INDONESIAN JOURNAL OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS
Vol. 16, No. 2, September 2026, pp. 318-329

Available online at:
https://ijal.upi.edu/index.php/ijal/article/view/273
https://doi.org/10.17509/62zt4r14

The Polahi community as a synchronic baseline for investigating language change in Gorontalo

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ABSTRACT

Tracing diachronic change in a language with predominantly oral transmission is a complex methodological task. This research explores this challenge in the Gorontalo language by examining the impact of cultural mobility and Arabic loanwords. Using an integrated qualitative approach that combines linguistic and ethnographic analysis of 8 informants in the Gorontalo region and analysing the data through semiotics and synchronic-diachronic comparison, this study proposes using the isolated Polahi indigenous community as a "synchronic baseline." The Polahi language, which exhibits lexical stagnation and denotative semantics, is proposed as a proxy for a more archaic form of Gorontalo. A comparison with the language of dynamic mainstream communities reveals that cultural mobility, significantly driven by Islamization, has triggered profound linguistic changes. The study identifies 416 Arabic loanwords that have undergone systematic phonological adaptation and radical semantic shifts. The transformation of meaning in key terms, such as *Syaib* (شَيْب), 'white hair,' into *sebe*, 'father,' and *Ajūz* (عَجُوز), 'old woman,' into *ajus*, 'mother,' serves as an important indicator of this process. This research concludes that cultural mobility significantly drives the restructuring of the Gorontalo linguistic landscape and offers the "synchronic baseline" model as an effective method for analysing language evolution in non-literate societies, with important practical implications for future language documentation and lexicography projects.

Keyword: Cultural mobility; Polahi people; synchronic-diachronic

Received:	**Revised:**
29 September 2025	5 August 2026
Accepted:	**Published:**
9 September 2026	26 September 2026

How to cite (in APA style):
Soga, Z. (2026). The Polahi community as a synchronic baseline for investigating language change in Gorontalo. *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics, 16*(2), 318-329. https://doi.org/10.17509/62zt4r14

INTRODUCTION

Language and culture are inseparable elements of a society's life. Language not only functions as a tool for communication but also serves as an essential medium for preserving cultural values and reinforcing collective identity (Bonilla & Morales-Doyle, 2024). For the Gorontalo people, this reciprocal relationship between language and culture creates a highly complex phenomenon. This complexity is further deepened by the internal dynamics of indigenous groups such as the Polahi people and by strong external influences, particularly the introduction of Arabic through the spread of Islam, which offers a rich site for investigating language contact and lexical diffusion.

A key actor in this cultural landscape is the Polahi community, one of the indigenous groups that still exists in Gorontalo Province. History records them as a group that consciously chose to self-isolate in the remote inland forests. This choice was not merely avoidance but active resistance to the domination and oppressive power of Dutch colonialism (Kulimba et al., 2019). Their separation from mainstream society has shaped a distinctive cultural pattern, evident in their practices, belief systems, and unique language (Lo Bianco, 2010). The Polahi people's linguistic uniqueness lies in a communication structure that tends to be literal and denotative. This linguistic pattern directly reflects their social isolation, which has limited their interaction with the more complex, layered systems of meaning that have developed in mainstream communities (Byers-Heinlein et al., 2025). This straightforward system of values, norms, and communication is a key characteristic that distinguishes the Polahi from other Gorontalo groups, making them a crucial case study that may offer a window into earlier forms of the region's

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language and culture. However, this assumption requires careful empirical examination.

At the same time, the broader linguistic and cultural landscape of Gorontalo has been significantly shaped by Islamization, which has been ongoing since the 16th century (Pomalingo & Rahim, 2019). The spread of Islam brought Arabic, which greatly enriched the local vocabulary, especially in religious, social, and cultural domains. This borrowing process is evident in various terms now common in daily conversation, such as *yukul* (to eat), *sebe* (father), and *ajus* (mother) (Soga, 2021a). Interestingly, this borrowing was not a crude adoption but a sophisticated adaptation that aligns with established principles of historical linguistics and semantic change. Borrowed verbs, for instance, do not follow Arabic grammatical tenses (such as *fi'il madhi and mudhari'*) but are contextualised through the addition of specific Gorontalo adverbs, like so *yukul* (has eaten) or *bayukul* (is eating). This phenomenon indicates a profound process of phonological, morphological, and semantic adaptation, where foreign linguistic elements are integrated into the local linguistic system (Hnatyuk, 2025).

Previous studies concerning the Polahi people have predominantly focused on their social and cultural practices, which can be grouped into three main themes. First, regarding social interaction, Pomalingo et al. (2025), Kadir (2024), and Dano (2021) have examined the Polahi's interaction with wider Gorontalo society, highlighting gradual shifts in their social isolation. Second, regarding subsistence and territoriality, Kulimba et al. (2019) and Bojangan (2025) have examined how the Polahi manage their nomadic agricultural lands and indigenous rights. Finally, a significant portion of the literature specifically examines their kinship structures, particularly the unique tradition of consanguineous marriage (momeku) within this community, as explored by Sally and Joe (2020), Hasmiati and Elviandri (2022), Walenta et al. (2022), and Afifaha and Rizkinab (2022). While these works provide essential ethnographic context, they generally treat language as a secondary aspect of social behaviour rather than a primary object of evolutionary analysis.

