

THE MAINTENANCE AND PRESERVATION OF THE SURIGAONON LANGUAGE IN CYBERSPACE

Francisco Perlas Dumanig and Maya Khemlani David
University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Abstract: The number of speakers of the Surigaonon language in the province of Surigao del Norte, Philippines is slowly decreasing due to the intrusion of major languages such as English, Cebuano, and Tagalog (Dumanig, 2006). These languages are used in official domains of communication in schools, church services, and government transactions. In sharp contrast, the Surigaonon language is used only in the home and other informal domains of communication and is frequently used orally, usually when talking with friends and family members. Moreover, the above-mentioned three major languages are commonly used in the written form particularly in printed and online newspapers, and orally heard in news stories on the radio and in church services. Because of their dominance, a number of Surigaonon people read these languages in print and online media. The presence of the three major languages threatens the Surigaonon language. Consequently, a Surigaonon website has been developed in the town of Gigaquit, Surigao del Norte to help in maintaining and preserving the Surigaonon language. The creation of a website where Surigaonon speakers can communicate and interact with each other using their own mother tongue might help the younger generations and other Surigaonons who have migrated to other places in the Philippines and other countries to preserve and maintain the language. It is, therefore, the focus of this study to examine how the Surigaonon language is maintained by means of cyberspace and to explore the benefits of creating such a website. A total of 50 Surigaonon website users were interviewed online and asked how the website helps in maintaining and preserving the language. These findings can be useful in initiating a new project and strategy to help in the maintenance and preservation of the Surigaonon language and other minority languages in the region.

Key words: Surigaonon language, language maintenance, cyberspace, oral vs. written, multilingualism

GLOBAL ISSUES

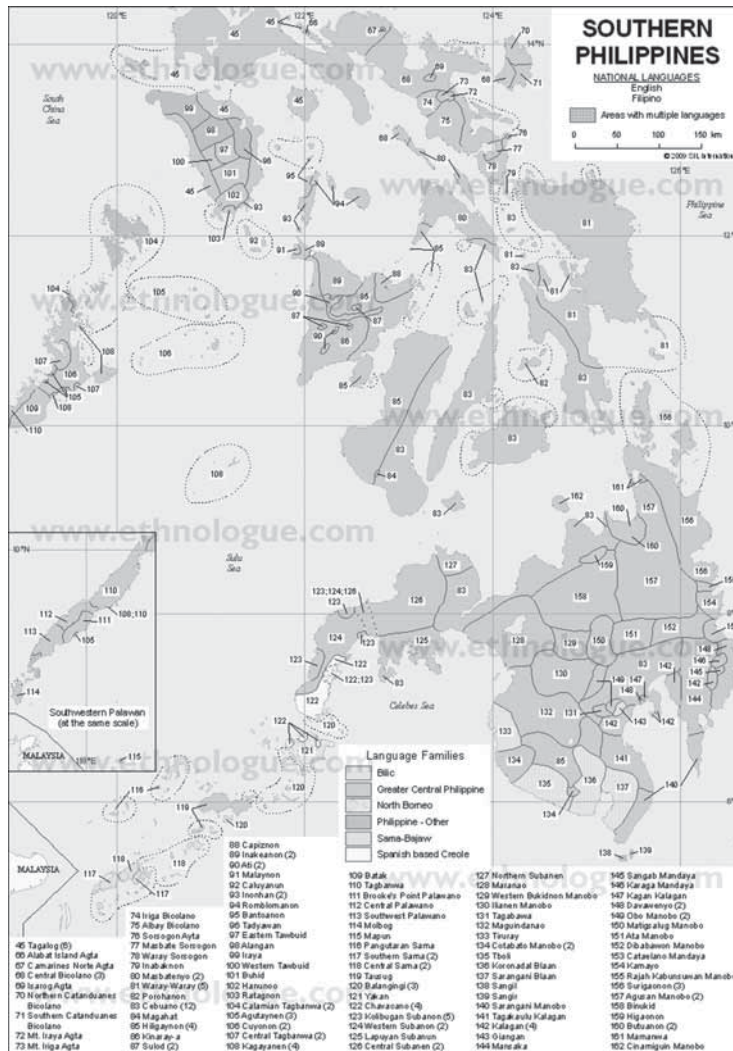
The Philippines is a multilingual and multicultural country (see map below). The latest survey of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) shows that the Philippines has 92 languages or dialects (SIL 2003). Except for Chavacano, a Spanish creole spoken mostly in the Zamboanga Peninsula in Mindanao, all indigenous languages in the Philippines are Austronesian (Paz 2002). Across the country, there are eight major languages with considerable number of native speakers. These languages are Tagalog, Ilocano, Bicol, Kapampangan, Pangasinense, Cebuano, Hiligaynon and Waray. Of these languages, only Tagalog, Cebuano and Ilokano are extensively studied. Many minor languages are not studied.



