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# Theoretical Study of Tansi Sawahlunto Creole Language Development Phase as a Language Preservation Efforts Model

**Arly Yanatri Zainsty[1], Elsa Putri Emrisah Syafril[2], I Made Gede Arimbawa[3], I Ketut Muka[4], Subadi[5]**

[1,5]Institut Kesenian Jakarta

[2]Creole Institute Indonesia

[3,4]Institut Seni Indonesia Bali

**ABSTRACT**: The diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds of coal mine laborers in Sawahlunto have given rise to a unique new language, the Tansi (creole) language. The Tansi language, the first labor creole language in Indonesia, was discovered and present in the interior of West Sumatra and consists of 10 languages, with Malay as its base language. Currently, Tansi is heading towards decreolization (approaching extinction) due to the shift in its function in a triglossia context compared to Indonesian (as the official language) and Minangkabau (as the dominant regional language). Therefore, this study aims to: (1) to explain the existence phases of the Tansi language and (2) theoretically examine existing Tansi language preservation models. The method used in this research is qualitative. In this study, the research findings descriptively described in the form of an explanation explaining the theoretical study of the development phases of the Tansi language as a model for language preservation efforts. Since this research topic was related to theoretical analysis, so a literature review approach used and focused on inductive problem-solving. The required data was sourced from written sources of a theoretical nature (primary and secondary). The collected data was analyzed by the interactive data analysis technique, modeled of Miles and Huberman. This analysis technique consisted of reduction (sorting data that was relevant to the study), data presentation (presenting data with discussion), and drawing conclusions. The results of this study indicate that: (1) the existence phases of the Tansi language are: pidginization, creolization, and decreolization. (2) The preservation processes that have been carried out are: (a) the process of documenting the Tansi language through dictionaries as well as novel; (b) pop culture, such as pop music; and (c) prestige, such as *tonel*, *wayang,* and traditional events. Then, the other proposed preservation is documentary films as a form of preservation of the Tansi language through pop culture.

**KEYWORDS:**Theoretical study, Sawahlunto Tansi creole language, language development phase, language preservation model

## I. INTRODUCTION

Since colonial times, the city of Sawahlunto which located in central West Sumatra has been a miniature version of Indonesia. Its people reflect a plurality, involving various ethnicities and languages. This heterogeneity come from the diverse population brought in, both as contract laborers and forced laborers in coal mines. This diversity raised the need for a common language to interact with one another. Thus, their communication process, without realizing it, "created" a unique language that became a common everyday language. This language, linguist Elsa calls Tansi, is a mixed of 10 languages with Malay as its base language. These languages are Minangkabau, Javanese, Chinese, Madurese, Sundanese, Bugis, Balinese, Batak, Dutch, and Malay. Furthermore, this language is the first labor creole language in Indonesia, discovered and present in the central region (rather than a coastal area with a trading background) (Syafril, 2011).

The emergence of creole languages often occurs in areas with a complex mix of cultures, such as the coal mining area of Sawahlunto, which is home to a diverse population of people from various ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. The Tansi language is unique and interesting because it exists in the homogeneous Minangkabau community in West Sumatra. The existence of the Tansi language is evidence of a cultural product that can be an asset for the people of Sawahlunto, a city undergoing transformation from a mining town to a tourist and cultural hub.

Language, in its context, functions as a social and communication system that is integral to a particular society and culture (Syafril, 2011). In other words, language is a crucial aspect of the cultural identity of a speech community. However, amidst rapid social, economic, and technological change, many local languages face the risk of extinction. These languages are often displaced by more widely used dominant languages. Specifically, Language will “dead” when no one uses it as a means of communication.

In another words, language in endangered situation when it only spoken in certain situations within a community in order to keep the language alive (Crystal, 2000). Then, the extinction of a language can be due to various reasons, e.g., a natural disaster, genocide, cultural assimilation, etc. Furthermore, there are several triggering factors of language extinction: war, authoritative pressure, economic reasons (e.g., migration), cultural domination by a majority population, political reasons (e.g., language education policies), historical reasons (e.g., colonization, border conflicts, etc.), and language attitudes (Austin & Sallabank, 2013).

This challenge of extinction also applies to Tansi, as both a local language and a creole. The process of shifting the function of the Tansi language or what is known as decreolization has placed this language in a triglossia situation which places it in a lower variety compared to Indonesian (as the official language) and Minangkabau (as dominant of local language) (Syafril, 2011). In this context, a theoretical study of the developmental phases of the Tansi Sawahlunto creole language (the Tansi language) is crucial for preserving this language as a valuable cultural heritage. Through a thorough understanding of its characteristics, we can develop an effective language preservation model.

