

From Home to WhatsApp: Digital Family Language Policy and Waijewa Language Transmission among Sumbanese Migrant Families in Kupang City

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ABSTRACT

This research examines digital family language policy and Waijewa language transmission among Sumbanese migrant families in Kupang City, East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. This study employed a qualitative-dominant embedded mixed-methods design, in which qualitative data from interviews and WhatsApp communication were used as the primary basis for interpretation, while questionnaire data provided descriptive quantitative support for identifying general patterns of language use and family language practices. The participants consisted of 28 Sumbanese migrant families with Waijewa-speaking backgrounds who live in Kupang City and use WhatsApp as part of their family communication. Data were collected through questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and selected WhatsApp communication practices, then analyzed descriptively and thematically using the framework of family language policy, language maintenance and shift, and digital sociolinguistics. The findings show that Waijewa remains strongly used in communication with parents, elders, adult relatives, and during family gatherings. However, its use with children is less consistent, as many younger family members understand Waijewa but often respond in Indonesian or Kupang Malay. WhatsApp functions as an extended family domain through voice notes, video calls, family groups, greetings, jokes, advice, and emotional messages. Nevertheless, digital communication does not automatically guarantee active transmission unless younger speakers are encouraged to participate in Waijewa. The research concludes that Waijewa remains resilient as a language of identity, kinship, and emotional belonging, but its long-term vitality depends on consistent family language management and active youth participation.

Keywords: Digital Family Language Policy, Waijewa Language Transmission, Whatsapp Communication, Sumbanese Migrant Families, Kupang City

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world, where regional languages function not only as means of communication but also as markers of ethnic identity, cultural memory, local knowledge, and intergenerational belonging. Badan Pengembangan dan Pembinaan Bahasa (2025) reports that Indonesia has 718 regional languages, a figure that reflects the richness and complexity of the nation's linguistic ecology. However, this diversity is increasingly challenged by migration, urbanization, education, economic mobility, and the growing dominance of Indonesian as the national language. In multilingual urban spaces, smaller regional languages often lose some of their public functions and become increasingly

restricted to intimate domains such as the home, kinship networks, religious gatherings, and intra-ethnic communication. This condition raises an important sociolinguistic concern: how can a mother tongue continue to be transmitted when its speakers live outside their original speech community and interact daily with more dominant urban languages?

This study is grounded in several foundational theories of language maintenance and family language policy. Fishman's (1991) theory of language maintenance and shift is used as a grand theoretical framework because it emphasizes intergenerational transmission as the core condition for minority-language survival. From this perspective, a language remains vital not simply because speakers value it symbolically, but because it continues to be used across generations in everyday life. Spolsky's (2004) language policy framework is also treated as a foundational theory because it explains language policy through three interrelated components: language ideology, language practice, and language management. In the family domain, these components refer to what family members believe about a language, how they actually use it, and whether they deliberately regulate or encourage its use. Similarly, King, Fogle, and Logan-Terry's (2008) concept of family language policy is used as a foundational model because it defines language planning within the home as a central mechanism in shaping children's language acquisition and heritage-language transmission.

Recent studies have extended these foundational perspectives by showing that family language policy is shaped by social, affective, and intergenerational factors. Curdt-Christiansen and Huang (2020) argue that family language policy is influenced by parental beliefs, socioeconomic aspirations, educational expectations, emotional attachment, and broader sociopolitical conditions. Hollebeke, et al. (2023) further show that parental efforts are central to heritage-language maintenance because parents are the primary agents who expose children to the language in everyday interaction. Ramoniené and Ramonaitė (2024) also demonstrate that family language policy is closely connected to dialect and heritage-language maintenance in diaspora contexts. These studies suggest that the transmission of a mother tongue is not automatic; it depends on whether family beliefs are translated into consistent language practices and active management at home.

Contemporary family language practices are also increasingly mediated by digital communication. The family domain is no longer limited to physical co-presence because relatives maintain contact through platforms such as WhatsApp, video calls, voice notes, and family group chats. Studies on digital and networked family language policy show that digital platforms can extend family interaction beyond the nuclear household and shape how heritage languages are practiced, negotiated, and emotionally experienced (Bose, Gao, Starfield, Sun, & Ramdani, 2023; Bose, Gao, Starfield, & Perera, 2024; Bose, Starfield, & Perera, 2025; Said, 2021). In this sense, digital platforms are not merely technical tools for communication; they are social spaces where intimacy, authority, identity, affection, and language ideology are performed. For orally transmitted regional languages, WhatsApp is particularly relevant because its multimodal features such as written messages, voice notes, video calls, images, emojis, and group interaction, allow speakers to use the mother tongue without being fully dependent on standardized writing practices. At the same time, digital communication can also become a space of language mixing or language shift if Indonesian or other dominant languages become the preferred medium of interaction.

