

## KOLUM KRITIKA

### SNEAKING INTO THE PHILIPPINES, ALONG THE RIVERS OF BABYLON: AN INTERVENTION INTO THE LANGUAGE QUESTION

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#### Abstract

The following are remarks made on 12 March 2008 at the launching of *Balikbayang Sinta: An E. San Juan Reader* published by Ateneo de Manila UP. Here the author puts forward seven theses through which the contentious "language question" may be reexamined, especially as it touches on issues of national solidarity.

#### Keywords

English language, Filipino language, national language

#### About the Author

E. San Juan Jr. is a cultural critic and a renowned scholar in the fields of Filipino and Asian American studies. He has published widely on cultural politics in the Philippines, Marxist theory, Filipino and Filipino-American literature, and postcolonial theory. He has been a Fellow of the Center for the Humanities and Visiting Professor of English at Wesleyan University, and Director of the Philippines Cultural Studies Center. He was also the chair of the Department of Comparative American Cultures at Washington State University, and Professor of Ethnic Studies at Bowling Green State University, Ohio. He received the 1999 Centennial Award for Literature from the Philippines Cultural Center. He is the author of *Beyond Postcolonial Theory* (St. Martin's, 2000), *From Exile to Diaspora* (Westview, 1998), and *After Post-colonialism* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2000). Recently, he was Fulbright professor of American Studies at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium, visiting professor of literature at National Tsing Hua University in Taiwan, and fellow of the Rockefeller Foundation Study Center at Bellagio, Italy. He is currently visiting professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of the Philippines, Diliman.

*I'm Miss American Dream since I was 17  
Don't matter if I step on the scene or sneak away to the Philippines  
They still goin' put pictures of my derriere in the magazine  
You want a piece of me? You want a piece of me?*  
- BRITNEY SPEARS, "Piece of Me"

*By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept when we remembered Zion ...  
How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign tongue?*  
- PSALM 137, The Bible

*It is also a misfortune to understand various languages because thus one has more occasions to hear stupidities and nonsense.*

- JOSE RIZAL, "Travel Diary, 4 July 1889"

In this current situation of portentous upheaval in the Philippines, any discussion of the "language question," like the "woman question," is bound to be incendiary and contentious. The issue of language is always explosive, a crux of symptoms afflicting the body politic. It is like a fuse or trigger that ignites a whole bundle of inflammable issues, scandalously questioning the existence of God in front of an audience of believers. Or the immortality of souls among the faithful. Perhaps my saying outright that I am a partisan for a national language, Filipino, may outrage the postmodernists and cosmopolites among you—how can you say such a thing when you are speaking in English? Or, as Senator Diokno once said, "English of a sort." How dare I infuriate the loyal speakers of Cebuano, Ilocano, Pampaguano, Ilonggo, Taglish, Filipino English, and a hundred or more languages used in these seven thousand islands. One gives up: it can't be helped. Or we can help lift the ideological smog and draw more lucidly the lines of demarcation in the battleground of ideas and social practices.

One suspects that this is almost unavoidable, in a society where to raise the need for one national language, say "Filipino" (as mandated by the Constitution) is certain to arouse immediate opposition. Or, if not immediately, it is deferred and sublimated into other pretexts for debate and argumentation. Fortunately, we have not reached the point of armed skirmishes and violent confrontations for the sake of our mother/father tongue, as in India and other countries. My partisanship for Filipino (not Tagalog) is bound to inflame Cebuanos, Bicolanos, Ilocanos, and so on, including Filipino speakers-writers of English, or Filipino English. We probably try to defuse any brewing conflict quickly by using the colonizer's tongue, or compromise babel-wise. My view is that only a continuing historical analysis can help explain the present contradictory conjuncture, and disclose the options it offers us. Only engagement in the current political struggles can resolve the linguistic aporia/antinomy and clarify the import and consequence of the controversy over the national language, over the fate of Filipino and English in our society.

One would expect that this issue would have been resolved a long time ago. But, given the dire condition of the Philippine political economy in this epoch of globalized terrorism of the US hegemon, a plight that is the product of more than a century of colonial/neocolonial domination, all the controversies surrounding this proposal of a national language since the time of the Philippine Commonwealth when Manuel L.

Quezon convened the Institute of National Language under Jaime de Veyra, have risen again like ravenous ghouls. I believe this specter can never be properly laid to rest until we have acquired genuine sovereignty, until national self-determination has been fully exercised, and the Filipino people—three thousand everyday, more than a million every year—will no longer be leaving in droves as Overseas Contract Workers, the whole nation becoming a global subaltern to the transnational corporations, to the World Bank-World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, and the predatory finance capital of the global North. If we cannot help being interpellated by the sirens of the global market and transformed into exchangeable warm bodies, we can at least interrogate the conditions of our subordination—if only as a gesture of resistance by a nascent, irrepressible agency.

