

Multilingual Youth and Identity Negotiation in Ambon's Urban–Traditional Community: A Sociolinguistic Ethnography

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Abstract

This study explores how young people in Hukurila, a customary village within the administrative area of Ambon City, use language to negotiate social identities amid the tension between traditional values and urban modernity. While Hukurila maintains customary institutions such as the mata rumah parentah system, ritual practices, and local language, its youth's interaction with urban schools, digital media, and popular culture has fostered hybrid linguistic practices blending urban Indonesian, Ambon Malay, English, and digital symbols. Employing a sociolinguistic ethnography within an interpretive–critical paradigm, data were collected through participant observation, sociolinguistic interviews, recorded conversations, and online ethnography involving youth aged 13–20 across home, school, church, community, and social media contexts. Findings reveal the emergence of hybrid linguistic identities, where Ambon Malay indexes local solidarity, while urban Indonesian and English-mixed slang signify modernity and social mobility. The local Hukurila language is rarely used in daily interactions but retains symbolic value in customary and religious domains. Language ideologies have shifted, language now serves as a marker of coolness, social belonging, and global aspiration. The study introduces the concept of Urban–Adat Multilingualism, describing communities that sustain traditional linguistic systems within urban social environments. It advances sociolinguistic scholarship by linking offline and online ethnography to examine youth language as social and ideological practice, highlighting the need for inclusive language education and context-sensitive approaches to multilingual identity in Eastern Indonesia.

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INTRODUCTION

Ambon has long served as a meeting ground between the old and the new, between the resonant sound of the baileo gong and the digital chime of smartphone notifications (Akapip & Kissya, 2023; F. Manuputty et al., 2023a). In Negeri Hukurila, a customary community located on the southern coast of Ambon Island, this intersection is most vividly experienced among young people. They grow up inhabiting a multilayered world: on one hand, bound by traditional social systems such as mata rumah parentah, local language, and ritual practices; on the other, they are also immersed in digital culture, urban schooling, and global popular culture (F. Manuputty et al., 2022, 2023b). This duality raises a compelling sociolinguistic question, how do young people use language to navigate and negotiate their identities across two value systems that often conflict: the traditional and the urban-modern? This question forms the starting point of this study.

Language is not merely a vehicle for communication but a medium for the construction of identity and social power (Drummond, 2018; Shalkov et al., 2021). In Hukurila, everyday language use among the younger generation reveals significant signs of change. The Hukurila language, a local variant of Ambonese Malay, is increasingly absent from public spaces. At home, adolescents tend to switch to Indonesian, while in social media and peer interactions, they employ hybrid forms combining urban Indonesian, Ambonese Malay, and English-inflected digital slang. This linguistic shift is not a purely structural phenomenon; it also reflects transformations in language ideology, intergenerational relations, and social belonging within an urbanized customary community. These dynamics can be observed in daily exchanges, for instance, when a teenager greets a friend with, “eh bro, beta su DM ko di IG,” effortlessly blending three linguistic systems in a single sentence. Such utterances illustrate how language has become an arena for negotiating fluid and multilayered identities.

Over the past two decades, research on the relationship between language, identity, and globalization has expanded significantly. On a global scale, Walker et al. (2019) introduced the concept of metrolingualism to explain how urban language practices transcend ethnic and national boundaries through creative linguistic mixing. In the Southeast Asian context, Ding and Chee (2023) highlighted how multilingual communities shape linguistic identities through the interplay of colonial and local languages. In Indonesia, studies by I. G. A. C. S. Putra and Tustiawati (2024) and J. R. Putra and Musigrungsi (2022) showed that urban language varieties such as Bahasa Jaksel or Bahasa Gaul represent social practices that signal modernity and mobility. Similarly, Sutrisno (2023) demonstrated how university students in Malang mix Indonesian and English to perform globalized identities and middle-class aspirations. These studies suggest that youth language use operates as a performative space where global and local values are dynamically negotiated.

In eastern Indonesia, however, sociolinguistic research on language and identity remains limited. Some studies, such as Apituley et al. (2022) and Sarah (2022), examined language shift in Maluku and Nusa Tenggara as a consequence of urbanization and migration. Litualy et al. (2022) and R. Manuputty (2022) found that urbanization contributes to linguistic attrition in mid-sized cities. Meanwhile, Afdhal (2023) and Utami and Rahmat (2023) argued that regional language revitalization efforts often fail to align with the social realities of youth embedded in digital ecologies. Sangaji et al. (2023), in a study in Ternate, revealed that the use of local Malay among adolescents has declined drastically, even as cultural symbols are maintained through music and online expressions. This suggests that local languages continue to hold symbolic significance despite their diminishing functional domains.

