

Linguistic Enclaves at the Border: Skou Language Resilience Among a Minority of Skou Speakers in a Migrant-Dominated Market

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ABSTRACT

Border markets are highly multilingual spaces in which indigenous languages encounter national languages, regional lingua francas, migrant languages, and languages associated with cross-border trade. This article examines the resilience of the Skou language in the Skouw border market on the Indonesia–Papua New Guinea (PNG) border. The study asks how Indigenous Skou marketeers maintain their heritage language while operating within a multilingual and increasingly migrant-dominated commercial environment. A qualitative approach was employed through interviews with four Skou informants in Abepura and Skou Mabo, Jayapura, in May 2026. The participants included three individuals connected to the Skouw Market and one elder identified by the researcher as having particularly fluent and clear command of Skou. The findings indicate that Skou remains an important resource for family interaction, intra-community communication, cross-border relationships, privacy, identity construction, and social cohesion. The market therefore functions not only as an economic space but also as a social domain in which Skou speakers reproduce their linguistic identity. The study further identifies emerging revitalization practices, including the teaching of basic Skou expressions in Skouw Mabo Elementary School, Bible translation, dictionary development, and intergenerational teaching. However, these efforts coexist with substantial language shift among younger generations. The article argues that the Skou case illustrates a form of linguistic enclave resilience, in which a numerically marginalized indigenous group uses concentrated social networks and selected communicative domains to maintain its heritage language within a linguistically dominant environment. The study contributes to discussions of language maintenance by demonstrating that border markets can simultaneously accelerate language shift and provide spaces for minority-language reproduction.

INTRODUCTION

Language is not only a means of communication but also an important resource through which communities construct identity, maintain social relationships, transmit cultural knowledge, and negotiate their position within changing social environments. For Indigenous and minority communities, the continued use of a heritage language can represent continuity with previous generations and provide a symbolic and practical connection to place, ancestry, and collective identity. However, this continuity can become increasingly difficult when speakers live in environments where other languages have greater institutional, economic, educational, or demographic power. Language contact, migration, urbanization, formal education, economic development, and increasing mobility may all contribute to changes in patterns of language use and, over time, to language shift (Fishman, 1991; Grenoble & Whaley, 2006).

Language shift is particularly significant when a smaller Indigenous language comes into sustained contact with one or more dominant languages. In multilingual communities, speakers may become highly proficient in languages that provide wider opportunities for education, employment, commerce, administration, and communication with outsiders. The heritage language may consequently become restricted to particular domains, such as the home, family, religious activities, or interaction among older community members. Such restriction does not

necessarily mean that the language has immediately disappeared. Instead, it may represent an intermediate stage in a longer process of language shift in which the social functions of the minority language gradually become narrower (Fishman, 1991). The critical issue is therefore not simply how many people know a language, but who speaks it, with whom, in which domains, for what purposes, and whether younger generations continue to acquire and use it.

Intergenerational transmission is particularly important in understanding language vitality. Fishman (1991) argues that the transmission of a language from one generation to another is central to reversing language shift. A language may have a written grammar, dictionary, school program, or official recognition, but these resources alone cannot ensure that the language remains a living means of communication. When children cease to use a heritage language naturally with parents, grandparents, siblings, and peers, the language may gradually move from being a community language to becoming primarily a symbol of cultural heritage. In severely endangered situations, the remaining fluent speakers may be concentrated among older generations, making documentation and intergenerational transmission increasingly urgent (Fishman, 1996).

This issue is especially relevant to the Indigenous languages of Papua. Papua is characterized by exceptionally high linguistic diversity, with numerous Indigenous languages spoken alongside Indonesian and regional *lingua francas*. The linguistic ecology is further complicated by migration, national development, education, interethnic interaction, and cross-border mobility. Indonesian functions as the national language and an important language of formal and wider communication, while Papuan Malay serves important *lingua-franca* functions in many parts of Papua. In border areas, additional languages associated with neighboring countries and cross-border communities may also become important. Consequently, Indigenous speakers frequently develop multilingual repertoires in which the heritage language occupies only some of the available communicative domains.

The relationship between language and economic activity is particularly important in border communities. Markets are sites where people with different linguistic backgrounds meet for practical purposes such as buying, selling, bargaining, transportation, and social interaction. Unlike relatively homogeneous domestic settings, markets require speakers to communicate across linguistic and social boundaries. A trader may therefore use a heritage language with a family member, Indonesian with a migrant trader, Papuan Malay with another Papuan community, and Tok Pisin or another language with a customer from Papua New Guinea (PNG). Language choice in such environments is consequently highly dependent on interlocutor, purpose, familiarity, and perceived social relationship.

The Skouw border market in Jayapura, Papua, Indonesia, offers a particularly significant setting for examining these processes. Located in the Muara Tami area near the Indonesia–PNG border, the market brings together Indonesian traders, Indigenous Papuan traders, local residents, and customers from PNG. Government sources describe the Skouw market as an important economic and social space in which people from the two countries interact, while recent reporting indicates that the market continues to attract large numbers of PNG visitors for everyday shopping.

