

A DESCRIPTIVE COMPARISON OF LANGUAGE POLICIES USING COBARRUBIAS' LANGUAGE IDEOLOGIES: THE CASE OF SINGAPORE AND TIMOR-LESTE

Alican M. Pandapatan

Mindanao State University-Main Campus, Marawi City, Philippines
alican.pandapatan@msumain.edu.ph

Zinab B. Barataman

Mindanao State University-Main Campus, Marawi City, Philippines
zinab.barataman@msumain.edu.ph

Noronsalam D. Bandrang

Mindanao State University-Main Campus, Marawi City, Philippines
Noronsalam.bandrang@msumain.edu.ph

Abstract

Language policy is mediated by the socio-politico-historical background of the society. It directs people to integrate and unify themselves to the vision of the governments towards progress, which includes education per se. This study compared Singapore and Timor-Leste, with quite similar backgrounds yet different implementation of policies as a result of each nation's linguistic ideologies. A qualitative comparative design was employed in this study, using Cobarrubias' Language Ideologies as a framework for comparison. Secondary materials are resourced as data. It is revealed the ideological concepts in the studied nations. In linguistic assimilation, Singapore did not employ the assimilation except for certain provisions in the government, and Timor-Leste had to assimilate minor languages due to the stronghold of dominant languages. For vernacularization, Singapore is accommodative to all linguistic groups, and Timor-Leste is fragmented to its bilingual approach. For linguistic pluralism, Singapore justifies an equitable response to the multilingual condition because of fewer languages, and all of these are dominant languages. Meanwhile, Timor-Leste is balancing the languages by strengthening the official languages and preserving the minor languages. In internationalization, both countries recognize the importance of foreign language in their constitution to advance internationalization and incorporate development through glocalization. It

appears that Singapore has more of an advantage in comparison, probably due to discovering a suitable language policy that addresses the needs of the nation. On the other hand, Timor-Leste as a young nation is critically strategizing the best policy it could have. Perhaps, one nation can learn from another's struggles as a benchmark. Certainly, no framework could be utilized in making perfect language policy because it is formed based on the nation's social, political, and historical background.

Keywords: bilingual education, glocalization, language policy, language ideology, vernacular

Introduction

Language policy is a promulgation through a language planning directed by the government. This is a set of ideas, laws, rules, regulations, and practices that aim to change the language system in the society (Johnson, 2013). Basically, the government as an authority sets instructions for the community in which language is defined, meaningful and aligned to the goal of the nation. A top-down approach is commonly applied when the government wants to influence the community with their direct mandate. It has been a practice by most of the government, particularly when achieving independence, to write policies as implied in the constitution to synchronize as a form of unification and national allegiance. However, this is not always the case of other governments recognizing the participation of the people in language planning. This is a bottom-up approach.

The Southeast Asian nations are 11 nations that have developed their language policy based on their identity, culture, experience, nation-building, economic growth, and political direction. Each nation defines its language policies historically. Meanwhile, while the 11 nations are comparable in their language policy and planning, this paper resorts to selecting Singapore and Timor-Leste for two main reasons. First, both countries are small in terms of their land mass. Second, they are peripheries of another SEA nation before they fully gain their independence. This determines how Singapore and Timor-Leste developed into states that address the social, political, and educational demands of the people. It probably starts with the rags status trying to create means to meet ends for the country. The battlecry for independence led the nations to further explore their capacity as nations while giving social justice to its people who are thirsty for cultural and linguistic pride. This boils down to the need of self-expression through governments that present themselves and their ideals.

The present status of the studied nations is perhaps having a major disparity when it comes to development and language competence. However, the objective of this study is to seek the implication of language policy in nation building such as unification and educational progress and how its people benefit from these policies. Probably, this can lead to a development of language policy amendments based on the advantage and strategies of Singapore to serve as a benchmark for Timor-Leste. Nonetheless, it does not confine nor question the existing policies of Timor-Leste in favor of Singapore's standing. To give merits to both nations, this paper discusses the historical background that allows understanding of the current situations. It helps in comprehending the longitudinal effect of experimentation or trials of language policies in order to achieve a harmonious and unifying system.

