

The Effects of Language on Social Structures: The Philippine Multilingual Scene

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The colonial imposition of Spanish and American languages was mostly responsible for their lasting influence on Philippine culture. The significant changes in our religion, education and government were made possible by the languages of these former colonizers. Spanish had the greatest impact on religion while English left its indelible mark on education. From a socio-linguistic perspective, the underpinnings of our low literacy rate and the marginalization of a number of ethno-linguistic groups can be traced to the impact of these languages. Our low literacy rate can be partly attributed to the failure of students, especially in rural areas, to complete even the primary grades because they hardly understand the language of instruction. The marginalization of a great number of ethno-linguistic groups is brought about by their inability to participate in governance because the language of the government is, in effect, still English which they barely comprehend. The use of our national language in schools and government could help mitigate these problems. But these institutions still cling to bilingual policy, fearing that the country would be hampered in communicating internationally if English were no longer an official language. The solution actually lies in understanding the separate functions of the languages, such that Filipino is for teaching and learning and English, for purposes of keeping up with the rest of the world.

Introduction

There have been quite a number of studies on the consequences of the domination of Spain and the United States of America as colonial powers in the Philippines. A lot has been said about the effect of this domination on Philippine culture lasting even after the end of these colonizers' physical presence. Coming from the bias of my discipline, linguistics, I hypothesize that it was the language of these powers which were most responsible for this lasting influence.

In this paper, preliminary though it may be at present for there is still a great deal of research needed to cover the scope of this study, I aim to show how the significant changes in religion, education and government were made possible by these languages. This is evident in the lexicon, sound system and fixed expressions found primarily in *Filipino*, the national language, and also in other Philippine languages. The discussion will be confined to situations which resulted in the changes on the structures named and which I feel adequately serve the purpose of this paper.

This paper will also attempt to discuss, from a socio-linguistic perspective, the underpinnings of some of the bigger problems the country faces today and which have hampered its full development. I will discuss two of these problems which are pertinent to this study, namely a low literacy rate and the marginalization of a number of the country's ethno-linguistic groups. No doubt numerous causes can be mentioned but I will focus on the still prevailing disunity of these groups and the far from satisfactory education of the majority of the population.

A prolonged colonial period and the effects of modernization have brought tremendous change to the lives of these distinctively culturally diverse people, the Filipinos. Presently in most cases, only language marks the difference between these groups. The continuing struggle of the state and its people to progress as a unified entity continues from the time Spain claimed the archipelago and named it Filipinas. Economic and religious motives drove the Spaniards to overpower the people they conquered. The United States with similar motives, likewise suppressed the Filipinos. In both cases, language played a crucial role. One indigenous language, *Tagalog*, steadily gained prestige and was used over the widest area. This language also had a considerable impact on the other ethno-linguistic groups. The three languages have had a lasting effect on these social structures mentioned but each played out its role best in one of them.

Language and Change

Spanish had the greatest impact on religion. Through the efforts of zealous friars and three centuries of Spain's rule, Christianity spread to almost all parts of the country, changing and often replacing the original beliefs of the different ethno-linguistic groups which the Spaniards were able to penetrate.

The great number of groups having diverse cultures and speaking diverse languages made the task of conversion to Christianity undoubtedly extremely difficult. Early on, the friars whose responsibility this was, realized that they could not use Spanish to communicate with the indigenous population and so had to learn their native tongues. They utilized the indigenous languages but used Spanish words and expressions for the Christian concepts which they introduced. To facilitate their work, vocabularies were compiled and grammars written of different languages

based on the Latin model. Catechisms were also prepared in these languages. An early example is the *Arte y Diccionario de la Lengua Zambala y Española* which was prepared by Esteban Merin. The date of publication is not recorded but it must have come out on or before 1601, the year this friar died. These publications were meant to help fellow friars learn the languages of those they intended to convert to Catholicism.

It can be said that the printed page went a long way in helping the friars in evangelizing. At the same time, it also exerted great influence in the analysis and understanding of Philippine languages, albeit a faulty one, since the Latin grammar was used as the model for these extremely different languages. The earliest printing press was established by the Dominican order in 1533 or about 70 years after the onset of the Spanish occupation. By the early part of the next century, three more presses were set up by different religious orders: the Dominican press in 1593, the press of the Franciscan order in 1606, that of the Jesuits around 1610 and the press of the Augustinian order in 1618.

