

The ecology of language planning in Timor-Leste

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Introduction

Language *planning* can be broadly defined as ‘activity most visibly undertaken by government ... intended to promote systematic linguistic change; to modify language behaviour in a community of speakers’. Language *policy* can be defined as a set of ideas, laws and practices intended to achieve the desired change (Kaplan and Baldauf 1997:xi). Language policy and planning is certainly used to pursue the agendas of those in power. However, in this paper, I present it as a way of sustaining endangered languages and controlling the spread of dominant languages. Using the metaphor of language ecology, language planning can be understood as *the active management of the language environment*.

An ecological metaphor offers a holistic framework for understanding the linguistic situation in Timor-Leste. Hornberger suggests that the ecology of language metaphor:

captures a set of ideological underpinnings for a multilingual language policy, in which languages are understood to live and evolve in an eco-system along with other languages, interact with their sociopolitical and cultural environments and become endangered if there is inadequate environmental support for them in relation to other languages in the eco-system (Hornberger 2002:35-36).

I argue that active management of the language ecology will protect and promote multilingualism in Timor-Leste by allowing space for all languages in the system and that a model of additive multilingualism offers the best chance of an inclusive and accommodating language policy.

Three sets of forces influence the language ecology of Timor-Leste:

- the dominance of English;
- the legacy of colonialism; and
- the politics of language and identity.

English is one of the imperialist¹ languages labelled by Pakir (1991) as ‘killer languages’ because of their displacing effect on local languages when they enter the ecology. The presence of English-speaking international aid organisations is a further complicating factor in the East Timorese language ecology.

The tendency in newly independent countries to officialise the former colonial language has invariably resulted in the dominance of the colonial language and limited opportunities for indigenous language speakers. Timor-Leste has adopted its former colonial language, Portuguese, as the official language but, like a number of more recently independent states, has

also officialised an indigenous language, Tetum. In response to strong popular support for Tetum as a symbol of national identity, the Constitution declared Portuguese and Tetum co-official languages and included a commitment to developing and valuing Tetum and the national languages, that is, the vernaculars. The Constitution acknowledges for the first time that Timor-Leste is a multilingual society. It remains to be seen whether Timor-Leste is able to avoid the legacy of colonialism and establish a balanced multilingual ecology.

The East Timorese nation has changed profoundly since it first declared independence in 1975 and was immediately annexed by Indonesia. FRETILIN constructed an anti-colonial national identity in the notion of the Maubere people. Today, traditional racial and ethnic identities coexist with new multiple identities, particularly among Timorese youth. Experiences of colonialism, occupation and the diaspora have reshaped identities of a number of groups who have varying attachments to languages and perceptions of their role. An ecological approach to language planning will allow for the fact that individuals may identify being East Timorese with a combination of languages.

History of language policy and planning

Five distinct language policy and planning phases can be identified in Timor-Leste, coinciding with the key phases in its turbulent history.

Portuguese contact and colonisation (1500s to 1975)

Although explicit linguistic expansion was not a policy of Portugal, the colonial period in Timor-Leste was marked by missionary language planning in the use of local languages to promote Catholicism. Twentieth century Portuguese colonial policy was assimilationist, designed to produce an obedient, Lusophone elite who saw themselves as Portuguese and would bolster the colonial regime. It was this elite who spearheaded the independence movement, influenced by events in the Portuguese African colonies and by liberation politics, popular in Europe at the time. Most of its members were educated in Portuguese and their loyalty to the language was strong.

The Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste (1975)

FRETILIN had a clear language policy in which Portuguese

was the official language and Tetum the national language. Much of FRETILIN's popularity stemmed from its popular education and Tetum literacy campaign. In its founding declaration it stated its intention to study and cultivate the indigenous languages.

