Timorese talking back: The semiotic construction of chronotopes in the Timor Sea protests

Abstract

Taking the dispute between East Timor and Australia over their maritime boundary as an illustrative context, this paper discusses the role of semiotic resources in constructing chronotopes of protest. Reflecting first on language choice in urban protests during East Timor’s struggle for independence, the paper goes on to analyse the deployment of material and virtual resources in East Timorese-led demonstrations against the Australian government’s stance in the dispute. Using ‘entanglement’ as a structuring metaphor, and looking at language choice, social and grammatical indexicality, imagery, embodied cultural capital and the choreography of assembly, the paper explores how the protesters constructed a set of chronotopes that drew on the injuries of the colonial past, and re-emplaced and re-framed them in the post-colonial present. The paper looks at the linguistic landscape of protest as a semiotic aggregate in which the periphery claims a voice and ‘talks back’ to the centre.

Key words

linguistic landscape; Timor Sea; East Timor; Australia; maritime border; centre-periphery; chronotopes; entanglement

Resumo

Usando a disputa de fronteira marítima entre o Timor-Leste e a Austrália como contexto, este artigo discute o papel de recursos semióticos na construção de cronotopos de protesto. Refletindo primeiramente sobre a escolha linguística nos protestos urbanos durante a luta timorense pela independência, este artigo passa a analisar o uso de recursos materiais e virtuais
nas manifestações timorenses contra o posicionamento do governo australiano na disputa. Usando o termo “emaranhamento” como estrutura metafórica, e considerando a escolha linguística, a indexicalidade social e gramatical, as figuras de linguagem, o capital cultural corporificado e a coreografia da manifestação, o artigo explora como os protestantes construíram um conjunto de cronotopos que apropriou-se das feridas do passado colonial, e relocalizou-as e recolocou-as no presente pós-colonial. O artigo olha para a paisagem linguística do protesto como um agregado semiótico no qual a periferia reivindica sua voz e ‘desafia’ o centro.

**Palavras-chave**

paisagem linguística; Mar de Timor; Timor-Leste; Austrália; fronteira marítima; centro-periferia; cronotopos; emaranhamento

1. **Aims and organisation of the paper**

This paper aims to contribute to linguistic landscape studies which focus on the mobilisation of semiotic resources in sites of political action and struggle. Taking the dispute between East Timor and Australia over their maritime boundary as an illustrative context, it focuses on the role of semiotic resources in constructing chronotopes of protest. In this paper, I reflect on language choice and indexicality in urban protests during the country’s struggle for independence and I further explore their role in the deployment of semiotic resources by protesters in two recent mass demonstrations.

The paper is organised as follows. I first introduce the key actors in the sites of protest selected for analysis. I then introduce the theoretical frameworks that helped me to explore the discourses of the protests and their meanings ‘in place’ (Scollon & Scollon, 2003). I take a southern perspective, which implicitly calls for reflection on my own positionality, and I therefore provide some background on my engagement with East Timor and briefly mention...
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my personal views on the issues in this paper. Taking a *longue durée* view, the paper then outlines the history of the East Timorese encounters with three dominant foreign powers, and the intergenerational language divide which has resulted in the post-independence state. I use the notion of ‘entanglement’ as a rich descriptive metaphor for understanding these encounters. I then introduce the key actors and present my ‘ways of seeing’ the linguistic landscape of protest. I trace the narratives in past protests to show how they are chronotopically reproduced in present-day protests. In doing so, I look specifically at language choice and indexicality in slogans and placards in street demonstrations. The paper provides a synopsis of the maritime border dispute between East Timor and Australia and goes on to look at the semiotic resources deployed by East Timorese protesters in two mass demonstrations against the Australian Government’s stance. I focus in particular on the role of the so-called ‘jerasaun foun’ (young generation) in these protests. The paper then discusses the semiotic resources deployed in the demonstrations and uses the idea of a ‘choreography of assembly’ (Gerbaudo, 2012) to look closely at the protesters’ multimodal repertoire of communication and how they orchestrated material and virtual modes of action.

2. **Introducing the actors and the Southern perspectives in this paper**

The activist Movement Against the Occupation of the Timor Sea (*Movimentu Kontra Okupasaun Tasi Timor* or MKOTT) was formed in 2004 to advocate for East Timor’s interests in its long-running maritime-boundary dispute with Australia. MKOTT, a coalition of non-government organisations and activist groups, organised a series of protests in 2013 and 2016 against the Australian government. While the main site of protest was outside the Australian Embassy in the capital city of Dili, the campaign was conducted on several international fronts, both in the real world and online. Positioning East Timor as David and Australia as Goliath, MKOTT semiotically constructed a set of chronotopes which drew on the injuries of the colonial
past, and re-emplaced and re-framed them in the post-colonial present.

