

Spelling options in Tetun Dili:

Awareness of 'rr' and glottal stop amongst tertiary students

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Introduction

One of the debates in Tetun spelling is whether to represent two sounds which are present in the source languages of Tetun Dili, but which are not pronounced by the majority of speakers, and are generally represented inconsistently in Tetun writing. One is the glottal stop, which is an important consonant in Tetun Terik (the historical source of Tetun Dili), but which is not pronounced by most Tetun Dili speakers; for instance, the word 'I/me' in Tetun Terik is *ha'u* but in Tetun Dili is pronounced *hau*. The second is a sound represented in Portuguese by 'rr', and clearly distinguished in Portuguese pronunciation from single 'r'; for instance Portuguese *carro* is a cart, while *caro* is 'expensive'. When borrowed into Tetun Dili, however, both are pronounced the same way by most speakers.

The author carried out a series of short experiments to determine whether university students in Dili could actually distinguish these options.

Method

I prepared lists of 15 words and presented these to Dili Institute of Technology students in my Tetun classes. In the first list, students were asked to select the word with an apostrophe (the symbol for the glottal stop) if they believed Tetun Terik had a glottal stop, and no apostrophe if they believed Tetun Terik had no glottal stop. In the second, they were asked to select 'rr' if they believed Portuguese had 'rr', and single 'r' if they believed Portuguese had single 'r'. I had not yet taught these classes about these distinctions.

Note that the two experiments used overlapping, but not identical, lists of words.

Experiment 1

In June 2005 I read out the two lists of words to 49 DIT students in my two "Tetun 1" classes. I pronounced both lists as I usually do in Tetun Dili – without distinguishing 'rr' versus 'r', and without pronouncing the glottal stop. All responses were rated correct or incorrect based only on the correctness of the 'rr' versus single 'r', and the presence or absence of the glottal stop. Any other spelling errors were ignored.

Most of the students were young, with 37 being 18-25 years of age, and only 4 having had any schooling during the Portuguese period.

Experiment 2

I prepared two lists of 15 words as per experiment 1, but instead of reading the words, presented two columns of spelling options, and asked the students to circle the correct one. For the glottal stop list, the option with the glottal stop was always presented first, while in the 'rr/r' list, the option with 'rr' was given first. For instance:

a'an / aan
arrame / arame

Photocopies of these lists were given to a total of 142 DIT students. The first 111 were "Tetun 1" students in October 2005. A further 31 "Tetun 2" students sat the test in March 2007. (Any student who sat the test twice was counted only for their first test). The students were aged 17-38 years, averaging 21.

Results

Results for glottal stop

In the test for the presence of absence of the glottal stop, students averaged 54% correct responses in the first, oral, experiment, and 66% in the second, written, experiment (Table 1). The increased accuracy in the second experiment may be due to students choosing between two written alternatives, as opposed to writing a word which they heard pronounced without a glottal stop.

In both experiments, the minimum number of correct responses was 27% correct (i.e. 4 correct out of 15 words). The maximum of correct responses per student was 87% (i.e. 2 errors out of 15 words) in the first experiment (both of these students being speakers of Tetun Terik), and 100% in the second experiment (4 students, none of whom claimed to know Tetun Terik).

The words which were most often written incorrectly were several which 'should' have a glottal stop. These were particularly poorly handled in the first, oral, experiment (e.g. *di'ak* was only 12% correct, *kle'uk* 22%, and *na'in* 23%). In the second, written, experiment, the percentages were higher, but still less than half correct for *de'it* 'just' (44%) and *di'ak* 'good' (47%). Both experiments showed a very high error rate for what are after all common words. A contributing factor may be that *di'ak* and *de'it* are written without a glottal stop in the New Testament (*Liafuan diak ba imi*) published by the Catholic Church, even though it does use glottals for other words such as *ha'u* and *na'in*.

The highest number of correct responses in experiment 1 was given for *lian* 'voice', with 92%. In experiment 2 (for which *lian* was not included), the word spelled correctly most often was *to'o* 'until', with 87%. This word was actually included as a check, to ensure answers were not random. Since it is fairly consistently written with a glottal stop in Tetun writing, I assumed (incorrectly as it turned out) that everyone would know it had one.

