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Sociolinguistics in France: Theoretical Trends at the Turn of the Century

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**Editor: Nancy C. Dorian** 

LÓVAIA: AN EAST TIMORESE LANGUAGE ON THE VERGE OF EXTINCTION

JOHN HAJEK, NIKOLAUS HIMMELMANN, and JOHN BOWDEN

Abstract

Lóvaia is a highly endangered Austronesian language spoken in newly independent East Timor. For generations it has been the most threatened indigenous language in East Timor, with evidence of long-term shift to Fataluku, a non-Austronesian language that dominates the local area in which the Lóvaia reside. We estimate that today there are only five fluent speakers. Information about the language is still very limited, but Lóvaia has also been erroneously classified as non-Austronesian. We provide information on the current sociolinguistic situation and social practices among the Lóvaia and discuss possible factors that may have impacted on language death in this case.

#### 1. Introduction

The precise number of indigenous languages in newly independent East Timor is still not determined, with recent estimates varying from fifteen to perhaps twenty (e.g. Grimes 2000; Hull 1998). Local languages fall into two genetically unrelated groups: Austronesian and what is conveniently called non-Austronesian. The best known of all East Timorese languages is Tetum, an Austronesian language that is the preferred local lingua franca, and is now, alongside Portuguese, also the nation's co-official language. The other indigenous languages are much less well known, although it appears that they are, on the whole, relatively secure and still spoken in their communities. At present, only one language, Lóvaia, is severely threatened and has been in significant decline since at least the mid-1950s. In addition to imminent extinction, the language has suffered for decades the ignominious fate of what might be best termed self-perpetuating confusion. This confusion has occurred as available information about the language has passed over time from the hands of one interested party to the next, leading to misinterpretation and some unintended reshaping along the way. The result has been for a long time a basic misunderstanding of the language's place in the areo-genetic linguistic structures of Nusantara (Indonesian archipelago including East Timor) and New Guinea.

Lóvaia survives today in a single hamlet in the Lautém district, located at the eastern extremity of East Timor. This paper is intended to provide an overview of the current sociolinguistic situation involving Lóvaia, and to explore to the best of our ability the process of language death in this particular case, including its cultural and historical specifics. It also provides us with the opportunity to discuss some of what has been reported of the language in the past. This aspect allows us to point to an important error about the language, so that, if nothing else, we are able at least to help resolve a lasting misconception about Lóvaia before the passing of the language's last fluent speakers. Our report is based on a series of survey visits to the Lóvaia-speaking area conducted in 2000 and 2001 by the authors. Although the focus here is on describing the sociolinguistic situation, it is intended that future publications on Lóvaia will document grammatical and other information we have been able to glean from its last surviving speakers.

#### 2. The literature on Lóvaia

The published literature on Lóvaia is scant. The first easily available published source of linguistic information on Lóvaia is a short article by Australian linguist A. Capell (1972), in which he provides a comparative wordlist of items in Lóvaia and the dominant language in the area, Fataluku, a non-Austronesian language partly described by Campagnolo (1972). Capell's source of information was a Portuguese scholar, Dr Rui Cinatti, who some time in the 1950s passed on to him a copy of a short article by Ferreira (1951b). Ferreira's article consists mostly of a bilingual Portuguese-Lóvaia vocabulary and was published in East Timor. It includes a number of lexical items that are transcribed according to Portuguese spelling conventions. Ferreira makes no attempt to explain their phonetic value, noting only the difficulty in trying to transcribe accurately the sounds of Lóvaia. Capell (1970) converts Ferreira's orthography into phonetic transcription, also without explanation. There are, not surprisingly, numerous discrepancies between Ferreira's and Capell's Lóvaia lists. Capell makes only brief grammatical comments about the Lóvaia data and concludes that Lóvaia ".. is quite different from Fataluku but also non-Austronesian." Unfortunately, a series of unusual sound changes in Lóvaia were enough to lead Capell off the track, despite his experience as an Austronesianist. Capell's classification of Lóvaia as non-Austronesian

has, however, stuck, Wurm (1982), Fox and Wurm (1983), Grimes (2000), and others assign Lóvaia, Fataluku, and the remaining non-Austronesian languages of East Timor to the same so-called Timor-Alor-Pantar stock within the Trans-New Guinea phylum. According to this classification, Lóvaia is a member of a large phylum stretching across Eastern Indonesia, East Timor, and New Guinea. However, our own field data support more recent claims by Haiek (1995, 2002) and Hull (1998), who rely solely on inspection of Capell's wordlist, that Lóvaia is in fact an Austronesian language. Hajek (1995) argues Lóvaia is most closely related to the Kisar and Roma languages spoken on their respective islands off the coast of East Timor. Apart from the lexical similarities, all three languages share the same unusual set of sound correspondences. This linguistic link to Kisar and Roma is also consistent with the Lóvaia's own belief that they come originally from Kisar.