The Waijewa language, spoken by communities from Wewewa in Southwest Sumba, East Nusa Tenggara, provides an important case for examining digital family language policy in an internal migration context. Waijewa is not merely a regional language; it is also a marker of Sumbanese ethnic identity, kinship, cultural belonging, and emotional connection to place

of origin. Previous research on Waijewa language maintenance among Sumbanese migrant workers in Denpasar found that Waijewa remained strong in domestic domains and family communication through social media, but its use declined in public domains where Indonesian and Balinese were more dominant (Ate, 2026). However, the Denpasar study did not specifically examine how family language policy operates through digital communication or how WhatsApp contributes to intergenerational transmission. Similar concerns have also been raised in recent family language policy research, which shows that heritage-language transmission is increasingly shaped by dispersed family networks, digital communication, and children's participation in dominant-language environments (Bose et al., 2024; Bose et al., 2025; Hollebeke et al., 2023).

Kupang City provides a distinctive sociolinguistic setting for extending this inquiry. As the capital of East Nusa Tenggara Province, Kupang is a multilingual urban center where people from different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds interact in education, employment, government, religion, trade, and neighborhood life. Benu, Artawa, Satyawati, and Purnawati (2023) show that local-language vitality in Kupang City must be understood within a complex linguistic landscape where different languages compete for visibility and social function. Unlike Denpasar, where Waijewa-speaking migrants encounter Balinese as a dominant local language, Kupang presents a different linguistic ecology. In Kupang, Sumbanese migrant families interact with Indonesian, Kupang Malay, and various regional languages from across East Nusa Tenggara. This makes Kupang a productive site for examining how Waijewa is maintained, adapted, or weakened in a multilingual urban environment that is geographically closer to Sumba but still sociolinguistically distinct from the Waijewa homeland.

Despite growing scholarship on family language policy, digital communication, and heritage-language transmission, several gaps remain. First, much family-language-policy research has focused on transnational migration, immigrant families, and large heritage-language communities, while internal migration within Indonesia remains less explored. Second, studies of regional language maintenance in Indonesia often emphasize language attitudes and domains of use, but pay less attention to how families manage language transmission in everyday digital interaction. Third, while social media is frequently mentioned as a supporting factor in minority-language maintenance, WhatsApp has not been sufficiently examined as an extended family domain where oral, emotional, and intergenerational practices take place. These gaps are important because digital communication has become inseparable from family life, especially among migrant families whose relatives are dispersed across different locations.

Based on this background, the present study investigates digital family language policy and Waijewa language transmission among Sumbanese migrant families in Kupang City. The study focuses on how Waijewa is used in home-based communication, how WhatsApp functions as a digital space for family interaction, and how family beliefs, attitudes, and management practices influence the maintenance or shift of Waijewa among younger family members. By drawing on language maintenance and shift, family language policy, and digital sociolinguistics, this study argues that Waijewa transmission in migrant families is shaped not only by language pride but also by everyday communicative choices made within the family. WhatsApp may operate as an extended home domain where intimacy, respect, humor, advice, and ethnic identity are reproduced through Waijewa. However, its contribution to language maintenance depends on whether younger family members are encouraged to participate as active speakers rather than passive understanders. Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) How is Waijewa used in home-based communication among

Sumbanese migrant families in Kupang City? (2) How do these families use WhatsApp as a digital space for Waijewa language transmission? and (3) What family language policies, attitudes, and ideologies influence the maintenance or shift of Waijewa among younger family members?

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative-dominant embedded mixed-methods design to examine digital family language policy and Waijewa language transmission among Sumbanese migrant families in Kupang City, East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. This design was chosen because the study aimed to understand not only the frequency of Waijewa use, but also the meanings, beliefs, family decisions, and digital communication practices underlying language transmission. In this design, qualitative data from semi-structured interviews and selected WhatsApp communication practices served as the primary data source for interpretation, while quantitative questionnaire data were embedded to provide descriptive support regarding general tendencies in home language use, WhatsApp-based interaction, language attitudes, and family language management. The study was theoretically informed by family language policy, language maintenance and shift, and digital sociolinguistics, with particular attention to how language ideology, language practice, and language management shape intergenerational language transmission.

The participants consisted of 28 Sumbanese migrant families living in Kupang City. They were selected through purposive sampling based on several criteria: the family had Waijewa-speaking members, originated from Wewewa or had strong familial links to the Waijewa-speaking community, had lived in Kupang City for at least one year, and used WhatsApp as part of family communication. Each family was represented by at least one adult family member, such as a parent, older sibling, or household head, while several families also involved younger members to provide insight into intergenerational language transmission. The selection of 28 families was considered adequate for capturing diverse patterns of family language practice across different household types, occupations, educational backgrounds, and levels of attachment to the Waijewa language. The study focused on families rather than individual speakers because language transmission is fundamentally embedded in family interaction, parental beliefs, and everyday communicative routines.

Data were collected using three main techniques: questionnaire, semi-structured interview, and documentation of selected WhatsApp communication practices. The questionnaire was designed to obtain information about language use at home, language choice with parents and children, attitudes toward Waijewa, frequency of Waijewa use in WhatsApp communication, and perceived factors supporting or weakening language transmission. The semi-structured interviews explored family language beliefs, parental expectations, children's responses to Waijewa, reasons for using or avoiding Waijewa, and the role of WhatsApp in maintaining family connection. In addition, selected examples of WhatsApp interaction, such as greetings, voice notes, family advice, jokes, prayers, and everyday messages, were collected only with participants' permission. These digital data were not treated merely as written texts, but as evidence of how family intimacy, ethnic identity, and language loyalty are performed in digitally mediated interaction.

