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The Tonsawang (*Toundanow*) Language of North Sulawesi, Indonesia — Language Contexts

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Language Name:	Tonsawang/Toundanow
Language Family:	Malayo-Polynesian > Western Malayo-Polynesian > Philippine > Minahasan
ISO 639-3 Code:	tnw
Glottolog Code:	tons1239
Population:	~20,000 (Wurm & Hattori 1981)
Location:	0.990354, 124.680771
Vitality rating:	EGIDS 7, UNESCO 3 (Mead 2013: 124)

Abstract

Tonsawang (also known as *Toundanow*) is an endangered Austronesian language spoken in a predominantly mountainous area in the northern tip of the island of Sulawesi, Indonesia. The speech community has been undergoing a sustained shift to the language of wider communication, a Malay-based creole, for over a century. Tonsawang is no longer being acquired by children, and in the few domains in which it is used the speakers are invariably middle aged or elderly. It is the most divergent of the Minahasan languages, in part due to the historically isolated location in which the community traditionally resides. This article examines and discusses aspects of history, society, culture, linguistic ecology, linguistic vitality, and language maintenance and revitalisation within the contemporary Tonsawang speech community.

1. Introduction

Tonsawang is a language of the Minahasan micro-group which is traditionally spoken in the *Minahasa Tenggara* ‘Southeast Minahasa’ district of North Sulawesi, Indonesia. Among the Tonsawang speech community the language is also referred to as Toundanow. This endonym¹ is not commonly known by other ethnic groups in North Sulawesi or used in any formal administrative capacity. Those outside the community use Tonsawang, or less frequently, *Tombatu*. These names all consist of the word *tou* ‘person, people’ together with a word or phrase which describes a feature of the community members or their location; i.e. *sawang* ‘help’, *indanow* ‘of the lake’, and *batu* ‘rock, stone’.²

The Tonsawang speech community is one of the smallest (Henley 1996: 48; Schouten 1998: 13-14) and most isolated (Sneddon 1978: 5) of those which traditionally inhabit the Minahasan districts³ (Figure 1). The Tonsawang people presently live in a collection of villages and one large town in a mountainous area in the southern part of North Sulawesi. The community is one of five indigenous Minahasan groups: *Tondano* (ISO 639-3 tdn), *Tombulu* (ISO 639-3 tom), *Tonsea* (ISO 639-3 txs), *Tontemboan* (ISO 639-3 tnt), and Tonsawang. It is bordered by the much larger Tontemboan speech area to the north and west, and the smaller, non-Minahasan *Ponosakan* (ISO 639-3 pns) and *Ratahan* (*Toratán*) (ISO 639-3 rth) language communities to the east and southeast (Figure 2).

¹ I would like to thank one of the two anonymous reviewers for bringing to my attention an additional endonym which is apparently used by people in one of the most remote villages (Tonsawang), *Lo’bahikolai* ‘The plain land with Talos’. The etymology behind this term is currently unclear.

² The first refers to the frequent situation of Tonsawang people living and working outside their community, often felling coconut trees and preparing the wood for sale. Another theory (Renwarin 2006: 92) has the etymology as derived from *Tou un Sawah* ‘people of the rice fields’. The second refers to the small bodies of water close to two of the villages. The third is the name of the largest settlement which is overlooked by the active volcano Mount Soputan. The name Tonsawang will continue to be used in this article. The use of this term adheres to that found in the Ethnologue and Glottolog publications and will avoid confusion with the name *Tondano* (from *tou* ‘person’ *ndano* ‘the water’) which refers to a separate ethnic group located to the north and east. The use of these two similar language names reflects that in each case the community lives close to a lake.

³ One of these languages, *Sangir* (ISO 693-3 sxn), is not marked on Figure 2. It is a member of the Sangiric micro-group and is spoken primarily on a number of islands between North Sulawesi and Mindanao in the Philippines. There are, however, also scattered communities of Sangirese speakers found in coastal areas in the north of the Minahasan peninsula (Sneddon 1978: 14; Watuseke 1956: 22).



Figure 1: The island of Sulawesi in Indonesia (Google Maps 2018a)



Figure 2: Approximate boundaries of linguistic and ethnic groups (Google Maps 2018b, adapted from Godée Molsbergen 1928)

This paper outlines the current situation of the Tonsawang language and its speakers. It includes relevant historical, social, and linguistic features of the community, based on previous literature in addition to observational evidence obtained as a result of extended periods spent in North Sulawesi from 2011 to 2018. Collaboration with indigenous Minahasan communities has been ongoing since 2011 and has allowed me to devote approximately 18 months to living and working with speakers of the Tondano⁴ and Tonsawang languages.⁵ Data and materials related to both these projects are available online at either The University of Cologne Multilingual Corpus of Annotated Spoken Texts (Multi-CAST: Brickell 2016a)⁶ archive or the Endangered Language Archive (ELAR: Brickell 2016b).⁷

The remainder of this paper is divided into five sections. In Section 2 a historical background of the region is provided. The description of how speakers came to inhabit the region incorporates recorded sources as well as beliefs and stories of local people. Section 3 presents an outline of the genetic lineage and relationships between Tonsawang and the other languages spoken in the region. This includes information relating to the languages within the Minahasan micro-group as well as the historically non-indigenous languages, one of which is now replacing Tonsawang in almost all domains of use. The linguistic vitality of Tonsawang and the current state of language use is examined in Section 4. In Section 5 community attitudes towards the language are discussed. This incorporates a description of recent attempts at maintenance and revitalisation which include locally-led efforts and my own modest attempts. The conclusion

⁴ Information on the Tondano-speaking community is found in Brickell (2015). Research conducted on Tondano was undertaken as part of PhD candidature from 2011-2015, supported by a La Trobe University Postgraduate Research Scholarship (LTUPS). Following this, funding came from a LTU Disciplinary Research Program (DRP: 2016-1) grant. The assistance of people from the Tondano and Tombulu communities in this project is much appreciated and my thanks in particular go to: Aby Malainkay, Leo Mamaris, Kalo Kojongian, Ester Olvi Mantiri, Fendy Parangkuan, Roy Nangin, Ros Nangin, M. Gigir, H.R. Paat, Jekar Mandey, Jenry Mandey, and Albert Polii.

⁵ Research within the Tonsawang community occurred as part of an Individual Postdoctoral Fellowship (IPF0246) 2016-2018, funded by the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme (ELDP). Funding was also provided as an affiliate of The Australian Research Council (ARC) Centre of Excellence for the Dynamics of Language (CoEDL) Linkage program. Special thanks are extended to the following people for their part in the Tonsawang documentation project: Jekar Mandey, Jenry Mandey, Albert Polii, Ariel Pangau, Marten Pangau, Jan Pelleng, Julin Ponomban, and all members of the Pelleng-Ponomban family.

