Long Terawan Dialect Mapping Report

Louis Rose
(Faith Comes by Hearing)
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Introduction
This report describes a dialect mapping exercise carried out among the Berawan people of Long Terawan, Sarawak, Malaysia. The author prepared for and conducted the exercise in the spirit of Participatory Methods with the aim of comparing the result of this method with existing information about their linguistic realities.

Occasion
I had prepared for this event knowing we would be in the Berawan heartland on a translation checking trip. The timing was just prior to the afternoon checking session and everyone was fresh. The participants were volunteers to the checking session and were not chosen specifically for this exercise. Both young and old were present.

Event Description
Location & Time: Long Terawan, Sarawak, Malaysia. Sunday, 3pm, 5 Sept. 2010
Group Makeup: 6 women: 1 teenager, 1 roughly in 30s, 4 over 40. 5 men: 1 roughly in 30s, others over 50.
Language in focus: Berawan of Long Terawan
Language of communication: Malaysian Malay (everyone present was bilingual in Malay)
Details:
• Of the 11 or 12 present, 3 did the floor work which was reasonable considering the ages and limited floor space. Based on discussion, everyone was participating.
• Eliciting the dialect names proved tricky as reference terms are mixed – three are village names and one not (Batu Belah). Of the three village names, one of those (Long Terawan) as a dialect reference actually refers to two places – Long Terawan and Mulu.
• Eliciting degree of understanding worked ok. These Long Terawan speakers can only understand a little of Long Jegan, roughly half of Long Teru, and lots (but not all) of Batu Belah. I didn’t perceive any trouble or misunderstanding of this step.
• Eliciting intelligibility was difficult. I worked at going slow and giving examples, but even then the first understanding by the group was REVERSED. We figured this out, and got it straight. I feel mostly confident that the result accurately reflects their perspective. Each pairing is able to speak their own dialect except Long Jegan. With them, Long Terawan speakers must choose some other language for communication whereas the Long Jegan speakers can continue speaking Long Jegan (at least according to the discussion results)
Discussion about literature was not completed as I sensed a possible offense to the pastor/translator with the potential for saying "Language Terawan is the wrong one to develop."

No grouping was done as there were so few items listed.

Numbering was not done as I couldn't understand the purpose to it given the faces that indicate relative understanding.

I took the picture above of the floor map, but did not get an audio summary. Time was against us with other events pressing.

Data and interpretation

Figure 1 shows the Intelligibility Legend that was shown to the participants while Figure 2 shows the Communication Legend. Figure 3 is a picture of the dialect map that the participants created during the exercise. Please refer to Appendix 1 for these pictures.

Immediately there is a problem with Long Jegan being labeled for Understandability as "sedikit" (frowning face) and yet being labeled with the red marker. The red marker means when the Long Terawan speaker meets a Long Jegan speaker, the Long Jegan speaker continues to speak Long Jegan while the Long Terawan person must switch to some other language to be understood. Later one of the participants said "people from Long Terawan can understand people from Long Jegan, but not the other way around." This statement is consistent with the red marker in so far as the Terawan speaker much change his language, but it contradicts the understandability marker which would seem to indicate that the Long Jegan speaker would need to change his language also.

While still in the community I investigated this discrepancy further. The above mentioned participant felt that when he meets a Long Jegan person, they both simply continue to speak their own dialects, even though the one (Terawan) will understand the other (Jegan) better than the other way around. It seems very odd to me that one or both do not change to something more intelligible.

Observations

Maybe some other descriptive pictorial legend is needed for the part of the exercise dealing with direction of intelligibility (the colored markers). Something that clearly indicates a person uses or alters their 1st/home/local language when meeting another person.

It would be good to hold this same discussion in Long Jegan, Long Teru and Long Palo/Ukuk.

I didn’t like using plastic pieces. I can put the faces on white construction paper. However, I did like the little envelopes I made for each symbol. It kept me organized.

Conclusion

Performing this participatory tool was a rewarding experience in part because of the enjoyment the participants had during the exercise. It was not part of any research project but rather a matter of personal interest to see what kind of results this sort of participatory method would produce in comparison to the linguistic work already done by authors like Robert Blust. It would seem to have good potential for gathering insider perspective, but needs experienced facilitation in order to trouble-shoot ambiguities or errors during the event.
Appendix 1

Figure 3: Intelligibility Legend

Figure 3: Communication Legend

Figure 3: Berawan Dialect Map