

Rural and Urban Language Variation in Balikpapan City: A Sociolinguistic Review

Variasi Bahasa Rural dan Urban di Kota Balikpapan: Tinjauan Sociolinguistik

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Abstract

This study is motivated by differences in language practices between coastal communities that maintain regional languages and urban student communities that are more open to informal Indonesian, slang, and digital media influence. This research aims to describe rural language variation at Kampung Baru Harbor and urban language variation among students of Universitas Balikpapan, as well as to explain the social factors shaping their differences. This study uses a descriptive qualitative design with a sociolinguistic approach. The data were obtained from natural speech events in two research locations and collected through non-participant observation, listening and note-taking techniques, and documentation of the social context of speech. The analysis was conducted through data reduction, categorization, thematic presentation, and conclusion drawing based on language choice, vocabulary, prosody, code-mixing, communication style, and identity function. The findings show that the rural community uses Bugis as a marker of ethnic solidarity with a direct, loud, fast, and efficient speech style.

Abstrak

Latar belakang penelitian ini adalah perbedaan praktik berbahasa antara komunitas pesisir yang mempertahankan bahasa daerah dan komunitas mahasiswa perkotaan yang lebih terbuka terhadap bahasa Indonesia informal, bahasa gaul, serta pengaruh media digital. Penelitian ini bertujuan mendeskripsikan variasi bahasa rural di Pelabuhan Kampung Baru dan variasi bahasa urban pada mahasiswa Universitas Balikpapan, serta menjelaskan faktor sosial yang membentuk perbedaan keduanya. Penelitian menggunakan desain deskriptif kualitatif dengan pendekatan sociolinguistik. Data bersumber dari peristiwa tutur alami di dua lokasi penelitian dan dikumpulkan melalui observasi nonpartisipatif, teknik simak-catat, serta pencatatan konteks sosial tuturan. Analisis dilakukan melalui reduksi, kategorisasi, penyajian tematik, dan penarikan simpulan berdasarkan aspek pilihan bahasa, kosakata, prosodi, campur kode, gaya komunikasi, dan fungsi identitas. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa komunitas rural menggunakan bahasa Bugis sebagai penanda solidaritas etnis dengan gaya tutur lugas, nyaring, cepat, dan efisien. Komunitas urban menggunakan bahasa Indonesia informal yang bercampur bahasa gaul dan unsur bahasa Inggris ringan dengan gaya santai, ekspresif, dan dipengaruhi budaya digital. Kesimpulannya, variasi bahasa di Balikpapan merepresentasikan relasi antara identitas lokal, mobilitas urban, dan perubahan sosial. Kontribusi penelitian ini ialah menyediakan model perbandingan sociolinguistik rural-urban di kota multikultural Indonesia.

INTRODUCTION

Language is a social practice inseparable from identity, power relations, social space, and communicative situations. Sociolinguistic research since Labov (1963, 1972) affirms that language variation is not a deviation from rules, but a social pattern that can be explained through the relationship between linguistic form and the characteristics of the speech community. Within this framework, differences in language choice, vocabulary, intonation, speech tempo, and communicative style can be read as social signs indicating speakers' position, affiliation, solidarity, and interactional strategy.

Balikpapan is a multicultural city that brings together coastal communities, harbor workers, migrants, school and university students, and professional groups. The publication *Kota Balikpapan Dalam Angka 2026* [Balikpapan City in Figures 2026] shows that Balikpapan continues to undergo social development and urban growth involving population, economic, and urban mobility data (Badan Pusat Statistik Kota Balikpapan [Balikpapan City Statistics Agency], 2026). This dynamic has implications for linguistic life, as urban space functions not only as a place of residence but also as a meeting point for regional languages, Indonesian, slang, and elements of foreign languages.

The central phenomenon of this study is the difference in language patterns between rural and urban communities within a single city. At Kampung Baru Harbor (Pelabuhan Kampung Baru), the Bugis language remains strong in everyday interaction because its community possesses ethnic bonds, kinship networks, and relatively communal economic activity. In contrast, the student community at the University of Balikpapan (Universitas Balikpapan) shows the use of informal Indonesian mixed with slang, light English terms, humor, and digital expressions. This difference demonstrates that language variation is shaped by domains of use, relations among speakers, communicative purposes, and the physical and social environment.

