

OUR LANGUAGE POLICY IN A SOCIOLINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE

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The language situation in the Philippines is not so much of a problem to begin with, for as long as everyone recognizes and respects the autonomy of each language among its native speakers in their own region, and for as long as a uniform language is not imposed on the entire population for some social or political end. At the moment this situation is subjected to a governmental language policy implemented principally by government agencies. The basic artificiality of a governmental language policy is incompatible with the equilibrium of languages, whether major or minor, although it may still become fully implemented and its ends may be successfully achieved.

Our language policy now stands at a critical point. Before the Constitutional deliberations our Institute of National Language had been able to operate on the 1937 proclamation of President Quezon where Tagalog was the basis of the national language. Now the 1973 Constitution provides that the National Language, to be called Filipino, is still to be defined and decided upon. Legally, therefore, Tagalog-based Pilipino as taught in our schools is not necessarily the Filipino which will be proclaimed our national language by the National Assembly.

The Constitutional provision allows for a wide range of interpretations. One extreme, particularistic in its tone, says that the national language will be one of the major Philippine languages. The other extreme, the universalistic, claims that the national language will be based on all Philippine languages, with a grammar abstracted from their various grammars

(different from but related to each other) and a vocabulary derived from their vocabularies. The Institute of National Language or *Surian ng Wikang Pambansa (SWP)* appears to be divided in its interpretation of the matter. The Director favors a strong stand on one model for the national language, presumably the current Pilipino, while at least three of its members favor a more open attitude, even allowing for competing models for the national language. The group of faculty members of the University of the Philippines that were active in the Constitutional deliberations has proposed a so-called "universal approach" to the development of Filipino, which is in a sense eclectic in grammar and vocabulary.

However the interpretation of the Filipino national language named by the Constitution is one thing. In fact, unless these varying interpretations are operationalized in terms of coming out with grammars, dictionaries, and a series of reading materials, one would not be able to evaluate them at all as to their effectiveness in serving as the national language.

Another development in our governmental language policy is the bilingual policy in education, which aims to develop the fluency of Filipino students in English and Pilipino. Inasmuch as Pilipino (so-called since 1959) is still the Pilipino which is Tagalog-based, this bilingual policy somewhat complicates the issue, in effect propagating the present Pilipino as the national language and legislating against the possibility of other major Philippine languages, like Cebuano, becoming the basis for Filipino.

The Department of Education and Culture (DEC) has issued on 19 June 1974 its guidelines for the implementation of the policy for bilingual education, which specifies the use of Pilipino and English as the media of instruction for different subject areas, with the local language serving as an auxiliary medium of instruction only for the first two grades. Pilipino will be the medium of instruction for the following subject areas — social studies/social science, character education, work education, health education, and physical education — with the further provision that elementary and high school textbooks in these subject areas will be only in Pilipino. All other courses will be taught in English. Along with this is the teaching of English and Pilipino as subjects in all the elementary and secondary levels. Bilingual education in the tertiary level will be left to the particular college or university to implement until 1984 when its graduates would be able to pass examinations for their professions in English and/or Pilipino.

The University of the Philippines made official the use of Pilipino as a medium of instruction as early as 1971. The offering of courses taught in Pilipino has become a regular feature of each school term, but the actual language used varied in style from teacher to teacher. This Pilipino is actually being used as the language of instruction and the language in which the students are to write their required paper work and examinations, yet there has been no attempt on the college or university level to monitor, much less standardize, this language variety, proudly called *Filipino ng U.P.*

On the other hand, the DEC has scheduled the full implementation of the bilingual policy such that by schoolyear 1978-79, it should be in full effect in the primary grades, and in subsequent schoolyears, in the intermediate, first two years of the secondary, and last two years of the secondary levels, respectively. Yet one has the impression that the paucity of textbooks in Pilipino, whether translations or originals, in the subject areas concerned (as assessed nation-wide in 1974) still holds true.

The big and immediate question now is, can the first four grades be taught in the subject areas concerned in Pilipino by next year, particularly in schools which are not in Tagalog-speaking regions?