From a southern perspective, while the deployment of semiotic resources is ephemeral, as protests are temporary and transient events, it is also enduring, as the imprints and memories of colonialism linger long after it has been dismantled in emergent nations. The Timor Sea protests were suffused with references to East Timor’s colonial past and its fraught relationship with Australia, currently its largest current development partner (RDTL, 2015:7). In addition, the protestors themselves embodied the intergenerational divide that has resulted from the language regimes imposed during three successive periods of foreign administration (respectively by Portugal, Indonesia and the United Nations).

In this paper I look at protest as a semiotic aggregate (Scollon & Scollon, 2003) in which the periphery ‘talks back’ to the centre. The centre-periphery distinction here is not geographical. While unwieldy, it fits the context of these events marginally better than does the North-South binary. Rather than representing fixed locations, both sets of binaries are ‘labile signifiers’ (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2011: 47). Australia in many respects fits politically and economically within the global North, despite its southern location. Yet within its borders and in its relationships with the global North, there are conspicuous attributes of the global South. Economically and socially, East Timor fits unambiguously within the global South. The centre here represents a locus of political and economic power in the context of a neo-colonial enterprise and the periphery represents a locus of relative powerlessness and resistance.

Reflecting briefly on my own epistemic positionality, I take a view of the South as both a position and a politics (Shepherd, 2002: 81; Kerfoot & Hyltenstam, 2017: 3). Like many Australians, I am highly critical of my government’s stance in the dispute, which suggested that the principle of the ‘fair go’, so often extolled as a core Australian value, did not extend to one of our nearest and most impoverished neighbours. I have been a close observer of language policy developments in East Timor and a regular visitor to the country for work, co-operation
and research purposes since 2001. I have tracked how language ideological debates and discourses have played out over time and I therefore consider myself to be an engaged and well-informed outsider.

As Mpendukana and Stroud (2019: 185) note in their analysis of student protest in post-apartheid South Africa, ‘semiotic landscape analysis promises to offer unique insights […] because one of its central concerns is that of mapping the semiotics of presence, erasure or absence of voices in place’. A semiotic analysis of the Timor Sea protests shows how, in these authors’ words, ‘temporalities are juxtaposed in the material unfolding of [the] protest’ (p. 185). Moreover, as Borba (2019: 163) observes of the Brazilian linguistic landscape at a time of recent political crisis, entextualisations in their temporal and geographical situatedness, may help us better understand the affective dimensions of recent political history.

In this paper, I use ‘entanglement’ as a structuring metaphor. In her exploration of post-apartheid life worlds in South Africa, Nuttall (2009: 11) proposes the term to describe what she calls the unexpected points of intersection where language, identities, spaces and histories come together. As Nuttall writes, entanglement speaks of an intimacy gained, even if it was resisted, rejected or uninvited (p. 1), a condition particularly true of colonialism and coloniality, inscribed as they are on the body politic and personal. Williams and Lanza (2016) define entanglement as a form of indexicality, which highlights the ways in which discourses become entwined semiotically in linguistic landscapes. Entanglement is also an apt metaphor to describe the ways relationships play out between the neo-colonial centre and the aid-dependent periphery in post-colonial development politics.

3. Multilingual entanglements

Situated in southeast Asia, one of the most linguistically diverse regions of the world, East Timor’s language situation reflects the entanglements of its pre-colonial and colonial past. With
language contact occurring as a result of trade, military alliances, migration and settlement since at least the 13th century (Fox, 2003), multilingualism is part of the fabric of East Timorese social life. In addition to Tetun, the national lingua franca, there are today 18 Austronesian varieties spoken on the mainland, with a further six on the offshore Ataúro Island and five Papuan varieties (Williams Van Klinken & Williams, 2015). Adding a further layer are the non-indigenous languages of Chinese, English, Indonesian, Malay and Portuguese, with English as a relatively recent arrival.

Entanglements with three phases of foreign domination have left a complex web of linguistic and cultural threads running through East Timorese culture and society. In order to untangle these threads, we need to look briefly at the role of language in these phases. The Portuguese established a settlement in eastern Timor in 1641 and declared the territory a colony in 1702. One of the largest and longest-standing imperial powers, its twentieth century strategy of declaring all its colonies to be overseas provinces – and later applying the UN designation of ‘non-self-governing territories’– together with its ideology of pluricontinentalism, enabled it to postpone decolonisation until well into the 1970s (see, e.g., Fischer & Klatte, 2011). Estado Novo colonial policy (1933-1974) maintained a strictly racialised social hierarchy in which to qualify as assimilated, an individual had to become Europeanised. Becoming assimilated entailed adopting the Portuguese way of life, language and Catholic faith. (Hajek, 2000: 217). Only assimilated citizens gained access to more than a rudimentary education and no more than a handful of East Timorese attained a university place in Portugal (Taylor, 1991: 17). These returnees were to spearhead the independence movement in the 1970s. The decolonisation of East Timor only began in 1974 after the fall of the Estado Novo regime and the Carnation Revolution in Portugal. It was halted by invasion and subsequent annexation by Indonesia in 1975. The occupation was to last for 24 years (for detailed histories, see Braithwaite, Charlesworth & Soares, 2012; Gunn, 1999). Although it is difficult to state an exact figure,
estimates indicate that the struggle for independence and the violence of the occupation cost the lives of some 205,000 people (Scambary & Wassel, 2018: 183).