The urgency of this study lies in two matters. First, the maintenance of regional language in coastal spaces shows that local language still functions as a source of solidarity and collective identity. Fishman (1965) explains that language choice is always related to the question of who speaks what language to whom, and when. Second, language innovation in urban spaces shows that the language of the younger generation moves rapidly, following social networks, education, social media, and popular culture. Androutsopoulos (2006, 2015) affirms that computer-mediated communication drives flexible multilingual practices connected to new social networks.

Theoretically, this study rests on the concepts of language variation, speech community, language domains, communicative style, and social identity. Hymes (1972), through the ethnography of communication, positions the speech event as the unit of analysis, encompassing setting, participants, purpose, sequence of acts, key, norms, and genre. Gumperz (1982) adds that contextualization cues, code choice, and conversational strategies help speakers negotiate social meaning. Within this framework, rural and urban language variation can be understood not merely as a difference in vocabulary, but as a social practice bound to the situation of communication.

Social variation theory from Labov (1963, 1972) and Trudgill (1972) is important for explaining that linguistic forms correlate with social class, prestige, gender, and community orientation. In the context of Balikpapan, prestige does not attach solely to standard language, but can also appear as covert prestige in regional language and local speech style. The Bugis language in the coastal community, for instance, can function as a marker of closeness and group membership, while student slang can function as a marker of contemporaneity and generational solidarity.

In addition, the concept of social networks explains why regional language can persist within particular communities. Milroy and Milroy (1985) show that dense, multiplex social

networks tend to maintain local linguistic norms, whereas loose networks more readily accept innovation. In the context of this research, the Kampung Baru Harbor community represents a relatively dense social network, while the student community represents a looser, more heterogeneous network that is more open to language contact.

Speech style is also an important element of this study. Bell (1984), through audience design, explains that speakers adjust their linguistic style to their listeners and the communicative context. Eckert (2008) states that variation possesses an indexical field, because linguistic forms can point to layered social meanings such as locality, modernity, familiarity, or authority. Agha (2003) and Johnstone (2016) also show that a linguistic form can become a social register when speakers and listeners recognize that form as a marker of a particular style. Accordingly, vocabulary such as Bugis maritime terms and student slang can be understood as registers marking the communities that use them.

Previous research shows that language variation in multicultural societies is commonly shaped by social contact and language contact. Poplack (1980) shows that code-switching and code-mixing follow specific linguistic and social patterns rather than being random mixing. Cheshire, Kerswill, Fox, and Torgersen (2011) show that contact among languages in urban spaces can give rise to new variation within young communities. In the digital context, Tagliamonte and Denis (2008) demonstrate that adolescent language in instant communication cannot be read as language decay, but as a patterned system of variation. These findings are relevant for reading terms such as *healing*, *random*, *bestie*, or *gaskeun* among students.

Identity studies are also important because language is used to construct social position. Bucholtz and Hall (2005) view identity as a product of interaction, not a fixed attribute carried by the speaker. Woolard and Schieffelin (1994) explain that language ideology shapes the way a society judges a particular language as refined, coarse, modern, local, formal, or prestigious. Coupland (2001) adds that speakers can stylize language to present a particular self-image. Accordingly, the choice of Bugis, informal Indonesian, slang, and light English needs to be read as identity practices that shift according to situation.

Although research on language variation, code-switching, and youth language has been conducted extensively, research directly comparing rural and urban linguistic practices in Balikpapan remains limited. This article fills that gap by comparing two distinct social spaces within a single city: Kampung Baru Harbor and the student community of the University of Balikpapan. This research gap is significant because Balikpapan displays not only urban modernity, but also pockets of coastal communities that maintain ethnolinguistic identity.

