

Statement of Multilingual Philippines Network Against Insensitive and Disrespectful Remarks of KWF Representatives

We would be angrier at Jerry B. Gracio's words, if we weren't so disheartened.

Mr. (Dr.?) Gracio, ironically the KWF¹ Commissioner of the Waray Language, has posted the following on social media:

“Yung ‘language activists’ na ang concern lang ay lengguwahe, at walang paki sa social at economic conditions ng mga tao, o sa national aspirations para sa demokrasya at pambansang soberenya—ay hindi talaga tunay na activists kundi reaksiyonyo...Hindi naisasalba ng kahit na anong wika ang makatid na pagtanaw sa mga bagay. In short, kahit nagsusulat ka sa sarili mong wika, chaka pa rin ang panitikang isusulat mo kung hindi ito nakaugnay sa sikmura at atay ng mga tao”

We are deeply offended and disturbed by this viewpoint. How could a Commissioner of the KWF, the government institution in charge of **promoting, developing, and preserving** our languages, be so dismissive of citizens' attempts to **promote, develop and preserve** our languages? Is this some kind of sick joke? Are we living in the twilight zone? How did someone antithetical to language advocacy become a language commissioner? Who selected him? It is reminiscent of Donald Trump's appointment of a climate change denialist as the head of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Utter hypocrisy.

The accusation that language activists are not concerned with social and economic conditions is inaccurate and unfair. Languages, whether signed or spoken, are fundamental to humanity. They are used in all domains: in our homes, the workplace, schools, markets, religious institutions, and the cybersphere. Languages are fundamental to communication, teaching, and learning. Languages are intimately connected to identity, self-esteem, and culture. They are used for courtship, love, recreation, argument, and debate. And indeed, what languages are included in government, media, and commerce has important economic, social, and political implications.

These interrelationships are not only experienced in our everyday lives; they are illuminated by research and thoughtful scholarship. Gorter et al. (c. 2007) calculate the economic value of linguistic diversity and multilingualism. Grin (2004) enumerates the market and non-market value of languages. Wurm (Ed., 2001) presents the unique philosophies, worldviews, and indigenous knowledge systems encoded in languages. Dalby (2003) discusses the expansion of flexible, nuanced communication options afforded by multilingualism. Ellis (2000), Posey (Ed., 2001), and Maffi (Ed. 2001) describe the synergy between ecological diversity and linguistic diversity. McIvor et al. (2009) explain that indigenous language and culture is a protective factor for at-risk communities in terms of physical health and mental well-being. On top of all of these societal benefits is the robust evidence for personal benefits of multilingualism, including: improved problem-solving ability (Bialystok, 2003); memory (Brito & Barr, 2012); information processing (Costa et al.,

¹ *Komisyon sa Wikang Filipino*

² Mazisi Kunene, from *The Ancestors and the Sacred Mountain*, 1982.

2008, 2009); multi-tasking (Prior & Gollan, 2011); brain plasticity (Zou et al., 2012); creativity (Maddux et al., 2010); language acquisition (Petitto et al., 2012; Kaushanskaya & Marian, 2009); and better resistance against diseases like Alzheimer's and dementia (Bialystok et al., 2007).

The hero and scholar, Jose Rizal, recognized the value of multilingualism, stating in *La Solidaridad* (translated from Spanish), "Man is multiplied by the number of languages he possesses and speaks." These are not mere words—he embodied this principle in learning and using numerous languages throughout his life.

Despite the societal and personal value of our languages, we live in a country in which one or two languages are promoted above all the rest. We live in a country where:

- no Philippine language, except one, is given official status by the Constitution;
- no language preservation or linguistic rights legislation has been formulated by the national government;
- the government has done nothing to facilitate access to government services, such as health, legal services, and public media, in indigenous languages;
- it is illegal to sing the national anthem in any Philippine language except one, under threat of fine or imprisonment;
- no Philippine language, except one, is sanctioned to be used in education above Grade 3, aggravating gaps in access and achievement;
- some students are penalized for speaking the mother tongue, a decades-long practice in violation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child;
- you cannot get into a good university unless you are good at English and Filipino; proficiency in other Philippine languages have no bearing in high school performance and university entrance exams;
- university language departments only teach one Philippine language, and ignore the rest;
- schools are forced to celebrate the amazing wonder of the national language, for a whole month of propaganda, with not even a day to celebrate our other mother tongues.
- the government has not advocated or provided assistance for the inclusion of minority Philippine languages in media, on the internet, or in the ubiquitous products of technology giants like Google, Facebook, Waze, etc.;
- media repeatedly characterize Visayans and other non-Tagalogs in a negative, discriminatory light
- people are often looked down upon as old-fashioned, corny, or uneducated for speaking the vernacular;
- many parents, practically responding to the concerted devaluation of the vernacular, avoid using it, thereby undermining children's opportunity to connect with their roots and avail of the numerous benefits of multilingualism;
- Many FM radio broadcasters, fast food staff, and other company employees are told by their Manila-based owners that they must speak in Taglish, not in local languages.
- Very few Philippine languages are included in national literature, music, and journalism competitions;

- Pageant contestants are ridiculed for speaking a native language during interviews;
- And so on...

