







Linguistic research on the Orang Asli Languages in peninsular Malaysia

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Abstract

The current paper aims to search and summarise the current literature on the linguistic aspect of the Orang Asli languages in Malaysia. Following the PRISMA Statement (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses), a systematic review was conducted with a particular focus on three main groups of the Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia: (1) Negrito; (2) Senoi; and (3) Aboriginal Malay. Of 158 works found, 58 were excluded (irrelevant); 100 were relevant and included in the review. Works published between 2009 to 2019 were selected and categorised into journal articles (n = 51), books (n = 28), undergraduate/postgraduate theses (n = 8), conference proceedings (n = 8), and chapter in book (n = 5). Of these works, the Negrito is widely discussed (n = 94), followed by the Senoi (n = 90), and then the Aboriginal Malay (n = 76). The sub-areas of these linguistic studies include phonology, morphology, sociolinguistics, syntax, semantics, lexis, and grammar. With regard to language documentation, to date, only ten projects are found dealing with the digital repository of the Orang Asli languages. Further research on linguistics seems warranted for the preservation of these languages.

Keywords: Orang Asli languages; indigenous languages; endangered languages; language preservation; language maintenance

1. Introduction

Nearly 516 languages are on the brink of extinction around the world, including those in the Pacific (210 languages), the Americas (170 languages), Asia (78 languages), Africa (46 languages), and Europe (12 languages) (Eberhard, Simons, & Fennig, 2020). With more than 500 languages across the world being regarded as 'Nearly Extinct' (based on the UNESCO's Language Vitality and Endangerment framework), language preservation seems critical and requires urgent attention from all parties (Lewis & Simons, 2009).

In Malaysia, Omar (2014) estimates that there are well over 100 different languages. Later, Simons and Fennig (2018) claims that the number to be even as high as 136, which is inclusive of the aboriginal indigenous languages. More recently, Eberhard et al. (2020) states that, of the living

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languages in Malaysia, 112 are indigenous and 21 are non-indigenous. Figure 1 shows that, in terms of language vitality, 11 are institutional, 5 are developing, 9 are vigorous, 95 are in trouble, and 13 are dying (Eberhard et al., 2020).

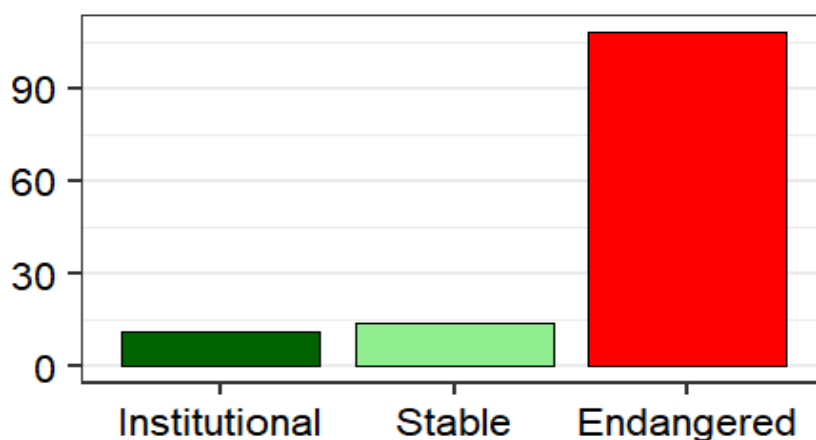


Figure 1. Profile of language vitality for Malaysia (source: Eberhard, Simons, & Fennig, 2020)

Malaysian indigenous languages are categorised into two distinctive groups, namely the Austronesian or Austroasiatic families. The former represents the major language group in Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah, Sarawak, and Labuan (roughly 80 languages). The latter embodies the minority language group in Peninsular Malaysia (approximately 20 languages) and belongs to the Orang Asli community (Omar, 2014).