Based on this background, the study is focused on two research questions. First, what is the language variation that emerges in the rural community at Kampung Baru Harbor, examined in terms of language choice, vocabulary, prosodic features, code-mixing, and communicative style? Second, what is the language variation used by the urban student community of the University of Balikpapan, and what social factors influence their linguistic practices? The objectives of this study are to describe the difference between rural and urban language variation in Balikpapan and to interpret the social meaning of that difference through a sociolinguistic perspective.

METHODS

This study employs a descriptive qualitative design with a sociolinguistic approach. This design was chosen because the aim of the research is not to test statistical relationships between variables, but to describe forms of language variation and interpret their social meaning in the context of natural usage. The qualitative approach is also consistent with the

principle of variationist research, which emphasizes the observation of vernacular speech and its situations of use (Labov, 1972).

The research locations were determined purposively: Kampung Baru Harbor as a representation of the rural-coastal community, and the student community of the University of Balikpapan as a representation of the urban community. The selection of locations was based on the social contrast between the two. Kampung Baru Harbor has a character of communal interaction, maritime economic activity, and strong Bugis ethnic ties. The student community of the University of Balikpapan has a more heterogeneous character, high social mobility, and intensive contact with digital culture.

The data source consists of natural speech events occurring at both locations. The primary data take the form of words, phrases, sentences, code choices, slang expressions, local terms, observed prosodic features, and notes on the context of interaction. The research subjects are speakers engaged in natural interaction within both communities. Because the research was conducted through non-participant observation, speakers' personal identities were not made a focus of analysis; the research focus was directed at linguistic patterns and the social context of utterances.

The primary research instrument is the researcher as observer. The secondary instrument is an observation sheet containing the categories: location, time of observation, participants, conversation topic, language choice, distinctive vocabulary, code-mixing, intonation, tempo, volume, speech style, and the social function of the utterance. These categories were constructed based on Hymes's (1972) ethnography of communication framework, Fishman's (1965) concept of language domains, and analyses of variation and style in sociolinguistics.

Data collection was conducted through non-participant observation and listening-and-note-taking techniques. The researcher observed conversations occurring naturally without directing their content. Data were recorded in the form of field notes containing linguistic forms and contextual information. To maintain research ethics, the data presented do not include speakers' personal names or private information.

The research procedure was carried out through five stages. First, determining the location and focus of observation. Second, observing speech events at each location. Third, recording linguistic forms relevant to the research focus. Fourth, grouping the data based on the categories of language choice, vocabulary, prosodic features, code-mixing, communicative style, and identity function. Fifth, compiling the research results and interpreting them through relevant sociolinguistic theory.

The data analysis technique uses a qualitative analysis model encompassing data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing, as described by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014). Data reduction was conducted by selecting data relevant to the research questions. Data presentation was conducted through descriptive exposition and comparative tables. Conclusion drawing was conducted by connecting the patterns found to concepts of language variation, social networks, identity, and language contact. To strengthen trustworthiness, the data were re-checked through repeated reading of field notes and consistency of analytical categories.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This section presents the research findings descriptively and factually based on the observation categories. Theoretical interpretation of the findings is separated into the discussion section to keep the analytical flow clearer.

Table 1. Observation categories for language variation

Observation Aspect	Data Indicators
Language choice	The primary language used in conversation, the secondary language, and situations of code-switching.
Distinctive vocabulary	Local terms, maritime terms, slang, digital vocabulary, and light English elements.
Prosodic features	Tendencies in intonation, voice volume, speech tempo, and utterance stress observed during the study.
Communicative style	The manner of conveying messages, the degree of directness, expressiveness, humor, and response patterns between speakers.
Social function	The role of language as a marker of closeness, ethnic identity, generational identity, or adaptation to the communicative context.

1. Rural Language Variation at Kampung Baru Harbor

Observation at Kampung Baru Harbor (Pelabuhan Kampung Baru) shows that the Bugis language remains dominantly used in everyday interaction among community members. The use of Bugis is most apparent in informal conversation, inter-resident interaction, communal activities, conversation surrounding harbor activities, and situations involving speakers with ethnic and social closeness.

