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Hanna J. Batoréo e Margarida Casadinho
(Universidade Aberta, Lisbon, Portugal)

**Perception and Evaluation of Language Identity
in East Timorese speakers of Portuguese:
Language and Cognition in a Multilingual Community**

Abstract

In the present study we propose to focus on perception and evaluation of language attitude and identity in the case of the East Timorese speakers of Portuguese, residing both in Timor-Leste (East Timor - ET) and in Portugal (cf. Batoréo 2005 and following, and the Casadinho corpus, in preparation).

Given the richness and the complexity of the linguistic situation observed in ET, its present sociolinguistic situation can be seen as a form of poliglossia, where typologically different languages – belonging to Austronesian, Papuan, and Indo-European families – stay in permanent language contact with each other and play roles of different sociolinguistic varieties.

It is claimed that the linguistic identity of ET inhabitants is constructed as a function of their history and the political options taken by their recently independent state with a generation gap observed at 40/50. The data are discussed in light of Cognitive Sociolinguistics (Language and Cognition).

Keywords: *Language and Cognition; Portuguese as a pluricentric language; Portuguese as L2 in East Timor; Language identity; Cognitive Sociolinguistics.*

1. Introduction

In the present study we propose to focus on perception and evaluation of the Portuguese language by the East Timorese speakers, residing both in ET and in Portugal, in

order to contribute in this way to the characterization of their linguistic attitude and identity.

Since 2002 Timor-Leste (East Timor - ET) has been an independent country, which due to its particularly dramatic history has a unique sociolinguistic situation¹. East Timor witnessed nearly five centuries of Portuguese colonial presence and control (1517-1975), followed by 24 years of Indonesian annexation, characterized by massive programs of education and alphabetization aimed at promoting the diffusion of the Indonesian language within Indonesia's new 27th province (1975-1999). Then three years of United Nations jurisdiction followed (1999-2002) before the independent state was proclaimed, in 2002, with its democratic status and constitution.

The local languages actually spoken in East Timor, both of Austronesian and Papuan origin, are mutually unintelligible and range between 16 and 32 (Hull 1998/2002, Thomaz 2002), the exact number depending on the linguistic criteria used for their description. Despite the adoption by the current ET government of linguistic policies aimed at eradicating Indonesian (see Taylor-Leech 2008: 160-161), and promoting Portuguese and the local Tetun², 24 years of Indonesian occupation contributed to the role of Indonesian as a *lingua franca* for communicating in inter-ethnic situations and as a language of written communication. After

¹ Though ET's sociolinguistic situation is a special one, a high degree of linguistic diversity is very common in Southeast Asian and the Pacific: 6,912 known living languages are spoken there (i. e., 737 are spoken in Indonesia by c. 200 million people and 830 are spoken in Papua New Guinea by less than 6 million people). ET's population of nearly one million occupies a small territory of 14, 609 sq. km. (Lewis 2009).

² Tetun is at the same time (i) one of the numerous vernacular languages in ET spoken in non-contiguous parts of the country and (ii) a local long-term *lingua franca* spread widely throughout almost the whole territory (known as *Tetun Praça* or *Tetun Dili*).

independence, in 2002, both Portuguese and Tetun were attributed the role of official languages, whereas Indonesian and English were guaranteed recognition as working languages in the ET Constitution³. This linguistic and sociolinguistic situation can be characterized as *poliglossia*, i.e., where typologically different languages stay in permanent language contact and play roles of different sociolinguistic varieties (cf. Batoréo 2010).

The great efforts currently undertaken by the East Timorese government with the support of the Portuguese government and of other members of the CPLP (Community of Portuguese Language Countries)⁴, Brazil in particular, to promote the use of Portuguese as a medium of instruction and the current attempts to implement orthographic standardization and lexical development of Tetun will eventually result in a gradual process of language shift and in a dismissing of Indonesian (cf. Taylor-Leech 2008).

