Language and Identity in East Timor: The discourses of nation building

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Abstract

Language choice in the newly independent Republic of East Timor can be usefully examined in the wider context of language policy in multilingual states. The present article reports on ethnographic research investigating official and popular discourses of language and identity in East Timor and the role of past and present language policies and practices in shaping national and social identity. It focuses on the discursive reconstruction of identity through five official instruments of language policy development. Hostile discourses in the Australian and Indonesian press towards the choice of Portuguese (the former colonial language) and Tetum (the endogenous lingua franca) as official languages provided the context for the investigation. A persistent theme in these discourses is that English and/or Indonesian would be preferable choices. The article puts these discourses into perspective by presenting findings from two data sets: (i) the 2004 National Census and (ii) analysis of the discourses of 78 participants in semi-structured interviews and student focus groups. The census shows clear signs of the revival of Portuguese and the reinvigoration of Tetum. It also shows how diverse linguistic identities have become in East Timor. The research findings show that there is less hostility to official language policy than claimed in the Australian and Indonesian press. However, the findings also emphasise the urgent need to reconstruct an inclusive, plurilingual national identity that can encompass diversity.

Keywords
Language policy, language and identity, East Timor, language choice, multilingualism, nation building.