

# Language and De-/Escalation of Conflict in Aceh, Indonesia

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This article examines the role of language in the de-/escalation of the Aceh conflict. Our analysis is situated at the crossroads of the literature on language and conflict and the literature on the micro-dynamics of violent conflict and everyday peacebuilding. We suggest that language, as a fundamental element of social engagement, although often overlooked in peace and conflict studies, plays a pivotal role in intensifying and alleviating conflicts. Through a case study of the conflict in Aceh, this article asks how power relations, discrimination, and violence are played out through language in the context of micro-level everyday realities. The analysis draws on interviews and focus group discussions conducted from 2014 to 2020 with a broad spectrum of stakeholders, including village heads, religious and cultural leaders, businesspeople, civilians, and former combatants. We employ vignettes to illustrate the various ways in which language has been used for conflict de-/escalation in the conflict in Aceh. Our analysis identifies several mechanisms through which language contributes to de-/escalate conflict.

**Keywords:** Aceh; Conflict; De-/Escalation; Everyday Peacebuilding; Language



## INTRODUCTION

Violent conflict has long been perceived primarily through a sociological lens, emphasizing the social practices that embody conflict management and peacebuilding, alongside the origins of conflicts (Azca, 2006; Pamuji et al., 2008). In this context, a substantial body of literature has investigated the link between conflict and language, encompassing aspects such as everyday linguistic practices, language within media landscapes, the interplay of nationalism and linguistic contestation in conflict zones, and the issues surrounding national identity (Csergo, 2007; Huang, 2000; Suleiman, 2004; Trijono, 2002). Furthermore, more pragmatic research avenues have delved into language's role in the mechanisms of conflict resolution, underlining the participation of social actors in conflicts with the aim of fostering resolutions and preventing future discord (Udasmoro &

Kunz, 2021; Udasmoro & Rahmawati, 2023; van Tongeren, 2023). Scholarly work has also analyzed the ways in which linguistic representations contribute to constructing social and political realities with strong implications for conflicts (Chiluwa, 2024).

Yet, less has been written in scholarly research regarding the mechanisms through which language acts as a catalyst for conflict escalation and de-escalation, in particular at the micro-level in the context of the everyday lives of civilians. While there is a growing literature on the micro-dynamics of violent conflict and everyday peacebuilding (Randazzo, 2016; Rigual, 2018; Rigual et al., 2022), the role of language has not received much attention in this literature. This article is situated at the crossroads of the literature on language and conflict, and the literature on the micro-dynamics of violent conflict and everyday peacebuilding. We suggest that language, as a fundamental element of social engagement, plays a pivotal role in intensifying and alleviating conflicts.

This article investigates the particular role language has played in de-/escalating conflict in Aceh. Through this case study of the conflict in Aceh, we show how power relations, discrimination, and violence are played out through language in the context of micro-level everyday realities. Our analysis identifies several mechanisms through which language contributes to de-/escalate conflict. The findings reveal firsthand accounts of how linguistic factors have played a critical role in escalating or de-escalating tensions. This exploration into the linguistic dynamics at play in the conflict of Aceh offers insights into the complex interplay between language and conflict.

The next section presents our methodology followed by a concise overview of the broader linguistic landscape in Indonesia. It is followed by a section that provides the background on the conflict context in Aceh. Thus, we introduce the conceptual framework that we draw upon in section six to investigate language as a social practice in the micro-level realities of conflict de-/escalation in the Aceh context. In the conclusion, we reflect on the broader implications of our findings in terms of the ways in which our analysis challenges the binary understanding of conflict escalation and de-escalation and suggests a more nuanced conceptualization of the fluidity and interconnected character of de-/escalation to understand the complex role of language in conflict settings.

## METHODOLOGY

This study is part of a larger collaborative research project entitled *The Gender Dimensions of Social Conflict, Armed Violence & Peacebuilding*, which focused on the dynamics of conflict de/escalation in different regions of Indonesia and Nigeria at the micro-level.<sup>1</sup> The research was conducted between 2014 and 2020 and involved a team of researchers from Indonesia, Nigeria, and Switzerland. In the context of Indonesia, the province examined was Aceh, with a specific focus on conflict dynamics and peacebuilding efforts. Several areas were selected as case studies, including Pidie Jaya, Banda Aceh, Aceh Besar, East Aceh, and Bireun.

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1 For more information regarding the research activities and outputs see the project website: <https://www.graduateinstitute.ch/research-centres/gender-centre/gender-dimensions-social-conflicts-armed-violence-and-peacebuilding>

For this article, the sub-district of Idi Rayeuk in East Aceh was chosen as the focal point, as it was one of the most severely affected areas during the Aceh conflict and experienced some of the highest levels of conflict escalation. This area was also considered a stronghold of the Free Aceh Movement (*Gerakan Aceh Merdeka*, GAM) – the guerrilla movement that fought a war of independence against the Indonesian State – and featured the second highest concentration of GAM members after North Aceh. For instance, in a key incident, GAM reportedly took control of this region from the Indonesian military for approximately 14 hours (Tempo, 2003). The high concentration of GAM members in Idi Rayeuk prompted the Indonesian military to impose stricter security measures, leading to frequent armed clashes between the Indonesian National Armed Forces (*Tentara Nasional Indonesia*, TNI) and GAM in several villages. The local communities selected for this study all experienced high-intensity conflict. As a result, the inhabitants in these communities developed an in-depth understanding of the complex ways in which language is linked to the de/escalation of conflict and mobilized various strategies to draw on language to contribute to de-escalating conflict situations.

