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# Languages on the Edge of the Mines: An Ecolinguistic Analysis of Language Shifts, Oral Traditions, and Economic Transformation in the Bungku Community in Bahodopi, Morowali, Nickel-Industrialized Indonesia

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**ABSTRACT**

The expansion of the nickel industry in Bahodopi, Morowali Regency, Central Sulawesi, has transformed the agrarian and maritime areas of the Bungku-speaking community into large-scale industrial areas. However, the impact of such expansion on the ecology of the local language has not been widely studied, especially in relation to environmental change and socio-economic transformation. This study aims to analyze the relationship between industrial extraction, environmental change, and the shift in the Bungku language and its implications for the sustainability of local ecological knowledge. The research uses a qualitative approach with data obtained through 25 in-depth interviews, ecological vocabulary collection, and field observations in the National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN) House Research Program on May 10–June 3, 2026. The data is analyzed thematically by linking changes in language use, environmental conditions, and social practices of the community. The results show that the ecological vocabulary of the Bungku language represents intergenerational knowledge about the maritime, forest, and agricultural environment. The decline in the use of vocabulary takes place through two interrelated mechanisms, namely demographic changes due to the influx of workers from outside the region that weaken language transmission in the family and referential changes due to the loss of rivers, fish, and forest resources that are the context for vocabulary use. The Indonesian language is increasingly dominant in industrial economic activities, while the Bungku language tends to be used as a marker of ethnic identity, including in land disputes and compensation. Language education initiatives through corporate social responsibility programs show potential, but still face limitations in learning materials, teacher training, and diverse student backgrounds. This study concludes that the shift in the Bungku language cannot be understood only as a result of language contact, but needs to be placed in the relationship between ecological, economic, and social changes. These findings contribute to the development of an ecolinguistic perspective and affirm the importance of integrated policies linking the preservation of local languages, environmental protection, and the sustainability of the ecological knowledge of communities in Indonesia's nickel industrial estate.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Extractive industries are not only changing the physical landscape of a region, but also the way its people speak and the language they speak. As the world transitions to clean energy, the demand for battery minerals is increasing rapidly, and nickel is becoming one of the most important commodities in this shift. Indonesia, which has one of the largest nickel reserves in the world, is now at the center of global nickel production. This is especially evident in the Morowali Indonesia Industrial Estate (IMIP) in Bahodopi District, Morowali Regency, Central Sulawesi [1], [2]. In more than two decades, IMIP has grown into a large industrial zone that employs tens of thousands of workers and attracts migrant flows, such as traders, contractors, and job seekers, from all over Indonesia. The area originally inhabited by the Bungku people, an agrarian-maritime community, is now being reshaped by industry, migration, and economic transformation [3], [4].

The economic and environmental impacts of these changes have been widely documented. Research shows that nickel processing in Morowali damages rivers and coastal waters, triggers deforestation, increases disease, and causes unresolved land disputes [2], [5]. The political study examines how the Indonesian government, PT IMIP, and foreign investors have turned Bahodopi into a "growth engine" for national industrial purposes [6]. The study of corporate social responsibility shows that the industry can benefit as well as harm the surrounding community [7].

However, these studies have not paid attention to the linguistic dimension. Few studies have examined what happens to native languages and the ecological knowledge they bring with them when the environment that supports them is lost. This gap is important because language is not just a means of communication. Ecolinguists have long argued that language is closely related to the environment in which it develops [8]–[10]. Bungku language, part of the Bungku-Tolaki subgroup in the Celebic branch of the Austronesian family [11], [12] contains vocabulary to understand the tides, name reef fish and open sea fish, recognize resin-producing forest trees, and manage shifting agriculture. This vocabulary is meaningful only as long as the speaker continues to live off the sea, forests, and fields. When rivers are clouded by mine and forest waste cut down for smelters, as many informants in this study have reported, the natural space to which the words refer disappears, and the stories that language tells about humans and their environment begin to lose meaning [13]. On the other hand, research linking mining and extraction to threats to indigenous languages is still limited [14], [15].

The novelty of this research lies in the ecolinguistic approach applied to the context of nickel industrialization in Bahodopi, which to the extent of the author's research has not been studied from a linguistic point of view. In contrast to previous studies that focused on economic, environmental, political, and corporate social responsibility impacts, this study places the Bungku language as the main object, by examining the relationship between the ecological knowledge contained in the language, the pressures of industrialization, and the response of local institutions.

