangerment (Brenzinger et al. 2003), we find the language falls between the categories of ‘definitely endangered’ and ‘severely endangered’. Thereby, in answer to my first research question that asks if the Remun language is endangered, we find a clear indication that says the language is endangered. As for the level of endangerment, the language appears to occupy a vulnerable position falling between the categories of ‘definitely’ and ‘severely’ endangered language. On a closer inspection of the shift, we find that the Remun language is gradually giving way to Iban and Malay languages. Iban by dint its regional hegemony is replacing Remun in many of the domains. Malay, on the other hand, with its pervasive power over media to institutions to everyday is rapidly making its way. English is also creeping in not simply as an occasional high lingua franca but in some cases as a home language. The Remun people’s proficiency in these languages, as the findings suggest, is indicative of subtractive rather than additive bilingualism.

Table-19: Overall Measurement of Language Endangerment

<b>Degree of Endangerment</b>	<b>Grade</b>
Safe	5
Unsafe	4
Definitely Endangered	3
Severely Endangered	2
Critically Endangered	1
Extinct	0

As for pinpointing the level the Remun language's endangerment, I do not claim any accuracy due to a number of reasons. First of all, the framework I have used to measure language endangerment may have certain limitations. For example, regarding one of its most crucial factors that purports to assess intergenerational language transmission, we assign a score relying on the proportion of speakers that speak the language in question. The finding, in this regard, may fail to gauge the intergeneration language transmission as it does not take into account how many of the respondents speak the language as their first language and what are the domains in which they use the language. Similarly, questions can be raised about the authenticity of the information the research based on. For instance, I did not find the Remun ethno-linguistic group separately identified in the Sarawak's population census barring me from obtaining any information about their population. In this regard, I had to rely on the information that various Remun headmen provided me. Then comes the question of the representative samples I covered in the study that may prove to be too small to be generalized for the whole Remun community. Taking all these factors into consideration, the findings can only claim to be suggestive rather than exhaustive. This being said, the quantitative nature of the finding may still merit our attention if we look upon research from the perspective of praxis. It is noted that language endangerment research, until now, has been mostly qualitative in nature failing to provide us with a precise picture of the degree of endangerment. Consequently, they prevent us from reaching a precise decision as to how much resources we should mobilize to revitalize a language. The present research, in this connection, may allow us to reach a decision regarding how much effort we exactly need to make to reverse the shift of the Remun language.

The dismal condition of the Remun language as reflected in the study runs counter to the finding that Cullip (2000) presented in his study of the language. He found the language well maintained by the people of the village named Remun. "The Remun of Kampong [village] Remun" Cullip observed, "may be characterized as a relatively stable polyglossic community with a strong intergenerational transmission". It seems the causes of anomaly between the findings of the two studies lie in their temporal as well spatial differences. Cullip's study was conducted in 1999 while the present one was conducted in 2007. As for sites of sample collection, Cullip took only the village of Remun into consideration, whereas the present study took into account the village of Remun in addition to two other Remun settlements that include the villages of Trioh, and Semukoi. However, the fact that later Remun settlements were showing tendency of language decay is clear from Cullip's (2000) observation during his time of study. Cullip (2000) notes, "There is some evidence (both anecdotal and in the form of wordlist) that many of the Remun villages southeast of the core three [the villages of Remun, Lebor, and Triboh] have borrowed extensively from Iban and that many of the younger generation speak Iban rather than Remun." Apart from a shift only to Iban, language transfer is also taking place, as we have found out in this study, to Malay to a large extent and also to English to some extent.

### **Revitalization of the Remun Language**

It is true speakers do not always have a free choice to continue to use their language. Their loyalty to a language is constrained by the broader politico-economic structures in which they live. Nevertheless, fate of a language is ultimately reliant on its speakers in the

sense that a language cannot sustain without their recognition. Irrespective of the forces that exert power to revive a language, the scheme cannot be successful until and unless the community that speak the language engages itself in the effort. Accordingly, the Remun language's potential for revival is closely connected to what its speakers think they can do to revitalize the language. To know about it, I asked them a few questions that asked what they think they can do to save their language and what sort of help they expect from government in this connection.

In response to the question that asked what the Remun community can do to preserve their language, a good number of respondents (40%) reported that they should try to speak their language in their daily lives. Some of the respondents (30%) said they should take their own initiatives to teach Remun at school. A few (15%) said they should make a special effort to communicate to the young people in their language while an equal number (15%) said they should take steps to write books and dictionaries in Remun. A few (10%) suggested that the best way to preserve their language is by retaining their traditions and culture.