The most prominent linguistic feature is the use of vocabulary related to maritime activity and coastal life. Several lexical forms recorded in the original field notes include *pallapi* [referring to a situation of abundant fish catch], *lattung* [referring to a small boat], and *massuro* [used to express a direct or quick action]. Vocabulary of this kind indicates the existence of a local lexicon tied to the experience of coastal work and environmental knowledge.

In the prosodic aspect, the speech of the rural community tends to sound loud, strongly stressed, and rapid in tempo. This pattern is apparent in conversations occurring within the busy harbor environment, particularly when speakers must convey messages quickly, briefly, and in a manner easily caught by the interlocutor. The speech style that emerges is relatively direct, focused on the core of the message, and minimal in the use of lengthy small talk.

Code-mixing with Indonesian was found, but it does not constitute the main pattern in intra-community interaction. Indonesian appears more frequently when speakers are in a more formal situation, interacting with people outside the community, or discussing topics related to administration, education, or modern terms that are not always available in everyday local vocabulary.

Another finding indicates a limited sign of shift among the rural younger generation. Young speakers still understand and use Bugis, but on certain topics they have begun to incorporate elements of Indonesian or popular terms, particularly when discussing technology, education, entertainment, or socializing outside the coastal community.

Table 2. Findings on rural language variation at Kampung Baru Harbor

Aspect	Findings in the Rural Community
Primary language	Bugis is dominant in informal, intra-community interaction.
Distinctive vocabulary	<i>Maritime terms and local vocabulary such as pallapi, lattung, and massuro.</i>
Prosody	Loud intonation, strong stress, relatively fast tempo, and higher volume.
Speech style	Direct, straightforward, functional, and oriented toward message efficiency.
Code-mixing	Limited; appears mainly in formal contexts or modern topics.
Social function	A marker of ethnic identity, social closeness, and coastal community solidarity.

2. Urban Language Variation in the Student Community of the University of Balikpapan

The student community of the University of Balikpapan (Universitas Balikpapan) shows the use of informal Indonesian as the primary language in conversation. Indonesian is chosen because the student community has a more diverse ethnic background, requiring a shared code that can be understood across groups.

The most apparent feature is the emergence of slang, popular expressions, and light English elements. Expressions such as *healing*, *bestie*, *random*, *gaskeun*, *nolep*, and *tidak vibes banget* [not very vibey] appear as part of casual conversation. These forms are used to build familiarity, mark humor, express emotional evaluation, and demonstrate closeness to digital communicative style.

In the prosodic aspect, student speech tends to be more relaxed, stable, and expressive. Voice volume is not as loud as in the harbor community because the communicative situation occurs in a relatively quieter environment. Speech tempo is also more variable, as students frequently use pauses, laughter, dramatic emphasis, and hyperbolic expressions in conversation.

Code-mixing was found quite frequently, particularly the mixing of Indonesian with light English and slang. Code-mixing does not always occur due to vocabulary limitation, but also functions as a stylistic strategy, a marker of closeness, and a means of displaying urban youth identity.

The findings also show that social media influences students' word choice and communicative style. Popular vocabulary circulating on digital platforms enters spoken conversation and is used flexibly according to topic, mood, and closeness between speakers.

Table 3. Findings on urban language variation in the student community

Aspect	Findings in the Urban Community
Primary language	Informal Indonesian as a shared cross-ethnic code.
Distinctive vocabulary	Slang, popular vocabulary, and light English elements.
Prosody	Relaxed intonation, more controlled volume, stable and expressive tempo.
Speech style	Familiar, humorous, expressive, flexible, and frequently hyperbolic.
Code-mixing	Relatively frequent; mainly Indonesian–light English and slang.
Social function	A marker of generational identity, modernity, familiarity, and digital culture.