This research aims to answer three interrelated questions. First, what cultural knowledge is contained in the Bungku language, and through what aspects of daily life is it inherited? Second, how does the industrialization of Bahodopi affect the use and

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sustainability of the Bungku language? Third, how do local institutions, namely families, schools, village leaders, and industry, respond to these changes, and what are the impact of these responses?

Theoretically, this research enriches the study of ecolinguistics and the study of language threats with the perspective of the border areas of the Indonesian nickel industry. In practice, the findings can serve as a basis for efforts to preserve local language and ecological knowledge by families, schools, and communities. For policy formulation, this research offers a foundation for governments and companies to incorporate the protection of indigenous languages and cultures into industrial estate planning and social responsibility programs.

## 2. METHOD

This study uses an ethnographic approach to ecolinguistics. This approach combines three methods. The first method is an in-depth interview that is semi-structured. The second method is the elicitation of the lexicon in eleven different fields of meaning. These fields include maritime terrain, fisheries, forestry, agriculture, seasonal and ecological words, customs and social life, traditional expressions and proverbs of local fish and marine life, medicinal plants, knowledge of marine weather and how habitats are classified. The third method is observation in village, school, and industrial settings.

Twenty-five people were selected to participate in the study. These people were chosen to represent an important group because the study focuses on ecolinguistic and socio-economic issues. These people include village leaders, officials from the district and provincial governments, teachers, as well as a school principal, small business operators, local and migrant workers, migrant workers, migrant workers, two school children (one from the local Bungku community and one from a migrant family) as well as four staff from PT IMIP who work in the field of public relations and CSR. Table 1 shows the details of the people who participated in this study.

Table 1. Informant categories, number of informants, and their illustrative roles

| Informant Categories | n | Illustrative Role |
|---|---|---|
| Customary/community leaders | 2 | Village elders, community leaders (community leaders) |
| Village and subdistrict government | 6 | Village heads, village councils, sub-district heads, sub-district economic staff |
| Provincial government | 1 | Governor of Central Sulawesi |
| Educator | 4 | Elementary and junior high school teachers, principals, Bungku language teachers |
| Local residents / MSME operators | 4 | Head of household, small business owner |
| Industrial workers (local and migrants) | 4 | Local employees, migrant workers, migrant worker spouses |
| School children | 2 | local students of Bungku; students of migrant families |
| PT IMIP Staff | 4 | Public relations and CSR/community development officer |
| **Total** | 27* | |

*Note: *The totals in source metadata varied slightly (25–27) among the summary tables in the original dataset due to overlapping role classifications.*

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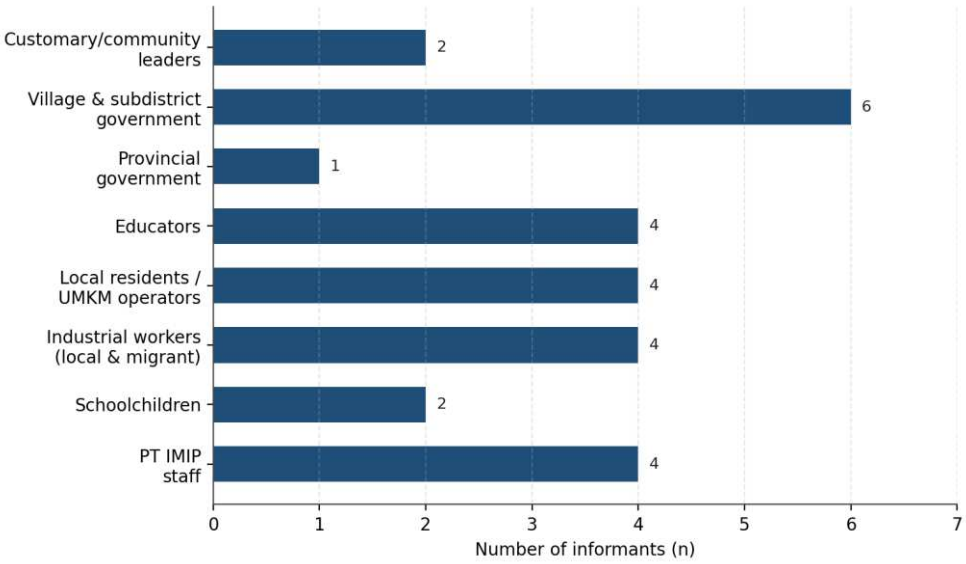



