System of Phonology of *Tanah Ulu* Creole

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Article Info	Abstract
	Creole, as a linguistic phenomenon resulting from language contact, necessitates investigation by linguists. This study examined the phonological system of Muarasipongi creole. The objective of the research was to determine the phonemes and ascertain the distribution of phonemes. The research employed a descriptive-qualitative methodology. The findings indicate that Muarasipongi Creole contains 37 phonemes. The phonemes include /p/, /b/, /t/, /d/, /tʃ/, /dʒ/, /k/, /g/, /ʔ/, /h/, /s/, /ʃ/, /m/, /n/, /ŋ/, /ɲ/, /r/, /l/, /w/, /j/, as well as the vowels /a/, /i/, /u/, /e/, /o/, /ae/, /ai/, /ua/, /uo/, /ou/, /oi/, /au/, /ei/, /iu/, /ui/, /ae/, and /ia/. Regarding phoneme distribution, the Muarasipongi creole exhibits variety. The consonants exhibit variability in their distribution. Furthermore, vowels exhibit perfect dispersion, with the exception of the phoneme /æ/. Furthermore, most diphthongs do not exhibit perfect distribution, with the exception of the phoneme /ai/.

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1. Introduction

Language is an essential requirement for human communication. Language facilitates meaningful communication among individuals. The primary form of human language is oral communication. It creates a form of engagement between the speaker and the listener. In Mandailing Natal Regency, located in North Sumatera Province, there exists a subdistrict named Muarasipongi, distinguished by its linguistic peculiarity. The residents of Muarasipongi are predominantly Mandailingnese, as indicated by their clan-based surnames. Despite being Mandailingnese, they do not utilize the Mandailing language in their daily interactions. They communicate in a language known as Muarasipongi. According to Harahap's research (2011), the sociolinguistic classification of the language spoken in Muarasipongi is identified as a creole.

The lexicon mostly consists of the amalgamation and alteration of the local language and the Minangkabau language, as Muarasipongi directly adjoins the Minangkabau region. Exploring creole as a linguistic phenomenon is essential, particularly through the lens of phonology. Refnaldi (2008:3) defines phonology as the examination of the organization and arrangement of sounds produced by individuals within a specific language into systematic patterns. Lass (1991:1) asserts that phonology is a subdiscipline of linguistics focused on the sounds of a language, examining its

purposes, attitudes, and organizational structures as linguistic aspects. Phonology comprises two components. They pertain to phonetics and phonemics. Refnaldy (2008:116) asserts that phonetics is the specialized examination of the production of speech sounds, their physical characteristics, and their interpretation. Demolin (2005:95) asserts that phonetics delineates the production, perception, and transmission of speech sounds in language. Moreover, Katamba (1989:60) asserts that phonetics encompasses the examination of speech sound production by speakers, their interpretation by listeners, and their acoustic characteristics.

This research delineated the phonemes and their distribution within Muarasipongi Creole. Consequently, the phonemes were thoroughly examined in the study. Idsardi (2003) asserts that phonemes constitute the phonetic alphabet of the mind. Furthermore, Jufrizal (1999:49) asserts that a phoneme is the smallest significant unit of sound. Bloomfield (1995:126) categorizes phonemes into two types: primary phonemes, referred to as segmental phonemes, and secondary phonemes, known as supra-segmental phonemes. Trask (2007:215) asserts that a segmental phoneme is a facet of pronunciation that necessitates the specification of a single consonant and vowel.

Vowel sounds are produced without restriction in the vocal tract when air flows from the lungs. Refnaldi (2008:63) asserts that vowel quality is influenced by several aspects of the vocal tract; additionally, the configuration of the vocal tract can be modified by speakers in multiple ways. Jufrizal (1999:39) states that a vowel is a sound produced without obstruction of the airflow via the oral cavity, resulting in voiced continuous sounds.