The preservation and revitalization of the endangered or extinct marginal languages, such as creole languages can be considered through adult learning and education as a powerful tool for preserving, revitalizing and promoting marginal languages (Dolcy, 2019). Based on this said, the language preservation model can utilize various approaches, such as language documentation (books, dictionaries, films, etc.), language education, language revitalization, and active community participation in the use and preservation of Tansi language. Through this model, we can raise awareness of the importance of preserving this language and develop concrete strategies to ensure its sustainability. One example of a possible preservation model for the Tansi language is documentary film. Theoretically, documentary film is an attempt to retell events or realities by incorporating facts and data (Nichols, 2001). The first documentary film made in the world was “Nanook of the North” (1922), made by Robert J. Flaherty).

Based on the backgrounds of the research above, this study has two objectives. The objectives are: (1) to explain the existence phases of the Tansi language and (2) theoretically examine existing Tansi language preservation models.

## II. THE METHODS

The method used in this research is qualitative. Qualitative research is a research procedure that produces descriptive data in the form of words and images, rather than presented numerically (Moleong, 2019). Specifically, this method involves data collection in a natural setting with the intention of interpreting the phenomena occurring, with the researcher as the key instrument (Anggito & Setiawan, 2018). Another definition of qualitative research is research that goes through a critical-scientific thinking process, namely an inductive process to capture facts and social phenomena occurring in the field through observation. Then, the characteristics of qualitative methods are the emphasis on the naturalistic setting, inductive, flexible, direct experience, in-depth, process, capturing meaning, wholeness, active participation of participants and interpretation (Raco, 2010).

In this study, the research findings descriptively described in the form of an explanation explaining the theoretical study of the development phases of the Tansi language as a model for language preservation efforts. The use of the analytical descriptive method was based on the assumption that its research aimed to obtain factual information of this matter.

Furthermore, a literature review approach used since this research topic was related to theoretical analysis. Therefore, the required data was sourced from written sources of a theoretical nature (primary and secondary). Then, this research focused on inductive problem-solving. Meanwhile, the collected data was analyzed by the interactive data analysis technique, modeled of Miles and Huberman. This analysis technique consisted of reduction (sorting data that was relevant to the study), data presentation (presenting data with discussion), and drawing conclusions, as shown in the following diagram:

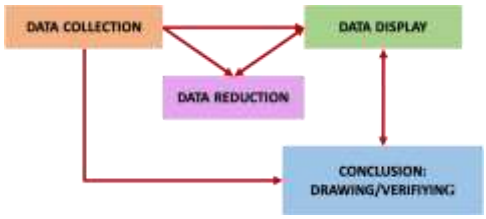



**Figure 1. Interactive Data Analysis of Miles and Huberman's Model (Miles et al., 2014)**

## III. DISCUSSION

The formation and development of the Tansi language, according to linguist Elsa's research (2011), began with a process of language mixing (pidginization) due to the communication needs of mining laborers. This language was then spoken from generation to generation for over 100 years (creolization). However, currently this language has undergone a process of decreolization due to several factors, namely education, social interaction, media, newcomers, and the mobility of the Sawahlunto

community (Syafril, 2011). The ongoing process of decreolization and the triglossia situation experienced by the Tansi language can cause this language to experience "extinction." Therefore, a model of preservation of this language is needed through various methods and efforts. The above description can be explained in the following diagram:

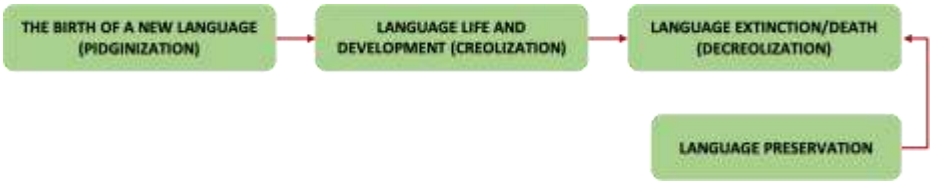



**Figure 2. Diagram of Language Birth to Language Preservation Process**

**1. The Existence Phases of the Tansi Language**

*a. The Birth Phase of the Tansi Language (Pidginization)*

Pidgin is a mixed language of two (or more) languages that appears naturally because each native language speakers do not understand each other (Fasold, 1990) (Wardhaugh, 1992) (Syafril, 2011). The birth of the Tansi Sawahlunto language as a pidgin-creole language that comes from a mixture of various languages (Malay, Minangkabau, Javanese, Chinese, Dutch, Sundanese, Batak, Madurese, Bugis, and Balinese) can be explained in three important parts.

