



Accent Erosion and the Negotiation of Youth Identity in Coastal West-South Aceh

Cut Faizah¹, Sabrina², Nyak Mutia Ismail³

cutfaizah@serambimekkah.ac.id¹, sabrina@serambimekkah.ac.id²,

nyakmutiaismail@serambimekkah.ac.id³,

Universitas Serambi Mekkah^{1,2,3}

Abstract

This study explores the phenomenon of accent erosion among youth in the coastal region of West-South Aceh (Barsela) and its implications for identity negotiation in a rapidly changing sociolinguistic environment. While Acehnese dialects have long served as markers of local belonging, generational shifts influenced by standardized Indonesian, schooling, migration, and digital media have reshaped patterns of speech. Through qualitative methods involving phonological observation, interviews with different age groups, and perception surveys, this research documents how accent features are fading and how young speakers reinterpret their linguistic choices. Findings suggest that accent erosion does not simply represent loss, but rather a complex negotiation in which youth balance local identity with aspirations for wider intelligibility and social mobility. Older generations often perceive these shifts as threats to cultural continuity, while younger speakers see them as part of adaptation to broader networks. The study highlights the need to approach accent change not only as a linguistic process but also as a cultural and educational challenge. Ultimately, it argues for the importance of innovative strategies—such as digital learning tools and awareness programs—to sustain dialectal diversity while acknowledging the evolving identity of Barsela's younger generation.

Keywords: *accent erosion, Acehnese dialect, identity negotiation, sociolinguistics, youth language*



Introduction

Language and dialect are deeply tied to cultural identity, functioning as markers of belonging and as symbols of social heritage. In Aceh, local dialects have historically reflected not only geographical variations but also the cultural resilience of its people. In recent years, however, the phenomenon of accent erosion—the gradual fading or modification of local phonological features—has emerged as a significant concern, particularly in the coastal West-South region (Barsela). Accent erosion is not merely a matter of sound change; it reflects broader sociolinguistic shifts shaped by education, media, mobility, and intergenerational dynamics. Recent studies emphasize that dialectal shifts are a global trend in multilingual communities. In Indonesia, local dialects often face pressures from standardized Indonesian promoted in formal education and public discourse (Siregar, 2022). These pressures can reduce the visibility of regional accents, especially among younger generations who are more exposed to media and mobility. A 2023 study on dialect leveling in Sulawesi highlighted how school-based language policies contribute to the decline of local accents by encouraging standard speech forms, which are often considered more prestigious. Similar findings have been observed in Aceh, where young speakers increasingly adopt Indonesian phonological patterns, consciously or unconsciously, to gain wider intelligibility and social acceptance (Idham & Yusuf, 2023).

The issue of accent erosion cannot be separated from identity negotiation. For older generations, the local accent carries symbolic weight: it represents tradition, kinship, and cultural pride. For younger speakers, however, accent variation can sometimes be perceived as a social burden. Research on accent perception demonstrates that accent features often influence how speakers are evaluated in educational and professional contexts (Nassaji, 2024). When local accents are linked with stereotypes of being “provincial” or “less modern,” young people may intentionally shift their pronunciation to align with standardized forms. This phenomenon has also been documented in studies of accent anxiety, which show that linguistic insecurity plays a role in how learners present themselves in both local and global contexts (Lee, 2025). In Barsela, preliminary observations show evidence of phonological features fading among younger speakers. Variations in vowel quality, intonation, and consonant articulation are increasingly leveled with Indonesian norms. While some of these changes occur naturally through contact and adaptation, they also signal a generational gap in cultural transmission. Younger speakers often position themselves in between two linguistic demands: preserving a sense of local belonging through dialect, while simultaneously pursuing mobility and broader networks through standardized forms. This negotiation of identity makes accent erosion a complex process, extending beyond linguistics to touch upon cultural continuity and social dynamics.

