

Tetun

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TIMORISME

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What is Tetun?

Tetun, or Tetum, is spoken in Timor-Leste. It is one of the country's two official languages, along with Portuguese, and is something of a culture shock to new arrivals.

Pre-arrival, many visitors, through no fault of their own, know little about Timor-Leste, and even less about Tetun.

This lack of knowledge does not last. Visitors soon find that the language bristles with a kinetic rhythm, quick, impassioned, and decisive. A packed bemo minivan ride around the capital city of Dili, for instance, soundtracked by three or four loud Tetun conversations at once, can pummel the senses and cause wide-eyed culture shock.

When things settle down, though, most visitors get used to the pace of Tetun and Timor-Leste. And they soon learn that country and language embody the same strength and resilience.

Types of Tetun

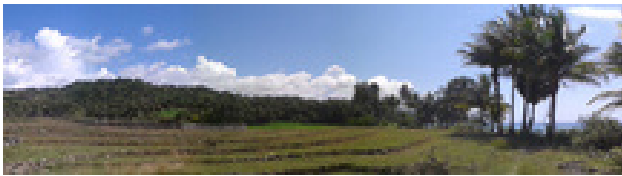
The 2002 Constitution, which came into being when Timor-Leste gained formal independence in May of that year, enshrined, via Article 13, Portuguese and Tetun as the country's official languages.

While the former bears the burden of education, governance and officialdom, it is the latter that acts as Timor-Leste's lingua franca and gives voice to everyday life across the country. Timor-Leste has around 25 indigenous languages and dialects, such as Bunak, Kemak, Makasae and Mambai. And whilst some of these tongues share many elements, others do not. It makes sense, therefore, to have a common language for trade, governance and community.

Tetun plays such a role. But even then, comprehension is not guaranteed. In places like Lospalos and Oecussi, people rely more on Fataluku and Baikeno, respectively, than Tetun.

Eye in the Middle Language Primer

Centuries of Portuguese rule left their mark on Timor-Leste. In Dili, many street names – Avenida Portugal, Rua de Angola, Rua de Moçambique and so on – bear a strong Lusophone flavour. And in the same city, colonial buildings serve as a constant reminder of Portugal's rule. The whitewashed Palácio do Governo and the Farol de Dili lighthouse, with its striped green and white base, both draw their fair share of glances.



Portuguese flavour

Equally, Tetun has degrees of Portuguese influence. The former soaked up many European loan words – avenida, adeus, desculpa, etc – from the latter.

This is certainly true of Tetun Dili, a simplified version of Tetun, understood and used across most of Timor-Leste. Historically, traders would use Tetun Dili in the capital's markets. They would then take this shared language with them and spread it wherever they went.

Thus, Tetun Dili also became known as Tetun Praca, or market Tetun, in recognition of the language's roots.

The name comes from the Portuguese word 'praça', or 'town square,' and reflects the language's directness and widespread nature.

Tetun Dili derives from Tetun Terik, the older and more rural version of the language. Terik lacks the European loanwords of its offspring, relying more on Austronesian root words.

Tones of Tetun

Both versions differ in their grammar. Terik, for instance, employs verb conjugation and subject marking, such as prefixes and suffixes. The Dili type, which focuses on ease of use, does away with such things. This refinement leads to a kind of linguistic disconnect.

Most Terik speakers will understand Dili, but the majority of Dili speakers will find Terik too complex to grasp, on account of its grammar. And if a Dili speaker sprinkles European loan words into their dialogue, the Terik listener will be equally confounded.



The farther a person goes from Dili, the deeper they go into the terrain of Terik. Venturing to the south coast, to places like Same, Suai and Viqueque, will reveal many speakers of this form of Tetun.

Those who head west to the border with Indonesia, meanwhile, will find that around Bobonaro and Maliana, Terik takes on an even more distinct form. Here, Bahasa Indonesia asserts itself in the form of borrowed words and phrasing.

And once a person goes across the border into East Nusa Tenggara, they will find Terik in the regencies of Belu and Melaka.