The Malaysian Department of Development for Orang Asli (JAKOA) classifies the the Orang Asli community (Malay: ‘Original People’ or ‘First People’) in Peninsular Malaysia into three major groups, i.e., Negrito, Senoi, and Aboriginal Malay. Under each separate ethnic group, they are branched out to six indigenous languages, in which altogether, there are 18 Orang Asli languages in Peninsular Malaysia (Simons & Fennig, 2018), as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The classification of the indigenous languages in Peninsular Malaysia (source: Simons & Fennig, 2018)

Classification	Language
Negrito	Kensiu
	Kintak
	Jahai
	Lanoh
	Mendriq
	Bateq
Senoi	Semai
	Temiar
	Jah Hut
	Chewong
	Mah Meri
	Semoq Beri
Aboriginal Malay	Temuan
	Semelai
	Jakun
	Orang Kanaq
	Orang Kuala
	Orang Seletar



Figure 2. Distribution of Orang Asli communities (source: Dentan, Endicott, Gomes, & Hooker, 1997)

JAKOA (2018a) reports that there are more than 170,000 inhabitants of Orang Asli communities in Peninsular Malaysia. Albeit being a tiny fraction - a mere 0.5 percent to be exact - as compared to the 32.38 million overall population of Malaysia (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2019), there are in fact as many as 853 Orang Asli settlements scattered all around Peninsular Malaysia (JAKOA, 2018b). The distribution of language families in Peninsular Malaysia is shown in Figure 2.

Lah (2014) claims that, due to technological modernity, most of Orang Asli communities are exposed to changes that endanger their way of speaking and living. This incongruousness in literature leaves room for uncertainties in this matter and urges the need to look into the current trend of linguistic research with regard to the languages of Orang Asli communities in Malaysia.

Language studies dealing with Orang Asli communities are argued to be limited within Peninsular Malaysia (Hassan, Ghazali, & Omar, 2015). Examining the important language studies will ultimately facilitate in the reporting of the current language maintenance of the Orang Asli languages and spark further discussions revolving the endangerment of such languages. These arguments further attest why preserving indigenous languages matters.

Thus, the current study will be an attempt to gather past linguistic efforts and discussions behind the study of the Orang Asli languages and provide new insights to address the issue of language endangerment. This study will benefit various stakeholders, specifically towards policy makers, linguists, and educators. It is hoped that this study will assist the government in planning appropriate language policy and actions for the indigenous communities in Malaysia. Furthermore, given the demand of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (IR 4.0), development is essential among the Orang Asli population to keep up with current global trends and to raise the awareness of the needs of the indigenous population in Malaysia (Farooqui, 2015; Idrus, 2011). We also hope that the current study will fill the present literature gap by putting forward further linguistic research on the Orang Asli languages.

2. Methodology

We report this systematic literature review based on the procedures set in the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) (Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff & Altman, 2009). We followed closely the nine steps highlighted by the PRISMA checklist, as shown in Figure 3. The steps are as follows:

1. Formulating the objectives of the study
2. Building the framework of the study
3. Forming the standards for selection
4. Creating the strategy to search in the literature
5. Choosing relevant works
6. Writing codes for selected works
7. Examining the attribute of selected works
8. Synthesising the works according to the objectives of the study
9. Reporting findings

In developing the research question, we referred to the research question of the current study: To what extent have the efforts to integrate and preserve endangered indigenous languages in Peninsular Malaysia been undertaken by linguistic scholars?

The basis of the present study revolved around previous linguistic efforts in maintaining the indigenous languages in Malaysia. Hence, the conceptual framework involved past studies on key items such as ‘Orang Asli’ and ‘indigenous language’ limited to the context of Peninsular Malaysia. To be more specific, there were four main criteria used during the selection process:

1. Past work between 2009 to 2019 only
2. Only among the 18 Orang Asli languages listed in the study
3. Materials were either in Malay or English
4. Materials were in all forms (e.g., journal, thesis, book, website)

With regard to the search strategy, we took into consideration the two sets of data available, namely the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) data and the digital repository (DR) data. For the SLR data, the search sources included the World Wide Web/Internet (Google, Google Scholar, Academia.org, Science Direct, Open Access Journals), bibliographic database (Linguistic Bibliography Online [BRILL]), Repository eThesis (EThOS, OpenThesis), handsearching of specialist journals/books (UUM Sultanah Bahiyah Library), and also snowball sampling/chain referral sampling through Reference and Bibliography List. The search strategy and selection of studies are summarised in Table 2.