The linguistic situation of the Skouw market is therefore highly complex. Indonesian is important for interaction with many Indonesian traders and migrants, while Tok Pisin and English are relevant to communication involving people from PNG. Papuan Malay and other local languages can also function as languages of wider communication among different Papuan communities. Within this multilingual environment, Skou represents a much smaller linguistic

system. The language must therefore compete for communicative space with languages that possess wider demographic and functional reach.

The Skou language, also known as Skouw, Skow, Sekou, Səkou, Te Mawo, or Tumawo, is traditionally associated with the Skou communities of northern New Guinea, including Skou Yambe, Skou Mabo, and Skou Sae in the Jayapura area. Donohue (2004) provides an extensive grammatical description of Skou and establishes the language as a distinct linguistic system of New Guinea. The Endangered Languages Project currently classifies Skou as threatened and reports fewer than 700 native speakers worldwide. It also identifies Indonesian/Papuan Malay as an important additional language used by the community.

The available documentation indicates that the sociolinguistic situation of Skou has been a concern for some time. The Endangered Languages Project reports that Skou is used particularly in the home and family domains and that children may understand the language even when they do not necessarily speak it.

This distinction between understanding and speaking is important because receptive knowledge does not necessarily guarantee continued intergenerational transmission. If children increasingly understand Skou but respond primarily in Indonesian or another dominant language, the language may remain present in the community while losing its role as an everyday language of interaction.

The vulnerability of Skou is also connected to wider social changes occurring around the Skouw border. Border development has increased mobility, commercial interaction, infrastructure, and contact with people from outside the Indigenous community. The market itself has become an important economic center, and previous research has documented the participation of both Indigenous Papuan and Nusantara traders in the Skouw market. Maryen et al. (2021), for example, found that Indigenous Papuan women constitute a smaller group of traders than Nusantara traders but possess particular linguistic and cultural advantages in their interaction with PNG customers. Their familiarity with Tok Pisin and the cultural environment of the Skouw–Wutung border enables them to participate in cross-border commerce in ways that differ from those of traders who have migrated from other parts of Indonesia.

This situation creates an important paradox for the study of Skou. On the one hand, the market is a high-contact environment that exposes Skou speakers to languages with wider communicative functions. On the other hand, the market brings Indigenous Skou speakers together on a regular basis and therefore may provide an important social environment for continued heritage-language use. In other words, the same market that can accelerate language shift may also provide opportunities for language maintenance.

This paradox raises an important question about how endangered languages survive in highly multilingual environments. Language maintenance is often associated with relatively protected domains such as the family and the local community. However, minority speakers do not necessarily live in isolated communities. They may work in markets, attend schools, interact with migrants, participate in religious institutions, and communicate with people across national borders. Their language maintenance strategies must therefore operate within, rather than outside, multilingual social networks.

The Skou case is particularly interesting because Skou speakers appear to maintain particular communicative spaces within an environment in which they are numerically and linguistically marginalized. During the researcher's May 2026 fieldwork in Skou Mabo and Abepura, Skou was observed and reported as continuing to be used among family members, Indigenous market participants, and members of close social networks. The fieldwork also identified an especially fluent Skou elder who was able to communicate clearly in Skou and

provide accurate Indonesian translations. Although this observation cannot be treated as a complete census of fluent speakers, it provides an important indication of the urgency of documenting the language and examining how remaining speakers use it.

The concept of a linguistic enclave provides a useful way to interpret this situation. In this study, the term does not refer to a geographically isolated community. Rather, it refers to a socially concentrated network of speakers who continue to use a minority language within particular relationships and communicative domains even though the surrounding environment is dominated by other languages. Skou speakers at the market may therefore participate fully in the wider multilingual economy while maintaining Skou as a language of family interaction, solidarity, identity, privacy, and communication among Indigenous community members.

Such a linguistic enclave can be understood as an interactional space in which language choice reinforces social belonging. When Skou speakers communicate with one another in Skou, they are not simply selecting the language they know best. They may also be signaling shared ancestry, community membership, and cultural identity. This is especially important in a market where migrant traders and customers from different linguistic backgrounds are present. Speaking Skou can become a way of making Indigenous presence audible in a space characterized by intense linguistic diversity.

The use of Skou for private communication provides another indication of its social importance. According to the May 2026 fieldwork, some speakers use Skou when they wish to discuss matters without outsiders understanding the conversation. Such language practices demonstrate that Skou can retain communicative value even when it is not the most widely understood language in the market. The language may therefore acquire a specialized function as an in-group code that reinforces social boundaries and solidarity.

At the same time, the boundaries created through Skou are not necessarily rigid. Fieldwork also indicates that Skou speakers sometimes share expressions with neighboring communities. For example, the expression *Raelefe*, reported as a greeting equivalent to “good afternoon,” has been shared with members of neighboring communities. This practice demonstrates that language maintenance can involve both boundary construction and intercultural exchange. Speakers can preserve Skou as an identity marker while selectively introducing elements of the language to outsiders.

