

# The Dynamics of Gane Language Shift in the Digital Era: A Paradox of Rejection in Practice and Acceptance in Identity among Senior High School Students

Syahrir Ibnu<sup>1</sup>, Nurhadi Hamka<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Universitas Khairun, Indonesia

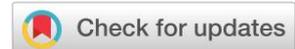
\*Correspondence: [nurhadighamka@unkhair.ac.id](mailto:nurhadighamka@unkhair.ac.id)

## ABSTRACT

*The Gane language, an indigenous language in South Halmahera, is at a critical stage of language shift, particularly among the younger generation. This study aims to document the patterns of Gane language use, identify the driving factors of its shift, and analyze the attitudes of senior high school students amidst this phenomenon. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with senior high school students, teachers, principals, and community leaders, as well as observations in school and social settings. The findings indicate that the use of the Gane language among students is significantly low, having lost its primary communicative domains to the dominance of Indonesian and Ternate Malay. The primary driving factors are the penetration of technology and social media, peer pressure that associates dominant languages with modernity, and the lack of economic value and prestige of the Gane language. Amidst this situation, a crucial paradox was discovered: students reject the use of the Gane language in practice, yet consciously express positive attitudes, admiration, and a strong desire to preserve it as a symbol of identity. This finding implies that revitalization strategies must be youth-centric, integrating formal school policies (curriculum) with informal, digital community-based movements that are relevant to their world.*

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## KEYWORDS

Gane Language; Language Shift; Language Revitalization; Education Policy; Social Media; Youth Identity.

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## 1. Introduction

The vitality of local languages in Indonesia is under unprecedented pressure. As the country with the second-largest linguistic diversity in the world, Indonesia faces a significant challenge in maintaining its more than 700 mother tongues, which serve as pillars of the archipelago's ethnic and cultural identities (Amir et al., 2023; Erniati et al., 2022; Putri, 2021; Taryono et al., 2025; Rahman & Amir, 2019). Amidst the currents of globalization and the strengthening of Indonesian as the national language, many local languages are undergoing a language shift which is a process where a speech community gradually abandons its heritage language in favor of another perceived as more socially, economically, or politically dominant (Khairiyah et al., 2025; Kojima et al., 2024; Saputra, 2025; Aswad et al., 2019). This phenomenon, if not mitigated, ultimately leads to language death, signifying the loss of a unique repository of knowledge, traditions, and worldviews (Amalia et al., 2024; Hermawan et al., 2022; Khairiyah et al., 2025; Rifaldi, 2024; Crystal, 2000; Dalyan et al., 2025).

One language facing serious challenges to its survival, currently "under pressure" and even threatened with extinction, is the Gane language of South Halmahera, North Maluku Province. Data from the Language Development and Fostering Agency (Badan Pengembangan dan Pembinaan Bahasa, n.d.) do not specify the status of the Gane language in detail. However, preliminary field observations suggest that the number of active speakers is dwindling, particularly among the younger generation. Adolescents, especially senior high school (SMA) students—who are key agents in intergenerational language transmission (Fought, 2006; Hornberger, 2008)—show a strong tendency to use Indonesian and Ternate Malay (the regional lingua franca) in nearly all of their communication domains. This situation signifies a serious disruption in the natural process of language inheritance, where schools and peer environments have become the primary arenas for linguistic shift. This reflects a phenomenon of intergenerational transmission failure that has also been observed in the context of other local languages in Indonesia (Ulfa, 2019; Wahyudi & Lestari, 2020; Yami et al., 2024; Sendana et al., 2025).

The language shift in Gane is not occurring in a vacuum; rather, it is driven by a convergence of powerful factors. Herniyastuti and Kadir (2024) and Sumilih et al. (2024) explain that a primary accelerator identified in recent research is the penetration of digital technology and social media. Furthermore, global platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and WhatsApp have created a new communication ecosystem where dominant languages become the norm while local languages are marginalized (Harahap et al., 2025). Studies by Bangun et al. (2024) and Putri et al. (2025) show how social media accelerates the erosion of local language use among Indonesian adolescents by offering content and interaction models that are more appealing and perceived as modern. This phenomenon directly impacts the linguistic choices of students in Gane, who are constantly exposed to national and global slang, while the input of the Gane language in their digital lives is virtually nonexistent.

