Sasak: The Language of Lombok - An Exploration of Ethnolinguistic Identity, Clitic Structures, Politeness, and Balinese Connections

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The Sasak language, spoken by the indigenous people of Lombok Island in Indonesia, is a fascinating subject of study due to its complex linguistic features and rich cultural heritage. This paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the Sasak language, focusing on four key aspects: ethnolinguistic profiling of Sasak speakers, the clitic system, speech levels, and historical connections with the Balinese language and culture. Interestingly, the word "Lombok" is derived from the word "loumbouk," which means "be straight" and symbolizes the honest character of the Sasak people (Sugianto & Hasby, 2022).

1 Ethnolinguistic Profiling of Sasak Speakers

The island of Lombok, located in Nusa Tenggara Barat, Indonesia, just east of Bali, is home to a diverse population, with the Sasak people being the predominant ethnic group. According to the 2010 Census, the Sasak comprise approximately 85% of the island's total population of 3,166,685 (Britannica, 2024). As of the mid-2023 estimate, the population of Lombok has reached 3,963,842 (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2024). The Sasak are thought to have originated from Java in the first millennium BC and are culturally and linguistically closely related to the Balinese. However, unlike the Hindu Balinese, the majority of Sasak practice a local Muslim faith and traditions.

Other ethnic groups on Lombok include an estimated 10–15% Balinese, with the small remainder being Tionghoa-Peranakan, Javanese, Sumbawanese, Arab Indonesians, and Chinese Indonesians. The Sasak population is divided into two main religious subgroups: the Waktu Lima, who are Muslims and the dominant group, and the Waktu Telu, who are animists with religious surface features of Muslim and Hinduism and originally occupied mountainous areas in the northwest, northeast, and central southern dry area (Ajamiseba, 1996).

According to the Ethnologue, roughly 85% of the population of Lombok speak Sasak (*Bahasa Sasak*). The Sasak language is primarily a spoken language, with few written resources available. While about 90% of the population of Lombok have some knowledge of the Sasak language and use it in everyday life, only a small percentage use it for written purposes (Staff, 1995). For some villagers on Lombok, Sasak is their only language. However, since Bahasa Indonesia is the official language of Lombok, Sasak is not used in government or law, and it has only been

taught as a second language in schools in Mataram (the major city on Lombok) since 1994 (Staff, 1995).

1.1 Dialect Continuum

The Sasak language has five major varieties based on regional distribution (Austin, 2004):

- Ngenó-Ngené (East Lombok: Selaparang)
- Menó-Mené (West and Central Lombok: Pejanggik and surroundings)
- Meriaq-Meriku (South and Central Lombok: Pujut)
- Kutó-Kuté (Northwest Lombok: Bayan)
- Ngetó-Ngeté (Northeast Lombok: Suralaga/Sembalun)