How Tetun spread

The Tetun people, whose origins trace back to either Sumatra or the Malay peninsula, settled on the fertile central plains around Dili, Suai and Viqueque in the 1300s. Their mastery of trade and diplomacy meant they soon came to power in the region.

And as their influence grew, so too did the reach of their language, a distant relative of Tetun Terik.

Soon enough, this early version of Tetun became an accepted lingua franca across the land.

Symbol of resistance

Four-fifths, or eighty per cent, of the country's population knows at least one form of Tetun, and many have a grasp of both.

This familiarity provided a lifeline during the Indonesian occupation.

The occupiers, keen to assert their dominance, heavily restricted the use of Tetun and Portuguese. Instead, they established Bahasa Indonesia as the sole language of entertainment, education and bureaucracy.

The Indonesians could not fully ban Tetun, however. In the same way that architecture, food and street names signify Timor's time as a former Portuguese colony, Tetun became a cultural vestige, a symbol of opposition against the occupation.

The language quickly found its way underground. There, it became the voice of resistance, the sound of defiance and the vessel of Timorese identity.



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Something sacred watched over Timor-Leste during this period.

First, in 1980, the Vatican granted Tetun official status, meaning it could be used in church services and civic functions.

And then, in 1981, the Catholic Church designated Tetun Dili the official liturgical language in Timor-Leste.

For the next twenty years, holy authorities delivered all sermons and prayers, and all Catholic texts, in Tetun. The church preserved the voice of the oppressed, and, honouring the Timorese, did not allow them to be silenced.

Maubere

The FRETILIN party, which sought Timor-Leste's independence, chose to communicate in Tetun and Portuguese rather than Indonesian. This approach had a twofold goal.

First, it would distinguish the Timorese from the Indonesians. And second, because the occupiers could not understand Tetun, it allowed for clandestine connection between grassroots guerrilla resistance in all parts of Timor.

One way the resistance established support was to create a sense of civic pride, as shown by their adoption of the term 'maubere', which the Portuguese colonisers used as a slur to disparage rural highlanders, whom they perceived as backward and illiterate.

FRETILIN, however, took pride in such a slight and turned it into a unifier.

'Maubere' became pregnant with notions of resilience and identity, which Xanana Gusmão, leader of FALINTIL, helped to foster.

FALINTIL was the armed wing of FRETILIN, and Gusmão lived alongside rural guerrilla fighters in the mountains of Timor-Leste.



Eye in the Middle Language Primer

There, he established Tetun as the official language of the resistance's bases and compounds.

The freedom movement strove to educate the population through Tetun literacy programmes, songs and music. By focusing on the notion of 'maubere' and celebrating the indigenous Timorese, the revolutionaries engendered feelings of pride and defiance and gave the people agency, even as the outsiders sought to erode their liberty.

Bahasa Indonesia

Even after the occupation ended in 1999, Bahasa Indonesia, or Bahasa Umum, remained entrenched in Timor-Leste, where it was used in education, trade and other formal matters.

In 2002, the balance was redressed. Timor-Leste, newly independent, designated Tetun and Portuguese the country's only official languages.

Indonesian was relegated to the level of 'working language,' which distanced the young nation from the influence of the former occupiers.

These days, Bahasa Indonesia remains in common use in Timor-Leste. Many people enjoy Indonesian sinetron and music, such as dangdut. Moreover, generations of Timorese adults, especially those who grew up between 1975 and 1999, were educated in Bahasa Indonesia.

But the Indonesian language also carries scars upon its currents. The forced, brutal occupation left more than 150,000 Timorese dead and traumatised whole swathes of the population. Beneath the layers of Indonesian pop culture, Bahasa Umum reminds many Timorese of a time of great pain.

Thus, demoting the official status of Bahasa Indonesia helped reclaim Timor's sense of self and cast aside a distressing remnant of the past.