Although many politically influenced sources indicate as much as twenty five per cent of the population speaking Portuguese⁵, in spite of its formal official status, at present

³ There are three different sections in *Constitution of the Democratic Republic of East Timor* (2002) that deal with the East Timorese language problem: *section 8* – International relations: “The Democratic Republic of East Timor shall maintain privileged ties with the countries whose official language is Portuguese.”; *section 13* – Official languages and national languages: “(1). Tetum and Portuguese shall be the official languages in the Democratic Republic of East Timor. (2). Tetum and the other national languages shall be valued and developed by the State”; and *section 159* – Working Languages: “Indonesian and English shall be working languages within civil service side by side with official languages as long as deemed necessary.”

⁴ See: Section 8 of the East-Timorese Constitution (cf. the previous note).

⁵ “According to the 2006 UN Development Report (using data from official census), under 5% (...) of the Timorese population is proficient in Portuguese. However, the validity of this report has been questioned by members of the Timorese National Institute of Linguistics (...), which maintains that Portuguese is spoken by up to 25% of Timorese, with the

Portuguese is estimated to be spoken by no more than *five per cent* of the ET population (cf. Castro 2004)⁶.

Due to historic reasons, it is silently assumed by the purists in both countries that the variety of Portuguese spoken in ET is the European Portuguese (EP) variety. Nevertheless, its real sociolinguistic complexity and linguistic specificity is largely unknown and/or neglected even by Portuguese linguists and teachers working in the territory (cf. Esperança 2007).

A morphologically rich language (at least at the level of verbal morphology), Portuguese is generally seen by its ET speakers as a *difficult* one, especially when compared to other languages with poor (less complex) morphology (Austronesian languages, e.g. Tetun and Indonesian, or English), as illustrated in example 1⁷.

(1) “ - Aqui tem que se falar Português, não é? Qual é a dificuldade?

T4 – *Sim. Em Timor, eu aprendi, assim... um pouco de Português.(...) [no] ensino secundário porque eu estudei na (no) seminário. (...)Por isso, ...é... aprendi um pouco. Mas depois... a ... acabar o curso secundário, não fala mais Português até... até agora. E depois, em 2000, o curso...o curso de Português até... a ... vir para Portugal.*

- E é difícil? Acha o Português uma língua difícil?

T4 – *Sim. Ah... Português é uma língua difícil mas... a ... para mim, quando tem iniciativa para aprender... e... coragem para aprender a falar... penso é... podemos é... por passar [?]. Mas é difícil. Muito difícil.”* (T 4 speaker from the *Casadinho Corpus*, a management and human resources student, for 7 months in Portugal).

(Eng.) You have to speak Portuguese here, don't you? How is that difficult? T4 – I learnt a little bit of Portuguese in Timor. During the

number of speakers more than doubling in the last five years (...)” → http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/East_Timor.

⁶ According to Lewis (2009): “Probably 2% of the population from East Timor worldwide can function in it, including about 9,000 people living overseas.” → http://www.ethnologue.com/show_language.asp?code=por

⁷ In all the Portuguese examples presented in this text the original idiosyncratic characteristics of the speakers are maintained. Due to space restrictions, in the English translation only an *approximate* translation of the content is provided.

secondary ducation, because I studied at a seminary. That is why I learnt a little bit. After secondary school I never spoke Portuguese again.... till now. In 2000 there was a course of Portuguese I came to Portugal.

- Is Portuguese difficult? Do you think Portuguese is a difficult language? T4 – Yes, Portuguese is difficult but when you are willing to learn and have courage to learn to speak I think we can pass. But it is difficult, really difficult.)

Given the general ET language characteristics presented above, our fundamental research questions are: (i) how do multilingual language users perceive languages and national language varieties they speak and what is their language attitude towards Portuguese? (ii) how do they evaluate Portuguese attitudinally? (iii) which cultural and cognitive models are used in order to categorize and evaluate local and national languages and linguistic varieties (especially Portuguese)? (iv) how is language identity constructed by the members of a multilingual/ pluriglossic community? (v) who are the *five per cent* of East Timorese who speak Portuguese?

We shall claim that there is quite a big difference between the over 40/50 ET population (cf. Batoréo 2005 and following) educated in the Portuguese colonial system and catholic religion, and also taught the Portuguese language as their mother tongue over thirty five years ago in the Portuguese colonial system. This generation can be opposed to the younger one (under 40/50) in which Portuguese was suppressed by Indonesian and English. We shall try to answer the following questions: (i) is there really a generation gap as far as the perception and evaluation of Portuguese by East Timorese are concerned? (ii) if so, does it influence the linguistic attitudes, loyalty and identity of the East Timorese?

