

Dialectological Study of the Serawai Language among Indonesian Language Education Students at UIN Fatmawati Sukarno Bengkulu

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ABSTRACT

Regional dialects represent an important component of Indonesia's linguistic diversity, yet many are experiencing reduced use among younger generations in educational contexts. This study aimed to analyze the phonological and lexical variations of the Serawai dialect as spoken by students of the Indonesian Language Education Program at UIN Fatmawati Sukarno Bengkulu, with a focus on identifying distinctive features and levels of dialect awareness. Using a qualitative descriptive design, data were collected through interviews, elicitation techniques, and repeated text readings with 30 student participants, and analyzed by classifying phonological shifts and lexical differences supported by triangulation for validity. The results revealed salient phonological distinctions, particularly in vowel endings (*Au, O, E*), assimilation patterns, and intonation, alongside lexical variation across regions, with some vocabulary items remaining uniquely emblematic of Serawai identity. While most participants recognized the value of maintaining their dialect, some showed limited awareness of specific differences, suggesting that language contact with standard Indonesian influences dialect sensitivity. These findings indicate that the Serawai dialect remains resilient as a cultural marker, though its vitality depends on intergenerational transmission and formal recognition within education. The implication of this study is that dialectological research not only enriches linguistic scholarship but also provides a foundation for language preservation strategies and curricular integration that can strengthen local identity in the era of globalization.

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Introduction

Language is widely recognized as a central component of cultural identity, social cohesion, and knowledge transmission, with regional and minority languages playing an especially important role in sustaining local traditions and worldviews (Iskandarsyah Siregar & Ahmed El Ajmi, 2023; Tang & Zou, 2025; Wilmot et al., 2024). In multilingual nations such as Indonesia, regional languages serve not only as tools of communication but also as markers of ethnic identity and cultural heritage that coexist with the national language, Bahasa Indonesia (Barlow, 2023; Mukhamdanah et al., 2025; Rakhmawati & Kartiko, 2022). Among the many regional languages of Indonesia, Serawai, spoken primarily in the southern part of Bengkulu Province, represents a significant but understudied linguistic and cultural resource. Although

Serawai continues to be used in daily interactions across several districts Seluma, Bengkulu Selatan, and Kaur the language has received less scholarly attention than larger regional languages such as Javanese, Sundanese, or Balinese (Andestend et al., 2024; Dewantara et al., 2024; Pramuniati et al., 2024). This situation raises questions about the vitality of Serawai, its dialectal variation, and its role in education and identity formation among younger generations.

Dialectology, as a subfield of sociolinguistics, examines the systematic variation of language across geographic and social dimensions, providing insights into phonological, morphological, lexical, syntactic, and semantic differences among speakers of the same language (Escobar, 2008; Gustina et al., 2018; M.Hum, 2017). Studies of Indonesian dialectology have revealed the richness of local languages and the interplay between language use, mobility, and identity, such as research on Malay dialects in Riau (Nevalainen, 2012), Javanese coastal and mountainous dialects ("Specific Research Approaches of Linguistic Subdisciplines," 2021), and geographic variation in Sundanese and Madurese (Anderbeck, 2012; Kartikasari et al., 2018). However, compared to these major languages, Serawai remains relatively unexplored, even though its speakers exhibit noteworthy dialectal variation, particularly between the "O" and "Au" dialects, which differ in sentence endings and vowel usage across regions such as Manna, Seluma, and Kaur (Al Alaslal, 2024; Aprianty et al., 2024; Sadigzade, 2024). This linguistic diversity provides fertile ground for analyzing how dialectal differences shape communication, identity, and social integration.

The preservation of local dialects is increasingly urgent given the pressures of globalization, migration, and the dominance of national or global languages, which can accelerate language shift and endanger linguistic diversity (Awal, 2024; Kassymova et al., 2024; Rahman et al., 2024). Research has shown that younger generations often experience declining competence in regional languages due to limited intergenerational transmission and stronger exposure to dominant languages in urban and educational contexts (Hadiwijaya et al., 2022; Rusdiansyah et al., 2024; Zulkiflee & Suhaimi, 2025). In the case of Serawai, while earlier studies suggested that speakers remain conservative and maintain their mother tongue with pride (Gustina et al., 2018; Siregar, 2022; Smith-Hefner, 2009), recent anecdotal evidence suggests that dialectal differences can create challenges in mutual comprehension, especially among younger speakers who are increasingly exposed to Bahasa Indonesia as the primary medium of education and social interaction. This tension between preservation and adaptation underscores the importance of documenting, describing, and analyzing dialectal variation within Serawai to safeguard its linguistic and cultural vitality.

