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# PERCEPTIONS OF LANGUAGE IN EAST TIMOR

MELODY ANN ROSS

Preston (1982) made a strong case for the validity and sophistication of speaker knowledge by demonstrating that individual and societal language use is the product of careful thought and reflection. Map tasks are a methodology commonly used by Preston and others in perceptual dialectology studies to gather data on a particular population's perceptions of language use. The task requires participants to mark language boundaries or language areas on a (usually) pre-printed map, drawing on their own notions, experiences, observations, or stereotypes. Very little work has been done on the systematic evaluation of Timorese opinions of language use in their country, apart from interviews (Quinn 2008, 2010) and surveys or questionnaires (UNMIT 2012, Leach 2012). To add to this body of literature, the present study investigates Timorese perceptions of language use, and particularly the strength of the connection between language and place in East Timor, using Preston's map-task methodology.

**1. INTRODUCTION.** East Timor is a small country in Southeast Asia with a history characterized by a long period of Portuguese colonial rule, Indonesian occupation from 1975–1999, recent administration by the United Nations, and the subsequent presence of other international aid groups. One of the many legacies left behind by this prolonged multicultural contact is a change and intensification of the already robust multilingualism. Since independence in 2002, East Timor has been divided on the issue of official and unofficial language use. The Constitution of East Timor states that “Tetun and Portuguese are the official languages of the Democratic Republic of East Timor” (van Engelenhoven 2006). This was a contentious decision, as using either the local lingua franca Tetun Dili or the former colonial language Portuguese, can imply strong ideological stances (Leach 2012, Molnar 2010). English and Bahasa Indonesia, the languages commonly acknowledged as those of economic opportunity, are officially recognized elsewhere in the constitution as “working” languages to further aid in East Timor's development. In addition to these four languages, East Timor is also home to 20 indigenous languages, many of which are in vigorous use, but some of which are in danger of dying out in the coming decades (Lewis, Simons, and Fennig 2015). East Timor's history has created a diversity of opinions and experiences, which are fundamental to individual and societal identity construction. As the UN's influence diminishes and the legitimacy of local governance increases, the idea of a distinct Timorese cultural identity is beginning to flourish.

**2. LITERATURE REVIEW.** Language ideologies are central to this ongoing identity construction, which makes this a potentially fruitful period for sociolinguistic research. The highly multilingual and ethnically diverse population affords many avenues of research for sociolinguistics; however, this type of research in East Timor is still in its infancy, and publications about language tend to focus on language policy and planning (e.g., Hajek 2000, van Engelenhoven 2006, Taylor-Leech 2008), nation-building (e.g., Leach 2003, 2008, 2012), language in education (e.g., Quinn 2007, 2008, 2010; Shah 2012; Boon 2013), and language and cultural documentation (see, e.g., Hajek 2006 for a summary). East Timor is home to 20 indigenous languages and many more dialects of those languages, spread across 13 administrative districts and reaching into the border with Indonesia, as shown in table 1 below of the main languages of East Timor (Lewis, Simons, and Fennig 2015).

Figures from table 1 indicate that smaller languages tend to be spoken in only one district, but that larger languages may be spread across several districts. By using information from census data, these languages may be situated in geographic space. Crucially important to the study at hand, administrative divisions do not consistently represent ethno-linguistic distributions, as seen below in map 1 (compare to map 2).

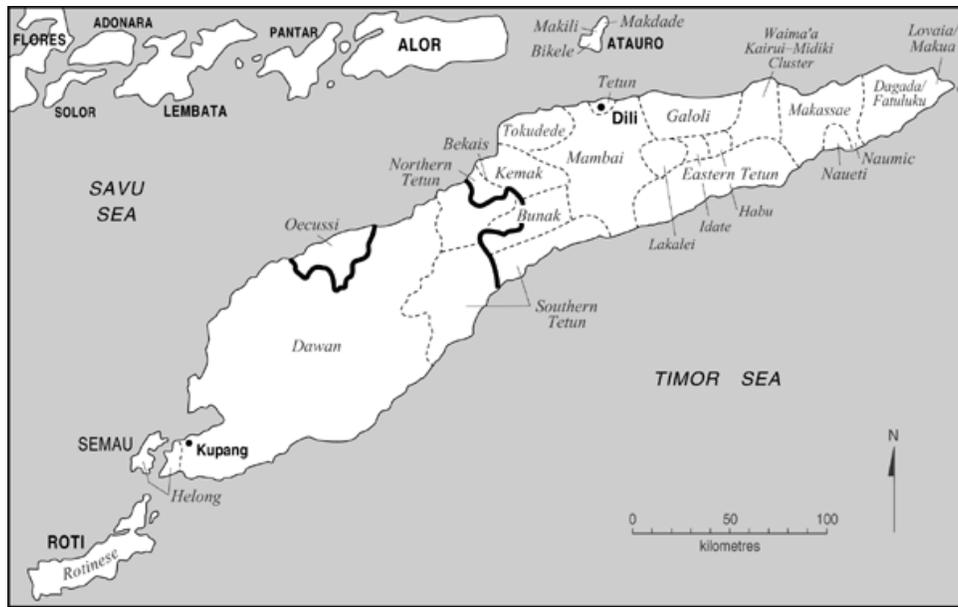
TABLE 1: Main languages of East Timor According to the Ethnologue

