

Writing English for translation into Tetun

Catharina Williams-van Klinken

Dili Institute of Technology

2021

1. Introduction

Translation is difficult. Translating from English into Tetun, a language with a very different structure, is particularly difficult. If a translator is very good, has high-level English, has sufficient background knowledge of the material, has sufficient time, and has the opportunity to clarify meaning with the source text writer, then it is possible to do a good translation of technical materials into Tetun. But these conditions can rarely be met.

However, if you are writing English text in order for it to be translated into Tetun, you can do a lot to facilitate good translations by writing in a translator-friendly way.

Following is a list of some structures that present particular difficulties for translation into Tetun, and how you can avoid them. In the tables, the left-most column shows examples that are difficult to translate into good Tetun, while the right-most one shows rephrasings that are more likely to be translated well. Most examples are taken from medical texts, but the same principles apply to all areas of writing.

2. Avoid impersonal constructions

In formal writing, English often uses impersonal constructions, avoiding saying who the actions are done by. In Tetun that is often not really possible. So if you omit saying who the actor is, translators will often use an unnatural Tetun construction ('translationese'), or will have to choose who did it, or attribute the action to a generic "person/people" (as if the actor is unknown) or give the actor as "we". It's better for the original writer to make that choice.

Avoid agentless passives

The most common impersonal construction is an "agentless passive", such as the following.

Passive without an agent	Active, with an agent
University fees must be paid in full before semester starts.	You/students must pay university fees in full before semester starts.
The struggle for independence was won in 1999.	Timorese won the struggle for independence in 1999.
He was shot dead in 1975.	Soldiers/an enemy/unknown attackers/... shot him dead in 1975.

Use verbs for actions

Another way to write impersonally in English is to use nouns instead of verbs when talking about processes. For instance, we can write about "the destruction of the city" without having to say who or what destroyed the city. In native Tetun, there are a range of well-known words to say "destroy", but the only way to say "destruction" is to borrow the Portuguese noun *destruisaun*, which is understood by far fewer people. The same holds for many abstract nouns.

Noun to refer to a process	Verb
The destruction of the city was complete.	The earthquake/fire/bombs completely destroyed the city.
This will be followed by the establishment of community tribunals.	After this, we/the government/... will establish community tribunals.
Distribution of the manuals is underway.	We/the organisation are currently distributing the manuals.

3. Keep chronological order

Tetun has a strong preference for presenting events in chronological order, that is, in the order in which the events happen. English can present events in either order. The difference can be seen in several situations, listed below. If the English follows chronological order, then translators will be more likely to translate into natural Tetun.

Present events in chronological order

English often presents events out of order. In the following examples, the initial event is in bold.

Out of order	In chronological order
Before eating, you must wash your hands .	You must wash your hands before eating.
People with HIV become vulnerable to diseases that take advantage of a weakened immune system .	People with HIV have a weakened immune system, and so are vulnerable to other diseases.
Which of the following would make you concerned about diphtheria in a patient with a sore throat ?	When a patient has a sore throat, which of the following conditions would make you concerned about diphtheria?

if ... – then ...

In English, you can say either “If this happens, do that”, or “Do that if this happens”. In Tetun, the “if” clause comes first, unless it is a condition you have already been talking about.

Response – condition	Condition – response (“if ... then...”)
Hyperinfection is more common if the patient has been given steroids.	If the patient has been taking steroids [avoid passive], then s/he is more likely to get hyperinfection.
You should refer a patient to hospital if there is severe abdominal pain.	If a patient has severe abdominal pain, you should refer them to hospital.
Humans get infected with lymphatic filariasis when a mosquito bites them and transmits the filariasis worm larvae.	When a mosquito bites a person and transmits the filariasis worm larvae, then the person can get infected with with lymphatic filariasis..

4. Clarify relationships between parts in long noun phrases

English can have long strings of nouns and modifiers, e.g. “the Education and Training Sector Investment Program budget”. This whole phrase is about a “budget”.

Tetun does not readily allow such long phrases. So if translators will translate these phrases literally, the result is unnatural and difficult to interpret. The alternative is for them to split the phrase, in which case they need to decide how each part relates to the rest. English writers can help by making the relationships clearer.

Clarify relationships

Sequences of nouns can show a wide range of relationships, including place (“**urban** population”), materials (“**metal** box”), use (“**wood** saw”), source (“**overseas** imports”) or level (“**high-level** discussions”). It can be helpful to specify these explicitly, rather than leave them implicit.

Relationships between words left implicit	Relationships between words clarified
rural water supply	supply of water in rural areas
high priority training	training which is of high priority
private and public sector human resource development	development of human resources in the private and public sectors

Be attentive to scope ambiguities

In some constructions, it is not clear to non-specialists what a particular word is modifying. Here are some examples:

- **“preventable disease and death”**: Does this mean “preventable disease, and also death”, as two separate things? Or does it mean “preventable disease and preventable death”?
- **“the key infection prevention and management activities you carry out in your day-to-day work”**: Does this refer to daily “infection prevention activities, and also management activities” as two separate activities? Or are both “prevention” and “management” related to “infection”?
- **“a severe penicillin allergy”**: Is the penicillin severe? Or is it the allergy to penicillin that is severe?

When translators are trying to work quickly, and don't really understand the material, it is easy to interpret these constructions incorrectly. Such constructions are not always avoidable, but sometimes rephrasing is possible.

Potentially unclear scope	Clearer scope
key infection prevention and management activities	key activities for the prevention and management of infection
a severe penicillin allergy	a severe allergy to penicillin

5. Choose your style of language

In every language, there are different styles (or “registers”) of language depending on who you are addressing, how formal the situation is, and what you are trying to achieve. You should write in the style that you would like your translators to use. If your target audience is highly educated doctors, and you want a formal technical style, then use that. If you are writing training materials to be used orally, then use a more oral style. If your target audience is farmers, then use a style that is appropriate to farmers.

6. Avoid long sentences

A general rule of journalism is to avoid sentences longer than 30 words. This works for most writing. In general, shorter sentences with clear connectors are easier to translate well than long sentences.

7. Explain terms when required

When there are technical terms for which no word exists, translators will tend to take a Portuguese term, and then perhaps add an explanation. It is much safer if the writer of the original text adds the explanation. e.g. for “hypocalcemia”, “shock”, or “pathogen”.

8. Avoid idioms

Most Timorese translators have a limited knowledge of English idioms, unless they are exceptionally fluent in English. Idioms in this context are expressions using more than one word, which together have an unpredictable meaning, such as “break the ice”, “get back on track”, or “hold back” (on giving advice). The risk is that these will be translated literally, so it is safer (though admittedly more boring) to avoid such expressions.

9. Be wary of words that are easily misinterpreted

Some words are well-known in Timor with one meaning, even though in English they have other meanings as well. For instance, “since” is usually interpreted to mean time (e.g. “since yesterday”) not reason (e.g. “since you think that, ...”).