



Mandailing Language Maintenance in the Era of Globalization: Challenges, Strategies, and Prospects

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Abstract

In the context of accelerating globalization, regional languages such as Mandailing face increasing pressure from dominant languages in education, media, and public life. This study investigates the current state of Mandailing language maintenance, identifying major factors threatening its sustainability, strategies employed by speaker communities, and prospects for revitalization. Drawing upon relevant literature from 2023-2025, alongside qualitative interviews with Mandailing speakers in North Sumatra (n = 20), this research employs thematic analysis to discern domains of use, speaker attitudes, intergenerational transmission, and external pressures such as migration, media, and schooling. Findings show that while Mandailing language continues to be used informally in family, religious, and cultural domains, its use in formal education and media remains minimal. Younger generations exhibit ambivalent attitudes: pride in ethnic identity coexists with utilitarian preferences for Indonesian or global languages. Key strategies for maintenance include family language policies, community ceremonies and cultural events, and inclusion of Mandailing in social media content. However, without institutional support—especially in curriculum, public signage, and media broadcast—the language is at risk of shifting. The study concludes with recommendations for policy-makers, community leaders, and educators to integrate Mandailing more fully into public life, education, and digital media to secure its maintenance in the global era.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, globalization has led to increasing mobility, migration, mass media penetration, and adoption of national or international languages. These pressures often reduce the functional domains of regional or minority languages, leading to language shift or even language loss. In Indonesia, a country of profound linguistic diversity, many local languages are under threat. Mandailing, a regional language spoken in parts of North Sumatra, has long held cultural importance among its speaker communities. However, empirical data about its maintenance in the face of globalization are sparse, particularly in recent years. This study addresses this gap by exploring the current status of Mandailing language maintenance, the factors affecting it, the strategies communities use, and possible steps forward.

Mandailing language maintenance refers to the deliberate and sustained efforts by individuals and communities to preserve, transmit, and revitalize the Mandailing language—a regional Austronesian language spoken primarily in North Sumatra, Indonesia. This process involves not only the continued use of the language in daily communication but also its integration into cultural practices, education, religious life, and media. Maintenance is especially critical in contexts where the language faces pressure from dominant national languages like Bahasa Indonesia, as well as from globalization, urban migration, and shifting cultural values.

According to Ritonga (2019), Mandailing language maintenance is deeply tied to the preservation of oral traditions such as mangandung, marturi, and maralok-alok, which encode local wisdom, ethical values, and spiritual teachings. These traditions are often performed during weddings, harvests, and religious ceremonies, and their decline signals a broader erosion of linguistic and cultural identity. Ritonga's study found that many Mandailing youth (ages 17–40) lacked understanding of these oral texts, with 87% unable to interpret their meanings, indicating a generational gap in language transmission. The research proposes a cultural maintenance model that includes textual interpretation using cognitive semantics and critical discourse analysis to make these traditions accessible to younger generations.

Siregar (2019) further emphasizes that language use within the family domain plays a pivotal role in maintaining Mandailing language. Her study in Kecamatan Torgamba revealed that 93% of respondents used Mandailing language at home, while other domains such as neighborhood (62%), religion (37%), and workplace (62%) also contributed to its survival. Importantly, the motivation for maintenance was strongly linked to ethnic pride and identity, with 100% of participants expressing that speaking Mandailing affirmed their cultural roots.

Zulkarnain et al. (2023) add another layer by examining Tutar, a traditional Mandailing communicative practice rich in moral and spiritual values. Mastery of Tutar enables speakers to maintain social harmony and express respect according to social roles. This form of language use is not only linguistic but also deeply ethical and performative, reinforcing the idea that language maintenance is inseparable from cultural and interpersonal dynamics.

In summary, Mandailing language maintenance is a multifaceted endeavor involving linguistic practice, cultural transmission, identity affirmation, and educational innovation. It requires active participation from families, religious institutions, educators, and cultural leaders to ensure that the language continues to thrive across generations. For researchers and community organizers like you, Rahmat, this means designing participatory models that integrate oral tradition, digital media, and sociolinguistic awareness into community empowerment strategies.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Language Policy and Language Maintenance

Wang & Hatoss (2024) conducted a scoping review of language policy and planning (LPP) in heritage language contexts. “Most studies (66.3%) use the term ‘heritage language’ to refer to the ‘language of transnational minorities’”. While Inan & Harris (2025) argue that heritage language maintenance should extend beyond the family to include institutions and communities. “We argue for reframing HLM as a collective responsibility involving educational institutions, policymakers, communities, and digital foundations”. In the other hand, Garcia & Wei (2024) revisit translanguaging as a tool for maintaining minority languages in multilingual classrooms. Garcia & Wei (2024) revisit translanguaging as a tool for maintaining minority languages in multilingual classrooms.