In this article, we draw on an overall dataset of 112 semi-structured, in-depth interviews and twelve focus group discussions with civilians.<sup>2</sup> From this dataset, we selected four villages where we found particularly interesting insights into the role of language in conflict de-/escalation. In these villages, a total of 26 interviews and five focus group discussions with 15-20 participants each were conducted. Interview respondents and focus group participants were selected in a way that guarantee a wide array of perspectives and experiences. Thus, respondents represent various segments of society, including religious leaders (*teungku*), village heads (*geuchik*), customary leaders (*imeum mukim*), youth leaders, former GAM combatants, business owners, and civilians. The village heads, community leaders, and GAM representatives were contacted for individual interviews. Local peace activists provided us with relevant contacts of youth leaders and businesspeople. For the interviews and focus group discussions with civilians, we used a snowballing technique. We made sure to sample respondents in a way that guarantee a diversity of population groups in terms of gender, age, etc.

For our analysis, we draw on vignettes as a methodological tool to examine the critical role of language in conflict de-/escalation. Vignettes are defined as concise narratives depicting individuals or situations, presented in either textual or visual form, that illustrate representative scenarios (Barter & Renold, 1999). This method allows to extract, to concentrate, and to analyze narratives derived from in-depth interviews and it enables the illustration of typical scenarios in which language plays various roles in the processes of conflict de-/escalation. Common themes observed across interviews were connected to identify overarching themes for further analysis. In the analysis, we paid particular attention to word choice, phrasing, and rewording which provided us with crucial insights not only into the content of events but also the language use of informants to convey these events.

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<sup>2</sup> We would like to thank our respondents for taking the time to speak with us. We use pseudonyms to refer to all respondents to guarantee anonymity. The names of the villages have been anonymized as well. We would also like to thank the local researchers who helped us conduct the interviews and our research assistants, Tabrani Yunis and Raihal Fajri, for their support during our fieldwork in Aceh.

## INDONESIA'S LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE

Indonesia, a nation encompassing over 17,000 islands and a multitude of ethnicities, boasts a rich linguistic tapestry. While *bahasa* Indonesia serves as the unifying national language, over 700 local languages persist across the archipelago. The selection of *bahasa* Indonesia, rooted in Malay, as the national language during the 1928 Youth Pledge marked a pivotal moment in Indonesian identity politics (Cribb & Kahin, 2004, p. 38). This act, as outlined in the Youth Pledge itself, aimed to transcend ethnic divisions and foster a unified Indonesian identity. The Dutch colonial power, established in the seventeenth century, had actively sought to maintain these divisions through a divide-and-rule strategy. Thus, the embrace of a shared national language served as a powerful counterpoint to this colonial legacy, emphasizing unity over difference.

Required in public spheres, including education and governmental sectors, Indonesian has experienced substantial grammatical developments, evolving into a constructed language that markedly diverges from its Malay roots (Sularto, 1986, p. 27). Despite its widespread use as a *lingua franca*, Indonesian exhibits significant regional variation in its spoken form. This phenomenon stems from the influence of local languages and dialects, leading to a prevalent code-mixing between Indonesian and these vernacular varieties (Udasmoro et al., 2023, p. 60). Sociolinguistic factors further contribute to this variation. Social class and educational background influence language use, with higher strata demonstrating a distinct register compared to their lower-class counterparts. Similarly, urban and rural populations exhibit differences in their Indonesian proficiency, with younger generations generally possessing greater fluency due to formal education. Literacy also plays a role, with older, less-educated individuals often encountering difficulties in speaking Indonesian fluently. Regional adaptations are particularly noticeable in areas beyond Java, such as Aceh, where residents have integrated Indonesian into their existing linguistic repertoire. Notably, certain demographics, such as the elderly in Aceh, may not speak Indonesian at all.

The Indonesian language is not characterized by gender distinctions in its grammar, semantics, syntax, or morphology, except for a limited number of words borrowed from Arabic or Sanskrit that incorporate gender forms. This study does not dwell on these exceptions. Instead, it concentrates on the ways in which social actors, both male and female, utilize language in manners that can either escalate or de-escalate conflict. Accordingly, the focus is placed on the varied application of language by these actors within the context of conflict dynamics.

Indonesia's rich linguistic landscape can pose challenges in conflict resolution. The multifaceted nature of Indonesian, with its regional variations and interplay with local languages, can lead to misunderstandings (Istianah & Suhandano, 2022). These misunderstandings can escalate tensions, particularly when actors manipulate language to exacerbate existing divides. Conversely, language can also serve as a tool for de-escalation and peacebuilding efforts. The complexities of this interplay are evident in analyzing past conflicts within Indonesia, such as in Aceh.

