

A Report on the Current Sociolinguistic Situation in Lautém (East Timor)

NIKOLAUS HIMMELMANN AND JOHN HAJEK

This report outlines some of the main sociolinguistic findings of two exploratory visits to the Lautém district, the easternmost district of Timor-Lorosa'e (East Timor). During the Indonesian occupation (1975–1999) Lautém was the most isolated part of East Timor. Access to the area by non-Indonesians was, with few exceptions, usually highly restricted. The area remained under tight control as Indonesian military forces — in large numbers — struggled to deal with ongoing guerrilla resistance. During this period all research activity in the area appears to have ceased. As a result, all previously available information (eg Campagnolo, 1972 and 1979, Thomaz 1981) about the language situation in the district is based on work conducted during the Portuguese administration of East Timor which ended in 1975.

The major concern of both trips was to establish in the first instance the current state of *Lóvaia* (also known as *Maku'a*), a language which has been known to be endangered since the 1950s. Here we address the following three points which may be of wider interest:

- The general sociolinguistic situation before and after the referendum held in 1999.
- Knowledge of Tetum in Lautém is more widespread than widely assumed and very likely to increase rapidly.
- *Lóvaia* appears to be moribund, with only a handful of speakers and semi-speakers left.

The first exploratory visit to the Lautém area was conducted in September 2000 and lasted four days (two linguists were present: John Hajek [University of Melbourne] and John Bowden [Australian National University]). The initial

staging point was Lospalos, the district capital, with one visit to Tutuala (the easternmost point of East Timor) and two visits to Mehara where the last speakers of Lóvaia had previously been reported to live. Linguistic and sociolinguistic interviews were conducted in all three locations, and recordings were made in Lospalos (Fataluku) and in Mehara (Fataluku and Lóvaia). A brief stop was also made in the northern coastal village of Com on the return of the research team to Baucau.

The second much longer visit to the Lautém area was conducted by Nikolaus Himmelmann [Ruhr-Universität Bochum]. During this visit, some 25 days were spent in March and April 2001 in Lospalos with ten trips to the villages Mehara and Tutuala. It was also possible to visit the villages/subdistricts Iliomar, Com and Lore on short trips. In addition, speakers from other areas of Lautém were informally interviewed in Lospalos, including speakers from Luro and from Baduro and Lautém (villages in the subdistrict of Moro, also called Parlamento).¹

1. General sociolinguistic and political background: Pre- and Post-Referendum 1999

1.1 Portuguese and Indonesian

The Lautém region has been identified in the past as one of only two areas of East Timor where Tetum (*Tetum* here and throughout this note refers to *Tetun-Dili* or *Tetun-Prasa*), the major lingua franca in East Timor, has not traditionally been widely known or used, e.g., Thomaz (1981), Hull (1998) and Hajek (in press). Our own assessment (see below) points to quite a different picture today — one which is rapidly changing in favour of Tetum.

Before 1975 Portuguese was reportedly the preferred means of communication between the inhabitants of the Lautém region and other East Timorese. The extent to which Portuguese was known in Lautém is not fully understood, apart from the fact that local Portuguese speakers were concentrated in areas with Catholic mission schools. During the visit to the region in 2000, contact was made with a small number of fluent Portuguese

¹ The authors would like to thank a number of people and institutions who have made these trips possible and productive. The United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) in Lautém, especially Mr Heran Song, the District Administrator, and Mr Dariusz Rasiński were essential in providing logistic support. In Mehara we are very grateful to Sr. Amadores Fernandes, the village head, who showed an eager interest in this project and greatly facilitated the work on Lóvaia. Sr. Duarte Almeida, his wife Sra. D. Lubania Almeida, and his younger brother Sr. Fernando Almeida shared their knowledge of Lóvaia with us. In addition, Dr Himmelmann very much enjoyed studying Fataluku with Sr. João Aparício and Sr. Inácio da Costa in Lospalos. He is also very grateful to the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* who supported this work with a generous grant. Dr Hajek is grateful to the School of Languages at the University of Melbourne and UNESCO for their financial support.

speakers — not unexpectedly in their late 30s and older, educated, and resident in Lospalos. In Mehara, knowledge of Portuguese was very limited.

After Indonesia's full incorporation of East Timor in 1976, Portuguese was replaced in schools and administration by Indonesian. The status of Portuguese was further reduced by its replacement in the early 1980s by Tetum as the liturgical language of the Catholic Church throughout East Timor.