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Main grammar points

- **Word order (SVO)** For all the underlying tension between Tetun and Bahasa Indonesia, both share at least a few common traits. They are Austronesian languages, and both adhere to a subject-verb-object order. In Tetun, a sentence might read 'hau gosta inus' ('I like [the] nose'*). The languages also tend to follow nouns with modifiers: the phrase 'hot chicken'* translates into the Tetun 'manu ai-manas' and 'ayam pedas' in Indonesian; they also reverse the wording so it reads 'chicken hot'

*long story

**In this context, 'hot' refers to 'spicy'

- **Verb tenses** Like Indonesian, Tetun does not conjugate or otherwise change verbs to show the timing of an action. Instead, the words rely on context or time words, such as an adverb [e.g., 'aban' / 'tomorrow'], to clarify when something occurred or is about to occur
- To indicate an ongoing action, add 'hela' after the verb (e.g., 'Hau hare fitun hela' / 'I am watching the stars')

- To indicate a completed action, use 'ona' ('already') or 'tiha' ('done') after the verb phrase (e.g., 'Hau hare fitun tiha' / 'I watched the stars')
- To indicate a future action, use particles like 'atu' ('about to') or 'sei' ('will') before the verb phrase (e.g., 'Hau atu hare fitun' / 'I'm about to watch the stars')

Tetun Dili glossary

Hello Elo

Good morning Bon dia / Dader di'ak

Good afternoon / day Boa tarde / Loron di'ak

Good evening / night Boa noiti / Kalan di'ak

Goodbye Adeus / Hau ba lai

See you soon / later Atelogu

See you tomorrow Atemanha

Yes Sin / Diak / Los

No Lae

Please Favor ida

Thank you (very much) Obrigadu (barak) [NB: Men say 'obrigadu', women say 'obrigada']



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No, thank you Diak, obrigadu
You're welcome De nada
Excuse me Kolisensa
I'm sorry Deskulpa
How are you? Diak ka lai?
I'm fine, thank you. And you?
Diak, obrigadu. Ita diak ka lae?
What is your name? Ita nia naran
saida?
My name is... Han nia saida...
Pleased to meet you Prazer
honhese ita
Happy to meet you Contenté
hasoru ita
Where are you from? Ita hosi
nebe?
I'm from (England) Hau hosi
(Inglaterra)



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No, I don't speak English Hau la
koalia Ingles
I speak a little Hau koalia itum
I'm learning a little bit Hau
aprende uitoan
I don't know Hau la hatene
**See the way [NB: sign of respect
when people are leaving]** Haré
daran
**I like to watch stars with you
again** Hau gosta hare fitun o ita
fila fali
It's beautiful Kapas

What is this? Nee saida?
How far is it? Dook ka lae?
Where is...? Iha nebee...?
Bus station Terminal bis nian
Road to (Dili) Dalan ba (Dili)
**What time does the ... leave /
arrive?** Tuku hira maka ... ba / to?
Stop here, please Para diak
Aeroplane Aviaun
Airport Aeroportu
Bus Bis / Biskota
Minibus Mikrolet
Hotel Otel
Market Mercado
What ... is this? Saida ... maka ae?
City Sidadi / Kota
Street Dalan / Estrada / Luron
Village Vila / Desa
Does this bus go to ...? Bis ida ne
ba ... ka lae?
How much? [Nee folin] hira? /
Selu kira?
That's too expensive Karun los
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Where are you going? Bá nebee ?

Just walking La'ò de 'it [NB: similar to 'jalan jalan' in Bahasa Indonesia]

I'm going (home) Hau ba (uma)

Home Uma

I like your nose Hau gosta o ita nia inus*

I like your nose too Hau mós gosta Ita-nia inus

Get outta here! / You're kidding!

Lae, ita bosok!

Beard Hasrahun

Bald Botak

Bald Englishman Orang Ingris botak / gundul

I like to (laugh) Hau gosta (hamnasa)

Laugh Hamnasa

Play Halimar

Eat / Food Han / Hahan

Drink / Drink Hemu / Hemu

I would like [cigarettes] Hau hakarak [sigarru] sira (NB: 'sira' pluralises a noun)

Do you have [rice]? O iha [etu] ka?

How much? Hira?

Water Bee

Beer Serveja

Cigarettes Sigarru

Lighter Iskeru

Chicken Manu

Fish Ikan

Rice Foos (uncooked) / Etu (cooked)

Meat Isin / Na'an

Noodles Mie / Masa

Soup Supa

I've spent one week in Timor-

Leste Semana ida ona iha Timor-Leste

How long have you been in Timor-Leste? Cleorona iha Timor-Leste?

