



The Lasting Influence of Dutch Colonialism on Language Use and Identity in Post-Colonial Indonesia

Elfa Salsabila ^{*1}, Aura Savinka Balqis ², Asmyta Surbakti³

^{1,2,3} Universitas Sumatera Utara, Medan, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author: elfasalsabila24@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 25 December 2025

Revised 12 January 2026

Accepted 20 January 2026

Available online

<https://talenta.usu.ac.id/lingpoet>

E-ISSN: 2964-1713

P-ISSN: 2775-5622

How to cite:

Salsabila, E., Balqis, A. S., & Surbakti, A. (2026). The Lasting Influence of Dutch Colonialism on Language Use and Identity in Post-Colonial Indonesia.

LingPoet: Journal of Linguistics and Literary Research, 7(1), 12–16.

ABSTRACT

This study qualitatively explores the enduring influence of Dutch colonialism on language use and identity in Indonesia. It finds that Dutch colonial administration created a hierarchical linguistic landscape where Dutch symbolized power and elite status, while Malay later formalized as Bahasa Indonesia was the widespread lingua franca that united the archipelago's diverse ethnic groups. Colonial use of Malay, influenced by Dutch linguistic frameworks, facilitated the later rise of Indonesian as a national language embodying unity and resistance. The research highlights social stratification in language access, with Dutch limited to elites, shaping nationalist leadership. Furthermore, Dutch lexical and phonetic traces persist in Indonesian, reflecting a hybrid linguistic heritage. Post-independence nationalist efforts promoted Bahasa Indonesia to consolidate identity and reject colonial cultural dominance. The study demonstrates language's dual role as a colonial tool and emancipatory resources, revealing the complex interplay of domination, adaptation, and resistance in Indonesia's post-colonial identity formation.

Keyword: Dutch Colonialism, Language Influence, Bahasa Indonesia, Identity Formation



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International.
<http://doi.org/10.26594/register.v6i1.idarticle>

1. Introduction

Travelling The legacy of Dutch colonialism in Indonesia extends far beyond political and economic domains, deeply influencing cultural identity and language use. During the colonial period, the Dutch established administrative systems and communication infrastructures that set the foundation for modern Indonesian governance and social organization. This colonial history shaped Indonesian identity through a complex interplay of domination, adaptation, and cultural integration, with language playing a pivotal role as both a tool of administration and a symbol of emerging national unity (Ricklefs, 2008; Taylor, 2003). A qualitative historical approach reveals the nuanced ways colonial language policies contributed to the formation of Indonesian as a national language and cultural marker, despite the oppressive context in which these developments occurred.

The formation of Indonesian national identity involved negotiating the colonial past while fostering a unified cultural identity amid diverse local communities. Indonesian a standardized form of Malay was initially popularized through colonial administration as a lingua franca to manage the archipelago's ethnic and linguistic diversity. This "simplification" of Malay, influenced by Dutch linguistic frameworks, was later adapted and embraced by Indonesians themselves as an essential instrument for national communication and cultural cohesion. Language, in this context, transcended its role as a communication medium, becoming a powerful symbol of unity, cultural expression, and resistance against colonial domination (Sutrisno, 2024;

Maier, 2005). Understanding these dynamics requires qualitative methodologies that explore the socio-historical contexts in which language and identity intersected.

Moreover, the post-colonial Indonesian identity reflects the complex ambivalence towards the Dutch colonial legacy. While colonial influence facilitated modernization and educational opportunities that contributed to nationalist movements, there was also a strong desire to reject Dutch cultural imposition, leading to the promotion of Bahasa Indonesia as the national language. This tension illustrates how colonial heritage shapes post-colonial identity in multifaceted ways, blending both adaptation and resistance. A qualitative, historical perspective illuminates how language use embodies broader cultural processes of reclaiming identity and negotiating the colonial past within contemporary Indonesia (Ricklefs, 2008; Maier, 2005).