Considering these hostile conditions, it is not a surprise that many Philippine languages are in decline, among the 50% of world languages at risk of extinction. Even large languages, like Kapampangan and Pangasinan, are losing ground rapidly. So what? Who cares? Only “reactionists”? Irina Bokova, former Director-General of UNESCO, eloquently stated:

“Language loss impoverishes humanity. It is a retreat in the defence of everyone’s rights to be heard, to learn and communicate. Moreover, each language also conveys cultural heritage that increases our creative diversity. Cultural diversity is as important as biological diversity in nature. They are closely linked. Some indigenous peoples’ languages carry knowledge on the biodiversity and management of ecosystems. This linguistic potential is an asset for sustainable development and deserves to be shared.”

Dr. Fernand de Varennes meanwhile writes, “Language has a tremendously important role as both gatekeeper and doorway: indigenous peoples may be excluded or disadvantaged where a government limits or refuses to allow the use of an indigenous languages within the institutions of the state and relations with the public, or a doorway can be opened in both education and advancement when the use of an indigenous language can serve to empower members of indigenous communities.”

So tell us, Sir Gracio, that languages have no bearing on society! Tell us that they have no bearing on development, justice, and democracy!!

As highlighted by the speakers of the recent International Conference on Language Endangerment, organized by the KWF (for which we congratulate them), language endangerment is very much tied with Gracio’s “more important” issues. If a country’s minority languages are in decline, that’s a smoking gun for something gone wrong...something unsustainable. Language endangerment is a symptom of power imbalances among different groups. It is a sign of a favoritism and inequality. It is a sign of intolerance and misunderstanding. It is mediated by government neglect or outright aversion to diversity. Advocacy for language rights and equality are therefore not diversions. They support, and go hand in hand with, efforts to create a more egalitarian society. To achieve this, as one of KWF’s speakers foretold, the majority has to start realizing these interconnections. They have to start respecting minorities, and accept some responsibility in the current imbalance. Barriers to equality and fair participation must be dismantled. Their languages, cultures, and identities must be included into the national narrative. Every supporter of social justice should be a natural ally of indigenous language advocates, and visa versa. The revitalization of threatened languages is a form of resistance against discrimination. Let’s not belittle these efforts.

And please spare us with the “you are anti-Filipino and anti-nationalist” trope. We don’t hate Tagalog, Filipino, or any other language. All languages are interesting, valuable, and important. We love the Philippines dearly, and want to help improve it for all. We oppose the valorization of one language (or two) at the expense of our other native languages. We oppose the establishment and perpetuation of social inequality mediated by a hierarchy of

languages. We oppose the use of a language, whether foreign or native, to achieve an essentially colonial exercise of homogenization. As written in a submission to the UN Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2012), de Varennes writes:

“Historically, the prohibition of or refusal to use indigenous languages has more often than not led to the exclusion of indigenous individuals from many facets of political and social life...During the fifteenth century, a trend started to emerge in Europe that would spread around the world and impact particularly on the languages and cultures of indigenous peoples: the rulers of centralising states and European colonial authorities began to feel the need to directly claim the allegiance of their subjects, and to link this to the idea of one uniting language – and even to some extent one national culture.”

We reject the idea that patriotism equates with conforming to a single identity. This is a flawed idea imported from European imperial powers. Pluralism has been a hallmark of the Philippines since time immemorial. It is our heritage and collective asset. To undermine our diversity through the imposition of a language, without concomitant measures to include others in the domains of power, is to extend a colonial framework under the guise of nationalism. And to dismiss people who try to resist that framework is to cushion your comfortable position of privilege.

Local, minority, and indigenous language advocates do not promote languages in a vacuum. We promote them because we know, we feel, and we appreciate how important they are—to individuals and to society. We promote them because linguistic rights are related to cultural, educational, and civil rights. We promote them to correct historical injustices and combat marginalization. We promote equal opportunities to excel in education and employment through fairer language policies. Some individuals try to effect change through academia, others through political lobbying, and others in their private lives. But we all hold these values close to our *puso, sikmura at atay*.

Flippant, gloating and insensitive remarks against language advocates should not be tolerated from any personnel of KWF. They are being paid with our taxes, and should represent our languages compassionately. They should aid, not belittle, the efforts of the public to protect, promote, and develop Philippine languages. They should forge partnerships for diverse language research, teaching, and learning with organizations like the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples, Commission on Human Rights, National Commission for Culture and the Arts, Linguistic Society of the Philippines, Talaytayan, Save the Children, Summer Institute of Linguistics, Translators Association of the Philippines, local language and literature groups, and universities. They should support the right of people to safeguard their mother tongues and fight for a brighter, more inclusive future. In short, they should be true language advocates. It would be judicious for KWF to remove Jerry Gracio from his post as Commissioner, as his views directly conflict with the agency’s mandate. Since that is not likely, Sir Gracio should have the humility to remove himself. If you don’t care about language issues, you have no right to be a language commissioner! Shame on you.

*The multiple creations do not invite disorder,
Nor are the many languages the enemies of humankind
But the little tyrant must mold things into one body
To control them and give them his single vision.
Yet those who are truly great
On whom time has bequeathed the gift of wisdom
Know all truth must be born of seeing
And all the various dances of humankind are beautiful
They are enriched by the great songs of our planet.²*

² Mazisi Kunene, from *The Ancestors and the Sacred Mountain*, 1982.