Map of the Philippines
 Source: Dumanig, 2010

The Surigaonon language is one of the minor languages of the Philippines: it is not widely studied. In the 1990 census, there were 345,000 speakers of the language (The Ethnologue, <http://www.ethnologue.com/>) and this fell, in 2003, to 344,974 speakers of the Surigaonon language (International Encyclopedia of Linguistics, 2003). A survey conducted in the CARAGA region revealed, approximately 88,129, speakers of Surigaonon which is equivalent to 22.40% of the total population of the CARAGA region (Census 2002). This data can be misleading because of the high rate of bilingualism in Cebuano (see map of Southern Philippines).

Extensive bilingualism has affected the development of the Surigaonon language. In fact, the Surigaonon language has become a secondary language to the Surigaonon people and is used only in the home domain and other informal domains of communication (Dumanig 2006). Consequently, the number of Surigaonon users has decreased especially amongst the young. In fact, the number of speakers of the Surigaonon language in the province of Surigao del Norte is slowly decreasing due to the intrusion of the major languages in the Philippines such as English, Cebuano, and Tagalog (Dumanig, 2006). These languages are used in official domains of communication in schools, church services, and government transactions while the Surigaonon language is used only in the home and other informal



Language Map of Southern Philippines

Source: http://www.ethnologue.com/show_map.asp?name=PH&seq=20

domains of communication. These three major languages are commonly found in the written form particularly in printed and online newspapers, and in handouts at church services. Because of their dominance, a considerable number of Surigaonon people read and listen to these languages, everyday, in the print media in both hard and soft copy, the latter by means of online media. In contrast, the Surigaonon language is frequently used orally when talking with friends and family members. The presence of the three major languages threatens the Surigaonon language. Consequently, a website has been developed by Surigaonon speakers in the town of Gigaquit, Surigao del Norte to help in maintaining and preserving the Surigaonon language. The creation of a website encourages the Surigaonon speakers to communicate and interact with each other using their own mother tongue. This might help the younger generations and other Surigaonons who have migrated to other places in the Philippines and other countries to preserve and maintain the

language. It is, therefore, the focus of this study to examine how the Surigaonon language is maintained and preserved in cyberspace and to explore the benefits of creating such a website.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Surigao is located in the Northeastern part of Mindanao, Philippines. It is part of the Caraga region. Its capital is Surigao City in the province of Surigao del Norte. The province has 434 barangays (provincial villages or wards) with 27 towns with a total land area of 2,739 square meters and has a total population of 409,468 (Census, 2010).

Surigaonon is the local language spoken in the district of Surigao del Norte and some parts of Surigao del Sur. 22% of speakers in the entire Caraga region used Surigaonon in 2002 (Census 2002). However, the number of Surigaonon speakers is difficult to quantify due to a high rate of bilingualism and the presence of other major languages in the Philippines (Table 1). The Surigaonon speakers have the highest rate of bilingualism in Cebuano (Dumanig 2006).