The data collection took place between April and May 2026 and was conducted in several stages. First, potential participants were contacted through Sumbanese community networks, church groups, family associations, and personal referrals in Kupang City. After

receiving information about the purpose of the study, participants who agreed to take part completed the questionnaire and joined the interview session. Interviews were conducted in Indonesian, Waijewa, or a combination of both, depending on the participants' preference and communicative comfort. When WhatsApp data were used, participants were asked to select examples that they considered representative of family communication, and all private names, phone numbers, and sensitive information were anonymized. This study was reviewed by LP3M Unit in Citra Bangsa University in Kupang and was granted an ethics institutional research permission under letter number 012/LP3M-UCB/IV/2026, dated April 2nd, 2026, because the study involved minimal-risk questionnaire and interview data. All participants were informed about the aims of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any stage. For child participants, parental or guardian consent was obtained, and children were also asked for their willingness to participate. The use of WhatsApp communication data required additional participant consent. All names, phone numbers, family identifiers, and sensitive information were anonymized.

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and manual thematic analysis. Questionnaire responses were tabulated in Microsoft Excel and summarized through frequencies and percentages to identify general patterns of Waijewa use in the home domain, WhatsApp communication, language attitudes, and family transmission practices. The qualitative data, consisting of interview responses and selected WhatsApp interactions, were analyzed manually using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis procedure. The analysis involved six stages: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, development of preliminary themes, review of themes, definition and naming of final themes, and interpretation of the themes in relation to the research questions. In the first stage, the researcher repeatedly read the interview responses and WhatsApp excerpts to gain an overall understanding of the data. In the second stage, meaningful units were coded, including expressions related to parental encouragement, passive understanding among children, language mixing, emotional use of Waijewa, identity expression, and the influence of Indonesian and Kupang Malay. In the third and fourth stages, these codes were grouped and reviewed to form broader themes. The final themes were then interpreted using the main categories of family language policy, namely language ideology, language practice, and language management, while also considering the sociolinguistic framework of language maintenance and shift. To strengthen the credibility of the analysis, questionnaire results, interview responses, and WhatsApp examples were compared through data triangulation. This procedure allowed the study to explain not only whether Waijewa is maintained among Sumbanese migrant families in Kupang City, but also how family communication and digital interaction contribute to its transmission or gradual shift across generations.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

FINDINGS

This section presents the findings of the study based on data collected from 28 Sumbanese migrant families living in Kupang City. The findings are organized according to the three research questions formulated in the introduction: (1) how Waijewa is used in home-based communication among Sumbanese migrant families in Kupang City; (2) how these families use WhatsApp as a digital space for Waijewa language transmission; and (3) what family

language policies, attitudes, and ideologies influence the maintenance or shift of Waijewa among younger family members. The findings are derived from questionnaire responses, semi-structured interviews, and selected examples of WhatsApp-based family communication. The presentation focuses on descriptive patterns of language use, family practices, and digital interaction, while broader theoretical interpretation is reserved for the discussion section.

WAIJEW A USE IN HOME-BASED COMMUNICATION

The findings show that Waijewa remains actively used in the home domain among many Sumbanese migrant families in Kupang City. However, its use is not equally distributed across all family members. Waijewa is used most frequently in communication with parents, grandparents, older relatives, and adult family members, while its use with children and adolescents is more variable. This indicates that Waijewa continues to function as a language of kinship, intimacy, respect, and ethnic belonging, but its transmission to the younger generation is not always stable.

Table 1. Waijewa Use in Home-Based Communication among Families

Home Communication Context	Frequently/ Always	Sometimes	Rarely/Never
Speaking Waijewa with parents or elders	26 families (92.9%)	2 families (7.1%)	0 families (0%)
Speaking Waijewa with spouse or adult relatives	21 families (75.0%)	5 families (17.9%)	2 families (7.1%)
Speaking Waijewa with siblings or cousins	20 families (71.4%)	6 families (21.4%)	2 families (7.1%)
Speaking Waijewa with children	13 families (46.4%)	10 families (35.7%)	5 families (17.9%)
Using Waijewa during family gatherings	24 families (85.7%)	4 families (14.3%)	0 families (0%)

As shown in Table 1, the strongest use of Waijewa occurs in communication with parents and elders. Twenty-six families, or 92.9%, reported that they frequently or always use Waijewa when speaking with older family members. This suggests that Waijewa still carries a strong intergenerational and affective function. It is not merely used as a habitual language, but as a marker of respect and emotional closeness toward older relatives. In many families, adult speakers consider Waijewa the most natural language when addressing parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, and older members of the extended family.

Waijewa is also widely used among adult family members. Twenty-one families, or 75%, reported frequent use of Waijewa with spouses or adult relatives. In these families, Waijewa is commonly used in everyday domestic situations such as discussing household matters, giving advice, telling stories, joking, remembering events in Sumba, and maintaining emotional closeness. Similarly, 20 families, or 71.4%, reported frequent use of Waijewa with siblings and cousins. These patterns indicate that Waijewa remains a living language in adult

intra-family communication, especially when the interlocutors share the same linguistic background and have active competence in the language.