Interpretations of the bible delivered from the pulpit and catechisms and grammars in the native languages must have been quite effective as shown by the widespread belief in the Roman Catholic faith up to the present (83 percent of the population today is Catholic). More significantly, the influence is clearly evident in the large portion of the vocabulary of these languages that contain words which show the influence of Christianity on the way of life and mindset of the Filipino. Words such as *Dyos* (God, the Almighty) is also used in expressions such as: *Dyos ko* (My God) an exclamation of surprise or pleading; Ilukano's *Kaasyan ka ni Apo Dyos* and Tagalog's *Kaawaan ka ng Dyos* (May God show you mercy) are popular expressions. *Dyos ti agngina* (God will repay/compensate) is how Ilukanos say "thank you," *iglesya* (church), *byirhen* (Virgin Mother), *anghel* (angel), *kumpisal* (to confess a sin or any admission not necessarily sacramental) and numerous others are part of the lexicon of many Philippine languages taking on added meaning through use. *Iglesya* not only refers to the Catholic church but is now used more specifically to mean the *Iglesya ni Kristo*, a religious sect established by Felix Manalo. The word *demonyo* is used to refer to the devil, a concept which replaced or expanded the indigenous beliefs in underground spirits which wrecked mayhem. *Penitensya* not only means penance for sins committed but also for the flagellant ritual practiced on Good Friday in some places in the country.

The incantations, ritual language of folk healing and amulets often consist of corruptions of prayers originally in Spanish and Latin introduced by the Spanish friars. The *dalit*, for example, was hung on the neck as a scapular and was considered an *anting-anting* or amulet by members of the Confradia de San Jose to acquire the 'ability of heavenly persons to move with agility and speed like birds in flight' (Ileto 1979). To this day, certain Catholic rituals and prayers are still said in Spanish, e.g., the rosary and novena prayers for the dead. Some amulets consist of prayers in a mixture of Spanish and Latin, at times garbled. The latter was learned by rote since this was the language of rituals in the Roman Catholic church even up to the 1960s. Some of these Christian concepts were simply introduced by way of translations in the indigenous languages. Others still were superimposed on the prevailing religious beliefs at the time of the Spanish occupation. The modification of ancestor worship or a shift from this to the belief in saints was not difficult to adopt. The Catholic church to this day still prohibits or, at the least, discourages baptizing children with names other than that of saints. Most Christian Filipinos have Spanish names of saints. Until about the 1940s, girls' names, almost always, included Maria before a saint's name such as Maria Teresa and Maria Martha. The practice was also utilized to get around the prohibition of giving names to girls other than that of saints. Hence, there are girls named Maria Selena after a Greek goddess, Maria Jasmine after a flower or Maria Ruby after a gem.

It was only in the schools of the elite that Spanish was taught and used as the medium of instruction. This is still very evident in vocabulary items associated with the elite at that time such as: *sapatos* (shoes), *kosido* (a rich stew), *karwahe* (horse drawn carriage), *kama* (bed), *payneta* (decorative hair comb) and *belo* (veil). Examples abound in the lexicon for schooling such as: *unibersidad* (university), *asignatura* (course/subject), *klase* (class), *maestra/o* (teacher), *lapis* (pencil), *kolehyo* (college), and names of disciplines like *antropolohiya* and *pilosopiya*.

The prestige and influence of the Spanish language increased towards the end of the Spanish colonial power. This was brought about by several factors. First of all, there was no language that was used nationally. Then it was through Spanish and the knowledge of this language that Filipinos learned of the liberal ideas widespread in Europe during this time (Frei 1959). Hence, Spanish at that time was the medium of expressions of protest and airing of national concerns.

Filipinos who could afford it or had access to higher education which was in Spanish and had entered into the different professions were trained in Spanish, making this language one of high prestige. Through Spanish, they also learned about government structures and policies which they questioned and criticized. As Ernest Frei observed, "... the knowledge of Spanish by the Filipinos and their consequent education would destroy the foundations of race superiority which now aggrandizes the Europeans."

Spain's initial efforts at controlling the inhabitants was by getting them into settlements with the church as the focal point. Although there were civil and military officials manning the government structures, the friars virtually controlled the people. They resisted or intentionally ignored the various edicts from the crown to use Spanish to govern and kept the inhabitants ignorant of laws and government policies by standing as interpreters and implementors. But even if this were the case, one cannot overlook the impact on government which is evident in official designations and titles, e.g., *gobemador* (governor), *konsehal* (councilor), *konseho* (council), *baryo* (barrio/village), *munisipyo* (municipality/city hall), etc. It must be noted that even at present new words, even those coming from English, are often made to sound Spanish such as, *demokrasya* from democracy, *groseriya* from grocery, *aspeto* from aspect and *ekspresibo* from expressive.