Although these studies are invaluable in documenting the social, agricultural, and traditional aspects of the Polahi, a significant research gap remains. Most existing literature engages little with historical linguistics or contact linguistics on how the Polahi language interacts with broader regional shifts. The primary distinction and explicit novelty of the present research is its deeper focus on linguistic analysis, using Polahi not just as an ethnographic subject but as a comparative linguistic tool. While previous studies have tended to describe social activities and interactions, this research aims to examine the Polahi language's everyday language to reveal how much of Gorontalo's older linguistic features have been preserved and how its cultural terms can help reconstruct the evolution of Gorontalo as a whole.

This limitation raises a fundamental problem: Gorontalo has undergone significant shifts due to cultural mobility and external influences. On the one hand, Polahi appears to retain an older structure; on the other, the language of mainstream communities continues to evolve through linguistic contact, especially with Arabic. Thus, an urgent analytical challenge emerges: how can we objectively measure and understand this linguistic "change" without a clear starting point or baseline in a predominantly oral society? Addressing this requires a rigorous theoretical approach where synchronic comparison serves as a proxy for diachronic reconstruction, an established method in historical linguistics when written records are scarce.

This article argues that the Polahi community, with its relatively stagnant and literal language and behaviour, can serve as a crucial linguistic and cultural baseline. By comparing this "baseline" condition with the Gorontalo language used in mainstream communities, the impact of cultural mobility and the process of Arabic vocabulary borrowing can be analysed more measurably and systematically. Beyond the local context of Gorontalo, this methodological approach offers a significant contribution to applied linguistics, language documentation, and indigenous language research globally, by providing a framework for studying contact linguistics in societies with limited historical documentation.

Based on this argument, the purpose of this research is to investigate whether the linguistic stagnation and denotative behaviour of the isolated Polahi community can be utilised as a baseline to track and map synchronic-diachronic processes, specifically phonological adaptation and semantic shifts, within the language of mainstream Gorontalo communities that have occurred as a result of cultural mobility and the integration of Arabic vocabulary.

METHOD

This research employs a qualitative method guided by linguistic theory (Litosseliti, 2025). The qualitative method was chosen because it can explore in depth the meanings, experiences, and worldviews of the Polahi people, including how they interpret their language and maintain their cultural identity (Lim, 2025). This approach relies heavily on the indigenous language and knowledge of the informants, thereby enabling a rich understanding of their social realities and existing cultural practices (Schroeder, 2024). Consequently, this approach is directed at providing a comprehensive overview of the relationship between language, culture, and identity within the Polahi

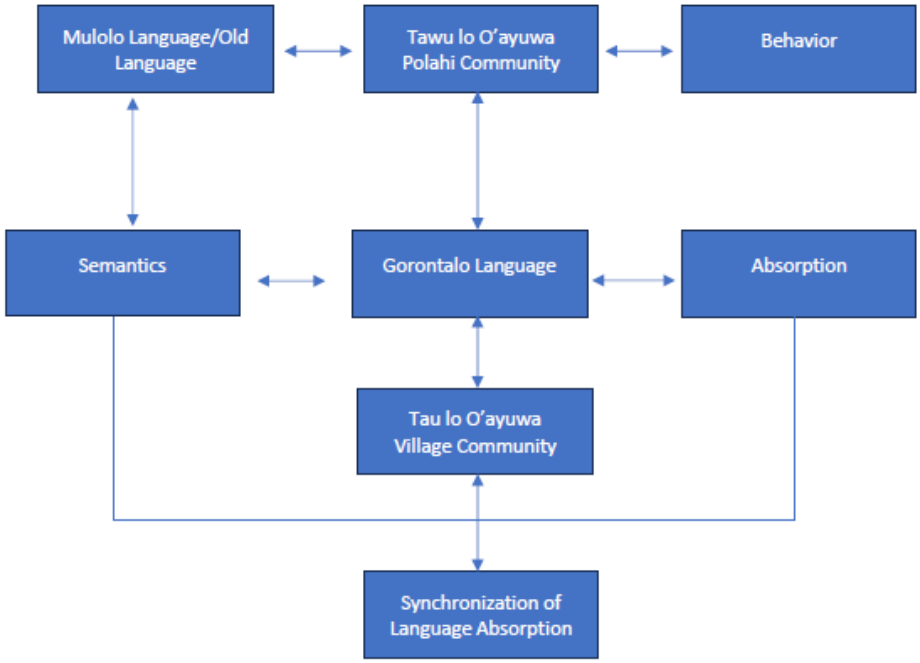
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community amidst external influences such as Islamization and modernisation.

This study is framed by two primary theoretical approaches (see Figure 1). First, to examine cultural mobility and Polahi behaviour, the semiotics of connotation by Roland Barthes is utilised (Barthes, 1972; 1977; Allen, 2004). This theory conceptualises culture as a layered system of signs, consisting of denotation (literal meaning), connotation (hidden cultural meaning), and myth (naturalised ideological narratives) (Berger, 2014; Nasution & Juanda, 2025). This Barthesian analysis is applied in practice by categorising interview transcripts into codes of communication behaviour to identify the dominance of denotative meaning, read cultural signs in Polahi's daily practices, uncover values and identity, and map the myths mainstream communities construct about their lives.