<b>Language</b>	<b>District(s)</b>	<b>Speaker population</b>
Mambae	Ainaro Aileu Bobonaro Cova Lima Ermera Liquiça Manufahi	131,000
Makasae	Baucau Lautem Viqueque	102,000
Bunak	Bobonaro Cova Lima	76,000
Baikeno	Oecusse <i>West Timor, Indonesia</i>	72,000
Kemak	Bobonaro Ermera	72,000
Tetun Terik	Bobonaro Cova Lima Manufahi Manatutu Viqueque	63,500
Tokodede	Bobonaro Ermera Liquiça	39,500
Fataluku	Lautem	37,000
Waima'a	Baucau	18,400
Kairui-Midiki	Manatutu Viqueque	15,000
Naueti	Viqueque	15,000
Idate	Manatutu	13,500
Galolen	Manatutu	13,000
Habun	Manatutu	2,700

Even though certain languages dominate certain regions, Timorese of all backgrounds tend to be multilingual (Hajek 2000). Young people living in Dili are likely to be fluent in their father's language, in their mother's language, as well as in the local vernacular, Tetun Dili. If their parents are also the result of mixed-language marriages, then young people may have competence in any number of their grandparent's languages as well. Depending on other factors, such as age and socioeconomic level, they are also likely to also have varying levels of fluency in Indonesian, Portuguese, or other international languages (van Engelenhoven 2006). As a result, identifying just one mother tongue for a Timorese person is a difficult thing to do. In spite of this, mother tongues or broader ethnolinguistic classifiers have historically been used as crucial identity markers, a practice that continues today (see, e.g., Fitzpatrick, McWilliam and Barnes 2013 on the importance of ethnolinguistic background and land claims).

Ethnolinguistic divisions within East Timor were a critical component in the nascent east-west (also *ema lorosa'e/ema loromonu*<sup>1</sup>) ethnic divide as a result of a near-civil war, commonly called the 2006 Crisis. To state it briefly, tensions erupted in 2006 between the members of the military and the police, after military personnel from the western part of the country (*ema loromonu*) felt that they were being treated unfairly by the administration, which was largely made up of people from the eastern part of the country (*ema lorosa'e*). Among the *ema loromonu*'s complaints were that their *ema lorosa'e* commanders were intentionally excluding them by using their mother tongues (such as Makasae or Fataluku) with one another. This conflict resulted in widespread societal violence and deaths, and while most scholars believe that the east-west ethnic divide was not a historically important social index, it is now unquestionably gaining prominence as a potential source of conflict (Arnold 2009; Hicks 2009; Leach 2012). Because of this, many Timorese feel uncomfortable identifying themselves as a member of either group, preferring to use the identity indexes more common across East Timor—mother tongue and place of origin (Leach 2012).

MAP 1: Language divisions in East Timor (from Fox and Soares 2003)



Although the *lorosae/loromonu* division is largely considered a contrived notion advanced by the agitators of the 2006 conflict, historically, Timorese have had deep connections to their ancestral lands. Ethnographic essays on concepts of land and cosmogony have shown that Timorese continue to practice recognizably Austronesian rituals, beliefs, and practices, such as the construction of and importance of the traditional house as a physical analogy of social and cosmic order, exchange relationships, and the symbolic classifications of binarism (McWilliam and Traube 2011). Even the early Portuguese inhabitants recognized a strong sense among the people of East Timor of belonging to particular places, and drew administrative boundaries along traditional ethnolinguistic “kingdoms” (Molnar 2010). Forced migrations during the Indonesian occupation further reinforced the cultural importance of origin, and promoted a nationalist re-imagining of the connection between the people and the land, emphasizing East Timor as a single “homeland” rather than many lands of origin (McWilliam and Traube 2011).

