A Comparative Study of Tetum Prepositions and Makasae Postpositions

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
 	This study examines the syntactic roles of prepositions in Tetum and postpositions in Makasae, with a focus on their functions in conveying spatial and relational concepts. Tetum, an Austronesian language spoken in East Timor, and Makasae, a Trans-New Guinea language spoken in Timor-Leste's eastern districts, employ different syntactic structures for conveying relationships between noun phrases and other sentence elements. While Tetum uses prepositions such as "*iha*" (at) that precede the noun phrase, Makasae uses postpositions such as "*isi e'e*," "*isi we'e*," and "*isi wo'i*," which follow the noun phrase to express similar spatial relations. The research employs a qualitative methodology, using elicitation and interviews with native speakers of both languages. Native speakers of Makasae were asked to produce sentences using "*isi* e'e," "*isi* we'e," and "*isi wo'i*" in various syntactic contexts, while interviews provided insights into the intuitive use of these postpositions across different speech settings. The collected data was analyzed thematically to identify patterns in the syntactic behavior of these postpositions and to compare them with the prepositional system of Tetum. Findings reveal that *"isi e'e,"* "*isi we'e*," and "*isi wo'i*" function similarly to prepositions in English, such as "in" or "at," but differ in their syntactic placement, as they follow the noun phrase in Makasae. This contrasts with the prepositional structure of Tetum, where prepositions like "*iha*" precede the noun phrase. Despite these syntactic differences, both languages convey spatial and relational meaning effectively, highlighting the typological diversity within the Austronesian and Papuan language families.

1. Introduction

Tetum is an Austronesian language primarily spoken in Timor-Leste, with smaller communities in parts of Indonesia, particularly in the region of West Timor. It belongs to the Malayo-Polynesian language family, specifically the Central-Eastern Malayo-Polynesian subgroup (Adelaar & Schapper, 2024; Hajek, 2007). Tetum holds significant cultural and historical importance in East Timor, serving as one of the country's official languages, alongside Portuguese. The language reflects a rich blend of indigenous roots and influences from Portuguese, Indonesian, and other languages due to the region's colonial past and its interaction with neighboring communities.

In terms of its linguistic status, Tetum is considered a vital language for daily communication, education, and governmental affairs in East Timor, where the majority

of the population speaks it. Despite its widespread use, Tetum has undergone a process of standardization since East Timor gained independence in 2002, with the aim of elevating the language in formal contexts. One notable feature of Tetum is its extensive use of prepositions, which play a crucial role in expressing spatial and relational concepts. Prepositions in Tetum generally follow a straightforward structure, often accompanying nouns to indicate direction, location, or possession, helping to clarify relationships between elements in a sentence. This characteristic is central to the language's grammar, which combines both simplicity and precision.

Makasae is a Trans-New Guinea language spoken primarily in the eastern districts of Timor-Leste, specifically in Baucau, Viqueque, and Lospalos. It belongs to the Timor–Alor–Pantar language family, within the Central and South Timor subgroup. Despite the growing influence of Tetum and Portuguese, Makasae remains an important language for approximately 50,000 to 60,000 speakers, serving as a key element of cultural identity and communication in rural Timorese communities (Sato, 2017).

A notable feature of Makasae is its system of postpositions, which follow the nouns they modify and express various syntactic relationships. Among the key postpositions are "*isi e'e*", "*isi wo'i*", and "*we'e*". These postpositions indicate location, direction, and movement away from a place, respectively. They are essential for understanding how spatial and relational concepts are conveyed in the language (Lima, 2019).

2. Review Related Literature

Prepositions and postpositions are functional words that express relationships between noun phrases and other sentence elements, often marking spatial, temporal, or abstract connections (Boas et al., 2019; Fera, 2019; Pujiono et al., 2023). In English, prepositions (e.g., in, on, at) precede the noun phrase, forming Prepositional Phrases (PP) such as "on the table" or "at home." These prepositions are considered heads of their phrases in syntactic theory (Pollard & Sag, 1994) and play a critical role in providing additional contextual information. Cognitive linguistics views prepositions as reflecting conceptual metaphors, such as using in to signify containment, which mirrors physical experiences (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Postpositions, on the other hand, are typically found in languages with non-SVO word orders, such as Japanese, Hindi, and Turkish. In these languages, the postposition follows the noun phrase (e.g., "book on the table" in Hindi, "*kitaab mez par*"). Though postpositions occur after the noun phrase, they serve the same semantic functions as prepositions—indicating relationships of location, time, possession, and instrumentality. The syntactic difference between prepositions and postpositions reflects broader language typology, with languages using postpositions often employing head-final structures (Dryer, 2013).

