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Tetum Acronyms Used on WhatsApp Messages in Timor Leste Communication Context

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menyelidiki penggunaan akronim Tetum dalam pesan WhatsApp di kalangan orang Timor di Timor-Leste. Topik ini dipilih karena meningkatnya prevalensi akronim Tetum di antara penutur Tetum di Dili. Metode penelitian deskriptif kualitatif digunakan, didukung oleh teknik dokumentasi untuk mengumpulkan data. Setelah data dikumpulkan, data dianalisis secara kualitatif. Temuan menunjukkan adanya 16 kategori leksikal yang berbeda dalam akronim Tetum. Data tersebut meliputi 4 kata keterangan, 1 kata kerja, 2 kata sifat, 5 kata benda, 2 kata ganti, dan 2 fungsi tata bahasa.

Kata Kunci: tetum, akronim, pesan WhatsApp

Abstract

This research aims to investigate the use of Tetum acronyms in WhatsApp messages among the Timorese in Timor-Leste. The topic was chosen due to the increasing prevalence of Tetum acronyms among Tetum speakers in Dili. A qualitative descriptive research method was employed, supported by a documentation technique to collect the data. Once the data were collected, they were analyzed qualitatively. The findings revealed 16 distinct lexical categories in Tetum acronyms. The data included 4 adverbs, 1 verb, 2 adjectives, 5 nouns, 2 pronouns, and 2 grammatical functions

Keywords: tetum, acronyms, WhatsApp messages

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Introduction

Timor-Leste, also known as East Timor, is a Southeast Asian country located to the east of Indonesia and north of Australia. The country recognizes two official languages: Portuguese and Tetum. Although Portuguese is the state's official language, Tetum functions as a *lingua franca* that unites various indigenous languages—among the 32 languages spoken in Timor-Leste. Historically, Tetum served as a *lingua franca* in the eastern part of Timor even prior to Portuguese colonization in the sixteenth century (Albuquerque, 2013). The use of multiple languages in everyday life reflects a complex sociolinguistic landscape in which language not only marks Timorese identity but also facilitates communication. Today, Tetum remains the principal language in the capital, Dili, and has been significantly influenced by Portuguese, reflecting its role as a bridge between local languages and the colonial language (Hajek, 2007). The constitutional recognition of Tetum alongside Portuguese underscores its importance for national identity and governance (Taylor-Leech, 2009).

In contemporary digital communication, particularly on platforms such as WhatsApp, the use of acronyms has become increasingly widespread as a means to accelerate message exchange. (Hartmann & Stork, 1972) defines an acronym as “a word formed from the initial letters of the words in a phrase,” and acronyms are frequently employed to economize time in both written and spoken communication. Similarly, Koelsch (2023) defines an acronym as being formed from the initial letters of words. This trend is evident in online conversations, where acronyms enable users to send messages rapidly. In Timor-Leste, Tetum acronyms such as “bono” (from “Boanuite,” meaning “good evening”) and “bota” (from “Boatarde,” meaning “good afternoon”) have become common in informal communication. Acronyms not only save time but also conserve effort. Moreover, acronyms can function as terms that encapsulate particular concepts or entities and thereby facilitate communication (Menaha & Jayanthi, 2019). Nevertheless, their use may give rise to misunderstandings, especially when recipients are unfamiliar with certain terms. Miscommunication can occur in the absence of shared understanding between sender and receiver, underscoring the potential drawbacks of excessive reliance on acronyms in digital communication. In technical writing, acronyms often replace descriptive terms, creating ambiguity and confusion, particularly when similar acronyms denote different meanings (Ammons, 1998).

Several theoretical studies and perspectives on forms of word-shortening are pertinent to understanding this phenomenon. Cannon (1989) states that “an acronym is a word formed from the first letters of the words in a compound term.” Kridalaksana (2008) asserts that “an abbreviation is a process of removing one or some parts of a lexeme or combination of lexemes so that a new word is formed.” According to Katamba (2002), “sometimes shortened forms are created using the initial letters of words which do not give permissible syllables. They fail the phonological test. In such cases, each letter is sounded separately. We call such forms abbreviations rather than acronyms. The term acronym is restricted to forms that are

pronounceable as normal words.” The term “acronym” is therefore limited to forms that can be pronounced as ordinary words, whereas “abbreviation” denotes shortened forms of a word or phrase that do not necessarily produce pronounceable words (Mack, 2012).

Word shortening reaches its logical conclusion in acronyms. Words composing a complex expression that refers to the name of an organization, company, or scientific concept may be reduced to their initial letters alone, which together represent sounds that form acceptable syllables and thus can be pronounced as words. Words formed in this way are called acronyms (Katamba, 2002). Furthermore, Harley (2006) observes that “the whole family of inventions is called initialism, and it has two main subgroups: acronyms, which are a collection of initials that are pronounced as a single phonological word according to the spelling conventions of English, and abbreviations, where the letters are read out one at a time.” Plag (2003) also explains that the orthography of acronyms may vary with respect to the use of capital letters. Capitals are usually employed, which can be interpreted as a formal device that clearly links the acronym to its base expression. This research will show that there is a unique communication in Timor-Leste communication context because of using Tetum in WhatsApp messages.

