

## **Language Vitality of the Sihan Community in Sarawak, Malaysia**

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**Abstract.** This paper discusses the language vitality of the Sihan or Sian community in Sarawak. Vitality of language refers to the ability of a language to live or grow. The language vitality of the Sihans was investigated using a field survey, observation and interviews. The output of the field survey was analysed using the nine criteria of language vitality, outlined in the UNESCO Expert Meeting in March, 2003 (Lewis 2006, 4; Brenzinger et al. 2003). The nine criteria include intergenerational language transmission, absolute number of speakers, proportion of speakers within the total population, trends in existing language domains, response to new domains and media, materials for language education and literacy, language attitudes and policies, community members' attitudes toward their own language and the amount and quality of documentation (Brenzinger et al. 2003, 7–17). The data from the survey were supported by the data obtained from observation and interviews. The findings of the study reveals that the Sihan language is under threat as it does not fulfil UNESCO's nine criteria of language vitality.

**Keywords and phrases:** language vitality, ethnolinguistic vitality, Sihan or Sian language, endangered language, language domains

### **Introduction: The Sihan or Sian**

The Sihan people are indigenous to Sarawak, a Malaysian state on the island of Borneo. They belong to the Austronesian group of speakers and are similar in appearance to other indigenous groups in Sarawak. The Sihans are associated with the Penan or Punan group, also indigenous to Sarawak. In Sandin's note (1985, 70), the Sihan people pointed out that in the past "the Kayan called us [Sihan] Penan, while we called ourselves Punan". The Sihans likely call themselves Punan because they once lived a nomadic life. Aichner (1958, 742) stated that the changing of the group's name from Punan to Penan reflects their change of status from a nomadic to a non-nomadic people. Their preference for the term Punan, on the other hand, is likely due to the fact that they once lived a nomadic life.

**Figure 1.** An elderly Sihan couple

Even though the Sihan consider themselves Punans, it is important to note that not all Punan ethnic groups are related to the Sihan people. As reported in Sandin (1985, 70), "We speak the same language with Punan Bushang and Punan Aput, and not with other Punans.<sup>1</sup> We consider the Punan Tanah 'ethnically' ours [sic]. We eat the same food and follow the same custom, though our language is not the same".

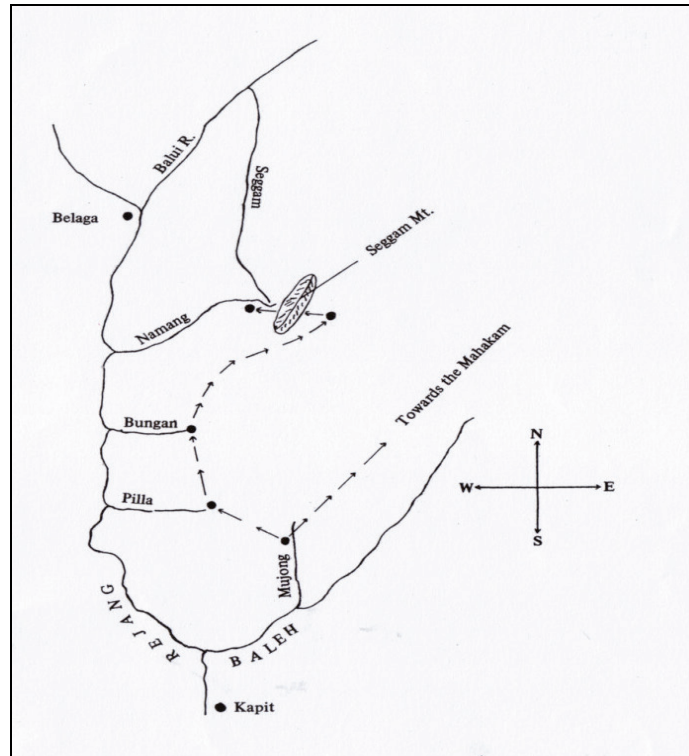
The Sihan people can be found in Belaga, a town situated in the Belaga Division of Sarawak (formerly the Seventh Division) located along the Rajang River. They live in houses that they rent from local Malays in a village known as Kampung Melayu in Belaga.

**Figure 2.** Belaga in Sarawak

Source: <http://www.asiatour.com/malaysia/e-11sara/em-sar10.htm>

Originally, the Sihan people lived in longhouses near the Namang River at Seggam/Senggam Mountain (Bukit Seggam/Senggam) across the Rajang River (see Figure 3). The interviews in the current study reveal that they came from the southern part of the remote area of Belaga before they settled near the Namang River. They migrated from their original settlement in Mujong near the Baleh River (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3.** The migration of the Sihan people from Mujong to the Namang River and Belaga



Source: Sandin (1985, 69)

From Mujong, they moved to the north towards the Namang River and then to Belaga [refer also to Sihan ethnohistory and settlement in Kedit (1992, 44–45)]. The Sihans are now settled in the town of Belaga but still commute to the longhouses in Sungai Namang on certain occasions, such as Christmas, the Harvest Festival (*Pesta Menuai*) and burial ceremonies.

### **The concept of ethnolinguistic vitality**

The evaluation of ethnolinguistic vitality involves a study of specific social factors that influence the life force and development of a community (either majority or minority) and the native language of that particular community. The ethnolinguistic vitality model suggested by Giles, Bourhis and Taylor (1977, 307–348) proposes the societal variable, which stipulates the structural factor that encourages or hinders the preservation of societal language in the long term. They cluster this variable into three factors: status, demography and institutional support. The model argues that the greater the ethnolinguistic group vitality, the more hope there is that the people will preserve the social identity and their native language in the life domain. On the other hand, an ethnolinguistic group with no or low vitality will likely lose the uniqueness of its group identity and the mother tongue.

