

# Marginalization in the Nickel Industry: A Sociolinguistic Study of Communities in Central Halmahera, Indonesia

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**Abstract**—This study aims to examine how language practices reflect power relations, social identity, and forms of marginalization experienced by local communities during the expansion of the nickel industry, especially in the Indonesia Weda Bay Industrial Park (IWIP). The research employed a qualitative approach of a case study conducted in Central Halmahera Regency, North Maluku Province, Indonesia. The 15 informants consisted of community leaders, non-governmental organization (NGO) activists, local government representatives, and local community members. Data were collected from various locations representing industrial centers, coastal regions, and peripheral areas and then analyzed to identify patterns of language use, key terms, and narratives circulating at the local level. The results showed that there was a significant difference in language use between the groups that interacted intensively with the industry and those that were relatively marginalized. Certain narratives contained markers of identity, resistance, and adaptation strategies to socio-economic changes that occur. These findings indicate that language plays a crucial role as an arena for identity negotiation and symbolic resistance, as well as reflecting the power dynamics generated by the industrialization of resources in Central Halmahera Regency.

**Index Terms**—sociolinguistics, marginality, Central Halmahera, nickel industry, social identity

## I. INTRODUCTION

Nickel has become a globally important commodity fueled by two major sectors, namely the stainless-steel industry and electric vehicle (EV) battery manufacturers. Oxford Analytica (2019) noted that over 95% of nickel demand today comes from stainless steel, alloys, and paint. However, the demand for EV batteries is expected to grow significantly in the coming decade. Analysis by Basuhi et al. (2024) states that about 66% of global nickel production is used for stainless steel applications, while the rest is starting to shift towards battery use.

On the supply side, the world's primary nickel production continues to increase. The International Nickel Study Group projected a 4.6% growth in 2024, following a 9.8% increase in 2023, and it was expected to grow 3.8% more in 2025 (Ferreira, 2024). In the global context, Indonesia has emerged as the dominant player. The Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis (IEEFA) reports that Indonesia's nickel production surged from 853,000 tons in 2019 to 2.2 million tons in 2024, an increase of 158% over five years (Peh, 2024).

The government's strategic initiatives, such as the ban on crude ore exports since 2014, have succeeded in encouraging industrial downstreaming. Consequently, the number of domestic smelters expanded substantially, from just two in 2016 to over 60 in 2024, while exports of derivative products have increased significantly to approximately \$38 to \$40 billion USD (GlobalData, 2025). As to reserves, CRI (2024) states that Indonesia accounts for approximately 21% of the world's total nickel reserves, making it the world's richest nickel nation. As a result, Indonesia has transformed into a nickel superpower.

Still, this dominance has also contributed to global oversupply, declining prices, and several environmental and social challenges, including pressures on local communities in the region, such as those in Central Halmahera Regency, North Maluku Province, Indonesia.

Nickel mining in Central Halmahera has become a structural phenomenon that undermines the socio-ecological sustainability of the local community, which has faced serious marginalization since its inception. Large-scale mining activities, particularly in the Indonesia Weda Bay Industrial Park (IWIP) area, have caused environmental damage, including deforestation, agricultural land degradation, and water pollution. This threatens access to traditional natural resources and weakens the local economic structures previously reliant on these resources (Ajam et al., 2023).

Studies from a political ecology perspective confirm that indigenous peoples living near mines are increasingly subject

to unequal power regimes, where legitimacy and profit favor corporations and external actors. Meanwhile, local residents are deprived of control over their own resources (Jamin et al., 2023).

The social impacts are no less serious. A Climate Rights International report shows that nickel mining and processing activities have led to water pollution, threatening the right to clean water and access to traditional livelihoods. This has ultimately forced local communities to lose their identity as part of the ecosystem that sustained them (CRI, 2024). This mining project has generated a new narrative in a broader context: communities are now viewed not as stable village entities anchored in their homeland, but as citizens subtly and systematically “expelled” by an industrialization process that has yet to provide justice or welfare to the local populace.

The nickel industry in Central Halmahera can be analyzed from multiple perspectives, including the impact of mining activities on community marginalization. From a sociolinguistic perspective, marginalization is not only driven by economic policies or structures but also by the ways language is used to determine who can speak, how they are heard, and how their speech influences decisions. Large-scale nickel industries, such as PT Indonesia Weda Bay Industrial Park, use technocratic language like “added value,” “downstreaming,” or “green industry,” which local communities frequently struggle to understand, limiting their participation in formal forums like Environmental Impact Analysis consultations or partnership negotiations.