During this period, the rapid Indonesianisation of the population was a paramount government objective (Hajek, 2000: 219) to be brought about through universal primary education in Indonesian. Modern Indonesian spread rapidly, especially after the public use of Portuguese was forbidden in the 1980s in a bid to enforce greater social control. Education came at the cost of forceful integration into the ideologies of the Indonesian state. Accounts have documented the way many young East Timorese were deeply alienated by such schooling (e.g., Nicolai, 2004). As a student and youth-led clandestine movement linked to the armed resistance and the exiled leadership emerged in the late 1980s, many young people lost years of formal education.

Ironically, despite the spread of Indonesian, Tetun became established as a lingua franca in this period. While Tetun had long been a contact language in East Timor, Tetun-Dili, the variety originally spoken in the capital, spread during the occupation because communities dispersed by war and forced relocation used it for wider communication and because the East Timorese clergy adopted it in preference to Indonesian in the liturgies. Both Tetun and Portuguese were strategically used by the resistance within East Timor and in the diaspora (see, e.g., Cabral & Martin-Jones, 2008).

Since independence, English has become firmly established as a language of wider communication in East Timor. In response to the violence and destruction that accompanied the Indonesian departure in 1999, the UN Security Council established a transitional administration which held full executive power until the handover to the East Timorese in 2002. A growing number of educated East Timorese speak English today as a result of employment with the UN, engagement with international advisors, agencies and business enterprises or as a result of taking refuge or studying in English-speaking countries. A flourishing aid industry has poured
millions into East Timor since 1999 with questionable results\(^1\), but one evident consequence is the rise in the number of East Timorese English speakers.

Taking a pragmatic view of these linguistic entanglements, the 2002 Constitution declares Portuguese and Tetun to be co-official, with Indonesian and English as working languages (Tetun is also a national language, along with the other indigenous languages). Importantly for this discussion, the constitution constructs a discourse of East Timorese identity and community as “arising from the collective memory of occupation and the resistance” (Leach, 2002: 44), bound together by the tropes of \textit{funu} (struggle), \textit{patria} (homeland), and \textit{solidariedade} (solidarity) and symbolically represented in the national anthem and flag. These tropes were invoked to powerful effect in the Timor Sea demonstrations, a point I shall return to later.

These distinct linguistic and cultural legacies have widened the generation gap between older East Timorese who lived under the regime locally known as ‘Portuguese time’, and younger East Timorese who grew up and were educated in the period known as ‘Indonesian time’. The State is seen by some to have privileged the older generation’s lusophone heritage at the expense of the ‘jerasaun foun’ (young generation) (Arthur, 2015: 42). This intergenerational divide runs largely along language lines. The Portuguese-speaking so-called ‘1975 generation’ grew up in assimilated families and were educated during the Portuguese colonial period; the jerasaun foun, grew up during the Indonesian occupation (1975-1999) and were educated in Indonesian; and today there is also the ‘independence generation’, sometimes known as the \textit{jerasaun miléniu} (millennium generation), educated in Portuguese and Tetun, who were born during the transition from occupation to independence (Wigglesworth, 2016).

To recall, Indonesian schooling aimed to shape a new exemplary generation of East Timorese, but it failed in its mission to inculcate a sense of belonging to the Indonesian nation. As the armed resistance was forced to retreat to the hills, young people in the towns organised a series
of pro-independence demonstrations that were violently suppressed. These demonstrations are at the heart of the discourses of protest discussed in this paper.

The members of the jerasuan foun are today no longer, strictly speaking, ‘young’, having reached their late thirties or early to mid-forties. As a result of their historical experiences, they are a highly politicised and active social group but, since independence, many have felt disenfranchised and that their part in the struggle has been undervalued (Bexley, 2007; Wigglesworth, 2016). The jerasaun foun played a central role in MKOTT and in orchestrating the Timor Sea Protests by constructing a decolonial discourse that contributed to the ultimately successful outcome of the dispute for East Timor.