At the UNESCO Expert Meeting in March 2003, nine criteria were defined for ascertaining the vitality of a language (reported in Lewis 2006, 4; and Brenzinger et al. 2003, 7–17); these factors will be used to evaluate the vitality of the Sihan language in the current study<sup>2</sup>:

- Factor 1: Intergenerational language transmission,
- Factor 2: Absolute number of speakers,
- Factor 3: Proportion of speakers within the total population,
- Factor 4: Trends in existing language domains,
- Factor 5: Response to new domains and media,
- Factor 6: Materials for language education and literacy,
- Factor 7: Language attitudes and policies,
- Factor 8: Community members' attitudes toward their own language, and
- Factor 9: Amount and quality of documentation.

### **Methodology**

The survey of language vitality in this paper used data collected through questionnaires, observation and interviews. The questionnaire was based on the use of the Sihan language in certain domains. In the survey, nine domains were considered: family, neighbours, religion, customs, agriculture, traditional medicine, place of work, education and business or market. Altogether 60 questions were developed to correspond to these nine domains. The survey was distributed to 71 Sihan volunteers. The data obtained from the survey were complemented by the data from observations and interviews.

The data from the questionnaire were processed using the Social Sciences Statistical Package (SPSS), and the output, as stated earlier, was analysed using the nine criteria of language vitality, outlined in the UNESCO Expert Meeting in March 2003 (Lewis 2006, 4; Brenzinger et al. 2003). The following discussion examines the outputs of the survey, observation and interviews that were carried out in this study.

### **Intergenerational Language Transmission, Absolute Number of Speakers and Proportion of Speakers within the Total Population**

In Figure 4, Gordon's (2005) notation, which is based on Wurm (2000), illustrates that the number of Sihan people is 50.

**Figure 4.** General information of Sihan language

## **Sian**

A language of [Malaysia \(Sarawak\)](#)

ISO 639-3: [spg](#)

<a href="#">Population</a>	50 (2000 S. Wurm).
<a href="#">Region</a>	Belaga, 7th Division.
<a href="#">Language map</a>	<a href="#">Brunei and Malaysia - Sarawak</a> , reference number 48
<a href="#">Alternate names</a>	Sihan
<a href="#">Dialects</a>	May be intelligible with Bukitan [ <a href="#">bkn</a> ], Ukit [ <a href="#">umi</a> ], Punan Batu 1 [ <a href="#">pnm</a> ].
<a href="#">Classification</a>	<a href="#">Austronesian</a> , <a href="#">Malayo-Polynesian</a> , <a href="#">North Borneo</a> , <a href="#">Melanau-Kajang</a> , <a href="#">Kajang</a>
<a href="#">Comments</a>	Nearly extinct.

*Source:* Gordon (2005)

These data can only be used as a general guide, as the field survey of the current study produced a different result. The number of Sihan people based on the field survey is 218. In fact, the number of speakers is difficult to determine because different sources employ different criteria in data collection. In addition to the consensus model used by Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) (Gordon 2005), which was used in this study, and the Malaysian government's census data based on ethnic groups, the researcher visited the longhouse of this community and noted the number of speakers manually.

Although the UNESCO criteria indicates that the number of language speakers does not necessarily signify that language vitality is endangered, "*ceteris paribus*, a smaller group is likely to be under greater pressure than a larger group" (Lewis 2006, 12). Given the small number of speakers of the Sihan language, its language vitality is likely endangered. As Brenzinger et al. (2003, 8) point out,

A small population is much more vulnerable to decimation (e.g., by disease, warfare, or natural disaster) than a larger one. A small language group may also merge with a neighbouring group, losing its own language and culture.

Considering the ratio of speakers to the overall population, the Sihan language is likely situated at Grade 5 of the language endangerment scale (safe: all speak the language).<sup>3</sup> In the extended UNESCO criteria (Appendix 1), Grade 5 refers to the status of a language that is still secured because all speakers are still using it. The factor of language transmission between generations also demonstrates that all informants who are married and have children agree that the Sihan language is the language that will be passed down to their children.

**Table 1.** Is the Sihan language your child/children's language?

	Frequency	%
Yes	39	54.9
No	1*	1.4
Not related (state reason)**	31	43.7
Total	71	100

Remarks: \*Two informants are married to Tanjong people. Nevertheless, in this survey only a couple passed the Sihan language to their child or children. The language that is being transferred to the child or children of the other couple is most probably Tanjong language, and not Sihan language. \*\*Informant is not married.

Most of the Sihan informants believe that the Sihan language should be taught in the home to the younger generations because according to them, language is the identity of a people and it needs to be taught and inherited.

**Table 2.** The Sihan language is not taught in the home

	Frequency	%
Agree	1	1.4
Uncertain	2	2.8
Disagree	35	49.3
Strongly disagree	33	46.5
Total	71	100

From another perspective, based on Brenzingers et al.'s (2003, 7) view, the Sihan language is likely "stable yet threatened (5-)". "Stable yet threatened" refers to a language that is spoken in most contexts by all generations with unbroken intergenerational transmission. However, multilingualism among the speakers of the native and one or more dominant language(s) have begun to penetrate certain important communication contexts. The dominant language in this context refers

to the language that has power or influence over other languages. In this case, the dominant language is Malay or *bahasa Melayu*.

The next section will discuss the stable yet threatened position of the language, the bilingual factor among the Sihan speakers and the role of the dominant language in specific contexts.

### Trends in existing language domains

Domain refers to the connection between the choice of language and the sphere and general activities of a particular society. According to Fishman (1972b, 15), specifically, domains are defined in terms of institutional contexts or socio-ecological co-occurrences. They attempt to designate the major clusters of interaction situations that occur in particular multilingual settings. Domains enable us to understand that language choice and topic are related to widespread socio-cultural norms and expectations.