The pattern becomes more complex in communication with children. Only 13 families, or 46.4%, reported frequent use of Waijewa with children, while 10 families, or 35.7%, reported using it only sometimes. Five families, or 17.9%, stated that Waijewa is rarely used with children. This finding shows that intergenerational transmission is uneven. In several households, children understand Waijewa but respond in Indonesian or Kupang Malay. In other families, parents use Waijewa when giving simple instructions, making jokes, or expressing emotion, but shift to Indonesian when discussing school matters, discipline, or abstract topics. This suggests that younger family members may develop passive competence in Waijewa without necessarily becoming active speakers.

Family gatherings also emerged as important spaces for Waijewa use. Twenty-four families, or 85.7%, reported that Waijewa is frequently used during gatherings involving relatives from Sumba or other Waijewa-speaking families in Kupang. In such settings, Waijewa is used not only for ordinary conversation, but also for storytelling, humor, advice, prayer, cultural reminders, and discussion of family matters. These gatherings strengthen the social presence of Waijewa beyond the nuclear household and help children hear the language in a wider family environment. However, younger speakers often participate unevenly; some respond in Waijewa, some mix Waijewa with Indonesian, and others remain mostly passive listeners.

The uneven use of Waijewa in parent–child communication is also reflected in the interview data. Some parents explained:

“We rarely use Waijewa when communicating with our children at home. They were not taught Waijewa from an early age, so they are not able to use it well.”
(Parent interview, P01; translated from Indonesian)

“My children understand some Waijewa expressions, but they find it difficult to respond in Waijewa. They usually respond in Indonesian because that is the language they have understood since childhood.”
(Parent interview, P05; translated from Indonesian)

This excerpt responses show that Waijewa is still recognized as a family language, but its use with children is limited because children did not receive consistent exposure from early childhood. Also, Waijewa transmission is not completely absent, but it is incomplete. Children may understand certain expressions, yet they do not develop active productive competence. A similar pattern appears in some children’s responses:

“I understand a little Waijewa, but I never use it. I usually speak Indonesian.”
(Child interview excerpt, C01; translated from Indonesian)

“I understand a little, but when I respond, I choose Indonesian because I am afraid of making mistakes.” (Child interview excerpt, C04; translated from Indonesian)

The children’s statements above indicate that Waijewa is understood at a receptive level but is not actively used in daily communication. This supports the questionnaire finding that Waijewa transmission is stronger among adults and older relatives than between parents and children.

Overall, the findings indicate that Waijewa is still strongly maintained in the home domain, especially among adults and older relatives. Nevertheless, the continuity of Waijewa among younger family members depends on whether families actively use the language with children or allow Indonesian and Kupang Malay to become the dominant languages of daily interaction.

WHATSAPP AS A DIGITAL SPACE FOR WAIJEWAS TRANSMISSION

The second research question concerns how Sumbanese migrant families use WhatsApp as a digital space for Waijewa language transmission. The findings show that WhatsApp plays an important role in extending Waijewa use beyond face-to-face interaction. For many families, WhatsApp functions as a practical and emotional communication space that connects relatives living in Kupang, Sumba, and other places. It allows family members to maintain contact through written messages, voice notes, video calls, greetings, family announcements, jokes, prayers, and advice.

Table 2. Forms of Waijewa Use in WhatsApp Communication

WhatsApp Communication Practice	Families Reporting Use	Percentage
Voice notes in Waijewa	24 families	85.7%
Phone or video calls using Waijewa	25 families	89.3%
Waijewa in family WhatsApp groups	22 families	78.6%
Written chat in Waijewa	17 families	60.7%
Greetings, jokes, and informal expressions in Waijewa	23 families	82.1%
Advice, reminders, or family messages in Waijewa	19 families	67.9%
Religious or cultural expressions in Waijewa	15 families	53.6%

As indicated in Table 2, phone calls and video calls are the most common forms of WhatsApp-based Waijewa use. Twenty-five families, or 89.3%, reported using Waijewa in WhatsApp calls with relatives. This shows that spoken Waijewa remains more dominant than written Waijewa in digital family communication. Many participants reported that they feel more comfortable speaking Waijewa than writing it because spoken interaction is considered more natural and emotionally expressive. Calls and video calls are especially used when communicating with parents, grandparents, and relatives in Sumba.

Voice notes also play an important role. Twenty-four families, or 85.7%, reported using Waijewa in voice notes. This finding is important in the context of digital family language practice because voice notes allow speakers to use Waijewa orally without needing to follow a standardized writing system. Through voice notes, family members can send greetings, advice, emotional messages, humorous comments, and short updates in Waijewa. This feature helps

maintain the oral character of Waijewa while adapting it to digital communication. For older speakers who may not be comfortable typing long messages, voice notes provide an accessible way to remain active in family communication.

