



# Revitalizing the Dawan Language: Community-Based and Technological Approaches to Language Preservation

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## ABSTRACT

The *Dawan* language (Uab Meto), spoken by the Atoin Meto people in western Timor, Indonesia, is facing serious endangerment due to both internal and external pressures. Intergenerational transmission is weakening, youth attitudes toward the language are increasingly hostile, and the dominance of Indonesian and foreign languages in education, governance, religion, and media further marginalizes its use in daily life. The influence of urbanization, migration, and economic modernization also contributes to language shift and erosion of traditional linguistic domains. This literature-based study explores the multidimensional and intersecting challenges contributing to the declining vitality of *Dawan* and offers a strategic, community-centered framework for its revitalization. The novelty of this study lies in its integrative and interdisciplinary approach, combining language ecology theory, functional bilingualism, and digital innovation grounded in active community participation. It highlights the underexplored synergy between traditional institutions (such as customs councils and elders), higher education institutions, and community-led technological initiatives in safeguarding endangered languages. Through a critical analysis of existing literature, field reports, and language policy reviews, the study proposes a revitalization model that emphasizes the pivotal roles of local curriculum development, religious and customary institutions, digital storytelling, and the systematic digitization and archiving of linguistic and cultural knowledge. It also underscores the importance of collaboration between local governments, NGOs, and academic researchers in implementing sustainable language planning. Ultimately, the study aims to inspire further empirical, participatory, and interdisciplinary research into the preservation and revitalization of minority languages in Indonesia, particularly in the eastern archipelago, where such efforts remain scarce and fragmented.

**Keywords:** *Dawan* Language, Language Endangerment, Revitalization, Language Ecology, Community-Based Approach



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## 1. Introduction

The endangerment of local languages constitutes not merely a linguistic concern but also a critical issue related to cultural continuity, collective identity, and the linguistic rights of indigenous communities. According to a UNESCO report (2003), approximately 50% of the more than 6,700 languages currently spoken worldwide are projected to face extinction by the end of the twenty-first century. Indonesia, a highly multilingual nation with over 700 regional languages, exhibits similar patterns of vulnerability, as the majority of these languages lack systematic documentation and show minimal intergenerational transmission (Simons & Fennig, 2018).

Within this broader landscape, the *Dawan* (Uab Meto) language spoken by the Atoin Meto people in the western region of Timor Island, East Nusa Tenggara is among those facing serious risks. More than a communicative medium, *Dawan* functions as a repository of cultural values, ritual knowledge, and the social structure of its speakers (Blust, 2009; Jonker, 1908). However, its vitality has weakened due to the dominance

of Indonesian in schools and administration, the influence of global media, and shifting linguistic preferences among younger generations.

Despite existing descriptive studies on *Dawan*, particularly in phonology, morphology, and ritual discourse (Isu, 2013; 2023), research on revitalization strategies remains limited. Previous efforts have primarily focused on formal education or documentation by researchers, with little emphasis on community-driven preservation mechanisms or the strategic use of digital innovation. Moreover, revitalization research in eastern Indonesia has seldom applied an ecolinguistic perspective, even though this framework recognizes the interdependence between language practices, cultural environments, institutional forces, and technological shifts.

This gap indicates the need for a revitalization model that not only addresses the linguistic features of *Dawan* but also situates the language within its broader socio-ecological ecosystem and contemporary digital realities. By integrating ecolinguistics with community-based digital participation, this study offers a different approach from previous efforts that tended to rely on top-down interventions or isolated documentation initiatives.

The decline of *Dawan* reflects broader challenges experienced by many Indonesian regional languages, which are increasingly marginalized due to modernization, urbanization, and the homogenizing influence of formal education and mass media. Once a strong marker of identity for the Atoin Meto community, the language is now used less frequently in both formal and informal settings, especially among younger speakers. This highlights the urgent need for revitalization strategies that are not only linguistically grounded but also socially and technologically adaptive.

Therefore, this study aims to formulate a strategic model for preserving the *Dawan* language through an ecolinguistic approach integrated with participatory digital technologies. By focusing on the synergy between traditional cultural practices, community engagement, and digital tools, this study introduces a novel framework that has not been widely applied in regional language revitalization efforts in eastern Indonesia. The proposed model is expected to serve as a best practice for sustaining minority languages in multilingual, digitally evolving contexts.