1) Colonial Period, Forced Labor, and Prison

Pidgin languages developed in situations where groups of people with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds were forced and compelled to interact in confined environments. During the colonial period, while in Sawahlunto prison, laborers from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds were forced to interact under difficult conditions and under high psychological pressure (Syafril, 2011). In these situations, the laborers were forced to communicate in their own languages and struggle to understand each other. The need of language for communication also served to build solidarity among laborers, resulting in the merging of elements from each region's language. Therefore, the initial pidginization of the Tansi language occurred in the mines, prisons, and barracks where they lived. It can be said that Tansi language was a pidgin language initially formed with a labor background during the colonial period (Syafril, 2011).

2) Interior

The pidginization process (and subsequent creolization) of the Tansi language occurred in the interior. This differs from the pidgin and creole languages generally developed in coastal areas (Syafril, 2011). It's happened because of the location of Sawahlunto in the highlands of West Sumatra and surrounded by hills.



**Figure 3. Sawahlunto City Surrounded by Hills (Photo from Wikipedia)**

3) Mining

Closely related to the colonial period and laborers in the Sawahlunto coal mines, the birth of the Tansi language as a pidgin in Sawahlunto is rooted in mining (Syafril, 2011). This arose from interactions between mine laborers with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. As is known, Sawahlunto was a crucial coal mining center in West Sumatra, Indonesia, in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

*b. The Development Phase of the Tansi Language (Creolization)*

Language development is studied internally and externally. Internal aspects can be studied through linguistics, including phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicosemantic. Meanwhile, external aspects can be studied through socio-anthropology, history, sociolinguistics, and psycholinguistics. However, this study focuses on sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics. In the case

of the Tansi language, these internal and external aspects have influenced its characteristics. The characteristic, are: mixture, reduced, and loose codification (Syafril, 2011).

Mixture means a mixed of various languages, accompanied by a mixed of phonology, morphology, syntax, and vocabulary from languages that are not part of a single language family. Reduced is a language (creole) that has a limited language structure and contains fragments of words and sentences from a particular language. Meanwhile, loose codification refers to the degree of flexibility or freedom in the use of grammatical rules or sentence structure (Syafril, 2011).

The development phase of Tansi language can be seen as diagram below:

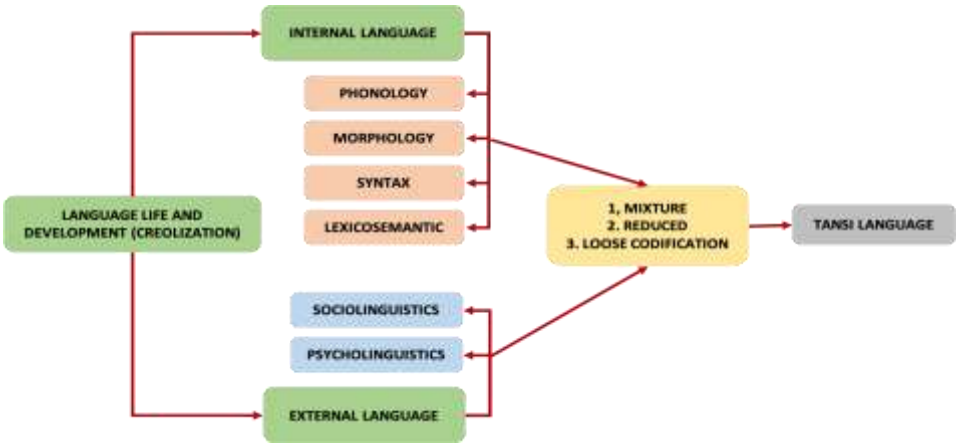



**Figure 4. The Development Phase of the Tansi Language**

The diagram in Figure 3 can be explained into internal and external language as below.