Despite their positional differences, prepositions and postpositions perform functionally equivalent roles across languages. Both are closed-class items that help structure meaning by linking noun phrases to other elements in the sentence. The main distinction between the two lies in their syntactic positioning—prepositions precede their noun phrase in languages like English, while postpositions follow it in languages like Japanese and Hindi. The study of these elements reveals important insights into syntactic word order and typological diversity in languages worldwide (Haspelmath, 2007).

3. Method

This research examines the Makasae postposition "*isi e'e*", concentrating on its syntactic functions within the language. In Makasae, "*isi e'e*" is the only postposition used to express a variety of syntactic functions, particularly in contexts related to location, direction, and possession. The study examined how "*isi e'e*" interacts with various sentence elements, including subjects, predicates, objects, adverbials, and complements. This research also compared the syntactic behavior of "*isi e'e*" with prepositions of place in English, which typically describe spatial relationships, such as "in," "on," and "at."

Data for this research were collected by using two techniques: elicitation and interviews. In the elicitation process, the native speakers of Makasae were asked to produce sentences using "*isi e'e*" in various syntactic contexts. This provided naturalistic data regarding the use of the postposition in different sentence types. Additionally, interviews were conducted with native speakers to gather insights into their intuitive use of "*isi e'e*" in various linguistic environments. These interviews will help identify any variations in the use of the postposition, including its syntactic functions in both formal and informal contexts.

The data were analyzed by using a qualitative approach focused on the syntactic roles of "*isi e'e*". The analysis would examine how "*isi e'e*" functions in various sentence constructions, particularly in expressing location, direction, and possession. In comparison, the study also examined how prepositions of place in English, such as "in," "on" and "at," operate syntactically in similar contexts. This allowed for a comparison of how a single postposition in Makasae can perform multiple syntactic functions, in contrast to English, where distinct prepositions are used for different spatial relations. The analysis will be thematic, focusing on patterns and variations in the use of "*isi e'e*" and how it compares with English prepositions of place in terms of sentence structure and syntactic roles.

4. Results and discussion

In Tetum, prepositions like "*iha*", "*at*", "*ba*"," *to*", and "*ho*", "with" precede nouns to express locations and direction. However, in Makasae, postpositions like "*isi e'e*"," isi *we'e*", and "*isi wo'i*" follow nouns to indicate locations or states. Please have a look to the following data for a clearer overview.

4.1. The Tetum prepositions and Makasae postpositions

1. *Ani eani oma   isi e'e.*
   I   now   home   posp
   'I am at home now'

"*Isi e'e*" in data (1) on the Makasae language above acts as a locative postposition marking the relationship between the subject "*Ani*" "i" and the location "*oma*" "home". The postposition "*isi e'e*" indicates the state of being at home, with "*e'e*" adding emphasis or finality to the statement. This postpositional phrase is key to the locative structure of the sentence, linking the subject to its location in a grammatically coherent way.

2. *Ha'u iha uma   agora.*
   I   at home now
   'I am at home now'

The word "*iha*" in data (2) above is Tetum language, which functions as a preposition, introducing the prepositional phrase "*iha uma*", "at home". This phrase establishes the locative relationship between the subject "ha'u", "I" and the noun phrase "*uma*", "home", showing that the subject is located at home at the present moment. The temporal adverb 'agora' 'now' modifies the sentence, indicating the timing of the action.

> 3. *Era   eani   Dili isi e'e.*
>   They   now   PN   posp
>   'They are in Dili at the moment'

"I*si e'e*" in the sentence (3) above functions as a postposition that modifies the location 'Dili', indicating that the action is happening in Dili at the moment. The postposition comes after the noun (Dili), which aligns with the typical structure of an SOV language.

> 4. *Sira   agora iha uma.*
>   They now   at   home
>   'They are at home now'

"Iha" on the sentence (4) above functions as a preposition that describes a location and operates adverbially to indicate place. The structure follows an SVO (Subject-Verb-Object) order, with "Sira","They" as the subject, "agora", "now" as the temporal adverb modifying the verb, and "iha uma", "at home" as a prepositional phrase that explains where the action takes place. In this construction, "iha" links the subject to the location "uma" ,"home", answering the question "Where" and functioning like an adverb of place.