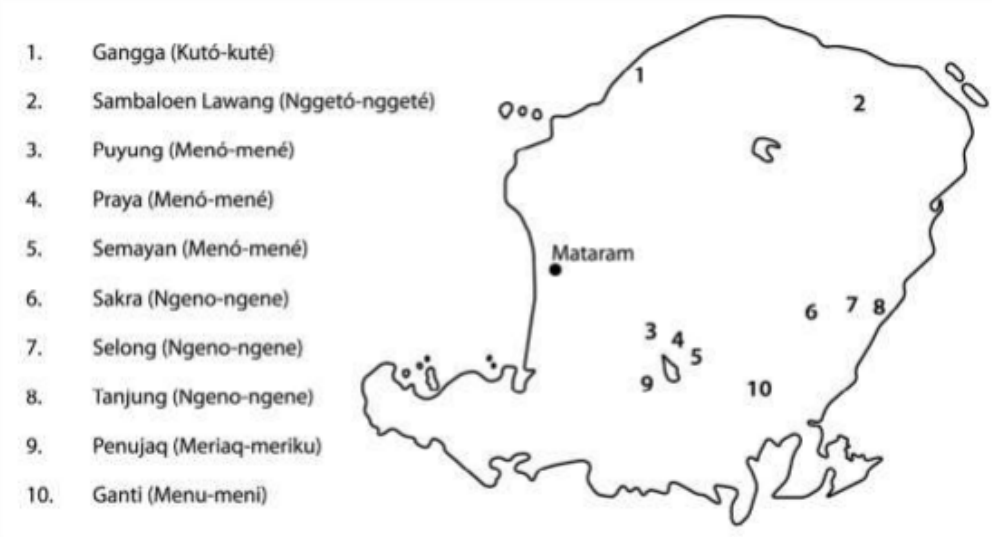

Figure 1: Regional varieties of the Sasak language in Lombok

Among these dialects, Menó-Mené is the most widely used and understood by most Sasak speakers, while Kutó-Kuté is used by only a few speakers in north-central Lombok and is not readily understood by speakers of other Sasak dialects (Staff, 1995). Staff also reported that the Ngenó-Ngené and Menó-Mené dialects are mutually intelligible, while the other three have limited mutual intelligibility. As seen from Figure 1, the areas where the Ngenó-Ngené (6, 7, 8) and Menó-Mené (3, 4, 5) dialects are spoken are adjacent. Thus, it is possible that the Sasak languages can be referred as a dialect continuum (Wilian et al., 2023).

1.2 Aksara Sasak

The Sasak language has a writing system called Aksara Sasak, also known as Hanacaraka, which appears to have been borrowed from their western neighbors, the Balinese, and also influenced by Javanese writing traditions (Austin, 2014). It is a Brahmic script with 18 base letters consisting of a consonant plus a vowel [a] (Austin, 2014; Staff, 1995) (see Figure 2). Originally used for inscribing texts on the dried leaves of the lontar palm (Borassus flabellifer), a cultural tradition shared with the Balinese, Aksara Sasak has been used for writing on paper since the 1970s. Knowledge of the script is now essentially restricted to the few Sasaks who are interested in studying the lontar writings. The script is not used in public or private signage (Staff, 1995), thus not part of the linguistic landscape on Lombok. Therefore, while there is some iconic use of Aksara Sasak, the writing system and scribal practice can be described as endangered (Austin, 2014).

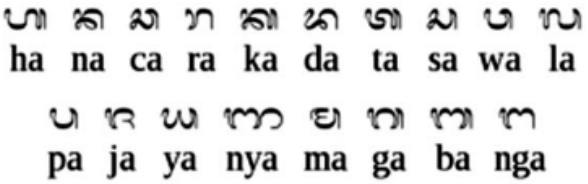

Figure 2: Aksara Sasak

1.3 The Balinese-Sasak-Sumbawa group

As proposed by Adelaar (2005), the Sasak language is part of the Balinese-Sasak-Sumbawa group (BSS), which, together with Malayic and Chamic, forms a branch of the newly proposed Malayo-Sumbawan subgroup of the Western Malayo-Polynesian languages (Shibatani, 2008). This proposal, unlike the previously common thought, excludes Javanese from the sub-family (see Figure 3).

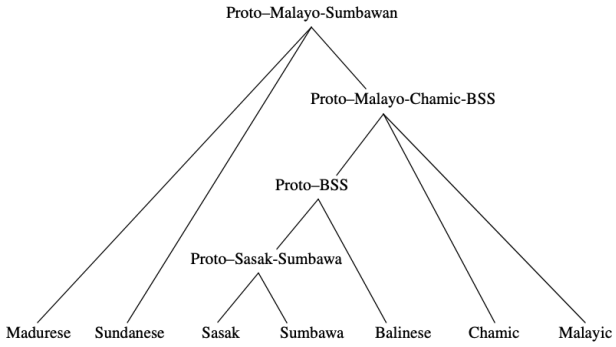

Figure 3: Malayo-Sumbawan Subgroup

1.4 Phonology

The language has 8 vowels and 19 consonants, and its sound inventory has been studied by various researchers, such as the one by Alchangeli et al. (2020) on the Menó-Mené variety (see figures 4 and 5).