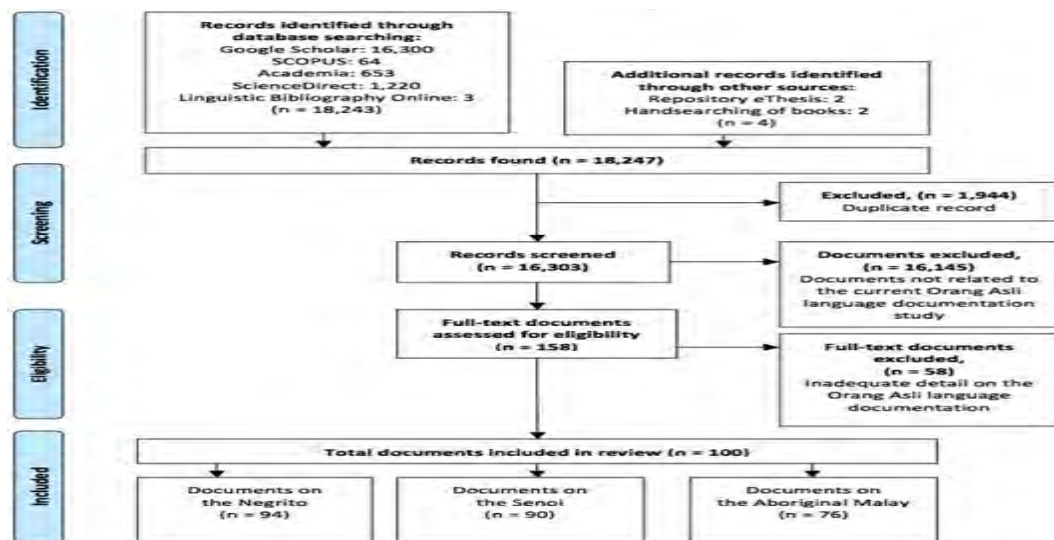


Figure 3. PRISMA Checklist

Table 2. Search strategy and selection of studies

Search Engine	Search String	Count
Google Scholar	Bahasa Orang Asli Malaysia OR Indigenous language Malaysia OR Kensiu OR Kintak OR Jahai OR Lanoh OR Mendriq OR Bateq OR Semai OR Temiar	158
	Bahasa Orang Asli Malaysia	15,500
	Indigenous language Malaysia	38,100
	Bahasa Orang Asli Malaysia AND Indigenous language Malaysia	3,770
	Bahasa Orang Asli Malaysia OR Indigenous language Malaysia	16,300
SCOPUS	Bahasa Orang Asli Malaysia	2
	Indigenous language Malaysia	62
Academia.org	bahasa orang asli Malaysia	638
	Indigenous language Malaysia	653
Science Direct	bahasa orang asli Malaysia	34
	Indigenous language Malaysia	1,220
Linguistic Bibliography Online	Bahasa Orang Asli Malaysia	3 (1 cannot be accessed)
	Indigenous language Malaysia	3 (7 cannot be accessed)
EthOS	Orang Asli Malaysia	1 (6 are below 2009)
	Indigenous language Malaysia	1 (6 are below 2009)
OpenThesis	Bahasa Orang Asli Malaysia	0 (23 are irrelevant)
	Indigenous language Malaysia	0 (899 are irrelevant, below 2009)
Handsearch from Sultanah Bahiyah Library UUM	Bahasa Orang Asli	2 books

As for the DR data, we subscribed the Linguistics Society blog and found the online post via <https://www.linguisticsociety.org/content/finding-archive-your-endangered-language-research>. This search led to discovering DELAMAN, the Digital Endangered Languages and Music Archives Network (www.delaman.org). The links for each archive (members of the DELAMAN network) were fully provided. Thus, we manually went through each archive and filtered to fit the criteria for the current study. The criteria used for the DR data involved any past work on any previous years, only among the 18 Orang Asli languages listed in the current study, and could be either spoken or written data. Out of 15 listed archives, only ten archives were found to be relevant to the present study. Under the ‘Resources’ section of the DELAMAN website (<http://www.delaman.org/resources/>), we came across OLAC, Open Language Archives Community (<http://www.language-archives.org>), and this was also itemised in the list as it possessed relevancy. We noted the fact that the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme (ELDP) was archived and preserved on the digital online Endangered Language Archive (ELAR).