Indonesian census figures suggest that by 1991 some 60% of the local Lautém population was fluent in Indonesian (see table below). This figure, although in line with the national average in East Timor, masks relatively high levels of proficiency amongst males in Lautém — which were the second highest in East Timor after Dili. The reasons for this gender-specific figure are difficult to ascertain: either (a) a genuine direct shift from one official language to another (Portuguese to Indonesian), or (b) a reflection of the high numbers of Indonesian troops posted to the area. The national average in 1991 is in fact inflated by the presence of high numbers of Indonesian transmigrants everywhere in East Timor, with the possible exception of the Lautém area. Lautém remained during the whole period of Indonesian control unpacified, resulting in the stationing of large numbers of Indonesian soldiers in the district until after the referendum in 1999.

Local Area	Men	Women	Total
Aileu	68.69	58.11	63.81
Ainaro	57.36	42.20	49.81
Ambeno	46.52	38.32	42.46
Baucau	62.43	49.00	55.91
Bobonaro	64.90	49.18	56.88
Covalima	62.88	50.20	56.53
Dili	88.14	79.35	84.00
Ermera	58.37	51.78	55.30
Lautém	70.02	50.09	59.97
Liquiçá	60.09	48.41	54.33
Manatuto	74.17	61.75	68.05
Manufahi	68.94	54.08	61.61
Viqueque	48.89	39.23	43.98
East Timor	66.30	54.10	60.34

Table 1: Numbers of Residents of East Timor per Region who speak Indonesian, 1991 Census

Source: Statistik Kesejahteraan Rakyat Timor Timur 1995, Hasil Survei Sosial Ekonomi Nasional 1995

1.2 Events after the Referendum and their impact on local languages

After the results of the referendum on self-determination were announced in early September 1999, the Lautém area, as elsewhere in East Timor, was hit by large-scale, often extremely violent, upheaval focussed on destroying infrastructure and dispersing local communities. 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 hiding in caves, waiting for international peacekeeping forces to arrive.

It appears that these terrible events as well as the preceding 25 years of guerilla warfare have affected the linguistic ecology in Lautém to a much lesser degree than could reasonably be expected. Today, while the number of still absent residents is not known, most people appear to have in fact returned to their original villages and towns. In fact, reports suggest that the majority of the native population left their homes for less than three weeks in September 1999, returning immediately once the UN troops took over control of the area. Moreover, no groups of dislocated people from other regions have settled in the area. It is known however, that many former residents of the Lautém district remain — apparently largely against their will — in militia-controlled camps in West Timor.

Consequently, the current distribution of speech communities is the same as it has been recorded in the available sources: Fataluku is spoken by almost everyone in the subdistricts of Lospalos and Tutuala, the only exception being the city of Lospalos where a substantial number of speakers from other areas (including various parts of Indonesia) can be found. The subdistrict of Iliomar is almost exclusively inhabited by speakers of Makalero, the subdistrict of Luro by speakers of Makasai. Fataluku also dominates the eastern villages of the subdistrict of Moro, while the population of the western villages of Moro is split among Fataluku and Makasai.

1.3 The introduction of English

As a result of the current United Nations administration of East Timor, many new languages have been introduced to the area for the first time. This is the direct result of the arrival of large numbers of administrators and military personnel from around the world. Military duties in the Lautém area have, for instance, been assigned to a large South Korean contingent. This contingent is also responsible for the opening of a large public Tae Kwon Do martial arts centre in Lospalos and smaller Tae Kwon Do training grounds in almost every village in Lautém.

Only one of these new languages, English, has had any direct impact, given its status as common lingua franca amongst foreign staff and as the official working language of United Nations transitional administration in East Timor. A number of local interpreters — with quite variable proficiency — were

initially hired in late 1999 and early 2000 to liaise between local people and UN staff. These were usually young university students who have studied English in Dili or in Indonesia. Not surprisingly, the arrival of large numbers of English speakers triggered a rush of enthusiasm for learning English amongst young people, and daily dealings with UN workers has led to a marked improvement in English proficiency, at least amongst interpreters and translators. More recently, however, an official process of Timorisation of UN administration has drastically reduced the numbers of foreign staff, especially outside of Dili, thereby also reducing the need for local English interpreters and translators.