Moreover, this language shapes the image of local communities by framing them in a way that benefits the dominant party, such as labelling them as “an investment impediment” or “unproductive.” Such narratives not only create stigma but also normalize exclusion from the decision-making process. In addition, complex technical documentation limits public understanding of rights and policy implementation, creating linguistic capital inequities that benefit the authorities (Ajam et al., 2023).

In this way, language becomes an arena for struggles over meaning that shape the public perception and limit alternative narratives. Sociolinguistic analysis can uncover these hidden layers of marginalization while also highlighting communities' efforts to build counter-discourses in defense of their rights and identities amid the expansion of the nickel industry.

Sociolinguistic literature emphasizes that language is not merely a means of communication but also a social practice that shapes, reproduces, and negotiates power relations (Hymes, 2013). In the context of extractivism, such as nickel mining, language serves as the primary medium through which “progress,” “order,” or “partnership” are interpreted, as well as how the voices of local communities are framed and constrained.

Fairclough (1992) argues that discourse does not simply represent reality but also constructs social relations, identity, and knowledge. Critical discourse analysis demonstrates how policy texts, press releases, and media coverage create a “discourse sequence” that centralizes the interests of dominant actors (state and corporations) while normalizing local sacrifices as a reasonable “social cost.” When labels such as “unproductive society” or “investment inhibitor” are attached to residents maintaining subsistence or customary practices, discourse functions as a social technology that delegitimizes their claims to living space. At this point, the concept of symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1991) operates seamlessly: those who control definitions such as “disrupted” versus “affected,” “relocation” versus “eviction,” and “partner” versus “masked laborer” often also control the horizon of possible policies.

The link between language and identity clarifies the cultural dimension of marginalization. Identity, according to Du Gay and Hall (1996), is a discursive construct that is constantly negotiated in power dynamics. When official terminology removes the local identity markers, such as replacing customary toponymy with industrial nomenclature, it is not only a semantic change but also a symbolic repositioning of residents from “owners of local knowledge of their space” to “beneficiaries” of extractive policy. This process causes the local communities to experience identity dislocation, or the feeling of being “alien in their own land,” as the language of policy and media provides no vocabulary to articulate ecological damage, relational loss (between human and nature), and moral claims to justice.

Park's (1928) classic framework on the “marginal man” helps us understand the social implications of marginalization. Park conceptualizes marginalization as a position at the edge of dominant structures, producing role dissonance, limited access to symbolic resources, and frequent disconnection from institutional networks. In the context of mining, local residents are pushed into a “social frontier zone.” They are compelled to adapt to the monetary economies, industrial area policies, and working hours regimes, yet lack adequate linguistic resources, mediation, and recognition to negotiate equally. When the dominant discourse governs the definition of “fair partnership” or “public consultation,” participation can be reduced to a procedural formality rather than a practice of substantive deliberation (Fairclough, 1992; Park, 1928).

Furthermore, sociolinguistics provides a micro-level perspective that complements the macro analyses of power. In everyday interactions, such as village meetings, environmental consultations, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) training, lexicon choices, turn-to-speech arrangements, and translation of technical terms, determine who is understood and who is considered “orderly”.

Studies on the relationship between language, power, and marginalization in the context of extractive industries have been widely conducted in various regions. These findings provide an important foundation for research in Central Halmahera. Rodríguez-Labajos et al. (2017) show that mining conflicts are not only about the distribution of resources but are also about the language of claims and the categorization of actors that govern who is perceived as victim or perpetrator. This approach aligns with Warburton (2024), who demonstrates that the rise of the nickel industry in Indonesia has been framed through discourses of nationalism and industrialization. While emphasizing resource

sovereignty, this narrative frequently excludes the concerns of local people who have been directly impacted by environmental and social issues.

The asymmetry of language and information remains one of the principal barriers to public participation in the decision-making process. Daniel and Hapsari (2019) identify that environmental documents often use technical and bureaucratic language that is inaccessible to affected residents, limiting their ability to understand the policy implications. In this context, Szabo et al. (2023) highlight how anti-mining activists construct a counter-discourse by framing “cultural heritage” and “health risk” to challenge the dominant pro-investment narrative.

Linguistic marginalization is also reinforced by how policies and the media frame mining issues. According to Lyytimäki et al. (2021), local media plays a central role in shaping public perception, as word choices such as “progress” or “threat” influence support for or opposition to mining projects.

