

The Existence of *Bahasa Walikan* as A Communication Tool in the Social Interactions of Non-Local Students from Universitas Brawijaya

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Abstract

Bahasa Walikan is a dialect unique to the people of Malang, characterized by a linguistic feature known as word phonetic reversal. *Bahasa Walikan* remains a definitive symbol of Malang's local cultural identity, yet its continued existence faces significant scrutiny. Its relevance is increasingly put to the test as daily usage shifts within a rapidly changing society. The purpose of this study is to analyze the use and existence of *Bahasa Walikan* among non-local students at Universitas Brawijaya, given the multicultural student body from outside East Java, which makes it an ideal setting for observing the use of *Bahasa Walikan* by non-local students. This study employs in-depth qualitative interviews and participant observation among non-local students. The results of the study indicate that non-local students perceive *Bahasa Walikan* as a vital tool for fostering emotional closeness and social inclusion. However, field data reveal its weak existence in the heterogeneous campus environment, with 72.4% of respondents rarely or never using the language in their daily interactions. This study confirms that *Bahasa Walikan* is at risk of extinction among university students due to the dominance of the national language and the lack of sustained active use. Without a commitment to and a positive attitude toward the language among its speakers, there is concern that the role of *Bahasa Walikan* as a symbol of Malang's local cultural identity will gradually disappear in the future.

Keywords: *Bahasa Walikan*, Existence, Universitas Brawijaya, Non-local students.

INTRODUCTION

The city of Malang has a unique sociocultural feature known as *Bahasa Walikan*, a local slang dialect characterized by reversing the order of letters within words (Fiaji, 2021). Hoogervorst (2014) and Yannuar (2018) explain that the social function of *Bahasa Walikan* extends beyond serving merely as a tool for communication; it also plays a deeper role. This language essentially serves as a reflection of strong solidarity and a source of pride in identity for the entire Malang community.

Historically, *Bahasa Walikan* holds profound strategic value. It was first pioneered by a figure named Suyudi Raharno as a secret code used by the *Gerilya Rakyat Kota* (Urban People's Guerrilla) fighters during their struggle against the Dutch colonizers. The use of this

code proved effective in formulating strategies and detecting infiltrators, following the frequent exposure of secret movements by Dutch spies (Setyanto, 2016).

Nowadays, *Bahasa Walikan* has evolved into a dynamic slang deeply intertwined with the social circles of local youth. Its use serves as the primary tool for reinforcing group identity (*Arek Malang*) and fostering social intimacy (Rizqy & Suryadi, 2023). *Bahasa Walikan* features unique speech variations, demonstrating flexibility in social contexts and varying levels of politeness depending on the closeness of relationships (Hidayani & Macaryus, 2019).

In addition to serving as a marker of identity for the people of Malang, the use of *Bahasa Walikan* is also popular among young people, even those from outside Malang (Fiaji, 2021). Its evolution into an adaptive slang is evidenced by the emergence of *Bahasa Walikan* words that have merged with standard language, such as “*Kuy*” (*Yuk*; let's) and “*Ngab*” (*Bang*; brother). This phenomenon highlights the dual function of *Bahasa Walikan* as both a local identity and an adaptive trend popularized by the younger generation (Muhammad & Fatimah, 2024). The majority of young people coming to Malang are students. This trend directly impacts non-local students who come to continue their studies. They often have to adapt to *Bahasa Walikan*, an informal lingua franca, to interact, be accepted, and build rapport in their new social environment, which ultimately helps spread these terms to their home regions (Fiaji, 2021).

One of the universities in Malang that is the top choice for non-local students is Universitas Brawijaya. As evidenced by *Seleksi Nasional Berbasis Prestasi* (National Selection Based on Academic Merit) admission data (RRI, 2025), Universitas Brawijaya has a multicultural student body, with 20.99% of students coming from outside East Java (West Java, Central Java, and Jakarta). This situation makes Universitas Brawijaya an ideal setting for observing the use of *Bahasa Walikan* by non-local students within a multicultural environment. The intensity of interaction between local and non-local students, both in academic and non-academic settings at Universitas Brawijaya, allows for the use of *Bahasa Walikan* in various communication contexts. However, this raises the question of the extent to which this language still exists within the student community at Universitas Brawijaya amidst the diversity of regional origins and the dominance of the national language.