A thesis by Putri Nurul Rahmadani Siregar (2019) titled *The Maintenance of Mandailing Language in Kecamatan Torgamba* explores how Mandailing speakers in Desa Pangarungan maintain their language through daily interactions. “Language use in family is dominated and it has the big role in maintaining Mandailing language... followed by neighborhood (62%), religion (37%), workplace (62%), homeland visits (50%), and cultural practices (87%)”. The study found that ethnic pride and identity were the strongest motivators for language retention, with 100% of participants citing them as reasons for continued use.

Another study titled *Textual Interpretation of Mandailing Oral Tradition* emphasizes the role of oral practices such as Tutar, especially in wedding ceremonies and religious events, as a medium for language preservation. “Government institutions and language offices have maintained and revitalized many endangered ethnic languages and oral traditions”. This suggests that institutional support—especially from local cultural offices—can play a vital role in sustaining Mandailing language through formal and informal channels. They highlight terminological inconsistencies and geographic gaps, especially in South America and East Asia. Language maintenance refers to efforts by a speech community to continue usage of their language in various domains despite external pressures. Language shift occurs when speakers gradually abandon the language in favor of another. The notion of language vitality includes indicators like intergenerational transmission, domains of use, speaker attitudes, and institutional support. Recent studies on Javanese, Angkola, and other Indonesian regional languages indicate similar challenges and strategies for maintenance.

2.2. Language Shift

Language shift and death have long been a topic of discussion among sociolinguists, linguists, language planners, educators, and others. The result has been an extensive literature about the causes, processes, symptoms, and results of

language loss and death (Denison 1977; Dorian 1977, 1980, 1981, 1987, 1989; Gal 1978; Skutnabb-Kangas 2000). Joshua Fishman developed many of the major sociolinguistic concepts that inform our understanding of language use in society. Reversing Language Shift (Fishman 1991) represents the culmination of much of that work and is perhaps best known for the introduction of the Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS). Following the call from Krauss (1992) and others, nascent efforts at language maintenance and language revitalization were redoubled, particularly in North America. A variety of innovative approaches, including community-based language development and maintenance projects, have been implemented in an effort to stem the tide of language loss. Though some gainsay Krauss's prediction of massive language loss by the end of the current century, no credible arguments to the contrary have been forthcoming and the pace of language shift and death appears to be growing.

The current edition of the *Ethnologue* (Lewis 2009) is the first in the more than-50 year history of that publication in which the number of identified living languages has gone down. While many languages were newly identified in the most recent edition, a total of 91 were for the first time recorded as having no known remaining speakers. (Lewis 2009). We cannot conclude that this many languages have gone out of use in the four years since the previous edition since there is always a lag time in the reporting of data. Nevertheless, the number is sobering. Of the 6,909 living languages now listed in *Ethnologue*, 457 are identified as Nearly Extinct, a category which represents a severe level of endangerment. Less serious levels of endangerment are not currently distinguished in the *Ethnologue*. If small speaker population alone were taken as an indicator of language endangerment, the current worldwide count of languages with fewer than 10,000 speakers is 3,524 which amounts to just over 50% of the identified living languages in the world today. Subsequent to the publication of Fishman's GIDS, other metrics for assessing the factors contributing to endangerment and vitality have been proposed (Brenzinger et al. 2003; Lewis 2008) yet the GIDS remains the foundational conceptual model for assessing the status of language vitality. In addition, *Ethnologue* has long used yet another scheme to categorize the language vitality status for each language it reports on.

Pardede & Matondang (2025) investigate the increasing use of Javanese among Mandailing speakers in Medan, particularly in multiethnic urban settings. "The Mandailing community actively uses Javanese in various social contexts... However, this phenomenon also limits the use of the Mandailing language, especially among younger generations". Their findings highlight a gradual shift away from Bahasa Mandailing due to social integration pressures, with code-mixing and lexical borrowing becoming common. The authors call for targeted revitalization efforts to counterbalance this trend.

While not directly focused on Mandailing language shift, the *El-Jaudah Journal* (2025) from STAI Mandailing Natal showcases how Islamic education institutions can empower local languages through faith-based pedagogy and community engagement.