## THE CONFLICT IN ACEH

The conflict in Aceh has a long and complex historical trajectory. What started as a secessionist conflict later became a vertical conflict between the Indonesian military and the Aceh Free Movement (Siapno, 2013). Conflict and violence have occurred continuously in Aceh under the various regimes in control of the Indonesian archipelago, from the Dutch colonial forces (before Indonesian independence in 1945) to the so-called Old Order under President Sukarno (1945–1966) and through President Suharto's New Order (1967–1998) and the Reform period (from 1998 until the 2004 tsunami and subsequent Helsinki Accord 2005) (Shaw, 2008). Shortly after Indonesian independence, the politics of Aceh had been dominated by calls for its independence from the Unitary Republic of Indonesia, demands that led to repeated armed insurrections. Since the 1970s, the independence movement led by Hasan di Tiro became the basis for the formation of the Free Aceh Movement, which waged an armed struggle against the central government from 1976 until 2005 (Zuhri, 2015). The GAM also involved women combatants, called *Inong Balee* (Kunz et al., 2018; Rahmawati, 2019; Schulze, 2006).<sup>3</sup> In the political arrangement that ended the conflict, the province remains part of Indonesia with wide-ranging political autonomy and a political scene largely dominated by former GAM members.

Acehnese demands for independence first from the Netherlands and then Indonesia were fueled by a range of issues, including the historical legacies of the Sultanate of Aceh and subsequent wars of independence, socio-economic grievances, political differences, and perceived differences in the understanding of Islam in Aceh and the rest of Indonesia (Reid, 2004; Schulze, 2003; Shaw, 2008). The latter point was highlighted in our interviews with a former GAM member (Interview with SB, March 2016) and echoes the findings of Hastings (1997), Schulze (2003), and Siegel (2000) who highlight the role of an Acehnese understanding of local practices of Islam as different and more 'pure' than 'Javanese' practices in Acehnese nationalist discourses.<sup>5</sup> Historically, certain segments of Acehnese society, particularly among the political elite, differentiate themselves from other regions of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (*Negara Kesatuan Republik Indonesia*, NKRI). This differentiation is often linked to their Islamic affiliation, earning Aceh the epithet *Serambi Mekah* (the Verandah of Mecca), which reinforces a sense of uniqueness when compared with other provinces in Indonesia. Additionally, the fact that Aceh ranks among the five poorest regions in Indonesia has fueled aspirations for independence from NKRI (Setyadi, 2022).

Language politics have played a crucial role throughout the years of conflict in Aceh. The Acehnese population, prioritizing their distinct Acehnese identity, often eschewed the Indonesian language, which they did not regard as their own, choosing to speak Acehnese instead. In addition, many Acehnese, especially the adults, did not speak Indonesian because they did not go to school. Economic disadvantage and widespread poverty were key factors shaping access to school education and are partly responsible for the low literacy rate in the Indonesian language in Aceh, especially among the older generation (Dinas Perpustakaan dan Kearsipan Aceh, 2021).

3 The number of *Inong Balee* troops recorded until 2005 was as many as 2000 to 2500 women, composed of young women and widows, carrying out military training and living in the forest and mountains (Rahmawati, 2019).

## LANGUAGE IN CONFLICT: CONCEPTUAL ELEMENTS

Within the context of social practices, language can be understood as operating in two fundamental ways: firstly, as a substitutive tool that depicts or reflects social realities, and secondly, as an interactive, constitutive element of social interaction (Mottier, 2008, p. 184). We follow the latter perspective, to conceptualize language as transcending its role as a mere communicative device or *lingua franca*, embodying a social practice integral to the construction of identity (Fairclough, 2001). Thereby, language is both constitutive and constituted, shaping and being shaped by social realities (Bourdieu, 1991).

In order to analyze the role of language as a social practice in conflict dynamics we draw on Mottier's framework that identifies three key dimensions of language: its capacity to forge meanings; its role in constructing identities and demarcating identity boundaries through naming and labeling; and its potential to reproduce, challenge, or transform power relations (Mottier, 2008, p. 192). The examination of language's influence on power relations underscores its dual significance: it reveals how language can contribute to reproducing conflictual power relations and escalation of conflict, while simultaneously harboring the possibility to challenge or transform these relations, and to support de-escalation efforts. Collectively, these aspects are linked to the production and reproduction of meanings, identity construction, and power relations, thereby affecting the processes of conflict escalation and de-escalation.

In the context of Indonesia, various examples illustrate the constitutive role of language and its potential to shape meaning, identities, and power relations. In the case of Aceh, conflict narratives have been used to transmit narratives of conflict across generations. For example, conflict narratives have entered not only the realm of literature, such as in the *Hikayat Prang Sabi* (An Epic Tale of Holy War), but have also been woven into the fabric of everyday life, for example through lullabies (Hardiansyah, 2010). The *Hikayat*, with its language of violence and calls for revenge framed as a religious duty, contributes to the normalization and justification of conflict within Acehnese society. Notably, the phrase *prang sabi* (holy war) itself may have originated with the male author of the *Hikayat*. However, through seemingly innocuous lullabies, conflict narratives are reproduced and transmitted across generations. This process of cultural transmission has a significant impact (Rizki, 2019).