Previous research has examined the social function of *Bahasa Walikan* as a builder of solidarity (Fiaji, 2021) and its linguistic identity dimensions (Yannuar, 2018). However, the majority of these studies have focused on native speakers or local communities. An area of research requiring further analysis is the role and experiences of migrant groups, particularly non-local students, as key subjects in understanding academic cross-cultural interactions. Thus, this study aims to fill this gap by examining the role of *Bahasa Walikan* in fostering adaptation and social interaction among non-local students in Malang, specifically at Universitas Brawijaya.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

From a theoretical perspective, language is defined as a symbolic system that links an individual's internal thoughts to interactions with the external world. There are two views regarding the nature of language. First, the nativist perspective proposed by Noam Chomsky (1965) holds that the ability to use language is innate to humans (Universal Grammar).

Second, the Sociocultural Perspective proposed by Lev Vygotsky (1978) asserts that language is a psychological tool acquired through social interaction and used to organize complex thought processes. Thus, language goes beyond mere communication; it is a fundamental structure that enables thoughts to be represented and transformed.

The primary function of language as an adaptive tool is to create social bonds through complex group coordination, enable the transmission of knowledge across generations, and facilitate abstract thinking and planning (Deacon, 1997; Tomasello, 1999). However, the use of language as an adaptive tool has limitations. Although language enables the rapid transmission of information, its success depends heavily on social context. A language is only adaptive if it is collectively adopted and understood by the community of users. The aspect of nativism also implies fundamental cognitive limitations, where non-linguistic factors, such as memory and attention, can constrain language performance. In conclusion, language serves as an adaptive tool to strengthen bonds and identity within an internal group. However, it also creates barriers that complicate communication and understanding with people or groups outside (Chomsky, 1965).

The phenomenon of *Bahasa Walikan* in Malang is a sociolinguistic case study on social adaptation and group identity, in line with Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural theory. This language does not arise from innate cognitive needs, but rather as an adaptive strategy. *Bahasa Walikan*, as a psychological tool, is acquired through social interaction and subsequently used to regulate group thinking and communication processes. Currently, *Bahasa Walikan* is maintained as a marker of local identity among the *Arek Malang* community. Research by Maulana et al. (2023), for example, examines the use of this slang as a local identity of the Malang community, affirming the role of language as a dynamic adaptive tool rooted in local culture to maintain regional identity differentiation.

The existence of a language depends not only on its historical aspects but also on how it continues to be articulated in various new social spaces (Blommaert, 2010). This existence reflects the phenomenon of language maintenance, which is driven by social factors and speakers' positive attitudes toward their identity (Holmes & Wilson, 2022). According to Bourdieu (1991), this is maintained through active use as social capital to gain recognition or integration within a group.

Thus, this study will analyze the existence of *Bahasa Walikan* as a means of active communication and a form of cultural assimilation among non-local students at Universitas Brawijaya.

METHODOLOGY

This research method uses a qualitative, ethnographic approach. A qualitative approach was chosen because it aligns with the nature of the research, which examines the object's natural conditions, where the researcher serves as the key instrument. The research results emphasize meaning rather than generalization (Sugiyono, 2021). Ethnography is conducted to describe and interpret shared patterns, beliefs, language, and values developed by specific social groups (Creswell, 2014).

This research procedure was implemented through systematic ethnographic stages, beginning with the identification of key informants to obtain representative primary data. The

ethnographic approach aimed to explore the existence of *Bahasa Walikan* among non-local students at Universitas Brawijaya and to determine how the existence of *Bahasa Walikan* is maintained in interactions among these students in Malang. The researcher approached subjects from diverse cultural backgrounds to analyze the existence of *Bahasa Walikan* amid the heterogeneity of Universitas Brawijaya. Next, the data collection process was conducted through interviews to explore subjective understandings regarding the use of local dialects as an active medium of communication. This stage was integrated with direct observation to observe the existence of language use in natural social environments. All data and situational contexts found were then documented in field notes to illustrate the existence of *Bahasa Walikan* and the extent to which this dialect persists as a local speech identity.