Related Literature and Studies

History

Singapore was a former part of the federation of Malaya (the old name for Malaysia). Since it was a member of the federation, its self-government recognized the dominant ethnic population which constitutes English, Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil as official languages. In 1965, they achieved independence and set English as the main working language while retaining Malay as the national language. Between 1966-1970s, the bilingual education policy was introduced that states all students must learn English plus their first language. In 1987, English was the main language of instruction and other languages were made as course subjects. During 1990 to 2000, a call for balanced bilingualism was emphasized to improve proficiency and competence. From 2010 up to date, bilingualism has continued while aiming for the maintenance of linguistic heritage. On the other hand, Timor-Leste is more recent in receiving their independence from Indonesia. Way back to the 16th century to 1975, they had been a Portuguese Colony which used Portuguese as official language while Tetum developed as lingua franca. Portuguese was banned when Indonesia Occupation took place introducing Bahasa Indonesia as an official and instructional language. Tetum continued as a form of lingua franca. During the Independence in 2002, the national leaders chose Portuguese and Tetum as their official languages. While the constitution declares the mentioned official languages, it also recognizes the working languages such as Indonesian and English languages. It also mentioned the other local languages as cultural heritage. Currently, there are standardization efforts of Tetum Language and revitalizing the proficiency in Portuguese.

Language Planning and Policy (LPP)

Singapore strategically moves in terms of language policy by promoting English as fundamental in economic development and global integration (Lee, 2024). It was noticed that a decline in mother tongue usage among younger Singaporeans threatens cultural identities. Thereby, English language became the dominant language. The authority tries to discourage the use of Singlish as a variety of English instead pushes the British Standard. It is an indirect annihilation of the proliferation of the local variety. In consequence, there is a challenge to the multilingual practice among speakers (Khalil & Çavuşoğlu, 2025). Furthermore, marginalization of certain dialects and languages took place due to the long term effect of earlier suppression policies. In contrast, the recent policy shifts of the government show increased acceptance of dialects and multi-languages (Lee, 2024). Learning from the past policies, the nation becomes multilingual-friendly among its people through combining the status, prestige, and educational planning to create a multilingual environment. Observations from experts state that weakening of native dialects and cultural memory among younger Singaporeans are due to the intergenerational shift and hierarchical status. Hence, social power dynamics influence the language policy implementation (Zheng & Luo, 2025). The bilingual policy particularly the English + 1 model reflects hybridity which increases the proficiency in English and maintaining the identity through mother tongue (Sundararaj, 2025; Koh & O'Brien, 2021). It clearly benefits one major language while others serve as support. It effectively responds to the needs of promoting a higher proficiency and saving cultural identity from early years to adulthood (Shu, 2025).

Timor-Leste developed the Mother Tongue-based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) to emphasize the importance of the first language. The support on linguistic diversity and multilingual proficiency was aimed (Ministry of Education, 2010; Wu & Zhang, 2023). In fact, multilingual practice is mobilized flexibly to support adult education (Cabral & Martin-Jones, 2021). Discrepancies on the maintenance of multilingual usage encounter conflicts particularly the attitudes towards the policy. Incremental reforms to align the language policies in national identity are slow across the various government phases. Portuguese seemed favored over Tetum (Cabral, 2021) leading to intergenerational language to be weakened and tensed. In reality, only 6.5% of the population spoke Portuguese as reported in 2019 stating a poor development (Marsal & Sukardi, 2021). The dominance of colonial occupations' influence continuously manifests which causes differing attitudes on language use and national identity (Wu & Zhang, 2023). Learning Portuguese in respect to the older generation and reinforced at school through laws marginalizes the majority of the people who speak Tetum. In

communication, it becomes a barrier due to the lack of proficiencies of many officials which causes resistance and inefficiency (Macpherson, 2011). This is in contrast to constitutional provisions (article 13) and the international human rights on linguistic accessibility (Marsal & Sukardi, 2021). Consequently, Tetum received positive perceptions among speakers and is viewed as useful for national development (Boon et al., 2021).

