

DIALECTALITY OF INDONESIAN IN MERAUKE: PHONOLOGICAL, LEXICAL, AND PRAGMATIC VARIATIONS IN A MULTILINGUAL CONTEXT

Rawuh Yuda Yuwana

Musamus University, Indonesia
rawuhyudayuwana@unmus.ac.id

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Abstract

This study examines the dialectal characteristics of Indonesian as spoken in Merauke, South Papua, a linguistically diverse region shaped by intense multilingual contact. While previous research has focused primarily on Papuan Malay and major urban varieties, Indonesian usage in Merauke remains under-documented. Using qualitative analysis of naturalistic spoken interactions, this study investigates phonological variation, lexical integration, and pragmatic patterns emerging from contact between Indonesian, indigenous Papuan languages, and migrant speech varieties. The findings reveal systematic phonological adaptations, including vowel lengthening and consonant simplification influenced by substrate languages; extensive lexical hybridization reflecting ecological and sociocultural realities; and pragmatic practices characterized by relational orientation, indirectness, and collectivist stance markers. Rather than representing deviations from standard Indonesian, these features form a stable regional variety shaped by sociocultural interaction. This study contributes empirical data to Indonesian dialectology and highlights the importance of integrating linguistic structure with cultural context in analyzing contact-induced language variation.

Keywords: *indonesian dialectology, merauke, phonological variation, multilingualism, pragmatics, local culture*

Introduction

Indonesian, as a national and lingua franca language, operates within one of the most linguistically diverse environments in the world. With more than 700 local languages spoken across the archipelago, Indonesian is continuously shaped by dynamic processes of language contact, multilingual interaction, and sociocultural negotiation. Rather than existing as a fixed standardized system, Indonesian demonstrates significant regional variation reflecting local linguistic ecologies and patterns of social interaction (Sneddon, 2003; Musgrave, 2014). These regional forms provide valuable insight into how national languages evolve when embedded within multilingual societies.

In eastern Indonesia, particularly in Papua, language contact processes are especially intense due to the coexistence of numerous indigenous Papuan languages alongside Austronesian languages and migrant speech varieties. Indonesian often functions not merely as a neutral communication medium but as a flexible linguistic resource that adapts to local communicative norms and sociocultural contexts (Donohue, 2011; Kluge,

2014). Previous studies have highlighted the emergence of Papuan Malay as a prominent contact variety shaped by substrate influence and sociolinguistic dynamics. However, less attention has been paid to localized Indonesian varieties that develop alongside or in interaction with these contact languages.

Merauke, located in South Papua, represents a particularly significant site for investigating contact-induced variation. The region hosts diverse indigenous languages such as Marind, Muyu, Kanum, Auyu, and Asmat, while also serving as a migration destination for speakers from Maluku, Java, and Sulawesi. This convergence of linguistic communities creates a complex multilingual ecology where Indonesian is continuously negotiated, reshaped, and localized through everyday interaction. Within such contexts, linguistic features often emerge not as random deviations but as systematic adaptations reflecting both structural constraints and social meaning-making processes.

Despite its sociolinguistic richness, Indonesian as spoken in Merauke remains under-documented within Indonesian dialectology. Existing research has primarily focused on widely recognized contact varieties such as Papuan Malay or on major urban centers, leaving peripheral yet linguistically dynamic regions insufficiently explored. This lack of documentation limits our understanding of how Indonesian diversifies across eastern Indonesia and how local sociocultural practices influence linguistic structure. Addressing this gap is crucial not only for expanding empirical knowledge but also for challenging assumptions that treat regional Indonesian varieties as merely non-standard or deficient forms.

From a theoretical perspective, contact linguistics suggests that sustained multilingual interaction can lead to phonological restructuring, lexical borrowing, semantic expansion, and pragmatic innovation (Thomason, 2001; Winford, 2003). At the same time, sociolinguistic approaches emphasize that linguistic variation is closely tied to identity construction, social relationships, and cultural values. In Melanesian communicative traditions, interactional norms often prioritize relational harmony, indirectness, and collective orientation, shaping both linguistic form and pragmatic behavior (Schieffelin, 1990; Pawley & Hammarström, 2018). Therefore, analyzing Merauke Indonesian requires an integrated framework that connects structural linguistic analysis with sociocultural interpretation.

Recent research influenced by Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) has demonstrated the importance of examining language as a resource for meaning-making within specific cultural contexts. Studies exploring Indonesian discourse, humor, and cultural texts show how linguistic choices reflect broader social orientations and communicative practices (Yuwana & Betaubun, 2024; Yuwana & Pertiwi, 2022). Building on this perspective, the present study treats Merauke Indonesian not as a deviation from standard Indonesian but as a legitimate regional variety shaped by sociocultural and contact-driven processes.