The role of Indigenous women is particularly significant in this respect. The May 2026 fieldwork identified approximately 15–20 active *mama-mama pinang*, or women selling betel nuts, who use Skou among themselves and within their social networks. These women can be understood as important informal anchors of language maintenance because the market provides them with repeated opportunities for interaction. Their linguistic practices demonstrate that language maintenance does not occur exclusively through formal education or government programs. It may also occur through ordinary economic and social activities.

This observation is consistent with broader research emphasizing the importance of community-based domains in minority-language maintenance. Fishman (1991) argues that language revitalization requires attention to the everyday social contexts in which speakers interact, particularly intergenerational and family domains. Similarly, Grenoble and Whaley (2006) emphasize that revitalization efforts are most meaningful when they are connected to actual community practices rather than being limited to documentation or symbolic recognition.

Recent developments in Skou education and documentation provide additional evidence of emerging language revitalization. According to the May 2026 fieldwork, Skou has been introduced at Skouw Mabo Elementary School since 2023, with students learning basic greetings and vocabulary. There are also efforts involving Skou Bible translation and dictionary

development. These initiatives are important because they create formal resources through which younger generations can encounter the language.

However, formal education alone cannot resolve the problem of language shift. Research on endangered and minority languages has repeatedly emphasized the importance of intergenerational transmission. A school may teach children greetings, vocabulary, and written forms, but regular communication between children and fluent speakers is necessary for the development of spontaneous language competence. Indeed, Fishman's work on reversing language shift places intergenerational continuity at the center of language maintenance, while later scholarship has cautioned against assuming that institutional recognition or school-based instruction automatically produces sustainable community transmission.

The situation therefore presents a tension between documentation, revitalization, and everyday use. Documentation can preserve linguistic knowledge, but preservation in an archive is not equivalent to maintaining a living speech community. A dictionary can record vocabulary, but it cannot by itself create speakers. A school can introduce children to Skou, but the language must also be heard and used in homes and community networks. For Skou, this distinction is particularly important because the available evidence suggests that the language is already concentrated in restricted domains and that younger generations may possess weaker productive competence than older speakers.

Against this background, the present study examines Skou not only as an endangered language but also as a language demonstrating forms of resilience under pressure. The study asks how Skou speakers maintain their language when they constitute a minority within a market where Indonesian and other languages have broader economic and communicative functions. Rather than assuming that multilingualism necessarily results in the disappearance of Skou, the study investigates the specific social practices through which speakers continue to assign value and function to their heritage language.

The primary research question is: How do Indigenous marketeers who speak Skou maintain their heritage language within the highly multilingual and migrant-dominated environment of the Skouw border market?

Three related areas guide the investigation. First, the study examines the linguistic practices through which Skou speakers negotiate between Skou and other languages in the market. Second, it investigates how Skou contributes to Indigenous identity and social cohesion in a migrant-dominated commercial space. Third, it examines emerging revitalization practices, including school-based teaching, documentation, religious translation, and intergenerational transmission.

The study contributes to the sociolinguistic literature in three ways. First, it provides contemporary qualitative evidence concerning the use of an endangered Papuan language in a highly multilingual border-market environment. Second, it shifts attention from language loss alone toward the social mechanisms of resilience through which minority speakers preserve particular domains of language use. Third, it proposes the notion of a linguistic enclave as a useful analytical perspective for understanding communities that are not geographically isolated but nevertheless maintain concentrated social spaces for heritage-language use.

The Skou case ultimately demonstrates that language resilience should not be understood as the absence of language shift. Rather, resilience may exist alongside severe vulnerability. Speakers can continue to use a language for identity, family, solidarity, privacy, and cultural connection even while the number of fluent speakers declines. The central challenge is therefore to transform these existing pockets of linguistic resilience into sustainable intergenerational transmission. In the Skouw context, this means connecting the language practices already found

among families, elders, mama-mama marketeers, schools, religious communities, and cross-border relatives so that Skou remains not merely a remembered symbol of Indigenous identity but a language that younger generations can actively speak and use.

METHOD

Research design

This study employed a qualitative research design. The purpose was not to quantify the number of Skou speakers but to understand how Skou is used, valued, and maintained by speakers who participate in the Skouw border market.

A qualitative approach is appropriate because language maintenance involves attitudes, social relationships, communicative practices, and perceptions of identity that cannot be adequately captured through speaker counts alone.

Participants

Four Skou informants participated in the study. Three were connected directly to the Skouw market, including the head of a local motorcycle-taxi team and two market sellers. The fourth participant was an elder from the Skou community who demonstrated particularly fluent and clear command of the Skou language.

The participants represented different social positions within the Skou community and provided information about language use in market, family, and community settings.

Data collection

Data were collected during fieldwork conducted in May 2026 in Abepura and Skou Mabo, Jayapura, Papua, Indonesia. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with the participants. The interviews addressed language choice, multilingual practices, perceptions of Skou, intergenerational transmission, market communication, and revitalization.