Language Learning

In Singapore, the proficiency in English is high, complementing the rise of Mandarin at the expense of various Chinese dialects. Singaporeans are multilinguals who combine the official languages and mother tongue. It was noticed that Malay speakers still maintain high proficiency in their mother tongue while others vary (Siemund & Li, 2020). It was also reported that the proficiency in mother tongue remains limited (Forlot, 2025). This is probably due to the attitudes towards learning the language. For instance, Chinese speakers developed mechanisms at home by speaking English which increased their proficiency (Tan, 2005). This imbalanced treatment of language at home allows reduction of mastery in one language like the mother tongue not being practiced. As home becomes relevant in the learning, the success of language learning is attained (Shu, 2025). As English becomes a mother tongue in place of the traditional mother tongues among younger generations, it creates disparities (Ao, 2024).

Meanwhile, the education in Timor-Leste is underway on its aim to elevate the competence and learning of the Timorese. The language learning is compliant more with national policies. It is not fully realized in application or practice. Teachers, on one hand, try to fit the language policy in the classroom. Proficiency is seen as a big problem among students. It is found out that there is a shortage of qualified teachers, lack of facilities, less funding, and no involvement of the language experts in the policy development (Burns, 2017). Moreover, the traditional way of teaching such as lecture-based is the most practiced which adheres to cognitive development and less focus on the performance or skill-based assessment. Moreover, young Timorese have decreased proficiency (Tans et al, 2023). Albeit the proficiency of the locals to use Tetum, its usage in higher education confuses lecturers with the role of the said language (Cabral & Martin-Jones, 2021). When the policy is supplied with lack of context, the actual practitioners would have challenges in implementing it. With the linguistic repertoire available and common to the locals, Timorese educators tend to use Tetum as a medium of instruction to support learning. Meanwhile, English and Indonesian are known but it is much less dominant and English being limited (Boon et al., 2021).

The reform in the language planning and policies as seen in the history of both nations convey more critical decisions that leaders have made. It accommodates the demands of society but most particularly the economic demand for economic opportunities and development which is directly evident in the educational system language policies.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative comparative design to comprehensively summarize the language policies in Singapore and Timor-Leste. The policies reflect the status of the country within the local context and internationally. The data is gathered using the various resources in the internet repository. To examine the language use through the government's prescription and implementation, material resources discussing the language planning, language policies, language education, and language learning are the main keywords in filtering the data materials. Ten articles or materials are collected in each country. In analyzing and comparing the two involved countries, the language ideologies of Cobarrubias (1983) is used. In his framework, four categories included to understand the decisions in the language planning. These are linguistic assimilation, vernacularization, linguistic pluralism, and internationalization. This addresses the various timelines how each nation implemented their language policies and its effect on society. The historical development of the policies being introduced in a specific period allows the readers to explore the authority's decisions. Moreover, the current status of the country is manifested through the implementation of such policies like in education.

Findings and Discussions

This section presents the comparison of Singapore and Timor-Leste in its language policies.

Linguistic Assimilation

This linguistic ideology posits the belief of the dominant language as superior in society. It has earned prestige as a working language because everyone can speak and use it in various events. Regardless of people's language background, they see its function in their daily lives (Zeng & Li, 2023). In this case, the identified official languages earn its status through a constitutional provision and other enactments of laws commonly determining the linguistic assimilation.