## 2. Literature Review

Language, as one of the main aspects of culture, plays a central role in shaping social identity and preserving local knowledge (Fishman, 1991). However, the processes of globalization and modernization have placed significant pressure on minority languages, particularly regional languages in Indonesia, which have experienced a decline in the number of active speakers (Simons & Fennig, 2018). UNESCO (2003) asserts that nearly half of the world's languages are at risk of extinction within the next century, including several Austronesian languages in the East Nusa Tenggara region.

Research on language vitality and revitalization strategies shows that the success of language preservation depends heavily on the continuity of intergenerational transmission and the strengthening of language use in diverse social domains (Fishman, 1991; Grenoble & Whaley, 2006). This is further supported by ecolinguistic studies that view language as part of a cultural and social ecological system, which is greatly influenced by environmental dynamics, policies, and technology (Haugen, 1972; Steffensen, 2000).

Regarding the *Dawan* language, several studies have found that it is experiencing a decline in vitality due to the dominance of the national language and the lack of effective documentation mechanisms (Isu, 2013; Isu, 2023). Phonological and morphological studies of *Dawan* reveal the richness of its linguistic structure, which is vulnerable to loss without systematic preservation interventions. In addition, the literature on the development of digital technology for the preservation of minority languages shows the great potential of digital media to support participatory documentation, learning, and language transmission (Czaykowska-Higgins, 2009; Austin & Sallabank, 2011).

The context of the community as an active subject in language preservation is also a major focus in contemporary sociolinguistic literature. Foulkes and Docherty (2006) emphasize the importance of social influence and speakers' attitudes toward language sustainability. Recent studies also highlight the role of community digital media in reviving the use of minority languages in social and cultural spheres (Crystal, 2012; Grenoble & Whaley, 2006).

Thus, integrating language vitality theory, ecolinguistics, and community-based digital innovation is a relevant, holistic approach to examining and formulating strategies for preserving the *Dawan* language while also filling gaps in empirical studies in the East Nusa Tenggara region.

## 3. Theory

This study uses the theoretical framework of language vitality (Fishman, 1991), which emphasizes intergenerational language transmission, language use across domains, and institutional support for community

languages. This theory is relevant for examining the sustainability of the Dawan language in the context of social change and globalization.

As a complement, an ecolinguistic approach (Haugen, 1972; Steffensen, 2000) is also used, which positions language as part of a socio-cultural ecosystem. Ecolinguistics views language not as standing alone, but as interacting with environmental, educational, economic, and technological factors.

#### 4. Method

The research method used was library research, including a review of the latest literature on language extinction, revitalization, language policy, and the digitization of minority languages. The main sources included publications from UNESCO, Ethnologue (Simons & Fennig, 2018), and local linguistic works (Isu, 2013; Isu, 2023). Additional data was obtained from public seminars and community discussion forums in East Nusa Tenggara.

#### 5. Result and Discussion

##### 5.1. Current Data and Context

According to UNESCO (2022), around 40% of the world's languages are facing extinction, including many regional languages in Indonesia. The Dawan language (Uab Meto), spoken in the Nusa Tenggara Timur region, is reported to be experiencing a decline in the number of active speakers, particularly among the younger generation (Ethnologue, 2023). The primary factors contributing to this decline include the dominance of Indonesian in education, media, and the economy, as well as the lack of documentation and learning materials for local languages (Isu, 2023). Recent studies confirm that the loss of local languages leads to the loss of cultural heritage and community identity, so language revitalization must integrate digital technology and community participation for long-term effectiveness (Austin & Sallabank, 2019; Grenoble & Whaley, 2021).

##### 5.2. Factors Threatening the Dawan Language

The *Dawan* language faces various internal and external pressures that have led to a decline in its vitality. The most dominant internal factor is the low rate of intergenerational transmission, in which parents are increasingly unlikely to use the *Dawan* language in their daily communication with their children, resulting in an unnatural and interrupted language inheritance process (Fishman, 1991; Grenoble & Whaley, 2006). Additionally, changes in language attitudes, particularly among younger generations, position the *Dawan* language as “outdated” and less prestigious compared to Indonesian or other foreign languages (Crystal, 2012). The lack of teaching materials and documentation of the *Dawan* language also exacerbates this situation, as the scarcity of learning resources and educational media makes the language difficult to learn both formally and informally (Austin & Sallabank, 2011).

