

Developing a Role for Kupang Malay: The Contemporary Politics of an Eastern Indonesian Creole

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This paper discusses contemporary sociolinguistic issues surrounding the use of Kupang Malay in West Timor, Indonesia. Kupang Malay is a Malay-based creole incorporating numerous lexical, semantic, and grammatical features from the surrounding vernacular languages found in Rote, Sabu and Timor. It is spoken as a first language in the provincial capital of Kupang and as a language of wider communication in the region.

Much of the contemporary debate over Kupang Malay is located in the realm of education. Like many other creoles in general, and like other Malay-based creoles in eastern Indonesia (Ambon Malay, Manado Malay, Larantuka Malay), Kupang Malay has frequently been stigmatized, in this case, as 'bad Indonesian'. Although it is by far the most prevalent language used in and around Kupang on a daily basis, it has been politically invisible and largely ignored by educators, because it appears incompatible with the state's taxonomy of languages, where only the categories of vernacular, national and international language are recognized. Encouraged by national moves toward decentralization and regional autonomy, particularly in the field of education, local educators are beginning to challenge the notion that there is no place for a regional language creole in the national education system.

The role of Kupang Malay in the expression of regional identity is also expanding. But at the same time, most people in Kupang maintain traditional ethnic identities (from Rote, Sabu, Timor, etc.) and turn to their inherited *adat* (custom) for socially significant events such as births, marriages, and funerals, and for the locally significant markers of ethnicity associated with woven cloth and dance. This leads to the contemporary debate in Kupang about the interaction between custom (*adat*) and this creole language: is it possible for a language to exist without a single corresponding *adat*?