

*Viva kay Señor Sto. Niño!:*  
SOME NOTES TOWARDS  
CRITICAL LANGUAGE  
STUDIES IN ENGLISH IN  
THE PHILIPPINES<sup>1</sup>

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In the beginning, there was form: the sound, the word, and the sentence. Then came its meaning. But this was not enough, the gods proclaimed. So came their function: the sound, the word, the sentence, and discourse. But then, many things happened. The gods were not alone, after all. There were people who were once silenced by their powerlessness, stripped of rights to speak, and to speak the way they wanted to. There were people who lived their lives fashioned after

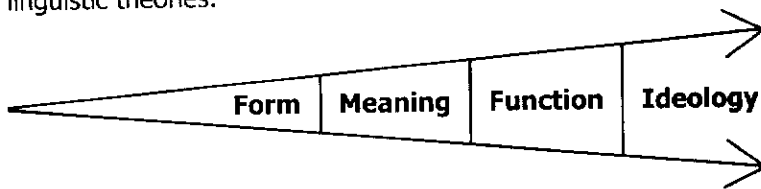
their gods, and people for whom were created foreign tongues and skins.

First came the form; then, the meaning; then, the function.  
And now, the ideology.

For the past two days, we have been witnesses not only to lectures on the different linguistic subfields, but also on the theoretical progression of concerns of linguistics. This theoretical progression was not given to us explicitly. If you notice, however, the chronology of topics is enlightening: phonetics, semantics, discourse analysis and, now, critical linguistics and critical discourse analysis. Not only does each one of them have a certain way of looking at language, but each likewise is tied down to certain aspects of language. Phonetics, along with morphology and syntax, looks at the form of language. Semantics deals with both form and meaning. Discourse analysis, certainly informed by many functional perspectives on language such as the Prague School of Linguistics, the "context of situation" of Malinowski, Firthian linguistics, and the Hallidayan functional-systemic linguistics, furthermore broadens the study of language by dealing with form and meaning, as well as function. At this theoretical stage, emphases are on language in use, although *use* here seems to be an unproblematic term.

For the past three decades, however, critical theories have emerged to study not only the form, meaning, and function of language, but also its ideology (e.g., Birch; Caldas-Coulthard and Coulthard; Fairclough; Fowler, *Linguistic Criticism*, Fowler et al.; Hodge and Kress; van Dijk). Language use, according to these theories, is ideological, and the task of linguistics is to uncover what are otherwise hidden ideologies that construct and are constructed by language. Ideology *can* take shape in language use, so we need to ask how and why such ideology takes such shape at a given time and place, and given certain groups of speakers. I would like to diagram my understanding of the theoretical progression of linguistic concerns from the time when

Ferdinand de Saussure initiated modern linguistics about a century ago. Let me caution you, however, that such diagramming is simplifying and abstracting, which is expected of any generalization. There is overlapping, of course; it does not mean that all those theories that are concerned largely with function and ideology are dated after those that deal with form and meaning. I am talking here of the theoretical, not necessarily historical, progression of linguistic theories.<sup>2</sup>



## EXPANDING PERSPECTIVES IN LINGUISTICS

### CRITICAL LINGUISTICS (CL)

The term *critical linguistics*, the way we use it now, first came out in the pioneering book *Language and Control* (Fowler et al.). A critical linguistics, according to the book, assumes that "there are strong and pervasive connections between linguistic structure and social structure" (185), and that its critical nature is grounded in the fact that "so much of social meaning is implicit" (196). The relationship between society and language, therefore, is not neutral, but that which "invites critical scrutiny" (194). Among its basic tenets are the following (194-95):

- (1) Forms of social organization influence linguistic structure and linguistic usage.
- (2) This influence operates in a deterministic fashion: social structure x demands linguistic variety a.
- (3) The process may be unconscious or, if a speaker does not know what is going on, he or she is under pressure not to resist.

- (4) Social structure bears on all parts of language, not merely those parts that are "about" personal pronouns or the labels for classes or roles.
- (5) Different forms of language should not be regarded as cognitively equivalent. They are not merely 'stylistic' in effect, but affect the potential expression of concepts, and thus the availability of concepts.
- (6) Prominent among the social structures which influence linguistic structures is inequality of power.
- (7) Language not only encodes power differences but is also instrumental in enforcing them.