Table 1. Languages and Dialects Spoken in Caraga

Languages/Dialects	Number of Households	Percentage
Caraga	393,362	100%
Cebuano	116,633	29.65%
Bisaya/Binisaya	111,416	28.32%
Surigaonon	88,129	22.40%
Kamayo	21,756	5.53%
Manobo	12,546	3.16%
Boholano	11,546	2.94%
Hiligaynon	7,851	2.00%
Butuanon	6,407	1.63%
Other local ethnicities	17,055	4.34%
Other foreign ethnicities	121	0.03%

Source: <http://www.ethnologue.com/>

In the province of Surigao del Norte which is part of the Caraga region, 95% of the people speak Surigaonon as the dominant language. The Surigaonon language is spoken in the whole province of Surigao del Norte and in Carascal, Cantilan (Kantilan), Madrid and Lanusa where these towns are part of the province of Surigao del Sur. The language shares linguistic properties with the Cebuano and Boholano languages. A few people in these regions also speak Waray and Tagalog and the majority claimed they could speak English (Dumanig, 2006).

Surigaonon has a number of dialects, such as Jaun-Jaun, Cantilan (Kantilan), and Naturalis. Typologically, Surigaonon is classified as Austronesian, Malayo-Polynesian, Meso Philippines, Central Philippines and Bisayan language. Figure 1 shows the position of the Surigaonon language in the Austronesian tree. Previous studies show that Surigaonon has 82% lexical similarity with Dabawanon Manobo, 81% Agusan Manobo, 69% with Butuanon (Dumanig 2006)

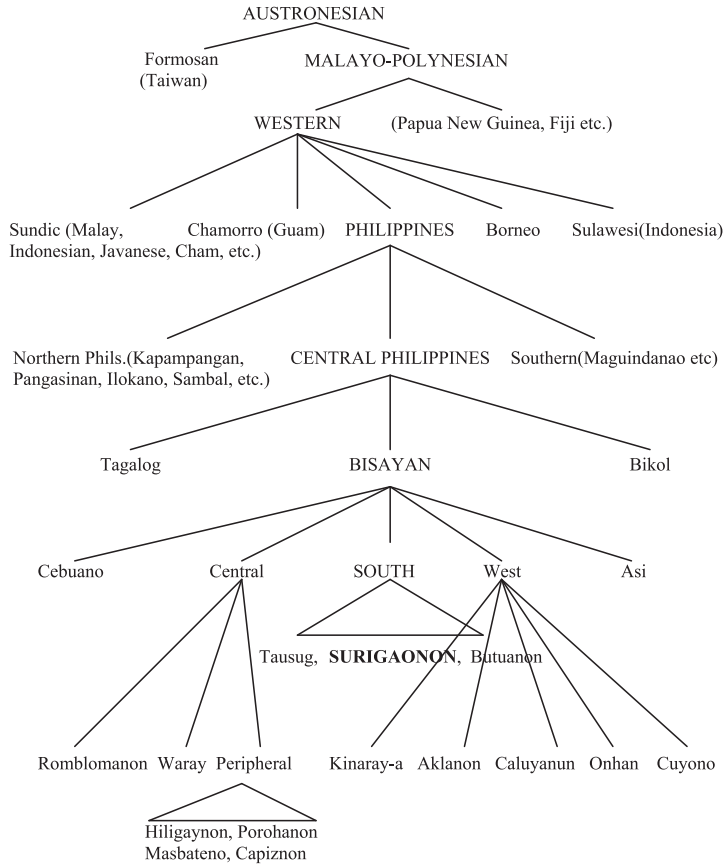


Figure 1. Surigaonon in the Austronesian Language Family
 Source: Lobel, J. W. (2000). An introduction to the languages of Romblon