The United States of America's policy of using English as the official language made this language the sole language of instruction and government. Consequently, it left its indelible mark on education. It was also used in non-formal ways at educating those that could not benefit from classroom instruction and had not become literate. This was by way of radio, movies and later television. Through English, western ways and culture seeped into the Filipino and in less than fifty years, made a significant part of the population turn away from indigenous ways and beliefs with no desire or attempt to learn about the different ethno-linguistic groups and their culture. With teaching materials solely in English, the Filipino student learned about life in the United States from the onset of his schooling, developing attitudes and aspirations as foreign as the language he studied in. Students were more conscious of apples and grapes rather than Filipino fruits like *atis* or *guyabano*. They knew more about barns and corals rather than about the *mandala* or *lamawan*. They could identify with, and knew more about, the different states and cities of the United States than about the ethno-linguistic groups of their

country. Life in America became the picture-perfect dream of a good number of Filipinos who aspired to speak English and believed it to be the mark of intelligence and the key to success. The word "imported" became synonymous with "good quality" and "latest model." Being able to go abroad, and even better live there, meant success.

Christian evangelizing was continued via the English language when Protestant missionaries came with the occupation of the United States of America which occupied the country until 1943. These missionaries concentrated on the provincial areas which were not fully evangelized by the Spanish friars. Unlike the friars whose policy was to interpret the bible using the language of the area, the protestant missionaries made efforts to make the bible directly accessible to converts. Curiously until much later, copies of this book were in English. The missionaries continued teaching and advocating Judeo-Christian concepts and values, which, because they were introduced through religion, had a staying effect on converts from the Catholic faith.

This period was followed by translations of the bible into the languages of the smaller ethno-linguistic groups. The American missionaries made primers for these languages, particularly for those languages without an orthography with the hope of teaching members of these groups to read the bible. One very aggressive group of missionaries was and still is the Summer Institute of Linguistics. They concentrate on groups in remote areas using a literacy program which not only converts the people but also exposes them to Western ways. Hence, like Spanish, the languages used for evangelizing educated the converts in ways that alienated them from their indigenous cultures.

Tagalog, through its prestige, gained by being the language of the capital. Because it was taught in schools since the 1940s, it further became the language of protest and nationalism. It was primarily the language used to espouse schisms from the Catholic Church and to incite sectoral protests and revolts. A large portion of the lexicon of the national language is *Tagalog* and because of this, members of the other ethno-linguistic groups fear that this language will raise the Tagalogs to a position of dominance.

It must be mentioned at this point that another language which left an imprint on the language and culture of the ethno-linguistic groups was

Chinese. The difference though was that it was not used extensively in "educating," that is, in evangelizing or as a language of schools nor in government. Because of this, the Chinese influence is seen almost entirely in the lexicon of food and family which is that of daily living. Some examples of this are: *sandok* (ladle), *syopaw* (a stuffed bun), *pancit* (noodles), *ate* (older sister), *kuya* (older brother), *pechay* (a leafy vegetable), *sitaw* (pole bean), *bilao* (round shallow basket), *uweteng* (number-pairing game of chance), *goto* (tripe) and countless more.

Literacy and Unity

Despite the fact that Spain was able to establish an educational system of primary, secondary and tertiary schools (Frei 1959) which the Americans continued and developed, the literacy rate to this day is quite low. One can say that the government figure of 96 percent is far from accurate. One reason is that although primary and secondary education is free, a great number of students, especially in rural areas, drop out of school after the fourth grade, most of them still not literate. In my view, one prevailing reason for the failure of students to complete even the primary grades is a language of instruction that they hardly understand.

The Spanish friars, who were given the task of educating the people, ignored the edicts from their king to use and teach Spanish for this purpose. They persisted in using the native language of the different groups. Their primary effort was to Christianize, hence their main interest was to be understood. Religious instruction and sermons from the pulpit did not require a literate population or audience. But as mentioned earlier, even if Spanish was not used as extensively as intended, it still had a tremendous impact on the local languages.

The Americans, on the other hand, made use of the bible to propagate the faith and Protestant sects and so had to have a literate audience. They also believed English was the only means of spreading democracy and their standards of living. They were quite intent in making this language the sole medium of instruction, but it was quite difficult and in most cases, impossible for the majority of students to internalize knowledge and at the same time, learn the tool, English, for acquiring this knowledge. The problem was compounded by two factors: (1) the lack of teaching materials in English for the schools all over the country; and (2) the lack of teachers who were skilled in English. Only a small number of

speakers became proficient because they were exposed to the language by way of reading materials and the media delivered in English which was available in a few urban areas. Only those who mastered English, either through individual efforts or because they had access to schools which taught English well and were exposed to it in everyday life, became truly literate and could earn degrees and become professionally, economically or politically successful. Ironically, English hampered the goals of the language policy of the American government which specified this language as the means towards literacy and the education of the populace in their ways. English structure and idioms were vastly different from those of the indigenous languages and therefore, quite difficult to learn. Besides this, for the majority, English had and still has a limited use.