1) Internal Language

a) Phonology

One of the distinctive phonological characteristics of Tansi is that the final vowel is usually followed by a glottal /ʔ/, followed by a change from a closed vowel to an open vowel, such as the vowel /i/ → /I/ in the word *bini* → *binik [binIʔ],* 'wife'. The phonological characteristics of the Tansi language: (1) mixture is the combination of sounds from several languages, with the main influence of the phonology of Minangkabau, Javanese, Malay, and to a small extent Balinese. (2) Reduced is phonological segmentation, like the word *habis* becoming *abis,* 'out of order'. (3) Loose codification is the use of inconsistent phonology, like the word *mbocor* from *bocor,* 'diarrhea' which originate from the Minangkabau language with the addition of the consonant /m/ before /b/ influenced by Javanese phonology (Syafril, 2011).

b) Morphology

The morphology of the Tansi language also has the characteristics of mixture, reduced, and loose codification. (1) Mixture: like a mixed of prefixes and certain language vocabulary, like the prefix *{meng-}* becomes *{m-}* (influenced by Javanese) for the basic word with the initial letter /b/ in word *bae* → *mbae,* 'throw away' (Minangkabau language). (2) Reduced: there is a segmentation of the Indonesian prefix *{meng-}* to *{ng-}*, there is a deletion of *[me-]*. (3) Loose codification: like the use of affixation *beadik,* 'have a sister', it can be without an affix, but experiences the addition of a new word before the noun, such as *punyak* or *ada…nya.* Thus, *beadik* becomes *punyak adek* or *ada adeknya* (Syafril, 2011).

c) Syntax

The sentence structure of the Tansi language also contains two main components, namely subject and predicate like Indonesian. There are also additional components such as objects, complements, and adverbs. The syntactic characteristics of the Tansi language: (1) mixture like in the sentence *ke la tak kecekin,* 'I have told you', there is the word *tak* replacing the subject 'I' (influenced by Javanese) and the word *kecekin,* 'tell/say' (Minangkabau language). (2) Reduced: in the sentence *ndak aku do, ke nye,* 'not me (but) you' where the contradictory form *ndak... do... nye* replaces the meaning *bukan... tetapi....* It does not use the word *tapi,* 'but', it uses the affirmative form *do* and *nye* (Minangkabau language). (3) Loose codification can be seen from two sentences: *ulangan klen la tak ponten* or *ulangan klen la aku ponten,* 'I have graded your test'. The use of the words *aku* and *tak* replace each other in the subject position and have the meaning 'I' (Syafril, 2011).

d) Lexicosemantic

The lexicosemantic description of the Tansi language and its meaning is based on the background that influences the existence of the language's lexicon, such as the region of origin, mining history, social and cultural factors, and the scope of the lexicon use. The lexicosemantic characteristics of Tansi: (1) mixture: like the word *laot,* 'stop for a moment' or 'the call from the coal mine foreman, signaling the end of work time and the laborers return to the tansi'. This word is derived from a combination of the words

*la,* 'already' (Minangkabau) and *uit [ɔut],* 'go out' (Dutch). (2) Reduced, like the word *ntik,* 'later' or 'soon' which has experienced the deletion of */na-/* from the word *'nanti'*. (3) Loose codification, like the word *iwak* which can replace the meaning of '*ikan* (fish)' or '*lauk* (side dish)' (Syafril, 2011).

1) External Language

a) Sociolinguistics

Tansi is used in formal and informal situations, and outside of Sawahlunto. The areas of use of Tansi include home, school, work, worship, public (markets and streets), and electronic media. Third-generation Sawahlunto residents living in the Old City Center (PKLm) and Old City Terrace (TKLm) begin to learn Tansi from childhood, while fourth-generation residents and beyond begin to replace the existence and function of Tansi with other languages (Syafril, 2011). For PKLm dan TKLm area today, the position of the Tansi language that used by the teenagers is in the middle, then Indonesian and *gaul* (slang) language is in the high, and Minangkabau language in the low variety of language (Syafril, 2019).

The mixture, reduced, and loose codification characteristics of Tansi in a sociolinguistic context can be seen in the sentence *dek, ke naikin janjang tu la,* 'bro, lift the ladder'. The sentence contains several compound words that have been halved and are loosely codified. The word *ke,* 'you' comes from the Javanese *koe* which has undergone a reduction of the vowel /o/ and the word *janjang,* 'stairs' from the Minangkabau language (a characteristic mixture). Finally, the position of the subject of a sentence can change (a characteristic of loose codification) (Syafril, 2011).

b) Psycholinguistics

In the realm of psycholinguistics, the Tansi language acquisition has undergone a process of pidginization and creolization since the colonial period. Every coal mine labor in Sawahlunto strives to activate all their speech tools (vocal organs, auditory senses, and even gestures) to communicate despite their different linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

