

Beyond Linguistic Empowerment: Language Revitalization Through Social Justice

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It is estimated that at least 43% of the world's languages are considered endangered (Moseley 2010). To address this problem, language revitalization efforts are being carried out across the globe, which include language documentation, development of literacy materials in community language(s), and the use of the mother tongue in basic education, among others. Despite these efforts, however, success stories are few and far between. What does it take for a language to be revital-

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Jesus Federico Hernandez. In press. Vernacular interrupted: Investigating the causes of language endangerment in the Philippines. Foundation for Endangered Languages. Brill Publishers.

ized? We argue that language revitalization efforts are merely palliative measures, and instead, we need to reframe our approach within a wider social justice framework in order to properly address the issue of language endangerment.

The Philippines is one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world with a linguistic diversity index of 0.842. Of its 186 languages, 41 are considered endangered, and 2 are reported to be extinct (Eberhard, Simons & Fennig 2020).

Language revitalization efforts in the country started in the early 1990s but these projects have not successfully resolved the problem of language endangerment. This is because there are multiple (extra-linguistic) factors which cause language endangerment, such as neoliberal education policies and the ongoing militarization in the countryside, all of which lead to the minoritization of small indigenous languages and communities. Thus, language endangerment will persist so long as these underlying causes remain.

The island community of Babuyan Claro is a concrete example of how language revitalization goes hand in hand with addressing larger social issues in the community. The island of Babuyan Claro is part of the Babuyan group of islands, and is a barangay 'village' under the administrative region of Calayan, Cagayan. Ilokano is used as the main language in the whole region, except on Babuyan Claro.

The people of Babuyan Claro are multilingual in at least three languages:

Beyond Linguistic Empowerment

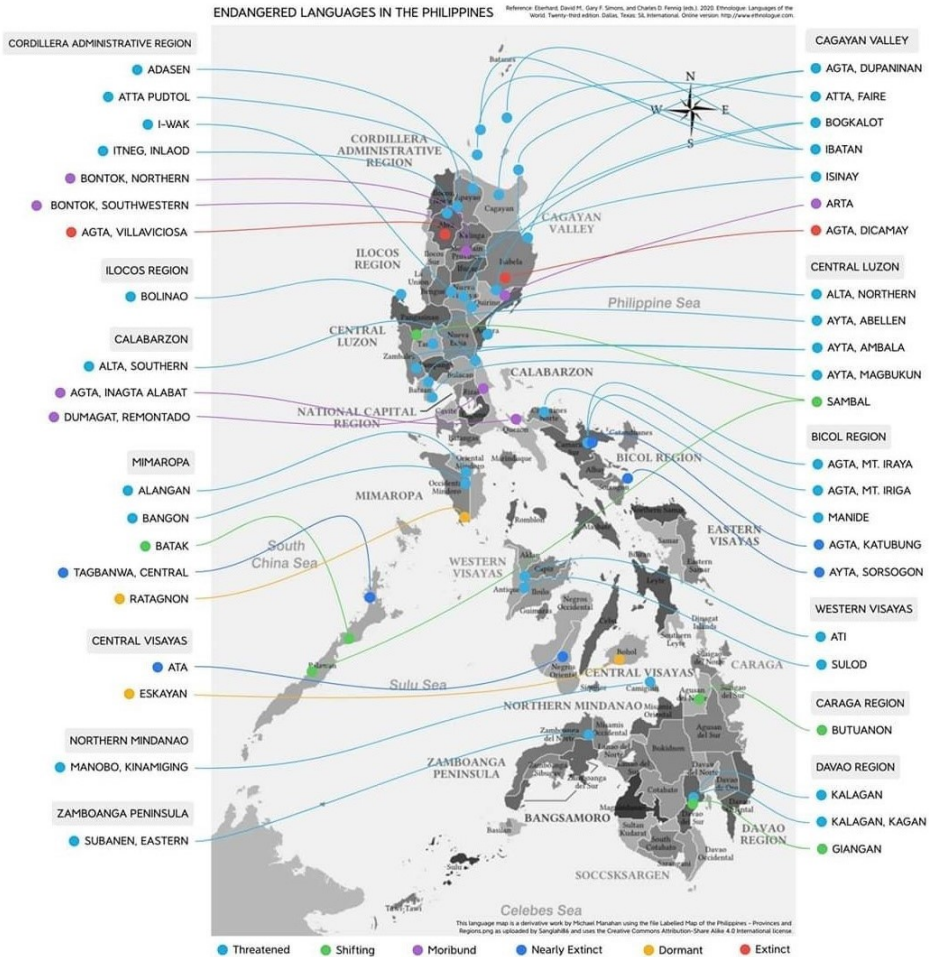


Figure 1. Endangered Languages in the Philippines

- Ibatan, the local language and the smallest of the three, which is a Batanic language related to Ivasay, Isamorong, Itbayaten, and Yami/Tao;
- Ilokano, the trade language and regional lingua franca of northern Luzon; and



Figure 2. The Location of Ibatan

- Filipino, the national language of the country, which is also the lingua franca of the capital city Manila, and is the language used in print and broadcast media.

Ibatan occupies a less privileged position vis-à-vis the two bigger languages, and while the language is still being used as the main language in Babuyan Claro, a decreasing number of children are learning it, making it a threatened language on the Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS) (Eberhard, Simons & Fennig 2020).



Figure 3. Babuyan Claro

Babuyan Claro remains relatively isolated, with neither commercial vessels going to and from the island nor stable mobile and telephone communication. The tough conditions on the island, especially during the long monsoon season from October to February, mean periods of hunger and sickness for the Ibatans. There are still very limited medical

facilities on Babuyan Claro, and in times of natural calamities, there has been little to no external support, leaving the Ibatans to recover and rebuild by themselves.

As Babuyan Claro has become further integrated into the larger nation state, the sociolinguistic contexts which supported the use of its languages became more and more fragile. Ilokano is the socially dominant language in the larger municipal region of Calayan, and so it was the main language for religion, education, and politics in Babuyan Claro until around the 1970s to 1980s. The shrinking domains in which Ibatan was used reflect the social status of Ibatan as the minority group in the region, and this is also seen in how the people experience discrimination based on their ethnicity. These overall experiences contributed to the endangerment of Ibatan at that time.

It was only when Rundell and Judith Maree of the Summer Institute of Linguistics came to the island in the 1980s that Ibatan saw the start of its revitalization (cf. Quakenbush 2007: 54–55). With their help, the Ibatans were able to establish a church, a school, the first local store, and a rural health unit in Kabaroan, where majority of the Ibatan speakers reside, and this expanded the domains of use of their language. More importantly, the revitalization of the language is diametrically connected to concrete steps that addressed the marginalization of the Ibatan community. On the 1st of June 2007, the Ibatans were granted their Certificate of Ancestral Domain Title (CADT) through the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act of 1997. This gives them collective rights to natural resources on Babuyan Claro as well as five kilometers of the surrounding ocean (Eberhard, Simons & Fennig 2020). The

Ibatans were also able to officialize their indigenous political structure through the formation of Kakpekpeh no Mangalkem ‘council of elders’ and the Ibatan CADT Holders’ Organization, both of which deal with matters internal to the Ibatan community.

These social, political, and cultural changes enabled the empowerment of the Ibatans, allowing its younger generations to be proud of their ethnicity, where they see the use of their language as an advantage, even outside Babuyan Claro. Such extra-linguistic factors have created and/or strengthened social networks that are strongly tied to the Ibatan language. As for Ilokano, it maintains its strong presence on the island, where other small but significant social networks are more strongly associated with the use of Ilokano as their everyday language. The community-level socio-political changes outlined here provide support for individual patterns of language choice and use, thereby allowing for the maintenance of multilingualism on the island at present.

The case of Babuyan Claro, and the Philippines more broadly, demonstrate that revitalization efforts which focus solely on linguistic empowerment can only do so much. It is imperative to address the larger extra-linguistic issues that surround the minority community. Cases of land grabbing, militarization, and abuse in these small indigenous communities of the country are commonplace, which contribute to the languages becoming endangered. It is by strongly pushing for social justice that we can see the empowerment of these communities, and only then, true revitalization of their languages.

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