As for the support the Remun people expect from government, most of the respondents (80%) demanded that the Remun language be included in the syllabuses and curricula of the schools in their region. In this regard, some (5%) went as far as to suggest that the Remun language be offered as an optional subject to speakers of other languages. A few of the respondents (10%) said that the government should take steps to broadcast the Remun language from radio everyday for a while. A few (5%) wanted the government to allow them more access to education which will eventually enable them to preserve their language. Some of the respondents suggested that the government take steps to write books and dictionaries in the Remun language.

## **Implications**

The findings suggest that Remun is not a dying language threatened with immediate extinction. The younger generation still use it to a large extent (e.g. 78% list it among the languages they mostly use). The language still dominates the home domain. The number of Remun speakers (approx. 7000) is healthy by Sarawak standard and does not appear to be critically vulnerable to population dispersal, epidemic diseases, and decimation. Further, they are geographically concentrated at contiguous territories allowing them to linguistically identify with one another. Nonetheless, the language is not also guaranteed a complete safety. The darker sides are also there. Six percent Remun children are found incapable to speak their mother tongue and only forty seven percent parents speak the language to their children. The picture will turn graver if we project the language use of the next generation. In this regard, I analyze in more detail how the Remun language fares in the prevailing political, economic and cultural power structure taking stock of some of the findings of this research.

The Remun ethnolinguistic group lies at the bottom end of the regional, national, and global hegemonic structure. As a relatively small and linguistically isolated community interacting within a multilingual, multiethnic, and rapidly changing socioeconomic environment, they are undergoing a great deal of macro-pressure which creates a potential for

language shift. The regional dominance of Iban is clear from its infiltration into the Remun household (e.g. used with spouse by 47%). The national language's hegemony, on the other hand, is reflected in its increasing use by the Remun (e.g. in school and supermarket by 100% and 94% respectively). And finally, English's overriding effect on both the regional and national languages is also evident. This is reflected not only in its use as a high lingua-franca (e.g. used by 56% in the workplace) but also in its use in the household (e.g. used by 41% with spouse).

While both Iban and Bahasa Malaysia play an identical role as hegemonic languages over Remun, they take different routes to dominate over Remun. Iban, as a local lingua-franca, dominates communication in local institutions, offices, and markets ousting Remun from such domains (e.g. Iban is used by 62% with friends in the non-home domain). Further, the presence of a much bigger Iban population around Remun leads to a high-frequency of intermarriage (as shown in the social profile) with them in which case usually the Remun spouse has to compromise his/her mother tongue. This reveals how Iban, apart from controlling the external domains, enters into the Remun household (e.g. used by 47% with children). The Iban invasion of the Remun household is significant from the perspective of language endangerment as home is often considered the last resort to resist an external and powerful language (Shohamy 2006). Similarly, the notable shift to Bahasa Malaysia can be attributed to its monopoly over a number of areas that the Remun experience linguistically. It is the language of education, media and commerce. The fact that Bahasa Malaysia transcends its utilitarian role and intrudes the Remun's private domains is evident from the list of languages Remun children mostly use (e.g. 61% list BM among the languages they mostly use). Moreover, the younger Remun generation tends to use an increasing number of Malay words in their Remun speech (see Table-14 above). English, in its turn, permeates the Remun society primarily as a language of pragmatic importance occupying a position similar to that of Bahasa Malaysia. Besides, English's exclusive dominance is clear in the new domain of commerce and technology.

Apart from the instances of shrinking Remun domains, the language's endangerment can also be perceived from its use by the younger generation. While every living language changes over time, concern arises when most of such changes take place in favor of the dominant languages. This is what happening to Remun as we found (in Table 14) that the younger generation used plenty of Malay words in place of their Remun counterparts. In this connection, I should add that during my research, I met a few elderly Remun respondents who complained that their children had forgotten quite a few Remun words for every day use. Such a situation forced them to use Malay and Iban words in their Remun speech as well. Simplification of syntax (shown above) as another symptom of language decay was also traced in the use of Remun. Moreover, some elderly respondents reported their distinctive use of supra-segmental features such as intonation. They used lengthened and rising tone, a feature absent in speech of the younger generation.