	Bilabial	Alveo-dental	Post-alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Plosive	p b	t d			k g	ʔ
Affricate			tɕ dʑ			
Nasal	m	n		ɲ	ŋ	
Trill/Tap		r				
Fricative		s				h
Approximant				j	w	
Lateral approximant		l				

Figure 4: Consonants in Sasak

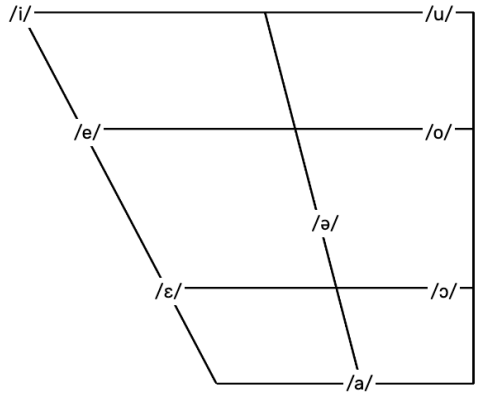

Figure 5: Vowels in Sasak

2 Clitic System in Sasak

Clitics are small grammatical elements that attach to other words or phrases, serving various functions such as indicating syntactic relations or encoding nominal features. They are not independent prosodic units and may phonologically attach to a host, with no lexically conditioned idiosyncratic forms or distributions. Clitics may appear in clusters with multiple clitics in different functions (see Example 1), typically coding nominal features (person/number/case), auxiliaries or verbal features (tense/aspect/mood/polarity), or pragmatic functions (question, information status) (Austin, 2004). Sasak, like its closely related neighbor Sumbawa, exhibits a robust system of clitics that clearly indicate the syntactic relations of subjects and objects (Shibatani, 2008).

(1) *wah-wah ku=jouq=e*
already-already I=take=3RD
"I stoped taking him (along)."

Sasak clitics can be classified into three main types (Austin, 2004), each serving a distinct function:

- Simple clitics:
  These are demonstratives that encliticize to the final element of the $\bar{X}$ that precedes them.

  (2) *Kanak=nó bace buku=ni*
  child=that read book=this
  "That child reads this book."

- Special clitics:
  These encode nominal categories of person and number.
  With nouns, they encode inalienable possessors, and with other hosts, they encode agent (A) and patient (P) semantic roles.
  In Menó-Mené and Meriaq-Meriku dialects, the patient clitic attaches to the verb, while the A clitic attaches to the first available host or a special auxiliary if the verb is transitive and already takes an patient clitic (see Table 1 for full set of special clitics). From the example below, we can see how complex the clitic system could be: the clitic be= is attached to the verb "meet," while the two special clitics are attched to their nominal and aspect hosts respectively.

  (3) *kance guru=m iaq=k be=dait lèmaq*
  with teacher=2SG FUT=1SG stative=meet tomorrow
  "It's with your teacher that I will meet tomorrow."

- Bound word clitics:
  These auxiliary particles in Sasak follow the first constituent of the clause and can occur in sequences of up to three.
  The first in a sequence can host special clitics for agent.

  (4) *ite bilang te=be=dait wajib ne=ngene ke rumah*
  we each we=stative=meet obligation 3RD=say to house
  "Every time we met, she just had to say 'come to my house.'"

Sasak features a set of free-standing full pronouns and reduced forms. The reduced forms

occur as both enclitics and proclitics referring only to agents, and as enclitics to possessors in nominal expressions. A unique reduced form (é) refers to third-person patients (singular or plural). (Wouk, 1999). Table 1 shows the comparison between the full pronouns and special clitics in the Menó-Mené dialect.

Table 1: Full Pronouns and Their Corresponding Clitics in the Menó-Mené variety

	Full Pronouns	**Clitics**
1SG	aku	k
1PL	ite	t
2SG/2PL	kamu	m
3SG/3PL	ie	n, é (for patients)

The phenomenon of cliticization in Sasak is subject-centered, including intransitive subjects (S), transitive agents (A) and passive clause patients (P), while excluding the agent of a passive, mirroring the English subject category (Shibatani, 2008) (See Examples 5-7).

(5) Intransitive Subject
(Aku) mu=k lalo jok peken
I PAST=1SG go to market
"I went to the market."

(6) Transitive Agent
Mun=n empuk Paul
PAST=3 hit Paul
"He/She hit Paul."