These publications provide valuable insight into the role of language in East Timor through the lens of post-colonialism, national development, and national identity construction. Similarly, many authors

<sup>1</sup> *Ema* ‘people’; *loro* ‘sun’; *sa’e* ‘rise’, ‘get up’; *monu* ‘fall’, ‘go down’. *Lorosae* generally refers to people from the three easternmost districts, Baucau, Viqueque, and Lautem, while *loromonu* generally refers to people from districts other than Baucau, Viqueque, Lautem. Dili is considered neither *lorosae* nor *loromonu* (Hicks 2009).

confirm the role of indigenous languages as crucial to individual identity construction and acknowledge the need for further consideration of indigenous languages. However, the literature thus far lacks investigative work that draws on the experiences of Timorese individuals. Very little work has been done on the systematic evaluation of Timorese opinions of language use in their country, apart from interviews (Quinn 2008, 2010) and surveys or questionnaires (UNMIT 2012, Leach 2012). To add to this body of literature, the present study investigates Timorese perceptions of language use, and particularly the strength of the connection between language and place in East Timor by using a *map task*.

MAP 2: Participant’s district of origin (N=51)



**3. METHODOLOGY.** Map tasks are a methodology commonly used in perceptual dialectology studies to gather data on a particular population’s perceptions of language use. The task requires participants to mark language boundaries or language areas on a (usually) pre-printed map, drawing on their own notions, experiences, observations, or stereotypes.<sup>2</sup> Many early dialectologists’ and sociolinguists’ work relied on covert, observation-based data such as phone surveys to divide dialect boundaries, rather than speakers’ overt knowledge of performance (Berns and van Marle 2002). Preston (1982) made a strong case for the validity and sophistication of speaker knowledge by demonstrating that individual and societal language use is the product of careful thought and reflection. Despite the fact that much of this takes place covertly, Preston argues that measuring overt characteristics and attitudes of language is as important as analyzing patterns in language production to understanding language attitudes and the behaviors attributed to language attitudes. Based on this model, many other studies have been produced focusing on the linguistic knowledge of discrete groups of people at the country level (e.g., Preston 1989 and Bucholtz et al. 2008 in the US; Purschke 2011 in Germany), state level (e.g., Fought 2002 and Bucholtz et al. 2008 in California; Drager and Grama 2014 in Hawai‘i), and city level (e.g., Lou 2010 in Washington D.C.’s Chinatown; Evans 2002 in Montreal). The present study focuses on linguistic perceptions of Timorese residents in Dili at the country level in a non-Western culture and was designed to yield insight into speakers’ degree of metageolinguistic knowledge and perceptions of place.

Many multilingual studies examine the linguistic society as a whole by identifying what metaphorical or situational domains are dominated by which languages, or which geographic locations are characterized by the presence of which languages (see, e.g., Chand 2011 on elite positions of Hindi; Huebner 2006 on the changing linguistic landscape of Bangkok; Karrebaek 2013 on the contexts of monolingual socialization of multilingual children). This has been done to some extent in East Timor; Williams-van Klinken (2001) explains the degree of Portuguese usage in various social domains, especially religious; Macalister (2012) describes the physical linguistic landscape of Dili and its

<sup>2</sup> Some studies ask participants to draw and label their own maps, such as Lou 2010.

importance in language planning by identifying that different languages are indeed dominant in different physical domains. Both of these studies attempt to locate language within metaphorical domains and semiotic space, but neither goes so far as to investigate speakers' mental orientation of languages in physical space.

