



Muarasipongi and Minangkabau Language Contact in Border of North Sumatera Utara-West Sumatera

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Article Info	Abstract
Article history: Received 18 April 2026 Revised 28 April 2026 Accepted 20 Mei 2026 Keywords: Language contact Minangkabau Muarasipongi North Sumatera West Sumatera 	This study examined language contact between the Muarasipongi language, also referred to in recent documentation as Tanah Ulu, and Minangkabau in the North Sumatra-West Sumatra border area. The study addressed a gap in previous scholarship, which had documented lexical comparison, the creole status of Muarasipongi, phonological structure, and bilingual practices, but had rarely synthesised these findings specifically as a border-contact system. A qualitative secondary-data design was employed. Data were drawn from published linguistic studies, institutional documentation, and repository records concerning Muarasipongi, Tanah Ulu, Minangkabau, and the social interaction of border communities. The data were organised into four analytical domains: lexical contact, phonological adaptation, bilingualism and code choice, and sociocultural domains of language use. The synthesis showed that contact was not limited to isolated loanwords. It was associated with recurrent lexical convergence, phonological adaptation, bilingual repertoires, and functional language selection shaped by mobility, markets, intermarriage, and proximity to Rao and other Minangkabau-speaking areas. At the same time, the available evidence indicated that Muarasipongi/Tanah Ulu retained structural features that distinguished it from standard Minangkabau, so the contact outcome should not be reduced to simple dialect borrowing. The study therefore argued that the border functions as a linguistic contact zone in which local identity and external linguistic resources are negotiated simultaneously. The findings contributed a consolidated sociolinguistic interpretation of Muarasipongi language contact and provided a basis for future field-based corpus, variationist, and language-maintenance research.
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1. Introduction

Muarasipongi occupies a distinctive position in the linguistic geography of northern Sumatra because it lies on the administrative boundary between Mandailing Natal in North Sumatra and the Rao area of West Sumatra. The area has historically been inhabited by Urak Ulu/Tanah Ulu and Mandailing communities and has maintained social and economic connections across the provincial boundary. Earlier cultural documentation described Muarasipongi as a border settlement in which different social groups interacted through farming, trade, marriage, and market exchange. The same documentation reported that Mandailing developed an important function as an

intergroup language in parts of the settlement, while interactions with communities in Rao brought speakers into regular contact with Rao and Minangkabau. This social configuration makes Muarasipongi an important site for examining language contact rather than treating language differences simply as a matter of geographical dialect boundaries (Suprpti et al., 1998).

The linguistic situation is particularly notable because the language spoken by the Ulu community in Muarasipongi has been described variously as Muarasipongi language, Tanah Ulu, and, in some studies, a creole resulting from long-term contact. Harahap (2011) concluded that the language could be characterised sociolinguistically as a creole, emphasising the mixture and modification of local vocabulary and Minangkabau resources. Hidayat and Jufrizal (2019) subsequently described a phonological system containing 37 phonemes and explicitly related the emergence of the Muarasipongi variety to language contact. These studies demonstrate that the linguistic outcome of contact is systematic: it is visible in vocabulary, sound structure, and the organisation of speakers' repertoires.

The existing literature, however, has tended to examine one dimension at a time. Agusnaldi (2012) concentrated on lexical comparison between Muarasipongi and standard Minangkabau; Dalimunthe (2018) investigated the historical-comparative relationship between Mandailing and Tanah Ulu; Harahap (2011) addressed the sociolinguistic status of Muarasipongi; and Hidayat and Jufrizal (2019) examined phonology. More recent work has also begun to document the language itself, including a 2023–2025 institutional effort to compile a Tanah Ulu–Indonesian dictionary and studies of phonology and language shift. Yet these strands have rarely been integrated into a single account of the border as a contact zone. The present study addresses that gap by synthesising available evidence to explain how contact with Minangkabau is manifested and what social conditions sustain it.

