A SOCIOLINGUISTIC INVESTIGATION OF ACEHNENE WITH
A FOCUS ON WEST ACEHNENE: A STIGMATISED DIALECT

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Thesis submitted in total fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Linguistics
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University of Adelaide
December 2014
And of His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the diversity of your languages and your colors. Indeed in that are signs for those of knowledge.  

Q.S. Ar-Rum (The Romans) 30, ayah 22
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ABSTRACT

This study investigates differences between two Acehnese dialects, the high status North Acehnese and the stigmatised West Acehnese, and explores the social interpretations of these differences. The linguistic subsystems that differentiate the two dialects are analysed and attitudes of Northern and Western Acehnese speakers towards the dialects are investigated. To obtain primary data from native speakers, intensive fieldwork in The Province of Aceh was carried out. An Acehnese wordlist from Daud & Durie’s (1999) *Kamus basa Aceh = Kamus bahasa Aceh = Acehnese-Indonesian-English thesaurus*, which is mainly based on North Acehnese, was used to elicit a comparative wordlist in West Acehnese. Three different methods were used in the data collection: participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and the matched guise test. The data from the questionnaire of the matched guise test was analysed statistically in order to determine the significance of the results.

There are salient differences between North and West Aceh dialects regarding several key phonological features and lexical items. It is also found that Acehnese has a more complex vowel system in comparison to Bahasa Indonesia. Although the Acehnese vowel system includes all the vowels of Bahasa Indonesia, North and West Acehnese exhibit different vowel correspondences in Indonesian loanwords and in some cases replace Indonesian vowels with the vowel /ɯ/, which is unusual amongst the world’s languages.

Some differences characterise North Acehnese as a ‘refined,’ ‘standard,’ and ‘prestigious’ Acehnese variety and West Acehnese as a ‘rough,’ ‘vulgar’, and stigmatised variety. However, these characterisations need careful discussion in this context. Due to the negative opinion towards their dialect, West Acehnese speakers accommodate their language style to North Acehnese when they communicate with people of non-West Acehnese background. However, the strong negative judgement that the majority of Acehnese people express towards West Acehnese in interviews and observations is not clearly reflected in the results of the matched guise test. The disconnect between attitudes to language and attitudes to people, and the array of different attitudes to different aspects of the language, is most pronounced in this case and has been the subject of repeated testing and further investigation.

In conclusion, this thesis demonstrates that within Aceh, dialect differentiation and linguistic stigmatisation are primarily based on lexical semantics, whilst
phonology plays a role, but morphology and syntax are unimportant. Some distinctive features of West Acehnese, that are perceived by the speakers of North Acehnese, are salient and others less salient, even to the point that people may not even notice the differences. Certain distinctions may suggest that the speakers of West Acehnese are confused, some may lead to mild amusement, whilst others signify West Acehnese speakers as having a speech impediment. Most importantly, however, it is shown that the stigmatisation of West Acehnese is based on a mere handful of different lexemes, which invite the negative attitudes of North Acehnese speakers that this dialect is rude and impolite, and its speakers are regarded as ‘crude’, ‘rough’, and unintellectual. The results show that North Acehnese is a more prestigious dialect than West Acehnese. I speculate that power is the reason for North Acehnese having a higher position than West Acehnese in the Acehnese linguistic stratification: in general, Acehnese speakers in North Aceh hold more social, political and economic power than Acehnese speakers in West Aceh.
DECLARATION

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

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Signed: ___________________________ Date: 8 December 2014
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Praise and thanks be to the Creator of the heaven and the earth. Greeting and salutation also go to the masterpiece, Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him), his family and companions.

I would like to express my deep appreciation to the Directorate General of Higher Education, the Indonesian Ministry of National Education, for the scholarship so that this study was possible. I also thank the Discipline of Linguistics for financial assistance for my fieldwork trips and conference/workshop attendance.

I would like to extend my sincere appreciation and thanks to my principal supervisor Dr Rob Amery and my co-supervisor Dr Ian Green who have willingly devoted much of their time to give me invaluable and ongoing advice and direction with ideas, preparation and writing. Their insightful comments on earlier drafts have been really appreciated. They have been supportive and patient. With all the difficulties I have experienced they were always there to give me help. Dr Rob Amery supported me financially to attend the 2010 InField in Oregon. My thanks to Professor Andy Butcher for his help and discussion in helping me solve problems on the complex Acehnese vowel system.

My sincere thanks go to the people in Nagan Raya and Bireuen in Aceh who helped make this project possible, especially Ayahwa Utuh Ma’in, Ngoh Din and his wife, Ayahwa Nyakna, Mak in Bireuen, Bang Asra, Mus, Pak Wildan, Bang Din and Pak Mukhlis for their time during the fieldwork. I also acknowledge the staff members of the Language Centre of Syiah Kuala University in Banda Aceh,
particularly Drs. Syamsul Bahri Ys, M.A, Faisal Mustafa, M.A., Mahlil, Tanzir Masykar and TM. Ridha Al-Awwal. They supported me until my research was completed.

I want to thank all my colleagues in the Discipline of Linguistics at the University of Adelaide, particularly Dr Petter Næssan and Dr Joshua Nash, who motivated me to finish this project and their kind help in reading my first draft chapters. They were also always available for continued discussion and insightful suggestions, especially during the final stage of completion. Professor Peter Mühlhäusler, Professor Ghil’ad Zuckermann, Dr Peter Mickan and Dr John Walsh have also been helpful and supportive in informal discussions. I would like to thank my colleagues in Room 915 Napier Building, including Clara Stockigt, Hesham Alyousef, Abdul Alhaidari, Kateryna Katsman, Jasmin Morley, and Meng Sun, for their kindness and support throughout my candidature. My thanks also to Dr Diane Brown for copy editing the thesis, according to the Australian Standards for Editing Practice (2013).

Finally, I would like to give a special note of acknowledgment and thanks to my beloved parents Abdul Aziz Hasan and Hazirah, brothers (Azhar Aziz, Miaazzi, and Azmir Jauhari) and sisters (Nurahmah and Azmainizar) particularly my lovely wife, Lili Trianawati and our children Alifah Putri Fadliawati, Adelia Putri Zuliana and Faiz Putra Fadliant for their patience, love, support and motivation.