Language also plays a crucial role in constructing the social reality of conflict. A single word can sometimes suffice to ignite conflict, as demonstrated in a poignant incident within the Indonesian landscape. A case in point involves Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, popularly known as Ahok, the former Governor of Jakarta, whose remarks during a 2016 gubernatorial campaign event sparked significant unrest between Islamic and nationalist factions. Ahok, a Christian of Chinese heritage, referenced a Quranic chapter in a manner that was perceived by Muslim groups as blasphemous: he cautioned against being misled by religious leaders using a verse in al-Maidah (*Al-Quran*, n.d., Chapter 5:51). This statement catalyzed both legal and societal upheaval due to dividing interpretations along communal lines. The Islamic Defenders Front (*Front Pembela Islam*, FPI), a hardline Islamic group, construed Ahok's words as casting doubt on the integrity of the content of the Quran itself, as if he were saying that people should not be deceived by al-Maidah. Conversely,



supporters of Ahok interpreted his statement as a warning against the manipulation of the text for deceitful purposes, that people should not be deceived *using* al-Maidah. This controversy led to a profound societal rift lasting at least six months, even dividing Muslim communities into factions supporting and opposing Ahok. Spearheaded by the FPI, a series of protests ensued, culminating in the mobilization of millions demanding Ahok's prosecution. The episode concluded with Ahok's conviction and a two-year prison sentence, underscoring the potent impact of language in precipitating conflict and societal division (Wangge & Wijanarko, 2023).

In Indonesia, language has also been used as a tool for manipulation and domination among different groups. A prime example is the sectarian conflict in Ambon, Maluku (1999-2002), which pitted (Christian and Muslim) indigenous populations against (predominantly Muslim) immigrants (Bertrand, 2004; Schulze, 2017). Although based on a long and complex history of conflict on the island, the violence was triggered by a fight between two young people, a Christian man from Mardika and a Muslim man from Batu Merah, a neighbourhood of Ambon City (Azca, 2006). During this conflict, the use of inflammatory language served as a flashpoint for violence (Schofield, 2010). According to reports, in this inflammatory context, the mere act of yelling "A mosque has been razed!" (*masjid dihancurkan*) by a Muslim person could trigger attacks on Christian communities, and vice versa, demonstrating how language can be strategically deployed to incite violence and escalate intergroup conflict.

Yet, in the context of the conflict in Ambon, language was also used strategically in multiple ways to de-escalate tensions and build peace. The impact of conflict triggered by linguistic choices has instilled a heightened sense of vigilance among the Ambonese regarding their language usage. Concerns that even slight misuses could lead to an escalation of tensions have led to a deliberate and cautious approach in communication. For example, a local youth group deliberately chose *baku bae* (meaning "to make peace") as their name. This choice was strategic, as they rejected the Indonesian terms "*damai*" or "*perdamaian*" – both of which also signify peace – yet, in the Ambonese context, these terms carried connotations of surrender, potentially hindering the peacebuilding message of the group. The phrase *baku bae* while conveying the same meaning, resonated more with the local understanding of peace as a mutually beneficial compromise. This demonstrates the significance of language selection in peacebuilding, as it allows for culturally and contextually appropriate messaging that can bridge divides between parties with differing experiences.

The strategy of employing language conscientiously to de-escalate conflict was also embraced by young local journalists during that period. They observed that the intensifying conflict in Ambon was often aggravated by the language choices in newspaper coverage, in particular reports originating from Java and international media, which lacked direct experience of the conflict in Ambon. Such media outlets frequently opted for sensationalist journalism, utilizing provocative headlines and language to captivate readers, thereby contributing to the tension. In response to this concern, young journalists in Ambon devised a strategy to mitigate the impact of external newspapers. They pursued more balanced sources of news, occasionally extracting and photocopying articles that portrayed positive stories, which they then disseminated without charge to a range of recipients within Ambon, for example in a journal called *Kanjoli* under the title *Provokasi Damai* (Provoking Peace). This

approach was labeled as peace journalism, contributing to de-escalate tensions and promoting peace (Interview with E, Ambon journalist, 17 September 2016). As these examples illustrate, language works to forge meanings and identities and contributes to reproducing or challenging power relations. Thereby, it plays a crucial role in de-/escalating conflict. The next section analyzes how language contributed to de-/escalate conflict in the context of the conflict in Aceh.

### **LANGUAGE AND CONFLICT DE-/ESCALATION IN ACEH**

During the conflict, Acehnese civilians found themselves caught between two armed groups: the Indonesian military and the Free Aceh Movement. In their interactions with civilians, both parties frequently resorted to violence over seemingly trivial matters, such as when civilians did not respond to their questions or when civilian responses to questions did not align with the expectations of the armed actors. Even when providing answers, the honesty of civilians was frequently doubted and they were often blamed regardless of how they answered questions posed by either side. This predicament placed civilians in an impossible position, forcing them to carefully consider their use of language.

The clash of languages added an additional linguistic complexity in this particular context. The communities where we carried out our research all share a common experience of village residents facing aggression from soldiers for failing to respond to inquiries in Indonesian. This created instances of misunderstandings that sometimes contributed to the escalation of conflict and resulted in violence. This violence was largely attributed to the disconnection between the soldiers, who communicated in formal and standard Indonesian, and the local residents, who employed a mix of local Acehnese language and Indonesian language, either out of choice or because they did not speak Indonesian. In this conflict, language emerged as a critical factor in de-/escalation and the deployment of language was intricately tied to the politics of identity.