Collectively, these studies demonstrate that research on Indonesia’s nickel industry has thus far focused on environmental, economic, and social impacts, including the issue of public participation in the licensing process (Van der Ent et al., 2013; Rodríguez-Labajos & Özkaynak, 2017; Daniel & Hapsari, 2019; Murdifin et al., 2019; Lyytimäki et al., 2021; Naryono, 2023; Szabo et al., 2023; Warburton, 2024). However, few studies explicitly link the marginalization of local communities to linguistic and discursive mechanisms in the context of the nickel mining industry.

Language is often treated merely as a tool for communication or advocacy, rather than as an instrument of power that produces, reproduces, and maintains relations of domination. As a result, the sociolinguistic dimensions of marginalization, such as linguistic distance, identity framing, and linguistic capital inequality, remain underexplored, particularly in strategic locations such as Central Halmahera.

Therefore, this study contributes to the literature by employing a critical sociolinguistic approach to examine the marginalization of local communities due to nickel mining. First, it conceptualizes language not only as a medium of information exchange but also as a mechanism that regulates access, participation, and legitimacy in decision-making. Second, this study examines Central Halmahera, particularly Indonesia Weda Bay Industrial Park (IWIP), to reveal how technocratic vocabulary, media framing, and policy discourse generate linguistic distance that weakens the bargaining position of local communities. Third, this study integrates power theory and language (Foucault, 1982), critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992), and the concept of discursive identity (Du Gay & Hall, 1996) to explain how socio-economic exclusion is produced and sustained through language.

Thus, the main question of this study is how, from a sociolinguistic standpoint, do nickel mining operations cause the local population to become marginalized? This question is the basis for exploring the discursive mechanisms operating in the interactions between the state, corporations, the media, and local communities, while opening space for the formulation of more inclusive policy strategies and linguistic mediation in nickel mining regions.

## II. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study strategy to gain an in-depth understanding of the marginalization of local communities resulting from nickel mining activities in Central Halmahera, analyzed from a sociolinguistic perspective. This approach was selected because it allowed the researcher to capture social, cultural, and linguistic contexts holistically, as well as to explore the meanings constructed by local actors in their interactions with the state, corporations, and the media (Palinkas et al., 2015).

The research location included several villages around the Weda Bay Industrial Park that experienced direct socio-ecological and discursive impacts from nickel mining. The research informants were selected purposively to ensure a broad representation of experiences, including affected community members, indigenous leaders, local government representatives, company spokespersons, local journalists, and environmental activists (Ajam et al., 2023).

Data were collected through three techniques: (1). in-depth interviews to explore language perceptions and practices, (2). participant observations at public forums and village meetings to record the use of technical terms and inter-stakeholder interactions, and (3). document analysis of policies, partnership agreements, press releases, and media coverage that contained framing discourses about mines and local communities.

A thematic analysis was conducted with reference to the framework of Fairclough's (1995) Critical Discourse Analysis, which includes the dimensions of text, discursive practice, and social practice. Interpretation of the findings drew on Foucault's (1982) theory of power and language, Du Gay and Hall's (1996) discursive identity theory, and Park's (1928) concept of marginalization. The validity of the data was ensured through source triangulation, method triangulation, and member checking. At the same time, research ethics were fulfilled by obtaining informed consent and protecting the confidentiality of informants' identities.

## III. RESULTS

### *Sociolinguistic Review of Marginality in Nickel Mining*

#### *A. Marginalization Processes*

The expansion of the Indonesia Weda Bay Industrial Park (IWIP) nickel mining industry in Central Halmahera has brought significant social, cultural, and economic changes to local communities. Behind the rhetoric of development and

promises of improved welfare lie dynamics of inequality in power relations that widen the distance between local communities, particularly indigenous communities, and global capitalist actors. In this context, language functions not only as a means of communication but also as an instrument of power that reproduces forms of marginalization, both symbolic and structural. A sociolinguistic approach provides an analytical framework to understand how the relationship between language, power, and local identity becomes intertwined in the process of marginalization.

Nickel mining in Central Halmahera has not only triggered ecological degradation and socio-economic transformation, but it has also introduced new patterns in land control and transfer. One concrete form of marginalization is the practice of companies purchasing land at prices far below its real value. This process is not merely an economic transaction but also a part of the structural marginalization that occurs within unequal power relations between residents, the state, and corporations. In line with Foucault's (1972) views, control of discourse allows those in power to frame reality to their advantage, including legitimizing the practice of land grabbing through administratively packaged and legalistic language.