1.4 Schools, media and language

During the first visit in 2000, schools had not yet reopened but were officially expected to open one month later in October. An internationally funded national program of school renovation was technically under way, but as a result of a national shortage of building materials, there was little sign of progress in the Lautém area. At the same time, the results of the national process of teacher selection for local schools throughout East Timor were about to be made available. Schools have indeed reopened in the region, albeit later than expected. And while the buildings were still being renovated in April 2001, classes on all levels were offered on a fully regular schedule in all major villages and appeared to be well attended.

Malay is still used as the medium of instruction at all levels, but schools were encouraged to shift to Portuguese as quickly as possible, particularly in the first two years. The Portuguese government has now assigned a small number of upgrading teachers to the region, as elsewhere, to improve the language skills of local teachers, who attend Portuguese classes in the afternoon two to three times per week. For the time being, the local languages Fataluku and Makalero (in Iliomar) are also used quite prominently in the schools for all non-technical communication. It is not unusual to hear students as well as teachers discuss the intricacies of Portuguese verbal inflections in Fataluku, the Portuguese form usually being accompanied by some kind of Malay glossing.

In 2000 the Lautém area remained very isolated in the complete absence of communication services. Electricity had not yet been restored anywhere in the area and there was as yet no access to television, radio, press or postal services. Since then, electricity has been restored in Lospalos and the surrounding villages (running from 6pm to 11pm). The UN now provides radio and to a much lesser extent television services to the area. UN radio broadcasts in Tetum, Malay, Portuguese and English are networked to Lautém, but since most people lost almost all their equipment during the post-Referendum terror, neither these services nor television broadcasts available via satellite are widely received.

2. Knowledge of Tetum more widespread than widely assumed

Earlier reports that Tetum is not known in the Lautém can now be discounted as no longer accurate. They should be taken, instead, as reflecting what the situation must have been like until the Indonesian invasion of 1975. Our recent visits indicate not only that Tetum is much more widely known than anticipated in the region, but that it continues to spread rapidly. On the other hand, it is often reported by natives of the Lautém district and by outsiders that within this district knowledge of Malay is still more widespread than that of Tetum, the new national language of Timor Lorosa'e. Such a difference would of course not be unexpected, given the obvious imbalance between the two languages in terms of access to administration, education, and media, (press, radio and in some sub-districts, television) in the area during the period 1975–1999.

Our own informal observation suggests that the extent of the difference in knowledge between these two languages may have been exaggerated, at least with respect to specific sectors of the local community (as discussed below). In any event any discrepancy is disappearing fast, with Tetum becoming the preferred lingua franca in this area, just as in other parts of East Timor. Our own investigations, supported by subsequent discussions with Tetum native speaker interpreters from Dili who have worked in the district, indicate that for the younger generations (roughly between 15 and 40), proficiency in one language appears to go hand in hand with proficiency in the other. That is, people who speak fluent Malay also appear to speak fluent Tetum. And conversely, those who speak little or no Malay also appear to know little or no Tetum. Speakers themselves always confirmed this impression when explicitly asked about their proficiency in either language. For older generations, a similar observation holds with regard to Tetum and Portuguese in that a high proficiency in Portuguese usually goes hand in hand with a high proficiency in Tetum.

The explanation for this pattern appears to be the same in both instances: those who have a high proficiency in Tetum and Malay/Portuguese have usually spent extensive periods of time in Dili, either working, attending high school or university, or participating in training seminars (offered by various government and private institutions), a pattern already well established in Portuguese times. Indeed many Tetum-speaking locals were able to confirm to us that this is how they learned Tetum.

A further factor in explaining the high status of Tetum in Lautém appears to have been the presence of large numbers of FRETILIN and later FALINTIL fighters in the district through the 1980s and 1990s. Greater Indonesian military success in other parts of East Timor led to a relative concentration of FALINTIL forces in Lautém. Many of these East Timorese fighters were in fact not native to the area. It is known for instance that the national FALINTIL commander, Xanana Gusmão, hid in the area for some time receiving substantial assistance from Fataluku speakers during this period. It is also known that Tetum was the common lingua franca amongst FALINTIL

members (Portuguese was also taught and used) — as confirmed by television footage smuggled out of the area in the mid-1990s. Local Fataluku-speaking FALINTIL guerrillas would be expected to have learnt some Tetum as a result. There is no evidence, however, of transmission of fluent Tetum as a specifically local phenomenon within the Fataluku and Makalere communities in the Lautém district. Those who never left their native area may have learnt some Portuguese or Malay in school, but never had much reason to use it, since everyday life was, and still is, conducted in Fataluku (or Makalero/Maklere in the Iliomar subdistrict).

