Language planning in multilingual countries: The case of the Philippines¹

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Abstract

Using the Philippines as a case study of a multilingual country and my familiarity with the South East Asian situation (Indonesia, Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore), I shall try to make a case for 1) the use of the language of the community as the initial language of literacy with transition to mainstream education; 2) parameters on when and how to introduce the national language or the official language in the schooling system; 3) parameters on the choice of and time for introducing the language of wider communication for the educated sector of society. Reasons will be based on philosophical principles as well as empirical evidence. Finally, administrative and political issues will be considered in attempting to translate policy into practice and implementation based on experiences of the past.

Introduction

Before giving a thumbnail sketch of language planning in a multilingual country such as the Philippines and then raising larger issues on the topic from the Philippine experience, I would like to begin with a short challenge.

I refer to the title of a 1971 book by Joan Rubin and Bjorn Jernudd entitled *Can Language Be Planned?* Rubin and Jernudd represent two of the early pioneers of language planning as a special discipline in applied linguistics; their probing question, asked more than thirty years ago, bears repeating in the light of some of the experiences of my own country where I have been involved in some capacity or another as one among several language planners. After more than thirty years of involvement in language planning attempts in my country, I too have been asking the same question.

The case of the Philippines

In addition to my own work on language planning in the Philippines entitled *Language and nationalism: The Philippine experience thus far* (Gonzalez 1980) and the well-documented work of Emma Bernabe in 1987 entitled *Language policy, formulation, programming, implementation and evaluation in Philippine education* (1565-1974)—a revision of her doctoral dissertation (mentored by Bonifacio P. Sibayan, another pioneering language planner)—various articles have been written on the Philippine case.

Briefly, the documents for language planning are found in different versions of our Constitutions, in the National Language Law of 1936, authored and sponsored by a great Filipino jurist, man of letters, language planner and congressman, Norberto Romualdez, and in various policies issued by the Spanish Crown during the period of Spanish colonization (1565-1898) and in the instructions of President William McKinley and Secretary Elihu Root at the start of the period of American colonialization (1898-1946).

There are instructions in the edicts of several Spanish monarchs compiled together as the Leyes de los Indios (see Bernabe 1987), instructing the Viceroy of Mexico, through whom the Philippines was governed, and reminding various Governors General of their obligation to teach the local *indios* the Spanish language. The Spaniards who had the most contacts with the locals were the missionary *frailes* of different religious orders who had their own agenda of evangelization in focus and who learned the local languages, wrote grammars (*Artes*) and dictionaries (*Vocabularios*) for their own members and compiled books of devotions, novenas and prayers as well as catechisms (summaries of Christian doctrine and teaching using a question-and-answer format) for their own use. While some of the *frailes* likewise wrote teaching manuals for learning Spanish, their works were primarily reference grammars and bilingual word lists for teaching their fellow Spaniards the local languages.

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It was not until the general reforms mandated by the Spanish Crown in 1863 and the Moret Decree of 1870 that the beginnings of a primary education system were established. These literacy schools were the first to provide some form of systematic literacy education through the *caton* (a question and answer form of the teaching of Christian doctrine), the *cartilla* (a syllabic way of learning to read Spanish), and writing exercises in Spanish. By 1898, according to Bazaco (1953), some two thousand of these schools were established under parish auspices and financed by the government.

These schools taught the Spanish language, but since they were small and children spent only a short time in them, the learning of Spanish was not very effective. More effective were the *colegios* for male and female students taking the *bachillerato* (an advanced secondary school diploma), where most of the students were boarders and learned Spanish to the point of fluency. Those who stayed for the full course (five years) could enter the university (University of Santo Tomas) and even the Spanish institutions in Peninsular Spain. However, these catered to a few students only. It is estimated (see Collantes 1977) that only about 2 to 4% of the population of less than 6 million were really fluent in Spanish when the Americans came. These were the *ilustrados* (enlightened ones) who had studied in Spain and Europe and returned with degrees in law, medicine, pharmacy.

