

Correcting a Wrong Language Policy

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ENGLISH

I had no difficulty whatsoever learning English [entered first grade in 1949], but a number of extraneous factors worked in my favor. Both my parents spoke near-perfect English. My father was a lawyer and my mother was a teacher. I went to a private school. I loved to read and nearly everything worth reading then was in English. The "system" taught me that anything native, like Cebuano literature ["Bisaya" magazine was in wide circulation then], was "inferior." Entirely apart from these factors, I simply fell in love with the language and in this regard can vouch for the fact that most of my classmates preferred to learn English than Tagalog. How we hated the Baralila and the Wikang Pambansa. Were we "brainwashed" into believing that Tagalog, being native, was inferior to English? Perhaps. But although we were unable to articulate it then, I believe now that we also instinctively felt no compelling need whatsoever to learn a third language in addition to English, which we learned mostly in school, and Cebuano, which we spoke at home and in the streets.

I can't disagree with those who find English a difficult language to learn, vis-a-vis Spanish, for instance, which has more cogent grammatical rules, apart from being much easier to spell and pronounce. The flaw in this conclusion, however, is that it completely ignores subjectivity. What I'm trying to say is that one who either loves the Chinese language or feels a compelling need to learn it is likely to find it easier than Burmese or Russian. [And incidentally, how many actually say to themselves, "I'm going to learn this or that language because it's easier to learn?"]

I'm no believer in "national" languages, but if the nations of the Philippines believe they need one, I would prefer English to Tagalog/Filipino/Pilipino for two common-sensical reasons. First, because no indigenous language will lord it over the rest [forcing everyone else to become trilingual], and second, because, like it or not, English has become the lingua franca of regional and global commerce and diplomacy. I believe we have much to learn from Singapore and Papua New Guinea, neither of which equates their choice of English with a lack of patriotism. [China is expected to spend at least 12 million dollars this year alone teaching its scientists, scholars and diplomats English.]

At the end of the day, no matter our individual preferences and biases, the choice of which language or languages to preserve and promote [whether in schools or in courtrooms], after a

period of intelligent debate, belongs to the nations that speak them, not to the structures that govern them, especially when the consent of the governed has become a permanent, unchallenged assumption.

SPANISH

Spanish should be actively encouraged and promoted, although not compelled, if for one reason and one reason alone: Sen. Blas Ople points to the fact that in the archives of Spain and Mexico [and in a few other countries], there are no less than eleven million documents written in Spanish relating to the Philippines which have yet to be translated. This is an academic gold mine awaiting rediscovery and appraisal. This is a treasure trove we cannot consign to the dustbin of history. The prolific and articulate Elizabeth Medina makes the compelling argument that we cannot fully understand and appreciate our past without comprehending the tongue in which much of it was recorded. I'm with you on this score, Ernie.

NATIONALISM

I refer to nationalism [which many erroneously equate with patriotism, which Benjie has noted] in my forthcoming book [A Country of Our Own] as the "religion of blame," at least insofar as the variety practiced in the Philippines is concerned. In the last four years, American Samoa, Guam, and Puerto Rico shared a similar experience: they all conducted referendums [referenda for the Latin grammarian] and guess what? They each voted to remain a territory of the United States. Anti-nationalistic? Absolutely. Unpatriotic? I hardly think so.

When Quezon preferred a government run like hell by Filipinos to one run like heaven by Americans, most of our people, hypnotized by blind nationalism, agreed with him. Many, to this day, still do, equating the foreign with evil and the native with good -- the polar opposite of the political and cultural imperialism imposed on us by external colonization. At the end of the day, just as communism proved to be as evil as unbridled capitalism [think child labor, monopolies, no unions, no labor laws, etc.], nationalism -- except where it has been practiced in an enlightened manner -- has proved to be as much a blight on mankind as imperialism.

ANTI-AMERICANISM

From the American viewpoint, the American occupation of the Philippines borders on the brutal [the anti-democratic nature of acquiring foreign possessions, the atrocities that marred the Philippine-American War, the immensely unjust military and commercial concessions coerced from the country upon independence, and the often high-handed manner by which the U.S. got what it wanted from the Philippines for decades thereafter].

From the Filipino viewpoint, however -- if only because the Spaniards and Japanese were

much harsher -- our "tutelage" under the Americans was relatively benign. Indeed, most Filipinos I've queried remain uncertain as to whether America did more good or harm to the country.

This appears to be the fundamental reason why anti-Americanism in the Philippines has always been an ambivalent social phenomenon, essentially a love-hate relationship. It's much more vocal than anti-Americanism in Japan, but is never likely to reach the level it did in Iran. Incidentally, Even Filipino Americans become the subject-victims of anti-Americanism: we love you for the things you send and the dollars you have, but hate you for leaving us and telling us that you know better what's good for us. [Not too long ago the argument was posited that "since you're not here you can't hope to understand what the problem is." In other words, non-residents can't be experts. Really? The guy at NASA who knows more about the moon than anyone else in the whole world was never an astronaut. And it took a Harvard surgeon, studying data, photographs, and x-rays sent through the internet, to diagnose the rare disease of a patient in New Delhi.]

Our version of nationalism doesn't make us merely anti-American; we've become anti-"other." Alongside Americans you can include the Chinese [traditionally resented because they prosper while we wither], the Muslims [for not converting and for wanting to secede], and the Japanese [some refuse to forgive them for WWII]. A recent poll conducted in Asia reveals that of all the peoples of the region, Filipinos least wanted to "work for a foreigner." This poll did not include Filipinos already working for foreigners overseas. Internally, Filipino nationalism actively discourages "regionalism" and "tribalism." Centralist thinking dominates the political and cultural discourse. Anyone who displays any awkwardness at belonging to or expressing loyalty to the metropolis is a "promdi," an outsider, a poor cousin.

Filipinos are a synthetic people who profess a manufactured culture, speak an illusory language, and inhabit a fabricated state.