The researcher also documented observations concerning the linguistic environment of the Skouw market and Skou Mabo village.

Data analysis

Interview recordings were transcribed and examined thematically. The analysis focused on recurring patterns concerning:

1. language choice according to interlocutor;
2. Skou use within family and Indigenous networks;
3. Skou as a marker of identity;
4. the use of Skou for private or restricted communication;
5. cross-border communication;
6. education and revitalization; and
7. perceived differences between older and younger generations.

Participant statements are presented as qualitative evidence rather than as statistically representative data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of interviews and field observations conducted in May 2026 revealed that Skou language maintenance in the Skouw border market is sustained through a combination of multilingual practices, interpersonal networks, cross-border relationships, identity work, and selective language use. Although Skou speakers operate in an environment in which Indonesian and other languages have broader communicative functions, Skou continues to occupy specific social domains that are meaningful to community members.

The findings indicate that Skou language resilience is not characterized by exclusive use of Skou. Rather, speakers demonstrate a flexible multilingual repertoire in which Skou is used alongside Indonesian, Tok Pisin, and other languages. This multilingual repertoire allows speakers to participate in the wider market economy while maintaining linguistic practices associated with family, Indigenous identity, solidarity, and privacy.

The findings are organized into six themes: (1) multilingual practices in the market, (2) the market as an internal social network, (3) Skou and cross-border relationships, (4) Skou as a language of privacy, (5) Skou as an identity marker, and (6) sharing Skou with outsiders. A second group of findings concerns revitalization and emerging resilience, particularly school-based teaching, documentation and religious translation, and the continuing generational gap.

Multilingual Practices in the Skouw Market

The first major finding is that Skou speakers do not operate monolingually. Instead, they demonstrate a flexible multilingual repertoire in which language choice varies according to interlocutor, communicative purpose, and social relationship. During the fieldwork, participants described the use of Indonesian, Tok Pisin, and Skou in different interactional contexts. Indonesian was associated primarily with communication involving Indonesian-speaking traders and migrants, Tok Pisin with customers and contacts from Papua New Guinea (PNG), and Skou with family members and members of the Skou community.

This distribution is consistent with the broader sociolinguistic profile of Skou. The Endangered Languages Project currently identifies Skou as a threatened language and reports that it is used mainly in the home and family domains, while Indonesian/Papuan Malay is among the other languages used by members of the community. The available description of Skou therefore already suggests a multilingual community in which the heritage language coexists with languages of wider communication.

The market intensifies this multilingual environment because it brings together traders and customers from different linguistic backgrounds. Previous research has documented the presence of both Indigenous Papuan and Nusantara traders in the Skouw market and has shown that Indigenous Papuan women participate in trading activities alongside traders from outside Papua (Maryen et al., 2021). The market consequently requires traders to possess linguistic resources that extend beyond their heritage language.

For Skou marketeers, multilingualism is therefore not simply an individual linguistic characteristic but a practical requirement of participation in the border economy. A speaker may use Indonesian to conduct a transaction with a migrant trader and subsequently shift to Skou when speaking with another Skou community member. Similarly, communication with PNG customers may require the use of Tok Pisin. The linguistic repertoire is consequently organized according to the social and economic demands of the interaction.

This pattern demonstrates that language maintenance does not necessarily require exclusive use of the heritage language. Instead, minority-language speakers may maintain their heritage language by assigning it particular domains and functions while using dominant or lingua-franca languages for wider communication. Fishman (1991) emphasizes that the maintenance of a minority language depends substantially on whether it continues to occupy meaningful social domains. In the Skou case, the language remains relevant precisely because speakers continue to associate it with particular relationships and communicative purposes.

The findings therefore suggest that multilingualism should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of language abandonment. The more important issue is the relative distribution of communicative functions. Indonesian and Tok Pisin provide access to broader social and economic networks, whereas Skou provides access to a more restricted but socially

significant network. The coexistence of these languages demonstrates a form of functional multilingualism in which speakers adapt their linguistic choices to the social ecology of the border market.

At the same time, the findings reveal a potential vulnerability. Because Indonesian and other wider-communication languages can be used with a much larger population, younger speakers may increasingly rely on these languages even in contexts where Skou was traditionally used. If this tendency extends into family and peer domains, the functional space available to Skou may progressively contract. Thus, multilingualism functions simultaneously as a communicative resource and as a potential mechanism of language shift.

The Market as an Internal Social Network

A second major finding concerns the role of the market as an internal social network for Skou speakers. Rather than functioning exclusively as a site of commercial exchange, the market provides a recurring social environment in which Indigenous speakers interact with one another. This is particularly evident among the group of *mama-mama pinang*, or women who sell betel nuts.

Katarina Malo reported that Skou continues to be spoken naturally within family groups and among approximately 15–20 active *mama-mama pinang* in the market (K. Malo, personal communication, May 15, 2026). This observation is significant because it identifies an existing community network in which Skou remains an ordinary medium of interpersonal communication.

