

Lexicalisation of emotion and character in Tetun Dili

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Abstract

Tetun Dili has a wide range of expressive idioms for talking about character, emotions and physical condition. These usually consist of a body-part noun followed by any word that can function predicatively, such as *kakutak malirin* (brain cool) ‘cool-headed, calm’ and *laran ida* (inside one) ‘united’.

These expressions are lexicalised to various degrees (e.g. according to the criteria presented by Pawley (1985)). This paper investigates the level of lexicalisation and standardisation of these idioms, the scope for creativity, and the influence of other languages, especially Portuguese. Data comes from an extensive oral and written corpus, observation, and elicitation.

These idioms raise challenges for lexicographers. Syntactically, some are compounds, while for others the two component words can readily be separated. There is considerable inter-speaker variation in syntactic preferences, for instance in whether negators and auxiliaries are placed before the idiom, or between the two component parts. Semantically, some idioms are interpreted literally, others are interpreted non-literally, and yet others have both a literal and a non-literal interpretation. For instance, *liman naruk* (arm long) can mean either ‘habitually thieving’ or ‘long-sleeved’.

Although they enrich the oral language, many of these idioms are avoided in writing. Indeed they are a challenge even for oral communication, in that many are known by only some segments of the community, and others are interpreted differently by different people. This is in part because Tetun Dili is a creole-like lingua franca, which most people speak as a second language (thus bringing the influence of their native languages), and which has a limited written history. A contributing factor is the influence of Portuguese, from which very different ways of talking about emotions have been introduced into Tetun. In particular, Portuguese loans make it possible to talk about emotions without necessarily mentioning a body part. For instance, *sente triste* ‘feel sad’ and *triste* ‘sad’ are used alongside of the native construction *laran triste* ‘inside sad’.

References

Pawley, Andrew, 1986, Lexicalization. In Deborah Tannen and James E. Alatis, eds *Languages and linguistics: the interdependence of theory, data and application*, 98-120. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press.