Youth sociolinguistics has extensively explored how language serves as a medium for expressing social identity and popular culture. Santika et al. (2023) and Syafaat and Setiawan (2019), for instance, observed that code-mixing in online spaces functions as a marker of digital subcultural affiliation. Similarly, Nasrullah et al. (2023) and Zalukhu et al. (2021) emphasized that youth language practices are transgressive, crossing rigid ethnic and social boundaries. Wei and Lin (2019) further argued that translanguaging among students is not linguistic “error” but rather a cognitive and social strategy for enacting flexible identities.

Within the Indonesian context, Sutrisno (2023) noted that youth slang shapes urban lifestyles, while Agbozo and ResCue (2021) and Raja et al. (2022) documented how young people in Bali mix English and Balinese in music and social media to signal modern-global belonging without abandoning local roots.

From an ethnographic perspective, Madkur et al. (2022) stressed the importance of understanding communities of practice, how particular social groups construct identity through routine practices, including linguistic choices. In this regard, Hukurila youth can be seen as forming a new community of practice, building solidarity through a distinctive hybrid speech style. Malin and Rind (2022), in their study of young Jewish communities in the United States, found a similar phenomenon: linguistic mixing fosters a sense of belonging while distinguishing younger generations from their elders. In Ambon, comparable dynamics emerge within youth church music communities, where everyday talk and song lyrics reflect a form of “modern Ambonese” infused with global symbols. The concept of indexicality provides a useful theoretical lens to understand how such linguistic forms operate as social signs, indicating who one is, where one stands, and with whom one seeks identification.

Nevertheless, while these studies offer broad insights into the relationship between language, identity, and globalization, contexts characterized by urban–customary duality remain underexplored. Ambon is not merely an urban space in the modern sense; it is a city interspersed with customary villages (*negeri*) whose social and cultural systems remain vibrant. In this environment, young people in Hukurila navigate dual realities, bound by ancestral loyalty and customary norms while simultaneously participating in urbanization and digitalization processes that promote social mobility. Consequently, linguistic hybridity here is not solely a product of globalization but also a strategy for mediating identity within two contrasting social orders.

Previous studies on multilingualism in Indonesia have largely focused on either purely urban or traditional rural communities, neglecting hybrid spaces like Hukurila. For instance, Nursanti (2021) examined language mixing in major cities such as Yogyakarta and Surabaya but did not address how these dynamics operate in urbanized customary settings. Similarly, Litualy et al. (2022) and Seals and Olsen-Reeder (2020) analyzed how globalization shapes Indonesian youth language styles but overlooked the interaction between customary values, local languages, and digital modernity. This study seeks to bridge that gap through an ethnographic analysis that integrates both offline and online spaces, viewing language as a social practice situated within an urban–traditional nexus.

The present study introduces the concept of Urban–Adat Multilingualism, a condition in which customary communities embedded within urban systems negotiate their identities through fluid, hybrid, and reflexive language practices. By examining the linguistic repertoires of Hukurila youth across domestic, communal, and digital domains, this research aims to understand how language functions not only as a communicative tool but also as an ideological arena where local, national, and global values intersect.

Specifically, the study aims to (1) describe the forms, functions, and contexts of language use among adolescents in Negeri Hukurila; (2) analyze the role of these linguistic

practices in shaping social identity and intergenerational relations; and (3) interpret how urbanization and globalization influence language ideologies within Ambon's urban–customary communities. Beyond documenting linguistic phenomena, this study seeks to reveal how young people in eastern Indonesia construct their own “identity homes”, spaces in which being anak negeri (a child of the customary land) and being an urban youth are not mutually exclusive but rather two dimensions of a lived experience continually negotiated through language.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a sociolinguistic ethnography design, since its main objective was to understand the social meanings behind the language practices of young people in Negeri Hukurila, rather than merely describing the linguistic forms that appeared. This approach was chosen based on the assumption that language is always embedded within social, cultural, and ideological contexts (Guillen, 2019; Priya, 2021). Through ethnography, the researcher was able to directly observe how language is used in daily life, in natural situations, and in meaningful interactions. This approach also enabled the researcher to capture the emic dimension, the perspectives and knowledge derived from the participants' own experiences, which lies at the core of a critical sociolinguistic understanding of youth identity and language practices.

The research was conducted in Negeri Hukurila, Leitimur Selatan District, Ambon City. The location was selected purposively because Hukurila represents a unique sociolinguistic phenomenon: administratively, it is part of the city, but socially and culturally, it remains strongly attached to traditional systems and the local language. Hukurila serves as a concrete example of how an indigenous community negotiates with the growing forces of urbanization and globalization. Moreover, its young generation lives in two interconnected worlds, the traditional (adat) life in the village and the digital life in the city. This situation makes Hukurila an ideal location for exploring the phenomenon of Urban–Adat Multilingualism, which is the central focus of this research.

