The Kelabit Language

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Introduction

• Linguistic properties of Kelabit
• The sociolinguistic situation
• Documenting Kelabit
• Conclusion
Linguistic Properties
Who?

• The Kelabit are one of the smallest **indigenous groups** in Sarawak and speak a language known as *karuh Kelabit* or *karuh tauh*.

• They traditionally lived in **longhouses** and practised **wet rice cultivation**.

• In recent years the community has undergone a number of changes – including **migration** to towns and cities

• This has had a big impact on **language use**...
Where?

- Kelabit is mainly spoken in the fourth and fifth divisions of **Northern Sarawak**, Malaysian Borneo.
Today there are **18 longhouse settlements** in and around the Highlands where different dialects of Kelabit are spoken.

The administrative centre is **Bario** where many villages were resettled after the confrontation with Indonesia.
What?

- Kelabit is an **Austronesian** language and part of the **Western Malayo-Polynesian** subgroup
• Kelabit is most closely related to Sa’ban, Lun Bawang/Lundayeh and Tring: collectively the **Apad Uat** languages...

• Blust argues that the languages of Northern Sarawak and Sabah form a single subgroup of Western Malayo-Polynesian: **North Borneo**
# Inclusive/Exclusive Pronouns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SINGULAR</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>you</td>
<td>he/she/it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLURAL</td>
<td>we</td>
<td>you</td>
<td>they</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kelabit</th>
<th>1.INCL</th>
<th>1.EXCL</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SINGULAR</td>
<td>uih</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>iko</td>
<td>ieh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DUAL</td>
<td>kiteh</td>
<td>kediweh</td>
<td>meduweh</td>
<td>diweh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAUCAL</td>
<td>teluh</td>
<td>keteluh</td>
<td>meteluh</td>
<td>deteluh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLURAL</td>
<td>tauh</td>
<td>kamih</td>
<td>muyuh</td>
<td>ideh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Reduplication

### (1) Derive Verbs from Nouns:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Noun</th>
<th>Verb</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>laput ‘cloud’</td>
<td>laput-laput ‘to be cloudy’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>legku ‘thunder’</td>
<td>legku’-legku’ ‘to thunder’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bariu ‘wind’</td>
<td>bariu-bariu ‘to be windy’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### (2) Mark Plural Number

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Root</th>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>na’an ‘type’</td>
<td>na’an-na’an ‘types’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### (3) Imperfective aspect

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Root</th>
<th>Imperfective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>kiding ‘lift’</td>
<td>kiding-kiding ‘lift to no avail’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>masiu ‘sell’</td>
<td>masiu-masiu ‘sell habitually’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Voice Alternations

(1a) ACTIVE VOICE (ACT)
I ate pineapple

(1b) PASSIVE VOICE (PASS)
The pineapple was eaten (by me)

(2a) ACTOR VOICE (AV)
Ne-kuman bua’ kaber uih
PFV-AV.eat pineapple 1SG
‘I ate pineapple’

(2b) UNDERGOER VOICE (UV)
Kinan kuh neh bua’ kaber ih
PFV.UV.eat 1SG PT pineapple PT
‘I ate pineapple’
Voiced Aspirates

Phonemes, clusters or allophones? (Blust 2006)
- Clusters do not typically occur elsewhere
- Voiceless sounds are unaspirated
- They alternate with voiced sounds under suffixation
- [dʰ] is realised as [s] in Kelapang Kelabit

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Bilabial</th>
<th>Alveolar</th>
<th>Palatal</th>
<th>Dorso-velar</th>
<th>glottal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Voiceless Plosives</td>
<td>p</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>k</td>
<td>ʔ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voice Plosives</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>d</td>
<td>g</td>
<td>ʔ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voiced Aspirates</td>
<td>bʰ</td>
<td>dʰ</td>
<td>gʰ</td>
<td>ʔ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africates</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>j</td>
<td>ʔ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nasals</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>ŋ</td>
<td>ʔ</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fricatives</td>
<td>s</td>
<td>h</td>
<td>ʔ</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liquids</td>
<td>l</td>
<td>ʔ</td>
<td>ʔ</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trills</td>
<td>r</td>
<td>ʔ</td>
<td>ʔ</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glides</td>
<td>j</td>
<td>ʔ</td>
<td>ʔ</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[t]  
*tutu’* [tutʊʔ] ‘fall’

[d]  
*tudu’* [tudʊʔ] ‘seven’

[dʰ]  
*tudtu’* [tudʰʊʔ] ‘salt’
Summary

• Kelabit is an Austronesian language spoken in Northern Sarawak

• It has many **typical Austronesian features** include a complex pronoun system; reduplication and a symmetrical voice system that are quite different from European languages.

• It also has a number of features that are **typologically rare** and possibly unique to Kelabit

• Hence, it is an invaluable resource in exploring the extent of **linguistic diversity** and **language universals**.
The Sociolinguistic Situation
Malaysia has **138 living languages** and a Linguistic Diversity Index of **0.761**.

- **52 languages** are spoken in Sarawak.

- Apart from the national languages of Malay, English and Mandarin, very few have official status.

