



Plantation Language as a Collective Identity: An Ethnolinguistic Study of a Multiethnic Community at PTPN IV Regional II Berangir Estate, North Sumatra, Indonesia

Friska Anggraini Barus

Sistem Teknologi Informasi, Institut Teknologi Sawit Indonesia, Medan, Indonesia

*Corresponding author: friska_anggraini@itsi.ac.id

Received: May 20, 2026; Revised: June 12, 2026; Accepted: August 25, 2026; Published: August 31, 2026

Abstract. This study examines language practices within a multiethnic community at PTPN IV Regional II Berangir Estate, North Labuhanbatu Regency, North Sumatra, with a particular focus on the emergence of plantation language as a collective identity. The study adopts a qualitative ethnolinguistic approach through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and field documentation. The findings show that the plantation community has developed a shared communicative repertoire characterized by plantation-specific lexicon, code-switching, code-mixing, and forms of address that are understood across ethnic groups. Terms such as *afdeling*, *ancak*, *brondolan*, *piringan*, and *gawangan* function not only as technical vocabulary but also as local knowledge and part of everyday social practice. The findings indicate that language in the plantation setting serves not merely as a tool for occupational communication, but also as a medium of social solidarity and a marker of community membership. The identity of “plantation people” emerges as the result of social negotiation built through shared life experiences, cross-ethnic interaction, and continuous language habituation. This study demonstrates that oil palm plantation communities constitute productive social spaces for the formation of new linguistic identities.

Keywords: ethnolinguistics; plantation language; collective identity; multiethnic community; oil palm plantation



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1. Introduction

Language constitutes an integral component of human social and cultural life. Beyond its primary communicative function, language serves as a medium for identity construction, cultural expression, and social cohesion within a community. From an ethnolinguistic perspective, language is not merely viewed as an autonomous linguistic system but as a representation of how a particular group perceives, organizes, and interprets its social world. Consequently, the relationship between language, culture, and identity has become a central concern in contemporary linguistic studies, particularly in multilingual and multicultural societies.

Language develops dynamically through continuous social interaction. Speakers do not simply inherit language from their families or ethnic communities; they also adapt, negotiate, and reshape their linguistic practices according to the social environments in which they live and work. Such processes often give rise to lexical borrowing, code-switching, code-mixing, and the emergence of shared linguistic repertoires within specific communities. In multiethnic settings, these linguistic developments frequently function as mechanisms through which individuals negotiate identity and establish social solidarity across ethnic boundaries. Within

such a context, language functions not only as a means of communication but also as a mechanism of social adaptation and collective identity formation.

Technical plantation terminology, local expressions, forms of address, and recurrent code-switching practices are continuously employed by community members regardless of their ethnic backgrounds. Over time, these linguistic resources become shared communicative practices that are collectively understood and reproduced by members of the plantation community. In this study, this shared repertoire is conceptualized as “plantation language”, referring to a localized linguistic system that emerges through shared experiences and social interactions within the plantation environment and functions as a marker of collective identity. Previous studies have extensively examined the relationship between language and identity in multilingual societies. Research on translinguaging has demonstrated that speakers utilize their entire linguistic repertoire to construct meaning, negotiate social positions, and foster a sense of belonging within diverse communities.

Almashour (2024), for instance, argues that translinguaging practices contribute significantly to identity formation and social inclusion among multilingual speakers. Within the Indonesian context, ethnolinguistic studies have predominantly focused on documenting local languages, examining cultural meanings embedded in traditional lexicons, and exploring language preservation among indigenous and ethnic communities. Existing research has investigated the relationship between language and culture among traditional societies, coastal communities, and specific ethnic groups. However, studies addressing the formation of collective identity through language practices in multiethnic plantation communities remain scarce.

Research on oil palm plantations in Indonesia has largely concentrated on economic development, labor relations, agrarian conflicts, social transformation, and environmental sustainability, while the linguistic dimensions of plantation life have received relatively limited scholarly attention. This gap highlights the need for an ethnolinguistic investigation that connects language practices, collective identity, and multiethnic plantation communities. The present study seeks to address this gap by examining how language practices within PTPN IV Regional II Berangir Estate contribute to the formation of plantation language as a collective identity.