The research participants consisted of sixteen adolescents aged 13 to 20 years, selected through purposive sampling. They came from various social backgrounds, junior and senior high school students, university students who still live in the village, as well as members of church youth groups and local music communities. This number was considered sufficient for ethnographic research because the focus was not on statistical representation but on the depth and diversity of experiences (Prosek & Gibson, 2021). The participants were selected because they are actively engaged in community social activities and maintain high levels of interaction with environments outside the village, either through schooling in Ambon City or through social media. This diversity provides a wide perspective on how language is used and interpreted across different social spaces, from home to the digital sphere.

Data were collected over four months using four complementary techniques. First, participant observation was conducted to understand language practices in natural contexts. The researcher took part directly in youth social activities such as church music rehearsals,

gotong royong (communal work), youth worship services, and informal gatherings by the beach or at small food stalls. These observations allowed the researcher to record patterns of language use, forms of code-mixing, and the surrounding social situations.

Second, semi-structured sociolinguistic interviews were carried out to explore the participants' perceptions and language ideologies. The interviews were conducted individually and in groups, lasting between 45 and 90 minutes. Through these interviews, insights were gained into how adolescents perceive what it means to be orang negeri ("village people"), their attitudes toward the local language, and the reasons behind their language choices.

Third, data were also gathered through the recording of natural conversations. The researcher documented interactions occurring in various social contexts, both formal (church events, youth meetings) and informal (hanging out, playing music, or chatting on social media). These data were analyzed using the framework of interactional sociolinguistics to examine how language choices index identity and social relations. Fourth, online ethnography was conducted by tracing interactions in youth WhatsApp groups and public social media accounts frequently used by Hukurila adolescents. This strategy allowed the researcher to observe the continuity between language practices in offline and online spaces, consistent with the digital ethnography approach proposed by Ritter (2022), which treats online spaces as an integral part of social life.

The data analysis process followed an interactive model Ritter (2022) that involved repeated cycles of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Conversation transcripts and field notes were thematically coded to identify patterns of meaning related to language, identity, and ideology. The analysis focused not only on linguistic forms but also on their social and indexical functions, how language choices signal identity positions and power relations among speakers.

To ensure data validity, triangulation was employed in three ways. Source triangulation was carried out by comparing data from various informants across age and gender. Methodological triangulation was performed by contrasting findings from observations, interviews, and social media analyses to ensure consistency. Time triangulation was conducted by collecting data over a sufficiently long period to observe the stability of language practices across different seasons of social activity. In addition, member checking was conducted with several key informants to ensure that the researcher's interpretations were consistent with their lived experiences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Language Practices in the Social Spaces of Hukurila Youth

The everyday lives of young people in Negeri Hukurila, a customary community located approximately 20 kilometers from Ambon City, illustrate how language never exists as a singular entity. Rather, it functions as a fluid social landscape where Ambon Malay, urban Indonesian, and English-mixed slang intersect across multiple interactional spaces. Whether at home, in school, at church, or on social media, these languages are alternated, blended,

and indexed according to social context and participant relations. This phenomenon reflects what Hidayat and Farid (2021) and Yazan (2019) term situated multilingualism, in which linguistic practices are always tied to specific social contexts and continuously negotiated by speakers in every communicative event.

Ethnographic observation over several months revealed that Hukurila youth engage in spontaneous, creative, and socially meaningful forms of code-mixing. Conversations between children and parents, for instance, indicate that Ambon Malay remains the dominant language in domestic domains. However, in informal settings or when interacting with peers, especially in front of houses or at the beach in the late afternoon, they frequently blend Indonesian with elements of digital English. A recorded example between two teenage girls illustrates this: “Beta su DM ko di IG, tapi ko seng balas e,” meaning “I’ve already sent you a message on Instagram, but you haven’t replied.” This utterance merges the basic structure of Ambon Malay (Beta su... ko...) with English-derived digital terms (“DM,” “IG”), framed in a casual, intimate tone. For speakers, this linguistic blend is not merely habitual, it represents their way of positioning themselves between two worlds: the customary village and the modern city, both of which shape their social horizons.

Observations in school settings further revealed another dimension of this linguistic practice. In classrooms, students tend to use formal Indonesian when interacting with teachers. Yet, once the recess bell rings, they quickly switch to Ambon Malay or an urban-sounding Indonesia–English mix. One informant, L., a 17-year-old high school student, explained during an interview that speaking in such a mixed style makes them feel “more trendy” and “connected with city friends.” This aligns with Cohen and Kassan’s (2018) concept of indexicality, which suggests that linguistic choices function as social indexes that signal group membership, symbolic status, or relational proximity. In this case, the use of English-mixed slang not only demonstrates lexical knowledge but also marks a modern, connected, and digitally empowered identity.

In religious spaces such as the church, however, language use becomes more structured and oriented toward sacred values. Indonesian is predominantly used by pastors or worship leaders, while youths often insert Ambon Malay expressions after the service to signify closeness and warmth within the community. For example, after Sunday worship, a group of teenagers jokingly remarked, “Ko tadi nyanyi seng kencang e, pendeta bisa pikir ko ngantuk!” (“You didn’t sing loudly earlier; the pastor might think you were sleepy!”). Here, Ambon Malay serves not merely as a communicative tool but as a marker of social intimacy and youth solidarity. This indicates that language does not merely adapt to social space, it actively constructs the social meanings of that space.