Figure 1

Theoretical Framework, Adapted from Barthes and Saussure (Barthes, 1972, 1977; Saussure, 1916)



Second, to analyse language mobility, the study uses Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of synchronic-diachronic linguistics, integrated with a semantic approach (Saussure, 1916; Joseph, 2025). This approach focuses on comparing the Gorontalo language spoken by the Polahi people (tau lo o'ayuwa) with that spoken by mainstream communities (tau lo kambungu). The objective is to trace how lexical and structural elements of Gorontalo have moved, assimilated, or shifted in meaning through contact with other languages, such as Arabic. This framework provides the foundation for explaining the phonological, morphological, and semantic mechanisms behind loanword adaptation (Stawarska, 2020), which is applied by systematically comparing the linguistic features of the two groups to reconstruct their historical trajectory of change.

Data collection was conducted during May 2024 through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Access to the isolated Polahi community, who were initially suspicious of outsiders, was successfully obtained through the mediation of local village leaders who had a relationship of trust and a history of trade interaction with them. Research informants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, which was displayed in Table 1, chosen intentionally based on relevant criteria that were strictly operationalised: "in-depth knowledge" was measured by the informant's ability to speak Gorontalo Mulolo (the ancient language) actively. In contrast, "direct experience" was measured by hereditary involvement in indigenous practices for Polahi informants, or by more than 10 years of intense interaction for informants from surrounding villages. The informants came from various backgrounds, including academics, residents of surrounding villages, and representatives from the Polahi community itself. Although this study involved only 8 informants, this sample size is justified and sufficient because the data collection process reached data saturation, where further interviews yielded no new themes or information. The entire data collection process was conducted in strict adherence to research ethics, including ethical approval from the relevant institutional ethics committee, which encompassed obtaining informed consent from the participants (Chand, 2025).

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Table 1
List of Informants

No	Initial	Gender	Position
1	KN	Man	Academician
2	KU	Man	Residents of Tolabolo Village
3	UN	Man	Residents of Pinogu Village
4	BY	Man	Polahi
5	EL	Woman	Polahi
6	TA	Woman	Polahi
7	PA	Man	Polahi
8	PP	Man	Polahi

The data analysis process was conducted in three primary stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. In the reduction stage, raw data from interviews were systematically transcribed and coded into specific analytical categories, utilising transcript examples to separate those falling under the 'phonological adaptation' category from those under 'semantic shift' (Creswell, 2014). The procedure to identify the 416 Arabic loanwords was conducted in a structured manner by cross-referencing the existing Gorontalo language corpus with a standard Arabic dictionary, and then verifying their actual usage through native speaker interviews. A lexical analysis was then performed by classifying vocabulary into word categories and differentiating between the original Gorontalo language (Mulolo) and loanwords. Any disagreements between researchers during the coding or interpretation process were resolved through a consensus panel discussion. The interpretation process then considered the socio-cultural context of the Polahi, the results of the semiotic analysis, and the synchronic-diachronic linguistic findings to map how cultural mobility contributes to changes in identity and language practices.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, this research applied validity and reliability strategies. Reliability was maintained through source triangulation (comparing information from various informants), methodological triangulation (comparing data from interviews, observations, and documentation), and time triangulation (re-checking data at different times). Data validity was strengthened through the process of member checking, which involved confirming findings and interpretations with the informants to ensure there was no distortion of meaning. Thus, the resulting data are scientifically accountable, both in terms of their accuracy and their ability to represent the complexity of the interaction between language, behaviour, and culture (Christou, 2025).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Establishing the Baseline: Behavioral Stagnation and the Denotative Language of the Polahi People

The foundation for understanding the dynamics of the modern Gorontalo language lies in comprehending its initial state (Kadir, 2024; Ntelu, 2025). In this research, the Polahi people function as a representation of this initial condition. Their historical isolation, rooted in an exodus to escape the pressures of the Dutch Colonial government (Kulimba et al., 2019), is the primary factor that has shaped their culture and language. A refusal to comply with colonial regulations such as taxes and fears of oppression drove them to flee and settle in the inland forest regions of Gorontalo. Lexically, the name "Polahi" itself means "people who flee" or "fugitives from a place." This life choice effectively created a social and linguistic laboratory, separate from the development of Gorontalo society in the villages (tau lo kambungu). This isolated existence caused their culture and language to evolve within a relatively closed ecosystem, thereby preserving features believed to be older or more original (Inglis & Pascual, 2021). Although no human language is completely static, this isolation makes Polahi relatively more stable and slower to change than mainstream languages.

Geographically, the Polahi people are found in two main mountainous areas: the Boliyohuto Mountains and the Tilongkabila Mountains. The Boliyohuto group is spread across several villages in the Tolangohula and Asparaga sub-districts and interacts most with the outside world (Afifaha & Rizkinab, 2022; Hasmiati & Elviandri, 2022; Walenta et al., 2022). Conversely, the group in Tilongkabila, particularly around Pinogu, is shrouded in a mystical aura and, according to local communities, is invisible to the naked eye, a belief that further reinforces their isolation (KN, 2024; KU, 2024; UN, 2024).