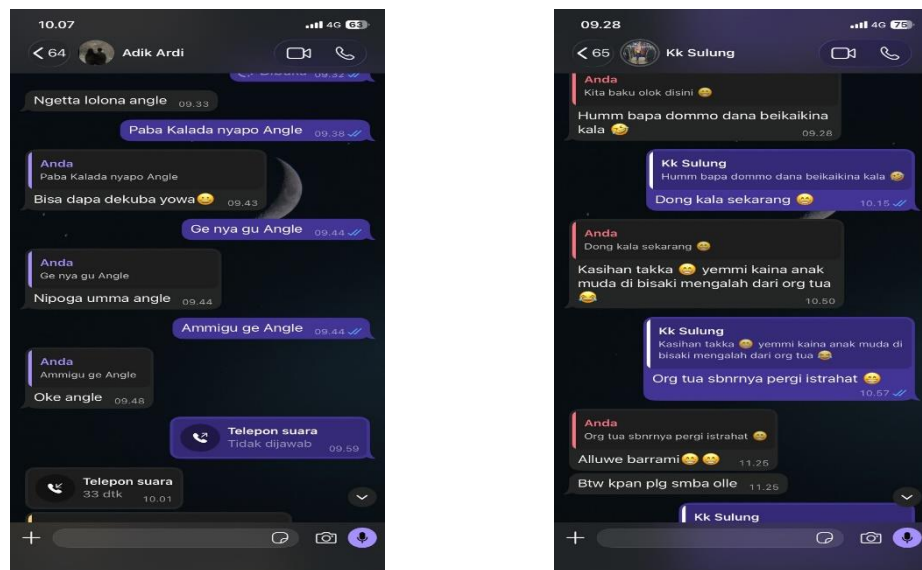
Family WhatsApp groups are also important spaces for Waijewa use. Twenty-two families, or 78.6%, reported that Waijewa appears in family WhatsApp groups, especially in greetings, jokes, informal comments, expressions of concern, and family announcements. These groups often include relatives from different locations, including Kupang, Sumba, Bali, Java, and other migrant destinations. In this sense, WhatsApp does not merely support communication between individuals; it also creates a digital family network where Waijewa can circulate across geographical distance.

However, written Waijewa appears less frequently than spoken Waijewa. Only 17 families, or 60.7%, reported using Waijewa in written chat. Several reasons explain this pattern. Some participants felt unsure about spelling Waijewa words in written form. Others preferred Indonesian for clarity, especially when messages involved practical information, school matters, money transfers, travel arrangements, or formal family coordination. As a result, written family chats often show language mixing, with Waijewa used for greetings, emotional expressions, jokes, and kinship terms, while Indonesian or Kupang Malay is used for longer explanations.

Greetings, jokes, and informal expressions are among the most common uses of Waijewa on WhatsApp. Twenty-three families, or 82.1%, reported using Waijewa for humorous interaction and expressions of closeness. This suggests that Waijewa carries strong affective value in digital communication. Even when Indonesian is used for the main content of a message, Waijewa may still appear in openings, closings, teasing, laughter, or kinship-based expressions. These small but repeated uses contribute to the symbolic visibility of Waijewa in family interaction.

The findings also show that WhatsApp is used for advice, reminders, and family messages. Nineteen families, or 67.9%, reported that older family members sometimes use Waijewa to give advice, remind younger relatives about family obligations, or express concern. In these cases, Waijewa is associated with authority, care, and moral guidance. Religious and cultural expressions in Waijewa were reported by 15 families, or 53.6%. These include prayers, blessings, condolences, and references to family customs or events in Sumba. Although this use is not as frequent as ordinary greetings or calls, it shows that WhatsApp can help preserve culturally meaningful expressions that might otherwise be limited to face-to-face family gatherings.

The WhatsApp data further illustrate how Waijewa circulates in digital family interaction. The following anonymized WhatsApp screenshot shows a common pattern in communication digitally between cousins using Waijewa:



Picture 1. WhatsApp screenshot excerpts using Waijewa and mixing language

This WhatsApp's screenshot excerpts provide a digital space in which Waijewa is still used in informal family communication. The repeated use of *angle* indicates that Waijewa is not only used to exchange information, but also to maintain kinship closeness and interpersonal warmth. At the same time, the occurrence of Indonesian elements such as *bisa* 'can' and *oke* 'okay' and Kupang Malay such as *dong* 'they' suggests that digital family interaction may involve language mixing. Thus, WhatsApp functions as an extended family domain where Waijewa remains visible, although its use may coexist with Indonesian and Kupang Malay in everyday digital communication.

Taken together, the findings indicate that WhatsApp functions as an extended family domain for Waijewa use. It does not replace the physical home, but expands the space in which Waijewa can be heard, spoken, and recognized. The strongest contribution of WhatsApp lies in oral-digital communication, especially voice notes, calls, and video calls. Written Waijewa is present but less stable because many speakers are more confident using Waijewa orally than in written form.

FAMILY LANGUAGE POLICIES, ATTITUDES, AND IDEOLOGIES

The third research question examines the family language policies, attitudes, and ideologies that influence the maintenance or shift of Waijewa among younger family members. The findings show that most families express positive attitudes toward Waijewa and consider it an important marker of identity. However, not all families apply an explicit or consistent strategy for transmitting the language to children. In many households, Waijewa maintenance depends more on natural exposure and family habit than on deliberate planning.