In addition to technological factors, the educational policy landscape also plays a significant role. The Local Language Revitalization Program, initiated by the Language Agency, mandates schools to be at the forefront of preservation (Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, 2025). However, the implementation of mother tongue-based multilingual policies in Indonesia often faces challenges and obstacles at the regional level (INOVASI, 2022). In Gane, there is no formal and systematic school policy that integrates the learning or use of the Gane language into the curriculum. This institutional void, as described by Shohamy (2006), often indirectly legitimizes the neglect of the local language in favor of prioritizing the national language. Consequently, students lack a structured space to learn, practice, and ultimately, value their mother tongue within the context of formal education.

The theoretical framework of language shift, pioneered by Fishman (1991), emphasizes the importance of functional domains (particularly the family, community, and school) in maintaining a language's vitality. When a language begins to lose its function in these key domains, it enters a trajectory toward extinction. This study positions itself within this framework by empirically analyzing how the Gane language has lost its domains among the younger generation. However, this research seeks to go beyond the mere documentation of decline. Drawing on the perspective of Jones & Schieffelin (2009), who view technology as a double-edged sword (both a threat and an opportunity), this study specifically investigates the potential of social media as an arena for revitalization.

The primary gap this research aims to fill is a deeper understanding of the internal dynamics of the younger generation in the face of language shift. Many studies focus on external factors such as media, policy, and economics (Nikmah & Subhan, 2025; Suhendi, 2025; Aditiawarman et al., 2025; Pramuniati et al., 2025; Ullah et al., 2024), but few have delved into the language attitudes and the potential for identity resistance among young speakers themselves. Are they completely passive in accepting this shift, or is there a complex negotiation of identity at play?

Therefore, this study has three primary objectives: first, to document in detail the patterns of use and domain contraction of the Gane language among senior high school students; second, to identify and analyze the multidimensional factors (especially the role of social media and education policy) driving the language shift; and third, to uncover the paradoxical attitudes of students toward their mother tongue in order to identify social capital that can be leveraged for revitalization efforts. Thus, the findings of this study are expected not only to provide a comprehensive sociolinguistic overview of the state of the Gane language but also to offer recommendations for revitalization strategies that are innovative, evidence-based, and centered on the youth as agents of change.

## **2. Methodology**

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to gain a deep and holistic understanding of the Gane language shift phenomenon from the perspective of the actors directly involved. The research was conducted in Gane, South Halmahera, a key region for Gane speakers. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to represent the language ecosystem, consisting of senior high school students, teachers, a principal, and community leaders.

Primary data were collected through methodological triangulation to ensure the depth and richness of the data. The techniques used included:

- a. In-depth Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participant groups to explore their motivations, perceptions, and experiences related to language practices and school policies.
- b. Participant Observation: Observations were carried out in school and community settings to observe and record natural language use patterns in various contexts of social interaction.
- c. Social Media Content Analysis: Analysis was conducted on relevant digital platforms to identify students' linguistic choices and trends in online communication, which is considered a significant factor in the language shift.

The qualitative data collected were analyzed inductively using thematic analysis, which included the stages of data familiarization, coding, and theme development to answer the research questions (Ahmed et al., 2025; Naeem et al., 2023). The credibility of the findings was ensured through source triangulation (comparing data across participant groups) and methodological triangulation (validating interview findings with data from observations and social media analysis). Furthermore, preliminary conclusions were validated through member-checking with several key informants to ensure interpretive accuracy.

### **3. Result and Discussion**

#### **3.1 Result**

Analysis of the qualitative data collected from interviews with senior high school students, teachers, the principal, and community leaders, as well as from field observations, reveals four primary, interconnected findings. These findings collectively illustrate the complex dynamics of the Gane language shift among the younger generation.

##### **a. Critical Usage Patterns and Functional Shift of the Gane Language**

The most fundamental finding reveals that the Gane language is at a critically low level of usage among senior high school students, indicating that the language shift has reached a critical stage. The language has effectively ceased to function as the primary medium of communication in their daily interactions, with their communicative spaces being completely dominated by Indonesian and Ternate Malay. This dominance is driven by the perception that these two languages are more relevant to the modern world and adolescent social life. Ironically, the only domain where students are still exposed to Gane is the domestic or family setting. However, the function of the language in this domain has undergone a drastic shift: it is no longer used for transmitting cultural values or intimate communication between parents and children. Instead, its role has been relegated to a "secret code" used by parents to discuss matters deemed inappropriate for their children.