Online ethnographic data reinforce similar patterns. On platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp, Hukurila youth display distinctive forms of digital multilingualism. They write captions that blend Ambon Malay and English, such as “Beta and the geng chillin’ at pantai Hukurila 🌊🌟” or “Seng easy tapi stay cool bae.” Such combinations demonstrate their ability to simultaneously integrate local and global identities. They are not merely imitating metropolitan linguistic styles but appropriating these symbols to assert a unique

identity as “modern children of the village.” In this context, language practices become performative acts of identity, each lexical choice constitutes a social action rather than a mere linguistic expression.

During field observations, the atmosphere of youth conversation in Hukurila revealed a fluid dynamic between customary norms and individual expression. In the late afternoon, for instance, several boys gathered in front of a tin-roofed stone house overlooking the sea, chatting while scrolling through K-pop videos on their phones and mimicking English pronunciation with distinct Ambonese intonation. Amid laughter, one shouted, “Eh bro, ko su lihat yang baru trending itu? Gila keren par abis!” This spontaneous mixture of Ambon Malay, Indonesian slang, and English expressions pronounced in a local accent embodies a deeper ideological representation of how youth interpret “being modern” without abandoning their local roots.

Analysis of these practices reveals that the linguistic blending in Hukurila is not a form of “linguistic deviation,” as often assumed in normative language ideologies, but rather a complex social strategy. Farrell et al. (2019) and Sunesti et al. (2018) describe such phenomena as translanguaging spaces, arenas where speakers freely deploy their full linguistic repertoires to negotiate meaning and identity. For Hukurila youth, drawing from multiple languages simultaneously constitutes an expressive act that demonstrates adaptability and sociocultural awareness. They recognize that being accepted in broader social contexts, school, city, or digital networks, requires linguistic flexibility. Yet, they maintain local linguistic features as markers of origin and solidarity.

An interview with another informant, N., a high school student active on social media, revealed a strong metalinguistic awareness of these practices. She remarked that using Ambon Malay online “feels more like myself,” whereas inserting English “makes the caption look cooler and connects better with friends outside Ambon.” This confirms that each linguistic choice carries specific social indexicalities, situating identity dynamically between locality and globality. Within the framework of indexicality theory Belay (2018), language operates as a continuously reproduced social sign through interaction, Hukurila youth employ these signs to negotiate their place in a rapidly transforming world.

Hybrid Linguistic Identities: Between Locality and Modernity

Youth identity in Negeri Hukurila is never singular or static; it is continuously negotiated between locality and modernity. In daily conversations, religious activities, and digital spaces, they present themselves as subjects living between two worlds: the orang negeri (village people) grounded in tradition, language, and communal solidarity, and the anak kota Ambon (urban youth) who are digitally connected and globally oriented. The linguistic blending of Ambon Malay, urban Indonesian, and English expressions thus becomes a performative enactment of hybrid, fluid, and context-dependent identity.

Interviews with several young informants indicate that each language carries a distinct symbolic value depending on social context. One male participant, R. (18 years old), stated that “in church or customary ceremonies, it’s not proper to mix languages because those are sacred spaces, so we should speak respectfully like the elders.” For R., using Ambon Malay in

ritual or religious events reflects both respect for tradition and communal belonging. In contrast, when chatting with friends or commenting online, he easily switches to mixed Indonesian and English expressions, such as “Chill bae, nanti beta bales DM ko,” which he described as “more stylish and connected to city friends.” This stylistic shift exemplifies the concept of identity as positioning, where identity is constructed and negotiated through social interaction rather than being inherently fixed.

Field observations during the Pattimura Day celebration further illustrate this dynamic. During the formal rituals, filled with prayers, songs, and traditional speeches, youth participants spoke in rich Ambon Malay, wearing red-and-white traditional attire, and imitating the tone and rhythm of elder speakers. Yet, once the ceremony ended, the scene transformed: they joked, took photos, and recorded videos for Instagram, exclaiming, “Eh bro, gaya dolo, nanti beta post di story!” and “Ko seng tag beta, nanti beta unfollow ko!” Language here shifted from sacred register to playful digital expression, signaling layered performances of identity, simultaneously rooted in local pride and oriented toward global belonging.

This phenomenon exemplifies agentic identity work, where hybrid linguistic identity is not a passive result of cultural tension but an active strategy for managing and reconciling two social worlds. As Seal (2023) conceptualizes through linguistic citizenship, language use is not merely communicative but also a social and political act that asserts speakers’ rights to speak in their own ways within spaces governed by dominant norms. In Hukurila, linguistic hybridity thus represents an act of linguistic agency, youth refuse to be confined by ideological boundaries of “local” or “national” language, choosing instead to project complex, autonomous, and critically aware identities.