(7) Passive Clause Patient
Te=empuk=m isiq Paul
PASS=hit=2 by Paul
"You were hit by Paul."

The pattern of subject cliticization to main verbs may vary among Sasak dialects, but subject cliticization to auxiliaries is more consistent across dialects. All Sasak dialects allow a subject to cliticize to an auxiliary, although cliticization may be optional or strongly disfavored by some speakers due to redundancy when a full pronoun occurs. Importantly, only subjects can cliticize to auxiliaries (Shibatani, 2008).

Sasak dialects display variation in their object enclitic systems. Some dialects, such as Puyung Menó-Mené, have a richer and fuller set of object enclitics (i.e., -k, -m, -n), while others, like Selong and Pancor Ngenó-Ngené, have a more impoverished system with only a third-

person object enclitic. In Puyung Menó-Mené, object clitic clusters is also possible (Shibatani, 2008).

(8) *Paul empuk=k*
Paul hit=1SG
"Paul hit me."

3 Speech levels in Sasak

The Sasak language has a complex system of speech levels, politeness strategies and honorifics that reflect the social stratification and cultural norms of the Sasak people. They are said to be similar to the systems in Balinese and Javanese. Traditionally, there are three main social levels in Sasak society:

The speech levels correspond to these social strata. They are known by different terms but basically the same concepts:

- Sasak Amaq/Base Sasak Biase: Used by common people in general and between intimate friends.
- Sasak Madya/Sasak Mamiq/Base Alus Madya: Generally used by the middle class, in traditional ceremonies, and informal occasions among non-intimate acquaintances.
- Sasak Raden/Base Alus Utami: Used by the upper class nobility.

Base Alus Utami is also used in special moments like in the wedding process, where the male's family comes to the female's family before nyongkolan, a ceremony called Sorong Serah Aji Krame (Zaenul, 2018).

Some informants suggest a fourth level, Sasak Bapaq or Sasak Jamaq, which is based on the Ngenó-Ngené or Selaparang dialect and is a combination of Sasak Amaq and Sasak Mamiq. It is considered the standard dialect and is used as a common medium of communication between the speakers of the five existing dialects. Between 1905 and 1952, this dialect was used for teaching reading and writing in all elementary schools using an old spelling system based on Latin alphabets. As a result, this particular dialect and social level are still maintained as the common medium of communication between speakers of the five Sasak dialects (Ajamiseba, 1996).

Since the 14th century, the Sasak people have been divided into four social castes: $Mnak$ (first caste, nobility class), $Perwangse$ (second caste), $Jajarkarang$ (third caste, commoner or layman), and $Sepangan$ (lowest caste or slave of an inferior class) (Austin, 2010). The society of Sasak people who have a nobility title are usually identified by the mention of the name as

Lalu and Raden for men, and Baiq and Dende for women. They comprise about 8% of the Sasak population. The classification is based on the social stratification of the Sasak people as $Mnak$ (nobility class) or non-$Mnak$ (lower class)(Nurullayali et al., 2021).

The Sasak language also has a system of humble (self-reference), honorific (address terms) that reflect politeness and social factors such as the degree of intimacy and social status. Rajabul (2023) identified eight patterns of address terms: nobility, general, intimacy, borrowing, kinship, religious, cultural, and personal pronoun patterns. The nobility pattern is associated with terms used for the aristocratic families of the Sasak people. Table 2 demonstrated how Sasak speakers of different social castes would use different forms to reference an identical entity:

Table 2: Word Forms in Different Speech levels

	Sasak Amaq (Low)	**Sasak Madya** (Mid)	**Sasak Raden** (High)	Honorific	Humble
1SG	aku	-	tiang	-	kaji
2SG/2PL	kamu	side	pelinggih	dekaji	-
3SG/3PL	ie	-	-	deside	-
“to eat”	mangan	bekelór	madaran	majengan	-
“body”	awak	perane	dèwèk	batang	rage
“yes”	aóq	-	nggih	-	meran

However, the use of polite language has changed over time. Younger generations do not always adhere to the traditional rules when using speech levels, and some may not be able to speak with Base Alus Utami, even when speaking with older people (Nurullayali et al., 2021).