This functional restriction indirectly sends a message to the younger generation that the language is exclusive to the older generation, not for their everyday use. This condition signifies a failure in intergenerational language transmission, disrupting the natural inheritance process. Consequently, students have become a generation of passive listeners who may recognize some vocabulary but fundamentally lack the opportunity or confidence to use it in complete conversations. The observation of domain loss and weakening intergenerational transmission in the family sphere mirrors broader concerns regarding the endangerment of local languages, including Gane, and their implications for cultural identity across Indonesia (Muin, 2025). Among these young speakers, the Gane language is no longer productive and is actively threatened with extinction.

##### **b. Driving Factors of the Language Shift**

The massive shift from the Gane language to other languages is driven by several primary, mutually reinforcing factors: technology, social pressure, and a lack of economic value and prestige.

The influence of technology and social media as a primary catalyst for language shift was a point of absolute consensus among all informants, including students, educators, and community leaders. High smartphone ownership, supported by the availability of a stable internet network (including free government-provided internet facilities) has fundamentally transformed the communication landscape of the younger generation. Social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and WhatsApp have become new social arenas where Gane language is practically absent.

This is in line with the findings of the study by Rani & Fiddienika (2024) who argued that to participate and feel relevant in these digital communities, young generations naturally adopt the dominant languages used on these platforms. This massive and continuous exposure to dominant languages through social media gradually reshapes their linguistic preferences, often subconsciously. This digital immersion creates an extreme imbalance, where the input of the Gane language is minimal while the input of dominant languages is massive and constant (Sibuea et al., 2025).

Students' choice to switch from Gane to the dominant languages is significantly influenced by social factors that establish a strong, unwritten linguistic norm. Ternate Malay, as the regional lingua franca of North Maluku, is consistently associated by students with concepts of progress, urbanity, and a modern self-image. This linguistic association, coupled with the finding that "none of their peers actively use Gane anymore," creates immense pressure to

conform. Consequently, using the Gane language in daily conversation risks inviting ridicule or being perceived as strange and old-fashioned. Thus, abandoning Gane is a rational social adaptation strategy that ensures inclusion and acceptance within their peer groups.

The choice to abandon Gane is a rational social adaptation strategy that ensures inclusion within peer groups. This process aligns with the understanding that socialization and the need for peer acceptance (crucial psychological drivers during adolescence) significantly influence linguistic attitudes and behaviors (Ibnu, 2024). Consequently, students' language switching is laden with social meaning, where adopting Ternate Malay is seen as an essential act of social adaptation to secure peer acceptance.

**Lack of Economic Value and Prestige:** From a pragmatic standpoint, the Gane language is perceived as having no clear economic value. Teachers highlighted that the language is not used in the professional world, is not a requirement for employment, and does not open access to higher education or business opportunities. Conversely, proficiency in Indonesian, as the dominant language, directly correlates with opportunities for upward social mobility and improved social status.

Furthermore, the prestige of the Gane language is also considered low; it is no longer used in domains respected by the community, such as government or mass media, a phenomenon that gives rise to a "linguistic stigma" or a sense of inferiority when using the local language in formal settings (Hamka et al., 2024; Ullah et al., 2024). Its status has been relegated to that of a mere "identity symbol," valued nostalgically but not functionally. This combination of a lack of economic value and low prestige directly results in students' low extrinsic motivation to learn and use it.

### **c. The Role of School Policy and Community Response**

Preservation efforts for the Gane language from an institutional standpoint were found to be minimal, both at the policy and community action levels.

**School Policy and the Institutional Void:** The absence of formal policies from the provincial and district education offices creates an institutional void that legitimizes the neglect of the Gane language within the education system. North Maluku province, which has dozens of local languages, lacks a comprehensive language preservation roadmap, often resulting in policy paralysis due to a priority dilemma. Consequently, without an official mandate, schools have no legal basis to allocate resources such as teaching hours or the development of learning materials. Within this void, teachers informally continue to use the Gane language during meetings or amongst themselves, demonstrating an "internal awareness." However, this practice is exclusive and not structured as a transmission effort in the classroom. The only concrete hope comes from the principal's initiative to propose the Gane language for the local content curriculum (a proactive, bottom-up step that has the potential to be a turning point).