Methodology

There are three principles employed in this study: data source, data collection method, and data analysis method. The data source for this research was obtained from a WhatsApp group using the documentation technique. The researcher collected data by documenting conversations and interactions within the WhatsApp group, which provided a rich qualitative data source for analysis (Fatyimah & Nugrahani, 2023). This procedure meant that the researcher first read Tetum-language texts that contained acronyms. Second, the researcher separated the Tetum acronyms according to lexical-category groups, determining whether they belonged to adjectives, adverbs, conjunctions, nouns, or verbs. The subsequent steps constituted the techniques used to analyze the data. First, the researcher constructed tables to separate the acronyms and their source words. Second, the researcher grouped the acronyms according to their lexical categories. Third, the data were analyzed qualitatively. This method involves the identification, analysis, and reporting of patterns (themes) in qualitative data (*Qualitative Research Methods*, 1 C.E.). Leech & Onwuegbuzie (2011) emphasize that this technique systematically categorizes verbal or behavioral data to identify the presence of particular words, themes, or concepts.

Results

In this study, the researcher identified 16 different data points, each representing various grammatical categories. These data were drawn from a range of sentence types within texts, demonstrating different grammatical positions and functions, such as subject, object, adverb, and complement. The sentences were analyzed to show how these categories appear in context, revealing the flexibility of language use in informal communication.

The following analysis examines acronyms commonly used in WhatsApp texts in Dili. It explores how these acronyms function in everyday digital communication, emphasizing their role in sentence construction and how they facilitate faster and more efficient interaction.

1. Ita ba deit/ dt.

We Pred just

'we just go'.

The word 'dt' on the sentence (1) above comes from its original word 'deit', 'just' in Tetum language that consists of four phonemes. Morphologically, two vowels in the middle like 'e' and 'i' are deleted, then the initial phoneme 'd' and the final phoneme 't' are combined to be the Tetum acronym. Grammatically in this case functions as an ADV.

2. Nia hela neba/ nba.

S/he live there

'S/he lives there'

The word 'nba' on the sentence (2) originally comes from 'neba', 'there' which grammatically behaves as an ADV. In daily communication, the Tetum speakers shorten 'neba' to become 'nba' as an acronym in social medias communication.

3. Sira halai ba nbe?

They run PRED where

'Where do they run to'

The acronym 'nbe' on the data (3) comes from 'ne'be', 'where' which grammatically functions as an 'ADV'. In written communication on social medias, it is often shortened to economize the time.

4. O hatene w nia naran.

You Pred me-OBJ my name

'You know my name'

'W' on the data (4) above originally comes from free morpheme 'ha'u', 'I/me' is pronoun which can behave as both SUB or OBJ syntactically. In this case, 'ha'u' is replaced with 'w' which behaves as OBJ grammatically.

5. Ita hnsn

We same

'We are same'

The word 'hnsn', 'same' on the data (5) above is an ADJ. It is an abbreviation from phoneme 'hanesan' which behaves as PRED COMP/PC syntactically.

6. Hasna hatene bwt barak
PN Pred thing many.
'Hasna knows many things'

'bwt' on the data (6) is abbreviated as an acronym from 'phoneme 'buat', 'thing' lexically as a noun which functions as an OBJ syntactically.

7. Nia hamrok boni.
S/he thirsty good morning
'S/he is thirsty'

The word 'boni' on data (7) is the acronym which is shortened from two words namely 'bom and dia' 'good morning' which are borrowed from Portuguese and used in Tetum language for morning greeting. In modern Tetum today 'bom dia' can be shortened in written text or in spoken language.

8. Sira la simu ha'u nia bota.
They NEG accept POSS noon
'They don't accept my afternoon greeting'

'bota' on data (8) is an acronym of 'boa tarde' 'good afternoon' which also borrowed from Portuguese language used in Tetum language for greeting. Nowadays, 'boa tarde' can be shortened as 'bota' in daily communication in both written and spoken in modern situation.

9. Bono, Maria
Good evening PN
'Good evening, Maria'

'Bono' on the data (9) is an acronym which shortened from two words namely 'Boa nuite' 'good evening'. These words are borrowed from Portuguese language used in Tetum language. These words are used by Timorese for greeting in the evening, however for modern Tetum, the words 'Boa nuite' has been shortened as 'bono' in both written and spoken communication.

10. Maromak mk hatene.
God Relative know
God knows'

'Mk' on the data (10) is an acronym which shortened from word 'mak'. Grammatically, 'mak' is used as relative pronoun which functions as connector in this sentence.

11. Ita nain rua/ it2 hadomi malu.
We person both love each other
'We both love each other'

'It2' on the sentence (11) above is an acronym which shortened from 'pronoun', 'ita nain rua'. 'we both' In this case phoneme 'a' on pronoun and nain rua' were deleted and replaced with number '2' that becomes 'it2' 'both of us' behaves as reciprocal grammatically.