⁶ iac2.uni-koeln.de/en/multicast-tondano/

⁷ elar.soas.ac.uk/Collection/MPI1035088

reached here is unfortunately not positive. With minor exceptions, indigenous languages are often viewed with indifference and the possibilities for continued use, maintenance, and revitalisation of Tonsawang are limited. Section 6 summarises and concludes the paper.

2. History, geography, and society

2.1 Historical and geographical outline

Attempting to provide a detailed history for the Tonsawang community is hampered by its historically peripheral status and a lack of recorded information (Renwarin 2006: 91). Formal mentions of the group are comparatively infrequent in contrast to the more numerous descriptions of Minahasa as a united entity⁸ or studies which focus solely on larger ethnic groups such as the Tontemboan or Tombulu.

Identifying an exact time period for the arrival of Tonsawang speakers at their present location is not possible. Taking a longer-term view is less problematic as the southward Austronesian migration patterns into North Sulawesi are reasonably well attested. Despite some continuing debate, one of the most common accounts of initial habitation involves the ‘Out of Taiwan’ models⁹ in which the region experienced the first wave of Austronesian expansion in the late third or early second millennia BC (Bellwood 1995: 112-113; Bellwood 2007: x; Blust 1984: 56; Sollheim 1975: 155). In this model the five different Minahasan ethnic groups all arrived in North Sulawesi as part of these initial Austronesian migration events.

⁸ The creation of a united political and socio-cultural unit under the label of Minahasa, meaning ‘united’ or ‘become one’, is a comparatively recent event. The first recorded usage of the word occurs in the treaty of 1790 (Godée Molsbergen 1928: 137). A frequent notion is that unity among the different ethnic groups occurred due to an historical alliance to fight the Bolaang-Mongondow kingdom (Henley 1996: 34). However, it is in fact almost entirely the result of the colonisation and Christian conversion policies of the Dutch. The policies enacted by the colonial administration and the Dutch missionaries were extremely successful at fostering unity and the use of Manado Malay as the primary language (Henley 1996: 45-61).

⁹ Research on human migration patterns in Island Southeast Asia involves linguistic, anthropological, archaeological, and computational phylogenetic research methods. Further information on the use of the Bayesian computational methods to examine Austronesian migration patterns is found in Greenhill & Gray (2009) and Gray et. al. (2011).

An unconfirmed theory is that the Tonsawang community arrived later in the region than the others (Renwarin 2006: 30; Riedel 1870; Watuseke 1958). The fact that the Tonsawang are absent from descriptions of the *'asal suku dari Minahasa'* 'origin of the Minahasan tribes' (Watuseke (1958: 11) and are one of only two tribes not named¹⁰ in literature which describes the most well-known creation myth of *Toar* and *Lumimu'ut*, e.g. Lundström-Burghoorn (1981: 35-37) and Henley (1996: 46-47), lends credence to this hypothesis. According to this theory the Tonsawang community originally consisted of two groups; the first came south from either Mindanao or Morotai (Riedel 1870: 25) and settled around the lake close to present day Kali Oki village (see Figure 3), while the second came west from the Tidore, Maju (Watuseke 1956: 55), and Makian islands (Riedel 1870: 31). This second group landed on the eastern coastline of the peninsula before moving south and west where they settled to the east of modern day Tombatu township. Eventually this second group traveled west again and united with the first group. The relative proportions of the two groups within the contemporary population remain unclear (Renwarin 2006: 92).

Presently, Tonsawang community members are the largest proportion of inhabitants of the Minahasa Tenggara district, which also includes speakers of the highly-endangered Ponosakan and Ratahan languages. The most recent (2017) population figure from the *Badan Pusat Statistik* 'Indonesian Centre for Statistics' for the district, including these two non-Tonsawang communities, is 105,714 (Badan Pusat Statistik 2018a). The largest concentration of people who self-identify as Tonsawang appears to be in the larger town of Tombatu. However, my personal experience has been that fluent speakers are rarely found there. Instead, they reside in smaller settlements located in areas to the south, southwest, west, and northwest of Tombatu (see Figure 3). The villages of Ranoketang Tua, Suhuyon, and Molompar are considered by community members to be the boundaries of the speech area. Many of the smaller villages are not easily accessible from other parts of the peninsula. From both coastlines there is hilly terrain which must be traversed in order to arrive at the flatter areas containing the larger villages. Today there is still only one road in or out in either direction. Any approach from the northern or central part of the peninsula is blocked by Mount Soputan. Although the primary road is of a comparatively high standard, the roads leading to the smaller villages farther south and west are less accessible.

Tonsawang speaking settlements are displayed in Figure 3. These are: Ranoketang Tua, Lobu, Silian, Ranoketang Atas, Kali, Kali Oki, Tombatu, Molompar, Kalait, Suhuyon, Tambelang, Ranoako, Buang, Banga, Lowatag,

¹⁰ The other is the Tondano, who are thought of as coming to the region later as slaves of the Tonsea group (Graafland 1898: 78-79).

Pisa, and Tonsawang.¹¹ This information is not intended to be exhaustive as it is not based on detailed linguistic surveys, but rather from information conveyed by people in Silian and Kali Oki.



Figure 3: Tonsawang speaking settlements in the Minahasa Tenggara district (Google Maps 2018c)

In pre-European times any regular contact between indigenous Minahasans and outsiders primarily took the form of trading and bartering with peoples from the northern Moluccas (Maluku). In addition, there was irregular contact with Chinese and Malays from within the Indonesian archipelago (Schouten 1998: 39). There were also external rulers, known as *datu* or *raja* ‘king, chief’, with which the different indigenous groups maintained some type of formal contact. During this period the sultanate of Ternate exercised sporadic control over parts of North Sulawesi (Henley 1996: 27). Similarly, the southern kingdom of Bolaang exerted a degree of influence. The Tonsawang were one of a number of groups who regularly offered tribute to this ruler, a practice which continued up until the 1800s, even after treaties had been signed with the Dutch (Henley 1996: 32-33). However, the extent to which external powers actually influenced the Minahasans is debatable. In all probability, the authority was more symbolic than practical (Henley 1996: 27).

¹¹ The settlements of Tombatu, Kalait, and Molompar are judged by community members to have minimal fluent Tonsawang speakers.