**The Community: Deep Concern, Delayed Action:** Community leaders voiced deep concern and offered a sharp analysis regarding the impact of modernization, particularly the internet, on communal identity. They accurately identified that the threat to their language now comes from the forces of technology-facilitated globalization. Although the diagnosis of the problem is very clear, the Gane community appears to be trapped in a state of collective paralysis. A wide gap exists between awareness of the problem and mobilization to find a solution. The call for a "joint movement" exists, but it has not yet materialized into concrete action or specific policies. Consequently, the burden of preservation is seemingly placed entirely on the shoulders of the school that is an institution that cannot withstand the tide of language shift alone without a supportive ecosystem from the community.

### **d. The Paradoxical Attitude of the Younger Generation: Rejection in Practice, Acceptance in Identity**

The most significant and paradoxical finding of this study is the chasm between students' linguistic practices and their attitudes toward their linguistic identity. In daily practice, they are the primary agents of the language shift; their conscious choice to use Ternate Malay and Indonesian actively erodes the domains of use for the Gane language. However, in the realm of attitude and awareness, they demonstrate the opposite. The students expressed a sense of "admiration" when made aware of the uniqueness of their community's language. The ongoing language shift is not the

result of a conscious rejection of their Gane identity, but rather a pragmatic response to pressures from their social environment, media, and modernity. This finding indicates that the value and uniqueness of the language have never been explicitly introduced to them, either at home or at school. When confronted with the fact that this language is an exclusive marker of their community, it transformed from a mere tool of communication into a powerful and pride-invoking symbol of identity.

This emerging awareness represents a highly valuable social capital. The problem is not how to convince a generation that rejects its language, but rather how to empower a generation that wants to reclaim it. Although a strong will exists, there is a missing bridge between the desire to preserve and the ability to do so. The students possess intrinsic motivation but lack the means and a supportive environment, such as a safe space to practice the language without awkwardness or learning materials relevant to their world.

### **3.2 Discussion**

The findings of this study present a complex and multifaceted picture of the state of the Gane language among the younger generation. This discussion will interpret these findings by situating them within a broader sociolinguistic theoretical framework.

#### **a. Confirmation of Language Shift and the Erosion of Functional Domains**

The research findings conclusively confirm the phenomenon of a significant language shift that is in an advanced stage. This situation resonates strongly with the theoretical framework proposed by Fishman (1991), who posited that language shift occurs when a minority language begins to lose its functional domains. The findings in Gane present a classic case of this theory. The Gane language has been systematically displaced from nearly all crucial domains in an adolescent's life, most notably the peer group domain.

More alarmingly is the severe functional erosion within the family domain, which Fishman (1991) considers the last bastion of defense for an endangered language. The use of the Gane language by parents, limited to secret conversations, has indirectly transformed its function from a tool of cultural transmission into a code of exclusion. This practice effectively severs the natural process of language inheritance and teaches children that the Gane language is not for everyday interaction. This failure of intergenerational transmission, as has also been documented in the case of urban Balinese (Mulyawan, 2017), is the clearest indicator of a language in serious peril.

#### **b. Technology as an Accelerator and a New Social Arena**

This process of language shift has been extraordinarily accelerated by the penetration of digital technology. This finding provides strong empirical validation for the argument made by Crystal (2000) as well as for case studies in Indonesia regarding the destructive role of social media on minority languages (Sibuea et al., 2025; Listiani et al., 2023). The mechanism behind the influence of social media is multifaceted. It creates an environment of total immersion in the dominant language, forms new social arenas where the local language is absent, and shifts interaction from physical to digital communities (Hamka et al., 2024). In this digital arena, the practice of translanguaging, or flexible code-mixing, becomes the norm, often further marginalizing the puristic use of the local language (Nugroho & Mulyeni, 2025). Crystal (2000) underscores the importance of the issue of language death, which is relevant to the observation of accelerated language shift in the current digital era (Crystal, 2000).

#### **c. Policy Vacuum and Institutional Neglect**

The situation in Gane reflects Shohamy's (2006) argument that language policy, or the lack thereof, is not neutral. The absence of a formal policy supporting the preservation of the Gane language constitutes a form of institutional neglect, which effectively paves the way for the dominant language. This challenge is exacerbated by the complexities of implementing multilingual education policies in Indonesia. Studies in rural areas indicate that inconsistent policy guidelines, a lack of teacher training, and a scarcity of teaching resources in local languages lead to the dominance of Indonesian in the classroom, often at the expense of local languages (Rusdiansyah et al., 2025). Consequently, the Gane language and others are left to face these pressures alone, their fate seemingly surrendered to the mechanism of natural selection in the era of globalization.

