

Wikang pambansa vs. sariling wika  
by Robby Tantingco

Again, this Buwan ng Wika (Language Month), let's remind ourselves that when Jose Rizal said "Ang hindi marunong magmahal sa sariling wika ay daig pa ang hayop at malansang isda," he was referring to one's native language, not national language.

And, once again, let's remind ourselves that our native language is Kapampangan. Let's not confuse our national language (which is Filipino) with our native language (which is Kapampangan). Native language is the language we were born with, our mother tongue, while national language is the language that government has chosen and promoted as the nation's official language. Therefore, this Buwan ng Wika, let's celebrate either our native language alone, or our native language first and then the national language second, or both at the same time. But we are making a big mistake if we celebrate only the national language!

Schools should be the perfect venue for the celebration of a native language, now that the Mother Tongue-Based Multi-Lingual Education (MTB-MLE) program of DepEd has taken hold... unless our schools have twisted the definition of mother tongue and made it refer to the national language instead of the native language.

Remember, our native language is much older than the national language. We were already speaking it long before the Spaniards came in 1571. It was only in 1937 that the concept of a national language was created, when President Quezon ordered that conversion of Tagalog, the language of the nation's capital, as the "wikang pambansa."

This privileging of one regional language over the many others slighted the Cebuanos, Ilocanos, Kapampangans, Hiligaynons, etc. To appease them, the government in 1959 started calling the wikang pambansa Pilipino instead of Tagalog.

In 1973, President Marcos further privileged Tagalog by making it the co-official language of government (along with English) and instruction (bilingual education). He also changed the spelling of Pilipino into Filipino to emphasize the break from Tagalog.

In 1987, the new Constitution under Cory Aquino ordered the government to develop and further enrich the national language by incorporating vocabularies and grammars from other regional languages, and in 1991, she created the Komisyon ng Wikang Filipino (KWF) to do precisely this. In 2001, UP published the Diksyonaryong Filipino which tried to show that indeed, Filipino was evolving into a national language because it now featured a few words that were borrowed from Cebuano, Kapampangan, Ilocano, etc.

But that was as far as it went.

Last 2007, KWF itself admitted that Filipino was still essentially Tagalog in lexicon, syntax and grammar. In other words, Filipino failed to evolve into the national language that the Constitution envisions it to be.

And just because everyone from Batanes to Tawi-Tawi understands and speaks Filipino doesn't make it a national language. Popular language, yes; common language, yes—but national language? The Constitution is clear: the national language should be the amalgam of different regional languages in the Philippines.

Maybe Filipino will eventually become our national language. But then again, maybe it never will. In the meantime, Tagalog continues to spread across the country like a wildfire, burning all other regional languages and leaving in its wake a desolate landscape of dead or dying ethnic cultures. Instead of unifying the country, the national language has only antagonized the regions. Instead of integrating the regional languages, Filipino has weakened them to the point of extinction.

The government's experiment with a national language which began in 1937 should now be considered a failure. Tagalog, Pilipino, Filipino or any other language, old or new, regional or national, indigenous or legislated, should never be imposed on people who are already fully functioning (and quite happy and proud, too) with their respective ethnic languages.

Government should de-nationalize one language and empower the other regional languages (including Kapampangan) to become the official languages of their respective regions, very much like what the MTB-MLE program has done in education.

The Philippines is one nation with many languages, not one nation with one language. Why do our leaders continue to close their eyes to this very simple, very obvious fact?

The sooner we accept this, the easier it will be to unite all Filipinos, because then, we will be focusing our nation-building efforts on our common cultural traits and our common aspirations, instead of wasting time and energy trying to impose a new language on an unwilling people, because it is really just a borrowed language from one region.

Patriotism does not extend to swearing allegiance to a national language. In fact, we are more patriotic if we save our respective regional languages. They have after all existed since the dawn of history; they have shaped our cultural landscape; and they have sustained the life of this nation. I have nothing against Filipino being a medium of communication between Cebuanos and Tagalogs, Kapampangans and Ilocanos, etc. After all, we do need a common language and Filipino is already serving that purpose.

What I find objectionable is our leaders' aggressive campaign to still promote it when it's already over-promoted as it is. Every man, woman and child in this country already knows how to speak it simply by watching Eat Bulaga or Umagang kay Ganda every single day of their lives.

So why do our government and educational system still want to ram down our throats the Alamat ni Mariang Makiling, for example, and totally ignore the Amlat nang Aring Sinukuan? Why do they still want us to study Florante at Laura which is the output of Tagalog culture, when we have our own Don Gonzalo de Cordoba which is even a superior work?

In fact, this Kapampangan comedia written by Anselmo Jorge Fajardo of Bacolor is the longest literary work in the country, with 31,000 lines on 832 pages. When it was staged at Teatro Sabina, it lasted seven consecutive nights!

Another Kapampangan work, Ejercicio Cotidiano, written by Luisa Gonzaga de Leon (also from Bacolor) is considered the first book written by a Filipino woman. Kapampangans were also ahead of Tagalogs in producing the country's first vernacular zarzuela, Ing Managpe by Mariano Proceso Pabalan Byron, staged in Bacolor in 1900.

Another Kapampangan, Juan Crisostomo Soto, wrote as many as 50 full-length plays (including translations of Shakespeare's tragedies), several novels and hundreds of poems and short stories, inspiring comparison of turn-of-the-century Bacolor with England's Elizabethan Period. I will accept Tagalog, Pilipino, Filipino or whatever you call it as a national language if that's what our leaders ask me to do, but I will resent it if after getting my support they still have the temerity to suppress my native language which already produced a golden age in literature long before they even thought of the word Filipino.