There was very little in the way of political or societal unification prior to colonisation. All communities were divided into *walak* ‘clan, ethnic group, or district’ within the loosely-defined geographic borders of their ethnic group. Each *walak* was a type of ‘mother village’ which consisted of multiple villages or one large village; each functioned as an autonomous political and administrative unit (Schouten 1998: 19; Renwarin 2006: 99-100). The territories of larger groups contained multiple *walak*. But, as one of the smallest linguistic and ethnic groups,¹² the Tonsawang area comprised only a single *walak* (XVI in Figure 4). While treaties between the *walak* were certainly possible, it was also not uncommon for violent clashes and tribal wars to occur; both within a single *walak* and between different *walaks* (Henley 1996: 27).

Figure 4 and Table 1 outline the traditional *walak* territories.



Figure 4: Minahasan *walak* territories (Schouten 1998: 18 adapted from Adatrechtbundel 1914)

¹² Records cited in Schouten (1998: 13-14) state that the only group with fewer speaker numbers as a percentage of the total population was the Ponosakan. Further detail on Tonsawang population and speaker numbers is provided in Section 4.1.

Number:	Walak name:	Number:	Walak name:
I	Bantik*	X	Kakas and Rembokan
II	Manado (Aris)	XI	Sonder
III	Tombariri	XII	Rumo'ong and Tombasian
IV	Tomohon/Sarongsong	XIII	Kawangko'an
V	Likupang	XIV	Tompaso
VI	Maumbi	XV	Langowan
VII	Tonsea	XVI	Tonsawang
VIII	Tondano Touliau	XVII	Pasan and Ratahan*
IX	Tondano Toulimambot	XVIII	Ponosakan*

Table 1: List of Minahasan walak territories¹³

These *walak* settlements were usually self-sufficient. Daily life revolved around hunter-gathering and subsistence farming of crops and livestock. Crops such as squash, bananas, and root tubers were planted on the periphery of fields, while other vegetables were planted in the middle (Schouten 1998: 20). Rice, and later maize, was also cultivated, and male members of the *walak* fished and hunted various indigenous fauna. Among the various indigenous flora utilised was the sugar palm tree (scientific name: *Arenga pinnata*) which provided fresh *saguer* or *tuah* ‘palm sugar wine’ and *bateh* ‘sago grubs’, both of which are still consumed today. Palm sugar wine is just one of multiple products created using the sap collected from these trees. It can also be heated in a large wok until it thickens, cools, and hardens into reddish-coloured palm sugar, or it can be distilled into highly-alcoholic palm brandy. The pith of the tree is also harvested. Once scraped out it is washed and dried to create sago flour which is used in various dishes including *sopulut*, a type of fried vegetable pancake. If the trunks of the trees are rotten and the pith is gone, any sago grubs living inside are collected to be marinated, grilled, and eaten.

¹³ “*” indicates non-Minahasan linguistic groups. Bantik and Ratahan belong to the Sangiric micro-group. Ponosakan is a member of the Gorontalo-Mongondow micro-group - see Section 3.2.

2.2 Indigenous creation myths and spirituality

There are several indigenous creation myths which seek to explain how North Sulawesi came to be inhabited. A number of these are widespread and are known by people regardless of their ethnic affiliation, while others are unique to the Tonsawang community. In the former category is the story of *Toar* and *Lumimu'ut* which has multiple versions (see Lundström-Burghoorn 1981: 35-37; Nas 1995: 58; Renwarin 2006: 41-42). The versions which I have had recounted to me during fieldwork, and which I have read in previous anthropological literature, all involve a mother and son who are considered as the two original ancestors. The story describes how they are separated for many years before being reunited in later life. At this later stage they are deemed to no longer be mother and son and instead become man and wife. The descendants of *Toar* and *Lumimu'ut* eventually populate the entire region. At the time when these descendants were numerous enough the land was ceremonially divided among a number of the tribes at what is known as the *watu pinewetengan* 'the rock of dividing' or 'the rock which has been divided'.¹⁴

Within the Tonsawang speech community there are also various traditional stories which recount the exploits of deified ancestors, known as *nawo* and considered unique to the Tonsawang *walak*. In one such narrative, the tale of the *nawo Oki* (Brickell 2016b) describes the change in the geography around Kali Oki village whereby the land was made habitable and fertile after it was originally submerged under water. Two ancestors, *Lelemboto* and *Kandolobalang*, fought against each other and in doing so dried out the land. This particular story involves aspects of animism, animal sacrifice, and the wielding of the elements of earth and water by the protagonists.

It is not always clear to what degree indigenous people consider creation myths to be historically accurate.¹⁵ On the one hand, the rapid and almost absolute conversion of the Minahasan people to Christianity in the 1800s, as well as Christian faith functioning as a marker of identity (see Section 5.1), might be expected to diminish the credence given to non-Christian folk stories. On the other hand, the inclusion of ostensibly identifiable ancestors in creation

¹⁴ This is located in Tompasso, *Minahasa Seletan* 'South Minahasa' district and is still considered to be a place of cultural significance.

¹⁵ Among indigenous people, thoughts on this matter often differ. During my time in the region I have met those who are content to maintain traditional beliefs alongside Christianity as well as those who act as if they are almost ashamed of pre-Christian ways. One unsurprising generalisation which does appear to hold, however, is that younger people are much more likely to believe solely in Christianity.

myths and folk tales makes them arguably more believable. Furthermore, the change in spiritual belief systems during religious conversion involved a certain amount of syncretism between the old and the new (Lünnemann 1994: 31). This was actively encouraged by the *Nederlandsch Zendeling Genootschap* (NZG) ‘Dutch Missionary Society’ who, as part of their attempt to create a unified territorial unit and colonial society, taught in schools that all Minahasans were in fact direct descendants of *Toar* and *Lumimu’ut* (Henley 1996: 56; Supit 1986: 15,19-22).

Prior to the introduction of Christianity to the region, the spiritual life of the Tonsawang people included practices of animism and shamanism. The overarching religion, however, was polytheistic ancestor worship (Henley 1996: 24). This system allowed for certain individuals to be assured of a future status as deified ancestors (Schouten 1995: 11; 1998: 23). While essentially egalitarian in nature, deified status was only attainable by means of extraordinary achievements and qualities displayed by people while they were still alive. The primary methods for celebrating these achievements were feasting and speech making (Lünnemann 1994: 30; Schouten 1995: 12; Schouten 1998: 22ff). The fundamental provisions for holding a *foso* ‘offering feast’ were courage and wealth. Courage equated to participation in tribal wars, including: head hunting, dismemberment of bodies, and the taking of slaves. Wealth was required to cover not only food and drink, but also the purchase of costly trinkets and objects which would then be destroyed in a ritualistic way during the feast (Schouten 1995: 11). Feasts allowed an individual’s profile to be raised in order to progress towards a future deified status. Another more immediate effect was an increase of reputation, political influence, and number of followers. These feasts were part of a series of nine, with each consecutive feast involving a higher degree of complexity. Each completed feast would then entail a rise in social status until it was high enough that veneration would be guaranteed for generations to come.

