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**THE IDENTITY CRISIS OF LANGUAGE AMONG URBAN TEENAGERS: A  
SOCIOLINGUISTIC STUDY ON THE SHIFT OF MOTHER TONGUE**

**NAFISAH HIDAYAH**

**UNIVERSITAS ISLAM NEGERI SUMATERA UTARA**

[nafisah0302232036@uinsu.ac.id](mailto:nafisah0302232036@uinsu.ac.id)

**Abstract:** Please The phenomenon of mother tongue shift among urban youth has emerged as an increasingly prominent issue amid the tides of globalization and digitalization. A language that should serve as a symbol of cultural identity is now experiencing a decline in both usage and meaning in the daily lives of the younger generation, particularly in urban areas. This article aims to examine in depth the factors contributing to the shift of the mother tongue and its implications for the linguistic identity of urban Indonesian youth. Using a qualitative-descriptive approach and library research methods, this study synthesizes findings from various scholarly journals and academic books related to sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, and language behavior among youth. The results indicate that this shift is driven by the dominance of slang, the influence of social media, formal education systems that inadequately support the preservation of the mother tongue, and the weakening role of families in language transmission. As a result, youth are experiencing a linguistic identity crisis, reflected in a diminished sense of pride in their mother tongue and reduced communicative ability with older generations. This article highlights the need for synergy between educational institutions, families, and government policies to address this phenomenon and restore the mother tongue as a vital component of national identity

**Keywords:** Language shift, urban youth, mother tongue, identity crisis, sociolinguistics.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Mother Tongue is the first language acquired by a child from an early age within the family and community environment. It functions not only as a means of communication but also carries cultural values, identity, and the collective self of a language community. In the context of Indonesia, which is rich in regional linguistic diversity, the presence of mother tongues represents an invaluable cultural asset. However, a growing phenomenon in urban societies today reveals a significant decline in the use of mother tongues, particularly among teenagers. This shift is increasingly evident in daily social interactions, where teenagers tend to use formal Indonesian, slang, or even foreign languages instead of their own regional languages.

This language shift, from a sociolinguistic perspective, is inseparable from rapid social and cultural changes. Globalization, urbanization, and the advancement of information technology have contributed to the homogenization of language in communication.

Languages perceived as more practical, modern, and prestigious are more widely chosen. In this context, mother tongues are often marginalized because they are considered outdated or no longer relevant to the daily lives of urban youth. This reflects that language is not merely a communication tool, but also a marker of social status and cultural identity (Malabar, 2015).

Sociolinguistic research shows that language is closely linked to identity. The use of a particular language may reflect an individual's social, ethnic, and cultural affiliations. When teenagers begin to abandon their mother tongue, they are essentially redirecting their cultural identity and affiliation. This is what scholars refer to as a "linguistic identity crisis," where individuals lose emotional, affective, and symbolic attachment to their native language (Walgito, 2010). This shift is not merely a change in word choice but signifies a transformation in cultural values and orientation.

One of the main causes of this linguistic identity crisis is the

weakening role of the family in transmitting the mother tongue to the younger generation. Many parents in urban areas no longer speak their regional languages at home and may even regard the use of Indonesian or foreign languages as more “elite” and prestigious. As a result, children do not receive adequate exposure to the mother tongue from an early age. This phenomenon is further exacerbated by a national education system that tends to prioritize Indonesian and foreign languages, while regional languages are treated as supplementary and often neglected.

On the other hand, mass media and social media also play a major role in shaping teenagers’ language habits. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter have become new spaces for youth to express themselves using short, trendy, and instant language. The mother tongue has little to no strong representation in these digital spaces. Consequently, teenagers rarely access or use their native language in either digital or social activities. Over time, this leads to the erosion of the mother tongue’s function as a means of

communication and cultural expression (Tiprili et al., 2024).

This language shift occurs not only in informal settings but also in formal and academic domains. In schools, there is very limited space for the active use of regional languages. Although some curricula include local content, its implementation is often ineffective. Many teachers either lack fluency in mother tongues or are unmotivated to instill pride in native language use among students. As a result, the school environment becomes part of a system that indirectly supports the dominance of majority or foreign languages in communication.

