

SIL AND APPLIED LINGUISTICS IN THE PHILIPPINES

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1. INTRODUCTION

Applied linguistics as carried out by members of the Summer Institute of Linguistics in the Philippines has been a tool used to encourage some of the more culturally and linguistically isolated speech communities to move toward a greater degree of communication with, and understanding of, the life and culture of their own nation and the wider community of the nations of the world. A basic element of this tool is descriptive linguistics. An SIL team initiates work in a speech community by engaging in in-depth studies of the various systems of the language, usually beginning with the phonology and then working through the analysis and description of grammatical, discourse, and lexical systems. Although analysis and description of a language are worthy goals, for SIL these studies are also a means to other ends. An SIL linguist works not only to analyze and describe a language but also to become socially adept in its use. He or she does this in order to understand how best to apply acquired linguistic knowledge and skills to help meet certain community needs.

2. LITERACY

In many of the cultural communities there is a need to increase the level of functional literacy. It goes without saying that a flow of information is crucial to a community if it is to meet the challenge of change and take advantage of opportunities to develop appropriately in our modern world. In the early 1950's when our family began residence among the Manobo people of Western Bukidnon in Central Mindanao we were often asked the question, 'Did you have to saw a hole in the sky when you came here?' At first we did not understand the reason for the question and we naively answered, 'Of course not'. 'Then how did you get in?' was the response. We were puzzled by this until we began to realize that according to their worldview the sky was a dome which joined the earth somewhere just beyond the borders of the Island of Mindanao. Since we were from far away, we must have had to cut a hole in the sky dome in order to get in.

It soon became obvious that, because of rapid change and the inevitable intrusion of a more expansive worldview into their way of life, this community was in urgent need of a better means of information flow. They needed information of many kinds which would help them understand and cope with all that was happening around them as a result of the influx of more knowledgeable settlers from other parts of the Philippines. It was also obvious to us that increasing the level of literacy skills was one place to start. We then began to include as part of our program the preparation of pedagogical materials to teach reading skills. We also needed to consider training competent people in the community to do the actual instruction. Although SIL focuses on the vernacular in its various literacy programs, it also recognizes the importance of producing what are called bridge materials to expand literacy skills to include competence in reading publications in the national language and/or a local trade language.

3. LITERATURE PRODUCTION

Literacy without literature is obviously inadequate. A community with a need for information must have a source of appropriate information. For this reason a major goal of SIL is the production of publications which are designed to help meet recognized needs. In the Western Bukidnon Manobo area there was a need for people to widen their worldview to include a more realistic understanding of space and time, and of peoples in other parts of the nation and the world. With the help of talented language assistants we began to design and produce works in the vernacular to help meet this need. One of the publications which became popular was an atlas of maps. The first map depicted in some detail the features of the local area. Other maps followed in sequence which included larger and larger areas, thus relating the local area to the world at large. The second section included illustrations and simple explanations of certain geophysical phenomena such as the shape of the earth, rainfall, earthquakes, eclipses and volcanoes. It also included a simple introduction of the solar system and its planets. The final section was devoted to illustrations of houses and buildings in other areas of the Philippines and of the world (see Elkins, Lumanbay and Elkins 1978).

In producing this and other publications, it was neither our aim nor within our competence or resources to offer a fully adequate solution to the problem of information flow but rather we desired

ELKINS

to begin to develop in the community a value for seeking information through literacy and to create an awareness of the kinds of information which can be available through literacy skills.

Our efforts in Western Bukidnon are typical of the activities of other SIL teams working elsewhere in the Philippines among the cultural minorities. Many kinds of publications have been produced (see Gieser 1989). We have tried to present a wide variety in order to show that literacy and literature have relevance in all areas of human life and work. Our efforts in the translation of the Christian Scriptures help to fill a vacuum which is often produced when a society's trust in their traditional moral order is eroded as a result of acculturation to a different way of life.

A common but serious problem among the more culturally isolated minority groups in the Philippines and elsewhere in the world is the destruction of personal and community self-esteem as a result of contact with other more privileged societies. One way to approach this problem is to begin to create through literacy and literature production an awareness of the rich resource any language can be when its potential for information flow is developed.

Toward the end of our project in Western Bukidnon I accompanied one of our Manobo friends who was at that time an itinerant salesman of vernacular Manobo literature. In one barrio I watched while he talked to people about the dozen or so booklets he had displayed and was offering for sale. Standing next to me were two elderly Manobo men. I listened as the I commented on the proceedings: 'See all these books in our language', one remarked. 'We used to think that our language wasn't any good and that we were no-good people. But look at all these books! We know now that our language is as good as any other language. It can be written and printed just like Tagalog and English. We also know that we Manobos are as good as any other people. That's what we now know because of these books'.

Because of the happenstance of history, many minority peoples around the world find themselves facing great difficulty as they seek to cope with the intensity of change which life in our modern world entails. Through applied linguistics SIL members, whenever they work, endeavor to help the cultural minorities move toward their rightful place as full citizens of the nation and of the community of nations.

REFERENCES

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