2.3 The Tonsawang community post-colonisation

The isolation of the Tonsawang speech community could not prevent the rapid and irreversible changes which occurred as a result of European colonisation. This process was initiated in earnest¹⁶ by the Dutch government sponsored *Verenigde Oost Indische Compagnie* (VOC) ‘United East India Company’,

¹⁶ The Spanish and Portuguese had prior but non-ongoing contact with indigenous people in the mid-1500s. The impact of this contact was extremely minimal in comparison with that of the Dutch.

which began a long period of operations in the region in the late 1650s (Godée Molsbergen 1928: 15). The changes imposed on all Minahasan ethnic groups were fundamental, and had economic, political, societal, and religious aspects.¹⁷ Initially, these changes were forced upon the indigenous population as part of the VOC strategy to extract resources such as rice and timber for immediate use (Schouten 1998: 41). Although VOC rule continued for many years, it came to an end in 1817 due to bankruptcy. Subsequently, the Dutch state began to directly administer the region. In this part of the colonial period the primary aim was the cultivation of crops for export. Foremost among these were coffee, maize, and cloves.

Descriptions of the upheaval which occurred during the colonial period are not covered in detail here, but can be found in publications such as Henley (1996, 2005), Lünemann (1994), and Schouten (1995, 1998). A summary of some of the most fundamental changes experienced by the Tonsawang community are:

- Forced relocation of villages, changes in population density, and improved infrastructure in order to impose compulsory cultivation of coffee crops.
- A slow shift away from the traditional culture of communal agricultural work known as *mapalus* or *ma'ando* 'collaborative work'.
- Creation of a hereditary ruling class which replaced the traditionally more egalitarian system of political administration and social advancement.
- Conversion of most of the population to Christianity in a period from 1830-1890 and the administration of the school system by the NZG.
- Successful creation of Minahasa as a unified political and cultural construct (see fn. 6). This lessened long-standing ethno-cultural divisions and decreased the use of indigenous culture and language as markers of ethnic identity.

¹⁷ The thought that Dutch colonisation and the conversion to Christianity served as unifying factors which are central to Minahasan identity is a common theme in present day Minahasa. The socio-cultural changes linked to this are almost universally viewed as positive events which rescued Minahasan society from a brutal and unsophisticated past, so much so that in conversations during fieldwork it has become apparent that many people perceive colonisation as an undertaking between equal partners. Statements such as 'it was different with the Minahasans, the Dutch always treated us as equals' have been commonly heard in discussions with community members.

Today the Tonsawang speech community is one which lacks economic opportunity and infrastructure in comparison to other ethnic groups. This is at least partially documented by the currently available statistics which confirm that the Tonsawang community resides in the district which consistently has one of the highest rates of poverty (between 14-22% over a ten year period) in North Sulawesi (Badan Pusat Statistik 2018b). A weaker economy is unsurprising when given the mountainous terrain of the Minahasa Tenggara district which restricts the cultivation of certain crops. This is an unfortunate geographic feature in an economy which is largely based around agriculture, as is the case for all districts in North Sulawesi (Sondakah & Jones 2003: 286). As a result, Tonsawang sub-districts have far lower yields for crops which are easier to cultivate on flatter terrain, such as rice or cassava (Badan Pusat Statistik 2018c). In contrast, crops that can be cultivated equally well in mountainous terrain, such as copra and cloves, have higher yields than all but one other district (Badan Pusat Statistik 2018c). Personal observations and discussions during fieldwork painted a picture of an over reliance of the local economy on copra production and the felling of coconut trees for wood. It is also not uncommon for Tonsawang people to travel to other districts to undertake this frequently difficult and dangerous work.¹⁸

The current economic status of the community is not a direct result of colonisation; there is no evidence that the Tonsawang experience was markedly worse in comparison to other groups in more affluent districts. Rather, it appears that this peripheral status is simply a continuation of their pre-European situation. Due to their later arrival in the region, it is likely that the Tonsawang were originally seen as outsiders. When they are mentioned in the literature, their minor standing is usually noted (Henley 1996: 48), as is a difference in customs, language, and appearance (Graafland 1898: 78-79). The lands settled by the Tonsawang were, and still are, less fertile and are farther away from the densely populated central areas of the Minahasan districts (Renwarin 2006: 95). The combination of these historical factors has left the community at a disadvantage which continues to this day.

¹⁸ During time spent in a Tombulu-speaking village in the Minahasa district to the north, I discovered that Tonsawang people had been logging coconut trees in the area for over three generations.

3. Language family and neighbouring languages

3.1 The Minahasan language family

Tonsawang is one of five languages which belong to the Minahasan micro-group. These and the neighbouring non-Minahasan languages are uncontroversially classified as part of the Philippine and Greater Central Philippine subgroups of Western Malayo-Polynesian (Blust 1991: 103; 2013: 193; Ross 1995; Zorc 1986), which is a higher order branch¹⁹ of the larger Austronesian family. Comparative research on the placement of languages within the Minahasan micro-group is restricted to the wordlists of Jansen (1855) and Niemann (1869) and the lexico-statistical study of Sneddon (1970, 1975, 1978). Sneddon's subgrouping hypothesis (Figure 5) has Tonsawang as a direct descendant of the proto-language, while the other four languages are classified into the 'North Minahasan' (Tontemboan) and 'Northeast Minahasan' (Tondano, Tonsea, and Tombulu) branches.

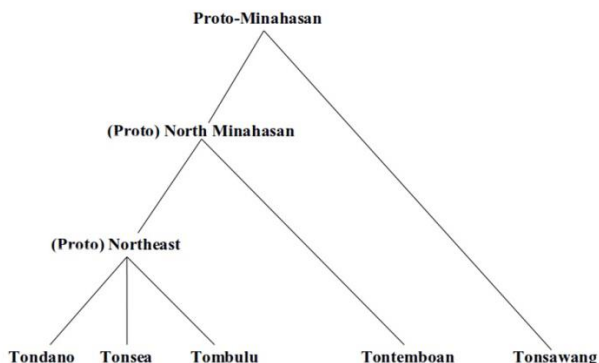


Figure 5: Languages of the Minahasan micro-group (Sneddon 1970, 1975, 1978)

¹⁹ There is no detailed specification of the WMP subgroup, despite the fact that it is often cited as clearly established (Adelaar 2005a: 14). Blust (2013: 31) notes that 'It is possible that Western Malayo-Polynesian is not a valid subgroup, but rather consists of Malayo-Polynesian languages that do not belong to Central Eastern Malayo-Polynesian. Its chief unifying character is the presence of systems of nasal substitution in active verb forms.'