THE COMPETING ROLES OF ENGLISH, FILIPINO, CEBUANO AND SURIGAONON

In formal domains of communication in the provinces of Surigao del Norte and Surigao del Sur, frequent use of English, Filipino and Cebuano are expected. However, in informal domains of communication, Surigaonon and sometimes Cebuano are used. This means that of the four languages, Surigaonon is only used in informal domains of communication. Other languages such as English, Filipino and Cebuano continue to dominate in the formal context and they are widely used in education. Both English and Filipino are used as the media of instruction in a bilingual education system. Consequently, English and Filipino are high status languages and have many functions in society. In addition, these languages are used in some places of worship. Because of their use in formal settings they hold much prestige. The Cebuano language is also used in formal domains particularly in church and the media. In sharp contrast, the Surigaonon language has no role in formal domains of communication. The Surigaonon language is used in informal domains such as home, market and friendship domains. Therefore, given this low language status, Surigaonons use other languages such as Cebuano, Filipino and English in various domains of communication. Moreover, these languages are perceived positively by people. Due to the unfavorable perception of the Surigaonon language, the number of speakers has fallen and

might further decrease in the near future.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The participants in the study were native speakers of Surigaonon language actively involved in an online social networking known as *Sinurigao and Manunuyat (writer): Surigaonon Writing in Surigaonon*. The website was created in March 2011 with the aim of reviving the use of the Surigaonon language among Surigaonon speakers. Currently, the website has 66 members. Another website was also used for the data gathering, the *Lumad Gigaquitnon Gajud Kaw?* (You are a native Gigaquitnon?) which has 815 members. This website aims to connect the natives of Gigaquit from different parts of the world and encourages them to use the Surigaonon language as the medium of communication. A total of 50 Surigaonon website users were interviewed online and asked how the website helped them in maintaining and preserving the language. The participants selected were speakers of the Surigaonon language, born in Surigao and had stayed in the province for at least 15 years and considered themselves as fluent speakers of the language. Due to the limited number of online members, only 50 participants were considered.

To validate the data from the interviews, 100 online postings in the website were also examined to determine whether the participants who actively involved themselves in wall postings are using and maintaining the Surigaonon language.

RESULTS

Language choice of Surigaonon speakers

The participants were asked about their choice of language since Cebuano, Filipino and English languages in Surigao are dominant. The purpose of this question was to examine the frequency of use of the Surigaonon language. The data results revealed how the Surigaonon language is used in the following domains - the home, religion, school, TV, newspaper, broadcasting and literature. See Table 2.

Table 2. Use of Surigaonon Language in Different Domains

Domains	Surigaonon	Cebuano	Filipino	English
Home	40	10		
Religion	5	30	5	10
School			15	35
TV			30	20
Newspaper		5	5	40
Broadcasting	5	5	25	15
Literature		5	10	35

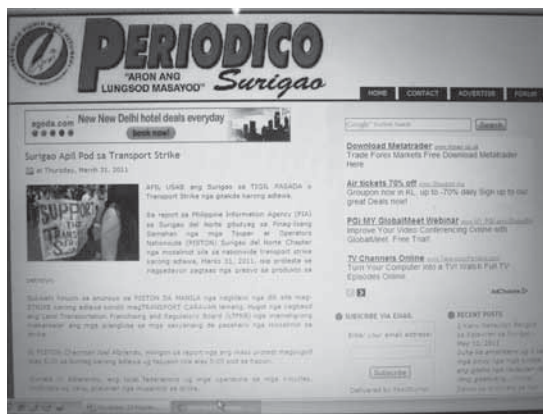
It is evident that in various domains of communication, the Surigaonon language has been and is being replaced by Cebuano, Filipino and English. The limited use of the Surigaonon language in a number of domains shows that the Surigaonons are shifting towards the major languages such as Filipino, English and Cebuano. Yet it shows that Surigaonon is still being used in the home domain by a large majority of the respondents and in the religious domain by a small minority of the respondents.

