

A Vowel Inventory of the Punan Ba Language

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Abstract

Punan Ba is an indigenous language, in Sarawak, East Malaysia, classified as endangered, with an estimated speaker population of fewer than 5,000 people. The study has two main objectives: first, to identify the inventory of vowel phonemes, and second, to discuss the suprasegmental elements of vowels in the Punan language. The data for this study is consequent to our interactions with native speaking informants.

To analyze the vowel phonemes of the Punan language, we applied a descriptive linguistic approach. We also used Praat software to obtain accurate vowel sound features in the form of spectrograms. Findings reveal six vowel phonemes, three diphthongs, and two triphthongs in the language, as well as vowel lengthening for /i/, /u/, /o/, and /a/ in the phonological system. The phonological study of Punan is not only significant for salvaging the language, but also for language documentation, and contributes new data to the field of phonology.

Keywords: *Punan language, descriptive linguistics, phonology, vowels inventory, linguistic anthropology, Malaysia*

Introduction

The Punan Ba people constitute one of the sub-ethnic groups classified as a broader Orang Ulu category, residing primarily in the districts of Belaga, Tatau, and Sebauh, in the state of Sarawak in Eastern Malaysia (see Figure 1 below). Historical and ethnographic sources indicate that the earliest Punan settlements appeared in the Belaga District, in Sarawak. Suggested by Langub (1975), the Punan community migrated from the Punan River in Belaga to the Kakus River in Tatau, and subsequently expanded into the Sebauh region. At present, we note that fourteen Punan longhouses exist across Sarawak, with an estimated population of approximately 4,790 speakers of the language.



Figure 1: Locations of Tatau, Sebauh, and Belaga Districts

Early literature often employed the terms Punan Ba or Punan Bah quite loosely to refer to the Punan as a whole (see Ling Roth 1896; Nicolaisen 1977, 1983). However, such use only remotely reflects the ethnic and linguistic realities of the community. Drawing on historical and sociogeographical perspectives, we note that Ba / Bah refers to the name of a tributary and an early settlement area in Belaga, rather than serving as a comprehensive ethnic label.

River-based naming practices have appeared commonly among Punan communities in Sarawak. Settlements and longhouses typically receive their nomenclature from nearby rivers