

FORUM KRITIKA

THE NEW CHALLENGE OF THE MOTHER TONGUES: THE FUTURE OF PHILIPPINE POSTCOLONIAL LANGUAGE POLITICS

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Abstract

For much of postcolonial language politics around the world, the fight has largely been between a foreign (read: colonial) language and (a) dominant local language(s). This is true in the Philippines where the debates have focused on English and Filipino, the Tagalog-based national language. In recent years, however, the mother tongues have posed a challenge to the ideological structure of the debates. Although local languages have long been acknowledged as positively contributing to the enhancement of learning in school, they have been co-opted mostly as a nationalist argument against English, American (neo)colonialism and imperialist globalization. The current initiatives to establish mother tongue-based education reconfigure the terms of engagement in Philippine postcolonial language politics: it must account for the fact that the mother tongues could be the rightful media of instruction. In the process, it must tease out issues concerning the decoupling of Filipino as the national language and Filipino as a/the medium of instruction, and deal with the politics of inclusion and exclusion in “bilingual” and “multilingual” education. Nevertheless, this paper ends with a general critique of language debates in the country, arguing that “content” has been sidelined in much of the discussion. The future of postcolonial language politics in the Philippines should not be about language per se, but about how the entanglements of language with the larger (neo)colonial infrastructures of education where medium, substance and structures are needed to advance the nationalist imagining of the multilingual nation.

Keywords

Alternative Learning System (ALS), Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Instruction (MLE), national language, politics of education

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INTRODUCTION

If one is to take stock of work done in postcolonial language politics around the world (e.g., debates, policy-making practices, research), the problem has been expressed essentially in terms of the tension between imperialist languages and local languages (Watson; Clayton; Ramanathan).

More often than not, the question has either been how to de-center the colonial/imperial languages from social life or how to slowly (re)introduce the mother tongues into the centers of power in society such as political governance and the educational system.

In this paper, the role of mother tongues in Philippine postcolonial language politics will be explored. Specifically, it will trace the reconfiguring of language politics in the country in recent years through an investigation of a range of mother tongue initiatives and discourses from national-level policy debates to grassroots projects around the country. The paper will show that, while the argument for mother tongues in education and social development is definitely not new, recent multi-sectoral, multi-level work in the area has opened up possibilities of a different discursive configuration of language politics in the country. These are the displacement of English and Filipino as media of instruction, the decoupling of Filipino as national language and as medium of instruction, and the re-mapping of the “nation” through the supposedly more inclusive mother tongues. The paper, however, also argues that postcolonial language politics in the Philippines should not be about language per se, but about the entanglements of language with the larger (neo)colonial infrastructures of education where medium, substance and structures are needed to advance the nationalist imagining of the multilingual nation.

MOTHER TONGUE INSTRUCTION AROUND THE WORLD

The literature on the use of the mother tongues or the first languages of learners has been overwhelmingly positive (Thomas). The Global Monitoring Report of UNESCO (Education for All) summarizes the rich field thus far:

The choice of the language of instruction used in school is of utmost importance. Initial instruction in the learner’s first language improves learning outcomes and reduces subsequent grade repetition and dropout rates. (17)

However, this seemingly unproblematic fact about mother tongues becomes a highly politicized argument if it is located in specific sociopolitical contexts. Indeed, the role of mother tongues in society and education depends on whose society and education we are talking about. Benson, for example, notes that in many ex-British colonies mother tongue schooling has been a historical by-product of separate and unequal development, for example the institutionalization of Bantu education during the apartheid era of South Africa, although pedagogical strategies emerging from this discriminatory practice have become potential agents of change towards equitable education. Similarly, mother tongues have served as compensatory tools to reverse the

trend of illiteracy and high school dropout rates in many marginalized communities and countries around the world, for example in Guatemala where only less than half of its rural Maya language-speaking population is enrolled in school and further half drops out after first grade.

Moreover, still according to Benson, mother tongues have also served as representations of new political ideologies of many societies around the world, for example the explicit political valuing of pluralism in the constitutions of Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam and Indonesia; while clearly educational development objectives drive the institutionalization of mother tongue instruction such as the ones used in Mozambique, Nigeria, Cambodia and Papua New Guinea.