Interviews with several residents of the Lelilef Sawai and Sagea villages revealed that most did not fully understand the purpose or legal implications of the land transactions. One of the community leaders in Lelilef recounted:

At that time, we were told to sign a letter; they said it was only compensation for the plants. But it turned out that it had also included the land. The price was only one million per hectare. We didn't know if it was a permanent land relinquishment letter. (Anonymous, Lelilef Sawai Village, May 19, 2025)

This testimony illustrates how limited access to legal and administrative language weakens the bargaining position of local communities. From Fairclough's (1992) perspective, this reflects the operations of dominant discourse that silences the voices of subordinate groups through non-inclusive technical language.

Furthermore, such communication practices also affect the construction of local people's identities. According to Du Gay and Hall (1996), identity is formed through language and discourse that positions the subject in a particular social relation. In this case, the company's official narrative that regards the community merely as landowners to be economically "empowered" shifts their historical identity as stewards of land and forests into that of mere recipients of financial compensation. This distorted identity ultimately reinforces marginalization, as it severs people's connection to the cultural and ecological foundations that are the source of legitimacy for their claims.

Thus, marginalization in Central Halmahera occurs through interrelated mechanisms: discourse control, the use of technical language that limits participation, and identity reconstruction that benefits the authorities. Sociolinguistic analysis allows us to uncover how language becomes an arena for meaning, a place where global political-economic interests can subtly but systematically erode local sovereignty in the process of agreement.

This imbalance of understanding facilitates transactions that are detrimental to residents in the long run. In the context of mining, language is not just a means of communication but also an instrument of power that shapes and regulates society's understanding of social reality. The technocratic language used by companies, such as "smelter," "mining business license," "compensation," or "social responsibility," becomes part of the dominant discourse, creating a symbolic distance between local communities and decision makers. This condition causes information inequality while weakening the bargaining position of local communities in social and economic negotiation forums.

When these terms are not translated into the local language or explained in a way that is accessible for residents to understand, a phenomenon called "linguistic asymmetry" arises. This is an imbalance in access and understanding of language that has implications for inequality in social participation. For example, residents of Lelilef or Sagea villages, who have limited access to legal and technical mining discourse, are often marginalized from the public consultation process or project socialization.

Furthermore, the language used by companies in communicating with residents also often includes terms such as "empowerment," "partnership," and "regional development." However, these terms often lack a clear operational meaning in practice. As a young man from Sagea stated:

They informed us that this land would be used for industrial estates, and we could also work there later. But until now, there has been no clarity. The land was sold at very low prices, and we lost the hamlet that used to be a place for gardening. (Anonymous, Sagea Village, May 19, 2025)

This quote shows how the narrative of development is used to legitimize the takeover of land at low prices while obscuring the loss of people's sovereignty over their living space. Language plays an important role in the symbolic erasure of local identity and history. Place names, customary sites, or terms in regional languages such as Sawai and Tobelo are often omitted or replaced in mining concession maps and company legal documents. This process reflects the practice of neocolonialism, where local meanings are removed by the discourse of extractive capitalism.

For local communities, land is not just an economic asset but part of their identity, history, and social relations. However, the formal negotiation system does not accommodate these values. A traditional local Weda figure said,

We have land, but it is more than just land. A sacred stone stood there, where our ancestors once held ceremonies. Now heavy machines have leveled it flat and replaced it with only two million dollars. Can sacredness, memory, and ancestral value ever truly be measured by money? (Waibulan, Weda District, May 19, 2025)

This explanation illustrates clearly how the concept of value is narrowed in the logic of mining capitalism: land is calculated solely in numbers, not through complex historical and cultural relations. In many cases, local narratives about customary lands, customary boundaries, and spiritual significance to natural spaces are ignored by the language of state law or corporate economic narratives. This condition demonstrates that marginalization occurs not only materially but

also through the removal of local voices and narratives from public discussion spaces.

However, language has also become a symbolic instrument of resistance for marginalized communities. In several community protests in Central Halmahera, particularly among the Sawai indigenous community, the use of customary terms such as *soa* (“local kinship unit defending land rights”), *hak tanah* (“land rights”), or *tanah warisan leluhur* (“ancestral heritage land”) constitutes a form of linguistic resistance to the dominant discourse imposed by the state and corporations.

In addition, the use of regional languages in community forums serves as an effort to maintain traditional social identities and relations threatened by the logic of industrialization. This shows that language is not merely passive but rather an active political space to defend and reclaim local meanings.