Indonesian occupation (1975-1999)

Indonesian language planning followed the policy it had employed throughout the archipelago, using Bahasa Indonesia as the language of unification and modernisation, with English as a second language (rejecting the colonial language, Dutch). Bahasa Indonesia was developed as a *lingua franca*, like Swahili in East Africa, as a symbol of regional identity, independence and integration. This period in Timor was marked by the aggressive spread of Indonesian and the prohibition of Portuguese, which came to be used as the clandestine language of the resistance. Transmigration encouraged the spread of Indonesian and the forced movement of populations combined with genocidal military strategies to cause widespread displacement of speech communities. Neither the Portuguese nor the Indonesians tolerated Tetum or vernacular languages in the classroom. Both systems relegated these languages to very low status. These policies contributed to the development of subtractive multilingualism, which resulted in very low levels of education and literacy. The use of Tetum by the resistance and church leaders, who insisted on using it in Mass after Portuguese was banned (as the language of the colonial 'enemy'), contributed to its symbolism as the language of national identity.

Post-referendum/UN administration (1999-2002)

This period was marked by the arrival of the outside world to Timor-Leste in the form of INTERFET, the United Nations (UN) and a large number of international English-speaking aid organisations. Although they did not exist to promote English, they generated pressure to use the language. A common assumption among predominantly monolingual Anglophones in Timor-Leste was that learning English would resolve the linguistic 'chaos' they perceived in the country. On the part of the East Timorese, some parties saw political advantage in supporting English. Its association with technological development and modernity made it attractive to some opposition groups and many young people who learned some English in the Indonesian education system.

Independence (2002-)

Since independence the implementation of post-colonial, post-conflict language policy and planning has begun. The Constitution honours FRETILIN's choice of Portuguese as the

official language during its brief interregnum of 1975. The grammar of Tetum and its lexicon are being standardised and expanded. Work has also started on recording the vernacular languages.

Current use of languages in Timor-Leste

Statistics before the recent census are outdated and unreliable. The census results will reveal a more accurate picture of language use. Until these figures are released, the current sociolinguistic situation can only be generally described. While Portuguese is reclaiming its place in the language ecology, between 60 per cent and 80 per cent of the population use some form of Tetum (Hajek 2000:409). Heavy borrowing from Indonesian has made Tetum a highly non-standard language that has lost touch with its oral traditions and diverged from its classical forms (Hull 1999). The national languages, or vernaculars, remain in the private, family and rural domains. English and Indonesian, which the NGOs persist in using, compete with the official languages, reducing the incentive to shift to Portuguese and to learn the official orthography of Tetum. Many documents are written in English and jobs are often advertised in Indonesian, which is also frequently cited as a desirable criterion for employment. Television Timor Lorosa'e recently ran a series of programmes teaching English, a gesture that seemed to defy language policy. The Constitution acknowledges the dominance of both languages in the region and their presence in the language ecology. As a way of managing the two languages, Section 159 of the Constitution (RDTL 2002) states that they will have the status of working languages 'for as long as deemed necessary.'

In a democracy people cannot be forced to speak certain languages and can make choices about the languages they consider advantageous to learn. Thus, if people decide it is in their interests to learn English, they will learn it, regardless of language policy. However, if English is allowed to enter the language ecology in an unplanned way, like a non-native species with no competitors, it will threaten weaker languages in the system. This is happening throughout the South Pacific. It is predicted that hundreds of vernacular languages will die in the South Pacific region in this century as a result of the dominance of English (Baldauf and Djite 2003:221).

A brief look at the challenges facing language planners reveals a complex situation and a fragile ecology.

The press

Journalists describe difficulties of writing in Tetum due to a lack of formal functions and genre, abstract language and technical terms. Loanwords and coined words cause ambiguity and confusion. Williams Van Klinken (2001) notes the tendency of journalists, when writing in Tetum, to use Portuguese noun phrases,

plural markers and gender agreement. These structures differ from Tetum, causing further comprehension problems for readers.

