

LANGUAGE ATTITUDES TOWARD THE ACEHNESE LANGUAGE AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract: This study investigates language attitudes toward the Acehese language among university students in Lhokseumawe, focusing on a small-scale qualitative inquiry conducted at Universitas Bumi Persada in June 2025. The research involved nine participants representing three academic disciplines: English Education (3 students), Economics (3 students), and Health Sciences (3 students). Employing a qualitative case study design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and short attitudinal questionnaires to explore cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of language attitudes. The findings reveal that while students demonstrate strong affective attachment to the Acehese language as a marker of ethnic identity, its functional use is increasingly limited to family and informal domains. Indonesian dominates academic and formal communication, whereas English holds instrumental prestige for global mobility. Despite positive symbolic attitudes, the reduced frequency of active use among younger speakers suggests a gradual shift in linguistic practices. The study highlights the urgent need for strategic language maintenance efforts within higher education institutions to sustain the vitality of the Acehese language.

Keywords: Acehese Language, Language Attitudes, Language Maintenance, Sociolinguistics, University Students

1. INTRODUCTION

Language functions not merely as an instrument of communication but as a powerful semiotic resource through which individuals construct and negotiate identity, express cultural values, and establish social belonging. Contemporary sociolinguistic scholarship emphasizes that language embodies symbolic capital, shaping how speakers position themselves within social hierarchies and cultural communities (Bourdieu, 1991; García & Wei, 2014). Language and culture are intricately intertwined, as each influences and shapes the other. This mutual relationship suggests that language changes can lead to shifts in cultural practices and beliefs, highlighting the close connection between the two entities (Husna & Hajar, 2024).

In multilingual societies, linguistic choices are rarely neutral; instead, they reflect ideological orientations, power relations, and

aspirations for social mobility. Indonesia, with more than 700 local languages, represents one of the most linguistically diverse nations in the world. Within this complex ecology, local languages coexist with Bahasa Indonesia as the national and official language, while English functions as a global lingua franca associated with academic advancement, economic competitiveness, and transnational engagement (Lauder, 2018; Zein, 2020). Such layered multilingualism inevitably shapes speakers' attitudes toward their heritage languages, influencing patterns of language maintenance, shift, or hybridization.

Language attitudes, defined as individuals' evaluative reactions toward a language and its speakers, play a central role in determining the vitality of minority or regional languages (Garrett, 2010). Positive affective attachment to a language does not automatically guarantee its active use; rather, sustained intergenerational transmission depends on the alignment

between emotional loyalty, perceived utility, and institutional support (Fishman, 1991; UNESCO, 2023).

In contemporary Indonesia, the expansion of formal education, digital media, and urban migration has intensified the dominance of Bahasa Indonesia in public and academic domains. At the same time, English increasingly functions as a language of prestige and global opportunity, particularly among university students (Zein, 2020; Dardjowidjojo, 2021). These dynamics may gradually reduce the functional domains of local languages, confining them to informal or familial contexts.

The Acehese language (Bahasa Aceh), spoken predominantly in Aceh, constitutes a crucial marker of ethnic identity and collective memory for the Acehese people. Historically embedded in oral traditions, religious discourse, and customary law (*adat*), Acehese serves not only as a communicative code but also as a cultural archive reflecting local epistemologies and social norms. The Acehese have cultural values embedded in its proverb such as trustworthiness, consistency, usefulness, patience, diligence, discipline, responsibility, and gratefulness (Ibrahim & Usman, 2021).

Nevertheless, processes of modernization, urbanization, and post-conflict socioeconomic transformation have reshaped linguistic practices across Aceh. The increasing institutional dominance of Bahasa Indonesia in formal education and governance, coupled with the instrumental value of English in higher education and professional advancement, has raised concerns regarding the continuity of Acehese across generations (Aziz & Amery, 2016; UNESCO, 2023). While the language remains widely spoken in rural areas, urban youth may exhibit domain-restricted use, signaling early patterns of language shift.