Externally, the dominance of Indonesian in education and state administration places the *Dawan* language in a marginal position, with limited usage space (Simons & Fennig, 2018). Migration and urbanization have also caused speakers to move to large cities, indirectly reducing their exposure to their native language (Haugen, 1972). Furthermore, the lack of support from local government policies, such as affirmative action and special funding, has made efforts to preserve this language less than optimal (UNESCO, 2003).

##### 5.3. Strategies for Preserving the Dawan Language

In response to these threats, strategies for preserving the *Dawan* language must be holistic and multidimensional. The consolidation of bilingualism, or functional bilingualism, is a realistic approach in the midst of globalization, where the *Dawan* language is used as the primary language in family, traditional, and informal education, while Indonesian and foreign languages complement national and international functions (Fishman, 1991; Grenoble & Whaley, 2006). The development of a local curriculum that systematically integrates the *Dawan* language, training for regional language teachers, and the development of culturally-based teaching materials are concrete steps to strengthen this foundation (Isu, 2013).

The integration of the three pillars of higher education also plays a strategic role in linguistic research, community service, and the education of local language teachers, thereby enabling academic contributions to directly impact the community (Czaykowska-Higgins, 2009). Language revitalization through traditional and religious institutions provides a vital socio-cultural space where the *Dawan* language can be revived in the context of traditional ceremonies and religious rituals that carry high emotional and spiritual value (Foulkes & Docherty, 2006).

Translating and digitizing cultural heritage expands language reach, documents cultural heritage, and provides innovative learning media. Digital technology opens up opportunities for the production of

educational multimedia, such as interactive digital dictionaries, e-books, and documentary films, which can increase interest in learning languages (Austin & Sallabank, 2011; Crystal, 2012).

#### 5.4. Community-Based Digital Innovation

Digitalization is a transformational strategy that serves not only as a documentation tool but also as a learning and language dissemination medium. The development of annotated Dawan language corpora, gamified learning applications, and the utilization of social media platforms are important innovations in building virtual communities of language speakers (Grenoble & Whaley, 2006; Isu, 2023). Collaboration between universities, communities, local startups, and indigenous institutions is essential to provide ample opportunities for participation and strengthen a sense of ownership of the *Dawan* language. (Fishman, 1991; Czaykowska-Higgins, 2009).

Overall, these digital preservation and innovation strategies must be implemented alongside clear and supportive public policies, with incentives that promote the sustainability of the *Dawan* language as a cultural identity and valuable linguistic asset (UNESCO, 2003).

### 6. Conclusion

The *Dawan* language faces significant internal and external pressures that threaten its survival as the mother tongue of the *Atoin Meto* community. Low intergenerational transmission, negative attitudes among younger generations towards the language, lack of teaching materials, and the dominance of Indonesian and foreign languages are primary factors accelerating the language's endangerment.

This paper is a literature review that summarizes, reexamines, and analyzes various theories and approaches in language maintenance studies. By integrating frameworks of language vitality, ecolinguistics, and community-based digital approaches, this study offers a novel contribution through an integrative proposal combining traditional strategies and digital innovation tailored to the local context of *Dawan/Uab Meto*.

The research lies in the insufficient focus on the synergy among community actors, higher education institutions, and digital technologies in regional language revitalization. This review also highlights the limited involvement of customary institutions and religious leaders in revitalization models that have predominantly centered on formal schooling.

Therefore, a holistic maintenance strategy that integrates functional bilingualism, the tridharma of higher education, culture-based revitalization, and the digitization of linguistic heritage needs to be mainstreamed. The utilization of community-based digital innovation, supported by affirmative public policies, can strengthen the foundation for the sustainable future of the *Dawan* language.

This study is expected to serve as a starting point to stimulate further empirical research and discussions supporting the preservation of other endangered local languages in Indonesia facing similar threats.

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