4. Ways of seeing the linguistic landscape

Some years ago, I wrote a paper analysing multilingual signage in downtown Dili (XXXX, 2012). My starting point then, as now, was geosemiotic, that is, all signs and discourses take their meaning from when, where and how they are placed (Scollon & Scollon, 2003: 2), and from where in the world and when in history they are situated (Aboelezz, 2014). Then, as now, I focused on social indexicality, or the links between the linguistic landscape and the wider historical, socioeconomic and political context. Influenced by broader scholarly thinking and a wider range of approaches which attend to ‘the agentive semiotic practices of social actors’ (Malinowski, 2019: 223), my own ways of seeing the linguistic landscape have grown and changed. However, one aspect of my thinking has not. In a setting where the echoes and scars of the colonial past are etched into its geographical, material and imaginary linguistic landscapes, one cannot avoid seeing these landscapes from a longue durée perspective.

The systematic destruction of property and infrastructure by the departing Indonesians and their militia gangs in the burnings that followed the vote for independence in 1999 was an act of organised reprisal and the climax of systemic epistemicide (e.g., Santos, 2014). Few
historical, documentary or photographic records have survived. The archives of the Fundação Mário Soares (Mário Soares Foundation) hosts the Arquivo e Museu da Resistência Timorese (Archive and Museum of the Timorese Resistance), which holds a collection of digitised photographs. Struck by the echoes of the past in contemporary images of protest, I collated a small visual corpus from this archive. As these images are poor quality, I have not reproduced them here but rather provide a reference or a link to their location. The images of the two demonstrations analysed later in this paper were obtained with permission from the web archives of La’o Hamutuk (Walking Together), a non-government organisation which analyses and reports on development processes in East Timor. I also downloaded one image from Wikimedia Commons, under fair use principles.

I was not physically present at the demonstrations and cannot claim either to have collected ethnographic data or to have conducted a material ethnography in the sense that Stroud & Mpendukana (2009) define it. My exploratory analysis aligns more closely with an etic interpretation than a detailed ethnographic study (Ben Said & Kasanga, 2016). Train (2016) advocates the creation of a dialogue between text-oriented archival research into the historical contexts of language and identity – and to this I would add image-oriented research – and the present-oriented focus of linguistic landscape research. My approach to understanding how the protestors signalled their visibility has more in common with this historical, intertextual approach.

The term ‘chronotopes’ originates with the literary philosopher, Bakhtin (1981), and refers to ‘time-space configurations’ (Perrino, 2011). The concept encompasses ‘the ways in which time and space are related to one another through discourse’ (Flores, Lewis & Phuong, 2019: 16). In this paper, I aim to explore how the MKOTT protestors semiotically constructed a set of chronotopes which gave coherence and unity to the campaign and shaped an image that was taken up by others. I draw on Blommaert’s interpretation of chronotopes as ‘invokable
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histories’, or ‘elaborate frames in which time, space, and patterns of agency coincide, create meaning and value, and can be set off against other chronotopes’ (2015: 110). Stasch (2011: 3) suggests that a chronotope that is big in spatiotemporal scale and ‘felt to be profound in its significance’ could also be called, among other things, a metanarrative. In an analytical study of individual migrant identity, Koven and Simões Marques (2015) define chronotopes as ‘recurrent sets of contrasting, juxtaposable discourse-based frameworks’ (p. 214). In similar vein, Sinatoria (2019) draws on Woolard’s (2013: 212) ‘sociohistorical chronotopes’ and ‘chronotopic frames’ to describe how people orient themselves towards a sociopolitical context. Sinatoria also makes astute use of ‘sets of contrast’ (Koven & Simões Marques, 2015: 214). These ideas provide a productive way of seeing how spatial and temporal connections were forged semiotically in the Timor Sea Protests. The demonstrators discursively invoked three sociohistorical frames containing sets of implicit contrast in chronotopic configuration (Sinatura, 2019: 431) – justice (and by implication, injustice), occupation (and by implication, resistance), and suffering (and by implication, sacrifice).

5. Narratives of resistance, struggle and injustice in the protests of the 1980s and 1990s

As the Indonesians tightened their hold on the country, its borders were closed to foreign visitors, and independence networks had no opportunity to bring their cause to world attention. Occasional visits by overseas dignitaries provided the opportunity for a series of pro-independence demonstrations which were violently suppressed by the Indonesians. The few surviving photographs from that time project a stark impression of what protest meant under occupation. My first purpose in describing them is to emphasise that, seen from a sociolinguistic perspective, they clearly indicate conscious code choice aimed at an international audience outside East Timor. Hajek (2000: 221-222) comments that pictures and film footage from East Timor in the 1980s and ‘90s show clearly the use of perfect Portuguese in
the banners in student demonstrations in Dili. While this is true, information in other photographs and accounts show that Indonesian and English were also used. As Hajek acknowledges of Portuguese, its use would have been purely symbolic as it is highly unlikely that the demonstrators could speak it, and the same can be said of English at the time. In later photographs, slogans in Indonesian directly addressed the occupying forces. My second purpose in describing these photographs, and elaborating the contexts in which they were taken, is to show how protestors were able to draw on acts of resistance, betrayal, sacrifice and struggle in the communicative resources they deployed in the Timor Sea Protests. In what follows, I describe four photographic scenes which show a set of chronotopes in the making.

