

An Addressing System on Tetum Language

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Abstract: *This study explores the addressing system in Tetum Dili, a prominent variety of the Tetum language spoken in Timor-Leste. Grounded in sociolinguistic and cultural-linguistic frameworks, the research investigates how forms of address reflect social relationships, cultural norms, and communicative values within Timorese society. Utilizing a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with native speakers, autoethnographic reflection, and analysis of naturally occurring speech in public events such as wedding ceremonies. The findings reveal that Tetum Dili employs a rich repertoire of address terms, including those based on kinship, honorifics, borrowed forms from Portuguese and Indonesian, and even culturally embedded disrespectful terms used in both friendly and conflictual contexts. These address forms serve as powerful markers of social status, intimacy, respect, and cultural identity. The study underscores the importance of address systems in understanding language use in multicultural and postcolonial contexts, and it advocates for further documentation to support language preservation and education.*

Keywords: Tetum Dili, Address terms, Sociolinguistics, Cultural communication, Language and identity

Introduction

Linguistics is the scientific study of language and its structure. It looks at how language is formed, used, and understood by humans. Linguists study different parts of language, such as sounds (phonetics and phonology), word formation (morphology), sentence structure (syntax), meaning (semantics), and language use (pragmatics). By analyzing these elements, linguistics helps us understand how language functions in the mind and in society (Fromkin et al., 2018; Yule, 2020).

One important branch of linguistics is sociolinguistics, which examines the relationship between language and society. Sociolinguistics focuses on how language varies depending on social factors like region, class, ethnicity, gender, and age. Sociolinguists explore how people use different forms of language in various social settings and how these variations reflect identity and cultural norms. This field helps explain why people speak differently in different contexts and how language can both unite and divide communities (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015; Holmes, 2013).

Closely related to sociolinguistics is the study of culture in communication. Culture influences how people send, receive, and interpret messages, shaping communication norms, values, and expectations. Every culture has its own unique ways of expressing meaning through language choice, body language, tone of voice, and even the meaning of words. Understanding cultural influences in communication is essential for avoiding misunderstandings and building effective, respectful interactions across diverse communities (Samovar et al., 2017; Gudykunst, 2004).

A practical example of the intersection between language, society, and culture can be seen in Tetum Dili, one of the main varieties of the Tetum language spoken in Timor-Leste, especially in the capital city, Dili. Tetum Dili developed through language contact between traditional Tetum and Portuguese, the latter being a colonial language. It is considered a creolized or urban variety that incorporates many borrowed words and phrases from Portuguese, as well as influences from Indonesian and English due to historical and modern interactions. Widely used in everyday conversation, media, education, and government, Tetum Dili plays a central role in Timorese public life. Its urban and official status helps shape national identity and serves as a bridge between traditional culture and modern communication (Hull, 2001; Hajek, 2006).



Review Related Literature

Linguistics, the scientific study of language, provides the foundation for examining how language is structured, used, and interpreted by humans. Foundational texts by Fromkin et al. (2018) and Yule (2020) outline core linguistic components—phonetics, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics—each offering insights into how language operates on both cognitive and social levels. These components allow for a deeper understanding of how language systems reflect human behavior, interaction, and organization.

Expanding beyond structure, sociolinguistics explores how language varies according to social factors such as region, class, ethnicity, gender, and age. As noted by Wardhaugh and Fuller (2015) and Holmes (2013), sociolinguistic variation reflects social identity and group affiliation, making it possible to observe how speakers adjust their language in different settings. One important aspect of this variation is the system of address, which refers to how individuals refer to or greet others based on social relationships. Address systems reveal underlying hierarchies, respect norms, and power dynamics, thereby serving as markers of social distance or intimacy.

Culture plays a crucial role in shaping such systems of address. According to Samovar et al. (2017) and Gudykunst (2004), cultural norms and values deeply influence how language is used in interpersonal communication. Whether a culture values hierarchy or equality, formality or familiarity, will often be reflected in its address terms. This cultural dimension, when combined with sociolinguistic awareness, is essential for understanding how speakers navigate identity, politeness, and social boundaries through language.