Figure 1. Distribution of 27 study informants by role category (see Table 1 for details)

Interviews were conducted primarily in Indonesian with some Bungku words mixed in. The interviews were written. Viewed thematically. Six main groups were used from the original data set: (1) language, education, and speaker regeneration; (2) history, tradition and collective memory; (3) local ecology, environment, and knowledge; (4) industrialization, migration and social transformation; (5) small business and local economic transformation; and (6) industry, CSR, and social relations. Words from the interviews were examined with a classification of the Bungku-Tolaki language (Mead, 1998-1999). This examination helped place the words in the known Bungku family. The results were compared with the literature on Morowali's economic and environmental changes as described in Section 1. All informants' personal names were displayed exactly as they appeared in the anonymous dataset. The quote was translated from Indonesian to English by the author. The key words of Bungku are left in their original language.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1. Results

#### *3.1.1. Ecology Lexicon as an Archive of Traditional Knowledge*

The lexicon elisitus confirms that Bungku maintains a dense and highly differentiated ecological vocabulary that includes the coastal, sea, forest, and agricultural domains. Table 2 presents illustrative samples from the maritime and fisheries domains, two of which are most extensively documented in field data.

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Table 2. Illustrative Bungku ecological lexicon from the maritime and fisheries domains

| Indonesia | Bungbung | English gloss |
|---|---|---|
| sea | singular | Sea |
| beach (beach) | Squirt | beach / beach |
| Coral Reefs (Coral Reefs) | São Paulo, São Paulo | Coral reefs |
| waves (waves) | Bomb | Waves |
| Strong currents (strong currents) | Sacrifice | strong current |
| East Wind (East Wind) | Timur Season | East Wind |
| Fishing (fishing with ropes) | Stuttgart | for fishing / fishing with ropes |
| Fishing (throwing a net) | São Paulo, Sã | throwing nets |
| bubu (fish trap) | Squirt | woven fish trap |
| reef fish (reef fish) | Seed fish | reef fish |
| Crab (crab) | Squirt | Crab |
| Smoked fish (smoked fish) | Stone Fish | Smoked fish |

This vocabulary does more than just give a name. Each word is related to an action—such as clearing the forest, planting seeds, fishing, or gathering plants. These activities are not just practical; they are part of a ritual that passes on values about how to live with the land. The way people speak in these moments carries meaning. For example, elders share proverbs in their language such as *"Tope Baratantonga Tompano Pandeanto, Tipetila Mengkena Pande Mo Tauanto,"* which means "we respect each other and complement each other's shortcomings." This type of saying connects direct utterance with concern for the community and the environment. In Mori, informants share poems: *"Wita Mori wita hinaaku wita kinekewoiku..."* or "Mori, my homeland, my birthplace..." These words don't just describe the land—they are rooted in identity. They show how language, land, ancestry, and ethics are intertwined. This is the kind of conversation that academics like Stibbe (2015) say is key to understanding ecolinguistics. It's not about words. It's about how words shape our relationship with the world.

### *3.1.2. Domain Contraction: Family and School*

In all groups of informants, respondents agreed on a clear generational trend: people over the age of about forty still speak Bungku well, while younger ones, both from Bungku families and migrant families, speak more and more Indonesian. The principal of SD Negeri 4 Bahodopi said simply, "At home, children today mostly speak Indonesian." At his school, eighty percent of the approximately 570 students come from migrant families, compared to only twenty percent from local Bungku families. This mix of students limits the ability to teach Bungku in the classroom even if the teacher wants to.

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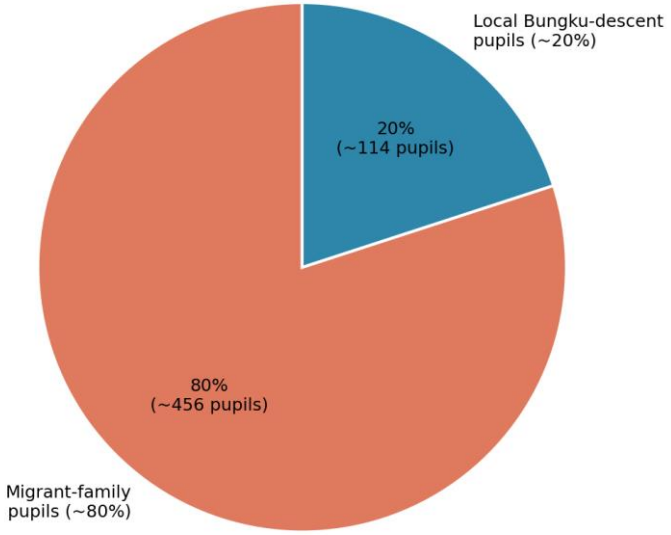