University students occupy a particularly strategic position within this

sociolinguistic landscape. As members of the educated youth and future professionals, they mediate between local identity and global aspiration. Their language attitudes are often shaped by academic exposure, digital literacy, and career orientation, which may recalibrate perceptions of linguistic prestige and utility. Research in higher education contexts demonstrates that students frequently develop multilingual repertoires characterized by functional differentiation: local languages for intimacy and solidarity, the national language for institutional communication, and English for academic and international engagement (García & Wei, 2014; Zein, 2020). The sustainability of regional languages, therefore, depends significantly on how this generation evaluates and integrates their heritage language within contemporary social and professional domains.

Lhokseumawe represents a dynamic urban center in Aceh where linguistic interaction among Acehese, Bahasa Indonesia, and English is particularly visible. As a site of educational development and socioeconomic mobility, the city reflects broader processes of linguistic negotiation occurring in Indonesian urban contexts. Within academic institutions such as Universitas Bumi Persada, students from diverse disciplinary backgrounds engage in daily decisions regarding language choice across formal and informal settings. Classroom discourse predominantly employs Bahasa Indonesia; English is often associated with scholarly competence and global relevance, while Acehese functions as a marker of solidarity and cultural intimacy.

Against this backdrop, examining language attitudes among university students becomes essential for understanding the prospects of Acehese language maintenance. This study seeks to explore how students perceive the Acehese language across cognitive, affective, and behavioral

dimensions and how these perceptions shape their actual linguistic practices. By situating the inquiry within a higher education context in Lhokseumawe, the research contributes to contemporary discussions on multilingualism, identity construction, and regional language sustainability in Indonesia.

This research seeks to examine the cognitive, affective, and behavioral attitudes of university students toward the Acehese language, exploring how they perceive, feel about, and use the language in various domains of interaction. It further investigates whether and how these language attitudes differ across academic disciplines, particularly among students from English Education, Economics, and Health Sciences. By analyzing these variations, the study aims to understand the broader sociolinguistic patterns shaping students' linguistic preferences and practices. Ultimately, the research explores the implications of these attitudes for language maintenance within higher education, especially in relation to the sustainability and functional continuity of the Acehese language in academic environments.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Language Attitudes in Sociolinguistics

In sociolinguistics, language attitudes encompass more than mere preferences; they represent the complex interplay between individuals' beliefs, emotions, and observable linguistic behaviors toward a particular language or language variety. Attitudes are not static cognitive constructs; rather, they are dynamic orientations shaped by socialization, cultural norms, ideological frameworks, and broader sociopolitical forces (Garrett, 2010; Lanza, 2020). They influence how speakers evaluate languages in terms of prestige, utility, identity, and affective value, ultimately affecting language choice, intergenerational transmission, and linguistic vitality.

Contemporary research conceptualizes language attitudes along three interrelated components: cognitive, affective, and behavioral, each contributing to a holistic understanding of linguistic evaluation. The cognitive component comprises beliefs, perceptions, and evaluations about a language's characteristics, functions, and status. These beliefs may encompass judgments regarding linguistic complexity, modernity, relevance in education or employment, or associations with social mobility. For example, in multilingual contexts, speakers may recognize a national or global language as more economically advantageous while simultaneously perceiving their heritage language as symbolically rich (García & Li, 2021; Kroskrity, 2018). Such cognitive evaluations are shaped by exposure to language ideologies circulating within media, educational institutions, and peer networks.

The affective component refers to the emotional responses and attitudes individuals hold toward a language. This dimension captures feelings of pride, attachment, shame, indifference, or ambivalence associated with speaking or hearing a language. Emotional investment often stems from affective ties to family, community rituals, or cultural heritage, which can sustain positive attitudes toward a heritage language despite external pressures favoring dominant languages (Block, 2021; Ushioda, 2019). Affective attitudes influence not only individuals' perceptions of linguistic value but also their willingness to defend or promote a language within social contexts.