Table 3. Family Language Policy Patterns among Families

Family Language Policy Pattern	Number of Families	Percentage
Parents or elders explicitly encourage children to speak Waijewa	18 families	64.3%
Waijewa is used naturally without explicit rules	21 families	75%
Children are corrected when they do not understand Waijewa	9 families	32.1%
Indonesian/Kupang Malay is allowed as the main language with children	16 families	57.1%
Parents believe Waijewa must be transmitted to children	26 families	92.9%
Parents worry that children may lose Waijewa	20 families	71.4%
Children understand Waijewa but often respond in Indonesian/Kupang Malay	19 families	67.9%

The data show a strong ideological commitment to Waijewa. Twenty-six families, or 92.9%, stated that Waijewa should be transmitted to children and younger family members. Most families associated Waijewa with ethnic identity, respect for ancestors, connection to Sumba, and family belonging. Parents and elders generally viewed Waijewa as something that children should know, even when the children were born or raised in Kupang. This indicates that Waijewa continues to hold high symbolic value among Sumbanese migrant families.

At the same time, explicit language management is less consistent. Eighteen families, or 64.3%, reported that parents or elders encourage children to speak Waijewa. This encouragement may take the form of asking children to answer in Waijewa, teaching them kinship terms, using Waijewa during family gatherings, or reminding them not to forget their ancestral language. However, only nine families, or 32.1%, reported actively correcting children when they do not understand or do not respond in Waijewa. This suggests that while many families value Waijewa ideologically, fewer families enforce its use systematically.

The most common pattern is natural or habitual use. Twenty-one families, or 75%, reported that Waijewa is used naturally at home without formal rules. In these households, children are exposed to Waijewa through conversations among adults, interaction with visiting relatives, phone calls with grandparents, and WhatsApp communication. This natural exposure helps children recognize and understand the language, but it does not always guarantee active speaking ability. Many children hear Waijewa regularly but respond in Indonesian or Kupang Malay, especially when speaking with siblings or peers.

The influence of Indonesian and Kupang Malay is also clearly visible. Sixteen families, or 57.1%, reported that Indonesian or Kupang Malay is allowed as the main language when speaking with children. Parents explained this practice in relation to school, peer interaction, urban life, and communicative convenience. Indonesian is often associated with education and formal communication, while Kupang Malay is commonly used in neighborhood and peer-group interaction. As a result, children may grow up in a multilingual environment where Waijewa is understood as a family or ethnic language, but Indonesian and Kupang Malay dominate daily interaction outside the family.

A notable finding is the emergence of passive bilingualism among younger family members. Nineteen families, or 67.9%, reported that children or adolescents understand Waijewa but often respond in Indonesian or Kupang Malay. This pattern suggests that Waijewa transmission is partially successful at the level of comprehension, but less secure at the level of active production. Passive understanding allows children to follow family conversations, understand advice from elders, and recognize cultural expressions. However, if passive competence does not develop into active use, the long-term vitality of Waijewa within migrant families may become weaker.

Parents' concerns about language loss are also important. Twenty families, or 71.4%, expressed worry that children may gradually lose Waijewa if it is not used regularly at home. This concern was especially strong among parents whose children were born in Kupang or had limited direct experience living in Sumba. These parents recognized that children's daily linguistic environment is shaped by school, friends, media, and urban multilingual interaction. For this reason, some families deliberately use Waijewa in certain situations, especially when speaking with elders, during family gatherings, or when communicating with relatives in Sumba through WhatsApp.

The gap between positive language ideology and inconsistent language management is also visible in the interview data. Some parents stated:

“Actually, we want our children to know and speak Waijewa because it is our family language and our identity as Sumbanese people. However, in daily communication at home, we usually use Indonesian because the children understand it more easily.” (*Parent interview excerpt, P08; translated from Indonesian*)

“Sometimes we use Waijewa when speaking with older relatives, but we do not have a special rule that requires the children to answer in Waijewa.” (*Parent interview excerpt, P10; translated from Indonesian*)

These interview excerpts above indicates that parents believe Waijewa should be transmitted to children, but they do not always create explicit rules or routines for using it at home. As a result, Waijewa transmission often depends on natural exposure rather than deliberate family language management.

Overall, the findings show a tension between positive language ideology and inconsistent language management. Most families believe that Waijewa is important and should be transmitted, but their everyday practices vary. Some families actively encourage children to speak Waijewa, while others rely mainly on exposure. Some children use Waijewa actively, while others only understand it. This indicates that Waijewa maintenance among Sumbanese migrant families in Kupang City is still strong at the level of identity and emotional attachment, but less stable at the level of systematic intergenerational transmission

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that Waijewa language transmission among Sumbanese migrant families in Kupang City cannot be understood simply as either successful maintenance or complete shift. Instead, the data point to a condition of partial and uneven transmission. Waijewa remains strong in communication with elders, adult relatives, and in family gatherings, but its use becomes less stable when the interlocutors are children or younger family members. This pattern requires a theoretical interpretation beyond the descriptive fact that Waijewa is “still used.” The central issue is that Waijewa survives in some family relationships but is weakened in others. Therefore, its vitality in Kupang City depends not only on whether families still value the language, but also on whether the language is actively transmitted to younger speakers through regular and meaningful interaction.