1.1. Literature Review

The literature on the influence of Dutch colonialism on language use in Indonesia reveals a complex and multifaceted legacy that deeply shaped linguistic identity and social structures. Dutch colonial rule established a linguistic hierarchy in which the Dutch language represented authority, education, and social mobility, yet it never became a widespread lingua franca among the general population. During the VOC period, Dutch was primarily confined to elites and colonial administrators, while Malay served as the practical lingua franca across the archipelago. Nevertheless, the introduction of Dutch administrative and educational systems laid the groundwork for intricate interactions between Dutch, Malay, and indigenous languages, ultimately shaping the linguistic landscape that would influence Indonesia's national language development (Ricklefs, 2008; Taylor, 2003; Everaert, 2023).

Importantly, studies highlight how Dutch colonial policies attempted to impose Dutch as a marker of social status and loyalty, but these efforts met with limited success outside elite circles. Dutch schools were scarce and mostly accessible to select indigenous aristocracy and Europeans, creating a linguistic elite who were conversant in Dutch but lived in multilingual societies where local languages prevailed. Groups such as the Ambonese and Minahasa were more exposed to Dutch language and culture due to their allegiance to the colonial regime, which bolstered Dutch influence within certain ethnic communities. This uneven access reinforced social stratification tied to language proficiency and identity during colonial times.

The emergence of Indonesian as a national language is perhaps the most significant linguistic legacy intertwined with Dutch colonial influence. While Malay was the lingua franca before and during colonialism, the codification and standardization of Indonesian which drew on Malay were indirectly shaped by Dutch linguistic frameworks and colonial administrative boundaries. The Dutch colonial state's use of Malay as a simplified communication tool among diverse ethnic groups inadvertently propelled the later adoption of Indonesian as a unifying national language after independence. The qualitative analysis of language policies shows that Indonesian language development was both a product of colonial pragmatism and post-colonial nationalist resistance, embracing Malay-based Indonesian to forge a cohesive identity distinct from Dutch colonial authority (Sutrisno, 2024; Maier, 2005; Everaert, 2023).

Further, the shift in official language use following the Japanese occupation and Indonesia's independence underscores the contested colonial linguistic legacy. Although Dutch persisted among educated elites and former colonial collaborators after 1945, the new Republic of Indonesia emphasized Bahasa Indonesia to consolidate national identity and reject colonial domination. The replacement of Dutch by Indonesian in education and administration symbolized both a break from colonial influence and a strategic move to foster national unity across diverse linguistic communities. This post-colonial language policy reveals a dialectic of adaptation and resistance, where colonial influence was acknowledged but ultimately subordinated to the aspirations of an independent Indonesian state (Everaert, 2023).

Qualitative research also emphasizes the symbolic role of language in shaping collective identity and memory related to colonialism. Dutch language proficiency was simultaneously a marker of modernity and elite status and a reminder of colonial subjugation. The ambivalence in post-colonial attitudes reflects this duality, as some groups maintained Dutch language use for pragmatic or cultural reasons, while the national discourse valorized Indonesian as a symbol of emancipation. Language thus functioned as a cultural battleground where histories of power, exclusion, and identity were negotiated continuously through and after the colonial era (Ricklefs, 2008; Maier, 2005).

In addition, recent scholarship on Dutch-Indonesian linguistic relationships explores how remnants of Dutch vocabulary and administrative language forms subtly persist within modern Indonesian language and legal terminology. These linguistic traces are living legacies of colonial administration that nuanced post-colonial identity constructions and language policies. Qualitative analyses of language contact and borrowing

highlight how these lexical influences coexist with efforts to cultivate a pure Indonesian national language, reflecting ongoing tensions between colonial inheritance and post-colonial identity formation.