The division of the domains for language use in a society is based on all social aspects of that particular society; therefore, the number of domains in various societies is not the same. For example, a society that lives on a paddy plantation will definitely have different domains than the urban society, whose members are government or private sector workers. In this survey, nine domains were constructed: family, neighbours, religion, custom, agriculture, traditional medicine, place of work, education and business or market.

### *Family, society, food and agriculture domains*

The Sihan language is widely used in the family, society, food and agricultural domains in the Sihan society (see Table 3).

**Table 3.** The use of the Sihan language in the family, society, food and agricultural domains

Language	Scale/ Domain	1 Never	2 Seldom	3 Sometimes	4 Frequently	5 Most of the time	n
Sihan	Family	2 2.8%	–	12 16.9%	6 8.5%	51 71.8%	71
	Society	3 4.2%	4 5.6%	4 5.6%	16 22.5%	44 62.0%	71
	Food	10 14.1%	13 18.3%	6 8.5%	7 9.9%	35 49.3%	71
	Agriculture	22 31.0%	3 4.2%	8 11.3%	2 2.8%	36 50.7%	71

The domains in which Sihan is reported as being widely used are non-formal and personal domains.

***Religious, customs and traditional medicine domains***

Nonetheless, there is a peculiar pattern in the use of the language in three domains: religious, customs and traditional medicine. The functional load and the functional transparency of the Sihan language in the religious, customs and traditional medicine domains illustrate change. The change in the pattern of language use in these three domains is closely connected to changes in the society.

First, there has been a change in religion. Before the British rule (1841–1962), Sarawak was ruled by the Sultanate of Brunei. During this era, many of the native people, such as the Malays, Melanaus and Kedayans, lived near the coastal and upriver areas and embraced Islam. However, when James Brooke succeeded in taking Sarawak from the Sultan of Brunei on 24 September 1841, Sarawak came under Brooke's administration. It was during the Brooke dynasty that Christianity widely spread to the indigenous peoples, including the Sihans, in the remote areas of Sarawak. The spread was intensive, and the indigenous people, including the Sihans, embraced Christianity, indeed until the present [for more detailed information on this intensive missionary activity, please refer to Wan Kamal and Noranizah (2010, 229–234), Payne (1994) and Minos (2000)].

As a result, although the religious domain is said to be the strongest domain in which to preserve the use of a native language, this is not the case in this community. Table 4 illustrates that the language use in the religious domain for the Sihan group is decreasing.

**Table 4.** The use of the Sihan language in the religious domain

Language	Scale/Domain	1 Never	2 Seldom	3 Sometimes	4 Frequently	5 Most of the time	n
Sihan	Whilst talking at the holy place	9 (12.7%)	7 (9.9%)	7 (9.9%)	0 (0.0%)	48 (67.6%)	71 (100%)
	Whilst talking during a religious ceremony	10 (14.1%)	6 (8.5%)	7 (9.9%)	0 (0.0%)	48 (67.6%)	71 (100%)
	Whilst talking during religious lecture	10 (14.1%)	1 (1.4%)	5 (7.0%)	7 (9.9%)	48 (67.6%)	71 (100%)

(continued)



**Table 4.** (continued)

Language	Scale/Domain	1 Never	2 Seldom	3 Sometimes	4 Frequently	5 Most of the time	n
	Whilst praying	10 (14.1%)	1 (1.4%)	5 (7.0%)	7 (9.9%)	48 (67.6%)	71 (100%)
	Whilst reciting request during prayer	8 (11.3%)	1 (1.4%)	5 (7.0%)	7 (9.9%)	50 (70.4%)	71 (100%)
	Whilst reciting request / others recites at the burial ground	9 (12.7%)	1 (1.4%)	6 (8.5%)	6 (8.5%)	49 (69.0%)	71 (100%)

Although the indigenous language is still widely used in the religious domain, the data also indicate that its use is mixed with other languages. Why is this happening? The interview results reveal that almost all informants interviewed have embraced Christianity. The Bible that they use has been translated from English to the Iban language; therefore, inevitably, the Iban language has played an important role in the religious domain in general. The study also reveals that the pastor, who has specifically been brought from Bintulu to the church in Belaga, uses the Iban language to preach sermons and conduct prayers. Almost all informants stated that they understand the Iban language used in the religious ceremonies at the church. The religious domain that involves the use of the Sihan language is only for private religious use. Nevertheless, the position of the Iban language in the religious domain cannot be considered to be a dummy H language, like the Mandarin language in the Singaporean Chinese community (Platt and Platt 1975) or the Arabic language, which is considered a superposed H language among the Muslims in Malaysia and Singapore (Norah 2003, 103).<sup>4</sup> The Iban language also serves as a lingua franca in many parts of Borneo.

For the customs and traditional medicine domains, Table 5 illustrates that there is a similar pattern to that of the religious domain.

**Table 5.** The use of the Sihan language in the customs and traditional medicine domains

Language	Scale/ Domain	1 Never	2 Seldom	3 Sometimes	4 Frequently	5 Most of the time	n
Sihan	Custom	24 33.8%	6 8.5%	8 11.3%	6 8.5%	27 38.0%	71
	Traditional medicine	23 32.4%	1 1.4%	6 8.5%	8 11.3%	33 46.5%	71

The study reveals that the Sihan language is no longer used in these two domains because the customs of this group and their practice of traditional medicine began significantly deteriorating when the members of the group embraced Christianity. This phenomenon can be traced back to the era before the Europeans came to Sarawak, during which most of the indigenous groups practised their own religions. The practice of paganism or animism encouraged them to hold on to their spiritual power and respected the elements of nature such as forests, mountains, hills, rivers, animals and fields, particularly paddy fields. To the people, the paddy was a symbol of strength, spiritual courage, happiness, and health, as well as a promise of good luck and good future for all individuals and for the group that protects the spirit of the paddy. However, most of the traditional practices that used the Sihan language, especially those that are archaic, such as spiritual healing, are no longer practised in this community.