View from a sociolinguistic perspective, language contact should not be equated automatically with genetic relatedness. Contact can produce lexical borrowing, structural convergence, phonological adaptation, code-switching, and changes in language choice without making the languages genealogically identical. Durkin (2020) notes that lexical borrowing normally presupposes a degree of bilingualism, while List et al. (2019) demonstrate the usefulness of systematic methods for identifying contact-related lexical similarities. Research on multilingual Indonesia likewise shows that language choice is shaped by domain, identity, institutional practices, and interactional goals (Liando et al., 2023; Mataraw & Adriansyah, 2023; Wahyuni et al., 2023). These perspectives are useful for Muarasipongi because the community is not simply located next to a different language; speakers participate in networks that connect households, schools, markets, marriage relations, and cross-border mobility.

The objective of this study was therefore to analyse the forms, mechanisms, and sociolinguistic implications of Muarasipongi–Minangkabau language contact in the border area of North Sumatra and West Sumatra. Specifically, the study asked: (1) what linguistic evidence indicates contact between Muarasipongi/Tanah Ulu and Minangkabau; (2) what patterns of lexical and phonological adaptation can be identified from previous studies; and (3) how social mobility, bilingualism, and border interaction help explain the persistence and transformation of the local variety? The significance of the study lies in reframing Muarasipongi not merely as an isolated local language but as a contact language embedded in a historically multilingual border ecology.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Language Contact, Borrowing, and Convergence

Language contact occurs when speakers of different linguistic systems interact sufficiently for linguistic features to move across languages or for speakers to develop shared interactional practices. One of the most visible outcomes is lexical borrowing, but contact may also affect phonology, morphology, syntax, discourse, and pragmatic conventions. Durkin (2020) distinguishes ordinary lexical borrowing from processes such as semantic borrowing and loan translation, while Kiegel-Keicher (2021) shows that borrowed forms may undergo integration within the recipient language. Onosson and Stewart (2024) further demonstrate that contact can influence the phonological treatment of borrowed material, including the adaptation of vowel sequences. Consequently, contact should be analysed as a process of integration and restructuring rather than as a simple transfer of isolated words.

Borrowing is closely related to bilingualism because speakers need access to the donor language or to interactional networks in which donor forms are meaningful. Contact intensity, prestige, communicative need, and the social distribution of speakers influence what kinds of linguistic material are borrowed. Lexical items associated with trade, food, kinship, technology, and everyday interaction can circulate particularly easily when communities interact regularly. At the same time, borrowing does not necessarily imply language loss. A local language may incorporate external forms while maintaining its own phonological patterns, discourse norms, and identity functions. This distinction is important in Muarasipongi, where contact with Minangkabau occurs alongside contact with Mandailing and Indonesian.

Language contact also has a social dimension. Multilingual speakers select codes according to interlocutor, topic, setting, and communicative purpose. Studies in Indonesia have shown that translanguaging and code-switching can be strategic resources rather than evidence of linguistic deficiency (Liando et al., 2023; Sari, 2022). In multilingual settings, speakers may use one language to signal local identity and another to facilitate wider communication. Mataraw and Adriansyah (2023) emphasise that language ideologies and

decentralised language policy affect how multilingual repertoires are valued. For a border community, these processes become particularly visible because the same speaker may regularly encounter several linguistic norms within a short geographical and social range.

2.2 Muarasipongi/Tanah Ulu and Minangkabau

The most direct evidence of Muarasipongi–Minangkabau contact comes from research specifically focused on the local variety. Harahap (2011) compared the Muarasipongi language with standard Minangkabau and concluded that its vocabulary represented a combination of local resources and modifications associated with Minangkabau. Agusnaldi (2012) likewise conducted a descriptive lexical comparison and identified systematic differences in final phonological segments. The study reported that Muarasipongi tended not to retain /k/, /et/, and /ei/ in final position and instead showed correspondences involving /ŋ/, /an/, and /ai/. These observations are valuable because they demonstrate that the relationship is not simply one of shared vocabulary; contact is associated with phonological adaptation as well.

Dalimunthe (2018) adds a crucial sociolinguistic perspective. The study distinguishes Tanah Ulu from Batak Mandailing and notes that Tanah Ulu is specifically associated with Muarasipongi, an area directly bordering West Sumatra. According to the study, Tanah Ulu speakers can use Minangkabau and Mandailing, whereas speakers of Mandailing and Minangkabau do not necessarily understand Tanah Ulu. This asymmetry indicates that multilingual competence is socially distributed rather than evenly shared across communities. The border therefore produces a repertoire in which Tanah Ulu functions as a local identity code while Minangkabau can serve as an intercommunity resource.