Therefore, the phenomenon of mother tongue shift must be studied in depth, as it concerns the future of national identity. If the younger generation loses their mother tongue, the cultural values, history, and traditions embedded in that language will also be eroded. This study aims to explore the factors behind the shift in mother tongue usage among urban youth and its implications for their linguistic identity. Through a literature review of recent journals and books,

this article is expected to provide an academic contribution to efforts in preserving mother tongues in Indonesia.

## **METHOD**

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach based on library research (Sugiyono, 2020). The data sources consist of various scholarly literatures, including nationally accredited journals and published reference books written in Indonesian. Sources were selected purposively, based on their relevance to the topics of linguistic identity crisis and mother tongue shift among urban teenagers.

The data were analyzed using **content analysis techniques**, aiming to identify thematic patterns, theoretical arguments, and relationships between concepts related to language shift and linguistic identity phenomena. The findings were systematically arranged to address the research questions and support the conclusions of the article. In this context, the researcher does not claim a single truth but rather emphasizes

the interpretation of various scientific sources to formulate a comprehensive view of the issues of language identity and the threat of mother tongue loss in urban settings.

The **validity of the study** is strengthened through **source triangulation**, by comparing the content and perspectives of multiple different literatures to produce a balanced and credible analysis.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS**

The phenomenon of mother tongue shift among urban youth is not merely the result of changing language preferences or trends, but rather reflects broader social and cultural transformations. In sociolinguistic studies, the mother tongue is a crucial element in shaping group identity, and the loss of this language signifies the loss of part of one's social identity (Rochayah & Djamil, 1995).

### **1. The Dominance of Slang and Foreign Languages**

Today's urban teenagers live in a highly dynamic social environment, where language undergoes shifts in

both function and status. The rapid development of slang and the increasing use of foreign languages (especially English) have become parts of social identity and symbols of modern youth culture. Slang is no longer merely a tool for informal communication, but has evolved into a medium to express group affiliation, intimacy, and social status. In this context, the mother tongue often loses its place, as it is considered "untrendy" and less prestigious among teenagers (Hijrah et al., 2024).

This phenomenon can be seen in the everyday language practices of teenagers on social media, in schools, and in their daily interactions. Terms such as "literally," "cringe," "no cap," and others have entered their everyday vocabulary, replacing native language expressions. This kind of dominance is not a neutral development; rather, it represents a form of cultural subordination in which global or dominant languages suppress the existence of local languages (Sihombing et al., 2023).

Slang and foreign languages provide a space for teenagers to showcase their modern identity, which

contrasts with the traditional values associated with the mother tongue. This aligns with social identity theory, which holds that language serves as a medium for the formation and reinforcement of social groups (Decker, 2015). When youth form communities with their own linguistic norms, languages that do not conform to these norms—such as the mother tongue—are often abandoned.

In addition, digital media accelerates the spread of slang and foreign terms throughout the country. Digital platforms such as TikTok and Instagram popularize a language style that is fast, humorous, and "relatable," but often far removed from the structure and cultural values of the mother tongue. In this context, the mother tongue experiences marginalization, as it cannot keep up with the rapid changes in language driven by algorithms and viral trends (Iswatiningsih et al., 2021).

Slang is often exclusive, understood only by certain groups, which creates communication gaps between generations. This gives rise to a form of linguistic identity crisis: when teenagers begin to feel "alienated" from the language and cultural identity

inherited from their parents, and feel more at ease with a new identity shaped by peers and digital spaces (Gultom et al., 2024).

The main issue is that the dominance of slang and foreign languages does not merely represent linguistic variation it gradually replaces the mother tongue across all areas of life. Without revitalization efforts and supportive language policies, the use of the mother tongue will continue to decline, especially in urban areas. Therefore, a collective awareness is essential to balance language innovation with the preservation of native languages.