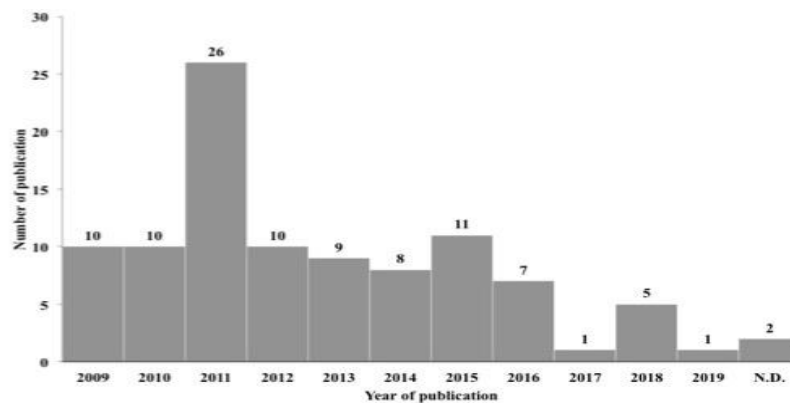
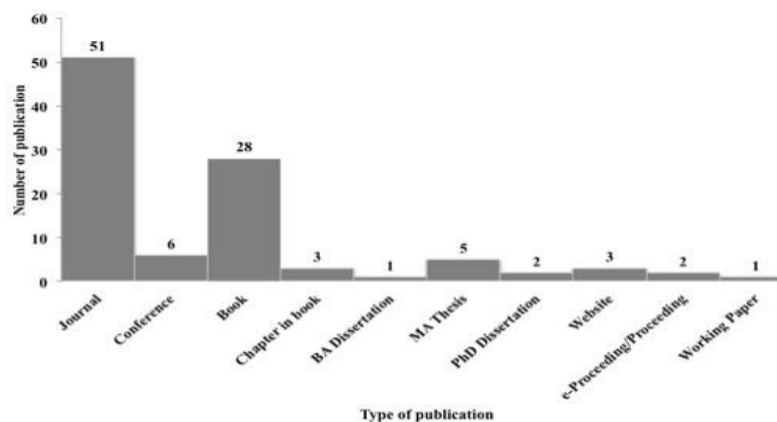
We assigned an acronym for each of the language group, i.e., ‘N’ for the Negrito, ‘S’ for the Senoi, and ‘AM’ for the Aboriginal Malay. The full list of codes for a language under each language group is shown in Table 3. As for the documents selected for review in this study, we assigned a number for easy reference (from 1 to 100). These numbers are shown in Table 4 (in the result section) and also in the reference list (first column).

Table 3. The code of the language

The Negrito (N)	The Senoi (S)	The Aboriginal Malay (AM)
N1. Kensi	S1. Semai	AM1. Temuan
N2. Kintaq	S2. Temiar	AM2. Semelai
N3. Jahai	S3. Jah Hut	AM3. Jakun
N4. Lanoh	S4. Chewong	AM4. Orang Kanaq
N5. Mendriq	S5. Mah Meri	AM5. Orang Kuala
N6. Bateq	S6. Semoq Beri	AM6. Orang Seletar

3. Results

Figures 4 and 5 show the year and type of publication for the selected studies, respectively. As observed in Figure 4 below, there is generally a downward trend in the number of publication, particularly after the year 2011. Out of a sample of 100 studies, 2011 is seen as the year with the most number of publications (26 publications), followed by 2015 at 11 publications, with 2009, 2010, and 2012 sharing the same number of publications (10 publications). 2017 and 2019 were found to have the least number of publications (1 publication only). With regard to the type of publication (see Figure 5), journals contribute the highest number of publication (51 publications), followed by books (28 publications). Undergraduate dissertation and working paper contribute the least number of publications (1 publication each).

**Figure 4.** Year of publication for selected studies**Figure 5.** Publication type

The number of publications according to languages is illustrated in Figure 6 below. Out of the 100 studies, 94 studies are related to the Negrito family (N1-N6), 90 studies are concerned with the Senoi family (S1-S6), while the Aboriginal Malay is described in 76 studies (AM1-AM6). Bateq (N6), from the Negrito family, receives the highest number of coverage (24 studies). As for the Senoi family, Temiar (S2) is mentioned the most (20 studies). With regard to the Aboriginal Malay family, Temuan (AM1) is described the most (15 studies). A detailed evaluation of these studies in connection to the languages reviewed is provided in Table 4.