The choice of the major languages is perhaps influenced by TV, newspaper, literature and the educational system where English and Filipino are given much priority. Consequently, the Surigaonon language is left with limited functions. People, generally, have a negative attitude towards the local language.

The onset of language shift is evidenced by the extent of code switching found in the local Surigao newspaper. Newspapers are written in Cebuano and not in the Surigaonon language. In fact, a local newspaper “Periodico Surigao” is in the Cebuano language but much switching in English occurs as seen in the extract below:-

“Gibana bana ang **killer** nga may gitas-ong 5’4” kasarangan ang pamanit, klaro ang **cheekbones**, **standard** hair ug nagsul-ob ug **green** nga sinina ug naka itom ug **city shorts**.” (*It is assumed that the killer has a height of 5’4”, fair complexion, clear cheekbones, standard hair, wearing a green shirt and black city shorts.*)
 (Periodico Surigao, March 30, 2011 <http://periodicosurigao.blogspot.com/2011/03/matud-sa-saksi-killer-sa-pulis-taas-ug.html>)

“Sumala ni Albarando, ang **local federations** ug **operators** sa mga **tricycles**, **multicabs** ug **vans** gilauman nga musalmot sa **strike**” (*According to Albarando, the local federations and tricycle, multicab and van operators are hoped to join the strike*)
 (Periodico Surigao, March 31, 2011 <http://periodicosurigao.blogspot.com/2011/03/matud-sa-saksi-killer-sa-pulis-taas-ug.html>)



Source: <http://periodicosurigao.blogspot.com/>

The occurrence of code-switching in written discourses might affect the progress of the language. In this context, subtractive bilingualism endangers the fluency of the speakers of one particular language.

Attitudes to Maintenance and Preservation of the Surigaonon language

The websites require the users to use the Surigaonon language as the medium of communication to enhance other Surigaonons to speak the language. Below are some of the wall postings in the websites.

- *Suyod na diri mga kalomonan. Bisan kun dili pa kaw hanas sa Sinurigao kuman anhi kaw makatuon kay kinhanglan man na ato matun-an an ato kaugalingon na sinultihan. Sayang an imo kaabtik sa ato sinultihan bisan isa way imo mahikanat* (Join here my fellow Surigaonons. Even if you are not proficient in Surigaonon this time through this you will learn because it is important for us to learn our own language. Your expertise in our language becomes futile if you do not use it)
- *Lumad Gigaquitnon sa grupo tagpangayan way lain maka entra kundi gutgut lamang. Dili importante kon tal o dayo lang basta an kasing kasing lumad Gigaquitnon.* (Native Gigaquitnon the name given to a group, no one can enter except Gigaquitnon only. It is not important whether you are native or visitor what is important is that you have a heart like a native Gigagquitnon.)

The fifty Surigaonon participants interviewed were concerned about maintaining and preserving the Surigaonon language. Interacting with other Surigaonon speakers in cyberspace helps them to make use of the language and, hopefully, enhance their proficiency in the Surigaonon language. Interviews were conducted, in which, the participants said;

“An pakipagestorya sa iban na Surigaonon makatabang gajud sanan maka abtik sa ila sinultihan na Surigaonon”

(Interacting with other Surigaonons will really help us to enhance our Surigaonon language)

“Sa una nan waya pay ako ka estorya na Surigaonon puro Tagalog ug English ra gajud ako pero koman nakatabang na ma practice ko pirmi an Surigaonon”

(Before, when I had no one to talk to in the Surigaonon language, I only used Tagalog and English but now it helps me to practice my Surigaonon language all the time)

In fact, using the mother tongue, Surigaonon, has helped them to maintain their Surigaonon culture and moreover to create solidarity. The language serves as a marker of a speech community's membership. The data revealed that when Surigaonons used the Surigaonon language when talking to other Surigaonon speakers, they felt a sense of belongingness as members of a community. The creation of the website has contributed in the language maintenance and preservation of the Surigaonon language.