It also transpires that the influence of Malay via the media, in particular television, was rather limited, since public electricity has been available for only a few years and only in the subdistricts of Lospalos and Tutuala (there are no electricity lines as yet in the other three subdistricts of Iliomar, Luro and Moro/Parlamento). On the other hand, given the major influence of the Roman Catholic Church, almost everyone has some limited access to Tetum through its use as the liturgical language throughout the Lautém district since the 1980s.

Among the observations supporting the view that Tetum is making strong progress in becoming the lingua franca of the area are the following:

- The members of the Timor Lorosa'e Police Service (TLPS), the emerging East Timorese police force, who at present assist the international civilian police officers (CIVPOL) on their patrols and often act as interpreters, consistently use Tetum when speaking to locals with whom they do not share the native language, even though they are also highly fluent in Malay. One of the authors (Himmelmann) happened to be present on a number of such occasions in 2001 and noted that, whilst he spoke Malay to the third party, the East Timorese police officer would regularly use Tetum. This, incidentally, is one of the settings in which proficiency in both Tetum and Malay could be observed and cross-checked with a fluent speaker of Tetum.
- The initial visit to the district involved one Tetum-speaking linguist (Hajek) and one Indonesian-speaking linguist (Bowden), and a Makasai-speaking assistant from Baucau (also fluent in Tetum, Portuguese and Indonesian). At all times in Lospalos, Mehara and Tutuala, we were able to communicate with educated locals, such as village and town officials and small businessmen in both Indonesian (Bowden) and Tetum (Hajek). These people were mostly native speakers of Fataluku (15–45 years), but also included Chinese shopkeepers in Lospalos. It was clear however, that Indonesian, when used for the benefit of the one Indonesian-speaking visitor, was only tolerated. Otherwise, in linguistically mixed situations involving either the researchers or the Makasai assistant, the use of Tetum was always strongly preferred. Some use of Portuguese was also made between the Makasai speaker and at least one Lospalos resident but stopped

when it became known that the Tetum-speaking linguist did not speak Portuguese — to the disappointment of the interlocutors.

- During a meeting in Lospalos for local political leaders and representatives of various local organisations which was organised by UNTAET to discuss the upcoming elections for the constitutional assembly in April 2001, it was obvious that the approximately 150 local representatives considered Tetum the appropriate medium for discussion. Perhaps most telling in this regard was the fact that while the UNTAET representative used Malay (or more precisely, English which was then translated into Malay) and the politicians from Dili sitting on the podium also used Malay in moderating and elaborating the presentation by the UNTAET representative, the local representatives insisted on asking their questions and delivering their comments in Tetum (which caused a certain amount of confusion, since the UNTAET interpreter did not know Tetum). Not surprisingly, the lively and extensive discussion among the East Timorese which followed the official presentations was exclusively conducted in Tetum, the sole exception being a short address by a FRETILIN representative who used Portuguese.
- Among younger people (15–30 years olds) it was repeatedly observed that whenever a conversation among East Timorese involved someone who did not know the local language (Fataluku), one would switch to Tetum rather than to some other shared local language or to Malay. Such a switch even happened in those instances where some of the Fataluku speakers were not able to participate fully in the ensuing communicative interaction because their Tetum was not fluent enough. Interestingly, rather than turning away from the conversation, these speakers would remain present in the background and eagerly observe the ongoing interaction, obviously attempting to pick up as much Tetum as possible.

It is not yet clear which consequences the strong identification with, and high prestige of, the national language attested in these observations will have for the vitality of local languages such as Fataluku or Makalero (the latter being spoken only by a fairly small population in the subdistrict of Iliomar). To date all local languages apart from Lóvaia appear to be fairly vigorous in that they are used in a broad range of domains and by all generations. Their high vitality is probably due to the fact that their use was a symbol of resistance against the Indonesian occupation.