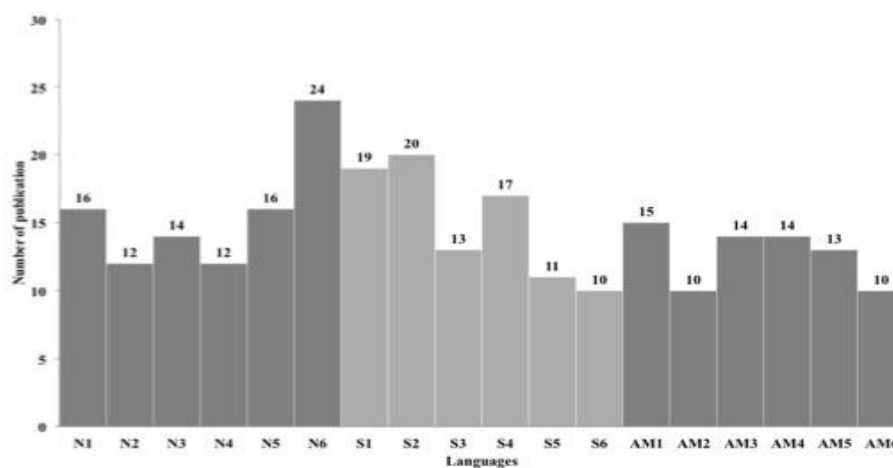


Figure 6. Publication according to languages (the code for each language is shown in Table 3)

Table 4. Evaluation of studies for each language (the code for each language is provided in Table 3, while the references are provided in the Appendix)

Author & Year	THE NEGRITO						THE SENOI						THE ABORIGINAL MALAY						Remarks
	N1	N2	N3	N4	N5	N6	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	AM1	AM2	AM3	AM4	AM5	AM6	
Adam, Yusop, & Makhtar (2018)									✓										
Ahmad, Noor, & Sharif (2011)						✓													
Amiruddin & Othman (2010)		✓				✓		✓	✓				✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Bedford (2009)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Benjamin (2011)																			Orang Asli in general
Benjamin (2012a)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Benjamin (2012b)								✓											
Benjamin (2012c)								✓											
Benjamin (2013)								✓											
Benjamin (2014)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓													
Benjamin (2016a)								✓											
Benjamin (2016b)																			Orang Asli in general
Burenhult (2011)			✓																
Burenhult (2012)			✓																
Burenhult & Majid (2011)			✓																
Choy, Ariffin, & Pereira (2010)													✓						
Coluzzi (2017)											✓								
Dallos (2011)				✓															
Dentan (2011)							✓												
Dunn, Burenhult, Kruspe, Tufvesson, & Becker (2011)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Dunn, Kruspe, & Burenhult (2013)																			Orang Asli in general
Endicott (2011)						✓													
Endicott (2016)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Enfield (2017)																			Orang Asli in general
Fatanah, Omar, & Daim (2012)						✓													
Fix (2011)																			Orang Asli in general
Fui, Haron, Yusop, Baharuddin, Mustapha, Lee, Zaidi, Jamaludin, & Mohtar (2015)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Ghani (2010)							✓												
Ghani (2015a)							✓												
Ghani (2015b)							✓												
Ghani & Lah (2015)	✓																		
Hajek (2010)																			Orang Asli in general
Hamid, Shaïd, Yusop, Maros & Aman (2018)															✓				
Hassan, Ghazali, & Omar (2015)	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓											
Howell (2011)										✓									
Kamal & Lim (2019)															✓				
Kamarudin (2014)								✓											
Karim & Hashim (2012)													✓						
Krishnasamy (2013)																			Orang Asli in general
Kruspe (2009a)										✓									
Kruspe (2009b)										✓									
Kruspe (2010)										✓									
Kruspe (2011)											✓								
Kruspe & Hajek (2009)										✓									
Lah (2014)						✓													
Lim (2010)												✓							
Ma'alip (2014)										✓									
Ma'alip & Seong (2016)										✓									
Majzub & Rais (2011)						✓													
Makhtar, Hamid, Ramli & Zailani (2018)								✓											
Makhtar, Soflee, Yusop & Laengkang (2018)								✓											
Mohamad, Ahmad, & Razali (2016)										✓									
Mokhtar (2011)						✓					✓								
Mustafa (2013)									✓										
Nicholas, Engi, & Ping (2010)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Peterson (2012)	✓																		
Phillips (2011)							✓												
Phillips (2013)							✓												
Phua (2015)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