The behavioral component encompasses the observable tendencies to use, avoid, or codeswitch between languages in specific domains such as home, school, work, or public spaces. Behavioral attitudes are enacted through actual language practices, including frequency of use, choice of language partners, and strategies for language preservation or

negotiation. Importantly, behavioral intentions mediate between internalized evaluations (cognitive and affective attitudes) and concrete linguistic practices (Baker, 2017; Piller, 2021). For instance, speakers with positive cognitive and affective orientations toward a heritage language may still limit its use to informal contexts if they perceive dominant languages as more functional in institutional settings (Bayard et al., 2022).

Empirical evidence suggests that positive language attitudes characterized by favorable beliefs, strong emotional attachment, and proactive use support language maintenance and revitalization efforts. When speakers value their heritage language cognitively and affectively, they are more likely to actively transmit it to younger generations, incorporate it into daily routines, and advocate for its institutional support (UNESCO, 2023; Fishman, 1991). Conversely, negative language attitudes manifested through beliefs that a heritage language is less useful, feelings of embarrassment, or behavioral avoidance can contribute to language shift and attrition. Negative attitudes may lead speakers to abandon their heritage language in favor of dominant languages in domains such as education, employment, and social mobility, thus accelerating the process of language endangerment.

In multilingual settings where local, national, and global languages intersect, understanding these attitudinal components provides critical insight into how linguistic ideologies shape language practices and influence language sustainability. By examining cognitive beliefs, affective orientations, and behavioral tendencies collectively, researchers can better capture the nuanced mechanisms through which language attitudes contribute to either the resilience or decline of linguistic communities.

2.2 Language Maintenance and Shift

Language shift is a well-documented sociolinguistic phenomenon that occurs when speakers progressively reduce use of their heritage language in favor of a more dominant one, often due to perceived social, economic, and educational advantages associated with the latter. In the Indonesian context, this dynamic is particularly salient; local languages, including those with rich cultural histories such as Acehese, increasingly recede from domains of formal interaction as speakers adopt Bahasa Indonesia and foreign languages like English for academic, professional, and broader communicative purposes. Empirical studies in Indonesia show that parents often prioritize Bahasa Indonesia at home to support children's educational success, even if this choice diminishes opportunities for children to acquire and use their regional language as a first language, illustrating one pathway through which language shift unfolds across generations.

This shift is not merely a matter of individual preference but is deeply embedded in macro-sociolinguistic processes. Urbanization, globalization, and media proliferation enhance the prestige and utility of the national language and international languages, thereby constraining the functional domains in which local languages are actively used. As a result, regional languages often become confined to informal settings such as home and community gatherings, while formal education, official communication, and professional environments privilege Indonesian and English. Consequently, younger speakers may internalize language ideologies that associate local languages with affective and cultural value but view them as less relevant for socioeconomic mobility, a condition that accelerates their reduced use outside private domains.

Academic research also highlights the critical role of intergenerational transmission in

maintaining linguistic vitality. When parents and caregivers consistently use a heritage language with children from early childhood, there is a greater likelihood that the language will be sustained across generations. However, when this pattern is disrupted, whether by a family language policy that favors the dominant language for pragmatic reasons or by broader institutional pressures, the heritage language becomes increasingly vulnerable to attrition. The literature underscores that without active reinforcement in educational settings and supportive language policies, heritage languages may continue to lose ground. This combination of familial, educational, and institutional influences determines whether a language maintains its functional presence or experiences irreversible decline.

In sum, language shift in multilingual Indonesian urban contexts reflects a complex interplay of individual attitudes, family language strategies, and structural forces within society. The sustainability of regional languages, therefore, depends not only on positive affective attitudes but on intentional practices of use within families, inclusion of regional languages in curricula and educational activities, and cohesive policy frameworks that recognize and valorize linguistic diversity as part of national cultural heritage.

