

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

people chose the language of comics, market, factory, radio and television, and a few newspapers and magazines.)

As early as the 1960s, therefore, the national language was already being viewed as a means of empowering the masses. But it is significant to point out that during this period of militancy and activism, people were already starting to redefine the national language in terms of the everyday language spoken in the streets and factories and the medium used in popular cultural materials, not the national language as developed by the INL and taught in schools. Linguists from the University of the Philippines differentiated this from the school-taught Pilipino by calling the language Filipino. Filipino was a national lingua franca which naturally evolved in populated centers across the country out of the need by members of different ethno-linguistic groups to communicate to one another. The language was made up of elements common to most Philippine languages or what linguists Ernesto Constantino and Consuelo J. Paz called the “universal nucleus.” (Paz, 1994) While the 1973 Philippine Constitution already accepted the distinction between Pilipino and Filipino, it viewed Filipino as a language still to be developed before it could be adopted as the “common national language.” (Article XV, Section 3) The language, however, was already a de facto national lingua franca.

In seeking to legitimize Martial Law, the Marcos dictatorship tried to wrest from the nationalist movement its initiative in emancipating the national language by translating to Filipino the names of public buildings and formulating fanciful and catchy slogans in Filipino for the President’s pet policies and programs (e.g. “Sa ikauunlad ng Bayan, disiplina ang kailangan” [For the nation to progress, discipline is needed], “Isang Bayan, Isang diwa” [One Nation, One Ideal]. But with countless political detainees crammed into military prisons, friends and family members disappeared and savaged, the people were not deceived.

On the other side, the underground movement grew strong, using Filipino for its propaganda and political education program and helping spread it throughout the country. To a large extent, the National Democratic Front could be credited with popularizing the National Language. It seriously studied its use for political consciousness raising, formulated guidelines on translation and a Filipino grammar for cadres, translated political terms for Filipino Marxists, and published underground materials in Filipino. (Atienza, 1992)

Above ground, the culture of fear that gripped the populace in the early years of the Marcos regime was finally shattered as the people filled the streets in rallies and demonstrations to voice out their protest and to clamor for the dismantling of the dictatorship. Empowering people with information on the real socio-political and economic conditions of the country, calling on all Filipinos to unite against the dictatorship could certainly not be achieved through the use of a foreign language. The

language of the protest movement, therefore, of what became known as the “parliament of the streets” was Filipino. In the euphoric days of the civil disobedience campaign launched by Cory Aquino that culminated in the EDSA February Revolution, elite and poor carried on a dialogue on equal terms, generating a discourse of power. It was the assertion of that power that finally toppled the dictatorship.

Enshrining Filipino in the 1987 Philippine Constitution

It seemed but natural that the language of people power would finally be recognized, legitimized and enshrined in the 1987 Philippine Constitution as the country’s national language. In keeping with the spirit of the EDSA Revolution, and with the new constitution’s goal to achieve social transformation, the language was envisioned to be an instrument for further people empowerment. Thus, Article IV Section 6 mandates Government to “take steps to initiate and sustain the use of Filipino as a medium of official communication and as language of instruction in the educational system.” English is also recognized as an official language but is preceded by the qualifying phrase “until otherwise provided by law.” (IV:7) To emphasize the importance of developing Filipino as the national language and ensure the involvement of experts and major ethnolinguistic groups, Article XIV, Section 9 provides for the establishment of a “national language commission composed of representatives of various regions and disciplines which shall undertake, coordinate, and promote researches for the development, propagation and preservation of Filipino and other languages.”

Being etched in the Constitution, however, is no assurance that the language provisions will be implemented. Ten years after the ratification of the 1987 Philippine Constitution, only the Filipino Language Commission has been established. But even this may be considered a dilution of the constitutional provision considering that the former National Language Institute remains intact within the new Commission. Ironically, the Government that should “initiate and sustain the use of Filipino” in government and the educational system because it serves the public and has been mandated to do such is still sleeping on the job. The President delivers his State of the Nation Address to the Filipino people in English, not Filipino. Filipino is still confined to official rituals and to opening and closing remarks.

Protest against Filipino

Significantly, opposition to Filipino as the national language did not come from below but from the wielders of power. With the return of elite to elective positions of power in Government, the national language has once again become a contentious issue.

During the campaign for the ratification of the 1987 Constitution, hardly anyone paid attention to the national language provisions. But at the first attempt of then President Aquino in 1989 to implement the provisions by issuing Executive Order (E.O.) 335 which mandated all government agencies to use Filipino in their official communications, 97 Congressmen from the Visayas and Mindanao formed a bloc to strongly oppose the E.O. Lifting the second sentence "As it [Filipino] evolves, it shall be further developed and enriched on the basis of existing Philippine and other languages" of Article XIV, Section 6, and separating it from the first sentence which declares "The national language of the Philippines is Filipino," they argued that the E.O. was unconstitutional because Filipino as a language does not exist and has yet to evolve before it can become a national language.

Simultaneously, the Cebu Provincial Board under the leadership of then Governor Lito Osmena passed Ordinance No. 89-8 prohibiting the use of Tagalog as medium of instruction in the Cebu. They contended that the Filipino national language was really Tagalog in disguise and imposing this on the rest of the nation was a form of "Tagalog imperialism." The regional officials of the Department of Education, Culture and Sports (DECS) obediently followed the ordinance and themselves banned the use of Filipino textbooks for the subject "Araling Panlipunan" (Social Studies) and the celebration of the annual National Language Week. The Cebu U.P. High School continued the celebration with much funfare as a sign of protest against the ordinance. The Provincial Board meanwhile allotted a budget for the retranslation of Filipino textbooks back into English. Several translations of the National Anthem to Cebuano were undertaken. But when Cebuanos could not agree among themselves which translation to sing, they reverted back to singing the anthem in its English translation, a reminder of the bygone period of American colonialism.