Hidayat and Jufrizal (2019) provide further evidence that the contact outcome has developed an internal phonological system. Their analysis identified 37 phonemes in Muarasipongi Creole, including a comparatively rich set of diphthongs. The significance of this finding is not that every phoneme can be attributed to Minangkabau influence, but that the local variety has developed a structured system that differs from a simple copy of standard Minangkabau. This supports a contact-based interpretation in which external resources are selectively integrated into a locally stabilised system.

Recent documentation strengthens the case for treating Muarasipongi/Tanah Ulu as a language deserving independent documentation. Balai Bahasa Provinsi Sumatera Utara reported field data collection for a Tanah Ulu–Indonesian dictionary in 2022–2023, with more than 2,000 lexical entries collected from speakers in Simpang Mandepo, Tanjung Medan, and Pasar Muarasipongi. The institutional documentation is significant because it moves the discussion beyond older comparative studies and indicates continuing efforts to record the language. At the same time, recent research has reported language shift among Muarasipongi teenagers in educational contexts, suggesting that

contact with wider languages must be considered together with intergenerational maintenance (Yurfadilah et al., 2025).

Minangkabau itself is not a homogeneous system. Dialectological studies have documented lexical and phonological variation within West Sumatra, including variation in Mungka, Lima Kaum, Sijunjung/Kabun, and Lubuk Basung (Antoni et al., 2019; Pujiama et al., 2021; Ariesty et al., 2022; Suksio & Jufrizal, 2024). This matters for Muarasipongi because the relevant donor or contact varieties may be regional Minangkabau forms rather than an abstract standard variety. Contact is therefore better conceptualised as interaction between particular speech communities and regional repertoires, not as a one-way relationship with a single uniform Minangkabau language.

3. Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design based on secondary linguistic and sociocultural data. The design was selected because the immediate objective was to synthesise and reinterpret documented evidence rather than to claim new field measurements. The analytical unit was a documented statement, linguistic pattern, or sociolinguistic observation concerning Muarasipongi/Tanah Ulu, Minangkabau, Mandailing, or their interaction in the border area. The principal sources consisted of peer-reviewed journal articles, university repository studies, official language documentation, and scholarly books or chapters on language contact.

Data were collected through document identification and purposive selection. Sources were included when they met at least one of four criteria: (1) they directly analysed Muarasipongi/Tanah Ulu; (2) they compared Muarasipongi with Minangkabau; (3) they documented social relations in the Muarasipongi border community; or (4) they provided a contemporary theoretical framework for interpreting contact, borrowing, bilingualism, or language maintenance. The source corpus was then organised into four categories: lexical evidence, phonological evidence, multilingual practices, and sociocultural domains of contact.

The analysis followed a thematic synthesis procedure. First, statements from each source were extracted and coded according to the four analytical domains. Second, findings that addressed the same phenomenon were compared to identify convergence and differences among studies. Third, linguistic evidence was interpreted in relation to the social conditions of the border, including market exchange, mobility, intermarriage, and the distribution of languages across domains. Finally, the synthesis was used to construct an explanatory model of the Muarasipongi–Minangkabau contact zone. Because the study relied on secondary sources, it did not generate new lexical frequency counts, speaker judgments, or acoustic measurements. Claims concerning current usage were therefore restricted to what the available sources documented.

To strengthen analytical validity, evidence from linguistic studies was cross-checked against sociocultural documentation and recent institutional language documentation. This triangulation was necessary because lexical similarity alone cannot establish the direction or mechanism of contact. A lexical correspondence may reflect inheritance, borrowing, parallel innovation, or chance resemblance. Similarly, the classification of Muarasipongi as a creole is treated here as a description reported in previous studies rather than as a claim newly established by the present research. Future fieldwork should therefore test the synthesis through recordings, speaker interviews, variationist sampling, and a structured Muarasipongi–Minangkabau corpus.