Standardising Tetum

The Instituto Nacional de Linguística (INL) at the Universidade Nacional Timor Lorosa'e (UNTL) has produced an official orthography for Tetum based on four principles of renovation (Hull 1999):

- Tetum-Praça¹ is the basis of the written language;
- Indonesian loanwords are to be avoided and eventually eliminated;
- Tetum-Terik² and Portuguese are the source languages for borrowing or coining words; and
- All loanwords should conform to the rules of the orthography.

The return to ethno-cultural origins of Tetum is an important marker of difference from Indonesia. A *laissez-faire* approach to word borrowing and spelling is therefore not politically expedient and will not assist mass communication in Tetum, for which a standard is urgently needed. Moreover, whilst it is a right to learn and use one's mother tongue, it is also a right to learn to speak, read and write in the official languages if one is to be an active, informed citizen. Failure to teach and learn the official languages effectively will disadvantage minority language speakers economically, politically and socially.

The judiciary

In February 2004 the Superior Council of Magistrates adopted a directive on the use of official languages in the judicial system. The Language Directive, as it is known, requires every court actor to use the official languages. Documents not submitted in official languages must be returned and given eight days for resubmission. The Judicial Systems Monitoring Project (JSMP), the strongest critic of the Language Directive, points out that ordinary people need to use their local languages in order to understand court hearings, that Tetum lacks legal terms, and that many court actors are not fully proficient in Portuguese (see Marshall paper, this issue). The JSMP (2004) also raises the issue of linguistic variations in the interpretation of terms and delays in the judicial process that may occur when documents are returned.

These are the challenges of language revival. On the one hand, as the JSMP argues, it is vital that justice is not miscarried by errors of interpretation or delays, which could lead to loss of public confidence in the system. On the other hand, use of official languages in intellectual spheres enhances their prestige. The use of Tetum in formal domains is vital for the modernisation and expansion of its vocabulary. It is also unrealistic to delay language reform until all court actors reach full proficiency in Portuguese, as only a minority will ever attain

this and will need to be high-level bilinguals. This process could take a minimum of one generation. In two important recent developments, the INL has prepared a glossary of Tetum legal terms and 23 students have graduated from a course in legal translation and court interpreting using official Tetum. This is a significant step towards promoting multilingualism in the judicial system.

Education

Language-in-education planning is the most important site for language planning because languages are formally learned through schools. Schooling in many multilingual countries has traditionally been conducted through 'submersion' programmes where the second language is the language of instruction (Skutnabb-Kangas 1981). Teachers in such systems, who are often survivors of submersion schooling themselves, can rarely do more than talk at students and elicit rote responses, resulting in student disengagement from learning, low achievement and high drop out rates, especially for girls (Benson 2004).

Educational language reform in Timor-Leste is being phased in through the primary school system. Tetum is the medium of instruction in pre-primary schools and curriculum policy states that primary schools must use Portuguese as the medium of instruction from grades one to six. Portuguese will be introduced in junior secondary grades from this year. The national curriculum framework for 2004-2009 will start with five hours of Tetum and three hours per week of Portuguese in grades one and two, reversing the proportion each year to six hours of Portuguese and two hours of Tetum by grade six (MECYS 2004).

There are differing views about the value of starting instruction in official languages early. Lopes (1998) argues that early introduction allows for optimal development of proficiency. Benson (2000) and Bruthiaux (2002) support a more gradual transition from the mother tongue to official languages by grade five. The main challenge will be avoiding submersion in both languages, which can be achieved through content-based teaching, educating teachers in second language teaching methods and valuing the mother tongue as a resource in the classroom. Content-based learning takes place when students are taught a language via the curriculum subjects at a level appropriate to their cognitive level. Teachers are trained to negotiate meaning through context and the use of the first language. This differs from submersion where children are expected to acquire the language at the same time as acquiring new academic concepts and are taught by teachers who do not speak the language well, relying on translation and rote learning.