The point here is that, while mother tongue instruction has proved to be pedagogically sound, its valuing differs across communities and societies. The many layers of ideology and politics which undergird it reveal, in particular, a specific politics of language and education and, in general, a sociopolitical landscape characterized by tension between inclusionary and exclusionary policies. Mother tongue instruction does not and cannot happen in a vacuum; even as it argues for its superiority over other modes of instruction, it is enmeshed in many other social issues. Unpacking these issues surrounding mother tongue instruction can reveal rich information about postcolonial language politics in many societies today.

MOTHER TONGUE INSTRUCTION IN THE PHILIPPINES

Recent initiatives on mother tongues revolve around *Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education* or MLE. It was institutionalized on July 14, 2009 through Order No. 74 of the Department of Education (DepEd), therefore it is believed to have supplanted the country's bilingual education policy (English and Filipino as media of instruction) which has been in place for close to three decades now. The difference between MLE and bilingual policy can be understood essentially in terms of which languages should be the media of instruction. Philippine bilingual education requires English and Filipino, the national language, as media of instruction depending on which subjects are being taught (see Gonzalez; Luzares). MLE, on the other hand, pushes for the mother tongues of students as media of instruction in all subjects. Currently, however, the debates seem to be limited to MLE and bilingual policy issues in the primary grades.

Order No. 74 is based explicitly on assumptions about the "superiority" of the use of mother tongues in education based on successful projects and empirical research which include the *Lingua Franca Project* of DepEd begun in 1999, an immediate precursor of MLE; the longitudinal study of the *Lubuagan Experiment* (Walter and Dekker; Dekker and Young) which showed that the educational performance of Primary 1-3 pupils taught in the local language outperformed those taught in English; and the DepEd study (e.g., Lim and Giron) which affirmed international studies

showing that pupils taught mathematics in their mother tongues performed relatively well in international tests.

Support for MLE (though limited to primary education as earlier mentioned) has come from a diverse range of sectors in Philippine society, creating an increasingly coalescing network of initiatives and alliances working for various levels of advocacy for mother tongue instruction, such as macrosystem values, policies and funding, research, and training and resources (Ball). There is currently a pending bill in congress supporting the vision of MLE. It is entitled “The Multilingual Education and Literacy Act of 2008” filed by Valenzuela Representative Magtanggol Gunigundo founded on similar premises as the DepEd Order No. 74. An opposing bill, also known as House Bill 4701 or the “Gullas Bill” (after its main sponsor Rep. Eduardo Gullas of the First District of Cebu), filed in 2006 but which has evolved into several versions through the years, attempts to re-instate the use of English as the sole medium of instruction in all levels of the educational system. This English-only bill currently has the support of the large majority of the members of the House of Representatives. The opposing bills (English versus the mother tongues as medium of instruction) deviate from past frames of debates in Philippine Congress during which the fight was mainly between English and Filipino.

Similarly based on the same assumptions about the superiority of mother tongues in the facilitation of effective learning in schools, several individuals, government agencies, and professional organizations have also taken an unwavering stand in favor of MLE. These include the Philippine Business for Education, Komisyon sa Wikang Filipino and the Linguistic Society of the Philippines. But what is perhaps more meaningful are the many regional, provincial and school-based initiatives to implement the MLE. These include the National Training of Trainors (TOT) spearheaded by the Department of Education, the formation of new coalitions such as Akademyang Bisaya Inc (ABI), and the holding of significant conferences such as the 1st Philippine Conference-Workshop on Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education sponsored by the 170+ Talaytayan MLE Consortium in Cagayan de Oro City and the MLE-themed Annual Conference and General Assembly of the Linguistic Society of the Philippines in Metro Manila, both in 2010.

It must be highlighted, however, that the MLE framework is really not new (see UNESCO *The Use of Vernacular Language*). As will be discussed in a section below, mother tongue instruction has been vigorously pursued in non-formal/indigenous/minority schools in the country. The mother tongues in these schools have not only served as tools for effective learning, but also as channels for the expression and affirmation of local cultures and identities. These uses of the mother tongues have rarely been questioned because of possibly at least two reasons. The first is that the MLE framework in these places has usually been a part of a larger framework of social and community development where the mother tongues are the “natural”: choice; the second is that it has been used

“outside” the mainstream education system where the bilingual education policy was put in place (Canieso-Doronila “The Emergence of Schools”; Tupas “Kalayagan”; Dekker and Young).

THE MOTHER TONGUE ARGUMENT THEN AND NOW

The “mother tongue argument” simply means the argument that mother tongues facilitate learning more effectively than non-local media of instruction based on empirical research (Cummins “Bilingual”; “Language”). This argument, however, takes on highly political and ideological dimensions if contextualized in specific situations and periods of time.