4 Historical Connections with Balinese

The historical connections between the Sasak and Balinese languages and cultures can be traced back several centuries. The Balinese Kingdom of Karangasem expanded into Lombok during the 17th century, marking the beginning of significant Balinese influence on the island. This period saw an influx of Balinese settlers, particularly from the Karangasem region, who were part of efforts to consolidate Balinese control and suppress local resistance (Parimartha, 1995). These settlers mixed with the Sasak population, leading to lasting cultural exchanges.

The integration of the Balinese and Sasak populations led to the adoption of Balinese loanwords in the Sasak language. For instance, the words “Cokor” meaning “feet” and the Javanese loanword “tumbas” meaning “buy” are used similarly in both Sasak and Balinese languages, indicating a shared linguistic heritage (Sugianto & Hasby, 2022). Social interactions between the Sasak and Balinese were heavily influenced by Balinese social structures. The Sasak people used specific linguistic terms to denote social hierarchy, such as “meran” for higher status individuals

and “kaji” for lower status, and employed honorifics like “jro” and “pelinggih” to address Balinese individuals, irrespective of their social status within the caste system (Wirawan, 2018).

The Sasak people adopted various Javanese cultural traditions, including the caste system and an aristocracy modeled on the Javanese court, and were influenced by Hindu-Buddhist cultural concepts and practices, including literacy, probably during the time of the Majapahit Empire’s influence in the 14th century. The Majapahit King Hayam Wuruk (1328-89) is said to have expanded Majapahit’s influence over Bali and claimed Lombok, Sumbawa, and parts of Sulawesi. In 1334, the Majapahit Regent is said to have visited the two most important Sasak kingdoms, Selaparang in east Lombok and Pejanggik in central Lombok. In the 17th century, the Islamic Makassarese empire established relations with the Selaparang Kingdom of east Lombok, introducing Islam and the Arabic script. In 1740, the Karangasem Balinese conquered the island and introduced law books and other texts, established a priesthood, and promoted Balinese culture. It is most likely that Aksara Sasak was borrowed and extended in use for writing Sasak during this time (Austin, 2014).

During the Dutch colonial rule, the writing of Sasak in the Latin script was introduced. After Indonesia’s independence in 1949, Bahasa Indonesia became the national language, and Sasak entered a diglossic relationship with it, being restricted to family, home domains, and traditional cultural activities (Austin, 2014).

The historical connections between the Balinese and Sasak languages and cultures have led to the development of traditions such as “ngejot,” where people give treats of food, drink, or other forms to relatives of different religions during religious holidays, and “saling undang” or “pesilak,” where people invite other ethnic groups to participate in religious or cultural activities (Wirawan, 2018). These traditions have helped build fraternal ties between Hindu Balinese and Muslim Sasak people. The phenomenon of Balinese with relatively large agricultural land being unable to cultivate their own land and requiring cultivators from the Sasak people has also contributed to establishing a good relationship between the two ethnic groups (Wirawan, 2018). This cultural equilibrium reflects enduring interethnic relations and mutual dependencies

5 Conclusion

The Sasak language is a testament to the rich linguistic and cultural diversity of Indonesia. Through this study of the Sasak language, we have explored its unique features and the complex interplay of social, cultural, and historical factors that have shaped its development.

Sasak speakers has a strong sense of cultural identity, reflected in their use of the language. The speech levels and politeness strategies have demonstrated the intricate social hierarchies and

cultural norms that govern language use in the society. The historical connections between the Sasak and Balinese have been particularly illuminating, highlighting the long-standing interactions and mutual influences between these two ethnic groups. The adoption of Balinese script, loanwords, and cultural practices by the Sasak people has enriched their language and culture, while also showcasing the dynamic nature of language contact and evolution.

Further research on the Sasak language and its various aspects, including its varieties, language acquisition, and language maintenance, would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of this fascinating language and its place within the broader context of Polynesian linguistics and cultural studies. By continuing to study and appreciate languages like Sasak, we can gain valuable insights into the human experience and the myriad ways in which language shapes our identities, relationships, and worldviews.

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