Unlike previous studies that focus primarily on ethnic identity or multilingualism in general, this research conceptualizes the plantation community as a distinctive social space in which a new linguistic repertoire emerges through intensive and sustained cross-ethnic interaction. Drawing upon an ethnolinguistic framework, this study aims to identify plantation-specific lexicons, describe patterns of language use in everyday interactions, and explain how plantation language functions as a symbol of solidarity and collective identity among community members. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of ethnolinguistic theory, linguistic anthropology, and identity studies, while also providing new insights into the sociocultural dynamics of multiethnic communities in Indonesia’s oil palm plantation sector.

Ethnolinguistics: The Interdisciplinary Study of Language and Culture

Language can be approached and analyzed from a variety of dimensions. When the focus is placed on the contextual factors that shape and contribute to the meaning of an utterance, the study is situated within the field of pragmatics. Similarly, when language is examined in relation to the cognitive mechanisms underlying the production of meaningful and grammatically well-formed linguistic structures, such as words, phrases, and sentences, the analysis falls under psycholinguistics. However, the present study adopts an ethnolinguistic perspective, which integrates linguistic and cultural analyses to explore how language reflects, conveys, and preserves the cultural knowledge, values, and worldview of a speech community. Ethnolinguistics is an interdisciplinary field that examines the reciprocal relationship between language and culture within human societies.

Emerging from the intersection of linguistics and anthropology, particularly ethnology, ethnolinguistics seeks to understand how people construct social reality through symbolic

systems. From this perspective, language is not merely a set of grammatical rules but also a reflection of a community's worldview, cultural values, knowledge systems, and collective experiences. Language therefore serves as a medium through which individuals categorize experience, interpret their environment, and transmit cultural knowledge across generations. Conceptually, ethnolinguistics is grounded in the assumption that language and culture are inseparable. Every community develops distinctive systems of meaning through the language it uses.

Consequently, ethnolinguistic inquiry seeks to reveal how cultural concepts, social values, and collective experiences are encoded in vocabulary, expressions, metaphors, naming systems, and everyday communicative practices. In this regard, language is understood not only as a reflection of culture but also as an active force shaping how people perceive and interpret their social and physical worlds. The close relationship between language and culture places ethnolinguistics in close dialogue with linguistic anthropology. Duranti defines linguistic anthropology as the study of language as a cultural resource and speech as a cultural practice. This perspective views language as an integral part of social action that cannot be separated from cultural contexts, social relationships, and speakers' lived experiences.

Therefore, the analysis of language should extend beyond linguistic structure to include the social contexts, cultural values, and everyday practices that shape language use. In the context of the present study, ethnolinguistics serves as an analytical framework for examining how language practices within a multiethnic oil palm plantation community function not only as a means of communication but also as a medium for constructing collective identity. Through this perspective, local lexicon, expressions, communication patterns, and speech practices that emerge within plantation life can be interpreted as representations of shared social and cultural experiences. Accordingly, the concept of "plantation language" is understood not merely as a linguistic variety developed for workplace communication, but also as a cultural symbol that embodies solidarity, belonging, and the collective identity of plantation communities.

Language, Collective Identity, and the Multiethnic Oil Palm Plantation Community

Within multiethnic communities, language functions not only as a means of communication but also as a marker of social membership, emotional proximity, and identity positioning. In language-identity scholarship, the use of particular languages, lexical choices, and shared speech forms often becomes a way of signaling who "we" are and who "they" are. Language, therefore, can be understood as a social practice that is continuously shaped by, and simultaneously shapes, everyday relations among community members. From the perspectives of ethnolinguistics and linguistic anthropology, the relationship among language, culture, and identity lies at the center of how social meaning is produced within communities. In a multiethnic oil palm plantation community, this process becomes more complex because speakers come from different mother tongues, ethnic backgrounds, and social experiences, yet live and work in the same space over long periods of time.

In such settings, daily interaction encourages translanguaging, code-switching, and the habituation of shared forms of speech that are understood by community members across ethnic boundaries. UNESCO emphasizes that linguistic diversity and multilingualism are important for social inclusion and the preservation of cultural identity, while translanguaging research shows that speakers draw on their full linguistic repertoires to make meaning and negotiate identity. The plantation community, therefore, can be seen as a social space that enables the emergence of a distinctive cross-ethnic communicative repertoire. In North Sumatra, this social setting is especially significant. BPS data show that the province has a substantial plantation area, placing it among the important plantation regions in Indonesia.