Fromkin et al. (2007: 195) elucidate that consonant sounds are produced due to an obstruction in the vocal tract as air moves from the lungs. For instance, the sound [p] is generated by an obstruction at the lips, while the sound [t] is produced by an obstruction at the tip of the tongue, among others. Yule (2006:38) asserts that vowels are articulated with a comparatively unobstructed airflow. The vowels are generally voiced.

Crane et al. (1981:72) elucidate the methodology for locating and identifying a phoneme inside a language. The concept of minimal pairings was established to identify a phoneme in language. A minimal pair consists of two words that share the same number of segments that differ in meaning and display a singular phonetic distinction.

Moreover, Katamba (1989:22) states that when two words are similar in every respect except for one segment, they are termed a minimum pair. The distribution of phonemes can be observed at the start, medial, and final positions. Nonetheless, not all phonemes are present in the initial, medial, and terminal positions. Linguists have developed notions to identify a phoneme.

The most effective method for identifying phonemes is using the concept of minimal pairs. Two words that vary by a single phoneme at a certain position. For instance, the terms tin [tin] and sin [sin] possess distinct meanings. These two words are

classified as a minimal pair. The distinction between the phoneme /t/ and the phoneme /s/ alters the meanings of the two words.

Allophones are the different phonetic realizations of a single phoneme. Allophonic variants are those that are influenced by the contexts in which they appear. They exist in mutually exclusive contexts, meaning they do not overlap and are in complementary distribution. For example, in English, [kh] is an allophone of the phoneme /k/, indicating that they are not distinct phonemes, as demonstrated in the words cool [kh u:l] and ski [ski]. In the absence of contextual influence, seek the free variety. Two phonemes that can occur in the same context without altering meaning. For instance, the phonemes /p/, /t/, and /k/ are aspirated when they occur in the beginning position in the English language.

A creole is a natural language that arises from the amalgamation of various languages. Robin (2010) asserts that a creole language differs from a pidgin language for most of its speakers. Wardaugh (1986:58) asserts that a creole functions as a standard language in nearly every respect and possesses native speakers. Schendl (2001) elucidates that the attributes of language undergoing the creolization process can be observed as follows: Initially, morphological and syntactic structures get more intricate, vocabulary expands, and pronunciation stabilizes.

Muarasipongi is a subdistrict situated in the Mandailing Natal Regency of North Sumatra. Nasution (2010) asserts that the Muarasipongi language, a distinctive indigenous language, is present in Mandailing Natal. The language of Muarasipongi is distinctive because it shares numerous lexical parallels with Minangkabau, despite Muarasipongi not being part of the Minangkabau region.

In accordance with the aforementioned explanation, theories, and statements, the researcher undertook an investigation of Muarasipongi Creole from a phonological perspective. The study examined the phonemes and their distribution in Muarasipongi creole.

2. Literature Review

Bahasa Tanah Ulu Muarasipongi is a regionally unique and culturally rich language spoken by the Urak Tanah Ulu community in Kecamatan Muarasipongi, Mandailing Natal, North Sumatra. It functions not only as a medium of daily communication but also as a vessel of ancestral knowledge, oral tradition, and communal identity. Linguistically, Bahasa Tanah Ulu exhibits distinctive phonotactic patterns that set it apart from neighboring languages. According to Siagian et al. (2022), the language contains six vowel phonemes—/a/, /i/, /u/, /e/, /ɛ/, and /o/—and fifteen consonants, including /b/, /c/, /d/, /g/, /h/, /j/, /k/, /l/, /m/, /n/, /p/, /r/, /s/, /t/, and /kh/. These phonemes are distributed across initial, medial, and final positions, forming syllable structures that typically range from two to four syllables per word. The language also features diphthongs such as "ae," "ei," and "uo," which contribute to its melodic and rhythmic

character. Historically, Bahasa Tanah Ulu evolved from Old Malay roots brought by migrants from Jambi, who modified their speech to avoid detection during periods of conflict. As Batubara (2021) explains, this led to deliberate phonological shifts—such as changing "-ng" to "-g" and "-m" to "-p"—creating a linguistic identity that was both protective and innovative. Over time, the language absorbed vocabulary from Minangkabau, Mandailing, Batak Toba, Javanese, and Dutch, resulting in a hybrid lexicon that reflects the region's role as a cultural crossroads. For example, words like onderlach (Dutch), opo (Javanese), and sambig (Batak Toba) are commonly used in daily speech, demonstrating the community's adaptive linguistic ecology.