At present there have been no dialectal differences identified for Tonsawang, either as a result of my own research or in Sneddon (1978: 6). Despite this, a number of speech community members have intimated that dialectal differences occur in settlements in the eastern part of the district. As such, the possibility of any variation is not completely discounted, especially considering that all previous research has been conducted in the same (central) part of the speech area.

Levels of mutual intelligibility among the Minahasan languages follow the sub-grouping in Figure 5. Discussions with community members and fieldwork observations in the Tondano, Tombulu, and Tonsawang communities confirm that the three languages in the Northeast branch have high levels of mutual intelligibility. Of the other two, Tontemboan appears most intelligible with Tombulu, while Tonsawang has only basic levels of intelligibility with any of the others. I have informally confirmed this by having Tombulu and Tondano speakers accompany me to Tonsawang villages on a number of occasions where they assisted with recording sessions and discussed various matters with Tonsawang speakers (in Manado Malay). Both this observational evidence and the results of Sneddon's analysis are unsurprising considering the geographic location of the different language communities. The Tonsawang speech area is not adjacent to any of the languages from the Northeast Minahasan branch (see Figure 2). Tontemboan is therefore the only Minahasan ethnic group which has had continued contact with Tonsawang-speaking communities. As a result, lexical borrowings into Tonsawang from Tontemboan are common and the two languages share a number of phonological innovations which are analysed as resulting from areal contact (Sneddon 1978).²⁰

3.2 Neighbouring non-Minasahan languages

The Ponosakan and Ratahan language areas border the Tonsawang community to the east and southeast. Ponosakan belongs to the Gorontalo-Mongondow subgroup of Greater Central Philippine languages (Blust 1991: 85), and has been described as severely endangered since the early 1980s (Noorduyn 1991: 53; Sneddon 1983). The most recent research on the

²⁰ Adriani (1925: 135) has Tontemboan (Makelai dialect) and Tonsawang together in one branch of the Minahasan micro-group. This hypothesis is disputed in the more recent and detailed work of Sneddon (1978: 10) on the basis that Tonsawang has an even larger number of innovations which are completely absent from other Minahasan languages.

language concludes that only a handful of speakers in one town remain (Lobel 2015: 396). The Ratahan language of the Sangiric micro-group of the Philippine group (Blust 2013: 82) is likewise critically endangered with no more than a couple of hundred elderly speakers in three villages (Himmelman & Wolff 1999: 3; Wolff 2010: 279).

The impact on Tonsawang communities by speakers of these highly endangered languages appears minimal. Large-scale movements of these ethnic groups into Tonsawang communities have not been attested. The most observable result of any contact is the borrowing of Ponosakan (and Mongondow) lexical items into Tonsawang (Sneddon 1978: 10). In fact, it is more likely that Tonsawang speakers have impacted the linguistic vitality of Ponosakan communities, as they are one of various groups of outsiders who moved into the traditionally Ponosakan-speaking port city of Belang in the first half of the 20th century (Lobel 2015: 430).

The greatest impact on Tonsawang comes from two languages of wider communication: Manado Malay (ISO 639-3 xmm) and, to a lesser extent, *bahasa Indonesia*, (ISO 639-3 ind). Manado Malay, commonly known as *bahasa Manado* ‘Manado language’, *bahasa pasar* ‘market language’ or *bahasa sehari-hari* ‘daily language’, has held an esteemed place in Minahasan society since it became entrenched as a lingua franca used by the Dutch and their elite class of indigenous officials during the VOC period (Schouten 1998: 101). At present, Manado Malay is spoken throughout all districts of North Sulawesi, various islands between North Sulawesi and Mindanao in the southern Philippines, and also farther South in Gorontalo province. Ethnologue (Simons & Fennig 2018) has Manado Malay as the first language of approximately 850,000 people and the second language of 1.5 million people. Whisler (2006) states that it is a second language of up to three million people. It is classified as a ‘Pidgin Derived Malay’ (PDM) due to shared structural features with other non-literary Malay varieties (Adelaar & Prentice 1996: 3; Adelaar 2005b: 202-204); it is closely related to the variety of Malay spoken in Ternate (Ternate Malay or North Moluccan Malay: ISO 639-3 max), from which it likely developed (Paauw 2008: 311; Stoel 2005: 8; Watuseke & Watuseke-Politton 1981: 326). Lexically, it contains many elements from Dutch and Portuguese, some which are shared with Indonesian, and a small amount of loan words from indigenous languages. Items in the final category are restricted to semantic domains such as place names, food, and animals. Morphologically, it is far more isolating than either the indigenous languages or standard Indonesian, and it is further differentiated by a complex paradigm of discourse particles (Stoel 2005). Today, its traditional use continues in more formal domains such as

some church²¹, local government, and school contexts. It is also now used in various mass media domains, e.g. internet and social media, radio, television, newspapers, billboards, political campaigns, and advertising (Mead 2013: 75). Moreover, it is also replacing indigenous languages in more informal domains such as the home and marketplace.

Indonesian is the other language of higher status which is encroaching on Tonsawang use. As the official language of a nation state with over 252 million inhabitants (Badan Pusat Statistik 2015), it has a much higher level of prestige and official support than any indigenous language. Throughout North Sulawesi the government-sanctioned form of standard Indonesian, known as *bahasa baku* ‘standard language’ or *bahasa yang baik dan benar* ‘language which is good and correct’, is ostensibly taught to all children from *sekolah dasar* ‘primary school’ level and above. The exact form of Indonesian being taught in these lessons is hard to ascertain, however, as there are multiple commonly-used codes of colloquial Indonesian which differ from the government-prescribed version (Ewing 2005: 227). Furthermore, Manado Malay has been converging with a colloquial version of Indonesian for some time and in certain situations differentiating the two is problematic (Paauw 2008: 44). Notwithstanding whether the contact form is colloquial or standardised, the result is the same for speech communities in which indigenous languages were once dominant. They are now constantly exposed to some form of Indonesian in contexts as varied as federal government administration, Indonesia-wide mass media, schooling, church services, and when communicating with Indonesians from outside North Sulawesi.