The Remun language's gradual loss of ground to other languages seems to have been triggered by interplay of a number of factors. First, the Remun have developed, over time, a negative attitude to their language. Negative attitude to a language usually stems from its inadequate utilitarian value, in particular, its unimportance in economy and production. In



support of this we find that the Remun language is used sparingly in school (33%), workplace (13%), and supermarket (0%). The decisive role economic power in language maintenance can be illustrated from the success of Tamil and Chinese languages in Malaysia. Besides, the language does not boast any extensive documentation. It may also generate negative attitude to the language. Perhaps attitude of this kind accounts for some Remun's choice of English and Bahasa Malaysia as the languages to be taught to their children.

Second, migration as a frequently cited reason for language shift also applies to Remun (e.g. 15% identified it as a reason for language loss). The Remun appear to migrate mainly for two reasons. First of all, with the expansion of population they are constantly losing their traditional means of livelihood such as land, forest and water bodies. This loss of subsistence is further aggravated by the advent of new value of life that hinges on the modern commodities. In addition, governments tend to plan development projects centering on big towns and cities. A combination of this two-fold pressure, among others, drives the Remun out of home. Incidences of Remun migration often bring an end to the use of their language given its poor relevance in the external domain.

Lastly, the absence of the Remun language in school is also reported (e.g. 10% of the respondents suggested so) to be a reason for language loss. In support of this, we find that only a few Remun students (e.g. 33% of the respondents) use their language for communication in school. This rate becomes much higher when Bahasa Malaysia is concerned (e.g. used by 100% for communication in school). This is also reflected in the list of languages Remun children mostly use (e.g. 61% listed Bahasa Malaysia as a language they mostly used as opposed to 78% who used Remun mostly). While there no doubt a proficiency in Bahasa Malaysia will be beneficial to Remun children, the reality shows that it may take place at the expense of Remun indicating a subtractive rather than an additive bilingualism. It may be mentioned that the Malaysian language education policy allows teaching of students' mother tongues through a policy termed as POL (Pupils' Own Language). But the policy hardly appears to be realized. By way of identifying some reasons for this, Omar (2003:113) maintains that it is often difficult to recruit teachers to teach a single language and to get at least 15 children necessary to initiate such classes. When teachers are concerned, one may wonder how a similar system involving other languages such as Bahasa Malaysia, Chinese, and English operate in Malaysia. As for the prerequisite number of students, true many of Sarawak's small languages may fail to represent 15 students in a classroom, but it should not occur to at least 20 languages of Sarawak, including Remun, that have more than 5000 speakers. If this happens, it will imply an exclusion of the language groups in terms of rights related to economy and education. Against this backdrop of the potential danger posed by the big languages, the Remun can neither abandon them in their own interest nor can they do so even if they want. In fact, multilingualism is found to be cognitively beneficial in general which for the Remun is crucial to sustain both politically and economically. This faces them with a situation in need of striking a balance that ensures cohabitation of languages. This is not easy to attain.

On revitalization of the language, it is important to note the Remun's perception of the danger their language is facing (e.g. 56% admitted their language was under threat). In response, many of them believed that their autonomous actions would be most effective to

save the language. The measures they suggested included, speaking the language to the younger generation, expanding the use of the language, documenting the language, etc. When governmental help was concerned, most of them asked for inclusion of the language in school curricula. The Remun's desire to take things in their own hands is significant. Though use of a language is often determined by the power of competing forces in a broader politico-economic structure, it ultimately survives in the speech of a community. In this regard, the Remun's intention to speak the language to the younger generation as a first step bodes well. Documentation, as a measure, though cannot guarantee the use of a language, it can play a vital role both in expanding its use (e.g. in school, in recording oral literature, etc.) and even in salvaging it from extinction (e.g. it happened to Hebrew).

As for governmental help, the demand for Remun's inclusion in school curricula is congruent with Malaysia's language education policy. Despite the fact that teaching of Remun in school will initially pose some challenges ranging from developing teaching materials to restructuring school curricula, it appears to be feasible if the community's volition is thought to carry any indication in this regard. In fact, there are no instances of successful language maintenance without participation of the concerned community. Global stories abound in this respect that include languages such as Maori, Hawaiian, Navajo, Lardil Thuaka etc. (Ash et al 2001). There are also Malaysian examples including the languages of the Kadazandusun and the Iranun in Sabah, the Iban in Sarawak, and the Semai in Peninsular Malaysia (Smith 2003). Government with a strong political will may take such instances into consideration to maintain the Remun language and their cultural heritage.