2.3 The Acehese Language in Contemporary Context

In the sociolinguistic ecology of Aceh, the Acehese language predominantly operates within informal, familial, and cultural domains, functioning as the principal medium of communication in domestic interactions, community gatherings, traditional ceremonies, and other contexts associated with intimate social bonds and local cultural expression. Acehese is deeply embedded in intergenerational practices such as storytelling (*museuduek*), customary rituals (*adat*), and communal rituals (*saman* and *seudati*), where

language and cultural ethos are mutually constitutive (Aziz & Amery, 2016; Willis & Willis, 2023). Such contexts reinforce the role of Acehese as a symbolic marker of group identity and collective memory, positioning it as a repository of indigenous knowledge and sociocultural norms.

In contrast, Bahasa Indonesia occupies the dominant position in formal education, public administration, and institutional communication throughout Indonesia, including Aceh. As the national language codified through state policy, Bahasa Indonesia is the official medium of instruction from primary schooling through higher education, as well as the language of legal documentation, governmental discourse, and formal evaluative assessments (Kuswandono, 2021). Its pervasiveness in educational curricula and bureaucratic structures reflects state-driven language planning efforts that prioritize national cohesion and interethnic communication, but it also inadvertently relegates local languages to marginal domains of use (Sneddon, 2015; Eriyanto, 2023). Consequently, students typically associate Bahasa Indonesia with academic success, credentialing, and civic participation, perceiving it as indispensable for navigating formal institutional landscapes.

Overlaid onto this national–local language orientation is the growing prominence of English as a global academic and professional resource. Within Indonesian universities, English functions not only as a subject of compulsory study but increasingly as a medium for accessing international research, participating in academic discourse, and engaging with transnational opportunities such as scholarships, conferences, and publication platforms (Zein, 2020; Lauder, 2018). Understanding the English language is considered essential due to significant growth in transportation and information sectors, which facilitates effortless

communication regardless of time, distance, or location (Muslem et al., 2019). English is the dominant language in various fields, including medical research and healthcare communication. (Nassriati & Hajar, 2024). In multilingual classrooms, English often emerges as the language of 'high prestige' among peer networks, particularly within academic programs that emphasize international standards (Lamb, 2021).

These layered linguistic hierarchies, where Acehnese functions in local and affective domains, Bahasa Indonesia in formal and institutional realms, and English in global and aspirational contexts, create a complex framework through which students assess the relative prestige and utility of each language. Sociolinguistic research indicates that hierarchies of language prestige influence speakers' attitudes by shaping beliefs about social value, economic opportunity, and personal identity (Garrett, 2010; Edwards, 2021). In this triadic configuration, the Acehnese language may be strongly associated with cultural rootedness and local solidarity but perceived as limited in instrumental utility for academic achievement or global engagement. Conversely, Bahasa Indonesia and English may garner higher functional prestige, particularly among educated youth navigating both national and transnational trajectories.

The interaction of these hierarchical language domains potentially affects young speakers' language choice, language use, and future linguistic behavior. When students internalize the idea that certain languages are more relevant to economic advancement and social mobility, their language practices may adapt accordingly, privileging languages of wider communication at the expense of heritage languages (Fishman, 1991; UNESCO, 2023). Thus, the prestige and perceived utility attached to Bahasa Indonesia and English could contribute to a domainrestricted use of Acehnese,

limiting the opportunities for active transmission and functional expansion of the local language beyond intimate settings. Understanding these attitudinal dynamics is crucial for evaluating the prospects of language maintenance strategies within educational institutions, where policy interventions and curriculum design might either reinforce linguistic diversity or inadvertently contribute to language shift.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to generate an indepth and contextually grounded understanding of university students' language attitudes toward the Acehnese language. A case study approach is particularly appropriate when researchers seek to explore a bounded system within its real life context and to capture complex social phenomena that cannot be meaningfully separated from their sociocultural environment (Yin, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). In sociolinguistic inquiry, qualitative case studies allow for rich, interpretive exploration of language attitudes as socially constructed, ideologically mediated, and context dependent phenomena (Garrett, 2010).