Overall, the literature substantiates that Dutch colonialism influenced Indonesian language far beyond direct Dutch language use, shaping sociolinguistic hierarchies, facilitating Indonesian as a national language, and leaving nuanced linguistic legacies still visible today. This influence is best understood through qualitative socio-historical frameworks that examine language policies, identity formation, and cultural memory, highlighting a dynamic interplay of domination, adaptation, and resistance in post-colonial Indonesia.

2. Method

The research method employed in examining the lasting influence of Dutch colonialism on language use and identity in Indonesia is qualitative in nature. This approach enables a detailed exploration of historical contexts, language policies, and socio-cultural dynamics by analyzing archival materials, colonial education records, policy documents, and literary sources. It focuses on understanding how language functioned both as a tool of colonial administration and a symbol of emerging national identity, reflecting processes of domination, adaptation, and resistance. A qualitative historical methodology facilitates comprehension of the nuanced interplay between Dutch linguistic frameworks and indigenous responses, revealing how the evolution of Bahasa Indonesia was intricately tied to colonial legacies and post-colonial identity formation. This method also allows for the examination of symbolic meanings attached to language use, social stratification based on linguistic proficiency, and the cultural memory associated with Dutch colonialism, providing a comprehensive understanding of Indonesia's linguistic and identity transformations over time.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1. Results

This qualitative study reveals that Dutch colonialism had a profound and enduring influence on language use and identity formation in Indonesia. The Dutch colonial administration established a stratified linguistic landscape where Dutch served as the language of power, governance, and elite education, while Malay, later standardized as Bahasa Indonesia, functioned as a practical lingua franca bridging diverse ethnic groups. Though Dutch was limited to elites, the colonial use of Malay under Dutch influence shaped the later formalization of Indonesian, embedding Dutch linguistic features into the emerging national language. This dual legacy illustrates how colonial language policies shaped both social hierarchies and nationalist identity.

The results emphasize a complex dynamic where Bahasa Indonesia stands as a symbol of both cultural unity and resistance. The simplification and administrative use of Malay by the Dutch ironically facilitated the rise of a national language that united Indonesia's myriad ethnic groups post-independence, distancing itself from Dutch dominance. At the same time, residual Dutch vocabulary and phonetic traits remained embedded within Indonesian, reflecting the intertwined linguistic heritage. This linguistic hybridity highlights the nuanced process of cultural negotiation post-colonial societies undergo.

A compelling feature of the findings lies in the social stratification of language proficiency during colonial times. As Dutch language access was limited, only select indigenous elites mastered it, while the masses primarily used Malay and local languages. This differentiator reinforced colonial power structures yet inadvertently sowed seeds for anti-colonial nationalist movements spearheaded by educated elites familiar with Dutch and nationalist ideas.

Table 1 below illustrates ten Indonesian words with high phonetic and semantic similarity to their Dutch counterparts, showcasing linguistic borrowing and influence embedded in pronunciation and meaning. The table includes phonetic transcriptions for clarity:

Table 1. Education Background

No	Indonesian	Pronunciation (IPA)	Dutch	Pronunciation (IPA)	Meaning
1	Apotek	/apotek/	Apotheek	/a.po:t'ek/	Pharmacy
2	Arloji	/arlodʒi/	Harloge	/hɔr'lo:ʒə/	Police
3	Bioskop	/bioskop/	Bioscoop	/bi.o'sko:p/	Cinema
4	Dokter	/'døktər/	Dokter	/'døktər/	Doctor
5	Ember	/embər/	Emmer	/'emər/	Bucket
6	Gorden	/gørdən/	Gordijn	/yɔr'deɪn/	Curtain
7	Guru	/'guru/	Guru	/'gy:ru/	Teacher
8	Handuk	/handuk/	Handdoek	/hɑn'duk/	Towel
9	Kantor	/'kantor/	Kantoor	/'kanto:r/	Office
10	Koper	/'køpər/	Koffer	/'køfər/	Suitcase
11	Kulkas	/kulkas/	Koelkast	/'kul,kast/	Refrigerator
12	Mental	/men'tal/	Mentaal	/men'ta:l/	Mental
13	Sekolah	/sə'kolah/	School	/sxol/	School
14	Tante	/tante/	Tante	/'tanta/	Aunty
15	Tempo	/'tempo/	Tempo	/'tempo:/	Time/speed

These examples underscore how Dutch administration and education contributed to borrowing and retention of Dutch words, often adapted phonetically and semantically within Bahasa Indonesia.