For example, the mother tongue argument in the Philippines has largely been used as part of the political ammunition against so-called imperialist English in Philippine classrooms (Tupas “Bourdieu”) which, thus, must be replaced with Filipino, the national language. In other words, Filipino was packaged as “the mother tongue” which was superior to English, “the second language” (Fuentes and Mojica 54) in terms of facilitating better learning outcomes in school. Moreover, this local national language as “mother tongue” also represented the values, cultures, and dreams of the Filipino people, a role which English, being a foreign and colonial language, presumably could not assume (Tupas “Back to Class”). In short, historically the national language as mother tongue was used as one argument for the re-examination of the dominant role of English in “mainstream” Philippine education and society, especially in the light of the decolonizing and anti-elite agenda of different sectors in the country (Tollefson; R. Constantino) and the heightening of liberalizing infrastructures of neocolonialist globalization within which English serves as the major lingua franca (Ordoñez).

In the process, this argument provided a broad framework for the use of Filipino, the national language, as medium of instruction leading to the institutionalization of bilingual education in the early 1970s where English and Filipino would be used as media of instruction in particular subjects in school (Luzares; Gonzalez). Therefore, the terms of engagement in postcolonial language politics meant that the fight would be between English and P/Filipino, with the latter forming “part of the cultural project on the development of a nationalist consciousness” (Sugbo 5). Meanwhile, the rest of the mother tongues were “being completely lost from sight” (Smolicz 98) relegated to secondary roles to play in literacy development and in the imagining of the nation; or, were left to be used in MLE-based schools for marginalized communities such as minority ethno-linguistic groups (Dekker and Young; Hohulin).

Recent MLE-related articulations also draw on the effectiveness of mother tongue instruction. However, instead of arguing for the use of Filipino, the national language, as a/the medium of instruction by virtue of it being a mother tongue, these articulations push the mother tongue

argument further by arguing that, if indeed mother tongues are more effective tools of learning, then they should be the media of instruction, not English and/or Filipino. If Tagalog-based Filipino happens to be the mother tongue of a particular community of students, it should also be the medium of instruction for this group of students. It is this push for mother tongues as languages of education which has posed a new challenge to existing configurations of issues related to language politics in the country.

THE NEW CHALLENGE OF MOTHER TONGUES

Thus, while there is indeed nothing new with the assumptions of recent MLE work which argue that empirical research since the 1950s has consistently affirmed the positive contributions of mother tongues to learning in Philippine classrooms (see UNESCO), the same argument used earlier to rally support for the national language as medium of instruction is now deployed more vigorously to argue for the use of the mother tongues as media of instruction. The argument draws on the fact that Filipino is not the mother tongue of most Filipinos, thus its use as medium of instruction (together with English) still marginalizes those who do not speak it as their first language as has, in fact, been empirically proven in research. If the superiority of the mother tongues in education is brought to its logical conclusion, then indeed the first or local languages of communities, provinces and regions should be the languages of instruction.

The Displacement of English and Filipino as Media of Instruction

Perhaps the most obvious implication here is the displacement of English and Filipino as media of instruction at least in primary schools. This is one reason why DepEd Order No. 74 is believed to have both supplanted the official bilingual education policy of the country which has been in place for almost three decades now, and ushered in the possibility of a multilingual education in the Philippines. Whether MLE succeeds in the end still remains to be seen because of the many challenges it must hurdle (Nolasco), but one factor that needs to be recognized is that MLE claims to be additive (as opposed to subtractive) in its approach to multilingual education. That is, MLE does not treat multilingualism as a problem to be solved (Cummins “Bilingual”; “Language”) but as a resource which can be tapped into in educating Filipino pupils.

Thus, while English and Filipino are displaced as media of instruction, they remain important languages that must be taught as subjects in school. In its most idealistic account, MLE envisions the flourishing of all languages in society through their promotion in school both as media of instruction and as subjects to be learned. MLE claims, for example, that its framework allows for a

more efficient learning of English and Filipino as subjects in school. The Lubuagan experiment has shown that primary pupils taught English through the mother tongue performed better in official government tests (in English) than those who were taught English through English. Similarly, Nolasco reiterates the importance of teaching Filipino as the national language through the mother tongues of pupils across the country. Thus, MLE claims that its framework not only supports the learning of both English and Filipino, but more importantly it can lead to more improved and successful learning of both languages. It only displaces these languages as media of instruction in primary grades but not as important languages of education and society.