The rise of digital media accelerates these changes. Platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram expose youth to diverse linguistic inputs, from Indonesian slang to global English, which further influence how they perceive and practice speech. Studies in 2022 and 2024 highlight how digital environments both threaten and preserve local accents. On one hand, online spaces create pressure for standardized, widely intelligible

language. On the other hand, digital tools also provide opportunities for documentation and revitalization of dialects if they are strategically integrated into content creation and education (Rahmawati, 2024; Syahputri, 2025). Against this backdrop, examining accent erosion in Barsela is both timely and urgent. The study aims to document specific phonological changes and to analyze the sociolinguistic factors driving them, with particular attention to intergenerational perspectives. Interviews with elders reveal concern about cultural loss, while youth often describe their choices in terms of adaptation and modernity. Understanding these perspectives allows researchers to situate accent erosion within a broader cultural negotiation rather than a simplistic narrative of decline.

The significance of this research extends into practical domains. Findings are expected to inform language education, cultural preservation initiatives, and technological innovations. One planned application is the development of a digital learning platform for Acehnese dialects that incorporates phonological variation across regions. Such an application would include listening and imitation exercises, examples of pronunciation from multiple dialects, and accessible explanations of phonetic differences. By appealing to younger generations through interactive digital design, the tool could serve both educational and informal contexts. More importantly, it could help strengthen awareness of linguistic diversity and cultural identity in Barsela. Shortly, accent erosion in Barsela represents a layered phenomenon that intertwines phonological change, social attitudes, identity negotiation, and digital influence. Research conducted between 2022 and 2025 consistently points to the need for multi-dimensional approaches in addressing dialectal decline. Rather than framing accent erosion solely as a loss, it can be understood as a site of negotiation where cultural continuity and adaptation intersect. This introduction sets the stage for examining how Barsela youth navigate these complexities and how such insights can be leveraged to design innovative strategies for preserving local linguistic heritage while engaging with the demands of a rapidly globalizing society.

Literature Review

Research on accent change and dialect erosion has gained increased attention in recent sociolinguistic studies, particularly in multilingual contexts where local languages interact with standardized or global codes. Scholars generally agree that language variation reflects not only phonological systems but also wider cultural, social, and political dynamics (Labov, 2022). In the case of Indonesia, where Bahasa Indonesia functions as the national lingua franca, dialect leveling is an ongoing process that influences the vitality of local accents and their symbolic role in identity formation.

Several studies conducted in the Indonesian context highlight the pressures faced by local dialects. Siregar (2022) reported that school-based policies emphasizing the use of standardized Indonesian inadvertently contribute to dialect loss, as students internalize the idea that their local accent is inappropriate in formal settings. Idham and Yusuf (2023) observed similar patterns in Aceh, where younger speakers increasingly adopt Indonesian phonological features in both formal and informal domains. This shift

suggests that educational institutions act as significant agents of language change, often prioritizing prestige and intelligibility over cultural preservation. Beyond Indonesia, comparative studies confirm that accent erosion is part of broader sociolinguistic phenomena. Nassaji (2024) argued that accent perception is strongly linked to identity and social evaluation; non-standard accents are often stigmatized, leading speakers to adjust their pronunciation for upward mobility. Studies on accent anxiety have further illuminated the psychological dimensions of this process. Lee (2025) developed the Accent Anxiety Scale to measure how individuals feel pressure to modify or hide their accent, showing that such anxiety affects learners' confidence, identity, and communicative choices. These findings resonate with observations in Barsela, where younger speakers report both awareness and ambivalence about their shifting accents.