The book therefore proclaims that its linguistic analyses are different from "conventional linguistics and sociolinguistics in taking as their subjects real, socially situated and usually complete texts" (195). CL moves away from the idea of language as an abstraction or idealization; from competence; from *langue*. Rather, it is interested in language as raw, active, and continuously moving; as performance; as *parole*. Language does not exist in a vacuum, so it should not be treated scientifically like a laboratory specimen. It is not enough to ask, "What is language?" We should also concern ourselves with the question, "How and why does language mean?" (Birch, 167).

Many critical perspectives on language emerged after CL (see, for example, the 90's work of Fairclough; Mills; and Wodak). They draw on some basic tenets of Critical Linguistics while advancing their own agenda. CL, thus, is currently under pressure to redefine its objectives in the light of still broader concerns in language studies, which involve anthropology, sociology, history, media and pop culture studies, economics, and politics.

Consequently, CL is to me directly relevant to current concerns of language use in the Philippines. I am talking here of languages used by Filipinos, such as Aklanon (my "local" language),

Ilonggo (my "regional" language), Filipino (my "national" language), and English (my "international" language). The sociolinguistic and cultural diversity of the Philippines is a rich source for critical linguistic studies. Because it studies language in context, CL then may help address several language issues in the country. My contention is that so much of language use in the country is not given attention precisely because of a lack of an appropriate theoretical framework for language studies. We know that we speak at least two languages in the country; some, including myself, even speak more. But, how *and why* we speak these languages are still questions that need to be answered. We must realize that our use of language is always ideologically motivated: it is socioculturally and historically constructed, as well as politically enforced. We need to have a linguistics that allows us to participate in the meaning making, historical (re)direction, and social (re)definition of our identities as Filipinos. We need a linguistics that pushes us towards sociocultural and historical research.

### CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS (CDA)

Let me talk very briefly now about critical discourse analysis, another growing field in linguistics, which, according to van Dijk, now "clearly enter(s) sociopolitical realms" (6). Although it shares with CL a view of language as ideological, it broadens language studies more to encompass sociocultural and historical practices that have not been prominently dealt with by CL. Critical Linguistics has been largely syntax-based, drawing much on functional concerns such as agency, transitivity, and theme-rheme. According to Fairclough, language should be differentiated from discourse since the latter is not just a use of language, but a practice that is embedded in the sociopolitical and ideological dynamics of culture. An instance of language use, thus, is simultaneously a text, a discursive practice, and a sociocultural practice (97). Language as text should be described; language as discursive practice should be

interpreted; and language as sociocultural practice should be explained. Since all these practices are present in any use of language, CDA deviates from CL because the former is involved in the simultaneous description, interpretation, and explanation of discourse.

Moreover, CDA is concerned mostly with contemporary uses of language, such as those in the media which are constructed within the context of advanced technological use and communication. In the pioneering 1996 book, *Texts and Practices: Readings in Critical Discourse Analysis* edited by Caldas-Coulthard and Coulthard, CDA attempts to analyze through language some changing discursive and sociocultural practices that are largely brought about by expanding technologies and scientific breakthroughs. Some of these issues include the marketization of public discourse, personalization of professional communication such as those between a psychiatrist and a mental patient; and racism and gender as depicted by the media through its manipulation of language.

For van Dijk, the "core" of CDA is "a detailed description, explanation and critique of the ways dominant discourses" (258) implicitly and indirectly influence our ways of life, including attitudes and ideologies. The theory and practice of CDA, in other words, "focus on the structures of text and talk" (259) as well as "*the role of discourse in the (re)production and challenge of dominance*" (249, italics as original).

I am particularly interested in CDA because of its broader treatment of language use. As I mentioned, a language use is a discourse when it is simultaneously a textual, a discursive, and a sociocultural practice. My analysis therefore is focused not only on, let us say, the question of agency in the text, but especially on how agency bears on aspects of society, history and culture, within which it was produced, and vice-versa.

I have many reasons why I choose to analyze the text "Viva Kay Señor Sto. Niño!", the dominant use of language as a chant in the original Ati-atihan Festival of Kalibo, Aklan. First, texts like this have not figured prominently in CL and CDA. Critical language analysts have largely concentrated on texts in media and literature, and on professional discourses such as medicine, law, and business.