## **2. Social Media and the Erosion of the Mother Tongue**

Social media has become one of the strongest agents in the process of language shift. Urban teenagers who grow up in the digital era use social media as their primary space for socializing, learning, and even forming their identities. Communication patterns on social media tend to rely on practical, fast, and responsive language, encouraging the use of slang, code-mixing, and viral popular words.

Unfortunately, within this digital ecosystem, the mother tongue hardly finds any space (Tiprili et al., 2024).

Teenagers prefer languages they consider universal and trendy to interact in the virtual world. The mother tongue is perceived as lacking aesthetic or social appeal in the context of social media, which demands concise and engaging expression. Moreover, social media applications and algorithms that favor content in Indonesian or foreign languages further distance the mother tongue from the digital public sphere.

As a result of this trend, the mother tongue is only used in very limited contexts, such as conversations with parents or when visiting their hometowns. In many cases, teenagers are no longer able to speak their mother tongue fluently because they are not accustomed to using it in daily life. This marks a process of "passivization" of the mother tongue, where the younger generation still understands the language but does not actively use it (Pasaribu et al., 2025).

Sociolinguistic studies show that the survival of a language heavily

depends on its function and domains of use. When a language is no longer used in public spheres such as education, media, and digital platforms it gradually erodes and dies out. This is a real threat to many mother tongues in Indonesia, whose number of speakers continues to decline (Malabar, 2015).

It is also important to note that educational content using the mother tongue remains very limited on social media. Many educational institutions, influencers, and local governments have yet to utilize digital media to revive local languages. In fact, if used properly, social media can be an effective tool to creatively and attractively reintroduce the mother tongue to teenagers (Sofyaningrum et al., 2024).

Therefore, it is important to implement local-based digital literacy programs that encourage teenagers to create and consume mother tongue content on social media. Such efforts could become one of the revitalization strategies for the mother tongue amidst the dominance of digital globalization currently underway.

### **3. The Role of Family and Education in the Transmission of the Mother Tongue**

The family is the primary and foremost environment in the language acquisition process for a child. The mother tongue is generally learned naturally through interactions between the child and family members. However, in urban, multilingual, and modern environments, the family's function as an agent of mother tongue transmission has significantly weakened. Many young families in big cities prefer to use Indonesian or foreign languages such as English in domestic communication. The reasons vary, ranging from considerations of efficiency, the influence of global lifestyles, to the belief that the mother tongue is no longer relevant or productive for the child's future (Gultom et al., 2024).

This phenomenon causes teenagers to grow up in an environment with minimal mother tongue stimulation. They may understand the mother tongue passively because they have heard it from grandparents but do not actively use it in daily communication. In the long term, this

will create a generation disconnected from their local language and culture. In some cases, urban children no longer recognize their parents' regional languages at all, leading to the loss of continuity in ethnic and cultural identity.

On the other hand, educational institutions, which should play a role in strengthening local languages and cultures, tend to reinforce the dominance of the national and international languages. The national curriculum only provides a very limited space for teaching the mother tongue, usually in the form of local content that is often not considered important by students or teachers. In fact, schools have a strategic role in preserving the mother tongue by creating learning environments that appreciate and use local languages in everyday activities (Sofyaningrum et al., 2024).

Many teachers also lack the competence or are not given sufficient training to teach the mother tongue in an engaging and contextual manner. As a result, mother tongue learning feels rigid, formal, and boring to students. Without support from pedagogical

approaches relevant to today's youth, mother tongue learning will become increasingly unattractive. This contributes to the weak motivation of students to study and use the mother tongue outside the classroom.

When schools and families fail to act as supporters of the mother tongue, the responsibility for language preservation shifts to the community. However, in heterogeneous and globally oriented urban environments, local language communities tend to be marginalized. Public spaces such as shopping centers, public transportation, or local media rarely feature the mother tongue, let alone in a form that is proudly displayed. This contrasts with rural communities that still maintain the mother tongue in their social and cultural practices (Setyawan et al., 2021).