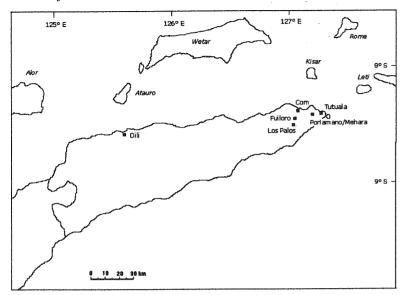
More recent and not easily accessible in the West is Sundana (1996), who provides a sketchy grammatical overview of Lóvaia based on data that were collected in 1991.

The most recent report is by Himmelmann and Hajek (2001), who describe briefly the results of a series of visits to Lautém, and in particular to the Lóvaia, by the three authors of this paper in 2000 and 2001. The report includes a short mention of Lóvaia's moribund state. Field data collected during these visits are now in the process of preparation for publication.

The nonlinguistic literature on Lóvaia is also very limited. De Almeida (1976) provides brief details about Lóvaia origin beliefs, while Ferreira (1951a) provides anthropological notes about the Lóvaia and Fataluku inhabitants of Lautém. Ferreira (1951a) appears to be the first published reference we have to the Lóvaia.

# 3. Historical background: East Timor from the 1500s

The Portuguese reached the island of Timor in the early 1500s. Over time they gained control of the eastern half of the island. Catholic missionary presence, for centuries independent of Portuguese control, also dates from that time. Full Portuguese control of East Timor only occurred in the early twentieth century, and until the 1950s the Portuguese presence in large areas of the colony was faint. However, the Portuguese had greater impact in the Lautém region, where the Lóvaia reside, for strategic reasons. The settlement of Tutuala, located on cliffs at the eastern tip of the island, is an important observation point and allowed its masters to observe first the Dutch and later the Indonesians who were in control of the surrounding islands. As a result, there are old Portuguese fortress sites at Fuiloro, Com,



Map 1. East Timor

and Tutuala. The road from Fuiloro to Tutuala passes directly through the Lóvaia-speaking area (see Map 1).

During World War 2 the Japanese and the Allies wrestled for control of East Timor. Loss of life and disruption were tremendous and surviving Lóvaia speakers still remember this period. As we discuss below in a later section, this short but bloody period of only a few years may have been the final blow to the transmission of the language to new generations.

The Portuguese returned after World War 2 and began in the 1950s and 1960s earnest attempts at infrastructure development. The unexpected and somewhat hurried withdrawal of the Portuguese in 1975 was soon followed by an Indonesian invasion and occupation in late 1975. Indonesia was eventually forced to withdraw after the internationally sanctioned referendum in August-September 1999 resulted in the East Timorese voting for independence (see Hajek 2000 for details). The period of Indonesian control (1975-1999) was one of severe oppression in the face of ongoing East Timorese military resistance, especially in the Lautém area where anti-Indonesian guerrilla activity was always strong. Mehara, where Lóvaia is still spoken in the hamlet of Porlamano, was a nationalist stronghold, and the previous mayor of the village was a well-known resistance leader until his death.

The events following the referendum in 1999 achieved international notoriety: a campaign of terror and destruction orchestrated by the

Indonesian military was designed to disperse local populations. In the Lautém area, large numbers of residents were forcibly bussed across East Timor to camps in West Timor, another 4,000 people were found trapped in Com awaiting forced relocation by ship to Indonesia, and some 10,000 people were also reported to have been found hiding in caves, waiting for the arrival of international peacekeeping forces. Fortunately, reports suggest that the majority of the native population, including surviving Lóvaia speakers, left their homes for less than three weeks in September 1999, returning immediately once the UN troops took over control of the area (Himmelmann and Hajek 2001).

#### 4. The people and their language

#### 4.1. Language name and ethnonym

Although we have used the name Lóvaia to refer to the language, the term is actually a borrowing from the surrounding Fataluku language. The original native term for the language is Maku'a (also: Makue, Makua). However, given the strength and prestige of Fataluku, it is not surprising that the Fataluku name for the language Lóvaia [ló:vaja] is considered to be more respectful by the speakers themselves than the endonym. The fact that such disparate linguistic prestige is reflected in the name of the language itself is no doubt a partial diagnostic of the terminal decline that Lóvaia is now in.