It is important to look at the Cebuano protest against the Filipino language in the context of growing demand among regions for decentralization and greater autonomy in local government and economic affairs. In the perception especially of the residents of the Visayas and Mindanao regions, most of the development has been concentrated in Manila and Luzon far too long. Whereas a large chunk of national wealth comes from the Visayas and Mindanao, only a tiny fraction of this return to the regions. The clamor for greater power in the use of local wealth for the development of their own regions or for self-reliance instead of perpetual dependence on the national government found expression in the movement for federalism of which the former Gov. Osmena was a strong advocate. Following this line of thinking, the order to use Filipino which they considered the language of the center of national power was an imposition from that center of power. However, while Tagalog may be spoken in the center of power, it is not the language of the power wielders. Historically, even Tagalog was marginalized under the colonial order. Ironically, in the

Cebuanos' rejection of the national language they believed to be Tagalog in disguise, they wittingly or unwittingly have become supportive of the actual language of the center of power – English.

Significantly, the voices of protest against Filipino do not come from the grassroots. Rather they represent the holders of power themselves in the region. In a dialogue I once conducted with local government officials and heads of colleges and universities and the local media in Cebu when I was still the Director of the U.P. Filipino Language Center (*Sentro ng Wikang Filipino*) and a part-time Commissioner of the Filipino National Language Commission, I had remarked that if the Provincial Board of Cebu was serious in protesting Filipino because it would threaten the survival of Cebuano language and culture, then the Board should ban Filipino movies, radio and television news and drama in Filipino, and the Filipino comics as well. The Board, of course, wisely did not choose to comment knowing the revolution they would have in their hands should they ban Filipino popular culture products. But there seems to be a deeper reason for the resuscitation of the old Cebuano grudge against Tagalog. Linguistically, the Cebuano language is really close to Tagalog. Given a short time, Cebuanos would learn the language faster than they would English which will probably take them a life time to master. Media has also done much to popularize and propagate Filipino nationwide. Should official communications of government agencies and the laws of the land be written in Filipino, should Filipino become truly the primary medium of instruction in the educational system and not the tokenism it is given today, then the Filipino people will begin to understand programs, policies, issues that affect their everyday lives. Then they can share in and grow with the information and knowledge that is currently still mysteriously veiled in that foreign language they cannot comprehend. With knowledge will come power – the power to participate in national issues and in the process of decision-making. And this will surely erode the power-structure in which an elite minority holds the reins of economic, political and social power while the greater majority are kept in poverty and ignorance.

Inroads Made by the National Language

But even with the government's lack of political will to carry out the constitutional mandate, and despite the ruling elite's opposition to it, the Filipino language is developing and continues to gain advocates even in areas traditionally the preserve of English.

In the Senate hall can already be heard speeches in Filipino.

In the courts, several judges and justices are planting the seeds of the national language. A leading figure is Judge Cezar Peralejo who, on his own, translated the Civil Code, Penal Code, Local Government Code and the Family Code in his effort to demystify the fundamental laws of the land and make these comprehensible to ordinary citizens. Together with some

U.P. law professors and Filipino language specialists, Peralejo worked on and published an English-Filipino Legal Dictionary (1995) to arm people with the basic legal terms with which to understand the legal processes. Before being appointed to the Court of Appeals, Justice Jose de la Rama conducted trials in Filipino. In his experimentation with the language, he proved that trial time was reduced by as much as 50% since there was no longer any need for court interpreters. More important, the accused and the accuser could already follow the proceedings and could themselves observe whether or not they are getting a fair trial. More active support of the Supreme Court for these efforts would have been crucial as these represent concrete measures in speeding up the process of dispensing justice, lessening the cost of trials, and most importantly, ensuring that justice is served. But the sad reality that most lawyers and judges prefer a foreign language remains.

Even in education, a growing number of intellectuals in different disciplines are becoming convinced that the national language is an effective instrument in teaching and learning. Academics are redirecting their minds and energies to discover and rediscover data on Philippine history, society and culture and to develop analytical tools more appropriate and relevant to Philippine conditions. Leading universities in the Philippines such as the University of the Philippines, Ateneo de Manila University and De La Salle University have legitimized Filipino as a language of academic discourse. The University of the Philippines, for instance, approved in 1989 a language policy mandating the use of Filipino as one of the primary languages of instruction in undergraduate courses, including the sciences. The use of Filipino as a language of research and academic discourse will surely broaden knowledge and bridge the gap between intellectuals and masses, not make the latter more “stupid and idiotic” as Locsin asserts.

But the chief propagator of the national language has been mass media. It is ironic that at a time when satellite communications is shrinking the world and there is a growing fear that a global culture will blur national identities and make irrelevant this issue of a national language, the leading Philippine television networks (GMA-7 and ABS-CBN) are moving towards completely Filipinizing their programming. With their A-B English-speaking audience migrating to cable TV, the networks find themselves catering almost wholly to a Filipino-speaking mass audience. But they are not alarmed, considering that cable TV's audience share is but a miniscule 3 to 12 %. (MPI Peoplewatch, 5 April 1997) Total Filipinization of Philippine television will hasten even further the propagation and development of the national language.

With the speed in which Filipino is reclaiming space in various sites in Philippine society, government will have no recourse but to speak in the language of the nation. The Teodoro Locsin of this country will have been rendered an anachronism in a world where street sweepers, jeepney drivers,

market vendors and yes, even teachers in Filipino, will have been empowered.

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