Clearly, the life pattern of this society has changed over time. The inevitable change that has permeated the society has slowly eliminated the traditional faith that it held for so long. Based on this study, although there are some Sihan people who still uphold the old customs and traditions, as a group, they no longer practise them. This is occurring because the Sihan people are now Christians, and the old customs are considered to be in conflict with the teachings of Christianity. In addition, although a majority of the people have stayed in the village and are still involved in agriculture, the younger generations have received wide exposure to education and modern ways of life as a result of the government's effort to educate the Sihan people. This has contributed to the improvement of the educational level of the Sihan people.

### ***Neighbourhood, place of work and education domains***

This section discusses the use of language in the neighbourhood, work place and education (school) domains. The information regarding work place and school in this study does not mean that the informants are working in those places, only that the informants visited these places. This is because, based on the study and survey, most of the speakers do not work in government offices. They work on their own (perhaps in a paddy field), work at other places or do not work at all. Among the 71 Sihan informants, three work in government, 16 work on their own and 52 do not work.

In the neighbourhood, place of work and education domains, the pattern of language use has changed. This is because all three of these domains involve speakers from other groups in the settlement area or near the Sihan settlement area. Furthermore, the current cultural and societal clash as well as the mix of different ethnic groups in the Belaga district has resulted in the Sihan people's mixing with other groups in their neighbourhoods. The Sihan settlement in

Belaga is situated in the Belaga Malay Village area. The Sihan people are also exposed to groups of speakers from other areas of Sarawak, for instance, Orang Ulu, Kenyah, Kayan, Penan, Kejaman and other groups who visit Belaga for shopping or business (Belaga is the centre of administration for the surrounding communities). The Sihan people are also introduced to other languages when visiting Bintulu or other places. The influx of people from outside Sarawak to Belaga also has introduced this group to other groups. In short, the neighbourhoods surrounding the Sihan people are the crossroads of many languages. Thus, the pattern of language use shows significant transformation, which is parallel to the changes in neighbourhoods, work places and school domains.

From a similar perspective, the society is exposed to school environments and offices (work places) that involve students and teachers or government officials from inner and outer Sarawak. As these two domains are formal, the language used is the Malay language.

There is a primary national school, a primary Chinese national-type school and a secondary school in Belaga that serve as learning centres for the children around Belaga. Abun Matu Primary National School is the only primary school in Belaga. Twenty-three Sihan students attended this school in 2009, while 20 of them attended the Belaga Secondary School. Seventeen students have completed their Malaysian Certificate of Education (*Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia*). Another two have completed their Malaysian Higher School Certificate (*Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia*). Two students completed only primary school. The language of instruction used in the formal school domain is Malay and English is taught as a subject. In the informal domain, there are a few languages being used, i.e., Malay, local Malay and other indigenous languages such as Iban, Kayan and Kenyah. Apart from these two domains, interactions with tourists from western countries and exposure to electronic media have resulted in the Sihan people being exposed to the English language and other languages.

**Table 6.** Language use in the neighbourhood, place of work and education domains

Language	Scale/ Domain	1	2	3	4	5	n
		Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Frequently	Most of the time	
Sihan	Neighbour- hood	36 50.7%	15 21.1%	18 25.4%	1 1.4%	1 1.4%	71
	Place of work	57 80.3%	9 12.7%	2 2.8%	2 2.8%	1 1.4%	71
	Education	50 70.4%	21 29.6%	–	–	–	71

As a result, as shown in Table 6, the use of Sihan in the neighbourhood, place of work and primary education domains is low. This indicates that the Sihan language is no longer the primary choice of the people (although it is still being used) because other languages are also being used.

In the Sihan community, apart from the Sihan language, the local Malay language or Sarawak Malay dialect is the language of choice for Sihan speakers. This is evident from the data in Table 7.

**Table 7.** If not Sihan, which is your preferred language?

Language Choice	Frequency	%
Local Malay language	70	98.6
Kayan language	–	–
Other local language	–	–
Other language than above	1	1.4
Total	71	100%

Apart from the Sarawak Malay dialect, the study reveals that most of the Sihan communities are also fluent in the standard Malay language, even older speakers. The use of standard Malay is closely related to the development of electronic media, particularly television. The existence of television, radio and electricity enables the community to enjoy a more modern life style. Although only a minority of them own mobile phones, this form of communication is well known among Sihan speakers. The standard Malay language is also introduced to the children of this group when they go to school, particularly government schools, which use standard Malay as the language of instruction.

Like many other indigenous Sarawak speakers, Sihan speakers can also speak other indigenous languages; for instance, the most popular language in Belaga is Kayan. Nonetheless, in the neighbourhood domain, which features the use of other indigenous languages, it seems that the language shift that sometimes occurs does not become a permanent second language, as most of the speakers in the community are stable bilinguals.