4. Results

4.1 Social Configuration of the Border Contact Zone

The synthesis showed that Muarasipongi is a multilingual contact environment rather than a linguistically isolated settlement. Historical documentation identified Urak Ulu/Tanah Ulu and Mandailing as major social groups in the area and described regular interaction through economic activities and neighbouring settlements. The border connection with Rao in West Sumatra created additional opportunities for interaction with Minangkabau- and Rao-speaking populations. Market exchange was especially important because the market functioned as a recurring meeting point for speakers from different communities. In this setting, language choice was determined by the participants in an interaction rather than by administrative boundaries alone.

Table 1. Social domains associated with multilingual contact in Muarasipongi

Contact setting	Main linguistic relation	Likely communicative function	Documented implication
Household/local community	Tanah Ulu/Muarasipongi	Local identity and everyday interaction	Supports local language continuity
Intergroup interaction in Muarasipongi	Tanah Ulu-Mandailing	Accommodation and wider local communication	Mandailing reported as an important intergroup code
Border and market interaction	Tanah Ulu/Mandailing–Rao/Minangkabau	Trade and mobility	Creates repeated opportunities for Minangkabau contact
Education and wider institutions	Local language–Indonesian/other dominant codes	Formal communication	May increase pressure toward language shift

4.2 Lexical Contact and Structural Differentiation

The strongest documented evidence of contact appeared in the lexical relationship between Muarasipongi and Minangkabau. Previous comparison studies described substantial lexical similarity but also systematic differences. Harahap (2011) characterised the vocabulary as a combination of local elements and modified Minangkabau forms, while Agusnaldi (2012) demonstrated that the comparison could be described through regular lexical and phonological correspondences. This pattern is consistent with a contact situation in which donor-language material is incorporated but adapted to the recipient system.

The evidence also indicates that lexical contact should not be interpreted as total convergence. Dalimunthe (2018) reported approximately 35% lexical similarity between Batak Mandailing and Tanah Ulu based on a 200-item Swadesh comparison. Although that comparison concerns Mandailing rather than Minangkabau, it is important for interpreting the broader Muarasipongi ecology: the local variety is embedded among multiple linguistic systems and cannot be explained by a single donor language. The presence of substantial similarity with one neighbouring language does not eliminate the possibility of intensive contact with another.

A further result concerned the distinction between borrowing and inherited similarity. Because Muarasipongi has a complex historical background and its speakers interact with both Mandailing and Minangkabau communities, a single lexical correspondence cannot automatically be classified as a Minangkabau loan. The appropriate interpretation is therefore one of layered contact. Items that occur in domains of cross-border trade or everyday bilingual interaction are especially promising candidates for future borrowing analysis, but directionality requires field-based evidence from comparable lexical sets and speaker histories.

4.3 Phonological Adaptation

The phonological evidence showed that contact is reflected not only in the presence of similar lexical forms but also in differences in sound realisation. Agusnaldi (2012) reported that Muarasipongi tended not to retain /k/, /et/, and /ei/ at the end of words, with correspondences involving /ŋ/, /an/, and /ai/. Hidayat and Jufrizal (2019) identified a 37-phoneme system, including vowels, consonants, and diphthongs, and argued that the system should be understood as a product of language contact. These findings indicate that borrowed or contact-associated material may undergo phonological accommodation rather than being reproduced identically.

The comparison with Minangkabau must nevertheless be handled carefully. Minangkabau itself has substantial dialectal variation. Research on Sijunjung/Kabun, Lima Kaum, Mungka, and Lubuk Basung has shown that sound patterns and lexical forms differ across Minangkabau-speaking regions (Antoni et al., 2019; Pujiama et al., 2021; Ariesty et al., 2022; Suksio & Jufrizal, 2024). Consequently, a form that appears unusual

in standard Minangkabau may be ordinary in a regional contact variety. This observation supports a border-dialect approach in which Muarasipongi is compared not only with a standard reference variety but also with neighbouring Minangkabau varieties in Rao and adjacent districts.

The result is therefore best described as phonological accommodation within a contact language. The local variety appears to have developed its own distributional restrictions and sound correspondences while incorporating or modifying resources associated with Minangkabau. Such adaptation is consistent with broader research showing that contact can alter the phonological treatment of borrowed sequences and produce recipient-language patterns that differ from donor-language forms (Kiegel-Keicher, 2021; Onosson & Stewart, 2024).