Figure 2. The proportion of students from migrant families compared to students of local Bungku descent at SD Negeri 4 Bahodopi

The erosion of the family domain is not limited to households of migrant descent. I once saw an informant in Lalampu village who grew up in Kendari and was not fluent in the Bungku language even though he grew up there. He showed how a life-oriented upbringing could break the transmission of the language from one generation to the next even within a family that was clearly of Bungku blood. However, he reclaimed his Bungku identity when mining-related land compensation made it important to be seen as a "native landowner" (owner of customary territory). This pattern is discussed further in Section 3.1.5. Another informant of the Bungku ethnicity said that although both couples could speak Bungku, the Indonesian language was spoken at home because so many ethnic groups lived here now. Where Bungku still exists, it usually remains in conversations between people of the same age who can speak in ritual and customary situations as well as in the dwindling number of exchanges within the family. This is typical of the stage of family domain erosion that occurred before the loss of language according to Fishman (1991) on the scale of intergenerational transmission.

School-based teaching was officially launched as a local content subject (local content) after the national language revitalization policy in 2022 (Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology [Kemendikbudristek] 2022). Learning began to be used in the Bahodopis junior high school curriculum from 2025. Teachers reported structural barriers common to all of them: there are not enough certified language teachers who are ethnically Bungku; bilingual teaching materials are so limited that teachers have to translate monolingual Bungku modules before they can use them; there are dialect differences between the Bungku Tengah and Bahodopi varieties; and most students, by definition, are non-native speakers. Despite these difficulties, some teachers noted enthusiastic acceptance among students of migrant descent. For example, a nine-year-old boy born in Jakarta learned Bungku numerals on his own at home from class notes. This

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suggests that school domains, despite having a structure, can still bring in new speakers across ethnicities if they receive sufficient resources.

### *3.1.3. Migration, Demographic Inversion, and the Emergence of Indonesian as the Industrial Lingua Franca*

Every group that provided information, including village officials, teachers, workers, and IMIP staff, all said that the large number of people moving to work in the area was the reason for the language change. People from the villages said that in some places there were more people moving there than the locals. This is a pattern that IMIP reported in 2025, when they have nearly 90,000 workers, mostly from outside Central Sulawesi. Since the company does not provide housing for all Indonesians in the dormitory, there is a great need for shelter such as restrooms to rent rental houses and other types of lodging. This has led to a change in the area that was once farmland and more and more people from different backgrounds are living in villages that were previously the majority of the Bungku population.

In this situation, Bahasa Indonesia is used as the language that everyone needs to buy and sell for work as well as meet people from backgrounds. This is similar to what Blommaert said in 2010 about how when many people move to work, the local language situation changes and the common language becomes more important. Some people say that this change is not about language, but rather about money and work. They say that Bahasa Indonesia is more useful and more helpful for school and work, while Bungku is only spoken by fewer people. This is what Bourdieu said in 1991 about how languages have value based on how much they help in the job market. The main ways of making money are now industrial and commercial, so a language that was once made for farming and willing to exist, near the sea, is no longer as valuable.

### *3.1.4. Economic Transformation: From Agrarian-Maritime Subsistence to a Wage and Compensation Economy*

I have witnessed intergenerational informants describe a shift that was largely welcomed by informants, moving from a subsistence livelihood based on resin resin, rattan, a shift in cultivation and fisheries to a cash economy built on industrial wages, land compensation, and service sector entrepreneurship. A BPD Vice Chairman in Bete-Bete recalled that earning money used to be very difficult; now informants can receive a million rupiah easily while many informants describe turning fields and rice fields into boarding houses, rental units, and small businesses serving migrant workers. Land compensation, which is given to each household according to land ownership and documented land area, yields results: some households use money wisely while others spend amounts at once quickly, a pattern summarized by one informant as "if you know how to manage money, money will survive; if you just spend it, money runs out quickly." This change carries an ecolinguistic cost. Fishermen explained that the decline in nearshore catches caused by sewage and coastal disturbance now requires longer trips, more fuel—five to ten liters of diesel per previous trip to twenty to twenty-five liters today, according to one informant—and mechanical boats instead of sails or paddles. These changes are beginning to replace not only fishing work, but also the traditional astronomical navigation knowledge that