In 1989, Pope John Paul II visited the territory, the only world leader to do so during the occupation. Towards the end of a Papal Mass, a group of young demonstrators pushed to the front of the crowd, unfurled a banner and began shouting slogans calling for independence. They were beaten back by police and arrested. This relatively small incident is regarded as the spark that ignited the urban youth resistance and, spurred by reporting in the international press, other actions followed. In a now-fading photograph, young demonstrators display a banner proclaiming (in what could be Tetun or Portuguese) ‘Timor Timorense’ (Timorese Timor) (Marcos, 1995: 85).

Two years later, in 1991, a Portuguese parliamentary delegation was due to arrive in Dili to observe the situation on the ground. Anticipating the displays that had occurred in front of international media with the Pope’s visit, the Indonesians began rounding up activists. In two photos, a young man preparing placards for the visit (which was suspended before the demonstration could take place), poses in semi-darkness giving the clenched-fist salute (see also Pinto, 2001: 37). Head swathed in a scarf with only his eyes showing, he displays a placard written in Portuguese which reads (my translation): ‘Fora os invasores’ (Invaders out), ‘Fora os mandados’ (this slogan is difficult to translate directly into English. ‘Mandado’ is the past
The risks of protest were brutally emphasised only weeks later when the military opened fire on a demonstration protesting at the shooting of a young resistance leader, killing over 250 people and wounding scores of others. This demonstration was a calculated risk on the part of the resistance leaders. It was well-known that displays of their images and nationalist symbols such as the FRETILIN flag would incite a violent response from the Indonesian military, but the scale and ferocity of the attack was unprecedented. The event, known as the Santa Cruz Massacre, was secretly filmed on Western cameras, smuggled out of the country and brought to the attention of the outside world. Photographs and film footage show slogans in Portuguese addressed to the international media such as ‘Xanana Gusmão (then commander of the FALANTIL resistance force), ‘Simbolo de luta national’ (Xanana Gusmão. Symbol of national struggle); ‘Viva a Liberdade’ (long live liberty); and in English included, ‘Portugal, where is your responsibility?’ ‘Indonesia, why you shoot our Church?’ and ‘Tears, injustice is what we suffer’ (Braithwaite, Charlesworth & Soares, 2012: 87).

After Santa Cruz, the resistance went largely underground but in 1997, the collapse of the Asian Tiger economies, political crisis in Indonesia and the fall of Suharto saw a resurgence of activism and protest. Pickets and demonstrations supporting East Timorese independence were by now taking place around the world as criticism of human rights abuses by the occupying forces gained momentum. As East Timorese pro-independence groups worked feverishly towards a referendum in 1998, at least a third of Dili’s then 140,000 residents took to the streets in support of a referendum (Bourchier, 2000, p. 25). Slogans in the photographs of these demonstrations index the gravity of these abuses. Many were in Indonesian, e.g., ‘Anti kekarasan’ (Anti violence); ‘Kontra perdarahan’ (Against bloodshed); ‘Suharto pembunuh’
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(Suharto murderer); ‘Tarin ABRI dari Timor-Leste’ (Pull ABRI 9 out of Timor-Leste); ‘Merdeka’ (Freedom/Independence); and some were in English, e.g., ‘Independent or death’; ‘Indonesians out of East Timor now’; ‘Viva Timor, Release Xanana’; ‘Pull Indonesian troops out of East Timor’.