The role of media and digital technology has also emerged as a critical factor in language change. Research across Asia indicates that exposure to digital media accelerates language homogenization, as speakers are constantly immersed in standardized linguistic models (Rahmawati, 2024). However, digital platforms can also serve as tools for preservation. Syahputri (2025) documented how Acehnese youth use social media and digital archives to showcase dialectal expressions, thereby creating new spaces for cultural continuity. These dual functions of digital media—eroding on one hand and revitalizing on the other—highlight the importance of integrating technological innovation into dialect preservation strategies. From a theoretical standpoint, the concept of language ideology provides a useful lens for understanding accent erosion. Language ideology refers to the socially constructed beliefs about language forms and their users (Woolard, 2022). In many contexts, standardized accents are ideologically positioned as symbols of modernity and prestige, while local accents are associated with rurality or tradition. Such ideologies are internalized by younger generations, who then shift their phonological practices accordingly. This ideological dimension explains why accent erosion cannot be seen purely as a linguistic phenomenon but must also be examined in terms of identity negotiation and social positioning. The literature thus underscores three main insights relevant to the Barsela case. First, accent erosion is often linked to institutional and societal pressures, particularly from education and national language policy. Second, the phenomenon involves both sociolinguistic and psychological dimensions, as speakers navigate stigmas, anxieties, and aspirations. Third, digital media plays a contradictory but crucial role in shaping outcomes, offering both challenges and opportunities for preservation. These insights provide a foundation for the present study, which aims to situate Barsela accent erosion within this global body of scholarship while also highlighting its unique sociocultural context.

Method

A complete This study adopted a qualitative approach with a descriptive and interpretive orientation, since the phenomenon of accent erosion cannot be fully understood only through phonological description but must also be analyzed in relation to social meaning and identity. To strengthen the findings, a small amount of quantitative support was included in the form of a perception survey. This combination allowed the research to merge phonological analysis with ethnographic exploration, resulting in a more comprehensive picture of the issue. The research was conducted in three locations along



the West-South Aceh coast: Meulaboh, Calang, and Aceh Barat Daya. These sites were selected because they represent different sociolinguistic contexts, ranging from more urbanized centers to semi-urban areas where exposure to standardized Indonesian is relatively high. The diversity of these sites ensured that the study could capture variations in speech practices across different communities, both in formal and informal domains, and provide a clearer view of how phonological changes emerge in everyday interactions.

Participants were recruited purposively to reflect generational perspectives. The younger generation, aged 15 to 25 and consisting of high school and university students, was expected to display the strongest signs of accent erosion. The middle generation, aged 26 to 45, including teachers, professionals, and community members, represented a group negotiating between older and newer forms of speech. The older generation, aged 46 and above, included traditional speakers whose Barsela accent is relatively stable. Sixty participants were involved in total, evenly distributed across the three generations and balanced by gender. All participants gave informed consent for recording and interviews, and anonymity was carefully maintained. Data were collected through three complementary techniques. Speech recordings were made using word lists and sentence prompts designed to elicit key phonological features such as vowel quality, consonant articulation, and intonation. Spontaneous conversations were also recorded to capture more natural variations in speech. Semi-structured interviews were then conducted to explore participants' attitudes and reflections on their accent, including feelings of pride, stigma, and adaptation in different social environments. A short perception survey was distributed to one hundred additional respondents to gather wider community views on prestige, stigma, and identity linked to the Barsela accent. Field notes accompanied all data collection to record contextual and non-verbal cues.

Analysis proceeded in two stages. Phonological recordings were transcribed into the International Phonetic Alphabet, focusing on identifying shifts in vowels, consonants, intonation, and rhythm. Cross-generational comparison enabled the identification of features undergoing erosion. Interview transcripts were analyzed thematically and coded into categories such as identity, stigma, adaptation, and cultural continuity. Analytical software supported the coding process, and survey results were described in terms of percentages and trends to confirm qualitative findings. Validity was enhanced through triangulation across recordings, interviews, and surveys. Member checking was used by presenting preliminary findings to selected participants for confirmation, while external linguists provided feedback to ensure analytical rigor. These measures reinforced the credibility and reliability of the study.