4.4 Bilingualism, Code Choice, and Language Shift

The documented multilingual repertoire is one of the most important characteristics of the Muarasipongi contact zone. Tanah Ulu speakers have been reported as capable of using Minangkabau and Mandailing, whereas the reverse competence is not necessarily symmetrical (Dalimunthe, 2018). This pattern indicates that bilingualism may be concentrated among members of the smaller or more locally embedded community because they need to communicate across several social networks. Such asymmetry is common in contact settings where one community has greater need for accommodation than another.

Language choice is also domain-sensitive. In the Muarasipongi settlement, Mandailing has been documented as an intergroup language in interactions between Ulu and Mandailing residents, while contact with Rao creates opportunities for Rao and Minangkabau use. In educational and institutional domains, Indonesian has additional influence. Recent work on Muarasipongi teenagers reports language shift associated with schooling, peer influence, and digital media (Yurfadilah et al., 2025). This suggests that contact with Minangkabau is only one part of a broader multilingual ecology. The local language may simultaneously experience maintenance through community identity and pressure from nationally or regionally dominant codes.

This finding is consistent with Indonesian sociolinguistic research showing that multilingual practices involve strategic code selection, translanguaging, and identity negotiation rather than a simple choice between one language and another (Liando et al., 2023; Mataraw & Adriansyah, 2023; Wahyuni et al., 2023). For Muarasipongi, contact should therefore be understood as a repertoire phenomenon. Speakers may maintain local forms in intimate contexts, accommodate to Mandailing in local intergroup communication, and use Minangkabau or Indonesian when broader communication requires it. The contact outcome is consequently shaped by social networks as much as by linguistic structure.

5. Discussion

The central finding of this synthesis is that the Muarasipongi–Minangkabau relationship is best interpreted as sustained contact within a multilingual border ecology. The evidence does not support a simplistic model in which Minangkabau replaced a pre-existing local language. Instead, the documented situation involves selective borrowing, phonological adaptation, multilingual competence, and domain-based code choice. This interpretation is consistent with contact linguistics, in which language change emerges from repeated interaction between speakers rather than from geographical proximity alone (Durkin, 2020; List et al., 2019).

First, the lexical evidence indicates that Minangkabau has contributed resources to the Muarasipongi linguistic repertoire. Harahap (2011) and Agusnaldi (2012) provide direct evidence for lexical comparison and modification. However, the direction of influence should not be generalised from every similarity. A border language may share forms because of borrowing, historical inheritance, areal diffusion, or parallel developments. The most defensible conclusion is therefore that Minangkabau contact has contributed to the shaping of Muarasipongi vocabulary, while the local system remains independently structured. This distinction is important because it avoids conflating contact-induced similarity with genetic classification.

Second, phonological adaptation demonstrates that contact is integrated into the internal organisation of the local variety. The reported correspondences in final position and the 37-phoneme inventory described by Hidayat and Jufrizal (2019) indicate that Muarasipongi is not simply a set of Minangkabau words pronounced by local speakers. Contact forms undergo adaptation, distributional restriction, and reorganisation. Similar processes have been documented more broadly in studies of loanword integration, where borrowed segments and sequences may be reshaped according to recipient-language phonology (Kiegel-Keicher, 2021; Onosson & Stewart, 2024).

Third, the contact zone is socially asymmetrical. The ability of Tanah Ulu speakers to use several neighbouring codes, contrasted with the more limited comprehension of Tanah Ulu among Mandailing and Minangkabau speakers, indicates unequal communicative demands (Dalimunthe, 2018). Such asymmetry has implications for language vitality. If speakers of the smaller language repeatedly accommodate to larger or institutionally stronger languages, the local language may lose domains even while remaining symbolically important. Research on Indonesian language maintenance and shift has repeatedly shown that intergenerational transmission and the breadth of communicative domains are central indicators of vitality (Cohn & Ravindranath, 2014; Collins, 2022; Iwan et al., 2023).