Despite its richness, Bahasa Tanah Ulu faces increasing pressure from the dominance of Bahasa Indonesia and the lack of institutional support. In response, the Balai Bahasa Provinsi Sumatera Utara (BBPSU) launched a revitalization initiative in 2022–2023 to document and preserve the language through the development of a Kamus Tanah Ulu–Indonesia. Fieldwork conducted in villages such as Simpang Mandepo, Tanjung Medan, and Pasar Muarasipongi yielded over 2,000 lexical entries, surpassing initial targets and highlighting the community's enthusiasm for preservation. Interviews were conducted in a familial and respectful atmosphere, with local leaders such as Burhanuddin and Bahrum Pungkut expressing strong support and pledging continued collaboration. The documentation effort not only serves linguistic preservation but also reinforces cultural pride and intergenerational transmission. As noted in comparative studies on language kinship, Bahasa Tanah Ulu shares structural affinities with Batak Mandailing but maintains distinct phonological and lexical features that justify its classification as a separate linguistic entity. In essence, Bahasa Tanah Ulu Muarasipongi is more than a regional dialect—it is a living archive of history, resistance, and identity, deserving of sustained scholarly attention and community-based revitalization.

Local languages—also referred to as indigenous or regional languages—are languages spoken by specific communities within a nation-state, often distinct from the national or official language. These languages are deeply rooted in the cultural, historical, and social identity of their speakers. UNESCO (2003) defines local languages as "languages that are native to a region and spoken by communities who have traditionally used them as a primary means of communication, often passed down orally across generations". In the other hand, Crystal (2000) states that "local languages represent the linguistic diversity of a nation and are crucial for maintaining cultural heritage and identity".

Creole languages are fully developed natural languages that emerge from the contact between two or more languages, typically in contexts of colonization, slavery, or trade. They often evolve from pidgins—simplified contact languages—when children begin acquiring them as their first language. Local and creole languages are vital components of global linguistic diversity. They embody histories of migration, colonization, resistance, and identity. Contemporary linguistic theory recognizes their

complexity and value, advocating for inclusive policies and community-led revitalization efforts.

Bahasa Tanah Ulu Muarasipongi is a distinctive regional language spoken by the Urak Tanah Ulu community in Kecamatan Muarasipongi, Mandailing Natal, North Sumatra. It represents a rich linguistic heritage shaped by historical migration, cultural fusion, and geographic isolation. According to research conducted by the Balai Bahasa Provinsi Sumatera Utara (BBPSU), Bahasa Tanah Ulu is undergoing documentation through a dedicated lexicographic project aimed at compiling a Kamus Tanah Ulu–Indonesia, reflecting its unique vocabulary, phonological patterns, and semantic structures. The language is primarily oral and used in daily communication, traditional rituals, and customary law deliberations. Its structure shows traces of Old Malay from Jambi, which was historically modified by early settlers fleeing conflict and seeking refuge in the upland areas of Muara Sipongi.

As described by Batubara (2021), these settlers intentionally altered linguistic markers to avoid detection, changing suffixes such as "-ng" to "-g," "-m" to "-p," and "-n" to "-t," while introducing diphthongs like "ae," "ei," and "uo" to create a distinct phonetic identity. For example, hangat becomes hangaek, air becomes aie, and bubur becomes buobuo, showcasing the creative evolution of the language. Over time, Bahasa Tanah Ulu absorbed lexical items from neighboring ethnic groups—including Mandailing, Minangkabau, Batak Toba, and Javanese—as well as Dutch colonial terms, resulting in a dynamic and hybrid vocabulary. Words like onderlach, smokel, and bepaek reflect Dutch influence, while opo and sopo derive from Javanese, and sambig from Batak Toba. This linguistic layering illustrates the region's role as a cultural crossroads and its openness to external influences while maintaining a strong local identity.