Second, I am an Aklanon, thus socialized into the cultural system that privileges beliefs and practices that are carried by cultural texts such as "Viva Kay Señor Sto. Niño!"

Third, I will be analyzing it from within, probably just with a critical distance from it, and not as an outsider who may not be aware of the cultural and historical nuances of its use. As an analyst of my own language, thus, I become involved in the articulation of my own meaning of a use of language, and "not reconstructing by detailed surgery, other people's meanings" of it (Birch 29). In so many traditional linguistic studies, it was the colonizer who imposed the meanings and structures on the languages of the colonized. Although this has spurred interest in language, I think that it is also about time that we described, interpreted, and evaluated our own uses of language, because in the final analysis, it is we who use and are directly influenced by them. I am not just talking, let me reiterate, of descriptions of Philippine languages, but of analyses of their use in sociocultural and historical contexts.

Fourth, the text in question is not an English text, but a combination of Spanish and Aklanon words. This leads me to language studies *in English* in the Philippines, and not necessarily *English language* studies in the Philippines which can be very limiting. The use of English in language studies in the country can redirect our attention towards English for cultural empowerment, and not only for instrumental and pragmatic purposes, the way we perceive it now. The use of English in the analysis of a non-English text may enable the latter to make its mark on English.<sup>3</sup>

Although "Viva Kay Señor Sto. Niño!" is a chant that is heard everywhere during the festival, I would like to focus on an instance where it is actually used. The context of this use is very relevant: it occurs during the morning mass on the third Sunday of January, the last and most important day of the week-long festival. The mass is celebrated at the Pastrana Park, Kalibo's town plaza, which is surrounded by the church on the right, a major school on the upper right, and the municipal hall, now the police station, on the upper left part of the park. The officiating priest, usually the highest ranking priest in the province, other officials, as well as important personalities in Aklan politics and society, are all on the grandstage facing a throng of devotees, Ati-atihan participants, and tourists, numbering tens of thousands. The Sunday mass is supposed to start the last day of festivities, highlighted by a procession in the afternoon until mid evening.

I am, of course, first interested in the immediate linguistic exchange in which "Viva Kay Señor Sto. Niño!" is chanted. Let me direct you, then, to this exchange made during last January's (1997) mass:

Priest: Tapos eon ro aton nga misa. Ro atong mayor may anang ihambae katon.

Mayor: Viva kay Señor Sto. Niño!

People: Viva!

Mayor: Viva kay Señor Sto. Niño!

People: Viva!

The linguistic exchange above occurred immediately after the mass. The priest, after leading the people to the last sign of the cross, looked at the mayor who was then positioned at the podium on the right front of the stage, then said, "Tapos eon ro aton nga misa. Ro aton nga mayor may ihambae katon." (*Our mass is finished. Our mayor has something to say to us.*) When the mayor, carrying the statue of the Sto. Niño, raised the religious icon and shouted, "Viva kay Señor Sto. Niño!" the crowd answered with a "Viva!" The procedure was the same for the next two chants, after which would be heard deafening sounds of drums and other



instruments. After about an hour of sustained and controlled attention, the people dispersed to different, even chaotic, directions to join Ati-atihan groups for merrymaking. They would converge again at the plaza for the religious procession in the afternoon.

The text above is, to start with, obviously heterogeneous because of a mixture of Aklanon and Spanish words. This observation allows us to entertain the idea that the festival is positioned historically and socioculturally. In "*Viva kay Señor Sto Niño!*" the heterogeneity I mentioned is sustained with "*Viva!*" and "*Señor Sto. Niño!*" as Spanish words, and "*kay*" as an Aklanon word.

The priest used Aklanon when he directed the people's attention to the mayor who would lead the chant. Somehow, implicitly here, the priest — who is an Aklanon and is currently involved in the dynamics of Aklanon politics and society — "empowered" the mayor to lead the chant. The mayor, taking cue from the priest who however still occupied the central position of the stage, chanted the first "*Viva kay Señor Sto. Niño!*" to which the people answered in unison with "*Viva!*"