The present research conceptualized Universitas Bumi Persada as a bounded institutional case situated within the multilingual ecology of Lhokseumawe. The design enabled the researcher to examine how cognitive beliefs, affective attachments, and behavioral tendencies toward the Acehnese language are articulated and negotiated within a higher education setting. Rather than aiming for statistical generalization, the study pursued analytical depth and contextual interpretation, aligning with contemporary qualitative research paradigms that emphasize meaning-making and reflexivity (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Tracy, 2020).

3.2 Research Site and Participants

The research was conducted in June 2025 at Universitas Bumi Persada, a private higher education institution located in Aceh. The university represents a linguistically diverse academic environment where Acehnese, Bahasa Indonesia, and English coexist across formal and informal domains of interaction. This setting provided a relevant sociolinguistic context for examining how students from different disciplinary backgrounds position the Acehnese language within their linguistic repertoires.

A total of nine undergraduate students participated in the study. The participants comprised three students from the Faculty of English Education, three from the Faculty of Economics, and three from the Faculty of Health Sciences. The inclusion of students from distinct academic disciplines was intended to capture potential variations in language attitudes shaped by disciplinary orientation, exposure to English, and professional aspirations. For instance, students in English Education are typically immersed in global linguistic discourses, whereas students in Economics and Health Sciences may prioritize instrumental language competencies associated with professional mobility.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, a strategy commonly employed in qualitative research to identify information rich cases that can illuminate the research questions (Patton, 2015). The selection criteria required that participants be native speakers or heritage speakers of the Acehnese language and currently enrolled as active students during the 2025 academic year. All participants reported regular exposure to Acehnese in familial or community contexts, ensuring that their attitudes were grounded in lived linguistic experience. Ethical considerations were strictly observed; informed consent was obtained prior to data collection, and

pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality and anonymity in reporting findings.

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected using two complementary instruments: semi structured interviews and a short attitudinal questionnaire. The use of multiple instruments enabled methodological triangulation, thereby enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Denzin, 2017; Tracy, 2020).

Semi structured interviews served as the primary data source. This format allowed the researcher to explore predetermined themes—such as language use patterns, perceptions of prestige, identity construction, and intergenerational transmission—while maintaining flexibility to probe emerging insights. Interviews were conducted in a language comfortable for participants (Acehnese or Bahasa Indonesia), audiorecorded with consent, and lasted approximately 30–45 minutes each. The semistructured format is widely recognized as effective in language attitude research because it captures nuanced reflections and ideological positioning that may not surface through closedended surveys alone (Garrett, 2010).

In addition to interviews, a short attitudinal questionnaire was administered to systematically assess the cognitive, affective, and behavioral components of language attitudes. The questionnaire employed a fivepoint Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” Items were designed to measure beliefs about the importance and utility of Acehnese (cognitive dimension), emotional attachment and pride (affective dimension), and self reported frequency of use across domains (behavioral dimension). The integration of Likert scale items provided structured attitudinal indicators that complemented and supported the qualitative narratives obtained from interviews.

3.4 Data Analysis

Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was selected due to its flexibility and systematic procedures for identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The analysis followed several stages: familiarization with the data through repeated reading, initial coding of meaningful units, categorization of codes into broader themes, and refinement of themes in relation to the theoretical framework of language attitudes. The coding process was both deductive guided by the cognitive, affective, and behavioral model and inductive, allowing new themes to emerge organically from participants' narratives.

Questionnaire responses were analyzed descriptively to identify overall attitudinal tendencies across participants and academic disciplines. Frequencies and mean tendencies were calculated to provide a general overview of agreement patterns. These quantitative summaries were not intended for inferential statistical analysis but rather to strengthen the interpretive validity of the qualitative findings through data convergence.