The importance of this network lies in the frequency and naturalness of interaction. Unlike a formal language lesson, market interaction provides repeated opportunities for speakers to use language spontaneously. The women meet regularly, conduct economic activities, exchange information, and maintain social relationships. Skou can therefore circulate through ordinary conversation rather than through a specially organized language program.

The market thus creates what may be described as a micro-domain of heritage-language use. Although the broader market is multilingual, particular groups of speakers create localized spaces in which Skou remains appropriate and meaningful. The linguistic environment is consequently heterogeneous rather than uniform: Indonesian may dominate interactions involving migrant traders, while Skou may remain audible within Indigenous social networks.

This finding is particularly relevant in light of earlier research on the position of Indigenous Papuan women in the Skouw market. Maryen et al. (2021) found that Indigenous Papuan women were less numerous than Nusantara traders and faced economic constraints in the market. E^{PKP}eJournal Universitas Cenderawasih+1 The present findings add a sociolinguistic dimension to this economic picture. Although Indigenous women may be numerically disadvantaged in the market, their social networks can provide an important environment for the continued use of Skou.

The *mama-mama pinang* can therefore be understood as informal linguistic anchors. Their importance does not necessarily derive from formal authority as language teachers. Rather, it derives from their regular participation in a social network in which Skou continues to be used. This type of informal language maintenance is particularly important for endangered languages because language transmission is sustained not only through formal institutions but also through everyday interaction.

The finding also suggests that the economic and linguistic functions of the market cannot be separated completely. Participation in economic activity creates repeated social encounters, and these encounters provide opportunities for linguistic reproduction. The market can therefore serve simultaneously as a commercial institution and a site of heritage-language maintenance.

Skou and Cross-Border Relationships

The third finding concerns the role of Skou in maintaining relationships that extend across the Indonesia–PNG border. Participants reported that Skou is used in communication with relatives and other members of related communities in places such as Wutung and Waromo on the PNG side.

This finding demonstrates that the national border does not necessarily correspond to the social or linguistic boundaries of the community. The Indonesia–PNG border is a political boundary, but family, cultural, and linguistic relationships may extend across it. Skou consequently operates within a social geography that is broader than the Indonesian side of the border alone.

The cross-border dimension is particularly important because the Skouw area has historically been characterized by mobility and interaction between communities on both sides. Skou is spoken in villages on the Indonesian side, while neighboring communities across the border maintain social relationships with Skou speakers. The Endangered Languages Project identifies Skou's location in the northern coastal border region and notes its association with Skou Yambe, Skou Mabo, and Skou Sae.

The fieldwork suggests that cross-border relationships may therefore contribute to the continued relevance of Skou. When relatives or community members share linguistic knowledge across national boundaries, the language acquires a function that cannot be reduced to local village communication. It becomes a resource for maintaining transnational family and cultural connections.

This finding also reveals a paradox. Increased cross-border economic integration exposes Skou speakers to Indonesian, Tok Pisin, and other languages. At the same time, cross-border mobility can create opportunities for maintaining relationships among people who share linguistic or cultural affiliations. The border therefore simultaneously contributes to language contact and provides a context for heritage-language continuity.

The Skou language consequently occupies an intermediate position between local identity and transnational connection. It is rooted in the Indigenous communities of the Skouw area, but its social significance can extend beyond the Indonesian national boundary.

Skou as a Language of Privacy

A fourth finding concerns the use of Skou for private or restricted communication. Nahum Hisagi explained that speakers sometimes use Skou when they do not want outsiders to understand what they are discussing (N. Hisagi, personal communication, May 15, 2026).

This practice provides important evidence of the continuing pragmatic value of Skou. The language is not used only because it represents cultural heritage; it can also perform a practical communicative function. In a market where Indonesian and other languages are widely understood, switching to Skou can restrict access to a conversation.

The use of Skou in this way establishes a temporary boundary between insiders and outsiders. The boundary is not geographical. Speakers remain physically located within the same market, but language choice creates a distinction between those who can understand the interaction and those who cannot.

This finding is particularly important for understanding the proposed concept of a linguistic enclave. The Skou enclave is not a physically separated territory. Rather, it is created through interactional practices. Speakers produce a temporary social space through the selection of Skou as the language of communication.

The privacy function also demonstrates that language choice is related to social relationships and power. A speaker who chooses Skou may be controlling not only what is said

but also who has access to the information being communicated. In this context, Skou provides a communicative resource that Indonesian or another lingua franca may not provide.

At the same time, the privacy function should not be interpreted as the only reason speakers use Skou. Rather, it represents one of several overlapping functions. Skou can simultaneously express solidarity, identity, intimacy, and privacy.

The finding is therefore significant because it demonstrates that the value of an endangered language may persist even when its demographic base is relatively small. A language does not need to be understood by everyone in the market to remain socially useful. Its restricted intelligibility can itself become part of its communicative value.