However, the long-term consequences of the new and radically different political situation in East Timor with respect to indigenous languages other than Tetum remain unknown. The current change in the linguistic ecology, with a widely accepted national language Tetum and the official language Portuguese, may very well lead to a rapid decline in the use of the local languages, in scenarios not unlike the ones observed for smaller language communities in Indonesia (cf., for example, Florey 1991, Himmelmann *forthcoming*, Wolff *forthcoming*). To put this more directly, if a rapid decline

in the use of local languages is to be avoided, protective and proactive measures in their favour are needed now (see also Hajek *in press*).

3. Lóvaia moribund

For Lóvaia there are a number of conflicting reports and assessments both with regard to its vitality and its genetic affiliation. During the present investigation, the following picture emerged with regard to vitality: the last generation that fully acquired the language as children appears to be the current generation of great-grandparents. Between five and eight speakers of this generation are still alive, all of them more than 70 years old. These remaining speakers and their relatives are aware of the fact that their knowledge of Lóvaia varies significantly, the greatest competence being attributed to one married couple, Senhor Duarte Almeida and his wife Lubania. Observations during elicitation sessions with several speakers confirmed this assessment. Interviews with some of the children of the last speakers (who are between 30 and 60 years old) made it clear that they know a few lexical items but are unable to form sentences or give complete grammatical paradigms. Earlier reports that up to 50% of the population of Mehara would be able to understand some Lóvaia and would know at least a few basic words could not be confirmed. Instead, it appears that knowledge of Lóvaia is limited to the small group of last speakers and their closest kin, the latter never having actively acquired the language.

There are still a number of reports of further remaining speakers which could not yet be checked. Thus, for example, it is reported that there is a younger speaker in his forties who currently lives in Dili. Even if one or other of these reports turned out to be true (and the history of language obsolescence studies is full of last speakers who are found long after the language has been declared dead), it would still appear that Lóvaia is a moribund language.

With regard to its genetic affiliation, it may be briefly noted here that the data collected during this trip strongly support the view expressed by Geoffrey Hull (1998:4ff) and John Hajek (*in press*) that Lóvaia is an Austronesian language and not a non-Austronesian language as speculated by Capell (1972).² This is particularly clear once the subject-marking prefixes on verbs are taken into consideration.

More technical and comprehensive information on both vitality and affiliation, including the full set of data collected for Lóvaia, will be found in two forthcoming papers to be co-authored by us with John Bowden.

² See also note 10 on pp. 99-100 of the present volume [i.d.].

References

- Campagnolo, Henri. 1972. "Études sur les Fataluku (Timor Portugais). II. Langue Fataluku (extrémité est de Timor Portugais)." *Asie du sud-est et monde insulindien*, 3, pp. 53–76.
- _____. 1979. *Fataluku I — Relations et choix: Introduction méthodologique à la description d'une langue 'non-austronésienne' de Timor Oriental*. Paris: SELAF.
- Capell, Arthur. 1972. "Portuguese Timor, two more non-Austronesian Languages." *Oceania Linguistic Monographs*, 15, pp. 95–104.
- Florey, Margaret. 1991. "Shifting patterns of language allegiance: a generational perspective from Eastern Indonesia." In H. Steinhauer (ed.) *Papers in Austronesian Linguistics No. 1*, pp. 39–47. Canberra: Pacific Linguistics.
- Hajek, John, in press. "Language maintenance and survival in East Timor: all change now? Winners and Losers." In David Bradley & Maya Bradley (eds) *Language Endangerment and Language Maintenance: an Active Approach*. London: Curzon Press.
- Himmelmann, Nikolaus P., forthcoming. "Language endangerment scenarios in Northern Central Sulawesi." In James T. Collins & Hein Steinhauer (eds) *Endangered Languages and Literatures in South-East Asia*. Leiden: KITLV Press.
- Hull, Geoffrey. 1998. "The languages of East Timor 1772–1997: a literature review." *Studies in Languages and Cultures of East Timor*, 1, pp. 1–38.
- Thomaz, Luis Filipe F.R. 1981. "The formation of Tetun-Praça, vehicular language of East Timor." In Nigel Phillips and Anwar Khaidir (eds) *Papers on Indonesian Languages and Literatures*, pp. 54–83. Paris: Cahier d'Archipel 13.
- Wolff, John U., forthcoming, "Causes of language attrition in Ratahan: a research agenda." In James T. Collins & Hein Steinhauer (eds) *Endangered Languages and Literatures in South-East Asia*. Leiden: KITLV Press.