To ensure trustworthiness, the study employed strategies such as data triangulation, transparent documentation of analytical procedures, and reflexive consideration of the researcher's positionality (Tracy, 2020). By integrating thematic qualitative analysis with descriptive attitudinal measures, the study offers a comprehensive and context sensitive understanding of students' language attitudes toward the Acehese language within a higher education setting.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Cognitive Attitudes

The cognitive dimension of language attitudes refers to students' beliefs, perceptions, and evaluative judgments regarding the status, functions, and

relevance of the Acehese language. In this study, all participants articulated a shared belief that Acehese constitutes a vital cultural asset and an indispensable marker of ethnic identity. They perceived the language as a repository of collective memory, oral traditions, customary expressions (*adat*), and local wisdom embedded within the sociocultural fabric of Aceh. Such beliefs reflect what contemporary sociolinguistic scholarship describes as *symbolic valuation*, in which a heritage language is cognitively associated with authenticity, ancestry, and cultural continuity (Garrett, 2010; UNESCO, 2023).

However, despite this positive ideological stance, several participants expressed concerns regarding the limited lexical modernization of Acehese, particularly in academic, scientific, and technological domains. Students from Economics and Health Sciences highlighted the absence of standardized terminology for technical concepts, which they perceived as reducing the language's functional adequacy in formal settings.

This perception aligns with findings in recent studies on minority language sustainability, which indicate that perceived lack of modernization can weaken the instrumental value of a language, thereby restricting its domain of use (Zein, 2020; Sallabank, 2022). In this sense, while the cognitive evaluation of Acehese remains strongly positive in terms of identity and heritage, its perceived limitations in epistemic and professional contexts may inadvertently reinforce language hierarchy, positioning Indonesian and English as more suitable for academic advancement.

4.2 Affective Attitudes

The affective component encompasses the emotional responses and attachments that speakers associate with a language. The data reveal that participants demonstrated a strong emotional bond with Acehese,

frequently describing it as the “language of home,” intimacy, and solidarity. The language was consistently associated with parental communication, intergenerational storytelling, humor, and expressions of empathy. Such emotional associations reflect what sociolinguists describe as *covert prestige*, whereby a local language maintains strong affective loyalty despite limited overt institutional recognition (Garrett, 2010; Dewaele & Li, 2020).

Notably, students from the English Education program articulated a nuanced perspective. While academically oriented toward English as a global lingua franca, they emphasized that Acehnese plays a foundational role in shaping their personal and cultural identity. They viewed bilingual or multilingual competence not as a replacement of local identity but as an expansion of communicative repertoire. This perspective resonates with contemporary multilingualism frameworks that conceptualize linguistic identities as dynamic and layered rather than mutually exclusive (García & Wei, 2014; May, 2022). Thus, the affective data suggest that emotional attachment to Acehnese remains resilient, even among students who are intensively engaged with global languages.

4.3 Behavioral Attitudes

Behavioral attitudes refer to observable linguistic practices and the tendency to use or avoid a language in specific domains. Despite positive cognitive and affective orientations, the behavioral findings reveal domain restriction in the use of Acehnese. Participants reported that Acehnese is predominantly used within family environments and informal peer interactions, particularly in relaxed or humorous exchanges.

In contrast, Bahasa Indonesia overwhelmingly dominates classroom discourse, administrative communication, and formal academic interaction. English, especially among English Education students, is frequently employed in presentations,

academic writing, and subject specific discussions. This functional distribution illustrates a pattern of *domain differentiation*, a common characteristic of multilingual societies where languages are compartmentalized according to social function (Fishman, 1991; Zein, 2020).

Students from Economics and Health Sciences reported frequent codeswitching between Acehnese and Indonesian during casual conversations. Such switching often occurred unconsciously and served pragmatic functions such as emphasis, solidarity, or lexical convenience. However, none of the participants reported using Acehnese in formal academic contexts, such as seminars, written assignments, or institutional events. This absence indicates that while the language retains vitality in informal domains, it lacks institutional reinforcement within higher education settings. Contemporary research suggests that when a heritage language is excluded from formal domains, its long term intergenerational transmission may weaken despite strong emotional attachment (UNESCO, 2023; Sallabank, 2022).