The research was conducted at Universitas Brawijaya, Malang City. This location was chosen because Universitas Brawijaya has a significant population of non-local students, making it an ideal social setting for observing the existence of *Bahasa Walikan*. The primary focus of the research was non-local students from outside Malang who actively interact with the surrounding community and are known to use.

The primary research instrument was the researcher themselves, supported by in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation. Data collection procedures were conducted using methodological triangulation. The in-depth interviews followed a structured guide to elicit primary data on the motivations for preserving the existence of *Bahasa Walikan* from the informants' perspectives. Participatory observation was used to directly observe the social context of the use of *Bahasa Walikan*. Documentation, including field notes, interview transcripts, and audio-visual recordings, served as supplementary data to strengthen the validity of the findings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Evolution of *Bahasa Walikan* from a Secret Code to a Means of Social Communication

Referring to the origins of *Bahasa Walikan* as a code used by the *Gerilya Rakyat Kota* during the military aggression, *Bahasa Walikan* emerged when the Malang guerrillas faced obstacles in communicating with their fellow fighters. To protect information from the enemy, *Bahasa Walikan* was created (Budianto, 2013). However, its meaning has shifted to become a symbol of local identity and a tool for social inclusion for the people of Malang. The use of *Bahasa Walikan* serves as a means of communication, eliminating awkwardness and fostering emotional closeness in interactions with residents. This phenomenon indicates an effort at linguistic convergence, where newcomers strive to align their speech patterns with those of the indigenous population to gain social recognition.

Language plays a crucial role for every individual in building and affirming their identity within society (Masyita, 2025). Based on the theory of communicative accommodation proposed by Giles and Coupland (1991), individuals tend to modify their speaking style to foster social intimacy and reduce interpersonal distance. Thus, the ability to adapt one's language style to social and cultural contexts accelerates adaptation and strengthens social bonds (Ningrum & Islam, 2024). For students in Malang, *Bahasa Walikan* serves as a marker

of membership in that group. When non-local students begin to adopt *Bahasa Walikan* vocabulary, they are undergoing a process of social identification, in which they strive to become part of the local community. The use of *Bahasa Walikan* is a way for students to show respect for local culture, thereby making their position within Malang society more socially accepted and recognized.

Jonathan (Interview, 2026) noted that although he initially felt unfamiliar with *Bahasa Walikan*, he developed curiosity about it as a form of adaptation to the new environment. This aligns with the views of several other informants who stated that using the local dialect can strengthen friendships and foster a sense of belonging in a new place. Hagerty and Patusky (1995) define a sense of belonging as an individual's experience of active engagement that fosters awareness of being an integral part of a social ecosystem. Non-local students consciously use *Bahasa Walikan* to break down the barriers between newcomers and residents. Thus, *Bahasa Walikan* has transformed from a defensive function during wartime to a function of social integration in the present day, enabling non-local students to feel more accepted within Malang's cultural ecosystem.

***Bahasa Walikan* as a Lingua Franca of Identity in a Heterogeneous Environment**

As explained by Kleden-Probonegoro and Katubi in Bella (2018), a lingua franca is an intermediary language or a common language used as a medium of communication or a social language within a community. According to Blommaert (2010), language adaptation in urban spaces is a process of forming a new identity that enables individuals to transcend primordial boundaries in order to achieve social integration. In the context of urban society and a heterogeneous campus environment, the use of *Bahasa Walikan* among non-local students exemplifies the role of a lingua franca in facilitating interaction among students from different regional and linguistic backgrounds and fostering a sense of community.

Bahasa Walikan is not merely used to convey messages, but also serves as a symbol of membership in the local community. This aligns with the linguistic anthropological perspective of Alessandro Duranti (1997), who views language not merely as a collection of words, but as a cultural practice that enables humans to interact and shape their social identities within society. Through this practice, non-local students undergo linguistic adjustment to align themselves with the local culture.