Day Loron

Week Semana

Month Fulan

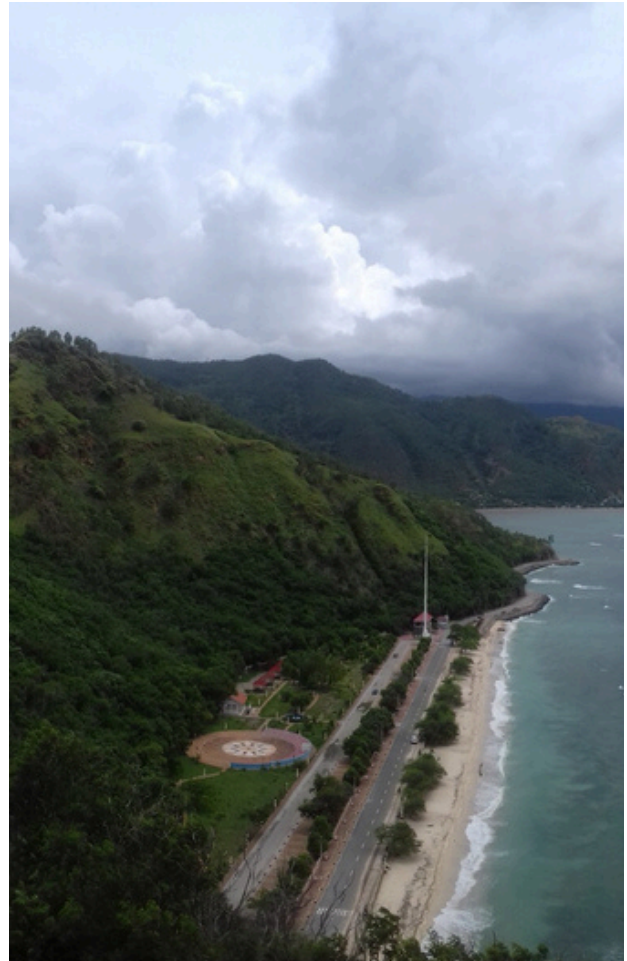
Year Tinan

Today Ohin / Ohin loron

Tomorrow Aban

Yesterday Horisehik

Die (death) Maté



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Numbers Numeru

0 Zero

1 Ida

2 Rua

3 Tolu

4 Haat

5 Lima

6 Neen

7 Hitu

8 Ualu

9 Sia

10 Sanulu

11 Sanulu resin ida

12 Sanulu resin rua

13 Sanulu resin tolu

14 Sanulu resin haat

15 Sanulu resin lima

16 Sanulu resin neen

17 Sanulu resin hitu

18 Sanulu resin ualu

19 Sanulu resin sia

20 Ruanulu

30 Tolunulu

40 Haatnulu

50 Limanulu

60 Neennulu

70 Hitunulu

80 Ualunulu

90 Sianulu

100 / Hundred Atus ida / Atus

1,000 / Thousand Rihun ida /
Rihun

1,000, 000 / Million Tokon ida /
Tokon

Family Familia

Grandparent Abo

Mother Inan

Father Aman

Uncle / Aunt Tiu / Tia

Brother Maun

Sister Mana

Younger sibling Alin

Cousin Primu

Nephew Sobrina

Niece Sobrinu

Pronouns Pronome

I Hau

He / She /it / Him/ Her Nia

You O [informal, singular] / Ita
[formal singular] / Imi [informal
plural] / Ita soot sira [formal
plural]

We / Us Ita [includes person
being spoken to] / Ami [excludes
person being spoken to]

They / Them Sira

NB: This is a Tetun Dili list, which we compiled from conversations we had around Dili and talking to a chatty, friendly stranger in Gleno. There might be a few errors here and there, but nothing life-threatening, we think.

- Visit translate.tetumdili.com for the most comprehensive Tetun translator on the web. Dictionary, grammar, phrasing... it's got the lot