Stable bilingualism means that the mother tongue is so stable that the use of other language is instrumental. This means that the second language that is learned and used does not affect language identity as it is purely functional. In the context of this study, this bilingualism is generated by the factor of multilingualism, or speakers being able to speak more than two languages. For example, according to Kedit (1992, 47), the Sihan leader is able to communicate in Kayan, Kejaman, Sekapan, Lahanan, Penan Talun, Kenyah, Malay, Bukitan and Iban – a total of nine languages not including Sihan, and other adult men are also able to speak

other languages although the women know fewer. They can shift to other native languages while communicating without any problems. In certain situations, there is also a phenomenon in which two speakers communicate using different languages. For example, when an Iban speaker and a Sihan speaker meet, the Iban speaker speaks Iban and the Sihan speaker speaks Sihan, and both understand each other well without either having to change languages. The researcher experienced this situation when she interviewed an Iban speaker who spoke to her in Iban although the researcher was using the Sarawak Malay dialect. This also means that although the Sarawak Malay dialect is the language of choice after Sihan, the choice of the second language depends on the environment of the settlement and those involved in verbal exchanges.

This stable bilingualism is also apparent in informant communication. Table 8 indicates the use of the Sihan language when the informant needs to communicate with the non-Sihans in the neighbourhood domain. In the neighbourhood domain, almost a quarter of the informants use the Sihan language all the time while talking with their neighbours even though those neighbours are non-Sihans. In this case, if the Sihan people use the Sihan language, their respective neighbours tend to use the Sihan language as well or their own mother tongue.

**Table 8.** Language use by the Sihan people when talking with non-Sihan neighbours

Language	Scale/ Domain	1 Never	2 Seldom	3 Sometimes	4 Frequently	5 Most of the time	n
Sihan	Talking to older non-Sihan of neighbouring village	37 (52.1%)	1 (1.4%)	16 22.5%	2 (2.8%)	15 (21.1%)	71 (100%)
	Talking to younger non-Sihan of neighbouring village	47 (66.2%)	2 (2.8%)	17 (24.0%)	0 (0%)	5 (7.0%)	71 (100%)
	Talking to peer non-Sihan of neighbouring village	49 (69%)	2 (2.8)	18 (25.4)	0 (0%)	2 (2.8%)	71 (100%)
	Talking to older non-Sihan of other village	51 (71.8%)	1 (1.4%)	18 (25.4%)	0 (0%)	1 (1.45%)	71 (100%)
	Talking to younger non-Sihan of other village	51 (71.8%)	1 (1.4%)	18 (25.4%)	0 (0%)	1 (1.45%)	71 (100%)
	Talking to peer non-Sihan of other village	50 (70.4%)	1 (1.4%)	18 (25.4%)	0 (0%)	2 (2.8%)	71 (100%)

Based on the current study, the position of the Sihan language in Factor 4 of the UNESCO criteria, Trends in Existing Language Domains (Brenzinger et al. 2003, 9–10), can be summarised based on Table 9.

**Table 9.** Loss of existing language use domain

Degree of Endangerment	Grade	Domains and Functions
Universal use	5	The language is used in all domains and for all functions.
Multilingual parity	4	Two or more languages may be used in most social domains and for most functions.
Dwindling domains	3	The language is used in home domains and for many functions, but the dominant language begins to penetrate even home domains.
Limited or formal domains	2	The language is used in limited social domains and for several functions.
Highly limited domains	1	The language is used only in very restricted domains and for very few functions.
Extinct	0	The language is not used in any domain or for any function.

*Source:* Brenzinger et al. (2003, 10)

Based on Table 9, it is suggested that the Sihan language falls into Grade 3 of the language endangerment scale, that is, the dwindling domains (the language is used in home domains and for many functions, but the dominant language begins to penetrate even home domains). In other words, the Sihan language is still being used at home and for many functions, but the dominant language, i.e., Malay, has begun to penetrate these spheres.

### **Governmental and institutional language attitudes and policies**

Language policy is the law that is related to the construction and implementation of language use in a particular language community. In Malaysia, the language policy is outlined in the Malaysia Constitution. Article 152 (*Federal Constitution* 2008, 186–188) states that the national and official language as well as the language of instruction in education is the Malay language. The same article also states that the Malaysian government does not prohibit its people from learning and using their own mother tongues. This means that all native languages may be used in communication (*Federal Constitution* 2008, 186–187).

When the Malay language was made the official national language as well as the medium of instruction in schools, the Sihan language, like many minority languages or non-dominant languages in Malaysia, experienced a deterioration of functional load in the public domain. This happened because the language no longer functions in the main public domain. Unlike the Iban language, the Sihan language was not chosen as one of the subjects under the Pupil's Own Language (POL)<sup>5</sup> scheme.

The Sihan language, which is not used in the public domain, indirectly suffers a deterioration or low functional load. This language also fails in strengthening its functional transparency, that is, the degree of autonomy and control that is owned by the language in specific domains. This is because the language is not given any function in the public domain. The Sihan language only functions as a vernacular language that has limited functions in the informal domain, which indicates that this language does not have power in the society.

Thus, Factor 7 of the UNESCO criteria, Governmental and Institutional Language Attitudes and Policies (Brenzinger et al. 2003, 13), likely positions the Sihan language in the context of threatened language vitality.

**Table 10.** Governmental and institutional language attitudes and policies

Degree of Support	Grade	Official Attitudes Toward Language
Equal support	5	All languages are protected.
Differentiated support	4	Minority languages are protected primarily as the language of the private domains. The use of the language is prestigious.
Passive assimilation	3	No explicit policy exists for minority languages; the dominant language prevails in the public domain.
Active assimilation	2	Government encourages assimilation of the dominant language. There is no protection for minority languages.
Forced assimilation	1	The dominant language is the sole official language, but non-dominant languages are neither recognised nor protected.
Prohibition	0	Minority languages are prohibited.

*Source:* Brenzinger et al. (2003, 13)

Based on Table 10, the Sihan language is situated between Grade 4 and Grade 3. In this case, it is true that minority languages are protected primarily as the languages of private domains; however, at the same time, the dominant language prevails in the public domain. This means that there is some degree of support from the government and that, at the same time, there is passive assimilation that occurs because the standard Malay language is the language of the public domain.