3. Method

This study adopts a qualitative research design, grounded in sociolinguistic inquiry, to explore patterns of language use, transmission, and vitality among Mandailing speakers in both rural and urban contexts. The qualitative approach enables an in-depth understanding of how language practices are shaped by social, cultural, and generational factors, particularly in the face of increasing linguistic shift toward Bahasa Indonesia. To enhance the depth of interpretation, the study is supplemented with limited quantitative descriptive data, such as speaker demographics, frequency of language use across domains, and self-reported proficiency levels. This mixed-methods orientation aligns with sociolinguistic best practices, which emphasize the value of integrating qualitative insights with basic quantitative measures to capture both the richness and distribution of language behaviors (Mallinson, Childs, & van Herk, 2013; Langman, 2013).

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews and participant observation in several Mandailing-speaking villages around Medan and Mandailing Natal, as well as among diaspora communities in urban centers such as Jakarta and Padang. The selection of sites reflects a deliberate effort to capture linguistic variation across geographic, generational, and socio-economic contexts. A total of twenty Mandailing speakers, aged 15 to 65, were purposively sampled to ensure balance across gender, age cohort, and location. Interviews focused on language use in different domains (home, religion, education, community), attitudes toward Mandailing and Indonesian, intergenerational transmission, and perceived threats to language vitality.

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and subjected to thematic analysis using a coding framework derived from UNESCO's Language Vitality and Endangerment indicators (UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages, 2003). These indicators include intergenerational transmission, absolute number of speakers, domains of use, response to new domains and media, and community attitudes toward their language. Observational data were used to triangulate interview findings and provide contextual depth, particularly regarding language use in religious ceremonies, cultural events, and informal interactions. The integration of qualitative and descriptive quantitative data allows for a nuanced understanding of Mandailing language maintenance and shift, offering insights into both the lived experiences of speakers and broader sociolinguistic trends.

4. Results

The findings of this study align with and expand upon previous research on Mandailing language vitality, revealing a generational gradient in language use and fluency. Older generations (ages 50 and above) consistently use Mandailing in domestic settings, religious rituals, and cultural performances such as mangandung, marturi, and maralok-alok, reinforcing the language's role as a vessel of spiritual and communal identity. These speakers often serve as cultural custodians, transmitting oral traditions and ethical values through language. Middle generations (ages 30–49) maintain Mandailing in informal family interactions and community gatherings, but tend to shift to Bahasa Indonesia in professional and educational domains, reflecting a pragmatic adaptation to national linguistic norms. Youth (ages 15–29) exhibit reduced fluency and active usage, often understanding Mandailing passively but preferring Indonesian for peer communication, schooling, and digital media. This generational shift is consistent with Ritonga's (2019) findings, where 87% of Mandailing youth were unable to interpret traditional oral texts, indicating a breakdown in cultural transmission.

Despite this decline in usage, ethnolinguistic pride remains strong across age groups, with Mandailing identity viewed as a source of cultural authenticity and moral grounding. However, Indonesian is widely perceived as more functional for academic success, employment, and social mobility, especially in urban and diaspora contexts. The study identified several facilitating factors that support language maintenance: (1) strong family language policies that prioritize Mandailing in early childhood, (2) regular participation in cultural ceremonies and religious events where Mandailing is the dominant medium, and (3) emerging digital content—such as YouTube channels and WhatsApp groups—that promote Mandailing expressions and storytelling.

Conversely, hindering factors include the absence of Mandailing in formal education curricula, rapid urbanization that disrupts traditional language domains, and the overwhelming dominance of Indonesian and global languages in mass media and digital platforms. Siregar (2019) notes that while Mandailing is still used in family and religious domains (93% and 37% respectively), its presence in education is critically low (12%), underscoring the need for institutional support. Harahap (2019) adds that diaspora communities often face conflicting pressures: the desire to preserve heritage language versus the need to assimilate linguistically into majority cultures, which accelerates language shift.

Older generations regularly use Mandailing in home, cultural rituals, and religious contexts. Middle generations use it in family and informal contexts but prefer Indonesian at work or school. Youth show reduced fluency, often understanding Mandailing but using it less frequently. Pride in Mandailing identity is strong across ages, but Indonesian is viewed as more useful for education and employment. Facilitating factors include strong family language policies, cultural ceremonies, and social media content in

Mandailing. Hindering factors include lack of school support, urbanisation, and media dominance of Indonesian and global languages.

In conclusion, Mandailing language maintenance is sustained by cultural pride and familial commitment but is increasingly challenged by structural and societal forces. Without targeted revitalization efforts—such as community-based literacy programs, integration into religious education, and digital storytelling initiatives—the language risks becoming symbolic rather than functional, particularly among younger speakers

5. Discussion

Discussion from the findings of this study reveal a nuanced and generationally stratified landscape of Mandailing language use, reflecting both resilience and vulnerability in the face of sociolinguistic change. Consistent with prior studies by Ritonga (2019) and Siregar et al. (2019), older generations continue to serve as the primary custodians of Mandailing, using it actively in domestic, religious, and ceremonial domains. Their linguistic behavior reinforces the role of Mandailing as a vehicle for transmitting cultural values, oral traditions, and spiritual teachings. However, this vitality is not uniformly sustained across generations.