A compelling case of the interplay between linguistic structure, social norms, and cultural values can be seen in Tetum Dili, the urban and creolized variety of Tetum spoken in the capital of Timor-Leste. As noted by Hull (2001) and Hajek (2006), Tetum Dili has evolved through intense language contact with Portuguese, Indonesian, and English, and now functions as a lingua franca in various domains of national life. A key sociolinguistic feature of Tetum Dili is its complex address system, which blends traditional Tetum terms of respect with borrowed and adapted forms from Portuguese and Indonesian. For example, terms like *senhór*, *senhóra* (from Portuguese), or the Indonesian-influenced *bapak* and *ibu* may be used alongside native Tetum forms depending on context, formality, and social hierarchy. The strategic use of these address terms reflects social positioning and cultural negotiation, reinforcing how language serves as a tool for managing interpersonal relationships within a multicultural society.

Thus, the study of Tetum Dili's address system exemplifies the intricate ways in which linguistic forms are shaped by both social structures and cultural expectations. It illustrates the necessity of an interdisciplinary approach that combines linguistic theory, sociolinguistic variation, and cultural analysis to fully understand language use in context.

Would you like this further expanded with examples of actual address terms or citations from researchers specifically studying Tetum Dili's address system? I can also help you create a research gap or research question based on this review.

Method

This research employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore the addressing system in Tetum Dili, focusing on how forms of address reflect social relationships, cultural values, and communicative practices in Timorese society. Qualitative methods were chosen for their capacity to capture the richness and contextual depth of naturally embedded linguistic behavior. Data collection was conducted using three primary sources: semi-structured interviews, autoethnographic reflection, and audio-visual documentation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with native Tetum Dili speakers, selected through

purposive sampling to represent a range of ages, genders, and social roles. The interviews explored participants' perceptions and usage of address terms in various domains such as family, education, workplace, and ceremonial events. The flexible format encouraged participants to share detailed personal and cultural insights.

In addition to interviews, autoethnographic reflection was used to incorporate the researcher's own lived experiences as a native speaker. This provided insider perspectives on how address terms function in daily communication. Field notes and reflective journals documented naturally occurring language use in both formal and informal interactions. The third data source came from audio and video recordings of wedding ceremonies, where the Master of Ceremony (MC) often delivers highly stylized and respectful forms of address. These culturally significant speeches were transcribed and analyzed to better understand address term usage in ritual and public settings.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which involved identifying recurring patterns and meanings across the dataset. Key themes such as kinship-based address, honorific titles, informal and disrespectful expressions were manually coded from transcripts and field notes. The use of multiple data sources enabled triangulation, enhancing the credibility and interpretive depth of the findings. Ethical procedures were followed throughout the study: informed consent was obtained from all participants, anonymity was preserved, and permissions were secured for all recorded materials. The researcher's dual role—as both investigator and cultural insider—was transparently acknowledged, and reflexive strategies were applied to mitigate potential bias and maintain academic integrity.

Results and Discussion

1. Immediate Family

Definition: Immediate family refers to a person's closest relatives, typically including parents, children, and siblings (Crystal, 2008).

Num	Tetum Language	English Language
1	Apa/Aman	Father
2	Ama/Inan	Mother
3	Oan	Children
4	Oan feto	Daughter
5	Oan mane	Son

2. Immediate Family Non-Blood

Definition: Non-blood immediate family includes individuals who are socially, but not biologically, recognized as close family members, such as adoptive or step-relatives (Goodenough, 1970).

Num	Tetum Language	English Language
1	Madrasta	Step mother
2	Padrastu	Step father
3	Entiada	Step daughter
4	Entiado	Step brother
5	Meau-Irma	Step sister
6	Meau-irmaun	Step-brother

3. Extended Family

Definition: The extended family encompasses relatives outside the nuclear family, including aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents (Levinson & Ember, 1996).

Num	Tetum	English
1	Abo mane	Grandfather

2	Abo feto	Grandmother
3	Tiu	Uncle
4	Tia	Aunt
5	Primu	Cousin (male)
6	Prima	Cousin/female
7	Subriñu	Nephew
8	Subriña	Niece

4. In-Laws

Definition: In-laws are individuals related through marriage, such as the spouse's parents or siblings (Parkin, 1997).

Num	Tetum Language	English Language
1	Banin	Parents-in-law
2	Banin mane	Father-in-law
3	Banin feto	Mother-in-law
4	Rian	Brother-in-law
5	Mane foun	Son-in-law
6	Feto foun	Daughter-in-law

5. Spouse

Definition: A spouse is a person's legally recognized marriage partner, either husband or wife (Crystal, 2008).