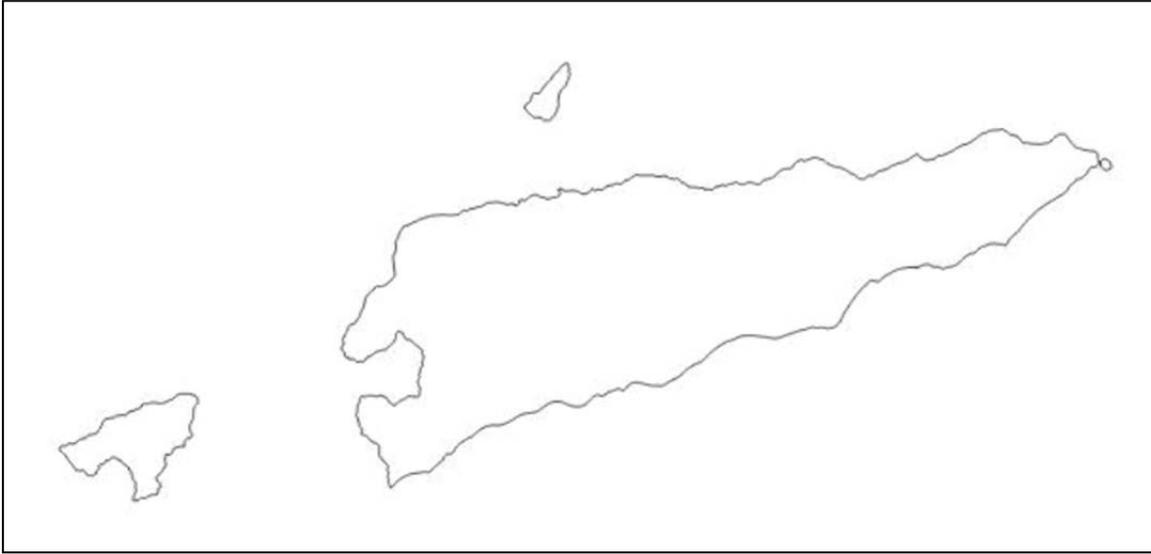
The capital city of Dili is home to Timorese people from all over the country. Fifty-one Dili residents were asked to mark boundaries on a pre-printed, simplified map of East Timor (figure 1), indicating where they believe language is used differently around the country. Consistent with methodology used by Preston (1982, 1989) and Drager and Grama (2014), these instructions are intentionally ambiguous to avoid acquiescence bias, in which participants tend to align themselves with responses that have a more positive connotation or one that they perceive the researcher desires. Five students from the Universidade Nacional de Timor Lorosa'e's English Conversation Class were recruited to administer the task. Generally, it was found that participants understood the task more quickly and provided more information when it was conducted by local students, rather than when I administered the task myself. The research assistants underwent a training session both on how to administer the task and on broader ethical research principles, during which time some challenges to administering the task were identified. The first was that Timorese are not generally accustomed to reading maps and therefore had difficulty orienting themselves on the map. Another challenge identified during the training session was that both the research assistants and the participants were reluctant to disclose some demographic information, especially ethnicity. Another challenge was the tendency for participants to want to consult one another while completing the task, likely because individual knowledge in East Timor is, in general, not as highly valued as collective or participatory knowledge (Stead 2014). The research assistants were asked to encourage participants to work alone, and to offer assistance with understanding the task, but to stop short of supplying examples.

Participation in this map task was entirely voluntary, and participants were not financially compensated. Research assistants were compensated for their time. The blank map in figure 1 below was accompanied by the following instructions in Tetun Dili:

*Mapa ida nee projetu husi estudante doutorada husi Universidade de Hawai'i, USA. Nia interese aprende ita-nia hanoin sira ho esperiensi sira. Resposta loos ita-nia hanoin mak, la ema seluk-nian. Mapa ida nee mak mapa Timor-Lorosa'e. **Favor ida, bele pinta baliza balu tuir ita-nia hanoin nebee iha ema koalio diferente i deskreve luan ida-idak.** Ita bele hakerek hira informasaun karik ita hakarek. Favor ida, inklui informasaun ruma kona ba lian se importante*

[This map is a project by a doctoral student at the University of Hawai'i, USA. She is interested in learning your thoughts and experiences. The right answers are your own thoughts, not someone else's. This map is a map of Timor-Leste. **Please, draw some boundaries, according to your view, where people speak differently and describe each area.** You can write as much information as you want. Please, include some information about language, if it is important.]

FIGURE 1: Blank map of Timor given to participants



Research assistants were instructed to read these directions to participants and provide further explanation if necessary. A demographic questionnaire on a separate page comprised: age, gender, ethnicity, birthplace, where in Timor they lived longest, employment status, parents' employment status, education level, mother tongue, other languages they knew, whether they had ever travelled outside Timor and where. Participants were also given information describing the research and how to contact me both locally and internationally.

#### 4. RESULTS

**4.1 DEMOGRAPHICS.** Fifty-one participants completed the task, ranging in age from 18 to 52, with the majority falling between 20–25. The gender divide was 44 male, 7 female; this is not a representative sample of the difference in gender populations of East Timor, and for this reason no analysis predicated on gender will be included in this paper. Participants accounted for 11 of East Timor's 13 districts, with the highest numbers hailing from Dili district, as shown in map 2.