Skou as an Identity Marker

The fifth finding concerns the relationship between Skou language use and Indigenous identity. Participants consistently associated Skou with their identity as members of the Skou community. For them, continuing to speak Skou represents a means of maintaining a distinctive identity in the context of modernization, migration, and increasing interaction with outsiders.

Nahum Hisagi connected the use of Skou with a sense of Indigenous ownership of the market, suggesting that speaking the language communicates the idea that the market is also “our market” (N. Hisagi, personal communication, May 15, 2026).

This statement is important because it illustrates that language can function as a marker of social belonging. The meaning of Skou extends beyond the propositional content of individual utterances. The act of speaking Skou can communicate who the speakers are, where they belong, and which community they represent.

The finding can therefore be understood as a form of linguistic territoriality. In a market characterized by the presence of migrant traders and customers from different linguistic backgrounds, Skou makes Indigenous presence audible. The language becomes a symbolic resource through which speakers reaffirm their connection to the place.

This interpretation is particularly relevant because the Skouw market is not socially homogeneous. Previous research has documented the presence of Nusantara traders alongside Indigenous Papuan traders and has highlighted the comparatively limited participation of Indigenous Papuan women (Maryen et al., 2021). Within this setting, language can become one of the resources through which Indigenous speakers maintain a sense of belonging.

The identity function of Skou also helps explain why speakers may continue using the language even when Indonesian is more widely understood. The choice of Skou is not necessarily motivated by efficiency. Instead, it can be motivated by solidarity and identity.

This finding supports the broader sociolinguistic observation that language maintenance is closely connected to the symbolic value assigned to a language by its speakers. A minority language can remain socially important even when its practical domain is relatively restricted. Conversely, if younger speakers cease to associate the language with positive identity, its remaining domains may become increasingly vulnerable.

For Skou, therefore, language maintenance is closely connected to the maintenance of Indigenous identity. Preserving Skou means preserving not only a linguistic system but also a means through which community members recognize themselves and one another.

Sharing Skou With Outsiders

The sixth finding introduces a dimension that complicates the idea of Skou as an exclusive in-group language. Katarina Malo reported that Skou expressions are sometimes shared with members of neighboring communities. One example is *Raelefe*, reported as a Skou greeting equivalent to “good afternoon” (K. Malo, personal communication, May 15, 2026).

This practice demonstrates that language maintenance does not necessarily require strict linguistic boundaries. Speakers may maintain the language as an important marker of identity while selectively sharing linguistic elements with people from outside the community.

Such sharing can be understood as a form of linguistic boundary negotiation. The speakers maintain a distinction between Skou and other languages while simultaneously allowing selected Skou expressions to circulate beyond the community.

The practice has two potentially complementary consequences. First, it increases the visibility of Skou. When neighboring communities learn Skou words, the language becomes publicly recognizable rather than remaining invisible within the wider multilingual environment. Second, it establishes interpersonal connections between Skou speakers and neighboring communities.

The result is therefore neither complete linguistic isolation nor complete linguistic assimilation. Instead, speakers negotiate a middle position in which Skou remains an identity-bearing language while also functioning as a resource for intercultural interaction.

This finding is particularly significant for understanding resilience. A language community does not necessarily become stronger by excluding outsiders. In some circumstances, selective sharing can increase the symbolic value and visibility of the language. The challenge is to ensure that such outward circulation does not replace inward transmission to younger Skou speakers.

In other words, sharing Skou with outsiders may contribute to language visibility, but intergenerational use remains essential for language vitality.

Revitalization and Emerging Resilience

The findings also reveal several emerging efforts to support Skou language maintenance. These include school-based teaching, Bible translation and dictionary development, and informal intergenerational practices. Taken together, these initiatives indicate that community members are not merely experiencing language decline passively. They are also developing strategies to maintain and document their linguistic heritage.

1. School-Based Teaching

One significant development identified during the fieldwork is the reported introduction of Skou language teaching at Skouw Mabo Elementary School in 2023. According to the fieldwork data, children are introduced to basic Skou greetings and vocabulary as part of the school's efforts to reconnect younger generations with the heritage language (H. personal communication, May 2026).

The introduction of Skou into formal education represents an important institutional development. It creates a space in which the language receives explicit recognition and provides children with structured exposure to linguistic forms that may not be consistently available in their everyday environment.

This development is particularly important given the existing evidence concerning Skou's restricted domains of use. The Endangered Languages Project currently reports that Skou is used mainly in the home and family and identifies the language as threatened. Earlier documentation associated with the language similarly described Skou as concentrated in village and family interaction and emphasized the community's bilingualism.

School-based teaching can therefore provide an additional domain in which Skou is legitimized and made visible to children.

However, the participants' accounts indicate that school instruction currently emphasizes basic greetings and vocabulary rather than full conversational competence. This distinction is

important. Learning isolated words or expressions may increase language awareness, but it does not necessarily produce active speakers.