In the hope of avoiding such a situation, which is almost ineluctable, I would like to offer the following seven theses that may initiate a new approach to the question, if not offer heuristic points of departure for reflection. In contrast to the dominant neoliberal philosophically idealist-metaphysical approach, I apply a historical materialist one whose method is not only historicizing and dialectical—not merely deploying the “Aufhebung” of Hegel within an eclectic, neo-Weberian framework (as Fernando Zialcita does in his provocative book *Authentic Though Not Exotic: Essays on Filipino Identity*)—but also, as Marx said, standing it on its head in the complex and changing social relations of production within concrete historical settings. The materialist dialectic offers a method of analysis and elucidation of the context in which questions about a national language can be clarified and the nuances of its practical implications elaborated.

*Thesis 1:* Language is not a self-sufficient entity or phenomenon in itself but a component of the social forms of consciousness of any given social formation. Marx considered language a productive force, conceived as “practical consciousness,” as he elaborates in the *Grundrisse*: “Language itself is just as much the product of a community, as in another aspect it is the existence of the community—it is, as it were, the communal being speaking for itself” (qtd. in Rossi-Landi 170). As such, it can only be properly addressed within the historical specificity of a given mode of production and attendant social-political formation. It has no history of its own but is a constituent part and constitutive of the ideological terrain on which the struggle of classes and historic blocs are fought, always in an uneven and combined mode of development. It forms part of the conflicted evolution of the integral state, as Gramsci conceived it as the combination of political society and civil society. The issue of language is located right at the heart of the construction of this integral state. Hence not only its synchronic but also diachronic

dimensions should be dialectically comprehended in grasping its worth and contribution to the liberation and fulfillment of the human potential.

*Thesis 2:* The function and nature of language then cannot be adequately discussed in a neutral and positivistic-empiricist way, given its insertion into conflicted relations of production, at least since the emergence of class-divided societies in history. Ferruccio Rossi-Landi explains the imbrication of language in social-historical praxis: “The typically social operation of speaking can only be performed by a historically determined individual or group; it must be performed in a given language, that is, within a determined structure which is always itself, to some extent, both an ideological product and an ideological instrument already; lastly, the audience is determined as well” by the historical-social situation (169). Language use, in short, the process of communication, cannot escape the necessity of sociopolitical overdetermination.

In the Philippines, the status and function of various languages—Spanish, English, and the numerous vernaculars or regional languages—cannot be assayed without inscribing them in the history of colonial and neocolonial domination of the peoples in these islands. In this regard, the terms “national-popular” and “nation-people”—as Gramsci employed them in a historical-materialist discourse—should be used in referring to Filipinos in the process of expressing themselves (albeit in a contradiction-filled way) as diverse communities, interpellating other nationalities, and conducting dialogue with themselves and other conversers.

It is necessary to assert the fundamental premise of the “national-popular,” the nation as constituted by the working masses (in our country, workers and peasants), not the patricians. Otherwise, the nation (in the archive of Western-oriented or Eurocentric history) is usually identified with the elite, the propertied classes, the national bourgeoisie, or the comprador bourgeoisie and its allies, the bureaucrats and feudal landlords and their retinue of gangsters, private armies, paramilitary thugs, etc. Actually, today, we inhabit a neocolony dominated by a comprador-bureaucratic bloc of the propertied classes allied with and supported in manifold ways by the US hegemon and its regional accomplices.

The recent unilateral policy pronouncement of the de facto Philippine president Arroyo that English should be re-instated as the official medium of instruction in all schools can only be read as a total subservience to the ideology of English as a global language free from all imperialist intent. Obviously this is propagated by free-market ideologues inside and outside government, even though a bill has recently been proposed in the Congress to institute the mother tongue as the medium of instruction up to grade

six of the elementary school. (One needs to interject here that this idea of using the mother tongue in the first years of education is not new; it was first planned and tested in the Sta. Barbara, Panay, experiment conducted by Dr. Jose V. Aguilar in the late forties and fifties. But this finding has been buried and forgotten by the neocolonialist policies of all administrations since 1946.) As Peter Ives pointed out in his book *Language and Hegemony in Gramsci*, issues of language policy in organizing schools and testing curriculum need to be connected to “political questions of democracy, growing inequalities in wealth and neo-imperialism” (164), since the daily acts of speaking and writing—in effect, the dynamic field of social communication—involves the struggle for hegemony in the realm of civil society, state institutions, and practices of everyday life.