Education levels ranged from primary school (1), some secondary school (4), secondary school graduates (14), some university (25) to university graduates (3), and four no-response. Socioeconomic potential was estimated by combining five other demographic features: occupation, education level, parents' occupations, and whether the participant had travelled abroad.<sup>3</sup> Based on these factors, participants were categorized as having high (12), medium (26), or low (13) socioeconomic potential. Participants reported 11 indigenous Timorese languages as their mother tongues and reported knowledge of other languages, both indigenous and foreign. Table 2 shows the range of languages that participants reported as a mother tongue or other language and the number of participants who reported speaking those languages.

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<sup>3</sup> For a Timorese person to have the economic means to obtain a passport and a visa to enter another country typically indicates that either they or their family have some not-inconsiderable income, because these things are themselves quite expensive, but also carry additional hidden fees such as physical exams and reproductions of birth records, etc.

TABLE 2: Participant mother tongues and other languages

Language	Mother Tongue	Other
Baikeno	2	-
Bunak	2	-
English	-	23
Fataluku	3	-
Idate	1	-
Indonesian	-	28
Kairui	-	1
Kemak	3	-
Makasae	12	3
Mambae	10	3
Naueti	2	1
Portuguese	-	32
Tetun	13	36
Tetun.Terik	1	2
Tokodede	3	-
Waima'a	-	1

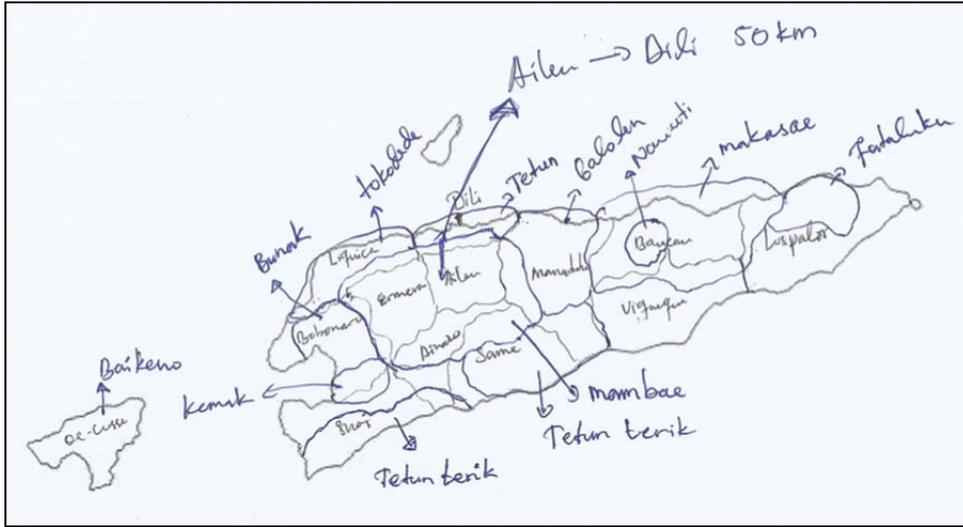
**4.2 ETHNICITY.** As expected, selecting an ethnicity presented a significant confound for the participants. 31 participants chose not to answer, and left the section blank. Of the 20 who provided responses, seven participants used an ethno-linguistic identifier (such as *Makasae*), ten used a traditional clan identifier,<sup>4</sup> and one person distanced himself from the entire concept by writing *la iha* (lit. ‘not exist’). Interestingly, only one participant chose a side in the *lorosae-loromonu* divide, declaring himself for the *lorosae*. Apart from being from Viqueque, there is no apparent explanation in the current data for why this participant chose *lorosae*, but the fact that only one participant self-identified as either *lorosae* or *loromonu* underscores the unease associated with the *lorosae-loromonu* divide. Another simply wrote *lorosae/loromonu*. However, for the purposes of analysis, I was able to assign a regional ethnic affiliation to each participant. Consistent with Hicks 2009, the resulting data may be split into 22 *loromonu* from Baucau, Viqueque, or Lautem, 19 *lorosae* from the other districts, and 10 from Dili (which is considered neither *lorosae* nor *loromonu*).

**4.3 ADMINISTRATIVE LABELS.** Participants were given a blank map of East Timor and asked to provide information about language and location (figure 1 above). The resultant maps ranged in complexity from nearly blank to extremely detailed. Most participants fell somewhere into the middle of that range, identifying about 10 districts and including 10–20 language labels. Figure 2 below is a typical example of the maps resulting from this task. In this map, the participant denotes individual districts (e.g., Lospalos/Lautem district to the west and Cova Lima district to the south-east) and associates languages with those districts (e.g., Makasae in Lospalos/Lautem district and Bunak in Cova Lima district).

