

THE USE OF INDONESIAN IN THE SOCIAL DYNAMICS AMONG THE SOCIETY IN DILI, TIMOR-LESTE

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Abstract

This article is based on an ongoing research examining the use of Indonesian within the social dynamics among the society in Dili, Timor-Leste. The current findings reveal that Indonesian has undergone a significant language shift, marked by a reduction in functional domains, weakened intergenerational transmission, and declining social meaning. Indonesian used to be dominant in education, administration, and public communication prior to 2002, but afterwards it is used in limited and in situational contexts such as economic interaction and communication with Indonesians. Generational differences are evident: older speakers retain relatively stable competence, adults exhibit mixed-code usage, and younger speakers rarely use the language productively. Linguistically, Indonesian in Dili shows simplification, lexical limitation, and interference from Tetun and Portuguese. Socially, it has shifted from a marker of identity to a residual symbol of historical experience. These changes are influenced by language policy, social-historical transformation, multilingual competition, and limited media exposure, positioning Indonesian as a residual language rather than an actively maintained one.

Keywords - *language shift, multilingualism, language policy*

Introduction

Language fundamentally functions not only as a tool of communication but also as a social phenomenon with complex roles in society. From a sociolinguistic perspective, language serves as a marker of identity, a means of social integration, and a vehicle for cultural and economic mobility. Hymes (1974) emphasizes that language must be understood within its context of use (language in use), as language choice is always influenced by social situations, participants, and communicative purposes. Similarly, Fishman (1972) argues that language use in multilingual societies is dynamic and reflects power relations, social change, and cultural orientation. This view is further supported by Labov (1966), who demonstrates that language variation is closely related to social stratification. Therefore, language is never neutral but is always embedded within the surrounding social structure.

Timor-Leste represents a complex multilingual and multicultural society. Various languages coexist, including Tetun as a lingua franca, Portuguese as an official language, and numerous local languages reflecting ethnolinguistic diversity. Additionally, foreign languages such as Indonesian and English are present as part of global and historical dynamics. The national language policy, which designates Tetun and Portuguese as official languages, reflects efforts to construct a post-independence national identity. According to Spolsky (2004), language

policy is not merely a formal regulation but also reflects language ideology that shapes linguistic practices. Hull (2001) further notes that linguistic dynamics in Timor-Leste are strongly influenced by colonial history and shifting language policies.

Historically, Indonesian played a dominant role in Timor-Leste prior to 2002, being widely used in education, administration, and public communication. Its presence was not only functional but also embedded in the social experiences of particular generations. Within the framework of collective memory proposed by Halbwachs (1992), language can serve as a medium for preserving and reproducing historical experiences. Anderson (1983) also highlights the role of language in shaping imagined communities and collective identity. Thus, Indonesian in Timor-Leste carries not only linguistic but also historical and identity-related dimensions. However, following independence in 2002, significant changes in language policy and practice directly affected the position of Indonesian. The language lost its institutional function and experienced a narrowing of usage domains, particularly in education and administration. This condition reflects a process of language shift, as described by Fishman (1991), where language use changes due to social, political, and economic factors, leading to gradual abandonment by its speakers. Dorian (1981) further identifies weakened intergenerational transmission as a key indicator of language decline.

In contemporary society, Indonesian in Dili has not entirely disappeared but is used in limited and contextual situations. Its use is uneven across social groups and strongly influenced by age and social experience. This suggests that Indonesian functions as a residual language, no longer dominant but still present in specific contexts. Code-switching and code-mixing are also common features. Gumperz (1982) explains that code-switching reflects social identity and adaptation to interactional contexts, while Myers-Scotton (1993) links language choice to identity negotiation and power relations. This study addresses three main questions: (1) how Indonesian is used within the social dynamics of Dili, (2) how its use varies across age groups, and (3) what factors influence its maintenance or shift. The aim is to provide an in-depth description of Indonesian usage, analyse its functional and structural changes, and identify influencing factors. The study contributes theoretically to sociolinguistics, particularly in understanding language shift in multilingual contexts, and practically as a basis for more context-sensitive and adaptive language policy, as emphasized by Cooper (1989).

Methodology

The result of the research presented in this article is from the beginning stage of its complete process in the next four months. Therefore, the research design used at this beginning stage is only the qualitative one with observation method. The data were so far collected by observing information about the social situations and the use of Indonesian among the society in Dili as the subjects of the research. The observation method was completed with note-taking technique to make notes about the Indonesian use and the social situations. The data were analysed by using qualitative descriptive method to make descriptions about the collected data.

Finding and Discussion

The use of Indonesian in Dili is currently limited and highly contextual, reflecting not merely a functional shift but a restructuring of its position within the local linguistic ecology. Indonesian is no longer employed as the primary medium of daily interaction; instead, it appears in narrowly defined domains such as transactional communication with Indonesians, small-scale economic exchanges, and retrospective discourse about the pre-2002 period. This pattern is more than simple domain reduction, it signals a reallocation of communicative roles within

a multilingual hierarchy in which Tetun and Portuguese occupy structurally dominant positions. In this sense, Indonesian has shifted from a high-function language to a peripheral resource, indicating not just loss of domains but also loss of institutional legitimacy and symbolic authority.