For endangered languages, formal education is most effective when it is connected to existing community use. Fishman (1991) emphasizes that intergenerational transmission within the family remains central to sustainable language maintenance. A school program can introduce and reinforce the language, but children need opportunities to use Skou meaningfully outside the classroom.

The school initiative should therefore be understood as an emerging support mechanism rather than a complete revitalization solution. Its long-term contribution will depend on whether classroom learning is reinforced by parents, grandparents, community members, and peers.

2. Bible Translation and Dictionary Development

The fieldwork also identified efforts involving Skou Bible translation and dictionary development. These activities represent an important form of language documentation and provide resources that may support literacy, education, religious practice, and future revitalization.

For a language facing a decline in the number of highly fluent speakers, documentation is particularly urgent. A dictionary can preserve lexical knowledge and provide a reference for teachers and learners, while translated religious texts can establish additional written and oral domains for Skou.

The importance of documentation is heightened by the limited demographic base of Skou. The Endangered Languages Project currently reports fewer than 700 native speakers and characterizes Skou as threatened. These figures indicate that linguistic knowledge may become increasingly concentrated among a smaller number of speakers.

Nevertheless, documentation and revitalization should not be treated as synonymous. A dictionary records language; it does not automatically create speakers. Similarly, a translated Bible may provide a valuable written resource without necessarily increasing children's everyday conversational use of Skou.

The effectiveness of documentation therefore depends partly on accessibility and community uptake. Materials need to be available to community members and incorporated into teaching, family interaction, religious activities, storytelling, and other meaningful contexts.

For Skou, documentation should ideally extend beyond lexical lists and written texts to include recordings of fluent speakers, conversations, narratives, oral histories, traditional knowledge, songs, greetings, and naturally occurring interactions. Such materials could preserve not only the linguistic structure of Skou but also the cultural contexts in which particular forms are used.

The current initiatives should therefore be understood as important foundations for future revitalization. Their greatest value will emerge when documented materials are transformed into resources that support actual language use among younger generations.

The Generational Gap

Despite these positive developments, the most significant challenge identified across the interviews is the generational gap in Skou language proficiency.

Participants described older speakers as having a substantially stronger command of Skou, including what they referred to as “deep” or traditional forms of the language. Younger speakers, by contrast, were described as having greater difficulty producing these forms and, in some cases, relying on simplified forms or written pronunciations.

This pattern is consistent with the broader vitality profile of Skou. The Endangered Languages Project currently classifies Skou as threatened and reports that the language is used

primarily in home and family domains, with most adults and some children identified as speakers. The evidence therefore suggests that the major issue is not simply whether younger people recognize Skou but whether they can actively use it.

The distinction between receptive knowledge and productive competence is particularly important. A young person may understand a greeting or recognize common Skou vocabulary without being able to participate in an extended conversation. Similarly, knowledge acquired through school instruction may remain largely passive if children do not have opportunities to use Skou with fluent speakers.

The generational gap consequently represents a potential transition in the social status of Skou. The language may gradually shift from being a language of everyday communication to being a language of cultural knowledge, ancestry, and symbolic identity.

This distinction is central to language revitalization research. Fishman (1991) argues that reversing language shift requires attention to the transmission of the language across generations, particularly within family and community domains. Grenoble and Whaley (2006) likewise emphasize that revitalization must be connected to actual community practices rather than documentation alone.

The Skou case illustrates this challenge clearly. The existence of a school program, dictionary, or Bible translation demonstrates institutional and community interest in the language, but these resources cannot replace natural interaction between fluent and emerging speakers.

The most important question for the future is therefore whether younger Skou community members will move from knowing about Skou to using Skou.

Intergenerational Transmission as the Central Challenge

The findings suggest that intergenerational transmission represents the central challenge for the future of Skou. The continued use of Skou among adults and elders demonstrates that the language remains socially meaningful. However, the weakening of productive competence among younger speakers indicates that the current social networks may not be sufficient to guarantee long-term continuity.

This situation creates a distinction between language resilience and language vitality. Resilience is evident in the continued use of Skou by community members, the maintenance of Indigenous networks, the teaching of the language in school, documentation initiatives, and the positive identity associated with Skou. Vitality, however, depends on whether these practices result in sustained acquisition and everyday use by younger generations.

The distinction is important because an endangered language can demonstrate considerable cultural resilience while simultaneously experiencing demographic decline. Community members may strongly value the language and actively participate in revitalization while the number of fluent speakers continues to decrease.

The Skou findings therefore suggest that revitalization should focus on connecting existing sources of resilience. The school, family, market, religious community, elders, and cross-border networks should not operate as separate domains. Instead, they could form a connected language-maintenance system.

For example, school-based vocabulary learning could be reinforced through conversations with grandparents. Dictionary materials could be used by teachers and marketeers. Recorded narratives from elders could become classroom materials. Market women could involve children in everyday Skou conversations. Cross-border relationships could provide opportunities for authentic communication with other speakers.

Such integration would transform isolated revitalization activities into a broader community language ecology.