This indicates that oil palm plantations are not only economic spaces but also lived spaces in which different ethnic groups meet through work, neighborhood relations, family life, and community interaction. Through sustained contact, language may develop into a collective form that no longer represents only the original ethnic languages, but instead becomes a shared plantation repertoire. At this point, the concept of plantation language becomes important,

because it marks the transformation of language from a communication tool into a symbol of solidarity and collective identity. From this framework, collective identity is understood as something negotiated through everyday linguistic practice rather than as a fixed or completed category.

Consequently, an analysis of speech, local lexicon, and communicative strategies in the multiethnic oil palm plantation community will show how language functions both as a unifying medium and as a marker of shared social experience. Such findings may enrich Indonesian ethnolinguistics by shifting attention from maintained ethnic languages toward community languages shaped through cross-ethnic interaction in work and everyday life.

2. Methodology

This study was conducted at PTPN IV Regional II Kebun Berangir, located in North Labuhanbatu Regency, North Sumatra. The research site was purposively selected due to its social characteristics that are highly relevant to ethnolinguistic inquiry, particularly the presence of a multiethnic community that engages in intensive social interaction within an oil palm plantation environment. As both a workplace and a social living space, Kebun Berangir brings together individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds, including Batak, Javanese, Malay, Nias, Minangkabau, Acehnese, and several other ethnic groups that have coexisted for a relatively long period. This ethnic diversity creates a continuous situation of language contact across various domains of social life. Social interactions occur not only in work-related activities but also in everyday settings such as employee housing complexes, educational facilities, places of worship, sports facilities, markets or small shops, and various community activities.

The high frequency of communication among community members facilitates processes of linguistic adaptation, meaning negotiation, and the development of shared communicative practices that transcend the boundaries of the speakers' original ethnic languages. From an ethnolinguistic perspective, such a social environment provides an important setting for examining the relationship between language and culture. Sustained social contact has the potential to generate distinctive linguistic practices within the plantation community, including the use of local plantation lexicons, occupational terminology, forms of address, everyday expressions, as well as code-switching and code-mixing practices employed in daily communication.

These linguistic practices function not only as tools of communication but also as representations of social experience, cultural values, and collective identity within the plantation community. This study is based on the assumption that long-term interaction within the multiethnic plantation community has given rise to a shared linguistic repertoire, referred to in this study as plantation language. Plantation language is understood as a set of linguistic forms and communicative practices that emerge through shared experiences of living and working within the plantation environment and that serve as markers of social membership and collective identity. Therefore, Kebun Berangir is considered an appropriate research setting for investigating how language functions as a medium for the construction, maintenance, and negotiation of social identity within a multiethnic oil palm plantation community.

The research participants consisted of various social groups involved in plantation life, including harvest workers, maintenance workers, foremen, clerks, assistant field managers (assistant afdeling), field managers (kepala afdeling), administrative staff, workers' family members, and community members residing within the plantation area. Informants were selected using a purposive sampling technique based on several criteria, including their level of involvement in daily linguistic interactions, length of residence or employment within the plantation environment, ability to provide relevant information related to the research focus, and representation of diverse ethnic backgrounds.

3. Results and Discussions

The findings indicate that the multiethnic community of PTPN IV Regional II Berangir Estate has developed a shared linguistic repertoire that functions as a common medium of

communication across ethnic boundaries. This repertoire consists of plantation-specific lexicons, forms of address, and recurrent expressions used by workers in both occupational and social settings. Terms such as *afdeling*, *ancak*, *brondolan*, *piringan*, and *gawangan* are not restricted to technical work activities but are also embedded in everyday conversations among community members.

The widespread use of these expressions demonstrates that plantation language has evolved beyond its original technical function and has become part of the community's collective communicative practices. From an ethnolinguistic perspective, this finding suggests that language develops through shared experiences and social interaction, resulting in a repertoire that reflects the cultural life of the plantation community.

3.1 Plantation Language as a Shared Linguistic Repertoire

The findings indicate that the multiethnic community of PTPN IV Regional II Berangir Estate has developed a shared linguistic repertoire that functions as a common medium of communication across ethnic boundaries. This repertoire consists of plantation-specific lexicons, forms of address, and recurrent expressions used by workers in both occupational and social settings.