This isolation has produced a highly pragmatic life philosophy passed down through generations: "Life is for Work" (Newiak, 2025). This principle dominates their daily activities, which are centred on productive tasks for survival such as farming, hunting, and crafting. Consequently, formal education has not become a priority in this community, where the majority of its members are illiterate and tend to choose work or marriage after reaching puberty (Holma & Huhtala, 2025).

This closed social condition also significantly affects their kinship structure and marriage traditions (Popescu, 2025). One of the most extreme manifestations of this cultural isolation is the

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practice of consanguineous marriage or incest (momeku) (Afifaha & Rizkinab, 2022). This practice, as recorded in the oral narrative of the marriage between Baba Dulla and Teno (see Figures 2 and 3), biological siblings, is presumed to occur because of limited social interaction with the outside world and a lack of knowledge of the normative prohibitions that apply in wider society (BY, 2024).

Figure 2
The Wedding Chart of Nene Bida and Akuba Resulting from Interview

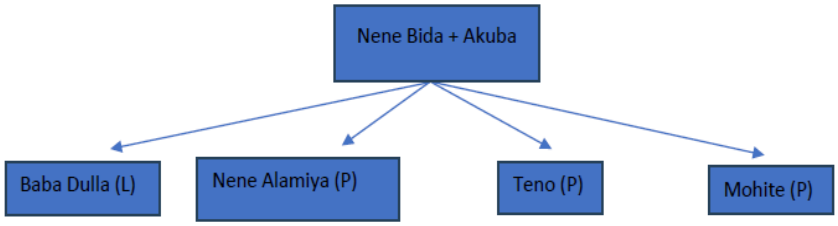
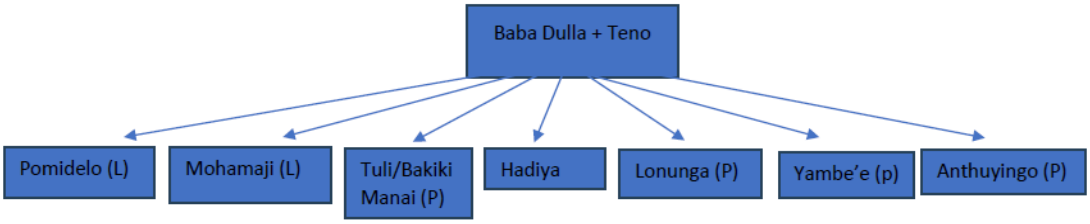


Figure 3
The Wedding Chart of Baba Dull and Teno Resulting from Interview



Cultural stagnation is also strongly reflected in their animistic belief system (Sakura & Yuki, 2025). Although some have had interaction with Islam, their core beliefs remain centred on nature-guarding entities. Their concept of divinity is divided into three: Polohuta (the lord of the land), Lati (the lord of the trees), and Lausala (the blood-drinking lord). This belief system reveals a cosmology that is intrinsically linked with the forest environment in which they live. Their daily lives are filled with interactions with this unseen world. They believe various types of spirits, or Lati, inhabit specific locations, such as Lati to hulo'o (the inhabitant of the banyan tree) and Lati to dutula (the guardian of the river) (BY, 2024).

Additionally, they believe in other beings like Ponggo (see Figure 4), that consumes human fetuses, indicating a worldview laden with supernatural elements.

Figure 4
Illustration of The Carcass of A Ponggo Repellent Bird from the Author's Observation



Their cultural practices consistently reflect this belief system. For example, to ward off disturbances from the Ponggo creature, they have a tradition of placing a crow carcass in front of their homes (BY, 2024). Such practices, which are not found in the Islamized mainstream communities, serve as strong evidence of a cultural system that has been preserved or has stagnated due to isolation.

In terms of subsistence, the Polahi people's farming traditions also show a static pattern that differs markedly from those of mainstream communities. They carry out their agricultural activities with very simple tools, without chemicals or modern technology, yet produce abundant harvests. BY (2024) expressed astonishment at the modern farming practices of mainstream communities, which often result in crop failure, in contrast to their own system, which has proven sustainable.

This local knowledge is passed down through rituals and strict taboos. A successful harvest is believed to depend on adherence to four prohibitions, such as not eating before planting and not placing unhusked rice on top of milled rice. Furthermore, they have special chants or mantras that are recited during planting and when crops are attacked by pests, which points to a spiritual-based ecological knowledge system that has remained unchanged by time (EL, 2024; TA, 2024).

Similarly, for healing, the Polahi people rely exclusively on traditional methods passed down from their ancestors. Because they lack access to modern medicine, they use specific chants or mantras to treat various ailments, from common illnesses to conditions like muscle strains. The use

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of a mantra such as “Linthi-linthi, linthi moluliya...” to treat a muscle strain is tangible proof of a knowledge system that has been isolated from modern medical developments (BY, 2024).

This isolation and cultural stagnation directly shape the language they use. The Polahi people in the Boliyohuto region are known to use an ancient variant of the Gorontalo language, referred to as Gorontalo Mulolo. This form developed in the forest community and has not been contaminated by foreign or other regional languages, unlike the language used by mainstream communities today (Pomalingo et al., 2025).