Another participant, S., a female student active in the church choir, expressed similar views. She explained that “Ambonese makes you feel closer to people, but Indonesian feels more polite, especially at school,” and that inserting English on social media “builds confidence, makes you feel like city kids too.” For S., each language embodies distinct emotional and social functions: intimacy, politeness, confidence, and connectedness. As Lewis (2022) argues, linguistic identity is performative, it is enacted through practice rather than inherited. Accordingly, Hukurila youth do not merely “possess” an identity; they actively perform and construct it through their linguistic choices.

The social ecology of Hukurila itself facilitates this layered performance of identity. Geographically, the village is not isolated from Ambon City, paved roads and internet connectivity allow constant exposure to urban culture, global music, and digital communication styles. Yet, traditional structures such as mata rumah parentah (clan-based governance), religious obligations, and participation in customary rituals remain integral to daily life. Within this coexistence, language becomes an arena for continuous identity negotiation. During worship, youth embody the role of faithful anak negeri upholding ancestral values; online, they reappear as cosmopolitan individuals expressing global belonging. These positions are not contradictory but mutually reinforcing, shaping a complex sense of self.

A late-afternoon observation at Hukurila's coastal football field illustrates this interplay vividly. As several boys played soccer, one shouted, "Ko bego, passing begitu saja seng bisa!" ("You fool, you can't even make that pass!"), followed by laughter. Moments later, they shifted topics to the English Premier League, saying, "Beta bilang, Haaland tuh luar biasa, parah, the best striker!" The effortless alternation between Ambon Malay and English within a single interaction exemplifies how local solidarity and global connectivity coexist seamlessly in their speech.

Overall, the linguistic behaviors of Hukurila youth reflect a deliberate and reflective form of dual identity. They know when to embody the role of orang negeri and when to perform as anak kota Ambon. Yet, rather than perceiving these as contradictory, they treat both as integral aspects of who they are. Through hybrid linguistic practices, they transcend dichotomies between tradition and modernity, local and global. In this sense, linguistic hybridity is not a symptom of identity loss but a manifestation of social intelligence, an adaptive strategy enabling Hukurila youth to navigate the shifting world while remaining rooted in their cultural heritage.

Language Ideology Shift and the Semiotics of Modernity

The shifting language ideology among the people of Hukurila illustrates how linguistic meaning is no longer defined solely by communicative function or traditional values but increasingly by its symbolic association with modernity, social mobility, and youth lifestyle. In this context, language functions as a site where social values are constantly negotiated and rearticulated. The younger generation in Hukurila grows between two intersecting worlds: one grounded in the customary norms and communal solidarity of orang negeri (indigenous villagers), and another that is digitally connected and culturally hybrid through interactions with the urban environment of Ambon City. This shift is evident in how young people evaluate, select, and use languages across different social spaces.

On one hand, the older generation in Hukurila continues to regard Ambonese Malay and local vernaculars as markers of customary identity and moral order. As one elder, Mr. T., remarked, "Young people today have forgotten our traditions because they mix languages and no longer know which is the bahasa negeri." This statement reflects an anxiety that linguistic mixture symbolizes the erosion of cultural roots and social discipline. For the elders, language serves as a marker of moral conduct and communal belonging, what Dickens et al. (2019) describe as language ideology, a set of socially grounded beliefs linking linguistic practice with moral, ethical, and social order. In this sense, the use of local language is not merely a linguistic act but a symbolic gesture sustaining social continuity.

Conversely, the younger generation views language as a fluid and creative medium of self-expression. Ethnographic observations in schools and along Hukurila's coastal areas show that adolescents often engage in mixed-language practices, as in expressions such as, "Adu, beta capek par study but tonight I still have to upload my story," or "Ko liat dong, it's trending on TikTok, gila keren abis!" These utterances combine Ambonese Malay, urban Indonesian, and borrowed English elements, not merely as tools for communication, but as symbols of coolness and belonging to a broader youth community. Here, language becomes a form of

symbolic capital, a means of acquiring social recognition and performing a modern, dynamic identity.

As Bourdieu (2018) explains, the social value of language lies not in its structural properties but in its symbolic power as recognized within a particular community. The linguistic choices of Hukurila's youth, especially the blending of Indonesian with English expressions, can thus be read as a strategy to gain symbolic legitimacy within shifting social hierarchies. This aligns with Dachs and Fletcher's (2022) contemporary reading of language as social capital, which links linguistic practice with economic mobility and social status in globalized contexts. In Hukurila, urban Indonesian and English function as semiotic resources of aspiration, toward higher education, urban employment, and participation in digital networks.

An interview with a young informant, M., revealed that language mixing is "not just a style, but a way to stay updated and connected with friends from Ambon." His statement exposes the underlying social logic of this ideological shift: the ability to navigate multiple linguistic codes now constitutes a new form of social competence. In a small café near the village's main road, a group of teenage boys were observed chatting and playing guitar, blending languages as they laughed and recorded videos for social media. One of them interjected, "Don't forget to tag beta in the reels," signaling how the digital sphere has become a new arena where linguistic identities are displayed and validated.