Language Revitalization

Although the Surigaonon language is used only in a few domains, such as home and religion, code mixing or code switching has become a common phenomenon. It is believed that due to popularity of the three languages in the media, these languages are being mixed with Surigaonon in the home domain. In the conducted interviews, code switching was rampant in the discourse of these speakers of Surigaonon.

“Well, nakatabang sija to promote surigao...like mga tourists spots amo jaon ako idea”
(Well. It helps to promote Surigao, like the tourist spots, that's my idea)

“I guess, not totally...dili man gud tanan kuman batan-on focus sa Surigaonon.” (I guess, not totally...not all young generations focus on Surigaonon)

Languages can be revitalized in various ways. Fishman (1991) provides some steps in reversing language shift. Fishman's model for reviving threatened languages consists

of eight stages. These include the acquisition of language by adults, creating a socially integrated population of active users of the language, encouraging informal use of the language and, when oral competence has been achieved, literacy must be encouraged, encouraging the use of the language in the educational system, in the workplace, in mass media and in higher education and government (Fishman, 1991).

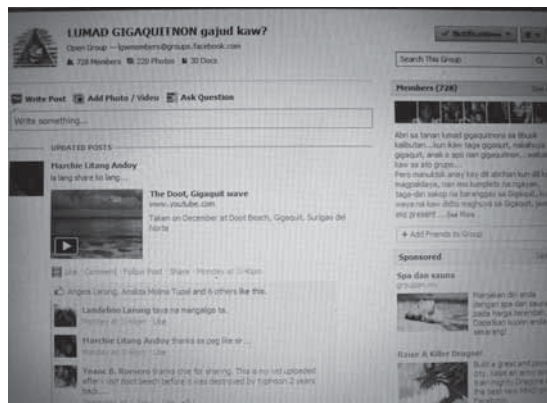
The social media and information technology may help in maintaining the language. Surigaonon websites were created to ensure that the speakers would have the chance to communicate with each other using the Surigaonon language. This also encourages those who are outside the locale to use the language and interact with other, Surigaonon speakers in cyberspace. The importance of using the Surigaonon language as emphasized in the website, helps people to realize that there is a need to maintain the language. The Surigaonon website was made to provide Surigaonon speakers with an opportunity to use and maintain the language. Postings in the Surigaonon language have motivated them to continually use the Surigaonon language as their medium of communication.



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/211318468893697/>

Language preservation

Website users can initiate interaction between and among the members, or they can share their opinions on personal and social issues using their mother tongue.



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/lgwmembers/>

Some members of the Surigaonon website were interviewed in the Surigaonon language and asked how the website has helped them to maintain and preserve the language. Based on their responses, it was clear that there were divided views. Out of 50 participants, 45 persons gave positive responses that the use of Surigaonon language will help preserve the culture and identity of Surigaonon people. The positive responses, shown below, focus on the benefits that users will experience in using the Surigaonon language.

“Nakatabang ba an mga website/s (GCC internal Forum) na ma preserba an ato sinultihan na Surigaonon.

The website (GCC internal Forum) has helped to preserve the Surigaonon language.”

“Nakatabang man kay hamok man nakakilaya nan ato sinultihan sanan nagpahibayo na surigaonon kaw.

It helps because others know about our language and it also informs that you are Surigaonon”

“Dinhi sa site na hibayuan nimo an sinultihan na Surigaonon.

In this website you learn the Surigaonon language”

Only 5 participants did not see the benefits of using the Surigaonon language believing that a dominant language like English will help the speakers economically. Participants said;

“Kinahanglan man sab an English kay para dali ra makatrabaho”

English is needed in order to find jobs immediately.

“Dili man magamit an Surigaonon sa iban lugar”

Surigaonon language cannot be used in other places.

Although the website focuses on some other social issues, basically Surigaonon speakers can interact and communicate with one another using the Surigaonon language. The website has also helped young generations to improve their Surigaonon language and have made them aware that the Surigaonon language can be used in other domains of communication particularly when discussing social issues. Consequently, the younger generation can learn the language as indicated in their voices (see extracts below).