Overall Pattern of Emerging Resilience

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that Skou language resilience is sustained through multiple, overlapping mechanisms rather than through a single institutional intervention.

First, social resilience is visible in the continued use of Skou among family members and Indigenous market networks. Second, economic resilience emerges from the market as a space where Skou speakers maintain social interaction while participating in multilingual commerce. Third, cross-border resilience is supported by relationships extending toward communities in PNG. Fourth, symbolic resilience is expressed through the association of Skou with Indigenous identity and belonging. Fifth, institutional resilience is emerging through school-based teaching, documentation, and religious translation.

However, these forms of resilience coexist with substantial vulnerability. The most significant vulnerability is the generational reduction in active language competence. The continued presence of Skou among adults therefore cannot be assumed to guarantee its future survival.

The overall findings can consequently be conceptualized as a tension between domain maintenance and domain contraction. Skou continues to occupy meaningful domains—family interaction, Indigenous social networks, privacy, identity, and some cross-border relationships—but the wider communicative domains of commerce, formal education, administration, and interaction with migrants are increasingly associated with other languages.

The future vitality of Skou will depend on whether its existing domains can be maintained and expanded sufficiently to support younger speakers. In this sense, the Skouw market represents both a site of linguistic pressure and a potential site of resilience. It exposes Skou speakers to dominant languages while simultaneously bringing Indigenous speakers together in recurring social networks.

The findings therefore support the interpretation of Skou as a linguistic enclave within a multilingual border economy. The enclave is not geographically isolated; rather, it is reproduced through patterns of language choice, interpersonal relationships, shared identity, and community practices. Its survival depends ultimately on whether these practices continue to include younger generations.

Implications for Skou Language Revitalization

The findings suggest several implications for future revitalization.

First, intergenerational transmission should be prioritized. Grandparents and other fluent elders should be supported in creating regular opportunities for children to hear and speak Skou.

Second, market-based language programs could complement school-based programs. The Skouw market already contains social networks in which Skou is naturally used. These networks could become sites for informal language learning.

Third, women's linguistic roles should be recognized explicitly. The *mama-mama pinang* group represents an existing community network that could participate in storytelling, greetings, vocabulary teaching, and oral documentation.

Fourth, documentation should prioritize audio and video recordings. Because the number of highly fluent speakers appears to be limited, recording natural speech is particularly urgent. A dictionary should ideally be accompanied by recorded examples, conversations, narratives, songs, and culturally significant expressions.

Fifth, school instruction should move beyond isolated vocabulary. Teaching greetings and individual words is a useful starting point, but revitalization would be stronger if students could eventually engage in conversations, narratives, songs, and culturally relevant activities in Skou.

Sixth, cross-border collaboration should be considered. If Skou-related linguistic knowledge continues to exist among elders on both sides of the Indonesia–PNG border, collaborative documentation with communities in Wutung and Waromo could strengthen the linguistic network.

Finally, revitalization should remain community-driven. Grenoble and Whaley (2006) emphasize that successful revitalization requires realistic goals, community commitment, appropriate resources, and locally meaningful programs. External documentation can support revitalization, but the long-term future of Skou depends on whether community members continue to choose the language in everyday life.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the resilience of the Skou language within the multilingual and migrant-dominated environment of the Skouw border market. The findings demonstrate that Skou remains an important resource for identity, social cohesion, privacy, family communication, and cross-border relationships even though Indonesian and other languages dominate many wider communicative domains.

The concept of a linguistic enclave helps explain this situation. Skou speakers are not geographically isolated from dominant languages. Instead, they maintain a socially concentrated space in which Skou continues to have particular functions. Family groups, Indigenous marketeers, especially the *mama-mama pinang*, elders, and cross-border relatives constitute important networks through which the language survives.

The findings also demonstrate that language resilience is not equivalent to language vitality. Skou continues to be used, but the substantial generational gap presents a serious threat. The presence of only a small number of highly fluent elders encountered during the May 2026 fieldwork underscores the urgency of documentation and transmission. Existing school teaching, Bible translation, dictionary development, and other revitalization activities are promising, but their effectiveness ultimately depends on whether Skou returns to regular intergenerational communication.

The Skouw market therefore presents a paradox. The same processes that increase contact with dominant languages—trade, migration, infrastructure, border development, and mobility—can contribute to language shift. Yet the market also creates a social setting where Indigenous speakers can reaffirm their identity and continue using Skou with one another.

The future of Skou will depend not simply on documenting the language before it disappears, but on maintaining the social relationships in which the language remains useful, meaningful, and alive. For this reason, the most urgent priority is to connect documentation with everyday practice: grandparents speaking with grandchildren, parents using Skou at home, marketeers maintaining Indigenous interaction, schools supporting community knowledge, and cross-border families continuing to communicate across the Indonesia–PNG boundary.

Skou should therefore be understood not merely as an endangered linguistic object but as a living expression of Indigenous identity whose survival depends on the continued agency of its speakers.

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