Accordingly, this study aims to investigate dialectal features of Indonesian as spoken in Merauke by focusing on three interrelated dimensions: phonological variation, lexical integration, and pragmatic patterns. The research addresses the following questions:

1. What phonological features characterize Indonesian as spoken in Merauke, and how are these features influenced by contact with local Papuan languages?
2. How does lexical borrowing, hybridization, and semantic extension operate within everyday interaction?

3. In what ways do pragmatic practices reflect local communicative values and multilingual interaction norms?

By addressing these questions, this study contributes to Indonesian dialectology and contact linguistics in several ways. First, it provides empirical documentation of an underrepresented regional variety shaped by intense multilingual interaction. Second, it demonstrates the importance of integrating phonological, lexical, and pragmatic analysis to capture the complexity of contact-induced variation. Third, it highlights how cultural values and communicative practices play a central role in shaping localized forms of Indonesian. Ultimately, this research advances understanding of how national languages evolve within multilingual ecologies and challenges monolithic views of linguistic standardization.

Method

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative sociolinguistic research design grounded in contact linguistics and linguistic ethnography. The qualitative approach was chosen to capture naturally occurring linguistic variation and to understand how phonological, lexical, and pragmatic features emerge within authentic multilingual interactions. Rather than testing predetermined hypotheses, the study aims to describe and interpret patterns of language use as situated social practices shaped by cultural and linguistic contact.

The analytical framework integrates structural linguistic analysis with sociocultural interpretation, allowing examination of both form (phonology and lexicon) and function (pragmatic meaning and interactional norms). This combined perspective enables a comprehensive understanding of Merauke Indonesian as a contact-influenced regional variety.

Research Setting

Data were collected in Merauke, South Papua, Indonesia, a multilingual region characterized by sustained contact between indigenous Papuan languages and migrant linguistic communities. The sociolinguistic environment includes speakers of Marind, Muyu, Kanum, Auyu, and Asmat languages, alongside Indonesian varieties influenced by migration from Maluku, Java, and Sulawesi. Everyday communication frequently involves code-switching, borrowing, and hybrid linguistic practices, making the setting particularly suitable for investigating dialectal variation.

Participants

Participants consisted of Merauke residents aged between 18 and 55 years old representing diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. The selection aimed to reflect the multilingual composition of the community and included:

- Indigenous Papuan speakers (Marind and Muyu backgrounds)
- Mixed-ethnicity speakers raised in Merauke
- Javanese-Indonesian settlers

- Speakers with cultural ties to Maluku communities

Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their active engagement in daily social interaction and regular use of Indonesian in multilingual contexts. This sampling strategy ensured the inclusion of speakers who contribute to shaping local Indonesian usage.

Data Sources and Corpus

The primary dataset consisted of 18 naturally occurring spoken interactions. Each recording ranged from approximately 60 to 90 minutes in duration, resulting in a corpus of extended conversational data. Interactions took place in diverse everyday environments, including:

- traditional markets
- beaches and informal gathering spaces
- schools and educational environments
- village and community settings

These contexts were selected to capture informal and spontaneous language use rather than controlled or elicited speech.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were gathered using multiple complementary techniques:

1. Naturalistic Audio Recording
Everyday conversations were recorded with participants' consent to capture authentic speech patterns and interactional dynamics.
2. Participant Observation
The researcher engaged in ethnographic observation to document contextual factors such as interactional roles, cultural norms, and communicative practices influencing language use.
3. Ethnolinguistic Interviews
Semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain participants' reflections on language usage, local meanings, and communicative preferences.

All participants provided informed consent, and ethical considerations included anonymization of identities. Examples included in the analysis were paraphrased when necessary to protect confidentiality while preserving linguistic characteristics.

Data Preparation and Transcription

Audio recordings were transcribed using auditory transcription focusing on phonetic detail relevant to dialectal variation. Transcriptions captured:

- vowel lengthening and phonological modifications
- lexical borrowings and hybrid forms
- pragmatic markers such as pauses, discourse particles, and stance expressions

Contextual notes from field observations were integrated into the dataset to support pragmatic interpretation.

Analytical Procedures

Data analysis was conducted in three interconnected stages:

1. Phonological Analysis

Local pronunciations were compared with standardized Indonesian phonological forms. Patterns such as vowel duration, consonant simplification, and prosodic rhythm were identified and categorized. Attention was given to recurring features suggesting substrate influence from local Papuan languages.

2. Lexical Analysis

Lexical items were analyzed to identify borrowing, hybridization, and semantic extension. The analysis examined how local ecological and cultural concepts were encoded through language and how migrant linguistic influences contributed to lexical variation.

