

# Improving Tetun translations

Catharina Williams-van Klinken

Dili Institute of Technology

June 2004

## Introduction

Translation into Tetun from English, Portuguese or Indonesian is notoriously difficult, and the standard of many current translations is low. The following factors contribute to this lack of quality:

1. The source texts are often very difficult to translate into Tetun. Some of the reasons for this difficulty are noted below.
2. Most Timorese are not used to writing in Tetun, have not been educated in it, and have little experience in reading it.
3. Translators are often insufficiently fluent in the source language, so that translations sometimes reflect misunderstandings of the source text.
4. Most translators have had no training in translation, let alone translation into Tetun. They generally have little awareness of why certain constructions are difficult to translate, and how they can seek ways around the difficulties.

This paper briefly presents a range of suggestions as to how translations could be improved, both in the short term and in the longer term. These are aimed primarily at organisations which employ translators, and are divided into three categories:

1. Suggestions on how to write materials that can more easily – and hence more intelligibly – be translated into Tetun. Although the examples given are in English, the same principles apply to Portuguese and Indonesian.
2. Suggestions which translators and their supervisors can implement immediately.
3. Longer-term suggestions for training translators and developing Tetun.

## Simplification of source documents

Tetun does not at this stage have a bureaucratic, technical or academic style of writing. It also lacks some of the grammatical features which are popular in these impersonal styles of writing in English, Portuguese and Indonesian, namely passives and widespread nominalisation. In short, it is immeasurably easier to translate more oral styles of writing into intelligible Tetun than it is to translate such impersonal written styles. It would therefore greatly facilitate good translation if the writers of texts to be translated, and people speaking through interpreters, would do the following:

1. Avoid using agent-less passives. That is, avoid constructions like “this building was destroyed in 1999”, which do not specify *who* destroyed the building. Tetun does not have true passives. So, when faced with such constructions, a Tetun translator has the following options:
  - Ask the author “Who did this?” Most translators are embarrassed to do this, the writers are in any case often not available, and many translations are too rushed to allow time for such consultation.
  - Take a guess as to who did it.

- Use generic *ema* ‘people, someone’ as the subject. This can however look evasive when the actors are in fact known. *Ema* also implies ‘someone else’, so would be inappropriate if passives are used – as is common in scientific writing – to avoid saying ‘I did it’ (e.g. “This experiment was conducted in Sydney”, meaning “I conducted this experiment in Sydney”).
  - Leave out the subject of the sentence. This is grammatically possible, but in many contexts would be unnatural.
2. Aim to use verbs instead of nouns when referring to processes. For instance, instead of writing “the destruction of the city was terrible”, write “the militia (or earthquake or fire or whatever) destroyed the city terribly”. If you do use nouns to refer to processes, translators have three options:
    - Use a native Tetun abstract noun, such as *hanoin* ‘opinion; think’. This is however rarely an option as there are very few such nouns.
    - Borrow a Portuguese abstract noun, such as *destruisaun* ‘destruction’. Such borrowings tend to be poorly understood except by people who speak Portuguese. For instance, while even children know *estraga* ‘destroy’, very few people know the noun *destruisaun*.
    - Translate the noun with a clause. This greatly increases the clarity of the translation, but means that the translator again has to know “Who did this?” (so that the verb will have a subject), and may also have to break the source sentence into two Tetun sentences.
  3. Avoid long sequences of nouns and adjectives, since Tetun can only comfortably handle two (or at a stretch, three). For instance, the following are impossible to translate intelligibly into Tetun within the time frame normally given to translators: “the back page of the last edition of the magazine”, “the first presidential election for an independent East Timor”, and “a pretty three-year old Chinese girl”.
  4. Avoid idioms, unless your translator is sufficiently fluent in the source language to understand them reliably. Most Timorese translators have a limited knowledge of English idioms, and consequently tend to translate them literally. Idioms in this context are expressions consisting of more than one word, which together have one meaning. Examples include ‘break the ice’, ‘get back on track’ and ‘hold up (the traffic...)’.
  5. Try to write about events in the order in which they happen. In Tetun it is more common to say “When school is finished, I play.” than “I play after school”. That is, you mention school first because it happens first.

### **Short-term suggestions for translators**

If translators have not yet received any translation training, it could be helpful for them and their supervisors to concentrate on a few basic steps.

1. Understand the text: Encourage translators to ask the writers (or other knowledgeable people) when they cannot understand the source text. People cannot translate what they do not understand.
2. Choose the key words carefully: Encourage translators to talk with the writers (or other knowledgeable people) when are having difficulty translating key words. For instance, if a text is about project planning, it may be necessary to discuss beforehand which terms will be used for concepts such as ‘goal’, ‘objective’ and ‘project’.
3. Test translations: Periodically test some of the translations done by each translator, and test important translations in their entirety. That is, give the translation to a good Tetun speaker who was not

involved in doing the translation, and ask him or her some comprehension questions, in either Tetun or some other language. Ideally, this speaker should be an articulate person belonging to the target audience for this publication. For instance, if the translation is aimed at children, test it with children, and if it is aimed at farmers with little formal education, try to test it with such a person. The translator should be present for the testing, even if the questions are asked by someone else. If translators can accept criticism, such checking could prove to be an excellent teacher.

### **Long-term needs**

There are at least three avenues which could greatly improve the quality of Tetun translations in the longer term.

1. Develop written Tetun. It is important that a wide range of original texts be written in Tetun. In this way written genres of Tetun could develop, away from the pressures of translation. Other needs include the development and dissemination of technical terms for many subject areas, and of a standard orthography.
2. Provide good training in translation. Translation principles and most skills taught are applicable to any language. In addition, there should be some training which focuses on the particular problems encountered in translating into Tetun. It would also be useful to have a formal system of accreditation. Various steps are currently being taken to make such training and accreditation available in East Timor.
3. Give translators further training in the source language (English, Portuguese or Indonesian). Such training could particularly focus on the genres and subject areas within which the translators are working.