6. The geopolitics of oil

In order to make sense of the textual layers of meaning in the Timor Sea protests, it is necessary now to form a picture of the geopolitical ambitions that engendered them. The dispute between Australia and East Timor over the maritime border has rankled for decades. For East Timor, sovereign rights over its land and sea borders are inextricably linked with its national identity. Australia’s stance, despite its claims of friendship with East Timor, can best be described as realpolitik based on maintaining its stake in the lucrative oil and gas deposits in the Timor Sea. In 1970, Australia began negotiating with Indonesia on seabed boundaries and reached a mutually advantageous agreement based on ‘continental shelf’ principles (Leach, 2013). Portugal, still the administering power in East Timor, refused to negotiate, opting to wait for the international process which, in 1982, resulted in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Portugal’s withdrawal created the so-called ‘Timor Gap’ in the Australian–Indonesian maritime boundary. UNCLOS establishes that maritime boundaries should conform to a median line between neighbouring states, but Australia resisted this principle because it would mean relinquishing control of the rich deposits in the Greater Sunrise oilfield. In 1989, then Australian foreign minister Gareth Evans negotiated a treaty with then Indonesian foreign minister, Ali Alatas, for joint exploitation and revenue-sharing in the Timor Gap. The treaty was founded on Australia’s de jure recognition of Indonesia’s annexation of East Timor. It was the only western country to do so. Famously, the two ministers were photographed gleefully toasting the treaty in a jet flying over the Timor Sea. 
Aware that with the restoration of East Timorese independence, the Timor Gap Treaty would no longer be valid, Australia withdrew from the boundary resolution procedures of UNCLOS and the International Court of Justice, leaving East Timor with no recourse to international arbitration. Negotiations dragged on as subsequent treaties continued to delay the settlement of a border. The treaty known as Certain Maritime Arrangements in the Timor Sea (CMATS) in 2006 placed a moratorium on boundary delimitations for 50 years (Strating, 2018). In 2013, relations between the two states reached an all-time low following the revelation by a whistleblower that Australian spies had bugged the East Timorese cabinet office during negotiations. Incensed by the further allegation that listening devices had been planted under cover of an aid project to renovate government offices, the East Timorese called for the annulment of CMATS, and threatened to withdraw from negotiations on the grounds that Australia was acting in bad faith (Leach, 2016). Eventually, East Timor triggered a compulsory conciliation process under UNCLOS in 2016, the first time this mechanism had been used. Finally, in August 2017, Australia and East Timor agreed on a boundary and signed a treaty, which was ratified on 30th August 2019, the 20th anniversary of the referendum in which 78.5% of people had voted for independence from Indonesia.

The two demonstrations I now focus on were mobilised by MKOTT. The 2013 action coincided with the anniversary of the East Timorese government’s ratification of UNCLOS. Under UNCLOS, governments cannot be forced to make decisions, but they are obliged to go to the negotiating table. The 2016 demonstration coincided with the anniversary of the Australian Government's withdrawal from the jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice. The demonstrations also marked a return to the politics of mobilisation, harking back to resistance days.

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The 2013 demonstrations amounted to a series of noisy but peaceful pickets outside the Australian Embassy in Dili. Relationships with Australia were particularly tense, with the CMATS agreement on the verge of collapse since the cabinet-bugging story had broken. The 2013 slogans again show conscious language choice directed at an international audience. In a display of intertextuality that shows an acute awareness of history, the signs in figures 1 and 2 index the entanglements between development needs and aid dependence. The image of the parasitical extraction of oil resources by Australia, depicted as a mosquito, would be lost on no-one in a country where mosquito-borne diseases are a major public-health burden. The poster on the far right shows Evans, the Australian minister responsible for signing the Timor Gap Treaty with Indonesia. Out of the camera frame is a matching picture of his Indonesian counterpart.

Figure 1. Australia is a mosquito.
https://www.laohamutuk.org/Oil/Boundary/CMATSindex.htm#2013

In Figure 2 (top left) the original photograph of the two ministers toasting the treaty is explicitly reproduced. The absence of any accompanying slogans in this and the picture of
Evans in figure 1 seems to assume common knowledge of the event and the collusion that it represents. In the foreground, the sign (lower left) asserts in Tetun, ‘**Australia tenke respeita soberania RDTL**’ (Australia must respect RDTL’s, i.e., República Democrática de Timor-Leste’s, sovereignty). The image of the cuffed hands symbolises the absence or denial of bargaining power. The slogan in the centre, written in Tetun, ‘That is we still talk about justice? We say no’ indexes the widespread indignation at Australian tactics.

In Indigenous East Timorese law and custom, justice is based on the principles of reciprocity and restoring harmony by maintaining equilibrium between disputing parties (Silva, 2000: 167). The post-colonial call for justice articulates the view that settling the maritime boundaries represents the completion of East Timor’s struggle for national sovereignty. In this view, Australia’s refusal to recognise the median line amounts to denying the East Timorese their sovereign entitlement (Strating, 2018). The word ‘justice’ is therefore irrevocably linked to sovereignty and the struggle for self-determination. It also references another unsettled issue in East Timor – the continuing impunity for war crimes and human rights violations committed between 1975 and 1999.
Figure 2. That is we still talk about justice?

https://www.laohamutuk.org/Oil/Boundary/CMATSindex.htm#2013

In contrast to the 1980s and ‘90s, there was plenty of time to prepare colourful, creative signs with clever word play and imagery (e.g., ‘Aussie, Aussie, Aussie, Oil, Oil, Oil’; ‘Right the wrong in the Timor Sea’; ‘All we want is Australia Fair’). In one emotive image (figure 3), a young boy brandishes the East Timorese flag, which is dripping with blood, his other arm outstretched with fist clenched. Invoking East Timorese suffering under occupation the red letters, written in Tetun, declaim, ‘Ha’u [-nia] raan fakar husi foho to’o tasi’ (lit. My blood spilled from the mountains to the sea), while a kangaroo, representing Australia, sips unperturbed from a barrel of East Timorese oil.