4.4 Cross Disciplinary Differences

Although the sample size was limited, notable cross disciplinary distinctions emerged. Students from the English Education program demonstrated heightened metalinguistic awareness and sensitivity to issues of language ideology, power, and linguistic diversity. Their academic exposure to sociolinguistics and applied linguistics appeared to foster a critical understanding of how languages acquire prestige and how minority languages may experience marginalization. This aligns with research indicating that formal linguistic education can influence students' attitudes toward multilingualism and language equity (May, 2022).

Economics students, by contrast, emphasized pragmatic and career oriented considerations. They

frequently associated Indonesian and English with professional mobility, competitiveness, and access to national and global markets. While they expressed pride in Acehese identity, their language choices were strongly influenced by perceived economic utility. Such instrumental orientation reflects broader neoliberal discourses in higher education, where language competence is often evaluated in terms of market value (Zein, 2020; Block, Gray, & Holborow, 2021).

Health Sciences students exhibited relatively balanced bilingual practices, using Acehese in interpersonal interactions while prioritizing Indonesian in academic and clinical communication. Their responses suggested an awareness of the importance of using nationally standardized language in professional healthcare contexts to ensure clarity and safety. However, they also acknowledged the practical benefit of Acehese when interacting with local patients in community based settings.

Overall, the cross disciplinary findings suggest that while positive attitudes toward Acehese are broadly shared, academic specialization shapes the degree to which students prioritize identity, ideology, or instrumental value in their linguistic choices. This nuanced interplay between symbolic loyalty and functional pragmatism illustrates the complex sociolinguistic ecology of higher education in Lhokseumawe.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal a complex sociolinguistic landscape in which the Acehese language persists as a meaningful cultural symbol for university students, yet its practical functions are increasingly confined to restricted social domains. Specifically, students expressed strong cognitive recognition of Acehese as an integral element of their cultural heritage and identity, and they articulated affective attachment characterized by pride and emotional resonance.

However, these positive attitudes do not consistently translate into active use of the language across broader communicative contexts. Instead, behavioral practices indicate that Acehese is predominantly reserved for informal interactions within family or close peer groups, while Bahasa Indonesia and English are preferred in academic, professional, and formal settings. This pattern, described in current sociolinguistic research as *symbolic language maintenance*, reflects a scenario where affective and ideological valuation of a heritage language endures, even as its functional deployment diminishes in significance (Fishman, 1991; Dorian, 2018; Kroskrity, 2020).

Such findings are consistent with theoretical frameworks of gradual language shift, which posit that heritage languages may retain symbolic value long after their utility in institutional domains has receded. According to Fishman's (1991) model of language shift and maintenance, a language can exhibit *status reversal*, maintaining emotional and identity linked value while progressively losing ground in education, administration, and economic opportunity.

Recent empirical studies in multilingual contexts, including other regional languages in Indonesia, affirm that this pattern often emerges in urbanized, educationally stratified environments (Zein, 2020; Anwar & Cahyono, 2022). In these settings, Indonesian occupies a dominant role as the national language of instruction and public discourse, while English is increasingly associated with academic capital, international mobility, and professional success (Lauder, 2018; Hamied, 2021). This hierarchical structuring of linguistic domains cultivates pragmatic language choices among youth, who compartmentalize linguistic functions based on perceived utility, prestige, and contextual appropriateness.

For students at Universitas Bumi Persada, these dynamics manifest in everyday communicative behavior. Despite valuing the Acehese language as an emblem of heritage, students frequently report shifting to Bahasa Indonesia for coursework, academic discourse, and formal evaluation, while deploying English in internationally oriented assignments or extracurricular activities. Acehese thus remains vibrant in affective dimensions but experiences *functional reduction*, whereby its application in institutional and wider social domains is limited. This phenomenon aligns with current sociolinguistic findings that local languages in multilingual societies often become demoted to “home registers” or “community codes” when national and global languages offer greater socioeconomic capital (García & Wei, 2014; Toulmin, 2022).