Drawing on examples from our field research in Aceh, we explore key mechanisms through which language contributed to de-/escalate conflict in this setting. Language plays a crucial role in constructing both the self and the other within a political context. The sense of otherness fostered through language use can be a significant driver of conflict escalation. The gendered use of language may also serve people to position themselves within the conflict, shaping their identities as linguistic subjects. Ambiguity or misinterpretations in communication can exacerbate tensions. Studying conflict dynamics in Aceh reveals how seemingly innocuous statements can be misconstrued, leading to violence. Selective use and manipulation of terminology can also contribute to de-/escalate conflict. Finally, we also analyze the ways in which silence is linked to the de-/escalation of conflict.

#### **Miscommunication**

Miscommunication is frequently cited as a factor in triggering violence during the Aceh conflict (Siapno, 2013). Almost all informants we interviewed highlighted that their lack of proficiency in Indonesian frequently led to violent encounters with military aggression. The Acehnese population, particularly the older generation, often



struggled with the Indonesian language due to limited educational opportunities and a long history of secessionist sentiment. Following the deployment of the Indonesian military by the New Order government to quell the separatist movement, this language barrier proved problematic. After the military's arrival, checkpoints were established to control movement and to identify potential members of the GAM. GAM fighters retreated to their mountain strongholds, leaving behind primarily women, children, and older men in the villages. These older men, lacking fluency in Indonesian, were particularly vulnerable to violence at checkpoints, risking victimization due to miscommunication during questioning by Indonesian soldiers.

One checkpoint incident, recounted by a woman from a village in the sub-district of Idi Rayeuk, exemplifies the tragic consequences of such miscommunication. Her husband, a fisherman unable to comprehend the soldiers' questions, fell victim to brutal violence. She told us:

“At the time, my husband was hurt as he was beaten by the Indonesian military. In Kuala Laut Idi, there was fighting, and the houses were burned. My husband had just come back from the sea and he was bringing back the fish. At the checkpoint, he was examined. My husband couldn't speak Indonesian, he was confused and didn't understand the soldiers. They asked in Indonesian: ‘What is this?’ He answered in Acehnese: ‘*Eungkot*’ (fish). They replied: ‘How can fish bleed like this?’ You know, the big fish were forced into a basket. Yes, there was water there, and blood. There was a razor in there and a sewing needle and a thread. The Indonesian military said that these were tools for slitting the throats of soldiers. They said: ‘This is to bind the soldiers’. My husband replied: ‘No, *Pak*, I'm just returning from the sea.’ But the Indonesian soldiers didn't believe him. It got to the point that my husband was told to take off his clothes, and they poured out half of the 15-kilogram basket of fish onto the street. A week after being beaten, my husband was stressed. He was brought to *Bang Min*'s home (the house of brother Min), and then they healed him.” (Interview with R, a village woman, Idi Rayeuk, 16 September 2016).

The story of this Acehnese man, unable to speak Indonesian and targeted and humiliated by the military, shows how language functioned as a tool of power during the Aceh conflict. This aligns with Fairclough's argument that language use can be an exertion of power (Fairclough, 2001). In this context, the Indonesian military's awareness of the Acehnese language barrier seemingly led to the use of violence. While Indonesian and Acehnese are distinct languages, they share a Malay root, facilitating some mutual understanding. Therefore, a complete lack of comprehension of the Acehnese language by the soldiers is unlikely. Fairclough suggests this phenomenon might be attributed to the “embodiment” of power within language use (Morley, 2004, p. 20). This concept highlights the ways in which social context and power dynamics influence communication. In this specific conflict zone, the hierarchical relationship between the authoritative Indonesian soldiers and the Acehnese men lacking Indonesian fluency created the conditions for the abuse of power.

Another instance of linguistic misunderstanding occurred during an operation by Indonesian troops to track down GAM members and became a popular example, often recounted with irony by the Acehnese, to highlight the absurdities of conflict

situations. We learned about this story during our interview with TY, a peacebuilding activist in Aceh. As the narrative goes, GAM members, in their flight, passed a security checkpoint where several local men were present. Following the passage of the GAM members, an Indonesian soldier approached the local men for interrogation. One soldier asked: “How many people passed by?” and one of the men replied: “*Tak kubilang*”. This reply pushed the soldier to assault the man. This assault was provoked by a linguistic misunderstanding. In the formal Indonesian language used by the soldier, “*Tak kubilang*” was interpreted as “I won’t tell you.” However, in the Acehnese dialect, the same phrase means “I didn’t count” (Interview with TY, activist, 20 September 2019).

This incident raises questions beyond mere linguistic miscommunication. It raises the question of whether the event represented a genuine misunderstanding or if it was a manifestation of the power dynamics between the dominant (the Indonesian soldier) and the subordinate (the Acehnese civilian), or both. Language is inherently contextual, and even when identical words or phrases carry different meanings, speakers usually discern their meanings based on context. This case of the Indonesian phrase *tak kubilang* exemplifies this phenomenon. For clarity, in Indonesian, to express the intention of withholding information, the phrase *takkan kubilang* (*takkan* being the contracted form of *tak akan* meaning ‘will not’) would be more precise. Thus, if the soldier had wanted to understand and encourage a successful communication, the misunderstanding could have been clarified. Yet, in a context of conflict, mutual suspicion and enmity between the communication partners, language can be used to escalate conflict.