The most tangible evidence of this linguistic stagnation is found in the lexical aspect. The Polahi people still retain old vocabulary that has been replaced by loanwords from the Indonesian language in mainstream communities. For instance, they still consistently use huhebu for ‘door’, huwali for ‘room’, and totoluwa for ‘window’, whereas mainstream communities have switched to pinthu, kamari, and janela (Pateda, 1978).

This stagnation is also evident in the semantic depth of their language. For the Polahi, the word monga (to eat) has a single, unvaried meaning. This is in stark contrast to mainstream communities, which have a variety of words for eating with different levels of meaning, such as morijiki (a polite form derived from an Arabic loanword) and molamelo (a polite, indigenous Gorontalo form), which indicates the development of a system of social registers in the language. Another example is the use of the word pange to refer to a ‘life partner’. According to PA (2024), the Polahi use the term pange and do not use the word hiyalo. The word pange carries only the social meaning of “life companion” and has no sacred or religious ties. This differs from the word hiyalo used in mainstream communities, the meaning of which has been enriched by institutional and religious concepts from Islam concerning the terms and pillars of marriage. This suggests that the Polahi language preserves original meanings that have not been shaped by religion-based cultural mobility.

The most fundamental characteristic of the Polahi language is its tendency toward textual, denotative comprehension, directly reflecting their limited social world. They are unaccustomed to using or grasping connotative, figurative, or implied meanings in conversation, which leads to linguistic alienation between them and mainstream communities. This tendency shows up in various communication behaviours. One example is when a host asked a Polahi individual to “look at” the clothes drying outside. This request was interpreted literally; he simply sat and watched the laundry from morning until evening, even when it began to rain, without taking any action to bring it inside. To him, the instruction “to look” did not implicitly contain the meaning “to guard” or “to secure.”

This denotative behaviour is also very clear in economic transactions. When transacting at the market, if an item costs Rp25,000, payment must be exact. If a buyer offers a Rp50,000 note, they will refuse it because, to them, the transaction value is Rp25,000, not Rp50,000. This indicates a literal and mathematical thought structure, devoid of an understanding of the contextual concept of receiving change (PP, 2024).

This literal nature also applies to social commitments. A promise or agreement is considered an absolute and inflexible bond. This was observed in the case of a Polahi man who became angry and demanded that his custom-ordered basket be purchased even though the person who ordered it was not present, and in another case where a Polahi individual refused to give entrusted honey to the recipient’s wife because the instruction was to deliver it directly to the intended person (PA, 2024). Although these interview incidents (such as guarding the laundry and exact-change transactions) might seem anecdotal, informants and community leaders confirmed that they represent the communal cognitive patterns of the Polahi people more broadly.

The explanations above, ranging from historical isolation and preserved cultural traditions like momeku and the animistic belief system to linguistic practices showing lexical stagnation and rigid denotative comprehension, consistently support the argument that the Polahi community can serve as a stable, representative baseline for measuring change in this research.

The Dynamics of Change: Cultural Mobility and the Impact of Arabic Loanwords on Mainstream Gorontalo Language

With the Polahi community established as a static baseline, the analysis now shifts to the opposite pole: mainstream communities (tau lo kambungu). Unlike the Polahi, these communities’ language and culture were not formed in isolation but resulted from centuries of intense interaction, assimilation, and cultural mobility. These dynamics are one of the primary engines of linguistic change in Gorontalo.

This process of cultural mobility was partly triggered by direct interaction between the Polahi and mainstream communities. Although both sides initially viewed the interaction with suspicion and stigma, it gradually evolved into a mutually beneficial, reciprocal relationship. The Polahi began selling forest products like rattan to the villages and, in return, purchased basic necessities unavailable in the forest, such as salt, matches, and sugar. Government efforts to integrate the Polahi into village life, such as building Mahayani housing, also accelerated this mobility process. Although many of these programs were not entirely successful, with a majority of the Polahi returning to the forest due to difficulties in adapting to the hot, noisy, and

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farmland-lacking village environment, these efforts significantly increased the frequency and intensity of contact between the two communities (PA, 2024; TA, 2024).

A crucial meeting point for cultural and linguistic mobility is the weekly market (pasar pekanan) found in various regions (Fabricius et al., 2016). Regular market schedules, such as in Randangan on Mondays or in Marisa on Sundays, create public spaces where diverse groups converge and interact, including traders from the OPSI (Indonesian Market Organisation) community, many of whom come from the Arab Village (Kampung Arab) in Gorontalo City. It is here that an exchange of not only goods but also linguistic innovations and vocabulary takes place (Carter & McCarthy, 2013).

However, one of the most transformative agents of cultural mobility in Gorontalo's history is the process of Islamization. The arrival of Islam not only introduced a new belief system but also brought a legal framework, social norms, and a repository of Arabic vocabulary that deeply influenced the linguistic landscape. This process was so profound that Arabic ceased to be foreign and became deeply embedded in religious worship, social etiquette, transactions, and even everyday conversation (Pomalingo & Rahim, 2019).

The linguistic impact of this Islamization-driven cultural mobility can be measured quantitatively. Out of a total of 10,471 words in an updated Gorontalo language corpus, 2,291 words (approximately 22%) are loanwords. This indicates that the Gorontalo language is highly open to external influences. Further analysis of the composition of these loanwords shows that, after Indonesian, the largest source of borrowing (1,712 words), Arabic ranks second as the most significant foreign source of influence. Arabic contributes 416 words, accounting for about 18.2% of all loanwords. This figure consistently indicates the substantial impact of cultural contact with the Islamic world on the lexical evolution of the Gorontalo language (Soga, 2021a).