#### *B. Residents' Conversations About Marginalization in the Nickel Industry*

In sociolinguistic studies, language is not only understood as a means of conveying information or a medium of communication between individuals but also as a symbolic arena where power, identity, and social ideology operate. Language reflects and shapes social structures, serving as an important instrument for articulating experiences, building collective identities, and responding to inequality. In the context of rapid social change, such as that triggered by the expansion of extractive industries, language plays a key role in the emergence of conflict and resistance, both in subtle and explicit forms.

In Central Halmahera, the presence of large-scale nickel mining industries such as the Indonesia Weda Bay Industrial Park (IWIP) industrial estate has triggered drastic changes in the socio-economic structure of local communities, including their relationship to land, natural resources, and living space. These changes not only have material impacts but are also manifested in everyday speech patterns and interactions. Social tensions, anxiety about the future, feelings of marginalization, and anger towards the state and mining companies are often not voiced in formal forums but are expressed spontaneously in informal spaces.

Simple conversations in kitchens, gardens, coffee shops, or between residents in hamlets and coasts record forms of dissatisfaction, disappointment, and criticism of the inequality they experience. Although spontaneous, these expressions reflect the collective experience of land grabbing, the loss of sovereignty over living space, and the unfair distribution of economic benefits. Thus, everyday language serves as a medium of meaning-making, a guardian of collective memory, and a means of resistance to the dominant narratives brought by the state and corporations.

Hernemus Takuling, a resident of Lelilef Sawai Village, described this situation in a gentle but firm tone:

This is my last farmland. Since the mining company arrived in 2009, our lands have been taken away one by one. If this land is sold, where will our children and grandchildren farm in the future? What will we eat if the mine eventually closes? I would rather live as a farmer. Working on the farm may seem simple, but it gives us sovereignty over our own land. I am not interested in working in the mines. (Hernemus Takuling, Lelilef Sawai Village, May 25, 2025).

For Hernemus, farmland is not only a source of livelihood, but it is also a heritage, a space of identity, and a symbol of sustainability. His concerns reflect the anxiety of many locals who feel marginalized by industrial expansion that ignores the long-term well-being of local communities. He explained that the land was bought at very low prices, even for the size of one meter by one meter; the price was not comparable to that of a pack of cigarettes.

This speech illustrates deep disappointment with low land prices and the loss of access to local food sources. Residents use metaphorical phrases such as “like buying fried bananas” to satirize the logic of corporate capitalists, who are considered to devalue the land.

The presence of the mining industry in Central Halmahera not only changed the physical landscape but also weakened the bargaining position of the local communities, especially farmers. Hernemus revealed that the land pricing process was unfair. Although presented as a “collective agreement,” the community was not actively involved in the negotiations. They were only informed of the price set by the company and the government.

The prices offered varied but remained extremely low, ranging from IDR 6,000 to IDR 9,000 per square meter. According to Hernemus, this amount was not even enough to buy basic necessities such as one kilogram of cooking oil. This situation reflects structural inequality in the economic relationship between local farmers and mining companies.

For Hernemus, this condition was essentially a form of eviction and deprivation of land rights. However, pressure from the authorities and the threat of criminalization led most residents to surrender. This shows that the language used by residents not only reflects powerlessness but also serves as a medium to voice hidden forms of resistance. In this context, Hernemus's experience and speech reveal the unequal power dynamics in agrarian relations in the mining industrial area.

A similar thing was experienced by one of the traditional leaders in Gemaf Village, who is still trying to defend his inherited ancestral land. However, the pressure to sell the land to the Indonesia Weda Bay Industrial Park (IWIP) mining company systematically continues, often disguised under the company's Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) terms like “social partnership.” According to the local leader:

I had one plot of land. The company, through IWIP's CSR staff, came and offered a price they had determined themselves, an extremely low one. I didn't want to sell it, but if I refused, they would keep pressuring me. This is a form of expulsion, only done subtly, using money and social pressure. Now, my farm can no longer be cultivated properly. The soil is no longer fertile. Every day, dust from mining activities covers it, and when it rains, the flood carries mud into the garden. The plants are dying slowly. So, even though I still have land, I can't

use it to survive. If that were the case, we would have left on our own because, without fertile soil and the garden produce, we would not be able to live here. (Anonymous, Gemaf Village, May 20, 2025)

This statement suggests that the loss of ecological access can lead to the elimination of living spaces, both physically and socially. From a critical sociolinguistic and ethnographic perspective of the environment, such utterances reflect a form of hidden resistance as well as an awareness of the inequality of power relations between indigenous peoples and extractive industrial companies. In addition to land loss, the carrying capacity of the land has drastically decreased due to pollution caused by industrial activities. Dust from mining activities covers the surface of the soil and leaves, while in the rainy season, water mixed with mud from industrial areas flows into residents' gardens, triggering flooding and damaging crops.