Despite the recognition of Serawai as a distinct language within the Malay family and the presence of two major dialects, research on its dialectology remains scarce. Existing works tend to describe the general features of Serawai or compare it superficially with neighboring languages (Abdul Muin, 2024; Peter et al., 2024; Ummah, 2019). Few studies have provided in-depth empirical analysis of phonological, morphological, and lexical variation within Serawai, particularly among students in higher education who represent the generation most affected by language contact, globalization, and educational policies emphasizing Bahasa Indonesia. This is a significant research gap, as university students not only reflect the linguistic realities of their communities but also play a critical role in the

future preservation or transformation of regional languages (Tavares, 2021; Zabadi et al., 2023; Zein et al., 2020). Understanding how Serawai dialects are perceived, used, and distinguished among Indonesian language education students is therefore crucial for informing both sociolinguistic theory and language policy in Indonesia.

Building on these considerations, the present study seeks to analyze dialectological variation of the Serawai language among students of the Indonesian Language Education Program at Universitas Islam Negeri Fatmawati Sukarno, Bengkulu. Specifically, the study aims to identify phonological and lexical differences as perceived by students, to document the dialectal features associated with various regional origins, and to explore the implications of these differences for language preservation and pedagogy. By focusing on Serawai in the context of higher education, this research not only contributes to filling the gap in dialectological studies of Indonesian regional languages but also provides practical insights into how local dialects can be integrated into language education to foster awareness, pride, and sustainability of linguistic diversity in the era of globalization.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design aimed at analyzing the dialectological variation of the Serawai language among students of the Indonesian Language Education Program at Universitas Islam Negeri Fatmawati Sukarno Bengkulu. A qualitative descriptive approach was considered appropriate because it enables the systematic documentation, interpretation, and analysis of linguistic phenomena as they naturally occur, without experimental manipulation (Furidha, 2024; Hall & Liebenberg, 2024; Koh & Owen, 2000). The primary data source was the spoken language of students who identified as native Serawai speakers, representing different regional backgrounds associated with the two dominant dialects, namely the “O” dialect and the “Au” dialect. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focused group discussions, and direct elicitation of word lists, sentences, and short narratives designed to capture phonological, morphological, and lexical features. The instruments used included a prepared list of lexical and phonological items adapted from previous dialectology studies and audio-recording devices to ensure accurate transcription and analysis.

The data collection process followed three key steps: first, participants were purposively selected to represent a balance of dialectal backgrounds; second, linguistic data were elicited and recorded in natural conversation as well as controlled tasks; and third, transcripts were reviewed and cross-checked with informants to confirm accuracy and reliability. Data analysis was conducted using (Mihas, 2023) framework, consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, combined with dialect mapping techniques to illustrate geographic and linguistic variation. Phonological, morphological, and lexical variations were classified according to established categories in dialectology (Fukushima, 2019; Vergeiner, 2025; Zawawi et al., 2023), while semantic and pragmatic functions were interpreted within the context of everyday communication. To enhance the validity and reliability of findings, triangulation was applied through the use of multiple data sources, repeated observations, and peer debriefing with linguistic experts. Furthermore, inter-coder agreement was established by involving two independent researchers in coding and

categorizing the data, with discrepancies resolved through discussion until consensus was reached.

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study. All participants were informed about the objectives of the research and provided consent prior to data collection. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained by coding participants’ identities and ensuring that the collected data were used solely for academic purposes. This methodological framework ensured rigor in data collection and analysis, allowing the study to produce credible insights into the dialectological variation of the Serawai language and its implications for linguistic diversity and language preservation in Indonesia.