<sup>4</sup> Traditional clan identifiers also carry strong ethno-linguistic affiliation; *Uab Meto*, *Atoni*, or *Dawan* can all be used to refer to the language *Baikeno* in Oecussi district.



FIGURE 3: Map J3, depicting administrative and linguistic divisions

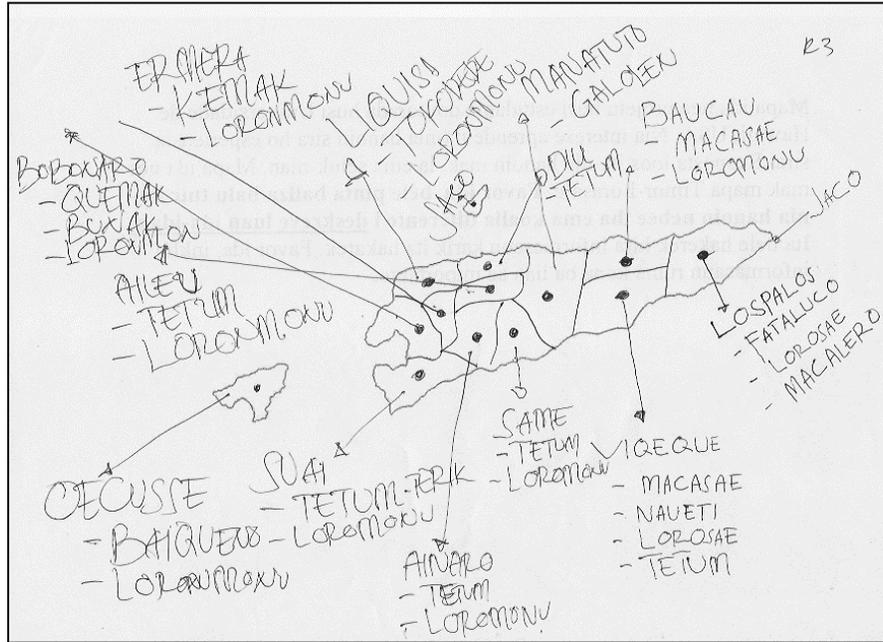


Another participant included a *loromonu/lorosae* distinction along with each district label (figure 4 below), indicating that for at least this individual, there is some importance attached to the ideological *loromonu/lorosae* divide. Twenty-one participants included a label for the island of Atauro, administered by the district of Dili, and 12 included a label for Jaco Island, a small, uninhabited island within the Nino Konis Santana National Park in the district of Lautem.

TABLE 3: Forgotten districts

District	Times Omitted
Aileu	21
Ainaro	16
Cova Lima	16
Ermera	16
Manufahi	16
Bobonaro	15
Liquiça	14
Manatutu	13
Baucau	11
Oecusse	11
Lautem	8
Viqueque	9
Dili	7

