



# Portuguese Word Choice in Tetun Dili, A Creole Language of East Timor

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## Background

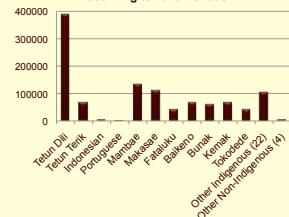
East Timor is a small country in Southeast Asia whose history is characterized by a long period of Portuguese colonial rule, 30 years of violent Indonesian occupation, and the recent presence of the United Nations and other foreign aid groups. One of the most important legacies left behind by this unique history of multi-cultural contact is robust multilingualism. Timor-Leste is home to about 20 indigenous languages, and both Portuguese and Tetun Dili hold official status, while Indonesian and English are recognized as 'working languages'.



## Language Use in East Timor

Only in the last decade has the idea of a distinct Timorese cultural identity been allowed to flourish, and language is central to this ongoing identity construction. Previous research has found that prevalence of Portuguese loans serves as a social marker and varies between registers, occurring more often in elite registers such as media and politics (Williams-van Klinken, 2001). This practice may also be employed to avoid Indonesian terms, but has been shown to obfuscate meaning among less-educated Tetun Dili speakers.

Speaker Numbers  
According to 2010 Census



## Research Questions

This study uses data from a language attitude survey administered in 2013 in Dili, the capital city of East Timor, in which multilingual participants were asked to provide their opinions and experiences about language use in education. Respondents gave their answers in Tetun Dili, a creole language that borrows heavily from Portuguese. This study investigates several factors that correlate with Portuguese word choice among survey participants, such as age, gender, languages of fluency, and attitudes about education East Timor.

## Methods and Participants

A 30-question survey was administered to various groups of people throughout Dili in July of 2013 by Timorese students fluent in both Tetun Dili and English. In total, 207 surveys were collected, but only 89 participants were chosen for this analysis. Those participants who were chosen had to meet 2 criteria:

- over 18 years of age
- wrote a comment in Tetun Dili in the optional comments section

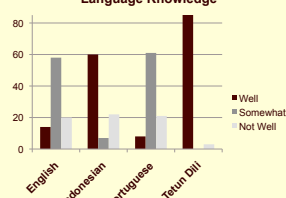
The resulting group consisted of 51 females and 38 males, ranging in age from 18 to 47, with the majority falling between 21 and 26. They represented all 13 districts of Timor-Leste, and their tenures in Dili ranged from 1 year to 30 years, with the majority falling between 3-11 years.

	Average Age	Median Age	Average Time in Dili	Median Time in Dili
Males	23.37 years	22 years	7.21 years	4 years
Females	24.82 years	23 years	9.04 years	8 years

## Participant's Language Background

Participants were asked to self-assess their linguistic knowledge. Few participants reported knowing English or Portuguese well, while many participants reported knowing Indonesian and Tetun Dili well. No participants reported that they only knew Tetun Dili somewhat.

Self-Assessment of  
Language Knowledge



These results are very likely due to the age group of survey participants, who were largely educated while the language of education was Indonesian.

## Common Portuguese Words and Their Tetun Dili Equivalents

It was very common throughout the survey for participants to use Portuguese words that have acceptable Tetun Dili equivalents. There is some vocabulary, however, that is very difficult to translate into Tetun Dili, or is otherwise so solidified in the lexicon as to render a Tetun Dili expression unnecessary.

Portuguese Word	Occurrences	Tetun Dili Word
importante 'important'	41	---
educaçao 'education'	32	---
uza 'use'	25	hodi, lori
aprende 'learn'	24	buka-hatene
escola 'school'	23	---
preciza 'need'	20	kuran
materna 'maternal/one's own'	20	amaa, -nian
desenvolve 'develop'	18	halo, hahalo
tenke 'need to, must do'	18	sei
tan 'more, as, again, even'	17	liu, hanesan, fall, mos
studente 'student'	13	---
lingua 'language'	10	lian
agora 'now'	6	oras nee

## Portuguese Words

Portuguese loan items were categorized as Nouns, Verbs, or Other. The Other category consisted of function words, adjectives, comparatives, and other expressions such as 'Obrigada' (thank you).