The example of two sentences of Tansi below exhibits characteristics of mixture, reduced, and loose codification in a psycholinguistic context: *"nak, anterin kranjang mamak ni ke buk Rami, yo" [nʌˀ, antərin kranjʌŋ mamʌˀ ni kə bUˀ Rami, yo],* or *"nak, ke anterin kranjang ni sama buk Rami",* 'Son, deliver this basket to Mrs. Rami, (okay).' The word *"buk"* means greeting to a woman of the same age as mother (influenced by Minangkabau language). While the word *"mamak",* 'mother' originates from Malay (characteristic of mixture). The word *"yo"* is the use of a short the word *"iyo",* 'yes' (characteristic of reduced and influenced by the Minangkabau language). The word *"ke"* and *"sama",* 'for' can replace each other. It is the characteristic of loose codification of the Tansi language (Syafril, 2011).

*c. The Extinction/Death of the Tansi Language (Decreolization)*

This language's existence has undergone decreolization over time, meaning the Tansi language has transformed slowly into a standard language, Indonesian (Syafril, 2011). It is due to:

1) standard language (Indonesia): the pressure to normalize the use of Indonesian within the Tansi community,
2) the dominantly used of local language: Minangkabau language,
3) education: the use of Indonesian language as official language in the school,
4) large influx of immigrants (newcomers) from other regions into Sawahlunto, resulting in new cultural acculturation, which has eroded the use of the Tansi language within the city,
5) social activities: like in offices that require the use of Indonesian as the official language,
6) the use of media, including social media that can be easily accessed: there is a flow of communication with different language backgrounds,
7) high language, middle language and low language: the differences of language status hierarchy have placed Tansi as a lower language because it is considered less prestigious. Meanwhile, the official language is considered more prestigious (high language), followed by the more dominant local language or slang (middle language).

## 2. The Preservation of the Tansi Language

*a. Language Documentation*

Documentation of the Tansi language has been carried out through two things: dictionaries and novel.

1) Dictionaries

The preservation of the Tansi language through dictionaries is crucial. Dictionaries serve as a reference source containing vocabulary, meanings, expressions, phrases, and idioms unique to the Tansi language, thus greatly aiding the understanding of this language. Dictionaries also enable the young generation to learn and appreciate the Tansi language as their cultural identity, thus enabling it to be preserved, transmitted, and passed down to future generations as well as enrich the world's linguistic diversity. Therefore, it can be said that dictionaries serve as a medium for maintaining the existence of the Tansi language in the modern era. Example of Tansi dictionary is the *"Sawahlunto Tansi Language Dictionary, Sawahlunto Tansi Dictionary, Sawahlunto Tansi Woordenboek,"* Tansi dictionary in three languages edition by Elsa Putri E. Syafril (2021).

2) Novel

Preserving the Tansi language through novels, such as “Laot” by Elsa Putri E. Syafril (2024), is an important effort to maintain the language's vitality and sustainability. In novel, Tansi serves as a rich and beautiful medium for conveying the stories, values, and experiences of the people who speak the language. Novel can enrich Tansi literature, maintain the language's authenticity, build awareness of its uniqueness, introduce Tansi to diverse audiences, and broaden understanding of the culture. Novels also serve to maintain the continuity and relevance of Tansi in contemporary literature.

*b. Pop Culture*

The pop culture in this study is pop music, chosen because it is an engaging and effective way to strengthen the presence of the Tansi language. Through pop songs in Tansi, emotions, stories, and culture can be expressed through lyrics that reflect the richness of the language. Pop music has broad appeal, especially among the younger generation. By using Tansi in pop music, it can attract the interest and attention of the younger generation to learn, appreciate, and use Tansi. Pop songs in Tansi are also a powerful tool for promoting the language, expanding its use, and preserving its valuable cultural heritage. An example of a Tansi pop song is *"Ndak Ketok-Ketok"* by Kang Nano (2009).

*c. Prestige*

1) *Tonel*

Tonel is the Tansi language theatrical performance with music. It was originally adopted by laborers in the past from Dutch *toneel* performances in Societeit, influenced by their understanding and cultural background. The performing arts of tonel can ensure the Tansi language survival form its endangered, spread the use of its language to wider community, and be recognized by future generation. The use of the Tansi language in Tonel in an artistic context can give the experience to the public about the beauty and power of the Tansi language. Tonel can be served as an educational tool for the younger generation in learning and appreciating the Tansi language. This performance is often performed at various cultural events and festivals, attracting visitors from diverse backgrounds, so the Tansi language can be introduced to people previously unfamiliar with the language. By using Tonel, the preservation of the Tansi language becomes more effective. It is not only enriching the culture of the Tansi people but also ensuring that the language is not forgotten by future generations.