Such incidents render visible the complex history of language politics in the context of Aceh, which included among other dimensions the imposition of the Indonesian language. In this context, the use of Acehnese is understood as an act of resistance, even if not always necessarily intended by the speaker. Thereby, language serves as a mechanism for exerting control. In both examples, the issue at hand was not necessarily the Acehnese individuals’ proficiency in Indonesian per se, but rather the opportunity their perceived linguistic shortcomings presented for the soldiers to justify acts of violence. The limited ability of the Acehnese civilians to communicate in Indonesian was exploited by the military as a pretext to legitimize violent actions, situated in broader structures of domination in the context of this conflict.

### Lexical Choices

The selection of terminology, as a facet of group identity, played a significant role in the escalation of conflict and violence. Wulan et al. (2006, p. 137) highlight the significant role of terminology in escalating violence during the Aceh conflict. A prominent example is term *cuak* (spy) which served as a potent label of identification, denouncing civilians as traitors collaborating with the Indonesian military or GAM. In 1976, GAM leader Muhammad Hasan Tiro on Mount Halimun reportedly accused slain GAM members of being *cuak* who had leaked information to the Indonesian military. Similarly, following the revocation of the Military Operation Zone in 1998, many victims labeled *Orang Tak Dikenal* (Unknown People) were reportedly targeted and killed based on accusations of being *cuak*.

In our research, this was also relevant. Interviews with Acehese respondents, particularly civilians, revealed a pervasive fear of being labeled *cuak*, with men being targeted more frequently. Some recounted instances of family members killed by unknown individuals after being branded *cuak*. Such an incident was mentioned in an interview with a fisherman in one of the villages in the sub district of Idi Rayeuk. He told us:

B When I got married, there was someone from Seunebok Baroh who came to my wedding. He was accused of being a *cuak* by GAM. I said, “No, he’s not a *cuak*. Look, is this not a cell phone number from the soldiers, and the police? I’ve got a lot of phone numbers too. Look at this. These are the phone numbers of the commanders, they are my friends... I didn’t have any connection at all, not with them (soldiers) there.” I was in the middle, I told them.

Interviewer How did the story go, *Pak*? Was one of your friends accused of being a *cuak*?

B Yes, he worked as crab seller buying crabs in Seunubok Pangou and selling them by going from village to village. Sometimes when he passed, the soldiers would come to the village on their operations and talk to people. One hour later, GAM passed through, because they knew that the soldiers had come into the village.

Interviewer So, they considered him a *cuak*?

B Yes. He was caught there by GAM. I told them to let him go.” (Interviewed with B, fisherman, Idi Rayeuk, 5 May 2016)

The label *cuak* could be weaponized beyond genuine suspicion of collaboration. Interviews revealed instances where accusations were deliberately leveled at disliked individuals. Personal animosity could motivate such accusations, potentially leading to deadly consequences. For example, a villager might falsely accuse a neighbor of being a *cuak* out of spite, potentially leading to the accused’s death at the hands of unknown actors (Tiwon, 2000). The following testimony from a village head in Idi Rayeuk, interviewed in May 2016, exemplifies this phenomenon:

“Maybe their mothers were killed by the military, or their fathers were kidnapped. In Aceh there were many *cuak*. So, if there was a post (checkpoint) here, and I was angry with someone, I could go to the post and say ‘*Pak*, he’s helping GAM. Last night he hid a GAM member. Last night he gave cigarettes to GAM.’ The person would be dead. Taken. It didn’t just happen once, but it happened often. In my village, in 1990, there was a corpse. After we looked into it, we found out ‘Oh, he was from Perlak. He was a crab merchant’. Because he had a debt to someone, that person reported him to the soldiers and said that he was involved with GAM. The person was taken, shot in the head, missing from his village only to end up here.” (Interview with J, village leader, Idi Rayeuk, 10 May 2016)

The label *cuak* not only fueled conflict but also instilled immense fear among Acehnese civilians. Caught between the warring factions of the GAM and the TNI, civilians faced the constant threat of being labeled *cuak* by either side. This designation often resulted in violence. Paradoxically, civilians were more likely to be targeted with such accusations than actual combatants. This is certainly linked to the fact that many civilians come from lower-class groups with limited education and proficiency in the Indonesian language, and without access to weapons and affiliations with power structures. This illustrates the ways in which language creates meaning and identities, shaping power relations and conflict dynamics with very severe implications for the everyday lives of civilians.

### Silence and code-switching

Caught between two armed groups during the conflict, Acehnese civilians were forced to carefully consider their language use and whether to speak or keep silent. Different strategies and approaches were adopted, depending on whether they were dealing with the Indonesian military or GAM. *Silence is golden* became a common strategy for Acehnese civilians when interacting with the TNI. Speaking minimally and answering questions concisely and factually was another method of self-protection. One civilian explained that they would only respond based on what they had personally witnessed because they understood that many questions served merely as tests; the military often already knew the answers. He explained:

“To protect ourselves from the TNI, we just surrendered. To protect ourselves, the key was not to talk too much. We only spoke based on facts. For example, if GAM [members] passed through and we were asked about it, we’d answer, ‘Yes, they did pass through.’ If we said they didn’t pass through, we’d get beaten because they already knew GAM [members] had passed.” (Interview with M, a small entrepreneur, Idi Rayeuk, 25 July 2015)

