

SHIFT OR MAINTENANCE?: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC STUDY OF THE TETUN LANGUAGE AMIDST THE DYNAMICS OF LANGUAGE POLICY IN TIMOR-LESTE

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Abstract. This study examines the dynamics of language shift and maintenance in Timor-Leste, focusing on the Tetun language. Tetun, as the co-official language alongside Portuguese, plays a key role in national identity and daily communication. However, challenges arise due to globalization, educational reforms, and the growing influence of Portuguese and English, especially among youth and in formal domains such as schools and public administration. Despite its official status, Tetun's vitality is increasingly questioned. This study aims to investigate how language policies, societal attitudes, and institutional practices affect the use and transmission of Tetun across generations. Using a mixed-methods approach, this study combines qualitative and quantitative data from surveys, interviews, and observations in educational and community contexts. Findings show that while Tetun remains strong in informal settings, it faces marginalization in formal domains due to the dominance of Portuguese and insufficient institutional support. The results highlight a mismatch between policy recognition and practical implementation. This study concludes that effective language maintenance requires culturally rooted and community-driven strategies. It contributes to the broader understanding of language policy in post-colonial multilingual societies and provides practical insights for sustaining indigenous languages like Tetun amid shifting sociolinguistic conditions

Keywords: *language Maintenance language Shift, language Policy, multilingualism, tetun*

INTRODUCTION

Timor-Leste is a young nation with a rich tapestry of linguistic diversity shaped by its complex colonial past, national rebuilding efforts, and ongoing sociopolitical transformations. Among its linguistic repertoire, Tetun occupies a significant space as both a co-official language with Portuguese and a symbol of post-independence identity. Spoken widely across the country in various dialectal forms, Tetun has been a vehicle for unifying diverse linguistic communities following independence in 2002. Despite its symbolic importance, Tetun faces increasing pressure from Portuguese, which is privileged in legal, educational, and administrative domains. This tension creates a fertile ground for studying the dynamics of language shift and language maintenance, particularly in post-conflict, multilingual societies.

Language shift refers to the gradual replacement of one language by another in the speech repertoire of a community. In contrast, language maintenance involves institutional and grassroots active efforts to preserve a language across generations. The shift from indigenous or local languages to dominant languages is a widespread phenomenon, especially in contexts where state policy, education systems, and social mobility are tied to mastery of global or ex-colonial languages. In the case of

Timor-Leste, Portuguese is associated with political legitimacy, historical continuity with the resistance movement, and international diplomacy, while Tetun, although used informally and locally, often struggles for legitimacy in academic and governmental settings.

This research is anchored in two major theoretical frameworks. First, the language ecology perspective (Haugen, 1972; Mühlhäusler, 1996) treats language as part of a broader socio-cultural and environmental system. It emphasizes how languages coexist, compete, and evolve in relation to institutions, ideologies, and speaker choices. Rather than viewing language endangerment as a natural process, language ecology considers it a consequence of imbalanced relationships among languages, often driven by unequal power dynamics. Applying this lens to Tetun allows us to explore how it navigates its place within a multilingual ecology alongside Portuguese, English, and various national and local languages such as Mambae, Fataluku, and Makasae.

Second, this study draws from Joshua Fishman's Reversing Language Shift (RLS) theory (1991), which offers a practical framework for analyzing how threatened languages can regain vitality. Fishman emphasizes the importance of intergenerational transmission, particularly within family and community domains (Stage 6 in his Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale or GIDS). In the case of Tetun, although the language is still being transmitted to children in informal contexts, its use in institutionalized settings such as schools, courts, and administrative offices is inconsistent. By combining ecological insights with the RLS framework, this research aims to identify both the threats and opportunities for Tetun's continued vitality.

Previous literature on Timor-Leste has often focused on language policy, the constitutional role of Tetun, and its function in education (Taylor-Leech, 2008; Quinn, 2010; Hajek, 2006). However, there is a noticeable gap in empirical studies that link language policies with lived language practices and speaker attitudes, particularly among youth and educators. Moreover, discrepancies persist between official discourse, which celebrates Tetun's role, and the practical reality, where Portuguese often dominates. This disconnect raises questions about the effectiveness of current language planning efforts and the underlying ideologies shaping language use.

In response to these challenges, this study investigates how language ideologies, policy enactments, and community practices contribute to either the maintenance or marginalization of Tetun. It seeks to understand whether institutional structures support Tetun not merely as a symbol of national identity, but as a functional language in domains crucial for social mobility and civic participation. The following questions guide this research: To what extent is Tetun being maintained or undergoing a shift across key sociolinguistic domains such as education, government, media, and everyday communication in Timor-Leste? How do national language policies and institutional practices affect the status and use of Tetun compared to Portuguese, English, Indonesian, and other indigenous languages? What are the attitudes of key stakeholders, particularly students and educators, toward Tetun as a national and cultural symbol, and how do these attitudes influence its ongoing use or decline?