Aside from the Constitutional provision for a national language, and the Bilingual Education Policy of the DEC, a third aspect of our governmental language policy is the new orthography for Pilipino finalized by the SWP on 1 April 1976 and disseminated by the DEC on 30 July 1976. This may not be considered a major orthographic reform in the sense that it simply clarified the use of diacritics and other marks, and liberalized the alphabet to include the use of the full complement of Latin letters in the English and Spanish alphabets for loan words. Indeed it was an improvement, in terms of clarity, over the 4 October 1971 version, but in principle was the same. Also, it provides for the retention of the spelling of words from other Philippine languages, even if these words use letters other than the *Abakada*. What the 1971 and 1976 guidelines achieved is a psychological divorce from the tenacious *Abakada* and the desire of some to keep the national language to the Tagalog 20 letters. What it fails to clarify is how to decide whether a loan word from a non-Philippine language is to be spelled in the *Abakada*, such as *notbuk* (notebook), *bulitin* (*bulletin*), *bupey* (*buffet*), *bokey* (bouquet), and *tsalet* (chalet), and when it is to be kept in its original spelling, such as *staff*, *coach*, *pizza pie*, *grand prix*, and others exemplified in the guidelines.

And so we note only three aspects of the governmental language policy, as shaped by decisions in the Constitutional Convention of 1971, the Department of Education and Culture, and the *Surian ng Wikang Pambansa*.

The question now arises as to whether we have been comprehensive in the studies that have led to the formulation of our language policy and in the implementation and consequent evaluation of such language policy. One must admit that before the National Assembly is convened, and before it can declare a particular language variety as the national

language to be called Filipino, we are still legally in the process of moving towards the definition of our language policy, despite the apparent support for Tagalog-based Pilipino by the SWP, DEC, and the Department of Public Information. The latter has not only tried to propagate the use of Pilipino by the mass media in the non-Tagalog regions, but has also supported the translation of masterpieces in theater and music from their English original (as Shakespeare and Menotti) or English translation (as Chekhov) into Pilipino, and their stage production by the Teatro Pilipino.

In sociolinguistic terms, the apparent desire of our national leaders to develop and propagate a Philippine national language may be studied in its theoretical and practical aspects as a case of language maintenance and language shift. An overview of the coverage of this sociolinguistic area shows how little has been accomplished, and in some ways, how weak and perhaps futile.

The study of language maintenance and language shift covers studies in bilingualism, psycho-socio-cultural processes that relate to stability or change in language use, and individual and group behavior towards language. While we have launched into bilingual education, it is doubtful whether such policy is built on substantial research regarding the performance of the Filipino bilingual, and even here a distinction has to be made — that bilingual education makes the Filipino student trilingual in effect, if his vernacular is not identical to Pilipino. Thus, should a variety of Tagalog become Filipino, then the non-Tagalogs will have to be educated in two languages which are in a sense, foreign languages, for Philippine languages may be as foreign to each other as Norwegian, Danish, and Swedish, or Polish, Russian, Czech, and Slovak are to each other. Would education therefore be still as efficient if there would be two media of instruction, and is it wise to identify the natural sciences, mathematics, and the humanities with English, while identifying social studies/science, and work, character, health, and physical education with Pilipino (or Filipino)?

Studies on the bilingualism of the Filipino have also been concentrated on language of code switching and interference, which is of primary interest to linguists. However, areas of research which should complement this are on total performance contrasts for educators to know how well students can perform various study tasks in both languages; on speed and automaticity in and habit strength of both languages, for psychologists to determine the extent to which both languages have been internalized and become operational; and on the relative frequency of the use of both languages in different social situations for the sociologist to note the situational dominance of each of the two languages.

The last mentioned area of research puts bilingualism, which is an individual phenomenon, into the context of society, which necessitates the recognition that a bilingual education policy would have two consequences: bilingualism for the student, and diglossia for the speech community — the community as a whole will be recognizing the use of two languages in its social interactions. As demonstrated by language situations in immigrant communities that eventually learn the language of the host country, bilingualism and diglossia occur independently of each other. And it is a question of whether the DEC meant for the development of bilingual students alone, or whether it also intended the development of a diglossic speech community. This state of bilingualism and diglossia co-occurring would be one in which a good number of the members of the speech community are relatively fluent in two languages, and the community as a whole used both languages in its personal and transactional interactions. But the act of using Pilipino as the medium of instruction in some courses would not necessarily result in a diglossic speech community for those who are out of school may choose not to learn Pilipino at all, and the community may carry on its affairs without using Pilipino. As a result we shall have bilingualism without diglossia, possibly meaning the indifference of the community to Pilipino,

and fail to propagate a national language.