From Fishman’s perspective, intergenerational transmission is the foundation of minority-language survival. However, the present study shows that the family domain should not be treated as a homogeneous or automatically protective space. In many Sumbanese migrant families, Waijewa is strongly maintained in upward and lateral family communication, such as communication with parents, elders, spouses, siblings, and adult relatives. Yet, this strength does not fully extend downward to children. This suggests that Fishman’s emphasis on the home domain needs to be read more carefully in migrant contexts. The home may remain symbolically Waijewa-oriented while becoming practically multilingual in everyday parent–child interaction. In other words, the home can preserve a language emotionally without transmitting it productively.

This distinction is important because it explains why Waijewa appears resilient and vulnerable at the same time. Its resilience lies in its continued use among adults and older relatives, where it functions as a language of kinship, respect, intimacy, and ethnic belonging. Its vulnerability lies in the fact that younger speakers are often positioned as listeners rather than active participants. When children understand Waijewa but respond in Indonesian or Kupang Malay, transmission occurs only at the receptive level. This condition creates what may be called partial maintenance: the language is not absent, but its productive use among the younger generation is weakened. Thus, the case of Waijewa shows that language maintenance should not be measured only by adult use or positive attitudes, but also by children’s active competence and willingness to respond in the language.

The uneven transmission of Waijewa is also closely related to Spolsky’s language policy framework, particularly the relationship between language ideology, language practice, and language management. The families in this study generally demonstrate a strong Waijewa language ideology. Parents and elders believe that Waijewa is important because it represents Sumbanese identity, ancestral connection, family belonging, and respect for older generations. However, this ideology is not always aligned with daily language practice. In many households, Indonesian or Kupang Malay is used more often with children because these languages are perceived as easier, more practical, and more familiar to the younger generation. This mismatch between ideology and practice explains why Waijewa may remain highly valued while still becoming less actively transmitted.

The weakest element in the family language policy pattern is language management. Although many parents want children to inherit Waijewa, fewer families establish explicit routines, expectations, or corrective practices that require children to use it. Some parents encourage Waijewa use, but many rely on natural exposure rather than deliberate planning. This finding deepens Spolsky’s framework by showing that ideology alone cannot sustain

intergenerational transmission if it is not supported by practice and management. In the Waijewa case, the problem is not the absence of pride or emotional attachment. The problem is the weak conversion of that pride into everyday communicative discipline. Parents may believe that Waijewa should be inherited, but if they habitually use Indonesian with children, the language policy of the family effectively favors Indonesian regardless of stated ideology.

The findings also suggest that family language policy in migrant contexts is often implicit rather than formally planned. Most families do not appear to consciously decide to replace Waijewa with Indonesian or Kupang Malay. Rather, the shift happens gradually through ordinary communicative choices: parents use Indonesian because children understand it more easily; children respond in Kupang Malay because it is common among peers; family members use Indonesian in WhatsApp because it is clearer for everyone. These small repeated choices become a *de facto* family language policy. Therefore, the shift from Waijewa does not necessarily result from deliberate rejection of the mother tongue, but from the accumulation of practical decisions that favor dominant languages in everyday life.

Kupang City's multilingual ecology helps explain why this pattern occurs. Sumbanese migrant families do not live in a Waijewa-dominant environment. Although Kupang is geographically closer to Sumba than Denpasar, it is sociolinguistically distinct from the Waijewa homeland. Indonesian has institutional value in education, administration, and formal interaction, while Kupang Malay functions as a strong everyday urban *lingua franca* in peer groups, neighborhoods, markets, and informal social life. Children therefore grow up in an ecology where Indonesian and Kupang Malay provide wider communicative access than Waijewa. This explains why Waijewa becomes associated mainly with family identity and older relatives, while Indonesian and Kupang Malay become associated with schooling, friendship, and urban belonging.

This urban multilingual ecology also complicates a simple minority-versus-dominant-language model. Waijewa is not competing with only one dominant language. It is positioned among several communicative resources with different social functions. Indonesian carries educational and institutional authority. Kupang Malay carries local urban solidarity and peer-group relevance. Waijewa carries ethnic memory, kinship, and connection to Sumba. Children's language choices therefore reflect not only language preference, but also their navigation of different social worlds. Their use of Indonesian and Kupang Malay should not be interpreted simply as lack of loyalty to Waijewa; rather, it reflects the practical and social value of these languages in their everyday environment.

WhatsApp further extends this sociolinguistic complexity. The findings show that WhatsApp can function as an extended family domain, but the Discussion must go beyond saying that WhatsApp "supports" Waijewa. Theoretically, WhatsApp expands the site of family language practice beyond the physical household, allowing Waijewa to circulate through voice notes, video calls, family groups, greetings, jokes, advice, and kinship expressions. This supports recent views of family language policy as networked and digitally mediated. However, WhatsApp does not automatically reverse language shift. It becomes a supportive domain only when family members actively use Waijewa and encourage younger speakers to participate. Without such participation, WhatsApp may merely reproduce the same intergenerational imbalance found offline.