12. Nia dehan c1.
S/he say what
'What does s/he say'

'C1' on the sentence (12) above is an acronym which shortened from 'saida' 'what'. Grammatically, 'c1' functions as an interrogative pronoun which behaves as OBJ in this case.

13. O diak ka lae/DKL?
You good or not
'Are you good or not'

'DKL' on the sentence (13) is the acronym which shortened from phrase 'diak ka lae'. The initial phoneme of the 3 words were taken and united them as an acronym. Grammatically, 'DKL' is used for the greeting in asking condition of somebody or something.

14. lakohi/lkoi ha'u.
You NEG me
'You do not want me'

'The word 'lkoi' is an acronym which originally comes from 'lakohi' 'not want'. In this case, 'lkoi' functions as NEG grammatically.

15. Imi mai agora/agr
You/PL come now
'You/PL come now'

'The word 'agr' is an acronym which shortened from 'agora' 'now'. Lexically, 'agora' functions as an ADV in this case.

16. Nia tauk lakon/lkon O
S/he afraid lose You/sg/OBJ
'S/he is afraid to lose you'

The word 'lkon' is an acronym which shortened from 'lakon' 'lose'. In this case, 'lkon' functions as PRED grammatically.

Discussion

Based on the findings of this study — namely the identification of 16 Tetum acronyms distributed across several lexical classes (4 adverbs, 1 verb, 2 adjectives, 5 nouns, 2 pronouns,

2 grammatical-function items) — several patterns of formation, communicative function, and broader sociolinguistic implications can be articulated.

1. Morpho-phonological patterns and acronym typology

The data reveal several consistent acronym-formation mechanisms: (a) internal vowel deletion and consonant clustering (e.g., *deit* → *dt*; *hanesan* → *hnsn*), (b) initial-letter extraction from multiword expressions (e.g., *diak ka lae* → *DKL*), (c) bilingual adaptation through abbreviation of Portuguese forms (e.g., *bom dia* → *boni*, *boa tarde* → *bota*, *boa noite* → *bono*, *agora* → *agr*), and (d) alphanumeric innovation (e.g., *ita nain rua* → *it2*). Mechanisms (a) and (b) indicate an economy-driven strategy grounded in phonological/orthographic cues; (c) highlights contact influence from Portuguese; and (d) demonstrates digital creativity that leverages numerals as semantic or indexical markers. Collectively, these mechanisms suggest that Tetum acronyms in WhatsApp are not arbitrary truncations but follow recurrent phonological, orthographic, and pragmatic strategies.

2. Grammatical category consistency and syntactic integration

Despite being reduced in form, the acronyms generally preserve the lexical categories of their source items (e.g., adverbs: *nba*, *dt*; pronoun: *w* from *ha'u*; noun: *bwt* from *buat*). This indicates that the reduction process does not typically induce category shifts: acronyms integrate into sentence structures retaining the syntactic functions of their full forms. In other words, the observed acronimization is primarily a case of lexical reduction rather than category reassignment, which facilitates fluent interaction among speakers despite orthographic compression.

3. Pragmatic functions: efficiency versus group identity

The corpus shows that acronyms serve a dual pragmatic function: they speed up message production (efficiency) and index in-group membership (digital solidarity). Forms such as *bota*, *bono*, and *dt* are especially prevalent in informal WhatsApp exchanges, reflecting community conventions. A secondary pragmatic consequence is potential ambiguity when messages are read by non-members or by interlocutors from different generations, which raises the risk of miscommunication—an issue that is salient for intergenerational and formal communication contexts.

4. The role of language contact in lexical processes

A notable portion of the acronyms derives from Portuguese lexical items (e.g., *bom dia*, *boa tarde*, *agora*), evidencing that historical and social contact shapes the shortening repertoire. These adaptations exemplify a borrowing + reduction trajectory, whereby loanwords are abbreviated and mapped onto Tetum phonology/orthography. Forms such as *mk* (from *mak*) further illustrate local phonotactic accommodation, suggesting an equilibrium between exogenous input and endogenous structural constraints.

5. Implications for language change and language policy

If sustained, these shortening practices may become entrenched within Tetum's written repertoire, particularly in sociotechnical registers frequented by younger users. For language planners and curriculum developers, this trend presents a tension: on one hand it reflects linguistic creativity and register differentiation; on the other hand, unchecked proliferation of

truncated forms into formal domains could undermine orthographic standards. Therefore, systematic documentation and the development of pragmatic guidelines for digital communication are advisable to mitigate miscommunication without suppressing natural linguistic innovation.

Conclusion

Based on the research conducted in Dili, Timor-Leste, it can be concluded that advanced technology has influenced the way people use language for communication. This influence is evident not only in the spoken language used by the Timorese in daily conversations but also in written communication, particularly on social media. The study found 16 acronyms, which encompassed various lexical categories and grammatical functions. In light of these findings, the researcher recommends that future studies explore the Tetum language and other languages in greater depth. There are still many linguistic aspects, both at the micro and macro levels, that have not yet been thoroughly examined.

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