This touches on the second area of research under language maintenance and language shift: the study of the psycho-socio-cultural processes that relate to stability or change in habitual language use. So far, there has not been any major research project which looks into areas such as the influence on language use of social stratification, intra-group relations (especially since the national language may be based on one Philippine language whose speakers may be the object of prejudice of some other ethnolinguistic groups in the country), cultural reinforcement of the different languages, even the dominance of one language over another in urban as opposed to rural settings.

This is a big and complicated area of research, and studies done abroad could not yet show on the one hand, any uniformity of correlation between language maintenance and language shift, and on the other, the availability of higher education in the mother tongue, number of speakers, intra-group similarity, and negative or positive attitudes of the majority to the minority. At the moment, we can only speculate on the implications of the following:

1. that Pilipino has spread over the years to the point that in the 1970 census, 44 percent of the population claim fluency in it, while 40 percent claim fluency in English.
2. that in terms of native speakers, however, Cebuano lays claim to 24 percent of the population, equal to Tagalog, and that if Cebuano were put together with Hiligaynon (10 percent) and Waray (5 percent), the native speakers of Visayan would constitute 39 percent of the 1970 population of the country.
3. that the mass media in the north have been reinforcing Ilocano, while those in the Visayas and Mindanao have been reinforcing Visayan.
4. that native Tagalog speakers may no longer be predominant nor widely influential among our national leaders.
5. that the Constitution must be translated

into Spanish and Arabic, and into Philippine languages which have more than 50,000 speakers, and this means 31 Philippine languages (as of the 1970 census); and yet in the event of a difference in interpretation, the English text will prevail.

These, and many more areas about our language situation, need to be carefully assessed in the light of a national language policy that will lead to a displacement of the vernaculars, while the national language would be the "prestige" language, technically meaning the language recognized as necessary for social advancement. Certainly, the cultural and literary leaders of the various Philippine languages, particularly the major ones — Tagalog (24 percent of the 1970 population), Cebuano (24 percent), Ilocano (11 percent), Hiligaynon (10 percent), Bicol (7 percent), Waray (5 percent), Pampango (3 percent), and Pangasinan (2 percent) — would not allow the displacement of their respective languages. The conferment of the National Artist Award on a Hiligaynon writer may already serve as a strong reason for the reinforcement and propagation of that language. The ease with which Cebuano has assimilated words from other Philippine languages, Spanish, and English may be a sign of its vitality, and were it not for the compulsory teaching of Pilipino in school, it could have also remarkably spread out all over the country. The strength of periodicals in Ilocano is also a case in point.

A comprehensive view of this situation necessitates the study of the Filipinos' behavior toward language, in terms of their sense of loyalty or antipathy, their support of their vernacular through its use in the mass media, the church, and other social institutions; their feeling for the mother tongue (usually a kind of "first love"), for its literature through time, and for its role in giving them a sense of belonging to a particular community.

Two major points arise from a speculation on these areas, one being the fact that the national language issue has always been identified with the medium of instruction in

schools. There is no doubt that educational institutions are influential in language maintenance and language shift, and yet other social institutions are equally important. Thus, while we now have the bilingual education policy, to take full effect by 1978 to 1984, we do not have any comparable policy in other social institutions, particularly the mass media, the church, and the entertainment world. The mass media and entertainment will always play the market, so to speak, in that they will always give whatever their consumers prefer, and consumers here mean major sponsors and advertisers on one hand, and the public on the other. If the owner of a radio or TV station in Mindanao feels that he can keep his listeners or viewers by using a Visayan language, then he will do so, especially since maintaining and even expanding his listening and viewing population is necessary for his enterprise to continue and prosper. This then becomes a contributing factor to the maintenance of the vernacular or trade language in that area, and would be a force against displacement of that language by another.