This restructuring is reinforced by generational stratification, which reveals a systematic rather than incidental pattern of language shift. Older speakers maintain relatively stable competence because Indonesian was once embedded in formal education and public life during their formative years, making it part of their linguistic habitus. The adult generation, however, demonstrates transitional competence, often marked by code-mixing and partial attrition. This group represents an intermediate stage where Indonesian is still accessible but no longer normatively required. Among younger speakers, the near absence of productive use indicates a critical rupture in intergenerational transmission. Importantly, this is not simply a matter of reduced exposure, but a shift in perceived utility: when a language is no longer linked to socioeconomic mobility, education, or institutional access, families have little incentive to transmit it. Thus, the discontinuity is structurally motivated rather than accidental. From a linguistic standpoint, the observable simplification of Indonesian in Dili, manifested in restricted vocabulary, reduced syntactic complexity, and pervasive interference, should not be interpreted merely as “deficiency.” It is more accurately understood as a process of functional restructuring under multilingual pressure. Speakers are not necessarily failing to maintain the language; rather, they are reconfiguring it into a limited repertoire suited to specific communicative needs. Code-mixing, therefore, operates as both a compensatory strategy and a marker of shifting linguistic norms. However, this adaptive flexibility comes at a cost: the erosion of Indonesian as a fully autonomous system, reducing it to a semi-dependent linguistic resource embedded within broader multilingual practices.

The transformation of Indonesian’s social meaning further accelerates this shift. Previously, the language functioned as both a practical medium and a marker of shared socio-political experience. In the present context, however, its symbolic value has narrowed to a historical index tied primarily to older generations. For younger speakers, Indonesian lacks both affective resonance and pragmatic relevance. This detachment is crucial: language maintenance is not sustained by structural factors alone but also by symbolic investment. When a language loses its capacity to signify belonging, aspiration, or identity, its decline becomes socially normalized. In this case, Indonesian is no longer ideologically positioned as “useful” or “prestigious,” but rather as temporally outdated.

Taken together, these dynamics suggest that Indonesian in Dili is not merely declining but has entered an advanced stage of language shift characterized by functional marginalization and symbolic attenuation. However, the claim that it is a “residual language” requires careful qualification. It does not imply complete obsolescence, but rather a condition in which the language survives in fragmented, low-prestige, and context-dependent forms. Its persistence is therefore contingent, not stable. Without institutional support or renewed social value, its trajectory points toward further contraction, potentially leading to passive competence without active use.

The factors driving this condition are interrelated and structurally embedded. Language policy is central, as the elevation of Tetun and Portuguese has systematically displaced Indonesian from formal domains, effectively removing it from sites of linguistic reproduction such as schools and government institutions. This institutional exclusion directly impacts intergenerational transmission, as families tend to prioritize languages that align with educational and economic advancement. At the same time, socio-historical reorientation

following independence has reshaped ideological attitudes, recasting Indonesian as a language of the past rather than of the nation's future. This ideological shift is reinforced by ongoing language contact, where Indonesian competes with languages that possess stronger political and cultural capital. In such a competitive ecology, languages without institutional backing are structurally disadvantaged. Finally, while media exposure provides some degree of passive input, it lacks the interactive dimension necessary for developing productive competence. As a result, Indonesian remains accessible at a receptive level but is rarely activated in real communicative practice. In sum, the marginalization of Indonesian in Dili cannot be explained by a single factor; it emerges from the intersection of policy, ideology, social practice, and linguistic adaptation. Your argument becomes stronger when you make this interaction explicit rather than presenting the factors as parallel causes.

Conclusions

Indonesian in Dili has undergone a significant transformation in its function, distribution, and social meaning. It no longer operates as a dominant language but is confined to restricted, situational contexts with limited communicative scope. Generational differences reveal a clear breakdown in intergenerational transmission, while observable linguistic simplification reflects not only reduced competence but also a functional reconfiguration of the language under multilingual pressure. At the social level, Indonesian has lost much of its role as an identity marker and now operates primarily as a historical symbol associated with past socio-political experience rather than present-day relevance. This shift is driven by a constellation of interrelated factors, including exclusionary language policy, the erosion of intergenerational transmission, socio-historical reorientation after independence, competition within a multilingual ecology, and limited opportunities for active language use through media. Within this configuration, Indonesian occupies a structurally marginalized position. From a theoretical perspective, this condition aligns with an advanced stage of language shift in which a language loses both institutional support and symbolic value, leading to its confinement to residual and low-prestige functions.

However, describing Indonesian solely as a residual language requires nuance. Its continued presence in specific domains particularly economic interaction and cross-border communication indicates that it retains a degree of instrumental value, albeit in a limited and non-expanding capacity. This suggests that Indonesian is not disappearing entirely but is being recontextualized within a narrower functional niche. Such a position is inherently unstable, as it depends on external factors rather than internal community transmission. Without deliberate intervention, whether through policy inclusion, educational integration, or increased functional relevance, this trajectory is likely to result in further contraction, potentially reducing Indonesian to passive competence among future generations. More broadly, these findings underscore that language maintenance in multilingual societies is not determined solely by exposure or speaker numbers, but by the interaction between institutional support, social value, and perceived utility. Therefore, any effort to sustain or reintroduce Indonesian must address not only its practical functions but also its symbolic positioning within the sociolinguistic hierarchy of Timor-Leste.

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