Despite its richness, Bahasa Tanah Ulu faces challenges from the dominance of Bahasa Indonesia and the lack of formal education support. The BBPSU's recent fieldwork in villages such as Simpang Mandepo, Tanjung Medan, and Pasar Muarasipongi gathered over 2,000 lexical entries, signaling both the urgency and potential for revitalization. Community leaders like Burhanuddin and Bahrum Pungkut have expressed strong support for these efforts, recognizing the language as a vital marker of Urak Tanah Ulu identity and cultural continuity. In sum, Bahasa Tanah Ulu Muarasipongi is not merely a means of communication—it is a living archive of history, resistance, and adaptation, deserving of scholarly attention and community-based preservation.

3. Method

The research was conducted utilizing a descriptive method and a qualitative approach. The descriptive method involves articulating facts based on information collected from informants and participants. There exist three. Phases for examining the qualitative research framework. The components include data reduction, data visualization, verification, and conclusion.

The research data comprised the utterances of native speakers of Muarasipongi creole, encompassing consonants, diphthongs, and vowels. Furthermore, the data source comprised seven native speakers of Muarasipongi Creole who served as informants for the investigation. Those individuals originated from various regions in Muarasipongi.

The instruments employed in the research were the Swadesh list, writing implements (pen and notepad), and a tape recorder. The Swadesh list served as a reference for the pronunciation of words in the Muarasipongi language by native speakers. Additionally, the researcher picked a supplementary list of words to enhance data accuracy. The writing instruments were utilized to record essential notes from the informants' statements. The tape recorder was utilized to document the interview between the researcher and the informants. Furthermore, interview rules were utilized as support throughout the interview process.

During data collection, the researcher prompted the informants to articulate words from the Swadesh list, along with a selection of other terms, without imposing rigidity in their responses. The investigator employed the elicitation method. The technique was employed to facilitate the rapid collection of data by the researcher during the interview.

Throughout the interview, a tape recorder was utilized to document the interaction between the researcher and the informants. The recording data was stored on the memory card. The researcher also employed a note-taking technique. This is beneficial for the researcher to include supplementary information.

4. Results

Data study reveals that Muarasipongi Creole comprises 37 phonemes. There exist 20 consonant phonemes and 6 vowel phonemes and eleven diphthong phonemes.

The consonant phonemes include;

/p/, /b/, /t/, /d/, /ʧ/, /ʤ/, /k/, /g/, /ʔ/, /h/, /s/, /ʃ/, /m/, /n/, /ŋ/, /ɲ/, /r/, /l/, /w/, and /j/. The vowel phonemes are /a/, /i/, /u/, /e/, /o/, and /ae/.

The diphthong phonemes are;

/ai/, /ua/, /uo/, /ou/, /oi/, /au/, /ei/, /iu/, /ui/, /ae/, and /ia/.

The spread of Muarasipongi creole exhibits variability. Nine consonant sounds exhibit a complete dispersion. The phonemes are /p/, /t/, /d/, /g/, /s/, /n/, /l/, /m/, and /ŋ/. The remaining consonant sounds exhibit incomplete distribution.

Phonemes /b/, /ʧ/, /ʤ/, /k/, /ʃ/, /ɲ/, and /r/ exclusively occur in initial and medial positions. The phonemes /w/ and /j/ exclusively occur in the medial position. The

phoneme /h/ can occur in both medial and final positions. The phoneme /ʔ/ occurs exclusively in the last position. The Muarasipongi creole exhibits a comprehensive distribution of all vowel sounds, with the exception of the phoneme /æ/. If the phoneme /æ/ appears just in medial and terminal positions, then the other vowel sounds are fully distributed. The phonemes /a/, /i/, /u/, /e/, /o/ appear in initial, medial, and final positions. Diphthong sounds exhibit variation, however none of the diphthongs has a complete distribution. The diphthongs /ai/ and /oi/ occur in both starting and medial positions. Diphthongs /ua/, /uo/, /ou/, /ei/, and /iu/ occur in both medial and final positions. The diphthongs /au/, /ae/, and /ia/ exclusively occur in the medial position. The diphthong /ui/ occurs exclusively in the final position.

