Abstract

Timor-Leste celebrated its formal political independence on 20th May 2002. The National Constitution of the new nation declared the endogenous lingua franca (Tetum) and the former colonial language (Portuguese) to be co-official. The remaining local languages were given the status of national languages. Indonesian and English were designated working languages “for as long as is deemed necessary.” In this article I consider the origins and implications of these constitutional provisions. The paper consists of five parts:

1. A social and economic profile of the polity. This section also discusses migration, communications and the media in relation to language policy and practice.
2. A language profile of the country, followed by a discussion of diglossia, multilingualism, literacy and official language choice.
3. An account of the sociolinguistic consequences of language contact and an historical analysis of social policies and practices that have shaped the habitus.
4. A discussion and analysis of current language policy development in terms of goals, motives and orientations.
5. An assessment of the prospects for language maintenance with special reference to policy outcomes and options.

I advocate a rights-oriented approach to language management, arguing that in the absence of such an approach, ad hoc power relationships between languages will continue to dominate social discourse and language politics.