- A great many languages are **endangered** and most are **under-documented**:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STATUS OF MALAYSIA’S 138 LIVING LANGUAGES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Institutional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vigorous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In trouble</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dying</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Ethnologue lists Kelabit as being EGIDS level 6b (Threatened) - this means it is still used among those of child-bearing age but not always transmitted to the next generation.

(Rethinasamy et al 2013, Martin & Yen 1994)
Speakers

• The total Kelabit population is listed as 5,900 in the Sarawak 2010 census – but perhaps more like 6,500 if we allow for population growth outside of Sarawak.

• But how many people speak the language?

• The population in the Highlands (where Kelabit is relatively vibrant) is perhaps only 1,200 – 1/5 of the total population.

• Speakers are multilingual – most speak Kelabit, Malay, English and local languages...

David speaks Kelabit, Malay, English, Kayan, Kenyah, Penan, Lun Bawang and Iban
When do multilingual speakers use Kelabit?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HIGHLANDS</th>
<th>TOWN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Language of <strong>daily communication</strong> – at home, at the town centre, at the airport etc.</td>
<td>• Kelabit is used in conversations among groups of Kelabit friends but...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• It can also be used in <strong>formal functions</strong> – i.e. at <em>irau</em> or feasts and in church</td>
<td>• <strong>Intergenerational transmission is declining</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Malay is the language of education.</td>
<td>• Speakers often <strong>code-switch</strong> or use English/Malay in multi-ethnic group settings.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Previous Documentation

• There are very few references on Kelabit or any of the Apad Uat languages – and few full descriptive works (see Asmah 1983, Clayre on Sa’ban and Blust on Kelabit).

• The earliest resources are word lists collected by travellers, missionaries and government officers – e.g. de Crespigny (1896), Roth (1896), Douglas (1911) and Ray (1913).

• There are two short glossaries (Amster 1995, Blust 1993)

• And a few stories/greetings in anthropological works (Rubenstein (1973), Saging & Bulan (1989), Bala (2002)
Revitalisation

- There have been a number of community efforts to **revitalise Kelabit** – particularly in towns.

**RADIO BARIO**

**TAWA’ RAUT**

**B** & **b**

**Bukuh** & **Busak**

**KELABIT CAMPS**
Challenges

- Resources and manpower!
- Orthography

The big question: What to do with the glottal stop?

(1a) [rəɾaʔ] ‘ant’  (2a) [kəmʊʔ] ‘you said’
(1b) [rəɾak] ‘torn’  (2b) [kəmʊʔ] ‘short’
Summary

- Kelabit can be considered **endangered** as speakers - particularly in towns - are shifting from Kelabit to Malay, English and other local languages and using Kelabit in fewer domains.

- Nonetheless, speakers have **positive attitudes** towards the language as a symbol of Kelabit identity and are keen to maintain its use.

- Revitalisation efforts are ongoing but face challenges of **disagreement over orthography** and lack of resources/support

- This is another way in which documentation can help!
Documenting Kelabit
Language Documentation

• **Language documentation** is generally understood as:

  “a representative and lasting multipurpose record of a natural language or one of its varieties”
  (Himmelmann 1998)

  “the creation, annotation, preservation and dissemination of transparent records of a language”
  (Woodbury 2011)

• The sample collected will depend on the **aims of the project**!
What is collected?

**Primary Data**
- Audio recordings
- Video recordings
- Images
- Written texts

**Annotation**
- Transcriptions
- Translations
- Analysis of data

**Metadata**
- Info about recording session
- Info about speaker(s)
Documenting Kelabit

- The corpus includes **audio and video recordings** of Kelabit, collected in **Bario, Pa’ Dalih** and **Pa’ Umur** over six and a half months of PhD fieldwork in 2013 and 2014.

- A variety of genres were collected, including **elicitation** and **naturalistic texts**.

- The recordings were transcribed using a working orthography and translated into English in **ELAN**.
Naturalistic Texts

- Roughly 7 hours of naturalistic texts: personal narratives; folk stories; procedural texts; news reports; formal speeches and songs

A children’s story

A children’s rhyme

A personal history
Elicitation

- Roughly **30 hours of elicitation sessions**: using word-list translation/linguistic stimuli, eliciting example sentences from words, eliciting grammaticality judgements and using non-linguistic stimuli

- Data from both naturalistic text and elicitation was used in a **basic sketch grammar** and in more detailed research into the voice system

- The next steps: (1) **archiving** the materials & producing useful **community outputs** and (2) expanding the description to produce a **full reference grammar**.
Summary

• The Kelabit documentation project involves the collection and archiving of primary materials in the Kelabit language.

• These are annotated in various ways to “add value” – transcription, translation, gloss, cultural information etc.

• Both structured elicitation and naturalistic data fed into a description of the language and more detailed analysis of voice.

• It is hoped that future documentation and description can feed into both revitalisation efforts in the community and increased understanding of variation in Austronesian.
Conclusion
Conclusion

• Kelabit – like many indigenous languages around the world – is facing endangerment in the context of increased migration and urban language shift.

• Nonetheless, it has an important identity function for the local community.

• It also has a number of interesting linguistic features which may feed into ongoing typological and theoretical linguistic debates.

• Thus it is important for linguists and local communities to document and describe in order to provide a record for posterity, support revitalisation and reveal interesting patterns to test and improve existing hypotheses and provide data for new linguistic research.
Many Thanks!