The integration of these 416 Arabic words was not a passive borrowing process but rather a complex and systematic phonological adaptation (Hamdi, 2017). Incoming Arabic vocabulary had to be adjusted to fit the sound system and phonotactic structure of Gorontalo. This was necessary due to significant differences in the phonemic inventories of the two languages. Arabic possesses a number of consonant phonemes, particularly pharyngeal (throat) and emphatic sounds, which do not exist in the Gorontalo phonological system. As shown in Table 2, in the adaptation process, these foreign sounds undergo substitution, being replaced by the closest sound that is easiest for Gorontalo speakers to pronounce (Hairuddin, 2024).

Table 2
Phonological Adaptation Patterns of Arabic Loanwords into Gorontalo

Arabic Source Word	Original Phoneme (Arabic)	Adaptation Rule	Gorontalo Form	Example / Meaning
ṣadaqah (صدقة)	Fricative /ṣ/ (ص) or /ts/ (ث)	Substitution to alveolar fricative /s/	**sadaka**	Alms / Charity
khuṭbah (خطبة)	Velar fricative /kh/ (خ)	Substitution to glottal fricative /h/	**hutuba**	Sermon
fiṭrah (فطرة)	Labiodental fricative /f/ (ف)	Substitution to bilabial plosive /p/	**pitara**	Fitrah / Purity
'ilmu (علم)	Pharyngeal fricative /'/ (ع)	Omission or merged into the initial vowel	**ilimu**	Knowledge
du'ā' (دعاء)	Glottal stop / hamzah (ء)	Omission of the final consonant	**du'a**	Prayer / Supplication
zakāt (زكاة)	Fricative /z/ (ز) & Long vowel /ā/	Substitution to /j/ and vowel shortening	**jakati**	Zakat / Almsgiving
Islām (إسلام)	Final consonant /m/ (سكون/sukun)	Vowel addition (epenthesis) to form an open syllable	**isilamu**	Islam
syukr (شكر)	Final consonant cluster /kr/	Epenthesis (vowel insertion between and after consonants)	**sukuru**	Gratitude
'amal (عمل)	Final consonant /l/ (سكون/sukun)	Vowel addition (epenthesis) for open syllable	**amali**	Deed / Action

Clear examples of this consonant substitution can be seen in many loanwords, as summarised in Table 2. Fricative sounds like *tsa'* (ث) and *ṣād* (ص) are consistently changed to /s/, as in the word *ṣadaqah* (صدقة), which became sadaka. The velar fricative *khā'* (خ) is merged into /h/, as in *khuṭbah* (خطبة), which became hutuba. Similarly, the labiodental sound *fā'* (ف) often changes to the bilabial /p/, as seen in *fiṭrah* (فطرة) adapted as pitara. One of the most significant adjustments is the loss of laryngeal sounds like *'ain* (ع) and *hamzah* (ء). Since these phonemes are absent in Gorontalo, they are often omitted or replaced by a vowel that fits the word's structure. For instance, the word *'ilmu* (علم) was adapted to *ilimu*, and *du'ā'* (دعاء) became *du'a*, where the final 'ain sound was merged into the vowel /a/ (Soga, 2021a).

Adaptation also occurred in the vowel system. Arabic has three basic vowels with a duration distinction (short and long), whereas Gorontalo has

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five vowels without a duration distinction. Consequently, all long vowels in Arabic are simplified to short vowels in Gorontalo. For example, the long vowel /ā/ in *zakāt* (زكاة) is shortened and changed to /i/ in the loanword jakati. Furthermore, phonotactic adjustments, or changes to syllable structure, also took place. Gorontalo strongly tends to avoid final consonant clusters (preferring an open syllable structure). Therefore, many Arabic loanwords ending in a consonant (sukun) were modified by adding a final vowel. This phenomenon is evident in words like Islām (إسلام) which became *isilamu*, *'amal* (عمل), which became *amali*, and syukr (شكر), which became *sukuru* (Soga, 2021a).

The adaptation process did not stop at the sound level; cultural mobility also triggered profound semantic shifts in many loanwords (Kim, 2012). Borrowed words were often reinterpreted to align with the socio-cultural context of Gorontalo. This semantic shift, as displayed in Table 3, appears to reflect the local community's creativity in integrating foreign linguistic elements into its own knowledge system.

Table 3
Semantic Shifts of Arabic Loanwords in Gorontalo

Original Word (Arabic)	Initial Meaning (Arabic)	Gorontalo Form	New Meaning (Gorontalo)	Shift Type
'Ajūz (عجوز)	Old woman / A feeble person	**ajus**	Mother	Total reclassification (Shift from age connotation to central family role)
Syaib (شيب)	White hair / Graying hair	**sebe**	Father	Metonymy (Shift from a physical trait to a respected social status)
ḥarīm (حريم)	The women of a household / A forbidden or sacred area	**harim**	A young, unmarried woman / A girl	Semantic narrowing (Shift from a formal/sacred family context to an informal social one)

The first and most prominent case, as can be seen in Table 2, is the word *'Ajūz* (عجوز). In Arabic, this word means "old woman" or "a feeble person." However, in daily conversation among the Gorontalo people, the word underwent a complete reclassification of meaning and was borrowed as ajus, meaning "mother." This shift from a connotation of old age to a central role within the family is a radical semantic transformation.