## **Conclusion**

The Remun can be characterized as an instable polyglossic community with a declining trend of intergenerational language transmission. All Remun children cannot speak Remun and none of them have the scope to obtain education through it in school. The language has a few diminishing domains and carries little utilitarian value leading to a negative attitude to it. It is not well documented and is not used in print and electronic media. However, the language is not faced with immediate extinction; it has a strong vitality in the home domain and most of its younger speakers use it as the primary language of communication. All the elderly people are fairly proficient in it and they consider their Remun identity to be inseparably associated with their language. Besides, the Remun population is healthy by Sarawak standard and do not seem to be critically vulnerable to population dispersal, genocide, and epidemic diseases.

The fact that the Remun are showing signs language loss is indicative of their potential dispossession of many other phenomena. This means that their cognitive patterns as well as their way of viewing the world are equally challenged. The decline of their language's vitality does not bode well for their cultures and knowledge systems, their oral literary and musical traditions. It also does not augur well for their environmental and medical knowledge as well as their cultural practices and artistic skills. In short, their language endangerment means a potential loss of an important part of the sum of human knowledge.

Language decay or language death, as we have found out, is merely symptomatic of a flawed politico-economic structure. More specifically, when a language group stops using its language, it does so only involuntarily and such an act takes place in the adversarial conditions of a broader sociolinguistic picture. The Remun are no exception. In their case, they confront a global, national, and regional axis of hegemony represented by English, Bahasa Malaysia and the Iban languages respectively. These languages dominate from both materially and epistemologically superior position.

English and Bahasa Malaysia's hegemony take place in the changed paradigms of imperialism and nation states. English is propagated in the name of world language that legitimizes it as a common language of communication for all. The factors that have precipitated the situation are colonization and global dominance of English speaking nations. Notably, English does not simply stop being an additional language for cross-cultural communication. It tends to replace other languages and that applies to Remun as have found out. Equally notable is English's import of new (capitalistic) world view that clashes with the indigene's traditional way of life with its far-reaching consequences for language (note the reasons for the Remun migration). English's hegemony of this kind compels the poorer nations to spend its limited resources for its promotion given such nations have countless endangered languages that require attention. Malaysia's distribution of resources, like many other countries, conforms to this trend.

Bahasa Malaysia, on the other hand, appears in the scene as a national language sending a message similar to that of English that a nation needs a common language of communication for all its citizens. The ideologies that are invariably attached to it are patriotism, unity, and national identity. What often remains hidden is that it is a language of the dominant ethnic group and promotion of the language situates them immediately at an advantageous position. Again like English, the national language does not remain static as an additional common language; it keeps occupying newer domains of the smaller languages resulting in their gradual shift (e.g. as in the case of Bahasa Malaysia). Secondly, the danger of the nation states' tendency to declare a language 'national' is that it excludes, in principal, the rest of the languages from care and attention. Such a norm can serve at best 300 (among 6,912) languages, given the world has about 250 nation states now. Declaring a language 'national' (with its associated ideologies) often allows (the dominant ethnic group of) a nation state to allocate its resources disproportionately to promote that language. This kind of tendency of nation states, with Malaysia making no exception, perhaps accounts for the endangerment many small languages of the world are facing now.

Iban's local dominance, on the other hand, stems mainly from its demographic power instigating a shift to it through controlling of external domains, intermarriages, and migration. Its impact on Remun may prove to be more significant than that of both English and Bahasa Malaysia given the Iban's affinity with the Remun in terms of culture, economy and history. This may result in a gradual transformation of Remun identity into an altogether Iban one with the simultaneous shift to the language.

When evils of small languages are many and language death is still more a norm than exception, worldwide efforts to save moribund languages abound. There is no doubt strategies to revive languages differ from one another. Appropriateness of steps to bring back a language to use is reliant on such factors as the level of a language's endangerment, nature and intensity of its competing forces, current standard of proficiency of its younger speakers, availability of resources and its documentation, etc. However, irrespective of such differences, their revival is contingent on certain common factors such as whether the language group is aware of the threat their language is faced with, whether they want to take part actively in the revival program, whether they are committed to teaching the language to the younger generation, etc. The Remun appear to be affirmative in terms of all these factors showing their language may not be doomed to failure. What they seem to be in most need of now are documentation of their language and its introduction in school curricula. This will help in both expanding the use of the language and in its steady transmission to the younger generation.