In practice, land pricing is carried out unilaterally by companies without a fair negotiation mechanism. This condition is described as a form of indirect eviction, where people "leave on their own" due to the loss of the ability to access and manage their land. A resident noted that while the presence of the mine did provide them access in the form of road infrastructure, the benefits of the development were only enjoyed by a handful of people, most of whom came from outside parties. As one resident put it, "Since the mining company arrived, the roads have been paved with asphalt, but its benefits were not enjoyed by the local residents; even the jobs were largely taken by outsiders."

This speech reflects the sense of marginalization felt by the local community, where the infrastructure development brought by the mining industry is not proportional to the improvement of the residents' welfare. The structure of the contrasting sentence "Since the mining company arrived... but..." shows a form of passive resistance to the development narrative brought by companies and governments. One resident said, "In the past, we could go into the forest to collect firewood, agarwood, and forest nutmeg. Now everything has been fenced. We have become strangers in our own land" (Anonymous, Gemaf Village, May 21, 2025).

This statement indicates a shift in spatial relations as well as the emergence of alienation from their living space. The phrase "strangers in their own land" serves as a form of identification of the experience of marginalization, where people feel a loss of control over indigenous territories that have been part of their lives for generations. This aligns with another statement: "If it weren't for a mine, no one cared about this land. We used to shout, but no one heard. Now it's just crowded because of the nickel." This speech contains an implicit critique of the state and the logic of extractive economics, highlighting how people were often ignored before the mines arrived yet became the most affected once the industry entered.

Max, a fisherman and farmer from Gemaf Village, shared his bitter experience while fishing in the waters of Tanjung Uli, a traditional fishing area used by the Gemaf and Sawai people for generations. He recalled being expelled directly by the security forces consisting of company officers, police, and the Indonesia Weda Bay Industrial Park (IWIP) employees: "When I was fishing there, suddenly a speedboat carrying security officers, police, and IWIP employees came. They immediately expelled us, saying that the area was forbidden for any activities" (Max, Gemaf Village, May 21, 2025).

For Max, the sea and the farm are the two main pillars of his life. Both are sources of livelihood that he works on every day to meet the needs of his family. However, since the mining company started operating, both have been slowly eroded. Some residents began to abandon the traditions of farming and preparing sago, turning instead to company labor, even if it meant giving up their long-established ecological relationship with the land and the sea.

What is more worrying is that the once-clear sea is now polluted by industrial waste. Max recalled one morning when the usually bluish-white color of the seawater turned deep black. He suspected that the company deliberately discharged oil into the sea, as every time he returned from fishing, the bottom of his boat was always coated with a deep black stain. According to him, the incident occurred around January 29, 2021, when the company dumped oil into the Ake Sake River, which then flowed into the sea and polluted fishing areas in the Veta waters.

#### IV. DISCUSSION

##### *A. Language and Power Analysis*

In Central Halmahera, especially around the Indonesia Weda Bay Industrial Park (IWIP) area, language has become a strategic instrument to manage public perception and secure social legitimacy. Mining companies and local governments often take advantage of development discourses packaged through technocratic terms such as "nickel downstreaming," "strengthening global competitiveness," or "sustainable industrial transformation." This narrative appears consistently in press releases, billboards, annual reports, and official forums, thus forming a discursive hegemony that places mining projects as an undeniable symbol of progress (Fairclough, 1992).

In several documented public meetings, local communities reported that the company's presentation materials were delivered in formal Indonesian, interspersed with industrial and English technical terms such as "nickel matte," "carbon capture," and "energy efficiency." These were generally presented without simple explanations or translations into regional languages such as Tobelo, Maba, or the local community languages. This shows how technocratic language becomes a barrier to substantive participation, because not all residents have adequate 'linguistic capital' to understand, let alone respond to, the discussion (Bourdieu, 1991). These findings align with Foucault's view (Foucault, 1982; Foucault & Deleuze, 1977) that power operates through the control of discourse: whoever controls the language also controls the direction of the conversation and the boundaries of what can be debated.

A similar phenomenon is observed in Morowali, Central Sulawesi, one of the world's nickel industry hubs, where the narrative of “becoming a global industrial hub” is reproduced and amplified through local media, official government publications, and corporate campaigns. Residents who attempt to object to the expansion of industrial estates are often confronted with technical terminology such as “smelter capacity,” “tailing management,” or “carbon neutrality target.” These terms carry major implications for the environment and social life but are rarely explained in language accessible to the public. As a result, the space for public debate narrows to only those who have mastered the technical language, while most residents are marginalized from the policy deliberation process (Van Dijk, 1993).