Singapore's language policy from the very beginning of its establishment as part of the Malaya Federation until its independence, there are no specific law provisions enacting one language to unify the people. What the self-state did was to recognize all

the dominating languages as officials while some as working language in the community. Institutionalizing particular languages from the emerged ethnic groups was an option to manage the existing linguistic diversity (Ao, 2024; Siemund & Li 2020). The promulgation of bilingualism is an attempt to establish a maintenance of self-identity through learning and practicing the mother tongue. However, discrepancies on abolishing Chinese dialects into a standard Mandarin could be a form of assimilation. There could be a selective assimilation into one particular language among specific speakers e.g. Chinese. This resorts to continuous change of policies on Chinese language (Tan, 2005). Another similar case is the discouragement of the Singlish (Singaporean English) to be replaced with the British standard. Other than those, declared official languages and mother tongues are not subject to the mutilation. In the present condition, as Singapore plays economic advancement globally, the instruction of focusing English as the language of trade and global economy requires people to achieve proficiency levels. Fueled by this motivation, the nation aims to global integration (Lee, 2024).

In the Timor-Leste historical account on language policy, the declaration of Portuguese and Tetum as official languages are due to the political influence of the colonial period. This has been part of the so-called language consideration after its independence from Indonesian Occupation in 1999. As affirmly stipulated in the country's historic constitution, Portuguese and Tetum are provided (2002 Constitution). This clear core law as basis for language policy is key foundation to nation-building and identity (Leach, 2017). It shapes the identity in the post-colonial language discourse (Taylor-Leech, 2008). Their rumination of the historical roots paved the way for reenactment of Portuguese in the constitution despite the fact that most speakers do not have high proficiency in Portuguese and some do not even speak it. The reinforcement of Portuguese is higher compared to Tetum which also serves as an official language. However, although strongly declared, the implentation faced challenges (Gusmao & Caet, n.d.). English and Indonesian languages are not official languages, they serve as working languages. The constitutional declaration of these languages are given prestige and the more or less 30 local languages in Timor-Leste are being assimilated to these dominant languages. In the modern educational reform, the MTB-MLE that adheres to the protection of the mother tongues in the community does not cover all the language since there is a problem with the standardization, although the goal is to support linguistic diversity as much as the policy is concerned (Ministry of Education, 2010; Wu & Zhang, 2023). Primarily, the recognition of indigenous languages is reflected in the constitution as cultural heritage, there is no further description into which these languages play at the national level. In fact, the Tetum is undergoing the process of standardization. A

continuous development for a local language serving as official language (Williams-van Klinken, 2019). This could mean a long process for the other local languages to be used in education.

In general comparison, Singapore does not employ a linguistic assimilation except for certain conditions mentioned. Meanwhile, Timor-Leste is assimilating minor languages that are not recognized as dominant languages.

Vernacularization

Vernacularization emphasizes the essence of indigenous languages in the society. Its process is to select, restore, and use the indigenous language by stipulating its status in the laws as official language then standardizing it. Mandating the use of an official indigenous language into the educational system is a more impeccable form of vernacularization (Zeng & Li, 2023).

The bilingual education policy of Singapore that states English plus a mother tongue is proof of vernacularization. Although their government recognized the four major languages, the bilingual education policy fortifies the heritage language of the Singaporeans who belong to a particular ethnic group. Its implementation as part of the taught subjects at schools are meaningful in the development of the language to attain standardization. This also adheres to the condition that when it is adopted widely in education, the vernacularization is met. This is the reflection from the English plus 1 model that binds internal and external balance (Sundararaj, 2025; Koh & O'Brien, 2021). The use of Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil as first languages of the existing races in the country is a corroboration of the essence of vernacular languages into the national government. However, the decline of the usage of mother tongue among young generations is a language dynamics due to intergenerational shift and hierarchical status (Zheng & Luo, 2025). Provided by this case, there might be a probability of stronghold on vernacularization due to this linguistic phenomenon.

The promotion of Tetum representing the other local or indigenous languages at the beginning of its independence is a realization of the cultural and national identity of the people though Tetum is just one of the indigenous languages. Speakers have a positive attitude towards Tetum; this is probably due to its relationship to the other indigenous languages existing in the country. Due to this promotion, it aims to improve the learning outcomes through mother tongue as well as preserve local languages per se (Ministry of Education, 2010). It is also easier for other language speakers in the community to use the language in communication. Most importantly, the use of Tetum in the educational space is a confirmatory index for the vernacularization. It is now the

standardization of Tetum that would complete the realization of vernacularization in the country. Aside from these, the pronouncement of the local languages as a nation's cultural heritage is work in progress for more vernacularization.