The church meanwhile has strongly supported the vernacular in its desire to make the rituals and the scriptures more immediately meaningful to its parishioners. Thus, even foreign ministers and priests have admirably acquired fluency in the local language to the point of being able to extemporize in it, for sermons and other devotional or inspirational homilies. The Holy Scriptures have been translated into many vernaculars, and the process of translation is still going on, probably until the Bible has been translated into all the Philippine languages. To many people, the Bible becomes the most important literature in their lives, and the fact that this is in the language they speak seems to reinforce their language consciousness, language interest, and even the feeling of language-related groupness. Moreover, the same reinforcement may hold true for Arabic, inasmuch as the Koran, to be really understood, must be read in the original. All translations, no matter how close, are considered only as interpretations.

The second major point is the argument that we need a national language for true nationalism to be realized among our people, the Presidential statement to this end being *Filipino para sa ating pambansang pangangailangan, bilang buklod ng pagkakaisa at tatak ng ating kaangkinang pambansa* (13 August 1973 at the opening program of the National Language Week held at the MLQ University). Yet there has been no need demonstrated by the Filipino masses for a Philippine national language, and it is still to be studied whether the Filipinos feel that they must learn and speak a Philippine national language in order for them to be truly Filipino. Is it not possible for various speech communities to use, say, Ilocano, Hiligaynon, or Maranao as the predominant language in their respective regions and in all social interactions, even using them as the media of instruction up to the secondary level, and still be Filipino nationalists?

Moreover, if the national language or Filipino were to be a standard language abstracted from the various Philippine languages, then the question of its replacing or being maintained together with the vernaculars comes into view. By its nature, it will certainly have two of the four attributes which are useful in the evaluation of language varieties, namely standardization and autonomy, inasmuch as its nature and propagation will be controlled by the Institute of National Language, but it will neither have historicity nor vitality, owing to the absence of a body of writers and native speakers. In fact, such a national language would be more akin to classical languages, such as Latin, than to other language varieties, such as local dialects, which are kept alive by their speakers.

What lies in the future is a relative uncertainty, relative because at the moment there is an apparent implementation of the interpretation that the Constitutional provision for a national language to be called Filipino means the current Tagalog-based Filipino. Should the cultural leaders — writers, publishers, producers, teachers, entertainers,

and the like — of the other Philippine languages realize that it is possible to maintain and reinforce their own languages as other models for the national language, then the uncertainty of having a Philippine national language within a generation becomes certain.

The implementation of a national language is not really impossible; given the necessary logistics, such that the national language may eventually displace the vernaculars in prestige and extent of coverage within a generation. But this involves a massive program of translation of the necessary textbooks and references into that language; the training of all teachers in the country in using that language as the principal medium of instruction, not only for the subject areas covered by Filipino in the bilingual education policy but for others as well; the use of a manual of style in that language which will determine grammaticality, clarity, and effectiveness of language use; the printing of a dictionary which lists all the words accepted as forming the vocabulary of that language; the subsidy of literary, technical, and other academic writers in that language; the publication of literature — books, magazines, newspapers, comic books — in that language, and their nationwide circulation at prices that would attract the buying public away from the vernacular literature; the strict monitoring of air time to ensure a greater exposure of radio listeners and TV viewers all over the country to that language against English and the vernaculars; the production of movies in that language using big stars, and their nationwide showing; the support for entertainers who use

the language, be they singers, dramatic actors and actresses, or comedians; the use of government examinations written in that language; and all other programs that will imbue that language with necessity, i.e., that the Filipino has to acquire fluency in that language in order to advance himself socially, professionally, and culturally.

But would this be really needed by Filipinos? For what end is it necessary? Despite the remarkable spread of Filipino, its propagation may still be considered weak in comparison with what has been accomplished for Russian in the 15 republics of the Soviet Union, or to Bahasa Indonesia. Perhaps this weakness is a sign of hesitation in the face of an uncertain end, for the final evaluator is time, and, with the advent of telecommunications, the interdependence of nations regardless of their respective GNPs, the deluge of printed materials in foreign languages which are necessary for our own technological and cultural growth, it is difficult to speculate on whether a Philippine national language would still serve the same purpose by the year 2000. Considering all these, it is only wise to be fully convinced of its necessity for the entire nation, before any language policy may be defined well and implemented successfully.

Note

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