This study aims to examine the sociolinguistic position of Tetun in contemporary Timor-Leste, to identify the factors that support or hinder its maintenance, and to provide insights for more effective language planning and policy that can strengthen Tetun's role in education, governance, and public life.

Ultimately, this study aims to contribute to the broader discussion on language maintenance in post-colonial and post-conflict nations, highlighting how language choice is never neutral but is always informed by history, power, and identity. Through a close examination of the Tetun case, it sheds light on the complexities of building a linguistically inclusive national identity in an era of globalisation and linguistic homogenisation.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative research approach to investigate the dynamics of Tetun language maintenance and shift in Timor-Leste. The research process began with semi-structured interviews involving 18 informants, including language policymakers, educators, linguists, and community leaders in Dili and selected surrounding districts. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, based on their expertise, roles in language-related institutions, and active involvement in education, language planning, or cultural preservation. The interviews aimed to explore stakeholders' perspectives on language use, policy implementation, and the sociocultural status of Tetun. Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board, and all participants provided informed consent, ensuring their confidentiality and the voluntary nature of their participation.

To enrich the data, the researcher conducted participant observations in various contexts, such as classroom settings, public institutions, and community gatherings, documenting how Tetun is spoken, taught, and perceived in everyday social interactions. Detailed field notes were compiled to capture both verbal and non-verbal aspects of communication and language choice in these settings.

In addition, relevant policy documents, school curricula, and media content were collected and examined to understand the formal positioning of Tetun in public life. These documents were analyzed to assess alignment between policy discourse and language practices on the ground.

All qualitative data collected from the interviews were organized and analyzed using a thematic coding process. The transcripts were read multiple times to identify recurring patterns, categories, and significant themes related to language use, policy perception, and identity. These themes were then manually coded and grouped according to their relevance to the research questions. The coding process followed an inductive approach, allowing themes to emerge naturally from the data rather than being imposed a priori. The analysis was guided by a contextual-descriptive framework, which enabled the researcher to interpret the data within the sociocultural and political context of Timor-Leste. This approach allowed for a grounded and nuanced understanding of how Tetun navigates its sociolinguistic space amidst competing languages, highlighting both the structural constraints and community-driven efforts that shape its maintenance or marginalization.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The research identified several key findings that highlight the complex status of the Tetun language in Timor-Leste. First, Tetun is widely used in informal and community domains. Survey responses revealed that most students, teachers, and civil servants communicate in Tetun at home, in markets, and during social gatherings. This aligns with Fishman's (1991) theory that the home domain plays a central role in maintaining linguistic vitality.

Second, while Tetun is symbolically positioned as a national and unifying language, it suffers from limited institutional support. In education, Portuguese continues to dominate as the language of instruction in most schools, despite being less accessible to the majority of the population. This language policy disconnect hinders Tetun's development in academic and professional spheres and discourages its use in written and formal contexts. Interviews with teachers and education officials confirmed a shortage of quality Tetun-language materials and inadequate training for educators in using Tetun as a medium of instruction.

Third, language attitudes among the youth are dualistic. Many young Timorese expressed pride in Tetun as a symbol of cultural identity, yet at the same time, they associated Portuguese and English with economic and educational advancement. This reflects a broader sociolinguistic tension where indigenous languages are valued for cultural heritage, while global languages are perceived as tools for socioeconomic mobility (Garvin & Mathiot, 1968).

Fourth, there are emerging domains where Tetun use is expanding. These include community radio, social media platforms, and early-grade education in some schools. Such domains are driven largely by community efforts and individual advocacy rather than formal policy directives. This finding aligns with Cash (2018), who emphasizes the importance of grassroots and community-based language revitalization.

Finally, despite its spoken strength, Tetun lacks corpus development necessary for full functional expansion. The absence of a standardized academic register and limited technical vocabulary inhibit its use in official documentation, legal discourse, and higher education. Kaplan and Baldauf (1997) stress that without focused corpus planning, a language cannot effectively fulfill all communicative functions in a modern state.

These findings collectively suggest that while Tetun is being maintained in personal and social spheres, it is vulnerable in institutional contexts. The gap between symbolic recognition and functional implementation represents the core challenge to ensuring Tetun's long-term sustainability.

Discussion

The sociolinguistic landscape of TL presents a dynamic interaction between language policy, identity construction, and practical language use. This discussion interprets the findings of the study in light of existing theories and empirical studies on language maintenance and shift, particularly as they relate to the Tetun language in both formal and informal domains.