Middle-aged speakers demonstrate transitional behavior: while they maintain Mandailing in informal family contexts, they increasingly shift to Bahasa Indonesia in professional and educational settings. This domain-specific shift reflects broader national language ideologies and the perceived utility of Indonesian for socioeconomic advancement. As Harahap (2019) notes, such pragmatic adaptation often leads to reduced intergenerational transmission, especially when younger family members are not actively encouraged to use the heritage language.

The most concerning trend emerges among youth participants, who exhibit passive understanding but limited active use of Mandailing. This aligns with Ritonga's (2019) finding that 87% of Mandailing youth could not interpret traditional oral texts, indicating a breakdown in cultural and linguistic continuity. Despite this, the study found that ethnolinguistic pride remains strong across all age groups, suggesting that identity-based motivations for language maintenance still exist. However, symbolic attachment alone is insufficient to sustain functional language use without institutional and community support.

Facilitating factors identified in this study—such as strong family language policies, cultural ceremonies, and emerging digital content—offer promising avenues for revitalization. These findings echo UNESCO's emphasis on the importance of community-driven initiatives and media engagement in reversing language shift. The presence of Mandailing in religious settings, particularly in khutbah and pengajian, also reinforces its spiritual relevance and potential for integration into faith-based education.

Conversely, hindering factors such as the absence of Mandailing in formal schooling, urban migration, and the dominance of Indonesian and global languages in media pose significant challenges. As Kaplan and Baldauf (1997) argue, minority languages often lose ground when majority languages offer greater access to material rewards and social prestige. In urban diaspora contexts, this pressure is compounded by the lack of communal reinforcement and the need to assimilate linguistically.

Overall, the study suggests that Mandailing is in a state of domain shrinkage rather than complete endangerment. Its survival depends on strategic interventions that combine cultural pride with practical usage. This includes integrating Mandailing into local curricula, producing youth-oriented digital content, and fostering intergenerational dialogue through community workshops and religious institutions. Without such efforts, Mandailing risks becoming a symbolic heritage language—valued but not spoken—especially among younger generations.

6. Conclusion

Mandailing language is currently maintained in informal domains and among older speakers, but its transmission to younger generations and use in formal domains is diminishing. Positive attitudes toward Mandailing identity exist, but pragmatic considerations favor Indonesian and global languages. To maintain Mandailing in the era of globalization, institutional support, community initiatives, documentation, and policy intervention are essential.

This study concludes that the Mandailing language, while still actively used among older generations, is undergoing a gradual shift in vitality across generational and geographic lines. The qualitative data—supported by limited quantitative indicators—demonstrate that intergenerational transmission is weakening, particularly among youth in urban and diaspora communities. Older speakers continue to use Mandailing fluently in domestic, religious, and cultural domains, serving as custodians of oral traditions such as mangandung and marturi. Middle-aged speakers maintain the language in informal settings but increasingly adopt Bahasa Indonesia in professional and educational contexts. Among youth, Mandailing is often understood passively but rarely used actively, reflecting a shift toward Indonesian as the dominant language of education, media, and social interaction.

Despite this decline in usage, ethnolinguistic pride remains strong across all age groups. Mandailing is widely regarded as a symbol of cultural identity and moral heritage. However, symbolic attachment alone is insufficient to sustain functional language use. The study identifies several facilitating factors that support language maintenance: strong family language policies, regular participation in cultural and religious ceremonies, and emerging digital content in Mandailing. These elements provide meaningful spaces for language use and cultural reinforcement.

Conversely, hindering factors such as the absence of Mandailing in formal education, rapid urbanization, and the dominance of Indonesian and global languages in media contribute to domain shrinkage and reduced transmission. These findings echo previous research by Ritonga (2019), Siregar et al. (2019), and Harahap (2019), which highlight the tension between cultural preservation and linguistic assimilation in the Mandailing context.

In sum, the Mandailing language is not yet endangered, but its vitality is fragile and unevenly distributed. Without strategic interventions—such as integrating Mandailing into local curricula, producing youth-oriented digital content, and strengthening community-based language programs—the language risks becoming symbolic rather than functional, especially among younger generations. This study underscores the urgent need for collaborative efforts among families, educators, religious leaders, and policymakers to ensure that Mandailing remains a living language, capable of expressing both tradition and contemporary identity.

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