4. Linguistic vitality and language use

4.1 Linguistic vitality and speaker numbers

Research concerning the vitality of languages in North Sulawesi is limited to a handful of surveys, all of which paint a depressing picture of a well-established shift to Manado Malay (Hertz & Lee 2006; Merrifield & Salea 1996; Mead

²¹ As pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, the use of Manado Malay in church services may be limited to preliminary information and greetings to the congregation. The sermon, prayers, and hymns are more likely to be expressed in standard Indonesian. In addition, the level of Manado Malay used may be dependent to some extent upon the religious practitioner who is delivering the sermon. Priests who are from outside North Sulawesi will likely use standard Indonesian throughout.

2013), a process which has been ongoing for over a century (Wolff 2010: 299). The assessment of Mead (2013: 124ff) utilises the six point vitality and endangerment rating of UNESCO (2003: 6-16) and the ten point Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS) of Lewis & Simons (2010). Tonsawang is rated as ‘definitely endangered, though clearly trending towards severely endangered’ and ‘shifting’, respectively (Mead 2013: 124).

Extended time in speech communities in North Sulawesi has allowed me to observe the low levels of linguistic vitality of indigenous languages. A combination of these personal observations together with information from previous sources (Hirabayashi 2003; Mead 2013; Wolff 2010) points to the following factors as relevant when explaining the low linguistic vitality of Tonsawang:

- It is not dominant in any domain, and appears to be disappearing in informal domains such as the home or marketplace. While previously used by people working in the *kebun* ‘fields’, this is now changing as the remaining fluent speakers become too old to undertake this type of work.
- People of working age often leave indigenous speech communities for long periods of time to seek economic opportunities. In addition, children from rural areas may be sent to live in towns outside the speech area while they attend primary school, high school, or university. This effectively deprives younger people of the opportunity to learn and use the language.
- Inter-marriage with other ethnic groups is common.
- The most fluent speakers are almost invariably middle aged or elderly. An intergenerational break in transmission is clearly evident, with most children having, at best, only basic passive skills.
- Improvements in road infrastructure has decreased the geographic isolation which once insulated the community from outsiders and kept young people in the villages. Although some smaller villages are still remote, the main road from the west and east coasts to Tombatu is now mostly paved and accessible even during the monsoon season.
- A decrease in the historical cultural variation between ethnic groups together with the habit of using Christianity and Manado Malay as markers of ethnic and cultural identification (see §5.1).

This low linguistic vitality co-occurs with a shrinking pool of speakers which, arguably, was never large to begin with. Official records for 1872 note that Tonsawang speakers made up only 2.7% (Schouten 1998: 13-14) of an approximate total population (in 1873) of 111,968 (Tammes 1940: 190). This

would put speaker numbers in this period at approximately 3,023. Estimations presented in Renwarin (2006: 34-35) for Tonsawang speakers, as a percentage of all Minahasans from 1959 to 1995 are similarly low at only 4%. As part of an estimated total Minahasan population in 1990 of 703,193 (Tammes 1940: 190), total Tonsawang speakers would number 28,127.

Ascertaining an accurate figure for current Tonsawang speakers is difficult. The official government figures relating to population (see §2.1) do not include sub-categories for specific ethnic groups at the district or sub-district level. Similarly, there have been no recent surveys undertaken to ascertain speaker numbers. In addition to the figure of 28,127 mentioned above, a total of 20,000 is given some years earlier in both Wurm & Hattori (1981) and Sneddon (1983). If either of these figures is correct, total speaker numbers would now certainly be much lower. An optimistic current estimate would be 8,000-10,000.

4.2 Language use

This overview of Tonsawang language use is a result of observations during fieldwork in the villages of Kali Oki and Silian, together with a small amount of time spent in Tombatu. In the latter settlement it proved nearly impossible to locate Tonsawang speakers. When meeting and chatting informally with people it was repeatedly stated to me that there were almost no Tonsawang speakers left in Tombatu as a result of intermarriage and outsiders moving in.

In smaller settlements speakers are more easily found, but even there the domains of use are not broad ranging. In the informal domain of the family home, the situations where I observed ongoing use of Tonsawang were primarily between elderly speakers (i.e. those born 1930-1950) and occasionally between these speakers and their children (i.e. those born 1950-1970). The latter age demographic could and would respond in Tonsawang, but were also just as likely to use Manado Malay instead. Amongst their own age group, the middle-aged demographic could just as easily use either Manado Malay or Tonsawang, but appeared to use neither exclusively. When speaking to children, both of the older-age groups used Manado Malay almost exclusively.²² Interactions showing these dynamics were also observed in other informal situations, from online chat on social media to ordering meals at local restaurants or buying

²² A welcome exception to this generalisation was observed in the interactions of four members of the Pelleng-Ponomban family. In one household the grandparents make a concerted effort to talk to their two grandchildren using Tonsawang. I can only hope that other families might follow this example.

products from *warung* ‘shop, stall’. The youngest speaker I observed utilising Tonsawang in these types of situations was born in 1989. Unfortunately, this level of fluency does not appear to be the norm in this demographic. It was certainly not evident within his peer group who instead appear to represent a generation of semi-speakers.

When meeting children or teenagers together with older speakers it became apparent that some members of the younger age groups would occasionally possess very minor passive skills. Furthermore, a small number could, with prompting and assistance from older speakers, produce basic constructions such as ‘How are you?’, ‘What is your name?’, and ‘Where are you from?’. Despite this, the children were rarely able to produce more than one or two words (of any class – adverbs, pronouns, numerals) unassisted, and it is safe to say that a break in transmission is well established.

In more formal domains, the use of Tonsawang is limited to specific cultural and ceremonial situations such as weddings, funerals, harvest festivals (*hari pengucapan* lit. ‘pronouncing day’, a type of thanksgiving celebration), speech contests, district-level government-sponsored celebrations (such as the ‘birthday’ of the district, annual local government meetings, or Indonesian independence day), and very occasionally at the beginning of specialised church services. It is during these proceedings that the Tonsawang language *may* be used to varying degrees. If the event is taking place outside, ritualistic dancing and chanting performed by people dressed as pre-Christian Minahasan warriors known as *kawasaran* or *cakalele* may also occur. The people who perform in this role are invariably younger men who are semi-speakers. The language used in all these situations is rarely spontaneous. Rather, it is often specific content which is recited from memory, in the case of older speakers, or read from pre-prepared texts, in the case of younger speakers.