The narratives of terus (suffering) and susar (troubles/difficulties) are rooted in the experience of colonialism and occupation (Silva, 2008). The idea of suffering which requires
appropriate recognition, as Silva states, “is fundamental in the contemporary local symbolic repertoire” (p. 174). Narratives of suffering and sacrifice have been identified by anthropologists in a range of East Timorese domains (e.g., Bovensiepen, 2009; Kent, 2016; McWilliam & Traube, 2011). Yet, they are not unique to the East Timorese. As Damaledo (2018: 22) observes, they are commonly used to construct a sense of unity and national identity in post-conflict societies.

Figure My blood poured from the mountain to the sea.

https://www.laohamutuk.org/Oil/Boundary/CMATSindex.htm#2013
The image of Australia as a kangaroo stealing East Timor’s oil was widely mobilised by MKOTT and their supporters. A recurrent slogan in the 2013 and 2016 demonstrations was ‘Don’t steal my oil’ (figure 4), the first-person possessive pronoun indexing a sense of personal ownership of the resources in the Greater Sunrise field. This sense enabled the campaignersto portray Australia as a thief, stealing territory and resources from the East Timorese. The image of Australia as a thief was contiguously replicated in street art and graffiti (see, e.g., figure 5). A dynamic part of political processes, street art and graffiti leave echoes long after the more ephemeral displays of protest have gone. The graffiti prompted by the demonstrations were not only a form of mobilisation but were also an important means of expressing emotions about the dispute (Ramos Goncalves, 2012).

Figure 4: Banner 2013. Don't steal my oil.

[Link](https://www.laohamutuk.org/Oil/Boundary/CMATSindex.htm#2013)
8. **Choreography of assembly**

Gerbaudo’s idea of a ‘choreography of assembly’ describes how people are mobilised into political action. The concept refers not only to the ‘bodily and emplaced nature of collective action’, but also to how social media practices ‘intervene in preparing the terrain, or setting the scene, for people coming together in public space’ (2012: 40). MKOTT and its international supporters showed a savvy awareness of the nexus between material and virtual assembly and the strengthened impact of having multiple sites of protest. In 2016, simultaneous demonstrations were organised by East Timorese and international solidarity groups in Australia (Canberra, Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide), Indonesia (Surabaya, Yogyakarta and Jakarta), Kuala Lumpur, Manila, Portugal (Aveiro and Lisbon), Northern Ireland (Dungannon), and England (Peterborough); the latter three locations have large communities of East Timorese immigrants. The 2016 demonstration in Dili, which, as with Santa Cruz, had the East Timorese
leadership’s support, attracted an estimated 10,000 demonstrators and many smaller protests were held across East Timor (Guterres, 2016).

The image in figure 6 captures some of the semiotic resources that operated in dialogic interaction with each other (Scollon & Scollon, 2003: 12) in the 2016 Dili demonstration. Slogans calling for the median line were widely repeated in Tetun and English and enmeshed with the trope of sovereignty. The white banner on the right asserts in Tetun: ‘Ami-nia soberania importante liu rekursus natural ne’be ilegalmente imi explora ona’ (Our sovereignty is more important than the natural resources you have exploited illegally). The grammatical indexical ‘ami-nia’, marking the exclusive third-person plural possessive pronoun in Tetun expresses the solidarity of the East Timorese people against the Australian government.

Colour was an important part of the choreography, used as a communicative resource by cohorts of demonstrators to signal their presence. Red is the predominant colour of the East Timorese flag and symbolises the blood that was shed in the struggle for freedom. Red banners and clothing show up everywhere in photographs of the 2016 demonstration. Rather than invoking socialism or workers’ power as one might expect in a western demonstration, red in this context invokes funu, a concept enshrined in the Constitution and which has acquired almost spiritual significance in East Timor. The word, which originally described ritualised warfare in the pre-colonial period, has come to be associated with rebellion against foreign domination and the long march to freedom. It is an icon of nationalism and Indigeneity (see e.g., Gunn, 1999; Ramos-Horta, 1987).