Vernacular languages and literacy

Space in the linguistic ecosystem is needed for vernacular

languages, which may become devalued with the development of Tetum, Portuguese and English. The use of vernacular languages in early education is known to provide a sound cognitive base for learning in a second or third language. Examples from many countries (see, for example, Hornberger 2002, Benson 2004 and Litteral 1999) have shown that the use of vernacular languages in the early years of schooling has positive effects on pupil retention, learning rates and the transition to literacy in a second language. A critical issue will be the production of literacy materials in Tetum and the vernaculars for children and adults that go beyond the classroom and reflect East Timorese culture, values and realities so that literacy can flourish. Students emerging from such a model of additive multilingual education will have good command of the official languages and their first language. They will also have something more: the knowledge that their linguistic and cultural heritage is valued in society.

Hornberger (2002) states that multilingual language policies are about opening up ideological and implementational space in the environment for as many languages as possible. Hornberger observes that language policy must overcome both institutional and attitudinal difficulties in order to be successfully implemented (*ibid*).

Dialogue and collaboration can counter negative community attitudes by engaging the public in debates and encouraging participation in language revival projects. Some ways for this to happen include:

- providing a range of reading material in the official and the national languages;
- encouraging participation in story making/writing in Tetum and Portuguese;
- offering prizes for pieces of writing that extend genre;
- celebrating oral literature, poetry and song; and
- holding language and teacher training workshops, cultural festivals, in-school and outside-school events for both adults and children, which provide rich environments for language acquisition.

These are examples of the approach that popularised the standardisation of the Kadazandusun language in Sabah, Malaysia. The key factor was that communities became actively engaged in the process (Lasimbang and Kinajil 2000).

Engagement at community and classroom level means involving the grass roots agents of language planning — teachers, community elders, NGOs and networks — in dialogue with academics and linguists. The Hundred Schools Parent-Teacher Association Project presents a golden opportunity to engage with parents on the issue of multilingual education. Parents often want their children to learn the colonial language because they see it as the language of opportunity, reinforcing the low esteem of local languages and

their speakers. It is important to convince parents of the value of learning in the vernaculars in children's early years at school. In an additive model of bi- and multilingualism, parents play a useful role as models of the local languages. Both parents and children can identify with school because it validates the language that is used at home.

Conclusion

If the East Timorese language ecology is to be sustained, then language planning should provide genuine space for all languages in the system. By creating this kind of space, some of the concerns about Portuguese may be overcome; there will be room for Tetum and the national languages and there will be less threat from English and Indonesian. Creating space may mean, for example, that vernacular languages are officially recognised in district courts and in hearings where the defendant does not speak the language of the court. A key factor in the maintenance of languages is their use in intellectual domains, so documents should continue to be written in Tetum as well as Portuguese. NGOs and aid projects can contribute by respecting language policy and making serious efforts to use the official languages. The media has a responsibility to disseminate information and mobilise popular support for official and national language development.

Friendship groups that want to send untrained English teachers to Timor-Leste should examine their motives carefully. Do they think English is inherently 'good' for the East Timorese or are they responding to a genuine need? What will the real long-term benefits be for the recipients? As English speakers we need to tread as lightly and respectfully through the East Timorese language ecology as we would through its biological environment.

In summary, policy success requires dialogue and community engagement in language planning from the bottom up as well as top down. Valuing languages as rich resources evolving in relation to one another is vital to the success of language policy and planning and can contribute to an East Timorese identity that is inclusive, accommodating and truly multilingual.

Notes

1. In 1997, according to the 'engco' model, the five main imperialist languages were: English, German, French, Japanese and Spanish. Portuguese came in eighth place. In 2050 Mandarin, Hindi, English, Spanish, Arabic are predicted to be at the top (Graddol 1997).
2. Tetum-Praça is the variety of Tetum spoken in Dili and its environs and used as the lingua franca throughout much of Timor-Leste.
3. Tetum-Terik is classical Tetum spoken on the south coast and primarily associated with traditional culture (Williams Van Klinken 2001).

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