Social media thus plays a central role in reinforcing these new language ideologies among youth. English expressions, internet acronyms such as *btw*, *idk*, and *lol*, and the use of emojis in captions or online messages serve as symbolic indicators of global digital belonging. Such practices signify not only shifts in communication style but also in the perceived value of language. Language becomes a symbol of cosmopolitan belonging, a sense of connectedness to a global world without abandoning local identity. In several observed social media posts, Hukurila youth wrote captions like "Beta miss home, but Ambon vibes still the best 🌟," blending local sentiment with globalized linguistic aesthetics.

This transformation demonstrates how language has evolved from a marker of cultural heritage into a socially commodified symbol. In line with Gal's (2018) notion of the symbolic value of language, linguistic worth is no longer measured by authenticity or preservation but by its aesthetic, emotional, and prestigious associations. In Hukurila, *bahasa campur* (mixed language) is now associated with freedom of expression, openness, and adaptability to social change. This indicates a reorientation of language ideology, from viewing language as the guardian of tradition to recognizing it as a means of participating in modernity.

Nonetheless, this shift is not without tension. Intergenerational encounters often involve subtle negotiations over what it means to be "modern" without "forgetting tradition." During a church meeting, one elder woman gently chided a youth for using too many English insertions, saying, "You think the church is a place to show off city talk?" Such interactions reveal a tension between two value systems: one emphasizing linguistic propriety and adherence to traditional norms, and another privileging freedom of expression and individual

identity. Interestingly, most young people respond not through confrontation but through linguistic accommodation, adjusting their speech style to suit context and audience in socially intelligent ways.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, this dynamic reflects what Yang et al. (2022) term sociolinguistic scales, the ways individuals position themselves across local, national, and global hierarchies of linguistic value. In Hukurila, these scales operate simultaneously: Ambonese Malay continues to symbolize intimacy and local solidarity, while urban Indonesian and English indexes participation in the modern world. Therefore, young people's linguistic choices should not be interpreted merely as imitation of urban trends but as symbolic strategies to navigate between customary continuity and the demands of modernity.

Local Language as a Symbol of Solidarity and Cultural Authenticity

Although rarely used in daily conversation, the local Hukurila language remains a potent symbol of social solidarity and cultural authenticity. Ethnographic observations reveal that the language endures not as an everyday medium of communication but as a symbolic vehicle for expressing attachment to ancestral values and spirituality. While younger generations now interact primarily in Ambonese Malay or urban Indonesian, the presence of the local language remains strong in sacred spaces such as church rituals, communal prayers, and traditional ceremonies in the *baileo* (village hall). The language's function has shifted, from communicative to emblematic, serving as an emotional and symbolic anchor of collective belonging.

During a Sunday church service, parts of the prayers and hymns were still recited in the Hukurila language. The solemn voices of elders echoed through the church adorned with young coconut leaves, as the congregation bowed their heads in reverence. When the ancestral prayer was uttered, the atmosphere turned deeply emotional, not merely due to its spiritual meaning but because the language itself evoked collective memory. As one informant, Mrs. M., explained, even though many young people no longer understand the words, hearing them "makes us feel close to our origins and to our ancestors." The language thus transcends communication, functioning as an emotional bridge between past and present, between humanity and the sacred.

A similar dynamic was observed during a traditional *tutup negeri* (village closure) ceremony in the *baileo*. Elders, dressed in customary sarongs, stood in a circle chanting invocations in the local language with solemn authority. Meanwhile, younger participants sat outside recording the event on their smartphones, posting it on social media with captions such as "Proud to be from Hukurila 🇮🇩 #negeriadat." Even if they did not fully understand the ritual speech, their act of recording and sharing represented a new form of respect, a symbolic revival of the language in digital spaces. Through such practices, youth extend the language's life in representational and emotional ways rather than communicative ones.

This phenomenon aligns with the concept of language maintenance and symbolic revival, which posits that endangered languages can persist as symbolic systems (Erz & Heeris Christensen, 2018; Yazan et al., 2023). The Hukurila language no longer functions primarily as a medium of communication but as a symbol of social solidarity and cultural authenticity. In

the framework of language nostalgia, endangered languages often gain renewed significance as representations of an “ideal past”, a time perceived as purer and more cohesive. This nostalgia, however, functions not merely as sentimentality but as resistance against cultural homogenization brought by urbanization and modernity. Thus, when the Hukurila community maintains the local language in ritual or liturgical contexts, they are asserting cultural continuity amid rapid social change.