The more complete designations for the language involve the words for 'speaking, language', Fataluku epululepule and Lóvaia kahal, so that the full designation is Lóvaia epule in Fataluku alongside native kahal Maku'a. According to de Almeida (1976), the Lóvaia people are also known as the Ma'ru Lauáni by the Makassae and Fataluku speakers along the neighboring northern coast of Timor. He also reports that Lóvaia (also: Lóbaia) is the Fataluku name of a small hamlet once apparently inhabited by the Lóvaia, which has since disappeared. We were not able to confirm or disconfirm this claim.

#### 4.2. Location and habitat

The last surviving Lóvaia speakers live in the hamlet of Porlamano, located within the village of Mehara. The local district, known as Lautém, has its district capital at Lospalos, some five to six hours by road from the national capital, Dili, to the west. To reach Mehara from Lospalos, one takes the road to Fuiloro before taking the one narrow road that extends

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east from the junction at Fuiloro to Tutuala. The population of Mehara live in a series of small subvillages or hamlets, including Porlamano, along this road, only a few kilometers before Tutuala. Access to Mehara from Fuiloro is often blocked in the rainy season by flooding from a large lake. Ira Laloro, that is skirted by the road to Tutuala.

Mehara has approximately 2,400 inhabitants, with some 350 living in Porlamano. Conditions are relatively primitive, although a powerline to Tutuala constructed by Indonesian authorities in the early 1990s has brought electricity to the area. The orchestrated destruction of infrastructure in 1999 led to disruption of the powerline, which was not restored until 2001. When roads are accessible, minibuses run through Mehara from Lospalos to Tutuala (on a fairly erratic schedule). Primary and middle schools operate in the village, but students are required to go to Fataluku-speaking Fuiloro and Lospalos for further education. Access to tertiary education is difficult and is available only in the national capital, Dili.

#### 4.3. Occupation

The local population of Porlamano are farmers who raise small livestock (pigs and chickens) and tend gardens. They grow corn, cassava, and potato for domestic consumption. Food intake is supplemented by the hunting of birds and other small game. There is also some consumption of fish, although direct access to the sea is made difficult by the terrain and the inland location of the hamlet.

# 4.4. Population

There appear to be only five surviving and reasonably fluent Lóvaia speakrs in Porlamano today. Some fifty years ago, Ferreira (1951b) reported what he terms "barely one hundred speakers" of Lóvaia. Subsequently Ethnologue (Grimes 2000), Fox and Wurm (1983) and others report the same estimated figures, that is, perhaps fifty speakers out of an ethnic group of approximately 500, although there is no indication of how this information was determined. The size of the ethnic group appears today overoptimistic: the population of Porlamano is much less than 500, and given the extent of language and culture shift in favor of Fataluku, the question of ethnic identity is a difficult one to assess (cf. Zelealem 1998). There appears to be little evidence of prior ethnic identity having been maintained by younger generations that have lost Lóvaia. These normally identify themselves, and are identified by others, as Fataluku. This is

hardly surprising when, as Ferreira (1951a) points out, the Lóvaia are generally indistinguishable from the neighboring Fataluku. The Lóvaia and the Fataluku look physically similar and share the same traditional way of living, the same diet, the same agricultural activities, and the same customs. Apart from their different origin traditions (see below), the only thing that we are currently certain of that allows us to set the Lóvaia apart from the Fataluku is their language.

#### 4.5. Religion

The local population is, as elsewhere in East Timor, officially Roman Catholic. However, local traditional beliefs are still widely held—without any perceived conflict with the practice of Roman Catholicism. A wellknown feature of animist practice in the area is the presence of ornate spirit houses with high pitched roofs, sitting above ground on stilts. Examples of these houses can be found on the road from Fuiloro to Tutuala.

There has been a strong missionary presence in the Lautém region for at least a century. The Church has also long operated mission schools in the district capital Lospalos and other larger centers, such as Fuiloro. Even though all the residents of Porlamano, including the elderly, have Portuguese names—a sign of Catholic faith—we have not been able to determine precisely when and how the people of Mehara became Catholic. There is no doubt that Catholic presence in Porlamano is longstanding: the Portuguese long passed through Mehara on their way to Tutuala, as noted previously. Ferreira (1951a) also mentions briefly the existence of converts at the time of his visits to the area. All the same, it is estimated that in 1975 only 25 percent of East Timorese were Catholic. Final mass conversion of 97 percent of the East Timorese only occurred during Indonesian control of East Timor (1975–1999) in response to Indonesian policy. Official Indonesian state ideology at the time, known as *Pancasila*, required all Indonesian citizens to adhere to one of five officially recognized religions: Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Protestantism, and Catholicism (see Haiek 2000).