3. Comparison of Rural and Urban Findings

Table 4. Comparison of rural and urban language variation in Balikpapan

Aspect	Rural: Kampung Baru Harbor	Urban: University of Balikpapan Students
Language choice	Bugis is dominant in intra-community conversation.	Informal Indonesian dominant as a cross-ethnic code.
Vocabulary	Local and maritime terms related to work, the coastal environment, and tradition.	Slang, digital vocabulary, and light English terms.
Intonation and volume	Loud, assertive, and louder overall.	Relaxed, stable, and more controlled.
Speech tempo	Relatively fast and direct.	More variable, with pauses, humor, and emotional expression.
Communicative style	Direct, functional, and efficient.	Expressive, creative, humorous, and flexible.
Code-mixing	Limited and situational.	Fairly frequent, as a stylistic and familiarity strategy.
Social identity	Ethnicity, tradition, and coastal community solidarity.	Younger generation, modernity, friendship networks, and digital culture.

Descriptively, the most prominent difference between the two communities lies in the dominant language, the source of vocabulary, the function of code-mixing, and communicative style. The rural community shows strong maintenance of the regional language, while the urban community shows faster linguistic innovation that is more open to digital influence.

DISCUSSION

The finding regarding the dominance of Bugis at Kampung Baru Harbor shows that the regional language still holds a strong social function within the coastal community. Based on Fishman's (1965) concept of language domains, language choice depends heavily on who the speaker is, who the interlocutor is, the topic of conversation, and the communicative situation. Bugis persists because it is used within intimate domains such as family, neighbors, informal work, and communal activities. Within such domains, the regional language is not merely a tool of communication, but a symbol of closeness and social membership.

The maintenance of Bugis can also be explained through Milroy and Milroy's (1985) social network theory. Communities with dense social networks tend to maintain local norms because each member interacts repeatedly and mutually monitors communicative norms. In the harbor community, work relationships, kinship, and spatial closeness reinforce the use of Bugis. Consequently, the shift toward Indonesian does not automatically replace the regional language, particularly in intra-community interaction.

The prosodic features of the rural community — loud intonation, strong stress, and fast tempo — can be understood through the relationship between language and the speech situation. Hymes (1972) emphasizes that speech events are influenced by setting and key, or the tone of interaction. The busy harbor environment allows for the emergence of a more direct and efficient speech style. Within Gumperz's (1982) framework, prosody can function as a contextualization cue that helps speakers assert intent, urgency, and social closeness in interaction.

Maritime vocabulary such as *pallapi*, *lattung*, and *massuro* shows that language variation is connected to local knowledge. These terms not only name objects or actions, but also store the social experience of the coastal community. Agha (2003) explains that cultural value can attach to linguistic forms and circulate within a community through communicative practice. Accordingly, the Bugis lexicon found at Kampung Baru Harbor can be understood as a form of local cultural capital inherited through everyday use.

On the urban side, the use of informal Indonesian by students demonstrates Indonesian's function as a shared code within a heterogeneous community. When speakers come from different ethnic backgrounds, Indonesian becomes the choice that enables cross-group communication. However, the Indonesian used is not the formal standard form, but an informal variety open to creativity, humor, slang, and English elements. This pattern is consistent with Bell's (1984) idea that speakers adjust their linguistic style to their listeners and the context of interaction.

Slang and code-mixing in the student community demonstrate that urban variation cannot be regarded as language decay. Poplack (1980) shows that code-mixing has its own pattern and social function. Tagliamonte and Denis (2008) likewise show that adolescent language in modern communication media has its own system and function, rather than simply being a deviation. In this study, expressions such as *healing*, *bestie*, *random*, *gaskeun*, *nolep*, and *tidak vibes banget* function to build solidarity, express emotion, and demonstrate closeness to popular culture.

The influence of digital media on student language can be explained through computer-mediated communication research. Androutsopoulos (2006) shows that digital

space has become an important arena for sociolinguistic research because language in digital media connects identity, social networks, and style. Androutsopoulos (2015) further explains the concept of networked multilingualism, that is, multilingual practice shaped by digital connectivity and global media flows. The findings among University of Balikpapan students show that digital linguistic forms move from online space into everyday spoken conversation.