An elder, Mr. S., explained that the language is now used only “for sacred times,” such as ancestral prayers and customary ceremonies, because “it is a holy language, not for everyday use.” This indicates a semi-sacral reclassification of the language. Its shift from everyday use to ritualized function signifies an elevation of symbolic value. In Bourdieu’s (2018) terms, this represents an accumulation of symbolic capital, the socially conferred prestige attached to certain practices deemed culturally legitimate. Although infrequently spoken, the Hukurila language retains high symbolic capital as a repository of customary authority and communal honor.

Additional observations at an elder’s home revealed occasional use of the language in family contexts. A grandmother addressed her grandchild in the local language, but the child responded in Indonesian, somewhat shyly. This interaction captures a gradual language shift: younger generations no longer speak the local language actively, yet continue to value it symbolically. When asked why she persists in teaching it, the grandmother replied, “So they know, it’s our people’s language, our village’s language.” Her statement reflects enduring cultural consciousness despite functional decline. Even as active use diminishes, the language retains symbolic strength as a marker of origin and kinship.

This symbolic transformation also manifests in the digital practices of young people. Several Hukurila youth post short TikTok or Instagram videos featuring fragments of hymns or prayers in the local language, often accompanied by brief translations in Indonesian or English. One teenage informant, F., explained that such uploads are “to show that our language still exists, even if it’s rarely used.” These acts constitute a form of digital revitalization, where social media becomes a platform for linguistic preservation through representation rather than conversation.

As Svendsen and Jonsson (2023) and Ward et al. (2018) observe, such symbolic revivals signify a functional shift from communicative to identity-based language use. Language becomes a semiotic marker of belonging that reinforces collective pride even when fluency is limited. In Hukurila, this phenomenon reveals how social solidarity is sustained through shared symbols, language as an icon of identity invoked in rituals, songs, and digital expressions to reaffirm communal distinctiveness.

Interestingly, this symbolism operates both inwardly and outwardly. Internally, it nurtures communal cohesion; externally, it serves as cultural representation. During tourism and cultural festivals, for instance, local language performances in songs or greetings signify the uniqueness of the village to outsiders. In one observed event, young participants dressed in traditional attire and sang in the local language before guests from Ambon City. Although their pronunciation was imperfect, the audience responded with enthusiastic applause. In

this sense, the local language functions as a collective emblem, not because all members master it, but because it embodies authenticity and cultural pride.

Urban–Adat Multilingualism: Negotiating Language in Emerging Social Spaces

The linguistic landscape of Hukurila reveals a social reality that can no longer be neatly classified as rural or urban, traditional or modern. Instead, it represents a hybrid social space characterized by urban–adat multilingualism. Geographically situated on the periphery of Ambon City, this customary community continues to preserve traditional social structures such as *mata rumah parentah* (clan houses), ritual practices, and the church as the center of collective life. Yet, its younger generation lives amid the intense flow of modernity, attending schools in the city, engaging on social media, and being exposed to global cultural currents. Within this context, language becomes the arena in which two worlds, urban and adat, intersect, interact, and are continuously renegotiated.

During field observations, it became evident that the boundary between traditional and urban spaces in Hukurila is increasingly blurred. In the *baileo* (traditional communal hall), where customary rituals are held, it is common to hear mixed conversations that blend Ambonese Malay and urban Indonesian. On one occasion, a young man was observed speaking with a customary elder while inserting phrases such as, “Yes, but I’ll update the WhatsApp group first so we can coordinate quickly.” This illustrates how even the most traditional spaces have become infused with digital communication practices. The language used here does more than convey information, it reflects sociolinguistic hybridity, in which linguistic symbols, styles, and norms from adat and urban domains intertwine (Seal, 2023). Language, therefore, is no longer confined to a single social domain but functions as a cross-boundary practice shaped by mobility and interconnectivity.

This phenomenon is even more explicit in digital spaces. Through digital ethnography of the Instagram and TikTok accounts of Hukurila youth, it was found that they frequently mix Ambonese Malay with urban Indonesian and English expressions in their posts and comments. For example, a photo in front of the church might be captioned: “Sunday vibes with my besties di negeri 🕌🙏 #Ambonpride.” In one sentence, they combine religious expression, local pride, and global modernity. As Lewis (2022) explains, such practices exemplify superdiversity, a social condition in which sources of identity, language, and meaning become increasingly complex and overlapping. For Hukurila youth, linguistic mixing is not a sign of disorder but a performative strategy that demonstrates their ability to live between two worlds: the rootedness of adat and the openness of modernity.

When asked about their use of mixed language, one informant, F., remarked, “If we only use standard Indonesian, it feels stiff... but when we mix it, that’s the Ambon style, and it’s cool.” This statement reveals that linguistic choices carry deliberate ideological and aesthetic meanings. Ambonese Malay, within the urban–adat context, is not only a marker of local identity but also a symbol of generational solidarity among Ambonese youth. Blending it with urban Indonesian and digital English expressions signals modern sensibilities and openness to global connections. Thus, their linguistic practice exemplifies agentic creativity, a means through which young people strategically mobilize linguistic resources to negotiate

their social positions within and across contrasting value systems.