Comparing the status given by Singapore and Timor-Leste to its indigenous languages is affirmations of patronizing the existence of ethnic groups in the society. The former is more accommodative to all existing linguistic groups due to the bilingual education policy. The latter is fragmentary to its bilingual approach. It does not allow the proliferation of various extant languages in the communities. Hence, the selection, restoration and usage of local languages such as Mandarin, Malay and Tamil for Singapore and Tetum for Timor-Leste is considered vernacularization.

Linguistic Pluralism

The existence of many languages in society is recognized by the government. Preservation of the heritage language and its advancement is promoted in the society through the support of the authority particularly on laws and localizing mandates in the diverse communities. The recognition is not only a symbol but it has roles in governmental affairs where multilingual conditions are needed. Maintaining and developing them should be on an equitable basis (Zeng & Li, 2023).

The presence of multilingualism in Singapore despite the specificity of bilingual education policy allows the various ethnic groups to practice their own mother tongue without subjugation due to economic and political standing internationally. The advantage of Singapore in terms of acknowledging its pluralistic condition is they easily gave the recognition without a massive resistance among the community. Probably, this is due to the smaller number of languages therein. All races are dominant and they have acquired the rights and recognition from the government. They saw also the advantage of putting status to this languages which show the governmental acceptance (Lee, 2024). With this, their co-existence reveals that pluralism in advanced society is not a problem. In fact, some Singaporeans are proficient in their first language (Siemund & Li, 2020), in contrast as found by Forlot (2025), it was found that some speakers are not. Their language planning suits to the social demands. Moreover, the government integrated this to the educational system to be developed while transmitting the knowledge to the next generation in a formal context.

The Timor-Leste selected few stipulated in the constitution. Their selective decision is not to marginalize other indigenous languages. Perhaps, they can only prioritize the dominant languages for their government to run on track. The declaration of Portuguese, Tetum, English, and Indonesians is already adopted to a pluralistic

perspective. However, the more or less 30 indigenous languages have to be studied although a MTB-MLE is promoted. In terms of the economic capacity, this could require more budget from the government since it is an investment at risk. Implementing so many language policies would not guarantee a major return of investment to the government especially if it is not needed in various government affairs such as trade, education, tourism, etc. Their government would not take on this option because it is probably a-not-priority in the list of national concerns and the focus is on the official languages to be strengthened and revitalized to meet its supposed function in the society and national development. It is a work in progress for Timor-Leste to stabilize the functions of the official and working languages for their gain. One of the main reasons as consequence of previous attempts is the decline of proficiency among Timorese young learners (Tans et al, 2023).

In comparison, Singapore exudes equitable response to the pluralistic condition of its people. Their advantage is fewer languages do exist and all are dominant. On the other hand, Timor-Leste is strengthening their official languages while preserving other languages. Language planning for the pluralistic condition of Timor-Leste would be needing more time because language development is a longitudinal process with trial and errors. Perhaps, with the latest involvement of Timor-Leste in ASEAN its commitment and goal to elevate the status of the existing languages would come in due time.

Internationalization

Due to globalization, countries adopt a foreign or non-native language which serves as dominant in various domains in society such as the means of communication for people. The status can be either an official language or a medium of instruction. In the experience of the former colonies of big giants, retaining the language of the colonizer and use it in various domains is common in order to promote development and advancement (Zeng & Li, 2023).