The Decoupling of Filipino as National Language and as Medium of Instruction

A less obvious and less discussed implication of MLE is the decoupling of the twin issues of national language and medium of instruction. The status of Filipino as the national language has changed through the years, especially because its role as the country's *inter*-national lingua franca is increasingly becoming an undeniable fact to many, if not most Filipinos. Despite high-profile opposition to it even in recent years, the sentiment on the ground seems to have shifted in favor of the acceptance of Tagalog-based Filipino as the country's national language (Espiritu; Kobari). This shift could also relate to the fact that Filipino is widely used as the language of communication among Filipinos in the country and abroad.

A bigger problem, however, emerges if this "fact" about Filipino as the local lingua franca of the nation is used to argue for its (continuing) institutionalization as medium of instruction. If the mother tongues under the MLE framework are to serve as media of instruction because of the now familiar argument about their superiority in the facilitation of learning, then Filipino should cease to be a medium of instruction except in places where it is the mother tongue of majority of learners. MLE, therefore, de-links the national language question from the issue of medium of instruction. Filipino as the national language need not be a/the medium of instruction; to put it in another way, Filipino can still remain the national language even if it ceases to be a medium of instruction.

The Re-Mapping of the Nation through the Mother Tongues

The third implication of MLE is the possibility of re-mapping the nation through mother tongue instruction. But to fully understand this point, we need to locate multilingual education within the broader politics of education in the country.

First, aside from the fact that the essential argument upon which MLE is based is not really new, its implementation is also not novel. While the "bilingual debate" (between English and

Filipino) was raging on for decades, and while part of Filipino's legitimacy as national language and medium of instruction was based on the mother tongue argument as discussed above, the MLE framework had actually been put in place in many non-formal/indigenous/minority primary schools across the country (Dekker and Young; Hohulin). Therefore, what the recent DepEd Order No. 76 attempts to accomplish is to "mainstream" mother tongue instruction in formal, arguably non-marginalized, schools across the country where bilingual education has been the dominant framework.

A specific case in point is the institutionalization of the Alternative Learning System (ALS) Curriculum for Indigenous Peoples (IPs) Education through DepEd Order No. 101 issued on September 14, 2010. This laudable effort to develop a curriculum to respond to the needs of indigenous communities began in 2006 and was prepared with the help of the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) and various indigenous cultural communities (ICCs). The learning competencies are based on the nationwide ALS curriculum, but the content is drawn from the Indigenous Peoples Right Act of 1997 which means that the content should be responsive to the specific needs and desires of indigenous communities and which can be modified further as it is used by different groups of IPs.

A key feature of the ALS curriculum – which differentiates it from the formal bilingual education curriculum – is the multilingual support provided by learning resources which are written in the mother tongues. The curriculum, in other words is framed within an MLE approach to education where the mother tongues, not English and Filipino, are the media of instruction through which identities are created and/or sustained. Indeed, while this "may be a positive development" (Sayed 25), the ALS curriculum is by itself not part of formal bilingual education and mainstreaming it into formal education is very difficult because of lack of certification and equivalency. "The danger," continues Sayed, "is that the ALS is seen as a second-best separate education track for indigenous peoples" (25).

Thus, while national imagining was envisioned by bilingual education through the use of the national language as medium of instruction to foster national unity and develop a sense of national consciousness (Sibayan and Gonzalez), people from minority or indigenous communities were, and perhaps still are, not part of this collective imagining. In a sense, many schools in marginalized minority communities have got it "right" through the mother tongue argument which has also been fundamentally espoused by bilingual education in its accommodation of Filipino as a medium of instruction. Yet in the process of getting it "right," the mother tongues have also been marginalized by bilingual education. In reality, then, there have in fact been two strands of education in the country for at least three decades now – the "mainstream" bilingual strand and the "non-mainstream" multilingual strand.

The issue in this case is not simply the fundamental mother tongue argument (which almost everyone does not seem to question), but the possibility of mainstreaming MLE in so-called formal education platforms. While the resistance is more explicitly about the need to sustain the efforts of the national language project in fostering national unity and national consciousness among Filipinos, the MLE challenge to bilingual education surfaces the covert ideological boundaries between those who are included and excluded in the collective imagining of the nation.