The phenomenon of urban–adat multilingualism also highlights the fluid continuity between offline and online linguistic life. In daily interactions at home or church, Ambonese Malay and occasional local dialects are used to signify intimacy and emotional closeness. In contrast, on social media, these are intertwined with global codes that signify modern lifestyles and aspirations. This interplay forms a linguistic continuum that bridges, rather than separates, traditional and digital spaces. As Dickens et al. (2019) argue, online linguistic practices serve as “social extensions of offline life,” mediating local ideologies, humor, and cultural expressions through digital discourse.

Further observations show that, despite their frequent use of mixed language, young people remain sensitive to traditional linguistic norms in specific contexts. When speaking before elders or participating in prayers at the *baileo*, they automatically shift to more formal registers and respectful intonation. One youth participant, R., explained, “When we talk to elders, we can’t just speak freely... it’s different outside.” This reflects a keen awareness of situational language use, aligning with the concept of situated multilingualism (Dachs & Fletcher, 2022). Language use, therefore, is never entirely free but continually negotiated in relation to social context and power dynamics.

From a broader sociological perspective, this phenomenon illustrates how customary communities like Hukurila adapt to urbanization without entirely relinquishing their traditional roots. Urbanization here is not merely a physical process but a symbolic transformation that reconfigures social values, including how people speak and assign meaning to language. The linguistic practices of Hukurila’s youth suggest that modernity is no longer perceived as a threat to adat, but as an opportunity to renegotiate what it means to be *orang negeri* (native community members) in the 21st century. Rather than choosing between locality and globality, they creatively merge both into distinctive linguistic and cultural styles.

Viewed through the lenses of superdiversity and sociolinguistic hybridity, the linguistic practices in Hukurila demonstrate that language is not a static entity representing a single identity, but a dynamic network of meanings in constant flux. Their linguistic hybridization becomes a social strategy to manage identity complexity in an increasingly fluid world. Language thus operates as an arena in which power, values, and aspirations are subtly negotiated. When a young person uses English expressions in a social media caption, they are positioning themselves as members of a global generation while maintaining their local flavor through Ambonese diction. Multilingualism in Hukurila, therefore, is not competitive but coexistent.

These findings challenge conventional views of language preservation and national language policy. Many linguistic policies still assume that a language is “preserved” only if it is used actively and in its pure form. However, the case of Hukurila demonstrates that preservation can also occur through symbolism, adaptation, and hybridization. Rather than positioning local and national languages in opposition, Hukurila youth show that both can coexist in hybrid forms that enhance the relevance of local languages amid social change. In

this sense, urban–adat multilingualism is not merely descriptive but also a political–cultural stance, asserting the right of indigenous communities to redefine their own linguistic identities.

From a sociological standpoint, the linguistic behavior of Hukurila youth reflects shifting social relations and power structures within urban customary communities. The use of mixed language is not simply a communicative strategy but an expression of their position within an evolving social hierarchy. With greater access to education and technology, young people possess more diverse linguistic capital. Within the framework of language as social capital, their ability to code-switch and adjust to multiple registers enhances their symbolic and social mobility within the new urban–adat social order.

CONCLUSION

This study affirms that the linguistic practices of youth in Hukurila constitute a reflective negotiation of identity amid the convergence of adat and urban modernity in Ambon. Through hybrid linguistic performances, mixing local languages, Ambonese Malay, urban Indonesian, and digital English, Hukurila youth demonstrate social agency in bridging two distinct social worlds. Language here is not a static cultural inheritance but a dynamic medium through which social belonging, symbolic status, and future aspirations are negotiated. The shift in language ideology, from traditional moral values to symbols of mobility and modernity, shows that young people perceive multilingualism as a means of global connectedness without severing their local roots. Meanwhile, the continued use of local language in ritual and religious contexts reaffirms its symbolic value as a marker of solidarity and authenticity. Emerging from this dynamic is the conceptual framework of Urban–Adat Multilingualism, a hybrid condition that transcends the dichotomy between tradition and modernity, between local and global. This research, therefore, not only elucidates how language functions as a medium of identity negotiation in complex social spaces but also offers a new understanding of how the linguistic life of urban indigenous communities like Hukurila serves as a creative arena where modernity and locality intersect, enrich, and sustain each other.

ETHICAL STATEMENT AND DISCLOSURE

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles, including informed consent, protection of informants' confidentiality, and respect for local cultural values. Special consideration was given to participants from vulnerable groups to ensure their safety, comfort, and equal rights to participate. No external funding was received, and the authors declare no conflict of interest. All data and information presented were collected through valid research methods and have been verified to ensure their accuracy and reliability. The use of artificial intelligence (AI) was limited to technical assistance for writing and language editing, without influencing the scientific substance of the work. The authors express their gratitude to the informants for their valuable insights, and to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback on an earlier version of this manuscript. The authors take full responsibility for the content and conclusions of this article.

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