Given this nuanced interplay between symbolic valuation and functional limitation, higher education institutions occupy a potentially transformative position in promoting linguistic diversity. Universities can intervene not merely as sites of language documentation but as active agents of language maintenance through curriculum design, policy formation, and cultural programming. Embedding local language content into coursework—whether through elective modules, integrative projects, or community based learning initiatives—can enhance the visibility and academic legitimacy of regional languages (May, 2018; McCarty & Wyman, 2019).

Furthermore, hosting cultural events, language festivals, and research colloquia centered on Acehese traditions would not only celebrate linguistic heritage but also create structured domains of use beyond informal gatherings. Such institutional support can help counteract domain restriction by fostering environments where the heritage language is both valued and practiced within formal academic spaces.

Recent scholarship underscores the importance of *institutional ecology* for language sustainability, arguing that policy support, pedagogical innovation, and community partnerships are critical to reversing or mitigating language shift (Hornberger & King, 2020; Grenoble & Whaley, 2021). In the context of Aceh, linking university initiatives with community language programs, local government language policies, and digital media platforms may further expand opportunities for intergenerational language transmission. Accordingly, the role of higher education extends beyond passive recognition of linguistic diversity to active cultivation of multilingual literacies that honor regional heritage while equipping students for participation in national and global arenas.

6. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that university students in Lhokseumawe demonstrate generally positive attitudes toward the Acehese language, particularly in the affective and identity related dimensions. Participants consistently expressed pride in their linguistic heritage and perceived Acehese as an essential marker of ethnic belonging, familial intimacy, and cultural continuity. In the cognitive dimension, students acknowledged the cultural and historical significance of the language, recognizing it as an integral component of Acehese identity. These positive evaluations suggest that, at the level of symbolic attachment, the Acehese language retains substantial vitality among educated youth.

However, the behavioral dimension presents a more complex sociolinguistic reality. Despite strong emotional attachment and positive beliefs about the importance of preserving the language, its actual use among participants is largely confined to informal and familial domains. Within academic settings, particularly at Universitas Bumi Persada, Bahasa

Indonesia predominates as the primary medium of instruction and formal interaction, while English occupies a prestigious position in academic discourse, especially among students in the English Education program.

The restricted functional distribution of Acehnese to home environments and casual peer communication reflects what Fishman (1991) conceptualizes as domain based language shift, wherein a heritage language remains symbolically valued but loses ground in institutional and formal spheres. Such patterns may represent early indicators of gradual functional reduction if not supported by deliberate maintenance efforts.

This discrepancy between positive affective attitudes and limited practical usage underscores a critical tension in contemporary multilingual contexts: symbolic loyalty does not automatically translate into sustained intergenerational transmission or expanded functional domains. The hierarchical positioning of languages—Acehnese for intimacy, Indonesian for national integration, and English for global mobility—creates a stratified linguistic ecology in which pragmatic considerations often outweigh cultural attachment. If this pattern persists, Acehnese risks being increasingly compartmentalized, potentially weakening its long term vitality in urban centers.

Although the present study is based on a small and purposively selected sample of nine students, its findings offer meaningful preliminary insights into how educated youth conceptualize and negotiate their linguistic identities. As exploratory research, it contributes to the growing body of sociolinguistic scholarship on regional language sustainability in Indonesia, particularly within higher education contexts. Nevertheless, broader generalizations cannot be drawn without further empirical evidence.

Future research should involve larger and more diverse participant groups across multiple universities in Aceh, incorporating mixed method designs that combine quantitative attitude surveys with indepth ethnographic observation. Longitudinal approaches would also be valuable in examining whether current patterns represent stable bilingual practices or transitional phases toward language shift. Through more comprehensive investigation, scholars can better understand the evolving sociolinguistic dynamics of Acehnese and formulate evidence based strategies for its maintenance in academic and public domains.

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