### **The community's attitude towards their own language**

The Sihan people admit that they are neither embarrassed by nor dislike their mother tongue even while communicating with other indigenous groups (see Tables 11a and 11b).

**Table 11a.** Dislike for speaking the Sihan language (n = 71)

	Sihan Language	
	Frequency	%
Totally agree	–	–
Disagree	33	46.5
Totally disagree	38	53.5
Total	71	100

**Table 11b.** Embarrassed when speaking the Sihan language (n = 71)

	Sihan Language	
	Frequency	%
Totally agree	–	–
Disagree	33	46.5
Totally disagree	38	53.5
Total	71	100

The attitudes regarding continued use of the Sihan language are also very positive; 90.1% of the informants stated that they will continue using the Sihan language in the informal domain, and 56.3% agreed or totally agreed with using the language in the formal domain. Nonetheless, when questioned about the future of the Sihan language, most of them are unsure whether the language will be in existence permanently or become extinct (see Tables 12a and 12b).

**Table 12a.** Sihan language will exist permanently

	Sihan Language	
	Frequency	%
Totally agree	5	7.0
Agree	3	4.2
Uncertain	52	73.2
Disagree	8	11.3
Totally disagree	3	4.2
Total	71	100

**Table 12b.** Sihan language will become extinct and lost

	Sihan Language	
	Frequency	%
Totally agree	1	1.4
Agree	1	1.4
Uncertain	57	83.1
Disagree	6	8.5
Totally disagree	6	8.5
Total	71	100

Speakers' attitudes towards their own language are an important factor in defending language vitality. In this case, the Sihan language seems to have faithful speakers, and this will greatly influence the vitality of this language in the community.

### Other factors

The Sihan language does not fulfil the criteria of Factors 6 and 9 on the UNESCO scale. With regard to Factor 6 (Material for language education and literacy), the community is observed to have no materials or traditional literacy and this has resulted in the language being situated on the lowest scale of Grade 0



(No orthography available to the community). Factor 9 (Amount and Quality of Documentation) has also not been fulfilled by this language, as the analysis indicates that no written documents exist in this language. In other words, this language is situated at Grade 0 on the scale (No material exists). The Sihan language does not fulfil Factor 5 (Response to new domains and media) as it is only at Grade 1, Minimal (the language is used only in a few new domains). It might be used in a new domain that is more private in form, such as the short message service (SMS) of mobile phones, but not a public domain such as the media, for example, radio and television. The Iban language is used in the local radio programmes, while the Malay, Mandarin, Tamil and English languages are used in television programmes.

### **Conclusion**

The vitality of the Sihan language has likely deteriorated because the nine vitality factors proposed by UNESCO have not been fulfilled. The functional load and functional transparency of the Sihan language are low or almost non-existent. In other words, although the Sihan language is used in all of the societal domains, these domains are irrelevant or unimportant domains (Crystal 2000, 83). Language vitality is increasingly threatened when the functional load is decreasing in many of the domains, particularly in the public domain. This is exactly what has happened to the Sihan language. It can also be concluded that the decreasing vitality of the Sihan language is due to the fact that the number of its speakers is declining. The fact that the Sihan language does not have orthography and documentation is also disadvantageous to its vitality. It makes it difficult for the language to be considered a prestige language. Furthermore, increasing numbers of encounters with outsiders has raised the number of bilinguals/multilinguals among the Sihan people, causing the decline in the use of the Sihan language in everyday activities.

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## Notes

1. The other Punans in this context are Punan Losong, Punan Apan, Punan Silat, Punan Gang, Punan Suai, Punan Jelalong, Punan Serungo, Punan Nyirong and Punan Niah.
2. Please refer to Appendix 1 for details on the nine criteria.
3. "All speak the language" in this study refers to 71 informants (33 percent of a total of 218 Sihan speakers) sampled who agreed to answer the questionnaire, be interviewed and be observed.
4. In the context of diglossia, Platt and Platt (1975), who elucidate the forms of Mandarin language in the Singaporean Chinese community, state that Mandarin is learned but not used in daily interactions. This is also true of Arabic, which is considered a superposed H language among Muslims because Arabic is not used for daily communication. The difference is that although the Chinese are not using Mandarin in their daily interaction and the Malays are not using Arabic, most of the Sihan people are able to speak and understand the Iban language fluently.
5. A non-dominant language can be taught as a subject in schools if there is a request from at least fifteen pupils who are speakers of that mother tongue. Among the non-dominant languages that are taught under this system are Mandarin, Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu and Iban (Asmah 1982, 112).

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## **Appendix 1**

### Language Vitality and Endangerment

#### UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages

Document submitted to the International Expert Meeting on UNESCO  
Programme Safeguarding of Endangered Languages  
Paris, 10–12 March 2003

### **4.2 Language Vitality Assessment**

#### **Factor 1: Intergenerational Language Transmission**

Six degrees of endangerment may be distinguished with regards to Intergenerational Language Transmission:

Safe (5): The language is spoken by all generations. There is no sign of linguistic threat from any other language, and the intergenerational transmission of the language seems uninterrupted.

Stable yet threatened (5-): The language is spoken in most contexts by all generations with unbroken intergenerational transmission, yet multilingualism in the native language and one or more dominant language(s) has usurped certain important communication contexts. Note that multilingualism alone is not necessarily a threat to languages.

Unsafe (4): Most but not all children or families of a particular community speak their language as their first language, but it may be restricted to specific social domains (such as at home where children interact with their parents and grandparents).

Definitively endangered (3): The language is no longer being learned as the mother tongue by children in the home. The youngest speakers are thus of the parental generation. At this stage, parents may still speak their language to their children, but the children do not typically respond in the language.