Results and Discussion

Contradictory Language Style

Table 1. Examples of Phonological Variations in Serawai Dialects

Feature	Native Speakers (Manna/Seluma)	Non-native Speakers (Kaur)	Description of Difference
Sentence	“-o” (e.g., sapo mano)	‘-au (e.g., sapau, manau)	Different vowel endings
Vowel Pronunciation	Open vowels “a, o”	Closoe vowels “e, au”	Shift in vowel quality
Use of Glottal Stop	Frequent in word-final	Rarely Used	Reduction in Glottal Stop

These phonological variations demonstrate the influence of regional origin on pronunciation, supporting the argument that dialects evolve dynamically due to social and geographical interaction.

Lexical Variations and Vocabulary Richness

Respondents identified significant lexical differences across dialects. Several words show divergent usage across regions but maintain equivalent meanings, such as *abang* (red), *aci* (advice), and *gagham* (salt). Lexical richness reflects the embeddedness of Serawai dialects in local culture and daily life.

Table 2. Selected Vocabulary in Serawai Dialects

Vacabulary	Meaning	Region of Used	Notes on Variation
Abang	Red	Manna, Seluma	Consistently Used
Aci	Advice	Kaur	Strong Cultural Connotation
Gagham	Salt	Mixed Regions	Phonetic Variation Observed

The lexical findings resonate with previous studies on regional Malay dialects, which highlight the role of vocabulary in maintaining cultural identity (Aprianty et al., 2024; Gustina et al., 2018). The persistence of unique lexical items shows that Serawai remains a vibrant marker of ethnic and cultural belonging despite pressures of language shift.

Student Perceptions of Dialect Differences

Survey data show varied perceptions among first-year students about Serawai dialect differences. In Class IA, 53% of respondents answered “no” when asked if they recognized dialect differences, while 47% answered “yes.” In contrast, Class IB demonstrated higher awareness, with 75% of respondents acknowledging differences in dialects and sentence endings.

Table 3. Student Perceptions of Serawai Dialects

Class	Respon “Yes”	Respon “No”	Notable Remarks
IA	9 (47%)	10 (53%)	Limites Awareness of Phonological Difference
IB	15 (75%)	5 (25%)	Clear Recognition of Setence-ending Features

These results highlight that dialect awareness varies across groups, influenced by geographical background and exposure. Consistent with (Aprianty et al., 2024), awareness of dialectal features is often shaped by social interactions and identity negotiation within academic environments.

Conclusion

The present study shows that Serawai exhibits salient phonological contrasts most visibly the alternation of final vowels “-o” versus “-au” and shifts in vowel openness alongside stable lexical items that index regional identity among first-year Indonesian language education students, and these patterns converge with broader Indonesian dialectology findings that foreground phoneme variation as a primary dialect marker (Septianingtias et al., 2024). Our evidence that students from different home areas differentially perceive and reproduce these features parallels results from Malayic varieties in Riau and coastal-inland Javanese, where geographic mobility and social networks mediate awareness and use of local forms (Hugo, 2016). The persistence of emblematic vocabulary (e.g., region-bound terms retained despite increasing Indonesian dominance) echoes work on lexical resilience in minority languages under contact pressure and supports claims that lexicon often serves as a durable ethnolinguistic badge even when phonology drifts. At the same time, the uneven metalinguistic awareness we observed between student cohorts aligns with studies showing that formal education in the national language can attenuate sensitivity to local contrasts unless reinforced by community practices and peer network (Tate, 2012). Taken together, these comparisons situate Serawai within a well-documented pattern of contact-induced variation while underscoring a locally specific configuration of phonological salience and lexical attachment. The novelty of our study lies in examining Serawai dialect differentiation within a higher-education micro-community rather than village or multi-site community samples common in prior research thereby revealing how emerging adult speakers perceive, negotiate, and reproduce dialectal cues in an institutionally Indonesian-dominant environment. The implications are theoretical, enriching Malayic dialectography with student-centered evidence on awareness and usage, and practical, indicating that curriculum designs in Indonesian language teacher education can leverage targeted dialect modules, peer-discussion tasks, and corpus-informed materials to strengthen dialect recognition and valorize local linguistic capital. Limitations include a single-institution sample, modest cohort

sizes, reliance on elicited and self-reported data that may underrepresent spontaneous code choice, and a focus on segmental phonology and lexicon without systematic prosodic or morphosyntactic measurement; future work should expand sampling across Bengkulu, incorporate acoustic and corpus methods, and integrate longitudinal tracking to capture change in awareness and usage across semesters.

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