> 5. *Gi   eani   escola   isi wo'i.*
>   S/he   now   school   posp
>   'S/he is at home now'

In this sentence, "*isi wo'i*" functions as a postposition to indicate "at" or "in" like in English and functions as location. The structure is simple and places the location at the end of the sentence, after the subject.

> 6. *Nia   agora iha escola*.
>   S/he   now   at school
>   ' S/he is at school now'

"Iha" In the sentence (6) is a preposition meaning 'at', and it is used to indicate the location where the subject is. The preposition "*iha*" introduces the noun "*escola*" (meaning "school"), forming the prepositional phrase "*iha escolar*", "at school". The subject "Nia" meaning "S/he" tells us who is acting, while the adverb "*agora*" (meaning 'now' modifies the action, specifying when the action is taking place.

> 7. *Maria eani   escola   isi we'e.*
>   PN   now school   posp
>   ' Maria is at school now'

In Makasae, the postposition phrase "*isi we'e*" in data (7) is used to indicate that something or someone is located 'at' a place, such as "at school." Therefore, 'Maria eani escola "*isi we'e*" translates to 'Maria is at school now.'

8. *Ita   agora iha   Australia*.
   We   now   at   PN
   'We are in Australia now'

The preposition "*iha*" in data (8) above functions to indicate the location of the subject. The preposition '*iha*' functions as a preposition to show a spatial relationship between the subject and its location. In this case, "*iha*" would be used to convey that the subject is situated in Australia, just as 'in' does in English. The preposition "in" (or "*iha*" establishes the relationship between the subject and the place, marking the location as Australia. The word 'now' in the English sentence serves as an adverb modifying the verb 'are,' indicating the present time, which would also be reflected in Tetum to convey the same temporal context.

9. *Ini eani   ospital   isi e'e.*
   We   now   hospital   posp
   'we are at the hospital now'

In Makasae, the phrase "*isi e'e*" in sentence (9) above functions as a postposition indicating 'at' or 'in' the location, so the sentence 'Ini eani ospital *isi e'e*' translates to 'We are at the hospital now.'

10. *O   agora iha Banco*.
    You   now   at   the Bank
    'You are at the Bank now'

"Iha" In the sentence (10) above is a preposition, similarly **"at"** in English, which functions to indicate the specific location where the subject "You" is located. Similarly, in Tetum, the preposition **'iha'** would be used in place of **"at"** to express the same spatial relationship.

11. *Pi   eani   Bali isi e'e*.
    We   now   PN   posp
    ' We are in Bali now'

In Makasae, the postposition '*isi e'e*' in the data (11) indicates a locational relationship similar to 'in' or 'at' in English. So, the sentence 'Pi eani Bali *isi e'e*' translates to 'We are in Bali now.'

5. Conclusion and Suggestions

This study has explored the syntactic roles of Tetum prepositions and Makasae postpositions in expressing spatial and relational concepts. It has revealed that while both languages use functional elements to link noun phrases to other parts of the sentence, they differ significantly in their syntactic structure. Tetum employs prepositions, such as "iha" (at), which precede the noun phrase, while Makasae utilizes postpositions, such as "isi e'e," "isi *we'e*," and "*isi wo'i*," which follow the noun phrase. Despite this syntactic difference, both types of markers serve similar semantic functions, indicating relationships of location, direction, and possession. This study highlights how Makasae, a Papuan language, and Tetum, an Austronesian language, reflect distinct

typological features, yet share functional similarities. By comparing the spatial markers in these two languages, the research contributes to our understanding of the linguistic diversity within Timor-Leste and the broader Austronesian and Papuan language families, shedding light on the interplay of syntactic structures and semantic meaning in these languages.

Future research could expand on this study by examining Makasae postpositions in comparison to postpositions in other Papuan languages spoken in Timor-Leste or the broader region. A more comprehensive cross-linguistic analysis could yield valuable insights into the typological features of these languages, particularly regarding their use of postpositions and prepositions. Furthermore, it would be interesting to explore the social and dialectal variations in the use of Tetum prepositions and Makasae postpositions. Investigating how these markers function in formal and informal contexts, as well as across different speech communities, could reveal additional syntactic and pragmatic nuances. Another avenue for future research would be to explore the historical and sociolinguistic evolution of these languages, particularly how contact with Portuguese, Indonesian, and neighboring languages has shaped their syntactic structures over time. Additionally, the findings of this study could have practical applications in the field of language education, particularly in the development of teaching materials for both Tetum and Makasae. A deeper understanding of their syntactic structures could help improve language instruction for non-native speakers and contribute to preserving these languages in an educational context.

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