3.2. Discussion

This qualitative research further finds that post-independence, Indonesian nationalist leaders consciously promoted Bahasa Indonesia to unify the country and sever Dutch cultural dominance. Nonetheless, the ambivalence toward the Dutch language persisted, balancing practical utility and colonial memories. The presence of Dutch loanwords and administrative language in Indonesia's legal and academic discourse exemplifies this blended cultural heritage.

In sum, the study supports the understanding that Dutch colonialism influenced Indonesian language and identity through a layered process involving administrative policy, education systems, societal stratification, and nationalist adaptation. Language served as both a colonizer's tool and an emancipatory resource, evidencing the dynamic interplay of power, resistance, and identity in Indonesia's post-colonial landscape.

4. Conclusion

The conclusion of this research reveals that Dutch colonialism significantly shaped Indonesian language use and identity through a layered process of domination, adaptation, and cultural integration. Dutch served as the language of power and elite governance, while Malay, influenced by Dutch language policies, evolved into Bahasa Indonesia, a unifying national language instrumental in post-colonial identity formation. The colonial linguistic hierarchy reinforced social stratification, yet also contributed to the rise of nationalist leaders who appropriated language for resistance and unity. Persistent Dutch lexical and phonetic traces in Bahasa Indonesia exemplify a hybrid linguistic heritage arising from colonial and indigenous interactions. Post-independence, the promotion of Bahasa Indonesia symbolized both the rejection of colonial dominance and the embrace of a cohesive national identity. Overall, language functioned as a dual symbol of colonial oppression and cultural emancipation, underscoring the complex legacy of Dutch colonialism within Indonesia's contemporary linguistic and cultural landscape.

References

Everaert, M. (2023). Speaking Dutch in Indonesia: Language and Identity. Brill. <https://research-portal.uu.nl/ws/files/231890927/9789004522855-BP000001.pdf>

Histofreak. (2025). How Dutch Colonization Influences Modern-Day Indonesia? <https://histofreak.com/dutch-colonies-in-nusantara-how-dutch-colonization-influences-modern-day-indonesia/>

Historia: Khazanah Arsip Kolonial yang Melimpah. (2022). <https://www.historia.id/article/khazanah-arsip-kolonial-yang-melimpah-pmkdw>

Journal of Educational and Social Research. (2024). Another Perspective in the Education of Netherlands in Indonesia During Colonial Period (1799 - 1942). Journal of Educational and Social Research, 14(4), 413. <https://doi.org/10.36941/jesr-2024-0112>

Maier, C. (2005). A Hidden Language – Dutch in Indonesia. eScholarship, University of California. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2cg0m6cq>

Nurrahmani, N., & Indrahti, H. (2017). Utilization of Dutch Colonial Archives for Historical Research. Journal of Indonesian History, 5(2), 34-49.

Ricklefs, M. C. (2008). Dutch Colonial Influence in Indonesian National Identity Formation: A Qualitative Historical Approach. International Journal of Asian Social Science, June 2025. <http://ijeais.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/6/IJAMR250616.pdf>

Ronaodidjojo, J. (1968). Colonial education policies in Indonesia. Historical Educational Review, 29, 15-35.

Sutrisno, A. (2024). Language as an Instrument for National Identity in Indonesia. Indonesian Journal of Cultural Studies, 12(1), 45-60.

Taylor, J.G. (2003). Colonial Legacies and Indonesian Nationalism. Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, 34(1), 145-160