*Thesis 3:* The Filipino nation is an unfinished and continuing project, an unfinished work, constantly being re-invented but not under conditions of its own making. Becoming Filipinos is a process of decolonization and radical democratization of the social formation, a sequence of collective choices. This is almost a cliché among the progressive forces with a nationalist orientation. It bears repeating that Filipino sovereignty is a dynamic totality whose premises are political independence and economic self-sufficiency. We have not yet achieved those premises.

Given the current alignment of nation-states in the world-system under US hegemony, whose hegemony is unstable, precarious, sustained by manifold antagonisms, and perpetually challenged by other regional blocs, becoming Filipino is an ever-renewing trajectory of creation and re-creation, a process overdetermined by legacies of the past and unpredictable incidences of the present and the future. Within this configuration, an evolving, emergent Filipino language may be conceived as both a medium and substantive element in fashioning this sequence of becoming-Filipino, a sequence grasped not as a cultural essence but a network of dynamic political affiliations and commitments. It is also an aesthetic modality of counterhegemonic, anti-imperialist expression.

*Thesis 4:* Only within the project of achieving genuine, substantive national independence and egalitarian democracy can we argue for the need for one national language as an effective means of unifying the masses of peasants, workers and middle strata and allowing them integral participation in a hegemonic process. Note that this is not just a question of cultural identity within the larger agenda of a reformist-individualist politics of identity/recognition.

Without changing the unequal and unjust property/power relations, a distinctive

Filipino culture incorporating all the diverse elements that have entered everyday lives of the masses can not be defined and allowed to flourish. Without the prosperous development of the material resources and political instrumentalities, a Filipino cultural identity can only be an artificial, hybrid fabrication of the elite—an excrescence of global consumerism, a symptom of the power of transnationalized commodity-fetishism that, right now, dominates the popular consciousness via the mass media, in particular television, films, music, food and fashion styles, packaged lifestyles that permeate the everyday practices of ordinary Filipinos across class, ethnicities, age and localities.

The consumerist *habitus* (to use Pierre Bourdieu's concept) acquired from decades of colonial education and indoctrination has almost entirely conquered and occupied the psyche of every Filipino, except for those consciously aware of it and collectively resisting it. With the rise of globalization, it has been a fashionable if tendentious practice among the floating litterateurs, mostly resident in colleges and universities, to advocate the maintenance of the status quo; that is, English as the prestigious language, Taglish as the media lingua franca, and Filipino and the other languages as utilitarian devices for specific tasks. But soon we find that this imitated pluralistic/multiculturalist stand only functions as the effective ploy of neoliberal finance capital. This seemingly pragmatist, accommodationist stance ultimately serves neocolonial goals: the Filipino as presumptive world-citizen functioning as compensation for the lack of effective national sovereignty. Its obverse is regional/ethnic separatism. The culturalist or civilizationalist program, often linked to NGOs and deceptive philanthropic schemes, skips the required dialectical mediation and posits an abstract universality, though disguised in a self-satisfied particularism now in vogue among postcolonial deconstructionists eulogizing the importance of place, locality, indigeneity, organic roots, etc.

We discover in time that this trend serves as a useful adjunct for enhancing the fetishistic magic, aura and seductive lure of commodities—from brand-name luxury goods to the whole world of images, sounds, theoretical discourses, and multimedia confections manufactured by the transnational culture industry and marketed as symbolic capital for the pettybourgeoisie of the periphery and other subalternized sectors within the metropole.

*Thesis 5:* Spanish and English are global languages needed for communication and participation in world affairs. They are recognized as richly developed languages of aesthetic and intellectual power useful for certain purposes—English particularly in the scientific and technical fields. But they have a political history and resonance for “third world peoples” who have suffered from their uses. Its sedimented patterns of thought and

action cannot so easily be ignored or elided. The discursive genres of law, business, liturgy, pedagogy, and so on, in English and their institutionalized instrumentalities cannot be judged on their own terms without understanding the political role they played, and continue to play, as effective instruments in the colonial domination of the various peoples in the Philippines and their total subordination to the political-cultural hegemony of the Spanish empire, and then of the American empire from 1899 to 1946, and of US neocolonial control after formal independence in 1946. Everyone knows that while Rizal used Spanish to reach an enlightened Spanish public and an *ilustrado*-influenced audience, the masses who participated in the Malolos Republic and the war against the Americans used Tagalog, and other vernaculars, in fighting for cultural autonomy and national independence. Historically the national and democratic project of the Philippine revolution—still unfinished and continuing—provides the only viable perspective within which we can explore the need for a national language as a means of uniting and mobilizing the people for this project.