Severely endangered (2): The language is spoken only by grandparents and older generations; while the parent generation may still understand the language, they typically do not speak it to their children.

Critically endangered (1): The youngest speakers are in the great-grandparental generation, and the language is not used for everyday interactions. These older people often remember only part of the language but do not use it because there may not be anyone to speak with.

Extinct (0): There is no one who can speak or remember the language.

Degree of Endangerment	Grade	Speaker Population
Safe	5	The language is used by all ages, from children up.
Unsafe	4	The language is used by some children in all domains; it is used by all children in limited domains
Definitively endangered	3	The language is used mostly by the parental generation and up.
Severely endangered	2	The language is used mostly by the grandparental generation and up.
Critically endangered	1	The language is used mostly by very few speakers of the great-grandparental generation
Extinct	0	There exists no speaker.

### **Factor 2: Absolute Number of Speakers**

It is impossible to provide a valid interpretation of absolute numbers, but a small speech community is always at risk. A small population is much more vulnerable to decimation (e.g., by disease, warfare, or natural disaster) than a larger one. A small language group may also merge with a neighbouring group, losing its own language and culture.

### **Factor 3: Proportion of Speakers Within the Total Population**

The number of speakers in relation to the total population of a group is a significant indicator of language vitality, where "group" may refer to the ethnic, religious, regional, or national group with which the speaker community identifies. The following scale can be used to appraise degrees of endangerment:

Degree of Endangerment	Grade	Proportion of Speakers Within the Total Reference Population
Safe	5	All speak the language.
Unsafe	4	Nearly all speak the language.
Definitely endangered	3	A majority speak the language.
Severely endangered	2	A minority speak the language.
Critically endangered	1	Very few speak the language.
Extinct	0	None speak the language.

#### **Factor 4: Trends in Existing Language Domains**

Where, with whom, and the range of topics for which a language is used directly affects whether it will be transmitted to the next generation.

Universal use (5): The language of the ethnolinguistic group is the language of interaction, identity, thinking, creativity, and entertainment and is actively used in all discourse domains for all purposes.

Multilingual parity (4): One or more dominant languages, rather than the language of the ethnolinguistic group, is/are the primary language(s) in most official domains: government, public offices, and educational institutions. The language in question, however, may well continue to be integral to a number of public domains, especially in traditional religious institutions, local stores, and those places where members of the community socialise. The coexistence of the dominant and non-dominant languages results in speakers' using each language for a different function (diglossia), whereby the non-dominant language is used in informal and home contexts and the dominant language is used in official and public contexts. Speakers may consider the dominant language to be the language of social and economic opportunity. However, older members of the community may continue to use only their own minority language. Note that multilingualism, common throughout the world, does not necessarily lead to language loss.

Dwindling domains (3): The non-dominant language loses ground and, at home, parents begin to use the dominant language in their everyday interactions with their children, and children become semi-speakers of their own language (receptive bilinguals). Parents and older members of the community tend to be productively bilingual in the dominant and indigenous languages: they understand and speak both. Bilingual children may exist in families where the indigenous language is actively used.

Limited or formal domains (2): The non-dominant language is used only in highly formal domains, especially in ritual and administration. The language may

also still be used at the community centre, at festivals, and at ceremonial occasions where these older members of the community have a chance to meet.

The limited domain may also include homes where grandparents and other older extended family members reside and other traditional gathering places of the elderly. Many people can understand the language but cannot speak it.

Highly limited domain (1): The non-dominant language is used in very restricted domains on special occasions, usually by very few individuals in a community, e.g., ritual leaders on ceremonial occasions. Some other individuals may remember at least some of the language (rememberers).

Extinct (0): The language is not spoken at any place at any time.

Degree of Endangerment	Grade	Domains and Functions
Universal use	5	The language is used in all domains and for all functions.
Multilingual parity	4	Two or more languages may be used in most social domains and for most functions.
Dwindling Domains	3	The language is used in home domains and for many functions, but the dominant language begins to penetrate even home domains.
Limited or Formal Domains	2	The language is used in limited social domains and for several functions.
Highly limited Domains	1	The language is used only in very restricted domains and for a very few functions.
Extinct	0	The language is not used in any domain or for any function.

### **Factor 5: Response to New Domains and Media**

New areas for language use may emerge as community living conditions change. While some language communities do succeed in expanding their own language into the new domain, most do not. Schools, new work environments, or new media, including broadcast media and the Internet, usually serve only to expand the scope and power of the dominant language at the expense of endangered languages. Although no existing domains of the endangered language may be lost, the use of the dominant language in the new domain has mesmerising power, as with television. If the communities do not meet the challenges of modernity with their language, it becomes increasingly irrelevant and stigmatised.



Degree of Endangerment	Grade	New Domains and Media Accepted by the Endangered Language
Dynamic	5	The language is used in all new domains.
Robust/active	4	The language is used in most new domains.
Receptive	3	The language is used in many domains.
Coping	2	The language is used in some new domains.
Minimal	1	The language is used only in a few new domains.
Inactive	0	The language is not used in any new domains.

The type and use of these new domains will vary according to the local context. One example of the possible use of this criterion is that an endangered language enjoys one new domain, broadcast media, including radio and television, but only for a half-hour a week. Though the availability of these media gives the language a potentially high ranking, the extreme time limitation results in limited exposure of the language, which thus would rank it at only a 2 or a 3. Inevitably, there will be different levels of achievement in different media. In education, assigning criteria can be based on two dimensions: up to what level and how broadly across the curriculum the endangered language is used. An endangered language that is the medium of instruction for all courses and at all levels will rank much higher than an endangered language that is taught only one hour per week.