In section (2) the theoretical and methodological foundations of our study will be presented. In section (3) we shall analyze and discuss the examples provided, presenting the results and the conclusions in section (4).

2. Theoretical and methodological foundations

What people think and how they feel about their own language(s) is important to those promoting literacy or other development activities as *more positive attitudes* generally correspond to *stronger linguistic and ethnolinguistic vitality* (cf. Lewis 2009)⁸. The big problem to be faced is that these attitudes are believed to be *difficult to assess directly* and equally *difficult to describe adequately*.

According to Norton (2000), in modern education and sociology the *identity of the language learner/user* is drawn on poststructuralist theories and argued as *multiple*, a *site of struggle*, and *subject to change*. The diverse conditions under which language speakers use the second language are claimed to be influenced by relations of power in different language and cultural sites: while multilingual speakers may be marginalized in one site they may be highly valued in another. This is why, every time they interact in one language, there is *engagement in identity construction and negotiation* (cf. Pavlenko and Blackledge 2003). While struggling to speak from one identity position they may be able to reframe their relationship with their interlocutors and claim alternative, more powerful identities from which to speak, thereby enhancing language learning. In this way, the identity of the language learner/speaker addresses the ways in which one's relationship to the social world is understood, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how it influences the chances for the speaker's future.

In linguistics and sociolinguistics⁹, it has been

⁸ http://www.ethnologue.com/ethno_docs/introduction.asp#lguse

⁹ "The way speakers perceive the linguistic variety around them affects language behaviour, in terms of preserving both the structure and the social functions of the language concerned." (Trudgill 2003).

traditionally defended that the *language attitude* of a speaker reflects the way (s)he faces different languages and language varieties (often being in contact with each other), giving rise to specific forms of *language identity*¹⁰ and *language loyalty*¹¹.

Recently, Cognitive Sociolinguistics (cf. Kristiansen and Dirven 2008) has addressed the language attitude and identity problems, arguing that in great part the construction of language identity depends on the *speaker's willingness* to construct and negotiate it¹².

In the present study the analysis is drawn on two corpora: (i) *The Batoréo corpus* (cf. 2005 and following) constituted by non-elicited (free) written Portuguese narrative discourse produced by 30 multilingual (both female and male), ET residents and Portuguese teachers in Dili, over forty; (ii) *The Casadinho corpus (in preparation)* constituted by free oral interviews with East Timorese residents in Portugal, in which the most significant subgroup is constituted by newly arrived

¹⁰ *Language identity* is understood as an “assumed and/or attributed relationship between one’s self and a means of communication” (Block 2007). It has been argued that deeper knowledge of language identity is a key to successful language policy and language teaching.

¹¹ *Language loyalty* understood as solidarity is traditionally defined as: “(it) is a principle in the name of which people will rally themselves (...) to resist changes in either the function of their language (as a result of language shift) or in the structure of vocabulary (as a consequence of interference)” (Weinreich 1953: 99).

¹² “When speakers of different language varieties communicate, the extent to which they understand one another may differ. Several studies such as Börestam (1987) have reasoned that language attitudes can play an important role in explaining such asymmetrical intelligibility relations. Positive language attitudes often encourage listeners to try to understand the language variety in question, whereas negative attitudes often hinder intelligibility. Spoken language comprehension is thus not necessarily only a matter of *being able* to understand, but might also be a question of *willingness* to understand.” (Impre, Sperleman and Geeraerts 2009) (our italics).

(last 5-7 months), students, mostly males, under forty.

The dependent variables taken into consideration are as follows: (i) age (two generations: over 40/50 vs. under 40/50)¹³; (ii) gender (male vs. female) in the first corpus; (iii) residence (ET/ Portugal); (iv) socio-professional status (adult students in Portugal vs. teachers of Portuguese in ET).

3. Data analysis and discussion

The ET speakers are conscious of language changes observed in their country and how difficult it is to learn Portuguese for the younger generation (under 40/50) educated in Indonesian (example 2). Their attitude towards Portuguese is positive and it is believed a new adaptation is needed in order to learn a new and difficult language.