A similar experience was shared by a female shop owner. Cautious speech became vital when answering questions from soldiers. She reported that if she withheld information, she feared that she would be blamed. To protect herself, she feigned ignorance, repeatedly using the phrase ‘no idea’ (*tidak tahu*) as a defensive tactic — a form of safe language aimed at de-escalation. In one particular incident, a village post had been burnt and the Indonesian soldiers were inquiring about the perpetrators, asking her for information:

“Yes, if we didn’t report it, we’d be blamed for not reporting it. But after reporting it, if they asked us who burned it, we’d answer that we didn’t know. We’d always say, ‘If we knew, we would’ve told you.’ The important thing was we reported that the post in our village had been burned. If they asked who burned it, we’d simply say we didn’t know.” (Interview with a female entrepreneur, Idi Rayeuk, 19 July 2015)

Meanwhile, in relation to GAM, the group emphasized the importance of civilians speaking truthfully about their observations. GAM strongly advocated for

transparency and accuracy in civilian accounts, as their primary concern was the presence of military forces in their territories. In conflict situations, GAM often found itself pursued by the military, prompting them to retreat to mountainous areas while occasionally descending into local communities. To maintain their strategic security, GAM urged civilians to refrain from withholding information, as such actions were perceived as highly dangerous and potentially escalating tensions or triggering armed confrontations. A man who owned a shop in Idi Rayeuk shared his experience:

“GAM told us not to hide anything. They’d say, ‘If you see soldiers passing, just say so’ If we told them the truth, like ‘Yes, soldiers passed’, they would stay alert. If we said ‘No one passed’, they wouldn’t be cautious, and this often led to clashes. That’s why they’d get angry with us. So, we just told the truth. If they asked if the soldiers carried heavy weapons, we’d tell them the truth if they did.” (Interview with M, a small entrepreneur, Idi Rayeuk, 25 July 2015)

Acehnese citizens also told us how they carefully selected their words during interrogations by the Indonesian military about the whereabouts of GAM operations, aiming to avoid aggression or endangerment. For example, M, a woman from a village in Ida Rayeuk told us:

M                    Aye, they came by and interrogated me. We used to have a house over there, a *ruko* (shophouse). We sold things there; we used to sell coffee. When there was a *combing* [operation], they asked where [the GAM members] went and who [the individuals] were. Question after question.

Interviewer      What was your reply then, *Ibu*?

M                    I replied that I didn't know: ‘No idea, no idea!’ (*tidak tahu, tidak tahu*) That was it! We tried to play it safe.” (Interview with M, a village woman, Idi Rayeuk, 26 May 2016)

In this context, subordinate language, particularly the use of the phrase *tidak tahu* was strategically employed as a means of signaling surrender to avoid provoking the Indonesian military, which appeared to focus on identifying faults within the Acehnese community.

Interestingly, in this context, gender dynamics also play a key role in the use of language to de-/escalate conflict. Our respondents explained that when a woman used the phrase ‘no idea’ in response to inquiries, it did not arouse suspicion by the armed actors. Conversely, an Acehnese man providing the same answer (either in Indonesian or in Acehnese) was often perceived as concealing information, regardless of whether the questioning came from the Indonesian military or GAM. This was motivated by the fact that men were generally disproportionately targeted and held accountable by both armed actors in Aceh’s tense environment. Women on the other hand were generally viewed as posing lesser threats<sup>4</sup> and were perceived as more

4 Although women were considered as posing lesser threats, during the conflict, women also joined GAM, including as combatants (Rahmawati, 2019).

likely to avoid violence. Several women respondents explained how they used language strategically to adopt a subordinate stance in order to avoid escalating conflict. Women thus strategically mobilized gendered social expectations regarding language use in order to protect themselves, diffuse tensions, and de-escalate conflict.

Another linguistic strategy employed to de-escalate conflict and prevent violence by either the military or GAM involved adapting language to suit the interlocutor. Code-switching served as a crucial strategy to de-escalate tensions and avoid confrontations that could escalate into armed clashes between the two parties. This approach is exemplified in an account of an incident shared by a *tengku* (religious leader) that occurred during an interaction with a battalion commander. Recognizing that the commander was from Sulawesi — a region in Indonesia where people are generally perceived as straightforward and less likely to take offense at direct communication — the *tengku* used to convey his observations in a candid manner, including discussions about the atrocities committed by both the Indonesian military and GAM. This approach is further elaborated in *tengku* IA's account:

“We had to assess individuals. If someone acted in a certain way, we adjusted how we spoke to them so they'd listen. At one point came a battalion commander named *pak* AM, likely of Sulawesi origin. We were talking about the brutality of GAM. During that discussion, if I stopped talking, they might suspect us of being political with the TNI. So, I kept talking and even added more to the stories, discussing the brutalities of both GAM and the TNI. Some of my friends turned pale as I spoke about these things, but I stayed calm. I thought, if I stopped, I'd definitely get beaten because they'd think I was withholding information. They'd ask about what we had just talked about. *pak* AM seemed like an intelligent man. His response was very serious. He was so happy to receive the information I shared that he even gave me Rp 20,000.” (Interview with *tengku* IA, a religious leader, Idi Rayeuk, 25 July 2015)

In this account, *tengku* IA demonstrated no fear in speaking openly about the violent acts committed by both sides, while his companions grew fearful of the battalion commander's reaction. Whereas in other situations, silence would be the most suitable strategy, in this case, silence carried more risk than speaking candidly. Moreover, the courage and confidence of a *tengku* are partly derived from their crucial role within Acehnese society as a religious authority. Religious leaders are highly respected not only within the Acehnese community but also across Indonesia, including among TNI members stationed in Aceh.