3. Pragmatic Analysis

Pragmatic features were examined through discourse analysis, focusing on:

- speech acts and politeness strategies
- stance-taking and relational markers
- indirectness strategies
- culturally meaningful silence and pauses

Interpretation was informed by sociolinguistic and ethnographic context to avoid decontextualized analysis.

Trustworthiness and Analytical Rigor

To enhance validity and reliability, several strategies were employed:

- Triangulation: Cross-analysis of recordings, interviews, and field notes.
- Iterative coding: Repeated review of data to refine emerging categories.
- Contextual validation: Interpretation grounded in ethnographic observation and participant perspectives.
- Reflexivity: Awareness of the researcher's role in interpreting multilingual interaction.

Result and Discussion

1. Phonological Variation in Merauke Indonesian

a. Vowel Lengthening and Rhythmic Influence

Local speakers frequently lengthen final vowels, producing patterns such as:

- *mama* → *mamaa*, *pulang* → *pulangg*, *sudah* → *suudah*.

This reflects Marind and Muyu prosodic tendencies, where vowel duration conveys emphasis or emotional stance. Such lengthening also contributes to a slower, melodic speech rhythm characteristic of Melanesian prosody (Donohue, 2011).

b. Consonant Simplification

Common reductions include:

- /r/ → /l/ or semi-approximant (e.g., *pergi* → *pelgi*, *baru* → *balu*).
- cluster simplification (*tr*, *kr*) → single consonants (*kering* → *keling*, *terus* → *teus*).

These patterns mirror substrate influence from Auyu and Kanum languages, where consonant inventory differs from Indonesian.

c. Example (Paraphrased)

“*Kita pulang dulu, maaa tunggu di rumah.*”
demonstrates vowel extension (*maaa*) and simplified rhythm.

d. Discussion

These phonological markers serve as identity signals and linguistic accommodation strategies within multilingual interactions. They are not merely errors but reflect stable community norms.

2. Lexical Variation and Local Borrowing

a. Indigenous Borrowings

Borrowed words are commonly used to refer to ecological and cultural realities unique to South Papua, such as:

1. *ndugu* (sago-based food)
2. *wowou* (Marind term for kinship grouping)
3. *tambu* (traditional prohibition sign)

These borrowings are incorporated seamlessly into Indonesian syntax:

“*Besok kita pergi lihat tambu di kampung.*”

b. Semantic Extensions

Words like *jalan*, *main*, and *antar* acquire expanded meanings in Merauke usage due to local sociocultural norms of communal movement and shared presence.

c. Influence from Migrant Varieties

Malay Ambon vocabulary such as *beta*, *dong*, or *seng* occasionally appears in youth speech due to strong cultural interaction with Maluku communities.

d. Discussion

Lexical hybridization shows Merauke Indonesian is a linguistic melting pot where local and migrant semantic networks merge, forming a complex, dynamic lexicon shaped by cultural ecology.

3. Pragmatic Features Rooted in Local Culture

a. Indirectness and Relational Warmth

Speakers avoid abrupt refusals. For example:

“Mungkin nanti saja kita ikut, lihat dulu angin.”
—signaling hesitation with natural metaphors.

b. Collectivist Stance Markers

The frequent use of 'kita' as both singular and plural reflects Melanesian collectivism, similar to its usage in Papuan Malay.

c. Extended Greetings and Social Bonding

Conversations typically begin with relational inquiry:

“Ko dari mana tadi? Jalan baik?”
even in contexts where standard Indonesian would require shorter greetings.

d. Silence as Pragmatic Meaning

Pauses are culturally meaningful, signaling respect or contemplation rather than communicative breakdown.

e. Discussion

These pragmatic practices demonstrate that Merauke Indonesian is deeply embedded in local cultural norms. Speech is not merely linguistic, but a social performance that reflects values of warmth, solidarity, and respect.

Conclusion

This study reveals that Indonesian spoken in Merauke develops into a distinctive regional variety shaped by intense multilingual contact and deep cultural traditions. Phonological features such as vowel lengthening, consonant simplification, and melodic rhythm reflect substrate influences from local Papuan languages. Lexical patterns demonstrate active borrowing, hybridization, and semantic extension tied to ecological, social, and cultural realities of Papua Selatan. Pragmatic behaviors—marked by collectivist stance, indirectness, relational emphasis, and culturally meaningful silence—highlight the role of Melanesian communicative values in shaping Indonesian usage.

These findings underscore that Merauke Indonesian is not merely a deviation from the standard but a legitimate dialect shaped by complex historical, linguistic, and cultural interactions. Documenting this variety enriches Indonesian dialectology and affirms the linguistic identity of communities in South Papua.

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