Finally, a research of this magnitude cannot claim to be conclusive in its findings of the phenomena that characterize the Remun language. Apart from drawing a limited number of samples from only three Remun villages, its limitations result from several other factors ranging from methodology to data elicitation processes. But these should not negate its strengths and validity in some of its claims. These, taken into consideration, may help us to come up with measures necessary to redress the Remun question of language endangerment.

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## Appendix

### **Borang soal selidik temuramah** *Interview Questionnaire*

1. Nama:  
*Name:*
2. Umur:  
*Age:*
3. Tempat lahir:  
*Place of Birth:*
4. Place you are now living at:
5. Status pekerjaan : Kakitangan kerajaan.swasta [    ] Berkerja sendiri [    ]  
*Employment Status: Employed [    ] Self-employed [    ]*  
  
Tidak berkerja  
*Unemployed [    ]*
6. Jantina:            Lelaki            [    ]            Perempuan    [    ]  
*Sex:                    Male                [    ]                Female            [    ]*

7. Status perkahwinan: Berkhawin [ ] Bujang [ ] Widow [ ]  
*Marital Status: Married [ ] Single [ ]*

8. Nama bahasa ibunda anda:  
*Name of your native language:*

9. The ethnic community you are married into:

10. What language do you use to communicate with your spouse?

11. What language do your children mostly use?

12. Bilangan tahun anda bersekolah:  
*Number of Years in School:*

13. Anda boleh bertutur dalam bahasa:  
Jika lebih daripada satu bahasa, nyatakan bahasa-bahasa tersebut.  
*Which language(s) can you speak:*

14. Anda paling fasih dalam bahasa:  
*Which language are you most proficient in:*

15. Di sekolah, anda diajar dalam bahasa:  
Jika lebih daripada satu bahasa, nyatakan bahasa-bahasa tersebut.  
*Which language(s) were you taught in school:*

16. Bahasa apakah yang anda tuturkan di rumah ketika bercakap:  
Jika lebih daripada satu bahasa, nyatakan bahasa-bahasa tersebut.  
*What language(s) do you speak at home:*

Dengan ibu bapa anda:  
*To your parents:*

Dengan anak-anak anda:  
*To your children:*

Dengan adik-beradik anda:  
*To your brothers and sisters:*

Dengan rakan-rakan anda:  
*To your friends:*

Dengan datuk dan nenek anda:  
*To your grandparents:*

17. Bahasa yang paling kerap anda gunakan di pejabat:  
*Which language do you mostly use at your workplace:*

18. Ketika bertutur, adakah anda menggunakan dua atau lebih bahasa yang lain?  
*Do you mix up two or more languages in your speech?*

Ya [ ]                      Tidak [ ]  
Yes [ ]                      No [ ]

19. Jika anda menggunakan bahasa campur, apakah bahasa yang paling utama/dominan dan apakah bahasa-bahasa lain yang anda gunakan?  
*If you mix up then what is the main language you use and what are the other languages?*

Bahasa utama/dominan:  
*Main language:*

Bahasa-bahasa lain:  
*Other language(s):*

20. Pada pandangan anda, bahasa apakah yang paling penting dalam kehidupan anda?  
*Which language do you think is most important for your livelihood:*

21. Pada pandangan anda, kanak-kanak patut diajar dalam bahasa:  
*Which language(s) do you think should children be taught:*

22. Pada pandangan anda, adakah generasi seterusnya akan bertutur dalam bahasa ibunda anda/mereka sendiri  
*Do you think your next generation will speak your native language?*

Ya [ ]                      Tidak [ ]  
Yes [ ]                      No [ ]

23. Pada pandangan anda, adakah bahasa ibunda anda mengalami ancaman kepupusan?  
*Do you think your native language is under threat?*



Ya [     ]     Tidak [     ]  
Yes [     ]     No [     ]

24. What factors do you think are responsible for this threat?

25. Pada pandangan anda, apakah langkah/cara yang boleh dilakukan oleh komuniti/masyarakat anda bagi menyelamatkan bahasa tersebut?  
*What do you think your community can do to save your language?*

26. Pada pandangan anda, apakah yang patut dilakukan oleh pihak kerajaan bagi menyelamatkan bahasa ibunda anda?  
*What do you think your government should do to save your native language?*

27. Do you think your Remun language is different from the younger/older generation?  
How is it different? Give some Examples.

**Terima kasih atas kerjasama yang pihak anda berikan.**

*Thank you for your cooperation*