All new domains, be they in employment, education, or the media, must be considered together when assessing an endangered language community's response.

### **Factor 6: Materials for Language Education and Literacy**

Education in the language is essential for language vitality. There are language communities that maintain strong oral traditions, and some do not wish their language to be written. In other communities, literacy in their language is a source of pride. In general, however, literacy is directly linked with social and economic development. Needed are books and materials on all topics for various ages and language abilities.

Grade	Accessibility of Written Materials
5	There is an established orthography, a literacy tradition with grammars, dictionaries, texts, literature, and everyday media. Writing in the language is used in administration and education.
4	Written materials exist, and at school children are developing literacy in the language. Writing in the language is not used in administration.
3	Written materials exist, and children may be exposed to the written form at school. Literacy is not promoted through print media.
2	Written materials exist, but they may only be useful for some members of the community; and for others, they may have a symbolic significance. Literacy education in the language is not a part of the school curriculum.
1	A practical orthography is known to the community, and some material is being written.
0	No orthography is available to the community.

**Factor 7: Governmental and Institutional Language Attitudes and Policies, Including Official Status and Use: Governments and institutions have explicit policies and/or implicit attitudes toward the dominant and subordinate languages.**

Equal support (5): All of a country's languages are valued as assets. All languages are protected by law, and the government encourages the maintenance of all languages by implementing explicit policies.

Differentiated support (4): Non-dominant languages are explicitly protected by the government, but there are clear differences in the contexts in which the dominant/official language(s) and non-dominant (protected) language(s) are used. The government encourages ethnolinguistic groups to maintain and use their languages, most often in private domains (as the home language), rather than in public domains (e.g., in schools). Some of the domains of non-dominant language use enjoy high prestige (e.g., ceremonial occasions).

Passive assimilation (3): The dominant group is indifferent as to whether minority languages are spoken as long as the dominant group's language is the language of interaction. Though this is not an explicit language policy, the dominant group's language is the de facto official language. Most domains of non-dominant language use do not enjoy high prestige.

Active assimilation (2): The government encourages minority groups to abandon their own languages by providing education for the minority group members in the dominant language. Speaking and/or writing in non-dominant languages is not encouraged.

Forced assimilation (1): The government has an explicit language policy declaring the dominant group's language to be the only official national language, while the languages of subordinate groups are neither recognised nor supported.

Prohibition (0): Minority languages are prohibited from use in any domain. Languages may be tolerated in private domains.

Degree of Support	Grade	Official Attitudes toward Language
Equal support	5	All languages are protected.
Differentiated support	4	Minority languages are protected primarily as the language of the private domains. The use of the language is prestigious.
Passive assimilation	3	No explicit policy exists for minority languages; the dominant language prevails in the public domain.
Active assimilation	2	Government encourages assimilation to the dominant language. There is no protection for minority languages.
Forced assimilation	1	The dominant language is the sole official language, while non-dominant languages are neither recognised nor protected.
Prohibition	0	Minority languages are prohibited.

### **Factor 8: Community Members' Attitudes toward Their Own Language**

Members of a speech community are not usually neutral towards their own language. They may see it as essential to their community and identity and promote it; they may use it without promoting it; they may be ashamed of it and, therefore, not promote it; or they may see it as a nuisance and actively avoid using it.

When members' attitudes towards their language are very positive, the language may be seen as a key symbol of group identity. Just as people value family traditions, festivals and community events, members of the community may see their language as a cultural core value, vital to their community and ethnic identity. If members view their language as a hindrance to economic mobility and integration into mainstream society, they may develop negative attitudes toward their language.

Grade	Community Members' Attitudes toward Language
5	All members value their language and wish to see it promoted.
4	Most members support language maintenance.
3	Many members support language maintenance; others are indifferent or may even support language loss.

2	Some members support language maintenance; others are indifferent or may even support language loss.
1	Only a few members support language maintenance; others are indifferent or may even support language loss.
0	No one cares if the language is lost; all prefer to use a dominant language.

### Factor 9: Amount and Quality of Documentation

As a guide for assessing the urgency for documenting a language, the type and quality of existing language materials must be identified. Of central importance are written texts, including transcribed, translated, and annotated audiovisual recordings of natural speech. Such information importantly helps members of the language community formulate specific tasks and enables linguists to design research projects together with members of the language community.

Nature of Documentation	Grade	Language Documentation
Superlative	5	There are comprehensive grammars and dictionaries, extensive texts, and a constant flow of language materials. Abundant annotated high quality audio and video recordings exist.
Good	4	There are one good grammar and a number of adequate grammars, dictionaries, texts, literature, and occasionally updated everyday media; there are adequate annotated high-quality audio and video recordings.
Fair	3	There may be an adequate grammar or sufficient number of grammars, dictionaries, and texts, but no everyday media; audio and video recordings may exist in varying quality or degrees of annotation.
Fragmentary	2	There are some grammatical sketches, word-lists, and texts useful for limited linguistic research but with inadequate coverage. Audio and video recordings may exist in varying quality, with or without any annotation.
Inadequate	1	Only a few grammatical sketches, short wordlists, and fragmentary texts exist. Audio and video recordings do not exist, are of unusable quality, or are completely un-annotated.
Undocumented	0	No material exists.

Source: Adapted and adopted from Brenzinger, M., Yamamoto, A., Aikawa, N., Koundioubu, D., Minasyan, A., Dwyer, A., Grinevald, C., Krauss, M., Miyaoka, O., Sakiyama, O., Smeets, R. and Zepeda, O. 2003. *Language vitality and endangerment*. Paris: UNESCO Expert Meeting on Safeguarding Endangered Languages. <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/doc/src/00120-EN.pdf>