From the perspective of symbolic anthropology, culture is understood as a network of meaning constructed through social symbols. Drawing on Geertz's (1973) explanation, humans constantly navigate the networks of meaning they create through language and action. *Bahasa Walikan* serves as a symbol of Malang's egalitarian identity. By practicing this language, non-local students are engaging in a process of cultural interpretation to gain acceptance within Malang's social structure, while simultaneously shedding their status as outsiders.

Field data support these theories. Wildan (Interview, 2026) notes that in the heterogeneous campus environment of Universitas Brawijaya, the use of *Bahasa Walikan* tends to involve the use of loanwords, such as "*Sabi*" (*bisa*; can), "*Agit*" (*tiga*; three), or "*Sam*" (*mas*; bro), mixed with Indonesian. This phenomenon indicates that *Bahasa Walikan* has a high degree of flexibility, allowing non-local students to continue interacting and feeling like locals when gathering with their peers.

The Existence of *Bahasa Walikan* in Universitas Brawijaya Students' Interactions

Existence literally signifies a movement or process of “growing out,” indicating that something that exists possesses actuality and is genuinely experienced within human experience (Yogantara, 2024). Furthermore, this existence is not merely understood as physical presence but is also evaluated in terms of its utility, benefits, and distinctive characteristics within society. In a social context, an existential analysis seeks to explain how an identity or object maintains its existence as much as possible through linguistic ability and recognition of its function within the prevailing norms of that environment (Yogantara, 2024).

In multicultural societies, the existence of language is analyzed through the interplay between identity, power relations, and intercultural contact. According to Parekh in Ramadhani et al. (2025), language is viewed as a cultural marker and a tool for integration, while Wardhaugh and Fuller in Ramadhani et al. (2025) highlight how minority languages maintain their position under the dominance of the major language. Within the context of Universitas Brawijaya, these dynamics increasingly depend on interactions between local and non-local students, where *Bahasa Walikan* must compete with the national language as a tool for inclusive communication.

This trend is evidenced by Wildan (Interview, 2026), who highlights the decline in the use of *Bahasa Walikan* by local students, aligning with the Ethnolinguistic Vitality Theory proposed by Giles et al. (1977), which posits a weakening of native speakers' pride. This phenomenon triggers excessive linguistic convergence toward an external language, consistent with Giles' (1973) Theory of Communicative Accommodation, which risks accelerating language shift toward extinction (Fishman, 1991).

In response to this, Jonathan (Interview, 2026) emphasized that the sustainability of *Bahasa Walikan* depends heavily on the consistency of native speakers in Malang in making it a source of pride. This aligns with the findings of studies by Rahman and Suryani (2023) and Rukayah and Hartati (2023), which state that the existence of a regional language within contemporary society can only be sustained if the local community maintains loyalty and a positive attitude toward the language to preserve the dialect as a symbol of their identity.

Based on data collected from 29 informants, 72.4% reported rarely or never using *Bahasa Walikan*, while 27.6% still use it as a means of communication in informal settings. This indicates a low level of vitality regarding the existence of *Bahasa Walikan* among students at Universitas Brawijaya. This phenomenon can be analyzed using Joshua Fishman's (1991) Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS), which posits that a language's vitality depends heavily on intergenerational transmission and its active use in daily communication. If the trend of *Bahasa Walikan* usage continues to decline, its existence may reach a critical low point. This condition ultimately relegates *Bahasa Walikan* to near-extinction, where it is no longer a living language in everyday communication and loses its function as a local cultural identity.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study indicate that the current state of *Bahasa Walikan* among students at Universitas Brawijaya is in a fragile condition. Although this language is still recognized as a

symbol of Malang's indigenous identity, its actual use in everyday conversation continues to decline. *Bahasa Walikan*, which originally served as a secret code of resistance, has now shifted to a means of communication for adapting to and building closeness with local culture. However, this role is beginning to diminish because its current use tends to appear only as specific word fragments in casual conversations.

Overall, *Bahasa Walikan* is facing the threat of extinction because most students no longer use it. Research data indicates that most students prefer to use the national language to communicate in the heterogeneous campus environment. This signifies a linguistic shift driven by the rarity of speaking *Bahasa Walikan*. If no effort is made to revive its use actively, the function of *Bahasa Walikan* as a local cultural identity of Malang will gradually disappear in the future.

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