

THE FILIPINO NATIONAL LANGUAGE: DISCOURSE ON POWER

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Pride in one's national language and culture should come naturally to a people. This, unfortunately, is not the case in the Philippines. The bitter periods of colonization under three different imperial powers have left scars and fissures in the Filipino consciousness. A small but powerful elite remains enraptured with a foreign tongue and culture while the greater majority, enslaved by poverty and excluded from the benefits of an English education, have been effectively silenced and marginalized. Fifty years after the colonizers have left the Philippines, the Filipino national language, while widely used around the country, is far from being the language of the centers of power. Instead, debasing the national language has become the preoccupation of those who still think as good colonials.

And so every time there are stirrings of support for the Filipino national language, editorials such as the one written by publisher Teodoro Locsin Sr. immediately appear in the English newspapers and magazines attacking Filipino as an inferior language that will spawn illiteracy not literacy:

Calling Tagalog or its disguise, "Filipino," a national language does not make it one. It is a linguistic water cure for 77 percent of the Filipino people who would go on speaking their own language – with English for intellectual, cultural and professional advancement. Tagalog as "Filipino" will only qualify them for the job of jeepney drivers or street sweepers or garbage collectors or market vendors or Tagalog teachers.

English, the language of knowledge for Filipinos, is difficult enough to learn and master, add Tagalog, the language of ignorance, and you have Tango "Filipino." *Tanga na gago pa Filipino!* [Stupid and idiotic Filipino]. (Locsin, 1 May 1993)

Such writing only serves to emphasize the alienation of the educated elite from the 77% of the populace Locsin refers to and looks down upon. Threatened by dramatic social changes that are likely to take place with the spread of a language majority can at last understand, the educated elite find it easier to defend a foreign language than to look at the possibilities a national language can do for the advancement of the nation as a whole. The issue of the Filipino national language is therefore really a discourse on power.

Hiding behind the Mask of Regionalism

In the drafting of the 1935 Philippine Constitution, delegates seemed to be one in the conviction that essential to independence was a national language to define a nation's character and distinctness. In the words of Felipe Jose, a delegate from the Mountain Province:

Bilang na ang mga araw ng pagka-alipin at pagiging palaasa at darating na ang araw ng kalayaan. Ang Espanya at pagkatapos, ang Amerika, ang mga makapangyarihan na ang kultura ay ipinilit sa atin, ay paalis na bilang mga kongkistador ng nakaraang panahon. At ang natitira ay ang ating panahon – ang panahon ng mga Pilipino kung kailan dapat nating itayo ang isang bagong bansa na may sariling kultura, sibilisasyon, kayamanan, karangalan, kapangyarihan, at wikang pambansa. (Cited in Constantino, 1991: 59)

(The days of enslavement and dependency are numbered and the day of freedom is coming. Spain and America, colonial powers that imposed their culture on us, are leaving. And what remains is our time – the time when we Filipinos can build a new nation with its own culture, civilization, wealth, honor, power, and a national language.)

But choosing which of the Philippine languages was to be recognized as the national language became a heatedly debated issue among the delegates even as the scale was tilted in favor of the Tagalog language. Protest against Tagalog was registered by Cebuano delegates who argued that Visayans comprised a larger population than Tagalogs. In an attempt to resolve the issue, some delegates called on the rest to rise above regionalism, emphasizing that it would take a shorter time and would involve less funds to propagate a local language like Tagalog across the nation than it would a foreign language like English:

If Tagalog were to be taught in all schools of the Philippines, within five years this language would be spoken all over the country. . . . We have spent not less than P200,000,000 for the teaching of English in our schools. If we should spend only P20,000,000 for Tagalog, we would achieve a greater piece of patriotic endeavor than the establishment here of English as an official language of the country. (Delegate Tomas Confesor cited in Gonzalez, 1980:53)

Eventually, the 1935 Constitutional Convention side-stepped the issue by simply leaving it to the National Assembly to “take steps toward the development and adoption of a common national language based on one of

the existing languages.” (1935 Constitution, Article XIII, Section 3) Significantly, the hegemony of the colonial languages, English and Spanish, in what was to be an independent state was virtually ensured with the provision declaring these as official languages.