Ethical standards were carefully upheld. Participants were fully informed of the study's aims and their rights, including the option to withdraw at any stage. Parental consent was obtained for participants under eighteen. Pseudonyms were used to preserve anonymity, and sensitive issues such as stigma or feelings of inferiority were approached with care. Approval for the study was granted by the ethics committee of Universitas Serambi Mekkah in early 2025. While the study was carefully designed, limitations remain. Findings cannot be generalized to all regions of Aceh, as the research focused only on Meulaboh, Calang, and Aceh Barat Daya. Furthermore, detailed acoustic analysis was limited by the available technology. Nevertheless, the combination of

phonological, interview, and survey data provides a sufficiently rich and holistic account of accent erosion in these areas. The chosen methodology ensures that the research does more than document sound changes. It situates accent erosion within broader social and cultural dynamics, highlighting how speakers—especially younger ones—negotiate their identities amid changing linguistic norms. This methodological foundation also sets the stage for applied outcomes, including the planned development of a digital learning application for Acehese dialect preservation, which will serve both educational and cultural purposes.

Findings and Discussion

Includes the data collected in Meulaboh, Calang, and Aceh Barat Daya revealed a layered picture of accent erosion that extends beyond mere phonological shifts. The analysis of recordings, interviews, and surveys showed that younger speakers exhibit clear signs of reducing distinct phonological markers associated with the Barsela accent. At the same time, older speakers maintain features that younger generations no longer reproduce consistently. This generational contrast is central to understanding how accent erosion functions both as a linguistic and a cultural phenomenon.

From the phonological perspective, the recordings identified several patterns of change. Younger speakers displayed a tendency to neutralize vowel contrasts that remain prominent in the speech of older speakers. For example, certain diphthongs traditionally pronounced with distinct glide movements in the Barsela accent were realized more closely to standardized Indonesian monophthongs. Intonation patterns also shifted, with younger participants often adopting flatter contours in spontaneous speech, aligning with Indonesian rather than the more melodic rise-and-fall observed in the older generation. Consonant articulation showed similar trends, as some younger speakers reduced the emphatic quality of plosive consonants, a feature historically noted in Barsela speech. While these changes do not eliminate intelligibility, they dilute the distinctiveness of the local accent. The thematic analysis of interviews confirmed that these linguistic changes cannot be separated from perceptions and identity negotiations. Older participants consistently described their speech as a marker of pride and belonging. They expressed concern that younger people were “forgetting where they came from” by adopting speech patterns that sounded less Acehese and more generic. In Calang, for instance, several elders noted that children who spend more time at school and on social media rarely reproduce the accent features of their parents. In contrast, younger speakers often downplayed the significance of accent change, framing it as a natural adjustment. A student in Meulaboh explained that “speaking more like Indonesian makes it easier to be understood outside our village,” suggesting that intelligibility and social mobility outweigh cultural attachment in their linguistic choices.

Survey results provided quantitative support for these perspectives. More than 70 percent of respondents under the age of 25 agreed that speaking with a strong local accent can create impressions of being “less modern” or “less educated,” whereas only 15 percent of respondents above 45 shared this view. In Aceh Barat Daya, respondents in the middle generation expressed mixed attitudes. Many acknowledged the importance of maintaining local identity but admitted they often modified their speech when interacting in professional or educational settings. This ambivalence reflects the

transitional position of the middle generation, caught between the cultural pride of elders and the pragmatic adaptation of youth. The findings also highlight the influence of schooling and digital media. Education plays a dual role: while schools teach Acehese history and culture, the primary medium of instruction remains standardized Indonesian. Students in Meulaboh noted that teachers often correct their pronunciation if it deviates from the standard, unintentionally reinforcing the idea that local accents are inappropriate in formal contexts. This dynamic confirms earlier literature suggesting that schools act as agents of language leveling (Idham & Yusuf, 2023). On the other hand, digital media platforms accelerate the shift by exposing young speakers to standardized Indonesian and even global English. In Calang, high school students reported imitating speech patterns from influencers on TikTok and YouTube, consciously shaping their accents to align with what they perceive as prestigious or “cool.”