*Thesis 6:* The use and promotion of a national language does not imply the neglect, elimination, or inferiorization of other regional languages spoken and used by diverse communities involved in the national-democratic struggle. In fact, it implies their preservation and cultivation. But that is contingent on the attainment of genuine national sovereignty and the emancipation of the masses, their integration into active participation in governance. Their inferiorization is tied to the oppression of their users/speakers by virtue of class, nationality, religion, ethnicity, locality, and so on. (My friends in Panay who use Kinaray-a, Ilonggo or Akenaon should not fear being dominated by a Manila-centric hegemony as long as they address crucial political questions of social justice and sovereignty in a manner that commands directive force, displacing the question of form with the substantive totality of communication across ethnic and local differences to forge a flexible but principled united front for national democracy and socialist liberation.)

Meanwhile, in the course of the national-liberation struggle, all languages should and are being used for mobilization, political education, and cultural self-affirmation. Simultaneously, the dissemination and development of one national language becomes a political and economic-cultural necessity for unifying the diverse communities under a common political program—which does not imply a monolithic ideological unity—in front of the monstrous power of finance-capital using English as an instrument of subordination and neocolonial aggression.

In this regard, I would argue that the unity and collective pride attendant on the

use of one national language provides the groundwork and fundamental requisite for the promotion and development of other ethnic/regional languages within the national polity. This is a psychological-ideological imperative that cannot be deferred. A dialectical approach should be applied to the historically contentious relations between a dominant vernaculat (Tagalog) and its subalternized counterparts (Cebuano, Ilocano, Hiligaynon, etc.) in order to transcend historically sedimented prejudices and promote creative dialogue and intertextuality among all the languages spoken in the Philippines.

*Thesis 7:* Hegemony, the moral and intellectual leadership of the Filipino working masses, the scaffold within which an authentic Filipino identity can grow, assumes the rise of organic Filipino intellectuals who will use and develop Filipino as the evolving national language. Again, this does not mean suppressing other regional languages. Nor does it mean prohibiting the use and teaching of English or other international languages (Spanish, French, Chinese, etc.). It simply means the establishment of a required platform, basis or foundation, without which the productive forces of the people within this particular geopolitical boundary can be harnessed, refined, and released in order to, first, benefit the physical and spiritual health of Filipinos, repair and recover the damage inflicted by centuries of colonial oppression and exploitation, and thus be able to contribute to the cultural heritage of humankind. That is why mandating the continued teaching of English equally with Filipino, with the mother language as auxiliary, at the secondary level, betokens a schizophrenic if not treacherous and treasonous policy of the ruling class beholden to US and transnational corporate interests.

Without an independent national physiognomy, Filipinos have nothing distinctive to share with other nations and peoples. Without national self-determination and a historically defined identity, there is no way Filipinos can contribute their distinctive share in global culture. In fact, it is impossible to be a global citizen unless you have fully grown and matured as an effective democratic participant in the making of a prosperous, egalitarian nation-people in a historically specific territory defined by a concretely differentiated sequence of events not replicated elsewhere.

Historical examples are often misleading, but sometimes elucidatory. It may be irrelevant and even Eurocentric to invoke the examples of Italy and Germany as nations that experienced unified mobilization through the affirmation of national-popular languages, Italy vis-à-vis the Papal ascendancy, and Germany vis-à-vis Latin/Roman Catholic hegemony. In any case, again, the social and historical function and character of language cannot be adequately grasped without situating them in the complex dynamics



of the conflict of social classes in history since the break-up of the communal tribes in the hunting-gathering stage, since the rise of private property in the means of production, and the intricate dialectics of culture and collective psyche in the political economy of any social formation. In short, language is not just a permanently undecidable chain of signifiers, always deconstructing itself and falling into abysmal meaninglessness, a vertigo of nonsense and silly absurdities quite appropriate, of course, for pettybourgeois careerists, dilettantes, and hirelings of the oligarchs. Rather, language is a social convention and a site of struggle, the signifier conceived as “an arena of class struggle” to use Mikhail Bakhtin’s synthesizing phrase (123).

To conclude these reflections with an open-ended marker: I believe that only from this historical materialist perspective, and within the parameters of the political project of attaining genuine autonomy as a nation-people, can the discussion of a Filipino national language be intelligible and productive. But, again, such a discussion finds its value and validity as part of the total engagement of the people for justice, authentic national independence, and all-sided emancipation from the nightmares of the past and the terrorist fascism of the present.

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