These are immediate forces that governed the production of the linguistic exchange in question. We see here a certain kind of hierarchy where the priest occupies the central position; the mayor occupies the peripheral position relative to the center; and the people are positioned quite distant from the center. In present-day Aklanon society, I see the same hierarchy still prevalent: the church is a very powerful force in political and social affairs exerting tremendous influence on government, while the people are most usually passive participants in religious and political governance. Of course, in Aklan, almost everybody is part of religious and political undertakings (such as the festival), but what they do and why they participate in such undertakings reveal similar power relations that I have briefly talked about. In short, the linguistic exchange above, including the manner by which it was produced, continued to participate in the further legitimization of such a hierarchy in Aklanon

society. Fowler calls this process "habitualization" (*Linguistic Criticism*, 27-37) because Aklanons experience the linguistic exchange in an uncritical manner, having been socialized into the belief system that perpetuates such a hierarchy. Aklanons did not see anything problematic with the linguistic exchange for the simple reason that such was deemed natural or commonsensical.

Such heterogeneity, thus, is not passive: it participates in the ongoing social processes of Aklan, and in this specific sense, defines and legitimizes such processes. If historically situated, the same heterogeneity becomes even more problematic because it shows how a linguistic interference in the past was, actually, a sociocultural interference.

However, this process of legitimization becomes more meaningful if we zero in now on "*Viva kay Señor Sto. Niño!*" Somehow, it is not just a lexical heterogeneity that can give us insightful views on "*Viva kay Señor Sto. Niño!*" Its syntactic and pragmatic positioning is also equally helpful, if not more revealing.

Eversince, I have been told stories about the Ati-atihan Festival. According to some stories, the festival could be traced back to about the 15th century when the Bornean datus arrived in the island of Panay. These datus, along with their families, escaped from the harsh magistrate of Borneo. When they landed in Panay, they were first met with resistance by the Aetas. After a series of negotiations, capped by what now is referred to as the Barter of Panay, where the foreigners gave the Aetas jewelry and precious spices, and the latter gave the former a golden salakot, the Aetas moved up to the hinterlands to give way to the Bornean settlers. Every year, presumably during the mango season, the Aetas came down to celebrate with the Borneans a newly found friendship. To reciprocate, the Borneans painted themselves with soot, to be like the Ati, thus the Ati-atihan Festival. The festival therefore, was supposed to have started as a local practice.

When the Spanish came, they were met of course with similar resistance that the Borneans received. They came with their own systems of beliefs and traditions, including the Catholic religion. With texts such as "*Viva kay Señor Sto. Niño!*" we can now probe into the implicit ways by which the Spanish were able to penetrate our culture and society. The text "*Viva kay Señor Sto. Niño!*" need not have existed during the time that the Spaniards first came to the country; were it introduced to us only yesterday, it would still be embedded in the cultural system and mode of thinking of Aklanons which are historically produced. My beliefs as to how the Ati-atihan Festival came about could even be a farce: but, the point is, Aklanons including myself are again positioned historically, and thus, whatever myths and beliefs there are in our society are never isolated from what we perceive to be our reality. And it is this reality, a very subjective reality, that I started to make explicit through language in order for us to see it from a different light. The word "*Viva!*" in "*Viva kay Señor Sto. Niño!*" semantically means "long-live," used to express approval or goodwill. In the context of the linguistic exchange above, however, its pragmatic use among us Aklanons is that of an imperative or directive. We are made to express approval of some person or thing. In the same linguistic exchange, the mayor had the task of using this directive while the people answered back with another "*Viva!*" whose pragmatic component was different. I will go back to this a little later.

On the other hand, "*Sto. Niñd'*" is another term which, of course, refers to a religious (Catholic) icon. When the mayor raised the statue of the Sto. Niño way above his head, the term received a pragmatic component that was again very implicitly made: the mayor called on us to venerate the Sto. Niño. He was above us, not among us. In short, the "*Sto. Niñd'*" in context also takes the form of a directive or an imperative especially when it is raised above all of us.

However, both "*Viva!*" and "*Sto. Niñd'*" are structurally apart from each other. How, for example, can the semantic and the

pragmatic components of *Viva* be transferred to the *Sto. Niño* in such a way that the relationship between both terms can be established? The text, of course, reveals the answer: through the use of "*kay*." But "*kay*" is even more strategic than it seems to be because it is no longer a Spanish word but an Aklanon — or generally — a Filipino word. In short, a local word was made to carry the responsibility of transferring all that which "*Viva*" means and functions, to all that which the "*Sto. Niño*" means and functions.