To address this issue, synergy is needed between families, schools, and government to create environments that support mother tongue transmission. Campaigns promoting the use of the mother tongue at home, the development of curricula based on local culture, and training for regional



language teachers need to be promoted nationally. Additionally, the development of interactive, technology-based learning media using the mother tongue can become a strategic solution to bring teenagers closer to their linguistic heritage.

#### **4. The Linguistic Identity Crisis of Urban Youth**

When teenagers begin to abandon their mother tongue, the process of forming their linguistic identity also undergoes changes. Linguistic identity is part of social identity, formed through the internalization of language and culture used in everyday environments. In the case of urban youth, the inability or reluctance to use the mother tongue becomes an indicator of a crisis in identifying with local cultural values (Walgito, 2010).

This crisis is not only individual but also collective. Young generations who grow up without skills and attachment to their mother tongue tend to form new identities far from their cultural roots. They associate themselves with global or national groups considered more modern and open. In many cases, teenagers even

feel ashamed or reluctant to admit that they come from a particular cultural background because they can no longer communicate in their own mother tongue (Sihombing et al., 2023).

The linguistic identity crisis also impacts intergenerational relations. When teenagers are unable to understand the language used by their parents or grandparents, significant communication gaps occur. This is not only a language issue but also an obstacle in the process of transmitting family values, norms, and history. As a result, emotional attachment to collective identity weakens, and teenagers lose orientation toward their cultural origins.

In the long term, the linguistic identity crisis can threaten the sustainability of local culture. When the mother tongue is no longer used by younger generations, many oral traditions, poetry, folk songs, and folktales also disappear. Language is not merely a system of signs but a vessel of collective knowledge and experience of a community. Losing language means losing the unique worldview and way of life of that community (Rochayah & Djamil, 1995). Furthermore, in a plural

society like Indonesia, language identity plays a role in maintaining harmony and tolerance among groups. When the mother tongue is no longer recognized or appreciated, the potential for identity conflicts and language superiority may arise. Therefore, preserving the mother tongue is not only an ethnolinguistic concern but also part of efforts to maintain national integration and pluralism.

The solution to this crisis is not to forbid the use of slang or foreign languages, but to strengthen the position of the mother tongue as part of daily life. Teenagers need to be encouraged to understand that using the mother tongue does not mean regression but is a form of pride in their origins and identity. Through integrative cultural education, the mother tongue can regain a rightful place in the lives of Indonesia's younger generations.

## **CONCLUSION**

The shift of the mother tongue among urban Indonesian youth is a complex social phenomenon that involves not only linguistic aspects but

also closely relates to identity formation, social relationships, and cultural values. The dominance of slang and foreign languages in youth interactions has clearly replaced the role of the mother tongue in daily life. Social media accelerates this process through the spread of viral language that is more appealing and relevant to teenagers' lives, but on the other hand, erodes the presence of traditional languages rich in cultural meaning.

The weakened role of families and educational institutions in facilitating the inheritance of the mother tongue worsens this condition. Families that prefer to use Indonesian or foreign languages for reasons of prestige or communication ease have created a gap between children and their mother tongue. Meanwhile, schools, as formal education institutions, have yet to provide adequate space for learning and utilizing the mother tongue in the teaching and learning process. As a result, many teenagers grow up without sufficient proficiency in their mother tongue and may not even recognize their own ethnic language.

A linguistic identity crisis becomes the consequence of all these factors. When teenagers lack emotional and affective attachment to their native language, they also lose part of their cultural identity. This leads to intergenerational gaps, weakens cultural solidarity, and in the long term, may accelerate the extinction of local languages in Indonesia.

To address this issue, collective effort across sectors are needed. The government can strengthen policies to protect regional languages through education, media, and regulation. Families must serve as role models in using the mother tongue at home. Schools should design culturally based learning programs in creative and contextual ways to engage youth. On the other hand, digital media should be utilized as a platform to revive the mother tongue in formats that suit the tastes and needs of the younger generation. Through these measures, the mother tongue can be revitalized as an important part of national identity and cultural heritage.

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