
Language and Policy: The Lessons of History

Andrew B. Gonzalez, F.S.C., Ph.D.*
De La Salle University

If one were to characterize the history of language and policy in the Philippines, one would have to state that the Hispanic period was one of repetitive decrees on teaching the Indio the Spanish language, the repetition itself a dramatic sign that the policy was not being implemented and therefore a failure; that the American period was so successful in teaching so many Filipinos the English language and making it such a feature of Philippine life that we are trying to live this success down at present in the interests of nationalism; that the Independence period has been characterized by a series of starts with apparently little or unsuccessful follow-up. Perhaps the modern language situation at pres-

ent, on behalf of Filipino, is an object lesson in Philippine planning in general: a series of starts with little to show for actually reaching our destination....

Taking a cue from some of our development economists and theorists as well as the business managers behind Kalakalan 20, I am beginning to think that the only model of development that will work in our society at least for the initial phase is one based on the Italian model, with its positive and negative features. Like the Italian, the Filipino thrives best in an environment of *laissez faire*, that things work out best when the Filipino is left alone, in a situation of seeming chaos, that our people are masters of the art of im-

provisation, what Claude Levi Strauss, the anthropologist, calls *bricolage*, that things work out with a minimum of legislation and government control, that somehow we are able to muddle through.

The implication of this is that if one wants things NOT to work, then the best way to succeed is to give them to a government agency, which will ensure their non-success.

I am, of course, caricaturing, for even in Italy, certain projects cannot be done by the private sector, that there have to be some interventions. The interventions that will work, I declare, are those where the State exercises minimal control, gives incentives, then lets the private sector do the rest.

The same goes for language policy, it seems to me.

There are certain sociolinguistic forces in Philippine society at present that are 'ineluctable', to use a favorite Joycean term. I doubt if one can stop them just like Canute couldn't command the waves to halt. The English language while not in danger of extinction among the elites is definitely on the wane. It is likewise developing a local variety that after a while will not be mutually intelligible with other varieties. The elites will of course always be understood, but not the hoi polloi.

The last inter-census indicates about 75% with some conversational competence in Pilipino (or Filipino); I predicted more than a decade ago that by the year 2000, the end of this decade, 98% of Filipinos will speak some variety of Pilipino or a form of lingua franca that is Manila-based, ultimately, Tagalog-based with many loans from other Philippine languages.

Taglish is being used in Philippine classrooms especially in Tagalog-speaking areas; one predicts that English will last longer in non-Tagalog speaking areas since it does not have to contend as much with Pilipino in these latter areas. Those in charge of schooling will realize soon enough that a more efficient alternative would be to use Pilipino more and more, even for science at the primary level after they ensure that those using the language know the

... certain projects cannot be done by the private sector, that there have to be some interventions. The interventions that will work. . . are those where the State exercises minimal control, gives incentives, then lets the private sector do the rest.

content of their subject matter.

Literature in Pilipino is flourishing; so is Pilipino flourishing in the mass media. There is no need to intervene.

The intervention, as I see it, will be necessary only in those subject areas that do not lend themselves as readily to Pilipino domination, the subject areas of science and mathematics at higher levels, and higher education in general in all areas except literature.

Here, some intervention is called for if we wish to speed up the process. But intervention demands outlay of resources, human and financial. Given our present financial situation, I do not honestly see the political will to allocate extra resources in these key areas or domains of language. What money is available will

be used for raising teachers' salaries and repairing school buildings. Idealistic professors and teachers will take the initiative but one foresees that their efforts will be limited in effectiveness.

One will then have a situation not like Malaysia or Indonesia or Israel but more like the situation of Norway and in the nineteenth century, many of the other modernizing European countries other than England, Germany and France (the languages of these three countries had been modernized by that century).

Is that so bad?

**Bro. Andrew Gonzalez, F.S.C., is the President of De La Salle University. He is also the Executive Secretary of the Linguistic Society of the Philippines.*