The question therefore is this: who is made to carry such a responsibility? If we consider just the text in isolation, the agent or the doer of the responsibility (or the action) is absent. But if we put the text back to its social context (the Sunday morning mass of the festival), we realize that it is the people (Aklanons, Filipinos, and those in the crowd) who were given that responsibility. They were made to venerate the *Sto. Niño*, a habitualized or naturalized practice in which they were engaged as Aklanons, or as Filipinos in general. Thus, when they answered, "*Viva!*" they were actually affirming or legitimizing the same social process within which they functioned as members of their society.

Our next question, then, is this: who made them carry such a responsibility? Again, without its context, the text "*Viva kay Señor Sto. Niño*" cannot answer this question. But given the immediate context, it was the priest. Not the mayor, but the priest. The mayor himself was also made to carry the responsibility, except for the fact that he was perceived more powerful than the people because the people elected him to be their representative. However, given a larger context — a sociocultural/historical context — the priest, himself an Aklanon, was also constructed by a history which witnessed not a merger of two cultures, but an intrusion of one culture into another through the manipulation of local practices such as the *Ati-atihan* Festival. The Aklanons, thus, are made to believe that they are celebrating a practice that is their own, but is actually largely not theirs. The text "*Viva kay Señor Sto. Niño*" is

not just a case of linguistic heterogeneity; it is not just a case of linguistic contact. It is a practice that is engaged in the further legitimization of a cultural belief system that is itself rooted in its history. The text as discourse constitutes and is constituted socially, culturally, and historically.<sup>4</sup> This view aligns itself theoretically with Fairclough's CDA which grounds language use as "always ... constitutive of (i) social identities, (ii) social relations, and (iii) systems of knowledge" (131).

My analysis treats language not only according to what it is, but how and why it means. It assumes that language use is a construction: it is not isolated from society, culture, and history. An uttered word, for example, comes to us already with its own history. It does not come to us in a vacuum. When we use it, this word already constructs our reality. When we use it unaware of this implicit construction, we will be led to succumb to its authority, to the reality that it constructs for us. Thus, we use it to legitimize its authority, history, and reality. On the other hand, when we use the same word with a critical awareness of its constructionist potential, we will be led to interrogate the word, ask where it came from, and how it came to us. In turn, we will not participate in its history, but we will question such a participation, especially if it contributes largely to a construction of reality that is not ours, but somebody else's.

In a similar vein, "*Viva kay Señor Sto. Niño!*" comes to us already with its own history. The problem is, this history constructs for us a reality that we think is ours but is actually somebody else's. This reality to many of us is natural and commonsensical; it is *what life really is*. This reality, from my perspective, and I hope from yours too, is *not* natural but naturalized; not commonsensical, but cultural; not *what life really is*, but what others *think life should be* for us. These are but a few lessons from critical linguistics and critical discourse analysis.

The next time I join Ati-atihan Festival, I shall still be happy; in fact, even happier. But as I strut on the streets of Kalibo, I shall

know that there is history in every step and sound I make. I should now make my own step; I should listen to my own sound. And, in so doing as an Aklanon, I — not the gods — should make my own history.

## NOTES

1. This paper was read during the "Seminar Workshop on Recent Developments in Linguistic Theory: Applications to Language Teaching," sponsored by the Linguistic Society of the Philippines, the Summer Institute of Linguistics, and De La Salle University in cooperation with the Commission on Higher Education, at De La Salle University, Manila, from October 27-29, 1997.
2. For example, Bakhtin and Voloshinov came before Chomsky, but theoretically, the former follow the latter because Bakhtinian linguistics insists on the utterance, not the (isolated) sentence, as the basic unit of linguistic analysis. Language, thus, becomes ideological through and through (see Voloshinov as an example).
3. I used "Critical English Language Studies" in a paper published in the October 1997 issue of this journal. I now find its use very limiting; I believe that a "Critical Language Studies in English" is more appropriate in the light of multifarious linguistic experiences of Filipinos today, only one of which is the use of English. Because the medium of analysis is still in English, I believe that the discursive formations and practices it attempts to describe, interpret, and evaluate, will influence and help determine the course and shape of English language use in the country.
4. It is for this reason that I wrote in a previous paper (Tupas) that the "Catholization of the Ati-atihan was a careful maneuvering to bring a colonial tool like a religion into a social practice to hasten the conversion of the people into Catholicism and, thus, their submission to a colonial power" (95).

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