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Table 1. Plantation Language as a Shared Repertoire

Theme	Empirical Findings	Ethnolinguistic Interpretation
Plantation lexicon	Technical plantation terms are widely used in daily interaction	Lexicon reflects shared occupational experience
Common expressions	Workers from different ethnic groups understand the same terms	Language functions as a medium of social integration
Everyday use	Plantation terms extend beyond workplace communication	Technical language becomes community language

3.2 Code-Switching and Cross-Ethnic Communication

The study also found that code-switching and code-mixing are common features of daily interaction. Speakers frequently alternate between Indonesian, local languages, and plantation terminology depending on context and interlocutors. Indonesian generally functions as the *lingua franca*, while local languages serve to express familiarity and cultural affiliation. Rather than creating linguistic barriers, multilingual practices facilitate communication among workers from different ethnic backgrounds. Plantation language operates as a neutral communicative resource that enables efficient interaction and mutual understanding within the community.

Representative Interview Excerpts

"Kalau kerja di kebun, semua orang paham istilah yang sama meskipun sukunya berbeda."
(Field Interview, Plantation Worker)

"Kadang kami pakai bahasa Jawa atau Batak, tetapi istilah kebun tetap sama dan semua mengerti."
(Field Interview, Foreman)

These statements illustrate how plantation language functions as a shared linguistic resource that bridges ethnic differences within the community.

3.3 Plantation Language and Collective Identity

A significant finding of this study is the emergence of a collective identity expressed through the notion of *orang kebun* (plantation people). Informants consistently described themselves not only through ethnic affiliation but also through their shared experience of living and working in the plantation environment. Knowledge and use of plantation language appear to function as symbolic markers of community membership. Individuals who understand and use plantation terminology appropriately are generally perceived as belonging to the community, whereas outsiders often experience difficulty understanding local expressions.

Table 2. Language and Collective Identity

Theme	Observation	Interpretation
Shared terminology	Common understanding of plantation lexicon	Symbol of membership
Daily interaction	Language used across work and residential settings	Reinforces social cohesion
Identity construction	Informants identify themselves as <i>orang kebun</i>	Emergence of collective identity

3.4 Ethnolinguistic Interpretation

The findings demonstrate that plantation language is not merely a communication tool but a cultural resource through which community members construct social relationships and collective identity. The continuous interaction among Batak, Javanese, Malay, Nias, Minangkabau, Acehnese, and other ethnic groups has generated a linguistic repertoire that transcends ethnic boundaries while preserving cultural diversity. In line with ethnolinguistic theory, language in Berangir Estate functions as a repository of shared knowledge, social experience, and cultural values. Plantation language therefore represents both a linguistic adaptation to a multiethnic environment and a symbolic expression of community belonging.

Tabel 3. Leksikon Bahasa Kebun

Leksikon	Makna	Fungsi Sosial
Ancak	Area kerja pemanen	Penanda aktivitas kerja
Brondolan	Buah lepas	Pengetahuan teknis bersama
Piringan	Area sekitar pokok sawit	Pengetahuan spasial komunitas
Gawangan	Ruang antarbaris tanaman	Identitas pekerjaan
Afdeling	Divisi kebun	Struktur organisasi sosial

4. Conclusions

The findings reveal that the multiethnic community of PTPN IV Regional II Berangir Estate has developed a shared communicative repertoire, referred to in this study as plantation language, which is used across ethnic boundaries. This repertoire is characterized by plantation-specific lexicons, code-switching, code-mixing, and communicative practices that are collectively understood by community members. The findings support the study's hypothesis that intensive social interaction within the plantation environment not only generates linguistic adaptation but also contributes to the formation of solidarity and collective identity. From an ethnolinguistic perspective, plantation language functions not merely as a tool of occupational communication but also as a representation of shared experiences, local knowledge, and social values embedded in plantation life.

The results are consistent with studies on multilingualism and translanguaging, which suggest that speakers draw upon their full linguistic repertoires to construct meaning and negotiate identity. In Berangir Estate, Indonesian, local languages, and plantation terminology are used flexibly according to communicative contexts, demonstrating that ethnic language boundaries are continuously negotiated rather than fixed. Furthermore, the emergence of the identity of "plantation people" indicates that language serves as symbolic capital that strengthens belonging and community membership. Theoretically, this study extends

ethnolinguistic scholarship by demonstrating that plantation communities constitute productive social spaces for the emergence of new linguistic identities.

While previous studies have largely focused on ethnic communities, educational settings, or migration contexts, this research highlights the role of plantation workplaces and residential settlements in generating collective linguistic repertoires that transcend ethnic boundaries. Future studies may undertake comparative investigations across plantation communities, explore the intergenerational transmission of plantation language, and examine the influence of digital communication on linguistic practices within plantation societies.

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