FIGURE 4: Map R3, depicting *loromonu/lorosae* distinctions



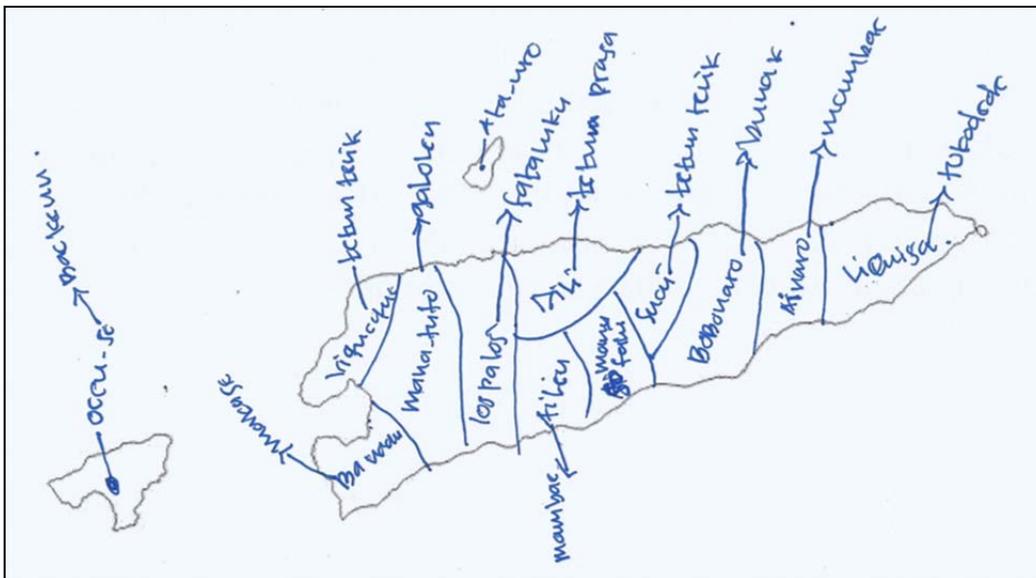
**4.4 DISTRICT LANGUAGE LABELS.** Participants included a wide range of language labels within districts, from 29 in Ainaro district to 79 in Viqueque district. The most diversity was unsurprisingly assigned to Dili district, with 11 unique languages labeled, and the least diversity was seen in Aileu district, with only three different languages labeled. Interestingly, Dili district was assigned only two of the three non-indigenous language labels, Portuguese (2) and English (1), while English was also assigned to Baucau (1), and Indonesian was only assigned to the geographically opposite ends of the country, Oecusse district (3) and Lautem district (2). The most assigned language label was largest L1 in the country, Mambae (107), which was labeled in 10 districts overall. The least frequent were Habun (1), one of the least-spoken languages in East Timor, and Raklungu (1), one member of an undocumented dialect chain spoken on Atauro Island (Lewis, Simons, and Fennig 2015). As the largest L2 in East Timor, Tetun was unsurprisingly assigned to all 13 districts. Table 4 below shows the number of times a particular language was labeled as belonging to a particular district.

TABLE 4: Language labels by district

Districts	Languages																TOTAL							
	Baikeno	Bunak	English	Fataluku	Galolen	Habun	Idate	Indonesian	Kairui	Kemak	Makalero	Makasae	Mambae	Midiki	Naueti	Portuguese		Tetun	Tetun Terik	Tokodede	Rahesuk	Raklungu	Waima'a	
Aileu									2		23					7								32
Ainaro	5								2		18					4								29
Baucau		1						4		32	1	2	8		4	1						10		72
Bobonaro	26								24		3				4									57
Covalima	17								8		2				1	22								50
Dili	1	1				1					1	2			2	39	1	2	3	1				72
Ermera	3								6		26				4		1							40
Liquica	1										9				3		20							33
Lautem			31	1			2			11	14				3									62
Manufahi	2										20				5	12								39
Manatutu				20	1	4						3	1	1	2	8	1							41
Oecusse	27						3								6	1								37
Viqueque								2	3	28		2	14		5	24						1		79
TOTAL	27	55	2	31	21	1	5	5	6	42	14	75	107	5	23	2	87	69	24	3	1	11		

Interestingly, even participants who had considerable difficulty orienting themselves on the map were able to identify languages spoken in the districts they did include. For example, figure 5 below appears to show 12 randomly drawn and labeled district areas; Dili district, Atauro island, and Oecusse district are in relatively correct locations geographically speaking, but other districts are assigned with little geographical accuracy. Furthermore, the map is missing Manatutu district. Despite this, the participant has correctly identified a major language of each district (compare to the Ethnologue data in table 1 above), indicating that although the participant does not have strong geographic resources, he has at least attained a robust level of linguistic knowledge.

FIGURE 5: Map M8, depicting randomly assigned districts with correctly assigned languages



**4.5 OUTLIER DATA.** Some participants were clearly confounded by the task, and did not label any districts on the map, instead writing lists off to the side. Some others included only Dili, or only their own district. Others, in addition to administrative divisions, also included major highways or distances between locations. Still others returned maps that were either blank (except for the participant’s own demographic information), or contained only written comments. Figure 6 below combines several of these characteristics, including the participant’s idea of the distance between somewhere near Dili and the subdistrict of Iliomar in Lautem district and detailed administrative division information and demographics, but only a few explicit references to language use. The text reads:

- (1) Liquiça : Lospalos
    - 3 subdistricts
    - Fataluku
    - Iliomar 1
      - Makalero
    - Loro subdistrict
      - Makasae
- Lospalos (Iliomar subdistrict) – 274 km → Dili