	Nouns	Verbs	Other
Males	140	93	64
Females	140	114	108
Total	280	207	172

Several survey variables were tested against one another in a linear regression. These variables include age, gender, opinion on the quality of Timorese education, self-reported fluencies and time lived in Dili.

## LINEAR REGRESSION MODEL FIT TO TOTAL PORTUGUESE WORDS

	Estimate	Std. Error	t value	Pr(> t )
(Intercept)	9.99053	3.27692	3.049	0.00311 *
age	-0.05085	0.12287	-0.414	0.68009
gender.f	-1.06973	1.00456	-1.065	0.29014
quality of education	-0.3501	0.41523	-0.843	0.40166
indonesian.well	3.29512	1.16873	2.819	0.00606 *
portuguese.well	-0.68007	1.74792	-0.389	0.69825
english.well	-1.81734	1.60936	-1.129	0.26218
english.some	-1.78671	1.26276	-1.415	0.16097
time.in.dili	0.12853	0.08585	1.497	0.13829

## LINEAR REGRESSION MODEL FIT TO TOTAL PORTUGUESE VERBS

	Estimate	Std. Error	t value	Pr(> t )
(Intercept)	3.603202	1.11462	3.233	0.00178 *
age	-0.011637	0.041786	-0.278	0.78135
gender.f	-0.189933	0.341645	-0.556	0.5798
quality of education	-0.346444	0.41217	-0.843	0.40166
indonesian.well	0.903238	0.39748	2.272	0.02575 *
portuguese.well	-0.891432	0.594457	-1.5	0.13766
english.well	-0.300201	0.547336	-0.548	0.58489
english.some	-0.435342	0.429458	-1.014	0.31378
time.in.dili	0.007151	0.029197	0.245	0.80713

## LINEAR REGRESSION MODEL FIT TO TOTAL PORTUGUESE NOUNS

	Estimate	Std. Error	t value	Pr(> t )
(Intercept)	4.48204	2.1331	2.101	0.0388 *
age	-0.01839	0.07998	-0.23	0.8187
gender.f	-1.18565	0.65391	-1.813	0.0736 *
quality of education	0.0649	0.27029	0.24	0.8108
indonesian.well	1.59673	0.76078	2.097	0.0391 *
portuguese.well	-0.21221	1.1378	-0.187	0.8525
english.well	-1.52898	1.04761	-1.459	0.1483
english.some	-1.14787	0.82199	-1.396	0.1664
time.in.dili	0.08907	0.05588	1.594	0.1149

## Discussion

The linear regression model for total Portuguese words shows that participants who self-report that they know Indonesian well are the *least likely* to use Portuguese words overall ( $p < 0.007$ ). Participants who knew some English tended to use *less* Portuguese overall (approaching significance,  $p = 0.161$ ). Participants who lived longer in Dili tended to use *more* Portuguese overall (approaching significance,  $p = 0.139$ ).

Participants who reported that they knew Indonesian well used *more* Portuguese verbs in their Tetun Dili comments ( $p < 0.03$ ), and participants who felt that the quality of education in East Timor was poor used *less* Portuguese verbs ( $p < 0.02$ ). Participants who reported knowing Portuguese well also tended to use *more* Portuguese verbs (approaching significance,  $p = 0.138$ ).

Finally, women were *less likely* to use Portuguese nouns in their comments than men ( $p < 0.08$ ), and participants who knew Indonesian well were likely to use *more* ( $p < 0.03$ ). Participants with robust or partial knowledge of English tended to use *fewer* Portuguese verbs (approaching significance,  $p = 0.149$  and  $p = 0.167$ ). Conversely, participants who had spent more time living in Dili tended to use *more* (approaching significance,  $p = 0.115$ ).

The use of Portuguese items appears to be a choice on the part of survey participants who hold certain views about the importance of certain languages. Similar to the findings of Williams-van Klinken (2001), the inclusion and exclusion of Portuguese words represents a value judgment on the part of Tetun Dili speakers (whether deliberately or not). Surprisingly, age does not seem to be a significant predictor of Portuguese words usage.

## Sources

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