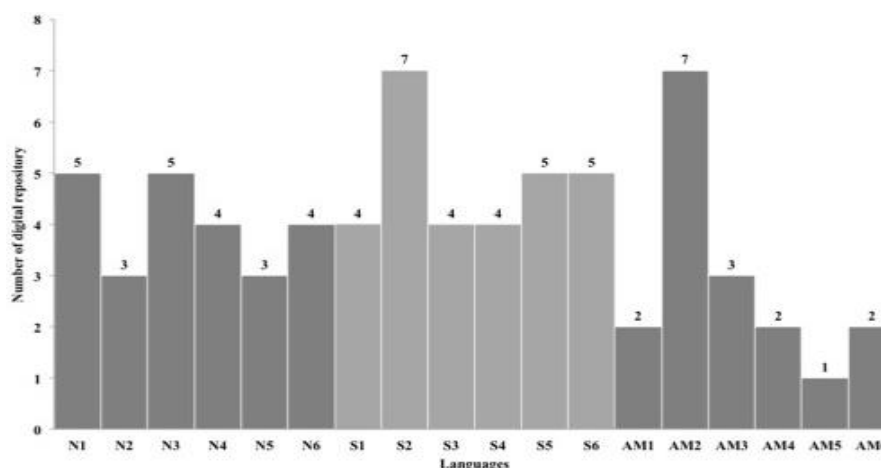


Figure 7. Digital repositories according to languages (the code for each language is provided in Table 3)

In addition, 10 digital repositories were also identified and classified based on the 18 different languages examined in the current study, as shown in Table 5 and illustrated in Figure 7 above. It can be observed in Table 5 that, out of 10 digital repositories, Ethnologue includes all languages in each language group. The other digital repositories that describe more than 10 languages include Open Language Archives Community (14 languages), and the Repository and Workspace for Austroasiatic Intangible Heritage (11 languages). The repositories that describe the least number of languages are SIL International Language and Culture Archives and World Oral Literature Project (1 language each).

Figure 7 above shows that all languages have been described in at least one digital repository. The language group that receives the highest coverage is the Senoi family (S1-S6) (29 times), followed by the Negrito family (N1-N6) (24 times), and then the Aboriginal Malay family (AM1-AM6) (17 times). Temiar (S2) from the Senoi family and Semelai (AM2) from the Aboriginal Malay family receive the highest coverage, i.e., 7 digital repositories each. As for the Negrito family, Kensiu (N1) and Jahai (N3) are described the most, i.e., 5 digital repositories each. The least described language is Orang Kuala (AM5) from the Aboriginal Malay family, i.e., 1 digital repository only.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper, we reported past linguistic studies and efforts in examining the indigenous languages in Malaysia. Our main aim was to assess the current development of linguistic studies in the Malaysian context, specifically the 18 sub-groups of indigenous communities in Malaysia. As mentioned in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Article 13), the indigenous communities are allowed to protect their heritage and tradition, including their languages. With most of the Malaysian indigenous languages currently being recognised as ‘in trouble’ and at risk of endangerment, the present study shall bring more awareness in preserving this national Orang Asli heritage for future studies within indigenous research. Future research should put an emphasis on this aspect so that one could better understand the linguistic outcomes of language endangerment and language loss.

The awareness in the current trends of linguistic research in Orang Asli languages will benefit various stakeholders, specifically towards policy makers, linguists, and educators. Firstly, it is hoped that this study will assist the government in planning appropriate language policy and actions for the indigenous community, particularly in Peninsular Malaysia. Hassan et al. (2015) remarked on the restricted number of studies pertaining to the vitality of indigenous languages in Malaysia, as most are done in Sabah and Sarawak (Ali, 2010; Coluzzi, 2010; Mohamed & Hashim, 2012). Thus, the present

study provides recent understanding on the current trends of the Orang Asli languages by bringing forward a systematic review of recent studies in this particular matter. In turn, researchers may benefit from the meta-analysis and develop relevant works within phonology, pragmatics and sociolinguistics, to name a few.

Based on the meta-analysis data of the Orang Asli linguistic research, the current study may benefit future studies on language vitality scales within the Orang Asli context in Peninsular Malaysia. Future research can focus on language vitality assessment tools, such as the Nine Factors by UNESCO, and the Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS). Following Fishman (2001)'s notion of diglossia and bilingualism under the domain analysis, the current study can also encourage further discussion revolving around the Orang Asli bilingualism. Besides gaining awareness, this study may inspire and provide a spark for more inclusion of indigenous communities within future research on the Orang Asli languages.

On top of the essential boost in the field of linguistics, the current study can also assist educators of the Orang Asli students. As of 2018, JAKOA (2018c) recorded that there are well over 40,124 Orang Asli students within 1,287 schools in Malaysia. Putting the existing digital repositories for the Orang Asli languages in mind can provide some insights for teachers in designing classroom materials for these minority students. Having said that, we believe that our results will generate more experimental works in linguistics, plus ongoing efforts, in order to maintain the Orang Asli languages in the future.

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