2) *Wayang*

The function of *wayang* is almost the same as that of Tonel. The preservation of the Tansi language through *wayang* has attracted attention through performances based on the cultural background of the descendants of mining laborers in Sawahlunto. The performance is not bound by rules like *wayang* in general; the most important thing is that the message is conveyed. In this case, *wayang* not only serves as a medium for introducing the Tansi language to the wider community and preserving it, but also demonstrates that the culture present in Sawahlunto is also a “creole” with all its distinctive characteristics.

3) Traditional Events

Traditional events are a significant effort in preserving and enriching the Tansi language. In every traditional event, Tansi serves as a central pillar for communication, understanding, and expression of cultural identity. Through traditional events, the young generation can engage in directly in using the language, such as singing, rhymes, lectures, or dialogues. They learn and hone their Tansi language skills, deepening their understanding of its meaning and values. Traditional events also provide a platform for sharing the history, traditions, and myths associated with the language. During traditional events, Tansi is not only a means of communication but also a medium that unites the community. It becomes a crucial opportunity to preserve and honor the Tansi language as a priceless cultural asset. Thus, through traditional events, the preservation of the Tansi language is achieved in a powerful and meaningful way, so that this cultural heritage continues to live amidst changing times.

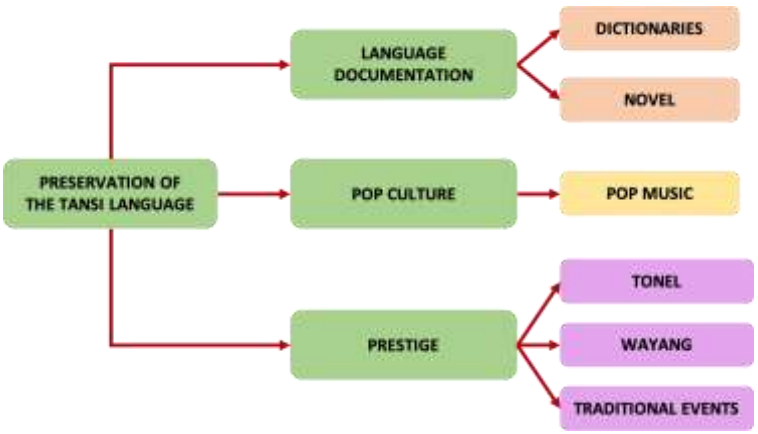



**Figure 5. The Preservation of the Tansi Language**

## CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTION

The existence phases of the Tansi language are: pidginization, creolization, and decreolization. The pidginization is the process of mixing two (or more) languages that occurs naturally because the native speakers of each language do not understand each other. The Tansi language originates from a mixture of various languages, namely Malay, Minangkabau, Javanese, Chinese, Dutch, Sundanese 3, Batak, Madurese, Bugis, and Balinese. The creolization is the process of transforming a pidgin language into a new language that continues to be used from generation to generation. The Tansi language, which has evolved into a creole, is over 100 years old. This language differs from the creoles commonly found on the coast, with a trading background, and a European-based language. Tansi, on the other hand, emerged in the interior of Sumatra, with a colonial labor and coal mine background, and a Malay-based language. The Tansi language has characteristics: mixture, reduced, and loose codification (loose codification is distinctive characteristic of Tansi). The Tansi language development (creolization) is studied internally and externally. Internal aspects through linguistics: phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicosemantic. Meanwhile, external aspects through sociolinguistics, and psycholinguistics.

The Tansi language has undergone decreolization over time, meaning this language has transformed slowly into a standard language. Several factors have contributed to the decreolization of the Tansi language. These factors include the standard language (Indonesian), the dominant regional language (Minangkabau), education, newcomers/immigrants, social activities, media use—including social media, and high- middle-low language. Tansi language preservation is carried out for keeping this language remains present and protecting it from extinction. The preservation processes that have been carried out in three ways. Those are: (a) the process of documenting the Tansi language through dictionaries as well as novel; (b) pop culture, such as pop music; and (c) prestige culture, such as *tonel*, *wayang,* and traditional events.

The other proposed preservation for the Tansi language is documentary films as a form of preservation of the Tansi language through pop culture (as audio and visual way). Furthermore, this theoretical study can be a reference for similar research in other regions and linguistic studies with different backgrounds.

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