The WhatsApp evidence therefore shows both possibility and limitation. On the one hand, Waijewa remains visible in digital communication, especially through oral and informal modes such as voice notes, calls, greetings, joking, and kinship address terms. These forms allow speakers to use Waijewa without relying on standardized orthography. On the other hand,

written WhatsApp interaction often includes Indonesian, Kupang Malay, or mixed forms. Younger speakers may read or hear Waijewa but still respond in Indonesian or Kupang Malay. This shows that digital platforms can extend the family domain, but they cannot guarantee active transmission. The decisive factor is not the platform itself, but the language practices and participation patterns established within it.

This point is particularly important for orally transmitted regional languages such as Waijewa. Voice notes and video calls create opportunities for oral transmission in digital space, but these opportunities remain limited if young speakers only listen and do not respond in Waijewa. The digital family domain therefore has a conditional role. It can strengthen Waijewa when it becomes a participatory space for intergenerational exchange. It can also reveal language shift when Waijewa appears mainly in adult or elder turns while younger family members respond in Indonesian or Kupang Malay. In this sense, WhatsApp is not simply a tool for language maintenance; it is a diagnostic space that shows whether Waijewa is actively circulating across generations or only symbolically present.

The study also contributes to family language policy research by showing that maintenance and shift may occur simultaneously within the same family network. The same family may maintain Waijewa with elders, mix Waijewa and Indonesian in WhatsApp, and use mostly Indonesian with children. This internal variation challenges any assumption that a family has one stable language policy. Instead, family language policy is relational and context-dependent. It changes according to speaker generation, topic, mode of communication, and communicative purpose. For Waijewa-speaking families in Kupang, the family language policy is not a single fixed rule but a set of flexible practices that often privilege Waijewa for identity and intimacy while privileging Indonesian or Kupang Malay for practicality and youth communication.

A further implication is that passive understanding should not be mistaken for secure language maintenance. Many younger family members may still understand Waijewa expressions, especially those used by parents or older relatives, but passive competence does not guarantee future use. If children do not develop the confidence or habit of responding in Waijewa, the language may gradually move from active family language to symbolic heritage language. This is why the study argues that Waijewa transmission in Kupang City is not absent but unstable. The language remains emotionally meaningful, but its long-term vitality depends on whether families can move younger members from receptive understanding to active use.

This study has several limitations. First, the study involved 28 Sumbanese migrant families in Kupang City; therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to all Waijewa-speaking families or to all Sumbanese migrant communities in other cities. Second, the quantitative component of the study was descriptive and did not involve inferential statistical testing. The percentages reported in the Findings should therefore be interpreted as patterns within the participating families rather than as statistically generalizable claims. Third, the questionnaire data may contain self-report bias because participants may present their language practices in ways that reflect positive attitudes toward Waijewa. Fourth, the WhatsApp data were selected with participant consent, which means the excerpts may not capture the full range of everyday digital interaction. Future research could involve a larger sample, compare Waijewa-speaking families across different migration destinations, include longer-term observation of parent–child interaction, and examine children’s actual digital language practices more systematically.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that Waijewa language transmission among Sumbanese migrant families in Kupang City is sustained through the interaction of home-based communication, digital family practices, and strong ethnic-language ideology. The findings reveal that Waijewa remains actively used in communication with parents, elders, adult relatives, and during family gatherings. In these contexts, Waijewa functions not only as a medium of communication but also as a marker of respect, intimacy, cultural memory, and Sumbanese identity. However, its use with children and adolescents is less consistent, indicating that intergenerational transmission is still uneven. Many younger family members understand Waijewa but tend to respond in Indonesian or Kupang Malay, showing that the language is maintained strongly at the level of family attachment but more weakly at the level of active youth production.

The study also demonstrates that WhatsApp plays an important role as an extended family domain for Waijewa language maintenance. Through voice notes, phone calls, video calls, family groups, greetings, jokes, advice, and emotional messages, Waijewa continues to circulate beyond the physical household and connects family members across geographical distance. This finding suggests that digital communication can support minority-language maintenance by creating additional spaces for oral interaction, emotional bonding, and cultural expression. Nevertheless, WhatsApp does not automatically guarantee language transmission. Its contribution depends on how actively family members use Waijewa in digital interaction and whether younger speakers are encouraged to participate as active users rather than only passive listeners.

Theoretically, this study contributes to family language policy research by showing that the family domain should not be treated as a uniform or automatically protective space for mother-tongue transmission. In the Waijewa case, language ideology, language practice, and language management do not always move in the same direction. Families may strongly value Waijewa, yet still use Indonesian or Kupang Malay more frequently with children. This finding extends Fishman's emphasis on intergenerational transmission and Spolsky's language policy framework by showing that digital family interaction can support heritage-language visibility, but only deliberate family language management can strengthen active youth participation. Practically, the study suggests that Sumbanese migrant families, community leaders, and regional-language advocates should create more regular opportunities for children to hear, speak, and respond in Waijewa, both at home and through WhatsApp family groups, voice notes, storytelling, jokes, greetings, and intergenerational conversations.

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