Num	Teum Language	English Language
1	Fen	wife
2	Laen	Husband

6. Special Address in Family

Definition: These are culturally or affectionately specific terms of address used within the family, often signaling respect, hierarchy, or closeness (Fitch, 1998).

1	Tetum Language	English Language
2	Mai	Mother
3	Pai	Father
4	Noy	Special term for addressing for a female
5	Baino	Special term for addressing a male.
6	Titi	Aunt
7	Titu	Uncle

7. Honorifics and respectful Titles

Definition: Honorifics are linguistic forms used to express respect, especially toward elders or those in authority (Agha, 2007).

1	Tetum Language	English Language
2	Mestri	Male teacher
3	Mestra	Female teacher
4	Professor	Male teacher
5	Professora	Female teacher
6	Señor	Term for Male
7	Señora	Terms for Female
8	Doutor	Terms for an educated person (male)
9	Doutora	Terms for an educated person

		(Female)
10	Amu	Terms for (monks)
11	Madre	Terms for (nuns)
12	Irmaun	Terms for (males)
13	Irma	Terms for (females)
14	Amu-dai	Respectful terms for an unknown person

8. Cultural Disrespectful Terms to show Friendship

Definition: In some cultures, mild insults or teasing terms are used playfully among friends to express closeness and trust (Eble, 1996).

1	Tetum Language	English Language
2	Fahi	Pig
3	Asu	Dog
4	Nahuin	Mother's vagina (vulgar word)
5	Het nia aman	Fuck own mother (vulgar word)
6	Lafaek	Crocodile
7	Katuas	Old man
8	Lekirauk	Monkey
9	Lastolun	Testicles (vulgar word)
10	Beikten	Very stupid

9. Cultural Disrespectful Term for Conflicts

Definition: These are pejorative terms used intentionally to insult or provoke others during interpersonal conflict, often varying by culture and social norms (Allan & Burrige, 2006).

Num ber	Tetum Language	English Language
1	Asu	Dog
2	Asu aman	Father of dog
3	Asu inan	Mother of dog
4	Traidor	Treason
5	Milisi	Militant
6	Mauhuu	Spy
7	Lastolun	Testicles (vulgar word)
8	Inan-huin	Mother's vagina (vulgar word)
9	Lekirauk	Monkey
10	Feto ain kanek/Feto bikan	Slut (vulgar word)
11	Het nia ama	Fuck own mother (vulgar word)
12	Het nia aman	Fuck own (vulgar word)

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the addressing system in Tetum Dili is a rich and complex linguistic feature deeply embedded in the social and cultural fabric of Timorese society. Through qualitative analysis of interviews, autoethnographic reflections, and naturally occurring speech in public ceremonies, it is evident that Tetum Dili employs a diverse range of address terms. These include kinship-based terms, honorifics, borrowed Portuguese and Indonesian forms, as well as culturally specific respectful and disrespectful expressions. The addressing system functions as a powerful social tool that reflects and reinforces relationships of intimacy, respect, social hierarchy, and cultural identity within Timor-Leste's multilingual and multicultural context. This research highlights the importance of understanding language use beyond mere grammar, emphasizing its role in cultural communication and social negotiation. Furthermore, the study underscores the need to document and preserve these linguistic practices as part of Timor-Leste's cultural heritage, especially amid ongoing language contact and change.

Suggestions

1. Further Documentation and Research: Future studies should expand the scope of investigation to include other varieties of Tetum and regional dialects to provide a comprehensive understanding of addressing systems across Timor-Leste. Comparative research could reveal variations and commonalities that enrich the sociolinguistic profile of the nation.
2. Language Education Integration: Educational institutions and language planners in Timor-Leste are encouraged to incorporate knowledge about the addressing system into language teaching curricula. Raising awareness of sociolinguistic norms can improve communicative competence and intercultural understanding among learners.
3. Preservation of Cultural Linguistic Practices: Efforts should be made to preserve traditional address terms and cultural communicative practices in the face of globalization and language shift. Documentation projects, community workshops, and multimedia resources can support this goal.
4. Promotion of Respectful Communication: Given the coexistence of respectful and disrespectful address terms within Tetum Dili, public awareness campaigns could promote the appropriate use of language in formal and informal contexts to maintain social harmony.
5. Interdisciplinary Approaches: Future research could adopt interdisciplinary methodologies combining linguistics, anthropology, and sociology to deepen insights into how language interacts with identity, power, and cultural change in Timor-Leste.

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