One of the central findings of this study is that Tetun remains a dominant language in informal and domestic contexts. Among students, teachers, and government officials surveyed, a strong majority reported using Tetun in daily conversations, community events, and interpersonal interactions. This supports Fishman's (1991) observation that language vitality often begins in the home and community, which serve as foundational domains for language transmission. Tetun's symbolic role in national identity, especially as a language of resistance during the Indonesian occupation, continues to bolster its presence in public discourse (Taylor-Leech, 2009).

However, the study also reveals a critical distinction between informal use and institutional support. While Tetun is widely spoken, it lacks robust presence in formal education and government documentation. Portuguese is still the primary medium of

instruction in many schools, especially in urban centers like Dili, despite the fact that many teachers and students are not fluent in Portuguese. Hajek (2006) identifies this gap between policy and practice as a significant barrier to language maintenance, as it limits the functional domains in which Tetun can develop terminologies, academic discourse, and professional utility.

Furthermore, observations and interviews with educators highlighted a shortage of high-quality Tetun teaching materials and trained educators proficient in academic Tetun. As Kaplan and Baldauf (1997) argue, effective language planning requires attention not only to status and acquisition planning but also to corpus planning. The lack of standardization and academic vocabulary in Tetun limits its utility in formal education and professional settings, encouraging a gradual shift toward Portuguese and, increasingly, English.

Despite these challenges, there is growing grassroots advocacy for the strengthening of Tetun within education and media. Some schools have begun integrating Tetun in early primary instruction, aligning with findings by Taylor-Leech (2008) that local language inclusion can improve student comprehension and engagement. Community-based media outlets and social media platforms also show increasing use of Tetun, particularly among youth. These trends suggest that digital spaces may offer a promising frontier for Tetun language maintenance, echoing Cash's (2018) emphasis on community-based revitalisation strategies.

Language attitudes among youth were another critical focus of the study. While many young people express pride in speaking Tetun, they also view Portuguese and English as languages of upward mobility and opportunity. This dual perception reflects Garvin and Mathiot's (1968) notion of language as both a marker of identity and a tool for socioeconomic advancement. It also mirrors broader global patterns in which local languages are maintained for cultural continuity, while global or colonial languages are adopted for instrumental purposes. The findings suggest that Tetun is neither fully shifting nor completely stable. Instead, it occupies an intermediate space where it remains vibrant in social and cultural life but is threatened by limited institutional support and shifting language ideologies among younger generations. The future of Tetun depends largely on how national language policies are implemented and how communities engage with and adapt the language to meet modern needs.

These findings have important implications for other post-colonial contexts, where indigenous or national languages often coexist with former colonial languages. The tension between symbolic recognition and limited functional use is a common challenge, underscoring the need for comprehensive language planning that includes both status, acquisition, and corpus development. The case of Tetun illustrates how community efforts, when supported by inclusive policies, can contribute to revitalizing and normalizing local languages in education, media, and public life.

Nonetheless, this study acknowledges certain limitations. The sample was primarily drawn from Dili and a few surrounding districts, which may not fully represent linguistic dynamics in more remote or rural regions of Timor-Leste. In addition, while the purposive selection of informants ensured depth and relevance, it may limit the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. Future research should consider larger and more diverse samples and longitudinal designs to better capture evolving language ideologies and practices across different regions and demographic groups.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that the Tetun language occupies a significant but vulnerable position within the sociolinguistic fabric of Timor-Leste. While Tetun is widely used in everyday communication and remains a symbol of national unity, it faces serious challenges in formal domains due to limited policy enforcement, insufficient educational resources, and competition from Portuguese and English. The current situation suggests a partial maintenance of Tetun: strong in cultural and informal spheres but weak in institutional domains critical for long-term language sustainability. Without deliberate efforts to strengthen its role in education, governance, and technology, Tetun risks gradual marginalization despite its widespread oral use.

Tetun is currently experiencing a state of delicate maintenance rather than an irreversible shift. While it continues to serve as the primary language in everyday life, the growing dominance of Portuguese in education, government, and professional contexts signals potential long-term displacement if unaddressed. The emotional and symbolic significance of Tetun among the population is a powerful force for its preservation. However, emotional attachment alone is insufficient without systematic support across institutional domains.

The findings highlight the urgent need to strengthen Tetun's role in formal education and public life. A structured bilingual education model should be adopted, integrating Tetun and Portuguese with standardized curricula, teacher training, and quality learning materials. Corpus planning is also essential to expand Tetun's academic and technical vocabulary. Incentives for Tetun use in media, digital platforms, and government communication can boost its prestige. Collaboration between government and civil society is key to ensuring Tetun's functional utility, not just its symbolic value. A well-funded and inclusive language policy can support a truly bilingual and culturally rooted Timor-Leste. Theoretically, this study contributes to understanding language maintenance in post-colonial settings. Practically, it offers a model showing how policy reform, community engagement, and linguistic planning can revitalize indigenous languages facing marginalization.

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