Thus, while political leaders could wax eloquent over the need for a national language in forging nationhood, they generally lacked the political will to break the nation’s bondage to a foreign tongue. Advocacy for the retention of the colonizer’s language as the language of power cleverly masked itself as regional opposition to the supposed dominance of the Tagalog language.

Two years after the ratification of the 1935 Constitution, Manuel Quezon, then President of the Philippine Commonwealth, did proclaim a “national language based on the Tagalog dialect” upon the recommendation of the Institute of the National Language (INL). The grammar developed by writer Lope K. Santos for the INL and adopted by the institute as the official grammar, however, proved to be so elaborate and complicated that even Tagalog speakers like Pres. Quezon found it unreadable and difficult to understand. (Gonzalez, 1980:73) To quell possible regional opposition, the national language was later called Pilipino.

Emancipating a Marginalized National Language

Independence did not bring about the end to dependency, the flowering of Philippine culture and the propagation of a national language. In fact, the English language had become so entrenched in the educational system that the national language Pilipino (as Tagalog was then called) was but a mere subject in the primary and secondary schools. In an effort at patriotism, President Ramon Magsaysay decided to issue, on September 23, 1955, Proclamation No. 186 declaring August 13-19 as *Linggo ng Wika* (National Language Week). One week every year since then, Filipino schoolchildren celebrated their own language by donning Philippine costumes and reciting lines from literary creations of Filipino writers. But the rest of the schoolyear, they were penalized and fined every time they were caught speaking the language of their home and of supposedly the nation’s. And so at a very young age, Filipinos were “miseducated” into believing that their culture was inferior because the national language was too inadequate a medium for abstract and lofty ideas. Significantly, the drop-out rate was high and only a minority, as Locsin himself admits, were able to master the foreign language. That minority went on to hold positions of power in politics, government and business. And like the annual celebration of the National Language Week, that minority only spoke the national language every election period when talking to the impoverished majority in English would most certainly lose them the elections.

In the mid 1960s, the University of the Philippines became the locus for a strong nationalist movement that sought to examine the roots of inequality and poverty in the country. "Miseducation" was the popular analytical term professors and students used in questioning the hegemony of the English language and culture in Philippine education and society, the lack of cultural identity of the Filipino and the continued marginalization of the national language. As students became increasingly aware of their alienation from the Filipino masses and as they sought a more active intervention in political, social and cultural issues by organizing and linking with the broader sectors in society, they also realized the importance of the national language as a basic and practical political education tool. As U.P. Professor Monico Atienza observed in his study of the role of the National Democratic Movement in the development of the national language:

Kaya kayang mapagbuhusan ng mga makabuluhang diskasyon ang mga usaping manggagawa, mga isyu ng unyon gaya ng pagpapataas ng sweldo at pagbago sa mga di-makatwirang kundisyon ng paggawa sa mga pabrika kundi gagamitin ang Pambansang Wika (PW) ang mga aktibistang inatasang lumuhog at magpalawak sa masang manggagawa? Ang mga magsasaka kaya'y mahihikayat kung hindi gagamitin ang wikang ito sa mga usapin ng pantay na karapatan sa lupa, reporma sa lupa, reporma o pagbabagong agraryo sa relasyon ng panginoong maylupa at mga kassama at ang mismong pagpapaunawa sa makabagong kilusang propaganda at kultural? Napipilitan man ang mga dila sa umpisa, ginamit ng mga aktibista ang wika o lenggwaheng ginagamit, sinasalita at nakagisnang o natutuhan nga ng masa sa kanilang pang-araw-araw na pamumuhay at relasyon sa kapwa nila milyun-milyong kalipunan. Salita ng komiks, palengke, pabrika, radyo at telebisyon at ilang dyaryo't magasin ang pinili ng mga aktibista ng sambayanan. (Atienza, 1992:69)

(Could the activists who were tasked to immerse themselves among the workers and broaden the mass base engage in relevant discussions of workers' concerns, union issues such as salary increase, the need to change unfair conditions of labor in the factories without using the National Language? Could the farmers be organized without using this language in talking about issues of equal rights to land, land reform, agrarian reform in landlord-tenant relations and in making them aware of the new propaganda and cultural movement? They may have found it difficult at first, but the activists used the language native to or learned by the masses and spoken in their everyday lives and in interacting with million others like them. The activists of the