The only formal domain where I have observed the Tonsawang language as fully dominant is at the twice weekly *lansia* (or *lanjut usia* ‘advanced age’) prayer groups restricted to community members over the age of 50. At these gatherings the older community members meet to pray, sing songs, and discuss villages matters, with proceedings conducted entirely in Tonsawang. From my observations, there is some variation in language used at these meetings. For example, some of the prayers are Christian and have been translated from standard Indonesian into Tonsawang. These appear to differ, in terms of lexicon and structure, from the work and prayer songs which are not of Christian origin. The latter category are said to contain language which is considered as more archaic and closer to *dali* ‘original’²³ Tonsawang.

²³ This is also based on observations while annotating recordings of these songs. Younger speakers who have assisted with transcribing are often unable to understand the full range of lexical items.

5. Community attitudes and possibilities for maintenance and revitalisation

5.1. Community attitudes

Through collaboration and networking in multiple Minahasan speech communities it has become clear to me that for many local people indigenous languages and cultures are often viewed as archaic aspects of modern society. They are commonly considered as less important than education, economic advancement, certain personality traits (e.g. openness and honesty), a pro-Western outlook, and strong adherence to the Christian faith. These fieldwork observations accord with the anthropological studies of Jacobson (2002a: 41; 2002b: 12), which demonstrated that local languages and cultural histories are *not* considered as inherent markers of Minahasan ethnic identity. In fact, they came last on a list of possible factors which are characteristic of identity formation (Jacobson 2002a: 41). This apparent broad-ranging apathy towards indigenous languages and cultures helps to explain the current lack of engagement in, and effectiveness of, maintenance and revitalisation of Tonsawang. It also makes the likelihood of implementing effective indigenous language programs low due to the difficulties in convincing local people of the importance of their languages.

While no-one I have collaborated with is against promoting languages *per se*, neither are they particularly enthusiastic about advocating for increased language use. Moreover, those who are motivated are often unable to effect change. As well as a lack of awareness of the importance of local languages, there are societal norms which make advocacy difficult. One is the frequent requirement to defer to elders or those of perceived higher status in any decision making.²⁴ People usually find it extremely difficult to violate the *status quo*, meaning they are unlikely to be comfortable instigating change unless it has already been sanctioned, either formally or informally, by people such as village elders, church elders, or those in local government roles. This appears especially evident in younger semi-speakers who are unlikely to act as catalysts for change without the guidance of older speakers, exacerbated by the fact that the most motivated and hardworking younger speakers often leave the speech community due to a lack of employment opportunities.

²⁴ This ‘concern for human hierarchy’ is a fundamental aspect of Austronesian culture (Henley 1996: 25). On a day-to-day basis this can be seen whenever decisions are required within groups which include people of perceived higher status. People often provide the response of *terserah* ‘up to (you)’ whenever input on decision making is requested.

Regrettably, older community members seem equally reluctant or incapable of taking a leading role in maintenance or revitalisation, even though in one respect they have a prime opportunity to do so. Due to the frequent habit of Minahasans emigrating to other parts of Indonesia or overseas for work (Florey 2005: 53-54; Wolff 1996), the older generation of speakers often take a primary role as caregivers for young children. I have now observed this situation in three different Minahasan speech communities (Tondano, Tombulu, and Tonsawang). Despite this opportunity, older, more fluent speakers commonly use Manado Malay with children (my observations accord with Jukes 2010). Aside from two community members with whom I have worked closely and who make a concerted effort to talk to their grandchildren in Tonsawang, the older members of families appear not to pass on their knowledge to the younger generation. To date I have been unable to ascertain precisely why so many older speakers are averse to interacting with younger generations in indigenous languages in an effort to improve intergenerational transmission.²⁵ A common response from older speakers is that the children do not understand or are not interested and willing to learn. They do not consider talking to children from a young age solely in indigenous languages.

Along with the lack of transmission is a belief that somehow children can, and indeed must, only learn indigenous languages in purely formalised contexts. When discussing possibilities for reversing language shift with community members, be they retirees, farmers, priests, or university lecturers, the strategies which are voiced most often involve primary and high school teaching, speech contests, ritualised socio-cultural situations, and increased use within the church domain. Currently, when maintenance and revitalisation programs are undertaken, often in piece-meal, short-term fashion, it is solely these formalised and ritualistic activities which occur.

An overarching issue which results from these community attitudes is a vacuum in maintenance and revitalisation leadership roles. When discussing possible grass-roots strategies with community members there are no specific people or groups who appear willing to take a lead organisational role. This is not particularly surprising when considering the community indifference towards indigenous language use and language shift, and the fact that different sub-groups are likely to look to others to take charge – this may be manifest in the notion of *tugas orang lain* ‘someone else’s responsibility’ (Jukes 2010). In effect, each age group looks to others to advocate: younger speakers expect older speakers to initiate change, older speakers may look to church or village

²⁵ See Jukes (2010: 4-5) for a speculative explanation of this problem in the Ratahan speech community.

elders, and the higher-status groups may look instead to the those in official capacities in local district (i.e. *kabupaten*) governments. In addition, everyone, including those at the higher levels, is seemingly willing to defer this responsibility to outsiders. This is perhaps unsurprising considering the high levels of pro-Western sentiment, and the high esteem in which Western educational institutions are held.

5.2. Maintenance and revitalisation efforts

At a local level there have been a small number of ad-hoc programmes introduced with the intention of strengthening Tonsawang linguistic vitality. Unfortunately, as yet these have been neither broad enough nor implemented efficiently enough to engage a large proportion of the community, and none of them appears to have increased domains of use or levels of intergenerational transmission.

One event which is organised on a regular basis is the *lomba pidato* ‘speech contest’. These are large community gatherings which are held at the market in Tombatu township one to two times a year. They are usually broadcast using loud speakers and often filmed. They are organised by the *Pemerintah kabupaten* ‘district government’ of Minahasa Tenggara and are attended by various local government members, education officials, clergy, and school teachers. Following the obligatory speeches in Manado Malay relating to local matters or politics, primary and high school age students take turns to read from pre-prepared, 10-15 minute speeches on a single, previously chosen topic in the Tonsawang language. Following the speeches, students are rated by a judging panel consisting of local teachers and academics who are considered to have high levels of fluency. Prizes for first, second, and third place are then awarded in the categories of primary, junior high school, and high school.