Singlish is the variety of English spoken in Singapore. Its characteristics, especially the phonological features, lie in the native tongue of the speakers. Adding the English as part of the bilingual policy in education and its stipulation in the constitution signify the international connection. It simply means the global integration is through promoting English. More than its use in education, it is respectfully the universal language that is used in major domains. The economic status at the same time the political influence of Singapore to the world is incomparable nowadays. Its leaders through English are their medium to the top of global engagements. As a result, the rise of using English at home becomes relevant among Singaporean families (Tan, 2005). Younger generations learn

English as their first language (Ao, 2024) because of the family preference for their children. Aside from English, the adoption of Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil as mother tongues and subjects at school offer another flavor for the advancement of Singapore because these languages are also dominant globally. Without a doubt, Singapore takes all the best in the world today. Their proficiency is also monitored well by the authority.

The colonial memory of Portugal to Timor-Leste through the language and faith impacted the government's choice to revive Portuguese as one of the official languages. It is believed that the Portuguese would bring advantage to international diplomacy particularly the support of Portugal to this colony. It is a form of influence in the language planning in the Global South persisted by covert power (Cabral & Martin-Jones, 2021). While there is support, the global impact of Portuguese might not be more advantageous compared to other languages. Another language that operates in the government and education is English and Indonesian. With the same goal, English has become more common in SouthEast Asian nations and the language that is understood by most of the investors and foreign people. The option to use the language in working domains offer opportunities for them to get involved and connected to the world. On the other hand, Indonesian is a language that is mutually intelligible to Melayu and is now a global language. The advantage for Timor-Leste is its possibility of various international engagement particularly the rise of ASEAN in socio-economic, educational, and political influence.

In comparison, both countries adopt foreign language or non-native language in their constitution for internationalization. This language policy agenda contribute to the development through glocalization or the convergence of local culture and global culture (e.g. Singlish, Philippine English).

Cobbarubia's (1983) language ideologies identifies the structure and construction of the LPP of Singapore and Timor-Leste on how they address demands in the local and global society. The directions of each nation are central to what is in the constitutional provisions. The LPP is not a subject for perfecting language development because it would be impossible to accommodate the diversity of speech communities. It can affect either few or several ethnolinguistic groups or social groups. For one, the LPP might be authoritative because of its nature to instruct certain conditions that everyone must follow. It is a rule of law.

Lesson from Singapore for Timor-Leste: A benchmark

Singapore's progressive thought in their language planning appears effective in their various domains such as in education, politics, economy, etc. This advantage is a

lesson that any country from SouthEast Asia could follow. However, it does not entail the directions Singapore took may apply to the context of other countries. Their experience is rooted from their rich historical background. Timor-Leste as a young nation in SouthEast Asia is exploring many things in their language planning and policy. While it is attributable to the crafting of policies, the results from the foreign researchers, the involvement of the locals to the decision-making process forging a more dynamic approach. The MTB-MLE is a good move, however, Timor-Leste may adopt the bilingual education policy of Singapore to start with. It champions actions, first, it can choose a preferred international language that is deemed necessary in their growth as a nation; second, it gives the speech community to practice their own mother tongue. Moreover, this adoption does not directly affect the change of constitution nor conflict with the constitutional provisions.

Conclusion

Language planning and policy (LPP) in the context of Singapore and Timor-Leste expose two different pathways of language development. The long term policies have impacted the nation's development and modernization. The capital of a country lies also in the strengthened and implemented language policies. Language, in more deeper discourse, is the means of not only communication but social integration and a modern living tradition. It connects people. The Singapore stronghold on the national goal and constitutional rights of the people emerged transformative and impactful to the people wherein they practice their own identity as members of a race and share commitments to the global requirement. Their LPP is futuristic which projected the benefits it brings to the nation as people see it now. Timor-Leste's ideal maintenance of official languages bound from its historical background is simply patronizing the influence it has brought to them by their former colonizer at the same time they value their own language. Their need to cope with the global scene as part of ASEAN motivates them to include working languages that would be beneficial in their favor. The similarities between Singapore and Timor-Leste in their LPP are the acknowledgement of the national identity through language, the bilingual constitutional provision (one native language and one non-native language as official languages), recognition of the language of their former state affiliation (Malaysia for Singapore, Indonesia for Timor-Leste), multilingualism in nature, and education focus. Therefore, LPP plays significant changes in nation building.

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