Fourth, the border should be understood as a network rather than a line. Administrative boundaries do not correspond neatly to linguistic boundaries. Market routes, marriage relations, employment, religious activities, education, and family

networks connect Muarasipongi to places across the provincial boundary. Historical documentation of the Muarasipongi border community describes recurring interaction with Rao and the use of multiple languages in market settings. Contemporary language documentation by Balai Bahasa also confirms that Tanah Ulu remains sufficiently distinct and socially significant to warrant dictionary development. These facts support a sociolinguistic conception of the border as a contact zone where linguistic resources circulate through people and institutions.

Fifth, variation within Minangkabau itself complicates the idea of a single donor language. Dialectological studies show that Minangkabau has internal lexical and phonological variation (Antoni et al., 2019; Pujiama et al., 2021; Ariesty et al., 2022; Suksio & Jufrizal, 2024). Therefore, future Muarasipongi research should compare the local variety with the Minangkabau varieties actually represented in cross-border networks, especially those associated with Rao and nearby areas. A standard-Minangkabau comparison remains useful as a reference point, but it may conceal the regional pathways through which contact operates.

Sixth, the contact situation has implications for language preservation. Contact itself should not be framed as a threat. Multilingualism can be a community resource, and the ability to move across languages may strengthen economic and social participation. The risk emerges when the local language loses intergenerational transmission and functional domains. Recent research on Muarasipongi teenagers suggests that educational and digital environments are important sites of language shift (Yurfadilah et al., 2025). This finding makes language documentation, local-language education, and community-based digital resources relevant to the future of Tanah Ulu/Muarasipongi.

The study also clarifies the relationship between the terms Muarasipongi language, Tanah Ulu, and Muarasipongi Creole. The sources reviewed use these labels in overlapping ways. This article therefore does not attempt to impose a new classification. Instead, it treats Tanah Ulu/Muarasipongi as the local linguistic variety documented in Muarasipongi and recognises that previous authors have analysed it as a creole or contact language. A definitive classification would require a broader historical-comparative and structural investigation involving neighbouring languages, historical sources, and a representative corpus.

The main limitation of this study is the absence of newly collected field data. The results synthesise existing documentation and consequently cannot establish present-day frequencies of borrowing, the productivity of particular contact features, or the distribution of linguistic forms across age groups. Nor can the study determine the direction of borrowing for every lexical item. These limitations are important because contact linguistics requires detailed speaker-based evidence. Future studies should therefore construct a Muarasipongi–Minangkabau–Mandailing comparative corpus, sample speakers by age and mobility, record spontaneous conversations in market and household

settings, and combine lexical comparison with acoustic and variationist phonological analysis.

Despite this limitation, the synthesis advances understanding by bringing previously separated findings into a single explanatory framework. It shows that the significance of Muarasipongi lies precisely in the interaction between structure and society: phonological and lexical patterns provide evidence of contact, while bilingualism, market mobility, intermarriage, and institutional language practices explain why contact persists. The border is therefore not simply a place where two languages meet; it is a social space in which speakers continually negotiate which linguistic resources are appropriate, meaningful, and identity-bearing.

6. Conclusion

This study concluded that Muarasipongi/Tanah Ulu constitutes a distinctive language-contact setting at the North Sumatra-West Sumatra border. Available evidence demonstrates that contact with Minangkabau has been expressed through lexical convergence, phonological adaptation, and multilingual speaker repertoires. The contact outcome, however, is not equivalent to simple absorption into Minangkabau. Muarasipongi retains a structured linguistic system and functions as an important marker of local identity.

The study also showed that contact is sustained by social mechanisms: cross-border markets, mobility, intercommunity relations, and the multilingual competence of local speakers. Mandailing and Indonesian are also part of the linguistic ecology, meaning that Muarasipongi should be analysed as a multidirectional contact system rather than a binary Muarasipongi–Minangkabau relationship. The principal contribution of the study is therefore a sociolinguistic model that connects documented linguistic patterns with the social networks that produce them.

For language preservation, the findings imply that documentation should be accompanied by domain expansion and intergenerational transmission. The ongoing Tanah Ulu dictionary project provides an important foundation, but future work should develop a digital corpus, educational materials, and community-based documentation that represent actual multilingual practices. Field research is especially needed to measure current Minangkabau influence and to determine how contact patterns vary across generations. In this way, the study of Muarasipongi can contribute not only to contact linguistics but also to the broader preservation of linguistic diversity in border communities.

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