5. Discussion

Consonant sounds in Muarasipongi Creole are categorized by position of articulation into bilabial sounds, including /p/, /b/, /m/, and /w/. Alveolar sounds include /t/, /d/, /s/, /n/, /l/, and /r/, while palatal sounds comprise /ʧ/, /ʤ/, and /ɲ/. and Phonemes /j/, velar phonemes /k/, /g/, and /ŋ/, glottal phonemes /ʔ/ and /h/, and postalveolar phoneme /ʃ/. The consonant sounds of Muarasipongi creole are categorized by manner of articulation into stop sounds, including /p/, /b/, /t/, /d/, /ʧ/, /ʤ/, /k/, /g/, and /ʔ/, fricative sounds such as /s/, /h/, and /ʃ/, nasal sounds including /m/, /n/, /ɲ/, and /ŋ/, a lateral sound /l/, a trill sound /r/, and glide sounds /w/ and /j/.

The distribution of consonant sounds in Muarasipongi creole exhibits variation.

The research findings indicate that there are nine consonant phonemes with a complete distribution. The remaining consonant phonemes exhibit incomplete distribution. Additionally, Muarasipongi Creole contains six vowel sounds. The phonemes include /a/, /i/, /u/, /e/, /o/, and /ae/. Djarjowidjojo (2009:1070) asserts that there are four characteristics for classifying vowels. The height of the tongue. the position of the tongue, the rounding and unrounding of the lips, and the tension and laxity of the muscles. Moreover, the parameters of tense and lax muscle states are not utilized in vowel classification due to their negligible impact on phonemes. The tense vowel does not affect the word's meaning. The table below displays the classification of vowels in Muarasipongi Creole.

In addition to consonant and vowel sounds, diphthong sounds are also present in Muarasipongi Creole. Muarasipongi Creole contains eleven diphthong phonemes: /ai/, /ua/, /uo/, /ou/, /oi/, /au/, /ei/, /iu/, /ui/, /ae/. and /ia/. Generally, diphthong sounds lack comprehensive distribution. The phoneme /ai/ exhibits perfect dispersion. The diphthongs /ai/ and /oi/ occur in both starting and medial positions. The diphthongs /ua/, /uo/, /ou/, /ei/, and /iu/ occur in medial and final positions. The diphthongs /au/, /ae/, and /ia/ exclusively occur in the

medial position. The diphthong /ui/ is exclusively located in the last position. The table below displays the diphthongs and their distributions in Muarasipongi Creole.

6. Conclusion

The research indicates that Muarasipongi Creole comprises 37 phonemes. The phonemes include /p/, /b/, /t/, /d/, /ʧ/, /ʤ/, /k/, /g/, /?/, /h/, /s/, /ʃ/, /m/, /n/, /ŋ/, /ɲ/, /r/, /l/, /w/, /j/, /a/, /i/, /u/, /e/, /o/, /ae/, /ai/, /ua/, /uo/, /ou/. /oi/, /au/, /ei/, /iu/, /ui/, /ae/, and /ia/. The phonemic count clearly indicates that Muarasipongi Creole diverges from its base language, Minangkabaunese, in terms of lexicon. In consonant sounds, the phoneme /ʃ/ appears in the word oso [oʃo] meaning 'know'.

The quantity of diphthongs serves as a definitive differentiation, with Muarasipongi possessing 11 diphthongs and Minangkabaunese including 5 diphthongs. The phonemic qualities of Muarasipongi Creole indicate its distinction from Minangkabaunese. Furthermore, there exists some similarity in terms of lexicon; nonetheless, phonetic alterations have occurred in certain positions within words. The phonemic alteration of /a/ to /o/ is a notable tendency observed in Muarasipongi Creole.

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