At the same time, the data suggest that digital media also holds potential as a tool for preservation. A small but significant number of younger participants in Aceh Barat Daya mentioned that they enjoy watching short videos featuring local Acehese content creators who use dialectal expressions for humor or storytelling. These examples indicate that when local accents are framed as entertaining or creative, youth can be receptive to them. This dual role of digital media—as both an agent of erosion and a platform for revitalization—echoes findings from Rahmawati (2024) and Syahputri (2025), underscoring the importance of strategic digital engagement in language preservation. The social meanings attached to accent erosion were particularly evident in how participants discussed identity. Older speakers interpreted accent change as cultural loss, often connecting it to broader anxieties about modernization and globalization. One elder in Calang remarked, “If our children do not speak like us, what will remain of our story?” Such concerns reveal how accent is tied to a sense of continuity and heritage. In contrast, younger speakers articulated identity more fluidly, seeing themselves as both Acehese and part of a wider Indonesian or global community. For them, accent modification represents agency and adaptability rather than betrayal of tradition. This divergence illustrates the negotiation of identity across generations, consistent with theories of language ideology that show how beliefs about speech are tied to notions of power, prestige, and belonging (Woolard, 2022).

These findings contribute to the broader debate on accent erosion by showing that it is not a uniform process of loss but a contested space of meaning. The erosion of phonological features is accompanied by shifts in attitudes and ideologies, which in turn shape how changes are interpreted and enacted. The Barsela case demonstrates that younger generations are not simply abandoning their accent; they are actively recalibrating their linguistic practices to balance intelligibility, mobility, and identity. While this may appear as erosion from one perspective, it can also be seen as adaptation and negotiation in a rapidly changing sociolinguistic environment. The discussion also points to practical implications. If local accents are to be preserved, they must be reimagined in ways that resonate with youth. The proposed development of a digital learning application is therefore timely. By offering features such as listening exercises, accent imitation practice, and accessible explanations of phonetic variation, the application could transform accent awareness into an engaging activity rather than a source of stigma. Importantly, it could bridge the generational divide: younger speakers could learn to appreciate the richness of Barsela phonology, while older speakers could

see their voices documented and valued. This approach aligns with recent scholarship calling for technological innovation in language revitalization (Nassaji, 2024; Lee, 2025).

In a nutshell, the study of accent erosion in Meulaboh, Calang, and Aceh Barat Daya illustrates the intertwined nature of linguistic, social, and cultural dynamics. Accent change is not only a technical matter of vowels and consonants but also a reflection of how communities navigate identity, prestige, and belonging. The generational contrasts uncovered in this study emphasize the need for nuanced strategies that honor cultural continuity while recognizing the realities of adaptation. The challenge is not to halt change, which is inevitable, but to ensure that local voices remain audible in new forms. In this way, accent erosion can be reframed as an opportunity for negotiation, innovation, and preservation, rather than simply as a symptom of loss.

Conclusion

This study examined the phenomenon of accent erosion in Meulaboh, Calang, and Aceh Barat Daya, revealing that changes in local speech patterns are not only linguistic but also deeply social and cultural. The findings show clear generational contrasts: older speakers continue to preserve traditional phonological features, while younger speakers increasingly adopt standardized Indonesian forms, often motivated by intelligibility, mobility, and prestige. These shifts reflect a broader negotiation of identity, in which accent becomes a marker of both belonging and adaptation. The study also demonstrated that education and digital media act as powerful forces shaping accent use. Schools reinforce standardized norms, while online platforms simultaneously accelerate homogenization and create new opportunities for revitalization. This duality suggests that preservation efforts must strategically engage with the very spaces where change occurs.

Rather than viewing accent erosion solely as cultural loss, it can be understood as a site of negotiation, where younger generations recalibrate their linguistic practices in response to social pressures and opportunities. For this reason, innovative responses are needed. The proposed development of a digital learning application for Acehese dialects represents one such pathway, combining documentation, pedagogy, and cultural pride to ensure that Barsela's voices remain both relevant and valued.

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