A second strategy commonly spoken about by local stakeholders is the need for the introduction of structured Tonsawang language teaching in primary and secondary schools. In fact, this would not be an entirely local strategy as it is part of the Indonesia education policy at a federal level which, in theory at least, requires some teaching of *muatan lokal* (*mulok*) ‘local content’ in all primary and junior high schools. As such, there are no official political obstacles to teaching local languages and cultures. A community member friend who teaches at the *sekolah menengah pertama* ‘Junior high school’ in Silian confirms that during his own junior high school years a modicum of Tonsawang language teaching was introduced, albeit sporadically. This teaching was for one or two hours per week in one class and included booklets and primers as teaching materials. However, these classes ended in 1999 and have not yet recommenced. From discussions with school teachers, it appears that there is now a lack of impetus at local

government level, a lack of teaching materials, and, more importantly, a lack of teachers who have the requisite fluency. Interestingly, a number of older community members have advised that they have offered their services to these classes as fluent speakers, but as yet education providers have not utilised their offers.

The only other programme which might be considered as language maintenance is the small amount of bible translation work conducted by the *Gereja Baptis Manado* ‘Manado Baptist Church’. I have been advised that this is a joint effort by the church administration in Manado together with fundraising and assistance from the Seaforth Baptist Church in New South Wales, Australia. The result of this collaboration is a number of gospels translated from Bahasa Indonesia into Manado Malay and Tonsawang. An additional piece of translation work is the Tonsawang-Indonesian dictionary of Kalangi (2012) which also includes a small amount of information on phonology and morphology.

Determining the exact results of these locally-led initiatives is beyond the scope of this paper. However, I am skeptical that they have resulted in any tangible positive change. Over almost two years I have observed no increase in the domains or frequency of usage of Tonsawang by younger community members. This is not surprising considering that, however well-meaning they may be, these locally-led activities are highly questionable strategies for reversing language shift, unless they are linked with ongoing usage in informal community domains (Fishman 2001: 14-15). Unfortunately, none of these local strategies addresses this issue. Instead they represent ‘functionally diffuse or free-floating efforts’ (Fishman 2001: 14-15) which are isolated from day-to-day life, are non-spontaneous, and are limited to formal social situations.

In addition to local efforts, there have been my own modest attempts to assist with indigenous language advocacy and maintenance. Foremost among these has been close collaboration with community members during the production of culturally-relevant digital media content narrated in indigenous languages. Primarily edited digital video, this content functions as a culture-specific documentary and ethnographic record and also as an elicitation stimulus (Brickell 2018) for further data collection. The inclusion of local people in the production process, including choosing the activities, explaining each stage which must be performed, and assisting with filming, has provided positive feedback and resulted in enthusiastic discussions about local culture. Community members who have participated are proud to have taken part and enjoying showing others the videos which are the result of their collaboration.

This content has been distributed within the community and also made available more widely via social media and video sharing websites.²⁶ The latter strategy aims to harness the pervasive levels of mobile phone ownership in North Sulawesi to disseminate this content; in 2016 62% of people owned these devices (Badan Pusat Statistik 2018d) and numbers are likely to have grown since then. Readily available 3G data packages mean that access to social media and video sharing sites and applications such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Youtube, and Vimeo is widespread. In addition to this type of digital multimedia content, there is the intention to produce storybooks based on traditional folk tales which have been recorded and annotated. However, at present these efforts have stalled while local people seek someone who can produce illustrations for the books. Once suitable illustrations are created it is hoped that these stories will be printed and distributed as widely as possible, especially to younger community members.

Attempts have also been made to empower young adults to take an advocacy role. During an earlier field trip, two school teachers (aged 25-28 years) from the village of Silian stated they were keen to undertake grass-roots documentation. Informal training sessions in audio and video recording techniques and the use of ELAN software were provided. Audio recording equipment was then left with the intention that they would record communicative events with friends and family members. Unfortunately, as yet these efforts have not produced the intended results. Professional and personal obligations (from full-time teaching to wedding preparations) together with a lack of confidence in using recording equipment appear to be the primary obstacles. While unfortunate, this sort of problem is not unexpected. Novice fieldworkers (local or foreign) will have different skill levels and often require multiple hands-on training sessions (Florey & Himmelman 2009: 134; Jukes 2011: 441). In an effort to provide extra training, funding has been obtained via the University of Melbourne Research Unit for indigenous Languages (RUIL) in order to bring an indigenous language speaker to Australia. The knowledge obtained during this visit can then be passed on to other community members.

As with the local strategies, the extent to which any of my attempts can assist in reversing language shift is debatable. As stand-alone measures, neither the production and dissemination of multimedia content nor piecemeal training sessions is likely to promote increased language use in informal situations. As such they are no less functionally diffuse than the locally-led efforts. However, in an increasingly internet-connected North Sulawesi, born-digital multimedia data have an arguably greater likelihood of reaching large

²⁶ [youtube.com/channel/UC0bQQEdQAm9uBKSeJSksWZw/featured](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC0bQQEdQAm9uBKSeJSksWZw/featured)

numbers of community members, especially younger ones, than any traditional non-digital content. Moreover, they increase awareness and help to make local languages a talking point among those who have watched them. In the end, however, the possibility that the necessary changes for language revitalisation can be effected by a foreign researcher is limited, especially when considering the time and budget constraints of most postgraduate or post-doctoral research projects (Musgrave & Thieberger 2007). I believe that the greatest hope for revival through increased transmission lies with older speakers who have caregiver roles. Unfortunately, I have minimal power to encourage local people to change their behaviour and the way they speak to each other in their homes. Instead, I can only try to highlight the importance of indigenous languages and culture.

6. Conclusion

The Tonsawang speech community consists of a collection of villages and one larger town in the Southeast Minahasa district of North Sulawesi, Indonesia. It is historically the most peripheral of the five ethnic communities who speak the languages of the Minahasan micro-group due to its later arrival on the Minahasan peninsula, smaller population, isolated location, fewer economic opportunities, and less infrastructure. While the irreversible and rapid change resulting from European contact has not been as detrimental to indigenous Minahasan people as it has been in other colonial contexts (e.g. Australia or North and South America), the effect on indigenous languages has been essentially the same, with Tonsawang now no longer dominant in any informal domain, and with a break in intergenerational transmission well entrenched. The sole demographic which consistently uses the language for informal, everyday communication is the elderly. For all other groups its role in modern society is primarily that of an antiquated cultural accessory which accompanies infrequently occurring and ritualised social events. At the current rate of shift, the language is well on the way to dying out within one to two generations.

Community attitudes towards Tonsawang are indifferent. Although there is no strong feeling against local language revival, nor is there any sense of urgency or any real organised local leadership. Convincing local stakeholders to advocate at a grassroots level is difficult due to a number of socio-cultural characteristics, most notably the fact that indigenous languages and cultures are seemingly no longer viewed as markers of ethnic identity. Until now attempts at maintenance and revitalisation, both the locally-led initiatives and those by outsiders, have been sporadic, and have unfortunately been unable to make any difference to the ongoing shift to Manado Malay.

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