From the perspective of identity, the rural-urban difference shows that language is used to display who the speaker is within particular social relations. Bucholtz and Hall (2005) emphasize that identity is formed through interaction, not something static. Bugis displays ethnic identity and communal closeness, while student slang displays generational identity, modernity, and membership within friendship networks. Accordingly, both communities in this study use language as a source of identity, but with different social orientations.

These findings can also be read through Eckert's (2008) concept of the indexical field. The same linguistic form can carry different social meanings depending on context. Bugis at Kampung Baru Harbor indexes locality, solidarity, and the continuity of tradition. Informal Indonesian mixed with slang among students indexes familiarity, flexibility, youthful style, and participation in digital culture. Johnstone (2016) refers to this process as enregisterment, that is, when linguistic forms become recognized as part of a particular group's way of speaking.

Comparison with urban sociolinguistic research shows that social contact and heterogeneity can accelerate language innovation. Cheshire et al. (2011) show that multicultural urban spaces can produce new variation as many linguistic sources converge within a young community. Although the context of Balikpapan differs from that of London, the general principle that emerges is similar: social heterogeneity and the social networks of adolescents or students provide space for linguistic creativity and the formation of new styles.

From the perspective of language ideology, society often judges regional language as traditional and slang as nonstandard. However, Woolard and Schieffelin (1994) remind us that judgments of language are always tied to social ideology. This study therefore rejects a simple dichotomy between regional language as backward and urban language as modern. Bugis and slang both possess social function: the former maintains the continuity of ethnic identity, while the latter enables self-expression and adaptation within urban social networks.

The contribution of this study is to show that within a single city, two linguistic processes proceed side by side. The first process is the maintenance of regional language within a rural-coastal community possessing a dense social network. The second process is urban language innovation within a student community possessing a looser social network and strong access to digital media. Both demonstrate that language development in Balikpapan does not move toward a single direction of homogenization, but forms a spectrum between locality and modernity.

The practical implication of this study relates to language education and cultural policy. In educational settings, student slang and code-mixing can serve as an entry point for teaching awareness of language varieties, rather than being regarded solely as error. On the other hand, the maintenance of Bugis in the coastal community needs to be seen as a cultural asset supporting the city's linguistic diversity. Accordingly, a sociolinguistic approach can help society understand when particular varieties are appropriately used, how identity is constructed through language, and why linguistic diversity deserves to be valued.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that rural and urban language variation in Balikpapan City is shaped by differences in social environment, interactional networks, identity orientation, and communicative needs. At Kampung Baru Harbor, Bugis remains dominant as a marker of

ethnic identity, coastal community solidarity, and the preservation of local knowledge. The loud prosodic features, fast tempo, and direct speech style show that the rural community's manner of speaking is connected to the physical context of the harbor and a functional pattern of communication.

In the student community of the University of Balikpapan, informal Indonesian serves as the primary code because the community is heterogeneous and requires a shared cross-ethnic language. However, this language develops into a creative urban variety through code-mixing, slang, light English terms, humor, and digital expression. Student urban language cannot be interpreted merely as deviation, but as an identity practice of the younger generation and a strategy for building social familiarity.

The relationship between the research questions and the findings shows that the rural-urban difference lies not only in linguistic form, but also in social function. Bugis represents the continuity of tradition and community cohesion, while student slang represents mobility, modernity, and adaptation to digital culture. Accordingly, language in Balikpapan functions simultaneously as a tool of communication, a marker of identity, a medium of social negotiation, and a mirror of societal change.

The scientific contribution of this study is to enrich Indonesian sociolinguistic research through a rural-urban comparative model within a single multicultural city. This study demonstrates that the maintenance of regional language and urban language innovation are not two mutually negating processes, but two dynamics that can coexist within urban space. These findings can serve as a foundation for further research on language contact, language attitudes, local language policy, and language-variety literacy in multiethnic urban areas.

The limitation of this study lies in the scope of observation, which remains limited to two communities. Future research is recommended to expand the number of locations, incorporate in-depth interviews, systematically record speech data, and compare variation based on age, gender, occupation, and intensity of digital media use. With such expansion, the linguistic dynamics of Balikpapan can be mapped more comprehensively.

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