Experiment 1 (49 respondents)		
Word	Gloss	% Correct
di'ak	'good'	12
kle'uk	'crooked'	22
na'in	counter for humans	23
de'it	'just'	38
ko'a	'cut'	47
ha'u	'I, me'	47
la'en	'husband'	47
ki'ik	'small'	53
boot	'big'	53
aat	'bad, broken'	63
naan	'sister (of man)'	67
du'ut	'grass'	80
sei	'still, will'	81
liis	'onion, garlic'	81
lian	'voice, language'	92
TOTAL		54

Experiment 2 (142 respondents)		
Word	Gloss	% Correct
de'it	'just'	44
di'ak	'good'	47
la'en	'husband'	52
ko'a	'cut'	63
boot	'big'	63
aan	'self'	63
na'in	counter for humans	63
foo	'give'	65
aat	'bad, broken'	66
ha'u	'I, me'	73
liis	'onion, garlic'	73
du'ut	'grass'	76
ki'ik	'small'	78
sei	'still, will'	84
to'o	'until'	87
TOTAL		66

Table 1: The words used for testing the presence of absence of a glottal stop, for both experiments, with overall percentages of correct responses, in increasing order

Results for 'rr' versus 'r'

For distinguishing single and double 'r', students averaged 61% correct responses in the first experiment, and 58% in the second. Only one student, who had completed Portuguese high school, wrote all 15 words correctly. Four other students had only 2 errors, the rest had at least 3. At the other extreme, one student had only 20% (3 out of 15) correct, while the rest gave correct answers for at least 5 words.

The average was raised somewhat by *hirus* (98% correct in experiment 1 and 93% in experiment 2). This was added as a check to ensure responses weren't just random, since native Tetun words never have double 'r'.

The words which were most frequently misjudged in both lists were consistently those which in Portuguese are written with 'rr', such as *ferrujen* (33% correct in experiment 1), *sigarru* (35% and 39%), and *bairru* (33%). (Note that DIT's main campus is in the suburb *Bairro Pite*, which led me to expect a higher rate of correct answers for this word.)

Experiment 1 (49 respondents)		
Word	Gloss	% Correct
ferrujen	‘rust’	33
sigarru	‘cigarette’	35
arranka	‘depart’	40
barraka	‘shelter’	41
terrorista	‘terrorist’	41
arruma	‘tidy up’	42
interroga	‘interrogate’	55
karu(n)	‘expensive’	56
garajen	‘garage’	67
korreius	‘post office’	69
arame	‘wire’	71
para	‘stop’	81
interese	‘interest’	90
karpinteiru	‘carpenter’	92
hirus	‘angry’ (T)	98
TOTAL		61

Experiment 2 (142 respondents)		
Word	Gloss	% Correct
bairru	‘suburb’	33
forru	‘lining’	36
irrigasaun	‘irrigation’	38
sigarru	‘cigarette’	39
karreta	‘vehicle’	40
arruma	‘tidy up’	47
arranka	‘depart’	53
arame	‘wire’	56
interese	‘interest’	57
kurita	‘octopus’	61
kura	‘cure’	71
karpinteiru	‘carpenter’	73
karu(n)	‘expensive’	79
para	‘stop’	89
hirus	‘angry’ (T)	93
TOTAL		58

Table 2: The words used for testing ‘rr’ versus ‘r’, for both experiments, with overall percentages of correct responses, in increasing order.

Conclusion

It is clear that these university students have very low awareness of which words ‘should’ have a glottal stop, and which words ‘should’ have ‘rr’ versus single ‘r’. This is a strong practical argument for not including them in an official orthography of Tetun. It does not aid reading, and will become a source of spelling errors for all students.

If these distinctions are retained for historical or nationalistic reasons, then efforts will need to be made to ensure students and all writers of Tetun memorise which words have ‘rr’ and which have glottal stops.