THE FUTURE DEBATES

Indeed, the new challenge of mother tongues requires new terms of engagement in postcolonial language politics in the country. As discussed in the earlier section, debates on language must account for the fact that the mother tongues could be the rightful media of instruction if the argument on their superiority in the facilitation of learning is pushed to its logical conclusion (Smolicz). In the process, the debates should attempt to tease out issues concerning Filipino as the national language and Filipino as a/the medium of instruction; can we speak of Filipino as the national language without necessarily speaking of it as a language of instruction? Moreover, it is also imperative for postcolonial language debates to deal with the politics of inclusion and exclusion in Philippine education. Who can imagine the nation through bilingual or multilingual education? And to widen the field of inquiry even further, does imagining through the mother tongues translate to puncturing (or perhaps broadening of) the social base of the (re) production of knowledge and power in country, usually dominated by those who are fluent in both Filipino and English? Can this begin with assertive or disruptive voices made audible through the mother tongues? (See Ileteo; Rafael; Villareal.)

Thus, put together, how can a nationalist language argument, firmly grounded on the need for a national language to foster a national unity and a collective imagining of the nation, grapple with this challenge of the mother tongues? Can the mother tongues serve as the bulwark of nationalist ideals, capable of uniting the nation through a more inclusive politics of education? After all, the “telling and the re-telling of the narratives of demons and saviours of a people,” dominant themes in Hiligaynon literature, is also “to engage in imagining the nation” (Villareal 65). Perhaps then even a more fundamental question should be this: do we need a national language?

There are, however, more questions that need to be asked, the most critical of which is perhaps the issue of content in Philippine education. If we scrutinize the network of issues concerning bilingual and multilingual education in the country, much discussion revolves around the (re)placement and (dis)placement of languages in schools as part of the country’s struggle with its (neo)colonial legacies. This does not mean that the role of content has not been part of the

discussion; in the early 1960s and 1970s, the “mis-education” of the Filipino people (R. Constantino) was at the core of the nationalist argument against English and, in a more general sense, against the endemic colonial trappings of Philippine society. The bilingual education policy of 1974 thus became the first formal education platform to accommodate a local language, P/Filipino, as a medium of instruction, together with English, as a political solution to the enduring problem of (neo)colonialism in the country. Yet, the same bilingual education infrastructure was used by the Marcos dictatorship to consolidate its power through the propagation of its myths and through the institutionalization of neoliberal “manpower” programs put in place by its acquiescence to dictates of US-led global economic institutions such as the World Bank (Bello, Kinley, and Elinson; Schirmer and Shalom).

Similarly, at the same time when bilingual education was re-affirmed and Filipino was installed as the national language in the post-Marcos 1987 Constitution, Philippine education continued to be plagued by imperialist content. In a pioneering research, Canieso-Doronilla (*The Limits of Education Change* 74) found among pupil-subjects of her study an absence of ethnocentric affiliation with Filipino nationality, pride of country, support of nationalism before internationalism/globalism, and commitment to decolonization and national self-reliance. Canieso-Doronilla concludes that it “is fair to say that the young respondents have as yet no conception of what it means to be a Filipino, identifying instead with the characteristics and interests of other nationalities, particularly American” (74) (see also Mulder; L. Constantino). In short, postcolonial language politics must take into greater consideration the role of content in Philippine education.

CONCLUSION

As late as 2003 during which former President Gloria Arroyo issued a memorandum that would put English back as the “sole” medium of instruction in the country, the issues raised did not substantially advance the ideological structure of the debates. Those in favor of English as the main language of instruction justified it on grounds that English is the language of globalization, social mobility and global competitiveness; those against it (thus in favor of the “bilingual” status quo) argued that Filipino, the mother tongue and the national language, would be more effective in facilitating learning among pupils and in fostering national unity and a nationalist consciousness. The charge against Filipino came from “non-Tagalog” critics who claimed that Filipino is divisive and is indicative of Tagalog imperialism. The ideological genealogies of these arguments can be traced back to the linguistic battles of the 1930s, early 1970s, and mid 1980s during which questions about national language and medium of instruction framed the debates. In all of these, the “mother tongue” argument was central to many positions.

The recent challenge of the mother tongues, however, substantially reconfigures the terms of engagement in postcolonial language politics. *Who* can imagine the nation and *how* can this be done through bilingual (English and Filipino, the national language) or multilingual education (MLE)? Crucially, it is also important not to forget the polemics of content vis-à-vis the role of language in the reconfiguration of such politics. It should likewise account for *what* can be imagined in the unrelenting postcolonial project of (re)making the Philippine nation. The medium and substance of nationalism should animate the future of postcolonial language politics in the country.

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