This condition shows that language mastery is not merely a matter of communication but also a representation of power and access to critical information. In both Central Halmahera and Morowali, linguistic inequality affects the asymmetry of relations between corporations, governments, and communities. Technocratic language that is not adapted to the local context not only obscures the negative impacts of mining, such as pollution, loss of productive land, and shifts in social structures, but also limits the opportunity for communities to articulate their interests within officially recognized frameworks. In other words, language control functions as a subtle yet effective mechanism of marginalization in the context of nickel industrialization in Indonesia.

### *B. Discourse Analysis: Mining and Framing Reality*

Discourse analysis is crucial to understanding how language shapes, frames, and directs public perceptions of mining activities. Fairclough (1992) emphasizes that discourse is not merely a series of words but a social practice that functions to build and maintain power. In the context of mining, discourses produced by companies and governments are often designed to present a positive image of the industry while obscuring or eliminating alternative narratives that highlight negative socio-ecological impacts.

One commonly used strategy is “economic growth framing,” where mining is constructed as a driving force for regional development. Narratives such as “downstream nickel for the welfare of the nation,” “Indonesia becomes a key player in the global supply chain,” or “economic growth based on mineral resources” are often repeated in official speeches, press releases, and media campaigns (Bebbington et al., 2018). Meanwhile, issues such as environmental degradation, land conflicts, or the loss of traditional livelihoods tend to be presented minimally or even completely ignored in the official discourse.

In Central Halmahera, official discourse on Indonesia Weda Bay Industrial Park (IWIP) often highlights figures such as the amount of foreign investment, jobs created, or the export value of nickel sulfate for electric vehicle batteries. The presentation of such information builds a narrative of modernization and progress that is difficult to deny, as it is framed within national interest and the global energy transition (Freeman & Pye, 2022). However, local voices highlighting water pollution, the loss of sago forests, or pressures on local culture rarely enter formal communication channels, creating a discourse that privileges corporate and state perspectives over those of the community.

This phenomenon aligns with van Dijk's (1993) view that discourse functions as an ideological tool: it not only conveys information but also determines what is considered legitimate knowledge and what is considered irrelevant. In the case of nickel mining, the dominant discourse equates progress with industrialization and foreign investment, while marginalizing the concept of sustainability-based welfare and sovereignty over local resources.

### *C. Language Interaction Analysis: A Meeting of Cultures, Power, and Meaning*

Language interaction analysis is essential for understanding the dynamics of communication between local communities and mining companies, especially in contexts involving language, culture, and power differences. According to Gumperz (1982), language interaction not only conveys a message; it also shapes and reflects social relationships, including power relations between the parties involved. Language becomes a medium through which meaning is negotiated, social roles are defined, and the legitimacy of a party is constructed or contested.

In the context of nickel mining in Central Halmahera, meetings between companies that use formal Indonesian mixed with industrial technical terms with local communities who communicate in regional languages such as Tobelo, Sawai, or other indigenous community languages often create linguistic distance. When companies hold public consultations on environmental impact assessments or project socialization meetings, presentation materials usually use terminology such as “tailings disposal system,” “carbon neutrality target,” or “downstream processing,” which have no direct equivalent in the local language. As a result, the public does not always understand the technical implications of the policies or plans presented, even if they have been formally “engaged” (Tsing, 2005).

This gap magnifies the risk of misunderstandings and conflicts. For example, residents may assume that the promise of “waste management according to international standards” means that there will be no pollution at all, when technically it means pollution within certain tolerance limits according to industry standards. This difference in meaning can trigger disappointment later when environmental impacts begin to be felt but are considered “still within safe limits” by companies.

From a critical sociolinguistic perspective, this phenomenon suggests that language interaction is never neutral. The party that controls “linguistic capital” (Bourdieu, 1991). It has the advantage of controlling the flow of the conversation and establishing the meaning of key terms. Companies can set a discussion agenda, choose vocabulary that minimizes risk perception, and avoid terms that can trigger resistance. Meanwhile, local communities that do not master technical language are left in a defensive position, relying on outside interpretations, or even forced to remain silent for fear of

misunderstanding.