Mehara has a small church, but no resident priest. Villages in the area take turns in having a priest come to read mass on Sundays.

# 4.6. Naming

Following Roman Catholic tradition in East Timor, the Lóvaia and their descendants all use Portuguese names and surnames for official purposes

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and in dealing with outsiders. Traditionally, the first generation of converts to Catholicism adopted the surnames of their baptismal sponsors, often missionary priests. This surname was then passed on to later generations. Following Portuguese practice, the surnames of both mother and father are passed on to a child and are often used together. When that child marries, his/her child keeps the paternal surnames on both sides of the family. Portuguese spelling is always maintained in the written form of names.

Alongside formal baptismal names, use of indigenous names and nicknames is also widespread within the local area. Ferreira (1951a) provides a long list used by the Lóvaia and Fataluku in the Tutuala area.

#### 4.7. Origins

Local populations agree that the arrival of the Lóvaia in the Lautém area is relatively recent and occurred after that of regionally dominant Fataluku. According to their own traditions, the Lóvaia are originally from Kisar, a small island to the northeast, visible from the East Timorese coast. They reputedly landed first at Com, which is the only safe harbor in the area, and which faces Kisar. From Com, they apparently moved inland to Mehara. Com itself is considered by all today to be part of Fataluku territory, and it is known to be a staging point for a Fataluku migration to the island of Kisar in the 1700s. De Almeida (1976) believes that in addition to Porlamano, where Lóvaia is still spoken, a nearby hamlet, Pitileti, was also inhabited by the Lóvaia. This is consistent with the belief among the older residents of Porlamano that Pitileti was likely the original Lóvaia settlement site in the area. However, the residents of Porlamano also consider the now extinct language of Pitileti — of which we have no trace — to have been different from Lóvaia. Ferreira (1951a) lists an alternative Fataluku name for Porlamano: Lacoxo coxo malai. No explanation is given, but the final element malai appears to be the same as the widespread Timorese term for 'foreign'.

# 5. Language situation today

5.1. Current sociolinguistic situation in the Lautém area: languages other than Lóvaia

Today, Fataluku is the language of day to day communication across all generations in Porlamano, even among surviving Lóvaia speakers. Not surprisingly, given that Lautém is overwhelmingly Fataluku-speaking, Fataluku is also normally used by the residents of Mehara to communicate with other native residents of the district. It is an oral medium, with little attempt until the present to write the language.

Despite centuries of Portuguese control, surviving speakers of Lóvaia appear not to know more than a few words and phrases of Portuguese. Portuguese influence on Lóvaia is limited and appears to be restricted to some basic items that have been borrowed everywhere in East Timor, like faro 'shirt' and kalsa 'trousers'. During the Indonesian period (1975–1999) an official policy of intensive Indonesianization led to the spread of Indonesian among younger residents in Porlamano, as elsewhere. Local schools still use Indonesian as a medium of instruction, but new national policy is for the progressive reintroduction of Portuguese. Tetum, the new co-official language of East Timor, alongside Portuguese, is not traditionally spoken in the Lautém area, but knowledge of this indigenous lingua franca is spreading rapidly everywhere among younger generations. including in Porlamano.

#### 5.2. Use and knowledge of Lóvaia today

There are no monolingual speakers of Lóvaia. The few surviving speakers are bilingual in Fataluku and Lóvaia and have little or no knowledge of Portuguese, Tetum, or Indonesian.

It seems quite clear that the present generation of elderly speakers is the last to have acquired the language fully in childhood, and to have continued to use it into adulthood, at least for some interactions (primarily, it appears, as a means to exclude others). Sundana (1996) claims there were only seven speakers left, the youngest of whom in 1991 was 69. Of these seven, two have died in the intervening period, and based on our visits, there appear to be no more than five left. We have been able to make contact with all of these individuals—four males and one female. The most fluent speakers are the one surviving married couple, also known by the villagers to make the greatest use of Lóvaia between them. The children of these speakers, aged from 35 to 55, have never learned the language in any depth. Instead, they have picked up a few words here and there (from their parents as well as their grandparents). There are other people in the village who are able to recite a few Lóvaia words, but this ability seems to be the result of a later dissemination of a couple of items—possibly in response to interest in the language by visiting researchers (linguists and anthropologists) who since the 1950s have periodically come to the village. Our own visits have also stimulated two grandchildren of the married couple to start taking down word lists.