“Oo, makatabang ini sa mga kabataan na Surigaonon.

Yes, this will help the young Surigaonons”

“Makahibayo gajud sila kun uno an Surigaonon.

They will really know what a Surigaonon is.”

“Matabangan sila kon mag join sila dinhi. Kon dili sila mag join unhon pagtabang na mulambo an ila sinultihan.

This will help if they join here. If they don’t join, how can they improve their language (Surigaonon)”

“Makatabang ang website para magkasinabtanay ang mga Surigaonon.

The website can help so that Surigaonons can understand each other.”

What is interesting is that there has also been an economic benefit of the website. The promotion of the Surigaonon Website and the emphasis on the Surigaonon language can help in improving the tourism industry. Tourists are becoming aware of the cultural and linguistic background of Surigao. The participants mentioned:

*“Parang nang invite sa mga tourist na mobisita sa Surigao.
It’s like inviting tourists to visit Surigao”*

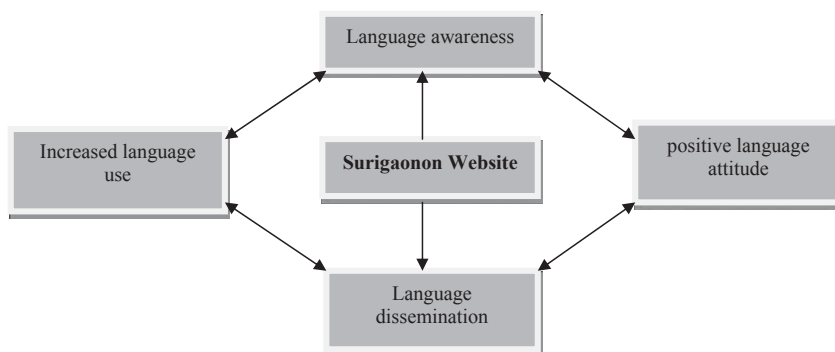
In short, the use of the website can be said to have helped the Surigaonon speakers in maintaining and preserving the Surigaonon language. Through the site, the users, both young and old, have become re-acquainted with their mother tongue and make use of it more extensively.

DISCUSSION

The creation of the Surigaonon website has offered speakers of the Surigaonon language an opportunity to maintain and preserve the language in cyberspace. It is evident from the findings, that Surigaonon speakers are becoming active in participating in discussions on social, political and personal issues and use the Surigaonon language to do so. In fact, the participants who took part in the study had positive remarks and feedback about the website and its contribution to language maintenance and preservation.

Based on the information provided by the netizens, it is evident that the Surigaonon website has had an impact on the Surigaonon speakers by resulting in them having a positive attitude of their language. The website has made speakers of the Surigaonon language aware of its importance in communication and this, in turn, has influenced their attitude to the language.

The findings can be illustrated as follows:



CONCLUSION

The emergence of major languages like Filipino, Cebuano and English in Surigao has reduced the functions of the Suriagonon language in various domains of communication. In fact, the Surigaonon language is used only in informal domains while English, Filipino and Cebuano are used in other domains. Consequently, people have developed a negative

attitude or perception towards the language because of its limited use. However, the establishment of a website for the Surigaonon speakers has helped them maintain and preserve their language. It helps, particularly young people, to be more familiar with the Surigaonon language. The creation of the Surigaonon website has had an impact on Surigaonon speakers by creating language awareness and positive language attitude, resulting in increased number of users.

Recently, a proposal has been made by the local government authority to establish a Surigaonon Language Center, in the City of Surigao. In the initial plan, the center will focus first on research on the Surigaonon language. Later the center will offer the Surigaonon language as an elective course at the tertiary level. Such a proposal coincides with the recent implementation of multilingual education in the Philippines in which English, Filipino and the local language are used as the media of instruction.

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