(2) T6 – *“Em comparação do ensino da lingua portuguesa e a lingua indonesia, a lingua portuguesa é mais dificil que a lingua indonesia. Com esta transformação da lingua, presentemente em Timor, podemos considerar os individuos de 40 a 50 anos de idade, já não é muito dificil, porque esses, já sabem mais ou menos, falar e escrever em português.*

Em geralmente uma parte dessas, é que neste momento estão colocados como professor de ensino da lingua portuguesa nas escolas. Pouco dificil para as crianças e os jovens que estão agora a aprender, porque, para eles é uma nova lingua, e é precisamente têm de fazer uma nova adaptação, porque anteriormente já foram adaptados com a lingua indonesia.” [T6: over 40, Batoréo corpus]

(Eng.) T6 - Portuguese is more difficult than Indonesian. Within the frame of the ongoing changes in Timor, we can consider that for those who are 40 or 50 it is not very difficult, as they can speak and write more or less. Generally part of them work as Portuguese teachers at school. It is more difficult for the young ones who are learning it, as it is a new language for them. They have to make a new

¹³ At the time the *Batoréo corpus* was constructed, in 2005, the age frontier was described as over 40 vs. under 40, as indicated in the extracts. Today (2011) it seems more appropriate to indicate it as approx. *over 40/50 vs. under 40/50*.

language adaptation, as before they were made to do it for Indonesian.

The older speakers (over 40/50) are conscious that all the time they were forbidden to speak Portuguese had a very strong negative influence on their language performance, as they had no books and no language contact with Portuguese (example 3). Nevertheless, they claim it is very important to fight for Portuguese and overcome the problems the ET speakers face in their independent country. They understand the language is not important because of the formal guarantee for Portuguese as an official language in the ET Constitution but because it is part of ET history, culture and tradition, as was fought for during the independence. Thus they understand it is “their own” language and they believe it should be valued and promoted (example 4).

(3) T7 – *“O maior problema em que encontrei durante a invasão indonesia, proibiram para não falar essa língua. Por isso durante esta temporada não falei português, devido à falta de livros e de convivência.”* [T7, over 40, Batoréo corpus]

(Eng.) T7 - My biggest problem during the Indonesian occupation was the prohibition to speak that language [Portuguese]. That is why I did not speak Portuguese during that time, as I did not have any books or communication practice.

(4) T 11 – *“Suprir as necessidades e resolver os problemas dependem muito do empenho e da boa vontade pessoal e do valor que se da ao Português. O ensino da língua portuguesa não pode ser interpretado como uma imposição, só porque foi definido na Constituição como língua oficial de Timor Leste. Deve essencialmente ser visto como um elemento que faz parte da Cultura de Timor. Esta Cultura confere identidade histórica a este povo. E por esta identidade própria o povo lutou pela sua libertação e independência. A língua portuguesa faz parte da Identidade, da Cultura e da Historia de Timor Leste. É sob este conceito que damos valor à língua portuguesa e a consideramos como nossa língua e assim promover o seu uso e à sua expansão em Timor Leste.”* [T 11: over 40, Batoréo corpus]

(Eng.) T 11 - Overcoming and resolving your problems depends on your dedication and good will and the value you attach to Portuguese.

Teaching Portuguese cannot be interpreted as a new imposition only because it was defined in the Constitution as an official language of ET. It should be considered as an essential element of Timorese culture. This culture gives historic identity to this people. That was for this identity that the people fought in its battle for freedom and independence. Portuguese is a part of the identity, culture and history of ET. It is in this sense that we value Portuguese and consider it our own language, promoting its usage and its expansion in ET.

The younger generation (under 40/50) who study in Portugal focus on difficulties they face in learning Portuguese because of the education provided only in Indonesian for 24 years (example 5). The students claim though that the official indications of implementing Portuguese in all the levels of ET education should be followed, their task being to learn the language in Portugal and then to go back and spread it in ET (example 6).

(5) - É difícil, o Português?

T1 – “É muito difícil. Porquê? (...) Porquê a noss... a minha geração, é, não estuda o (a) língua português, ê (é) outro língua. Porquê? Em 1974 e até 1998 nós (?) não estudar outro língua e indonésio.” [T1- 35M, Casadinho Corpus]

(Eng.) Is Portuguese difficult?