A second, similar case is the word *Syaib* (شيب). The Arabic etymology of this word refers to "white hair" or "greying hair." In Gorontalo, however, the word was phonologically adapted to sebe and semantically given a new meaning: "father." This shift from a physical trait (white hair) to a social status (father) likely occurred through metonymy, in which the trait became a marker for the respected figure. It is highly probable that the semantic shifts in both *ajus* and *sebe* are rooted in the use of metaphors or honorifics. Addressing parents as "the one who is old" or "the one with white hair" as a form of respect may have gradually become the standard terms themselves. This process indicates how local cultural values regarding respect for elders actively reshape the meaning of borrowed vocabulary.

The third case is the word *ḥarīm* (حريم). In Arabic, this word refers to a sacred and private meaning: "the women of a household (mother, wife, sisters)" or "a forbidden/sacred area." In Gorontalo, the word was borrowed as harim and narrowed in meaning to "a young, unmarried woman" or "a girl." This transformation shifted the meaning from a formal, sacred family context to a more general, informal social one.

The dynamics of change in mainstream Gorontalo communities' language are clearly visible in the integration of Arabic vocabulary, which shows systematic phonological adaptations and profound semantic shifts. This suggests that speakers did not just borrow foreign words; they also "tamed" them and assigned new meanings that fit local cultural realities (Kadir, 2024). Thus, cultural mobility actively alters a language's structure not only at the surface level (vocabulary) but also at deeper levels, such as its sound and meaning systems.

Synthesis: Reading the Synchronic-Diachronic Process Through Comparison

After establishing the Polahi community as a relatively static baseline and mapping the dynamics of change in the mainstream communities, this synthesis stage aims to connect these two sets of findings. Here, the comparison between the two communities is no longer viewed as two separate portraits but as a single, unified narrative that helps reveal the Gorontalo language's evolutionary process over time.

Saussure's (1916) linguistic theory sharply distinguishes between synchronic analysis (the study of language at a specific point in time) and diachronic analysis (the study of language evolution through time). For many languages like Gorontalo that lack a long written tradition, direct diachronic analysis is challenging because historical evidence is scarce. However, this research proposes a methodological argument: a careful synchronic comparison between two cognate speech communities with different historical trajectories

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can serve as a reliable proxy for diachronic analysis. In other words, this research suggests that we can "read" traces of historical change by comparing the present-day linguistic conditions of two different groups.

Within this framework, Polahi functions as a "synchronic portrait" of an older, more archaic stage of Gorontalo. The social isolation they have experienced for hundreds of years has effectively "preserved" or slowed change in certain lexical and semantic features, providing a rare window into the past. In contrast, the Gorontalo language used by mainstream communities offers a different "synchronic portrait": a language system that has undergone a long process of cultural mobility, language contact, and adaptation. Their language is the result of a series of diachronic changes triggered by social interaction, trade, and, very dominantly, Islamization. Therefore, the linguistic gap between these two synchronic portraits, between the language of the Polahi and that of the mainstream communities, is, in essence, the trace of the diachronic trajectory itself. The difference is not merely a geographical dialectal variation but reflects the evolutionary process the mainstream Gorontalo language has undergone. This comparative approach enriches the literature on historical reconstruction in contact linguistics, where synchronic variation often holds the traces of diachronic development (Stawarska, 2020).

This approach parallels what classical Arab linguists like al-Khalil bin Ahmad practised. To find the purest and most original form of Arabic, they travelled inland to study the language of the Bedouins, whom they considered uncontaminated by contact with foreign speakers in urban centres. In this context, the Polahi people can be seen as the 'Gorontalo Bedouins,' which presents an important reference for linguistic authenticity (Soga, 2021b).

The first synthesis of evidence lies at the lexical level. A direct comparison indicates that the vocabulary retained by the Polahi (such as huhebu, totoluwa) reflects an older form. In contrast, vocabulary in mainstream communities (such as pinthu, janela) results from diachronic change driven by contact with Indonesian as the national language. Furthermore, at the semantic level, the word monga (to eat) in the Polahi community, with a single, denotative meaning, can be considered the basic semantic condition. The development of rich meaning variations within mainstream communities (Molamelo, Morijiki, Mosimukulu) seems to result from a diachronic evolutionary process, in which the need for social stratification and contact with Arabic and Manado cultures created new layers of meaning.

The absence of a system of honorific registers in Polahi, such as the lack of a word like tingoli (polite 'you'), also indicates an archaic feature. This reflects a simpler and more egalitarian social structure. Conversely, the presence and mandatory use of polite registers in mainstream communities trace a diachronic development toward a more complex, hierarchical social structure.

