

A MIND-BOGGLING, HEADBANGING DECISION? POPULAR LANGUAGE POLICY DISCOURSES IN EAST TIMOR

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In this presentation I describe findings from my doctoral research into language policy and planning in East Timor. I briefly describe the language situation and the language problems, which in many respects are typical of the classic problems facing multilingual polities in the developing world. In other respects, however, language politics and ideologies in Timor-Leste are the unique product of its colonisation by two sharply contrasting, hegemonic powers, Portugal and Indonesia. Another complicating factor is the presence of Australia and the United Nations, which have played an active role in promoting English in a situation where the National Constitution of 2002 designated Portuguese and the national indigenous lingua franca, Tetum, as co-official languages, with English and Indonesian as working languages “for as long as is deemed necessary.” Each language has its own set of associations and political overtones and there is strong competition between them. I present and discuss my findings from semi-structured interviews and focus groups which explored the relationship between language policy, language dispositions and identity. I assess their congruence with the current official discourses of language policy and planning in East Timor. The findings show that there is less hostility to language policy than might be expected if one were to believe the Australian press.

Mode of Presentation: Individual paper

Sub-topic: Language Policies and Planning

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