From the above analysis, it is evident that language (both as spoken words and as and silence) served as a crucial tool for Acehnese civilians to protect themselves in everyday life from potential acts of violence perpetrated by both the military and GAM. The use of precise and cautious language became an essential skill among civilians, rooted in their understanding that both parties relied heavily on extracting information through them. Aware of the tactics employed by both the military and GAM in their search for intelligence, civilians strategically employed various linguistic approaches. These included deliberate silence, truth-telling, minimizing speech, feigning ignorance (for example through repetition), or, conversely, speaking candidly to avoid raising suspicion of withholding information or lying. The



instrumental use of feigned ignorance can also be seen as a form of subtle resistance—by strategically withholding information, civilians can avoid compliance with factional demands while minimizing the risk of violent reprisal. This delicate balancing act requires simultaneously projecting deference to authority, as any perceived linguistic transgression could mark civilians as targets for violence. Through their sophisticated deployment of linguistic strategies, these individuals utilize subtle yet effective communicative practices to navigate and defuse potentially volatile situations. Thus, language can also be used to de-escalate tension and to create space for constructive communication instead of using provocative rhetoric, making it a crucial tool in the prevention of violence and conflict.

### CONCLUSION

During the conflict in Aceh, civilians found themselves caught between two armed groups – the Indonesian military and the Free Aceh Movement – capable of deploying violence at any moment and frequently over seemingly trivial matters. In this context, language played a double role through various mechanisms: in some situations, it contributed to an escalation of the conflict through miscommunication, in others, civilians were able to use language to de-escalate conflict drawing strategically on lexical choices, silence, and code-switching. Our analysis illustrates the complex ways in which language interacts with conflict in the context of Aceh. More broadly, our analysis shows that the use of language shapes the micro-level everyday dynamics of conflict, playing a significant role in de-/escalating conflicts. Recognizing the critical importance of language is a key component in efforts to manage conflict and to support and foster everyday forms of peacebuilding.

Much of the existing literature on the conflict in Aceh has analyzed conflict de-/escalation through the lens of the primary belligerents (Tiwon, 2000; Schulze, 2006; Siapno, 2013; Zuhri, 2015). This article contributed to the study of the Aceh conflict by shifting the focus from the study of major actors at the macro level (Shaw, 2008; Zuhri, 2015; Rahmawati, 2019) to examining the everyday micro-level processes of conflict de-/escalation linked to language. Thereby, our analysis illustrates several linguistic survival mechanisms employed by civilians at the grassroots level navigating daily life in Indonesia's longest-running conflict zone. In an environment where conventional moral frameworks offer minimal protection, civilians must constantly modulate their communication approaches based on careful psychological assessment of their interlocutors when engaging with GAM and TNI forces. Importantly, our analysis challenged the prevalent characterization of Acehnese civilians as passive victims (Tiwon, 2000; Hardiansyah, 2010; Zuhri, 2015), revealing instead their agency as active participants in conflict mitigation. We illustrated the complex ways in which civilians in conflict zones actively and strategically employed their linguistic capabilities as tools to avoid provocations and de-escalate conflict, both individually and collectively.

Studies examining language in conflict situations have investigated extensively how language functions as a mechanism for expressing speaker identity (Huang, 2000; Suleiman, 2004; Csergo, 2007). Thereby, language serves as an instrument for positioning both the self and the other, and has the potential to contribute to conflict

escalation. Research has additionally emphasized power dynamics as fundamental to language use in conflict situations, particularly how language operates as a means of power assertion during periods of violence and conflict (van Tongeren, 2023; Chilwa, 2024). This article contributed to this literature by examining language's multiple roles as an instrument of control and power, and as a factor in quotidian conflict dynamics. Our analysis showed that processes of conflict de-/escalation are intimately connected to how individuals at the grassroots level—spanning diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, genders, and age groups—engage with and develop linguistic strategies for survival in contexts of conflict and violence.

Our analysis highlighted the ways in which intersectional dynamics are linked to language and conflict. As the vignettes demonstrated, dynamics of gender intersecting with social class and age particularly affected elderly men from lower social strata lacking cultural capital, such as proficiency in the Indonesian language. This made them especially vulnerable to language-related violence by authorities and armed groups. Conversely, in certain contexts, the social perception of women as a lesser threat allowed them to use language strategically to diffuse tensions and avoid conflict. Further research is needed to explore in more detail how these intersectional dynamics shape the ways in which language is connected to conflict.

Beyond the scope of our analysis, our vignettes challenged the binary understanding of conflict escalation and de-escalation and suggested that a more nuanced conceptualization of the fluidity and interconnected character of de-/escalation is more helpful to understand the complex role of language in conflict settings. Anecdotal evidence from our research in Aceh suggested that in certain situations, individuals may decide to, or feel they have to, make concessions or endure forms of non-physical violence, such as submission or humiliation, to de-escalate a conflict through language and avoid physical harm. Further research could explore the complexities of these everyday conflict management strategies through language.



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