T1 - It is very difficult. Why? Because my generation did not study Portuguese but another language. Why? Because from 1974 till 1998 we just studied Indonesian.

(6) - Por que é que veio para cá estudar?

T4 – “Sim. Ah... primeiro... a ... relação com a língua portuguesa, a... decisão do governo de Timor... a ... principal, na parte da educação,... a ... implementar a língua portuguesa na (no) ensino básico, ensino médio... a ... decisão do governo para implementar a língua portuguesa na escola e... na (no) nível universidade... a ... em 2012 tem que... a ... ,talvez, implementar a língua portuguesa no curso... (...) eu ...a ... trabalho na universidade, a ensinar...a..., vim pa(r)a cá aprender mais português e depois voltá (voltar). É.” [T4 – 38M, Casadinho Corpus]

(Eng.) Why did you come to study here?

T4 - First there is the relation with the Portuguese language. There is

the decision of the government of Timor to implement Portuguese in education, in primary education, in secondary education, at the university level, in 2012. Maybe [I will ?] implement Portuguese in the course. I work at the university and teach ... and I came here to learn more Portuguese and then to go back.

4. Results and Conclusions

On the basis of the language data collected in two different ET corpora we have focused on the perception and evaluation of Portuguese by the East Timorese, residing both in ET and in Portugal. All the subjects declared general language loyalty and positive language attitudes towards Portuguese. The analysis shows that neither gender nor the place of residence (ET vs. Portugal) seems to be relevant to the speakers' language attitudes. The only really meaningful variable seems to be the generation the speakers of Portuguese belong to (under 40/50 vs. over 40/50), as it translates different life-span perspectives to the contemporary ET history, its tradition and future.

The *over 40/50 generation* learnt their basic Portuguese in the colonial times as their mother tongue (no L1/L2 distinctions were taken into consideration at that time). They lived through the Indonesian occupation and the imposition of the Indonesian language and many of them were active in the anti-Indonesian resistance and used Portuguese as their resistance language. In this case strong identification with Portuguese as chosen and not imposed, as well as idealised and liberating is observed. These speakers look for strength in the past and try to mobilise it for the future; they understand Portuguese as a vehicle of their identity, culture and history and in this way also prospectively as a guarantee of their expected prosperous future.

The *under 40/50 generation*, on the other hand, show their solidarity to Portuguese because they rationally

appreciate the importance of Portuguese as their official international language, constitutionally and governmentally supported. They face it as a guarantee of development and internationalization of the newly formed democracy. They show trustfulness in local politics and governmental decisions, which are pragmatically understood as useful for the better future.

The results obtained in our analysis concerning the attitudes of the ET speakers of Portuguese towards its usage show that though generally all of them show positive language attitude for its preservation and maintenance, their background attitudinal argumentation is quite different in different age groups. Thus the existence of a clear generation gap at 40/50 can be postulated.

In the older group (over 40/50) a historically grounded idealistic identity model can be observed, where Portuguese is promoted as a vehicle of local identity built up on idealized past memory. In this case language loyalty towards Portuguese is grounded on idealized, internalized values.

In contrast, in the younger group (under 40/50) a politically grounded pragmatic identity model can be defended. These speakers face Portuguese as a useful instrument for developing and internationalizing their country by peaceful means. In this case, and contrary to the previous one, language loyalty is rationalised and pragmatically grounded.

The ET speakers of Portuguese are conscious that as language use shifts from a traditional language to one of wider communication, formally and officially supported, differences in use appear between age groups¹⁴, especially in a pluriglossic situation as the one observed in their country.

¹⁴ “As language change takes place, older adults tend to be the final speakers of the traditional language.” (Lewis 2009)
→ http://www.ethnologue.com/ethno_docs/introduction.asp#lguse

It should be taken into account that as “the use of a language by children is (..) a significant indicator of the patterns of intergenerational language transmission which is key to language maintenance.” (Lewis 2009)¹⁵, special stress should be given to teaching Portuguese to the *youngest ET generation* in order to claim the survival of the Portuguese language as well as its further development.

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