One of the most relevant pieces of evidence for this diachronic shift is the reclassification of the meanings of *Arabic* loanwords. The transformation of the meaning of Syaib (white hair) into *sebe* (father) and *'Ajūz* (old woman) into *ajus* (mother) was not a change that happened overnight. It was a historical process in which the Gorontalo people, after interacting with Islam, gradually adopted foreign terms and gave them new social functions that aligned with local values concerning respect for elders (Wibawa, 2023). This finding aligns with contact linguistics (Kim, 2012; Hamdi, 2017), which shows that loanwords are often reconceptualised to meet the pragmatic needs of the recipient culture.

The same applies to the concept of marriage (Sally & Joe, 2020). The Polahi concept of pange (partner), which is purely social, can be considered the baseline. The concept of hiyalo in mainstream communities, which is laden with the legal and institutional meanings of Islam, is the product of a long diachronic change. The difference between these two words succinctly summarises the history of Islam's impact on social institutions in Gorontalo.

The denotative linguistic behaviour of the Polahi people can also be read as a preserved feature (Ashirboy & Komilovna, 2025). Their tendency to understand language literally, as in the construction to "look at" the laundry or the commercial transaction with exact change, reflects an older model of communication in which ambiguity and implied meaning were less dominant. This stands in stark contrast to communication practices in mainstream communities, where understanding context, connotation, and implicit meaning is crucial. The ability to navigate these layers of meaning is not innate but results from diachronic evolution within a socially complexifying society. Comparing the denotative and connotative meanings of words like Banthi (slammed vs gambling) or Dutu (to place vs dowry tradition) vividly illustrates the two ends of a historical trajectory. Polahi retains the original denotative meaning, while the mainstream language has developed new connotative meanings alongside new cultural practices.

Taken together, this evidence suggests that the linguistic and behavioural differences between the Polahi and mainstream communities are not random but reflect two different models of cultural adaptation in response to historical pressures, particularly colonialism and Islamization. The first model is adaptation through isolation, executed by the Polahi people. In response to external pressure, they withdrew. The result was the preservation of a high degree of cultural and linguistic authenticity, but with the consequence of stagnation and disconnection from broader developments. The

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second model is adaptation through integration, which characterises the mainstream communities. They responded to external pressures and influences, especially Islam, by actively engaging with, absorbing, and reprocessing them. The result is a highly dynamic, syncretic culture and language, capable of adapting to changing times despite losing parts of its "original" form.

This comparison also clarifies the concept of "cultural mobility": for the Polahi, mobility tends to be physical (nomadic within the forest). Conversely, for mainstream communities, mobility is social, intellectual, and religious, allowing the exchange of ideas and ultimately catalysing profound linguistic change.

Thus, comparing the synchronic conditions of the Polahi and mainstream communities has paved the way for reconstructing a rich diachronic narrative. This analysis supports the view that language is not static but a living archive that continuously records a community's interactions, adaptations, and changes. It also shows that contact, and the absence of contact, are the two primary forces shaping a language's phonological, lexical, and semantic destiny.

CONCLUSION

This research began with a fundamental challenge in historical linguistics: how to trace changes in a language transmitted predominantly orally. Using the Gorontalo language, this study shows that cultural mobility has significantly reshaped its linguistic landscape. The central argument is that, by using the isolated indigenous Polahi community as a synchronic baseline, we can systematically map and analyse the diachronic impact of social interaction and Arabic vocabulary borrowing. Comparing the Polahi language, which tends to be denotative and relatively stable, with the dynamic, connotative language of mainstream communities reveals an evolutionary narrative, from systematic phonological adaptations to radical semantic shifts in key vocabulary related to social structure and religion.

This research's primary contribution extends beyond documenting linguistic phenomena in Gorontalo. More broadly, this study offers an integrated analytical model that combines anthropology's ethnographic depth with linguistics' analytical precision. This "synchronic baseline" method offers a potential alternative for reconstructing the history of minority or indigenous languages with limited written records. This model could be replicated in other contexts worldwide, where isolated "relic" communities can unlock the trajectory of change in larger, more dynamic language groups. Despite this, this methodological contribution must be understood with its limitations in mind: assuming a baseline community is completely static is a theoretical simplification; every language, no matter how isolated, inevitably undergoes some internal change over time.

Before drawing broader implications, it is important to acknowledge several limitations of this study explicitly. First, the relatively small informant sample and the fully qualitative nature of the data make the findings more interpretive and exploratory than definitive proof. Second, the lack of adequate written historical records limits the study's ability to triangulate the proposed diachronic proxy fully. Despite these limitations, the findings have twofold implications. Theoretically, this research reaffirms the critical importance of documenting and analysing the languages of isolated communities. They are not merely cultural anomalies but are living archives that hold invaluable data on history, cognition, and language evolution. Practically, this study's findings and methodology provide a solid foundation for projects aimed at updating the lexicography and compiling a language-and-culture encyclopedia for Gorontalo. By systematically distinguishing archaic forms, internal innovations, and adapted loanwords, future language preservation efforts can be conducted with greater accuracy and historical depth. Future research could apply this model to examine the influence of other contact languages or to explore changes at more specific linguistic domains, such as syntax, morphology, discourse analysis, or pragmatics, which were beyond the scope of this study.

AI USE ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

No AI tools were used to generate or edit the content of the manuscript.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was supported by the Research Fund provided by the National Research and Innovation Agency (Badan Riset dan Inovasi Nasional/BRIN) Indonesia.

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