Clothing, a form of embodied cultural capital (Seals, 2013), is an important semiotic resource which marks a group’s identity and enhances its visibility. One contingent (not shown) wore white bandanas with logos, and T-shirts with transfers reproducing a now-iconic photograph of the Santa Cruz marchers. Other groups wore colours representing their places of work or study (dark blue for the Institute of Technology, pale blue for the National University,
green for RENETIL and red for FRETILIN and MKOTT members and supporters).

A parallel campaign was organised on Facebook by the American-based solidarity group, the East Timor Action Network. Protestors were invited to share photos of themselves supporting East Timor’s boundary rights (figure 7). Gerbaudo notes how online forms of communication play a crucial role in directing people towards protest events, suggesting how they should act and constructing an emotional narrative to sustain their coming together (2012: 12). As he writes, social media pages and posts are ‘conduits through which organisers have condensed individual sentiments of indignation, anger, pride and a sense of shared victimhood’ (2012: 14). The MKOTT supporters’ Facebook pages had nothing like the scale and impact of the 2011 global protest movements such as the Tahrir Square Uprising, the Indignados Movement or Occupy Wall Street but, nevertheless, fuelled the emotional appeal of the protest and extended its ‘repertoire of communication’ (Martín Rojo, 2014: 10).
9. Summary and closing comments: How the periphery talked back to the centre

Through the process of entextualisation, language, ideas and ideologies move across time and space, and flow from the past to the present (Martin-Rojo, 2016: 62). In this paper, I have tried to show how the MKOTT protestors appropriated and entextualised long-standing narratives, symbols and images of resistance in the service of their cause. I have shown how the slogans and messages of the campaign were filled with references to the pain, injustice and suffering of the colonial past. By depicting Australia as illegally occupying their sovereign maritime territory, the campaigners drew parallels with the Indonesian territorial occupation and claimed the moral high ground. The protestors used emotive imagery, depicting Australia as a parasite, a bully, and a thief. Strong, repeated intertextual narratives challenged power disparities and aid dependence (e.g., ‘We need justice, not aid’ in figure 1), and recalled suffering and sacrifice (e.g., ‘My blood spilled from the mountain to the sea’ in figure 3). Though generally powerless on the world stage and in their own country, the MKOTT leaders deployed chronotopes of justice, occupation, and suffering to mobilise an effective, networked campaign on an international scale. In slogans, the intersubjectively positioned grammatical indexicals constructed a discourse of ‘we’ (the East Timorese people) versus ‘you’ (the Australian government), projected a united front in the face of a common adversary and had emotional resonance linked to individual and collective memory (c.f., Malinowski, 2019: 225). The use
of colour and clothing enhanced the visibility of the demonstrators and created visual associations with funu and past struggle.

Above all, I have tried to illustrate the complex relations between language choice and the politics of language. Conscious code choice and the targeting of language use to audience positioned Tetun as the language of the movement’s identity, with English as the language of the adversary (Castells, 1997). In short, by positioning themselves as David versus Goliath, MKOTT claimed a voice on behalf of the jerasaun foun. I have also shown how parallel sites of protest and the effective use of social media created a choreography of assembly and extended the campaign’s communicative repertoire.

The Timor Sea protestors semiotically constructed a set of chronotopes of resilience in the face of injustice and suffering that have deep roots in in the colonial past and continue to be entangled in the ongoing processes of post-colonial development. In closing, there are other complexities that may play out in the state-level decisions that follow the ratification of a permanent maritime border, and other risks and dangers to contend with in an oil-dependent state. Yet the protests made visible and audible the voices of the jerasaun foun, who built a united, cross-generational campaign that enabled them to talk back to the centre and claim a role in influencing the outcomes of the dispute. As such, the Timor Sea protests represent a profoundly decolonial act.

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**Notes**

1 https://fpif.org/timor_where_has_all_the_aid_gone/


4 Tetun contains a very high number of Portuguese loanwords

5 http://casacomum.org/cc/arquivos?set=e_48#!e_53

6 *Frente Revolucionária do Timor-Leste Independente* (Revolutionary Front of Independent East Timor), the leading pro-independence party

7 *Forças Armadas da Libertação Nacional de Timor-Leste* (Armed Forces for the National Liberation of Timor-Leste)

8 http://casacomum.org/cc/arquivos?set=e_48

9 *Angkatan Bersenjata Republik Indonesia* (Armed Forces of the Republic of Indonesia). In 1999 ABRI was renamed *Tentara Nasional Indonesia or TNI* (Indonesian National Military)
Construction of chronotopes in the Timor Sea protests


11 See the original image at https://www.unsw.adfa.edu.au/school-of-humanities-and-social-sciences/timor-companion/keating

12 A play on the words in the Australian National Anthem, which is entitled ‘Advance Australia Fair’

13 Resistência Nacional dos Estudantes de Timor-Leste (National Resistance of Timorese students)