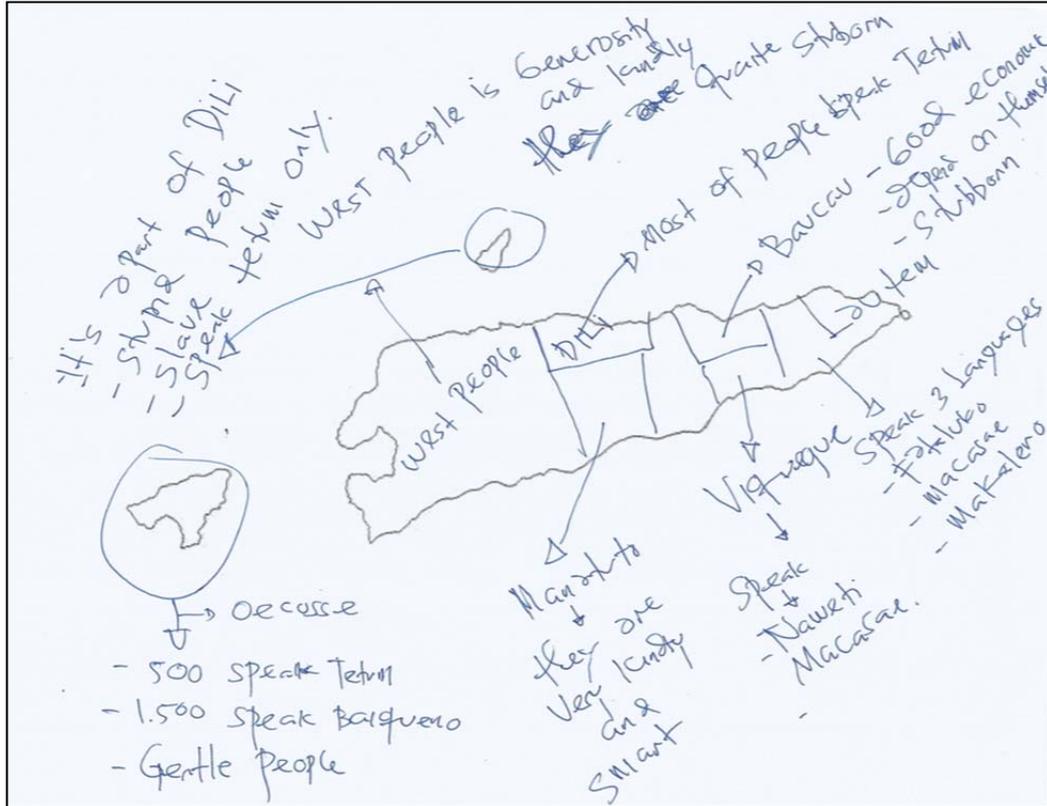
FIGURE 6: Map J1, depicting administrative divisions and distances



**4.6 METALINGUISTIC COMMENTS.** Finally, a small number of participants returned maps with very detailed language information, often including dialectal information or other commentary. Figure 7 below depicts one of the more interesting examples of this, assigning character traits to districts, as well as languages. The text in the upper left appears to refer to the island of Atauro and reads “It’s a part of Dili; stupid people; slave; speak Tetun only.” Another noteworthy feature of this map is that character traits were assigned to districts in the absence of linguistic comments (e.g., Baucau and Manatutu). These comments indicate this participant’s negative perception of monolingual Timorese,<sup>6</sup> and also underscore the connection between place, language, and social ideology. These comments and two separate data points (figure 4 above and the ‘lorosae’ participant) corroborate Leach’s (2012) and others’ hypothesis that the east-west divide is gaining prominence as an identity marker.

<sup>6</sup> Despite these comments being written in English (which was frankly surprising), this participant only listed Makasae, Tetun, and Waima’a as languages he speaks or knows somewhat.

FIGURE 7: Map T1, depicting character, language and district/region assignments



**4.7 TRENDS ACROSS GROUPS.** Statistical models were run on the map data to test for factors that might significantly affect participants' ability to label districts or languages, or to comprehend the task. Data were fit to linear regression models to test the significance of age, ethnicity (*lorosae/loromonu/Dili*), socioeconomic potential, mother tongue, and other languages of fluency. Against expectation, there were no instances of significance for any of the factors tested. This null result indicates that participants are drawing on some other resource to complete the task and that further research is required to investigate that resource.

**5. DISCUSSION.** This study examined Timorese perceptions of language use in East Timor by using a map task and found that, contrary to expectation, administrative divisions were a more important factor in identifying language areas than were traditional ethno-linguistic divisions. Participants demonstrated robust abilities to assign languages to administrative districts regardless of the extent of their geographical precision. Furthermore, one participant provided an explicit connection between language, region, and larger-scale social evaluations. Largely, participants behaved homogenously in their labeling behaviors and did not demonstrate significant differences across demographic factors.

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