Lóvaia is no longer actively used by the handful of surviving speakers, with the exception of the last surviving married couple, who are more inclined than the other speakers to sometimes use the language to, as stated previously, prevent comprehension by nonspeakers. Not surprisingly, lack of daily use has weakened the memory of the language among notionally fluent speakers. We found it necessary, when eliciting data, to do so with more than one speaker present, to help jog memories when gaps occurred.

# 5.3. Why has Lóvaia become an endangered language?

Lóvaia's demise has been a long and gradual one—the process of decline was clearly under way in the first half of the twentieth century. As mentioned above, Ferreira (1951b) reported barely one hundred speakers left by mid-century. By the early 1980s the estimate was of no more than fifty. Assuming that this figure was not already overly optimistic, severe population losses incurred during the Indonesian occupation, especially in the Lautém area, as well as increasing age, are likely to account for the drop to only seven in 1991 and five today.

Given the age of surviving speakers (at least 70+ in our view, and possibly 80+ if Sundana [1996] is correct), intergenerational transmission appears to have ceased fifty, if not sixty, years ago. Whatever the precise time frame, they both point to the period 1940-1950. It appears to be no coincidence that this is the time of the bloody wartime conflict of East Timor (1942-1945) when 50,000 East Timorese lost their lives, population dispersal was widespread, and villages were destroyed everywhere. Allied ordinance maps prepared before war reached East Timor indicate the presence of at least one other hamlet close to Porlamano, facing the coast, which we know by recent visits no longer exists. No trace of this hamlet survives even in maps drawn by the Portuguese in the 1950s. The differences suggest local communities near Porlamano never recovered from the events of World War 2. If this hypothesis is correct, it was certainly not the trigger for language decline, but it may prove to have been the final blow that stopped completely the passing of the language on to the next generation.

There are other reasons for Lóvaia's gradual demise that long precede the events of World War 2. In the first instance, the Lóvaia appear to have always been only a relatively small group surrounded by much larger numbers of Fataluku. The Fataluku are a big group (today approximately 30-40,000) and have always been dominant in the Lautém area. Moreover, Fataluku linguistic and cultural vitality is extremely strong.

An additional factor that may plausibly be contributing to language death in the case of Lóvaia is the phenomenon of what has been termed "cultural concealment." This is a social characteristic of the islands lying offshore around Lautém district, and indeed the wider Moluccan area around Timor (Florey and van Engelenhoven 2001). Van Engelenhoven and Hajek (2000) provide specific details about this process in which subordinate ethnic groups are obliged to mask their cultural identity (including use of their own language) outside of clearly defined physical boundaries (usually the hamlet or village where the subordinate group lives). Distinct cultural expression is not permitted outside of these boundaries nor in front of members of the dominant group. Given these restrictions, it is easy to see how the cultural and linguistic practices of the subordinate group can be weakened, and how at the same time shift to the dominant group can occur. Usually the original landowning group is predictably dominant. Later arrivals, typically small in number as were the Lóvaia, are obliged to submit to this arrangement presumably in order to receive land to settle. This phenomenon of cultural concealment is well known in the small islands off the East Timorese coast, including Kisar, the presumed original home of the Lóvaia. On Kisar roles are reversed: the original landowning Austronesian Kisarese dominate the more recently arrived non-Austronesian Oirata (who are in fact Fataluku settlers arriving from Com). The Oirata are fluent in the language of the dominant Kisarese but, unlike the Lóvaia, are what Dorian (1998) terms "resistant" in that they have also been able to fully maintain their own language within their own village. A similar ability to maintain linguistic and cultural identity within the realm of a larger, more dominant group is of course not unknown in other parts of the world, for example the Arizona Tewa, who live among the Hopi (Kroskrity 1993). In the case of the Oirata, successful language maintenance appears to be favored by the clear physical separation of the two populations on an island that consists almost entirely of a partly submerged volcanic cone. Here, and on many other small volcanic islands of the Moluccas, population movement and contact tend to be reduced by the difficult physical geography. A similar kind of physical separation has not been possible in Porlamano, given its location both within the much larger Fataluku-speaking village of Mehara and along the only road from Fuiloro to Tutuala.

# 5.4. The future of Lóvaia

Given the advancing age of its few surviving speakers, and the largely passive knowledge of the language by younger generations, it is inevitable

that Lóvaia will disappear as a spoken language in the next few years. Even today, it is barely a spoken language. In the absence of efforts by linguists and the ethnic group itself to document the language now while there are still a few speakers left, no traces of Lóvaia will be accessible to the residents of Porlamano village itself very soon, let alone to anyone else.

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#### Note

1. In the local cultural context such restrictions on the use of minority languages are part of a mutually negotiated process that fits with the intricate social structures on these islands.

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