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informants remember from the Bungku maritime vocabulary, where a ray-shaped constellation points to the north, a kite-shaped constellation points to the south, a morning star points to the east, and the sunset indicates the west. The informant notes that young fishermen are abandoning this knowledge because they are leaving the fishery for a satisfying and easier industrial job. The informant notes that local youth get priority for recruitment at PT IMIP, over outsiders. This cumulative effect erodes practices that give meaning to the maritime lexicon, showing how environmental and economic changes can weaken the vitality of the language even without active emphasis.

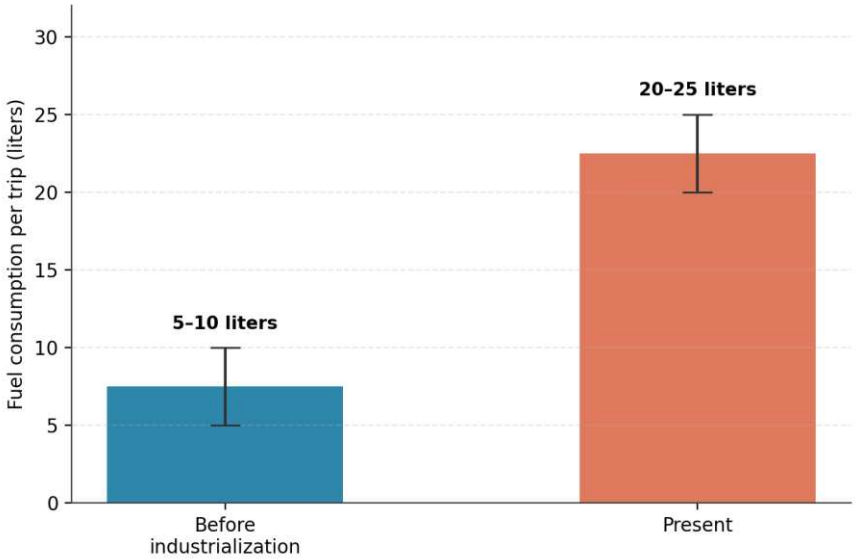



Figure 3. Comparison of fuel consumption (liters) per fishing trip before and after industrialization, based on fishermen's informant reports

### *3.1.5. The Paradox of Ethnolinguistic Identity under Extraction*

The data show an important pattern: people continue to reaffirm their Bungku ethnic identity just as their Bungku linguistic competence begins to weaken. When the growth of the industry makes it important to be known as the "(original) owner of Bungku land, a title that is important for compensation, job priority, and bargaining power with PT IMIP and local governments, many informants talk about placing more emphasis on their Bungku origins. Even those who grew up without active linguistic competence talk about strengthening their genealogical connection with the Bungku heritage. This pattern is consistent with the findings of Duchêne and Heller (2012) that when there are markers of "pride and gain", markers of minority identity can maintain or even increase their economic value, while the language that once carried such markers fades from everyday use. It also points to points that scholars have identified in the area of language threats but are rarely seen this clearly in places where resources are drawn. Historically, ethnic identity and linguistic competence have been intertwined. New economic incentives can separate the two. As a result, identity remains a claim, over land, resources, and a sense of belonging even though the language that used to show that identity becomes a relic.

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### *3.1.6. Institutional Response: Curriculum Revitalization and Corporate CSR*

Two official ways to help emerged from this research. The first is the government's efforts to update the curriculum. This effort follows the national policy of *Merdeka Belajar* Episode 17 on the revitalization of regional languages (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). Since 2025, the government has added Bungku as a subject to primary and secondary schools in Bahodopi. As Section 3.1.2 shows, the program still faces limitations due to a shortage of teachers, lack of teacher certification, and a lack of teaching materials. The second way comes from PT IMIP's CSR division. These people say they have helped build the school's infrastructure, such as classrooms, furniture, fences, and sports facilities. They also provide funds to bring Bungku literature to the school environment. CSR workers say that these projects are in line with the company's story of combining extraction work with cultural treatment. They also protected places like Fafontofure/Fafontogaro and Pontudua from mining damage by establishing negotiated exclusion zones.