#### **d. Interpreting the Paradox: Youth Identity Negotiation**

The most interesting finding is the paradoxical attitude of the students. At the level of practice, they are the primary agents of the language shift; however, at the level of awareness, they demonstrate a strong desire to become its saviors.

This phenomenon refutes the assumption that the younger generation inherently wishes to abandon their culture; on the contrary, it reveals a complex negotiation of identity. Their choice to use the dominant language is a pragmatic strategy, while the desire to preserve the Gane language is a response to the need for cultural roots (Putra & Tustiawati, 2024; Lumbanbatu, 2024).

This positive attitude, also found among Generation Z in other Indonesian contexts, indicates the potential to foster "new speakers" (individuals who did not acquire their mother tongue traditionally but possess a strong motivation to learn it) (Aisy & Wahyudi, 2024; Nabilla, 2023). It is this potential that opens a strategic opportunity to reverse the trend. In line with the views of Jones & Schieffelin (2009), digital media is not merely a threat; it can also be a golden opportunity for language revitalization through digital activism. If social media is the arena where the Gane language is currently losing ground, then the same arena must be used to launch a "counter-attack." The strong desire from the students constitutes an invaluable social capital, signifying that an audience for a revitalization program already exists and is, in fact, highly receptive.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This section summarizes the key findings of the research and formulates strategic recommendations based on the preceding analysis. This study concludes that the Gane language is undergoing a rapid and critical phase of language shift among senior high school students in Gane, South Halmahera. This shift is no longer merely a symptom but a dominant reality, manifested by the loss of the language's function in the vital domains of adolescent life. This phenomenon is driven by the convergence of three mutually reinforcing factors, creating a "perfect storm" that threatens the sustainability of the Gane language for future generations.

The primary driving factor is the omnipresent dominance of social media, which serves as the main accelerator in eroding the use of the Gane language. The power of this technology is exacerbated by social and economic factors, whereby the Gane language is perceived as lacking the prestige and pragmatic value to support its speakers' futures. This situation is worsened by a policy vacuum within regional educational institutions, which lack a clear roadmap for language preservation—a form of institutional neglect that effectively legitimizes the marginalization of the Gane language.

Nevertheless, the most crucial finding of this study is not one of extinction, but of hope. Amidst the strong currents of the shift, a paradox was revealed: a strong will and a highly positive attitude among students to preserve their mother tongue. The language shift, it turns out, is not driven by a rejection of identity, but rather by the lack of space, opportunity, and means to express that identity. This latent potential within the younger generation is the most valuable social capital and must become the cornerstone of any future revitalization efforts.

Based on the conclusions above, effective preservation efforts can no longer be conventional but must instead adopt a synergistic, two-pronged strategy: a) For the School (Top-Down Policy at the Micro-Level): It is recommended that the school immediately realize its plan to propose the Gane language for the local content curriculum. This step will provide institutional legitimacy and a formal space for students to learn. Furthermore, the school needs to create an environment that supports the informal use of the Gane language, for instance, by establishing a "Gane Language Day," forming language clubs, or holding creative competitions (such as writing poetry or short stories) that are relevant to students.

b) For the Regional Government (Top-Down Policy at the Macro-Level): The Regional Government (Education Agency) needs to formulate more concrete policies to support the preservation of local languages, in line with the national revitalization program. This support can take the form of developing a standardized local content curriculum, providing teaching materials, conducting teacher training, and allocating funds for language programs in schools and communities. c) For the Community and Community Leaders (Bottom-Up Movement): The community is encouraged to transform concern into concrete action. Active collaboration with the school is needed to organize activities that involve the younger generation in using the Gane language outside of school hours, such as in traditional ceremonies, religious activities, or traditional games. This will help recreate the lost language ecosystem. c) Strategic Recommendation (Digital-Based Revitalization): Given that social media is a primary driver of the shift, it must also become a primary tool for revitalization. It is recommended to develop creative, brief, and engaging digital content in the Gane language (e.g., TikTok videos,

memes, or Instagram Reels) created by and for the younger generation. Using the Gane language on the platforms they use daily will make it appear 'cool,' modern, and relevant, thus bridging the gap between their desire and their linguistic practice.

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