In addition, differences in communication styles also shape interaction. In local cultures, communication tends to prioritize politeness, avoidance of confrontation, and the use of metaphors or proverbs to express criticism. In contrast, corporate communication styles tend to be direct, linear, and data-driven. This inconsistency can lead companies to dismiss public criticism as “irrelevant” or “not fact-based,” when in fact the criticism is rooted in real experiences that are difficult to translate into formal technical language (Li, 2007).

Therefore, the analysis of language interaction reveals that the marginalization of local communities in the context of mining does not occur only through economic policies or structures but also through the dynamics of everyday communication. This is where the urgency lies: presenting linguistic mediation mechanisms, such as community translators and cultural facilitators, as well as adaptation of materials into local languages. These mechanisms ensure that language does not become a barrier to participation but rather a bridge that builds more equal relationships and mutual understanding.

#### *D. Language and Identity Analysis: The Battle for Meaning Amid Industrial Expansion*

Language and identity analysis offers an important lens for understanding how linguistic interactions shape, change, or even erode the identities of local communities in the context of large-scale nickel mining. Hall (Du Gay & Hall, 1996) emphasizes that identity is not fixed but rather a social construct that is continuously negotiated through language and discourse. In spaces where economic, political, and cultural forces converge, such as in Central Halmahera, language becomes the main arena where identity formation takes place.

In practice, mining companies and the supporting actors often deploy specific labels to describe local communities, such as “indigenous peoples,” “traditional communities,” or “beneficiary communities.” At first glance, these terms may appear neutral or even positive, yet behind them is a framework of meanings that can shape people’s self-perception. For example, the term “beneficiary society” positions the community as a passive party, merely receiving rather than actively shaping the direction of development. Similarly, the term “traditional society” often evokes romanticized images of attachment to nature but also implicitly limits them to roles that are deemed “appropriate” by outsiders (Li, 2014).

The construction of identity through such language directly influences how people perceive themselves. When official narratives repeatedly position them as recipients or objects of development, this framing can internalize their sense of powerlessness and erode their identity as political subjects entitled to determine their own fate. Conversely, in some cases, communities strategically adopt this language to negotiate rights, for example, by reinforcing claims as “indigenous peoples” to gain formal recognition or legal protection (Bebbington et al., 2018).

A concrete example can be found in Central Halmahera, where communities surrounding the Weda Bay Industrial Park are often described in corporate media as “beneficiaries of the progress of the nickel industry.” In this narrative, employment in factories or mines is constructed as the benchmark of progress, while traditional livelihood practices such as sago cultivation, hunting, or fishing are often portrayed as less productive activities. Such language not only frames public perspective but also shifts the value standards by which communities assess their own well-being.

The analysis of language and identity in this context reveals an ongoing struggle over meaning between the dominant narratives brought by the company and the counter-narrative articulated by communities. Some communities reject labels they perceive as restrictive and instead cultivate new collective identities that emphasize sovereignty over land, forests, and natural resources. Such resistance is often expressed in advocacy forums, alternative media, or customary gatherings, where local language and traditional terms are used to articulate visions of development that differ from the industrial logic (Tsing, 2005).

## V. CONCLUSION

The marginalization of local communities in Central Halmahera due to large-scale nickel mining occurs through a combination of ecological, social, economic, and mutually reinforcing linguistic and discourse mechanisms. Language functions not only as a means of communication but also as a strategic instrument to regulate power relations between indigenous communities, such as the Sawai people, and both the state and mining corporations. The use of technocratic terms such as “smelter,” “mining business license,” “downstream,” or “partnership” conveyed in formal language without translation or adaptation to local language creates linguistic distance. This distance produces asymmetrical understanding and participation, weakening local residents’ bargaining positions in official forums, obscuring their rights to land and sea, and legitimizing the land takeovers at prices far below their real value.

Additionally, discursive actions taken by businesses and governments, like labeling “beneficiary communities” or substituting industrial nomenclature for traditional toponyms, contribute to the symbolic erasure of local identity and the repositioning of locals as passive participants in development. This dynamic is reinforced by media framing and policies that prioritize narratives of economic growth, downstreaming, and the energy transition, while minimizing or eliminating the voices of residents who criticize environmental degradation, the loss of farmland and forests, or restrictions on access to the sea. Therefore, this study emphasizes that critical sociolinguistic approaches are essential to unravel how language, discourse, and everyday interactions function both as arenas and as instruments in the formation, reproduction, and perpetuation of structural injustices in extractive industrial areas such as Central Halmahera. At the same time, such approaches can open up opportunities for formulating policy strategies and linguistic mediation practices that are more

equitable and contextually responsive to affected communities.

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