These actions are real. Only part of the answers to population and financial problems are visible. The people who share their stories say that these actions are far less powerful than the great forces that push people to stop using Bungku. A single class with local content and a few extracurricular activities cannot restore the way families used to pass on Bungku from one generation to the next or the way people keep Bungku words alive. According to UNESCO's language power category (2003), these programs touch on the "material and policy" side of language health. These programs do not solve the problem of family transmission or the proportion of Bungku speakers in entire communities. Because neither the government curriculum nor corporate CSR is designed to undo the population shift created by the job market.

## 3.2. Discussion

The findings support this article's idea: the threat of language in mining frontiers such as Bahodopi cannot be fully explained by people meeting each other alone. Traditional contact-linguistic theories predict that language shifts occur whenever many language speakers come to regions where minority languages are spoken. This idea is clear. Consistently reported by informants. Yet the data show an environment-based mechanism that works at the same time. The land itself is changing: rivers are red due to mining waste, fish stocks are declining, and forest and rattan resources are being converted into land. These changes are gradually eliminating the objects that many Bungku words describe. Where people can still speak Bungku well, the everyday opportunity to use words such as *tende olaro*, *sasamat*, or *mesui* and *motasu* ritual words is shrinking, as the actions to which these words refer are also shrinking. This supports Haugen and Mühlhäusler's idea that the health of a language is inseparable from the health of the environment and the practices it describes. It also transforms Nettle, Romaine, and Maffi's idea of biolinguistic diversity from a pattern to a local cause: environmental damage doesn't just occur at the same time as language loss in mining areas; it actually helps cause loss by eliminating the real-world ecological words need [16].

The second contribution of this study is to show how mining politics changed the market value of language in ways predicted by Bourdieu, Duchêne, and Heller. Something

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rarely seen in detail in Indonesia's mining areas. Indonesian has become a practical language needed for Bahodopi industry and trade, needed for employment, school, and trade between groups. Bungku has been moved to the role of identity and a sense of belonging in land talks and payments but has become less important for everyday business. This change explains why people can feel strongly about their ethnicity even if they speak the Bungku language poorly. In subsistence life, identity and language are inextricably linked. When ethnicity acquires its own economic value—such as for land claims or hiring preferences—identity can grow despite shrinking language use.

These findings are also linked to extractive industry studies, which show land loss, environmental damage, and disputed compensation and approvals in mining areas around the world. It is rare to add language to the list of social costs. The Bahodopi case suggests that language loss should be viewed as a hidden social cost of mining. Compensation plans, land tenure records, and CSR programs are not created to remedy this. Their individualized, money-oriented thinking can even accelerate the problem by giving more power to the dominant economic language than the ancestral language.

Finally, this study provides a sign. New school children with Bungku heritage are learning Bungku PT IMIP is ready to fund oral literature and protect traditional sites and parents continue to use Bungku in family and customary settings. These signs suggest that the decline of Bungku, although serious, is not yet irreversible according to the Fishman scale. In accordance with Indonesian policy, a plan for Bungku that is appropriate to its situation—still vulnerable but not yet critically endangered—should use many fluent native speakers, but it will also be necessary to improve weak family teaching and overcrowded schools. This plan should combine school programs (teacher training for Bungku ethnic speakers, bilingual books and dialect standardization rules) with family and community teaching. Importantly, this plan should protect the environment and land use so that places such as forest plots, fishing areas, and ritual sites remain. Without these places, the ecological words that Bungku uses may one day become a collection of words that have no world to explain.

## 4. CONCLUSION

This study examines the consequences of nickel industrialization in Bahodopi, Morowali Regency, by leveraging field data collected in the Bungku ethnolinguistic community during a period of very rapid economic transformation. The Bungku language maintains an ecological lexicon that includes maritime, forestry, and agrarian regions, which are historically transmitted through oral traditions, ritual practices, and daily subsistence activities. This vocabulary and the intergenerational transmission that supports it are under interlocking pressures from two directions: large-scale labor migration, which has made Bungku speakers a demographic minority in their villages and displaced Bungku from the domain of families and schools in favor of Bahasa Indonesia; and environmental and economic transformation, which has eroded the ecological practices of fisheries, the collection of forest sap that displaces cultivation that provides much ecological relevance to everyday life. At the time, ethnic identity was in some cases strategically reaffirmed for its economic and political value, in land negotiations and compensation even as the

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underlying language competency weakened, illustrating the separation of language and identity that characterized the linguistic market restructured by extractive capitalism.

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