Both Spain and the United States colonized and suppressed the different ethno-linguistic groups of the numerous islands of the country which were brought together by Spanish rule. Both powers made efforts at unification and realized the tremendous difficulty in governing a linguistically diverse populace and hence, decided to use their own language for this task. But because neither Spanish nor English became the national language of these diverse groups, these powers failed to unify the country in all respects as one nation. Up to the present, a number of groups consider themselves as members of their own groups and do not conceive themselves as part of the nation or as Filipinos. A great number of these groups are marginalized because the language of the government is, in effect, still English, a language they do not understand. They are unable to participate in governance except by voting for government officials usually by way of a paid ballot or blindly following community or clan leaders.

The need for a language that would be acceptable to the numerous ethno-linguistic groups as the national language had to be one which they could easily learn and understand. This then had to be one closest to their own indigenous language or one of the Philippine languages. These languages historically belong to one language family with a common core. In other words, they share common sounds, have a high cognate count and have very similar syntactic structures. Needless to say, because of the power that went with it, the language of the colonizer inevitably still held great prestige.

Initial attempts at legislating a Philippine national language, *Tagalog*, were started during the Commonwealth period (1935-1945) when a Filipino president and General Assembly were established. Even if the measures taken to make *Tagalog* the national language were not as fruitful as expected, this language gained prestige as it was not only the language of the capital city, which was the center of commerce and influence, but was also the only Philippine language taught in schools. The main cause for its failure as the national language, or to be accepted nationally, was the policy to keep it pure of foreign loans. This policy was officially supported by the Institute of National Language. This stifled the language and did not allow it to modernize and keep up with advances in science, technology and the rapid cultural changes which the country has been experiencing. In the meantime, continuous interaction between the ethno-linguistic groups mandated a language in which they could communicate with each other within their regions and on a national level.

Trading and migration of the groups within a geographic region resulted in certain indigenous languages becoming the common language between these groups, such that *Ilukano* is the lingua franca in Northern Luzon, *Tagalog* is the common language in Central and Southern Luzon and Palawan, *Sebwano* and *Hiligaynon* in the Visayan group of islands and in the large island of Mindanao, and *Tausug* in the Sulu Archipelago. The ease in transportation by air and sea has made the population even more mobile and has caused the development of a national lingua franca which is the language used by those who wish to communicate outside their region. This language is now the official national language of the country. Structurally, it consists of the common core of the languages of the Philippines. Its lexicon consists of and is constantly enriched by the vocabulary of its speakers who come from the diverse linguistic groups and is expanded by foreign loanwords.

The use of *Filipino* has encouraged serious studies which have helped rediscover indigenous thought and concepts. In the field of health, what used to be brushed aside as superstition and backward practices have contributed to alternative cures and in understanding the reasons for certain failures in modern medical and health practices. Other disciplines such as psychology, linguistics, history and philosophy, to name a few, have scholars theorizing on Philippine perceptions and thinking which has contributed to raising the self-esteem of the nation.

The use of *Filipino* is gaining ground, and although there are debates still in progress as to its base and on the most effective process for its development, it is recognized as the national language. The concern for setting a standard variety of *Filipino* raises the question on the base of the language — is it *Tagalog* or is it the common core of Philippine languages? A positive answer to the former raises emotional group and regional loyalties to the local language. If the latter is the answer, this conflict becomes a non-issue. In reality, *Filipino* is now widely used and is being enriched with loans from the languages of its users making it truly national.

On the question about the process of development, the issue on maintaining the loans from English in their original form or assimilating them into the linguistic patterns of *Filipino*, brings forth problems of orthography. This has become a crucial issue because of the heavy borrowing from English in the fields of science and technology and the different professions and also as a result of imported books, movies and TV shows which have had a great impact on Philippine ways. Problems such as silent letters and consonant sequences found in English but foreign to any Philippine language have caused undue delay to the full use of *Filipino* as the official language. Underlying this issue is the resistance of those who pride themselves as experts of the English language and of those who fear change.

The major problem facing the national language today is its actual use by government and schools. These two institutions still cling to a bilingual policy, fearing that the country would be hampered in communicating internationally if English would no longer be an official language. The problem actually lies in the confusion between the language for teaching and learning, which should be *Filipino*, with a language to be learned for purposes of keeping up with the rest of the world, which is English. Understanding these separate functions would definitely help in putting irrelevant issues to rest, such as globalization versus nationalism and the role of language. ●

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