Language planning was thus hardly explicit and the educational system itself rather inchoate and highly elitist. To speak of a plan would probably be an exaggeration.

Language planning activities during the American colonial period were geared towards education and the civil service but were not guided by explicit language laws or agencies. Although initially both McKinley and Root had ordered the two Philippine Commissions (that provided civil government after the military administration and began the civil government itself in 1902) to teach the local languages, they also instructed that English should be propagated so that Filipinos would become familiar with the ways of democracy. English was made the language of government and competence in English became a condition for work and advancement in the civil service (although examinations continued to be given in Spanish and in English, the former until about 1940). The Americans made English the medium of instruction for the entire education system and an official language for public administration and the professions. English, therefore, became the language of social advancement. This provided an incentive to students to learn that language in order to advance through education and eventually study abroad under the *pensionado* system (fellowship program) (see Gonzalez 2003). Most of the early Filipino leaders, educated in Spanish, became bilingual. They used both English and Spanish in their professions but had to carry on in English for day-to-day governance in a civil service that carried on almost totally in English by the end of the period before World War II.

A National Language Institute, established in 1937 under the Romualdez Law, mandated the development of a national language, which became an official language in 1941, an enactment confirmed during the Japanese-sponsored government under Jose P. Laurel. Its propagation and use was encouraged during the brief Japanese Occupation from 1942 to 1945 (see Gonzalez 1977). English continued as the language of government, business and education, even under the umbrella of the Japanese East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, although the teaching of Japanese as a foreign language became mandatory during the Japanese Period.

Post World War II independence, granted by the United States on July 4, 1946 (although Independence had been declared by Filipinos themselves on June 12, 1898), saw the national language being taught in all grades (primary and secondary). The medium of instruction remained English until June 1974 when the clamor of nationalists led to initiation of a bilingual scheme in which some subjects were taught in the national language and others in English, a policy repeated in 1984 and continuing until now. The national language, based on Tagalog, was renamed Pilipino in 1959 and renamed once more, as Filipino, by the 1973 Constitution and again by the 1987 Constitution. English continues to be an official language and, at present, the bilingual education system remains in operation.

Policy and practice

As of last count (McFarland 1993), there are 120 mutually unintelligible Philippine languages in use in the islands although all are genetically related. In addition, based on the National Statistics Office 1990 survey, about 99% of Filipino households speak Filipino or Tagalog as a first or second language. About 56% of Filipinos report themselves able to speak English (see Social Weather Stations 1994). The lack of resources and the multilingual situation in the archipelago make it impossible to try to develop all languages although the Komisyon sa Wikang Filiino, or the academy, has a division that focuses on the conservation and maintenance of these languages and their literatures. The official languages continue to be Filipino and English, the national language Filipino, but the language most commonly in use in schools is English and in the print medium, still English. Other media (audioa nd TV) are now dominated by Filipino. Officially Filipino can be used in government work and in legislation as well as judicial judgments, but English still dominates.

What we have in the Philippines in 2003, therefore, is a multilingual society still trying to crystallize itself as a nation, having 120 separate languages, but now, by consensus, having accepted Tagalog-based Pilipino (renamed Filipino because it is perceived to have incorporated vocabulary and elements from the other Philippine languages). The population uses English for its intellectual and business needs and Filipino for local communication and entertainment. A scattering of foreign languages, learned by some in special schools and through travel, are also heard: Japanese, French, Spanish and Mandarin (in order of popularity as choices by students).

Policy and reality do not match. The official language is supposed to be Filipino and the language of the schools to be increasingly Filipino. In fact, however, English continues to dominate government and business transactions at the highest levels as well as international communications and education, especially science and mathematics classes, at all levels and all subjects at university level. Planning has been explicit, not only through government policy declarations by colonial and later by independent authorities, but also through an enlightened and immensely rational national language law passed in 1936 and through statements in the Philippines constitutions of 1935, 1943, 1973 and 1987. (The 1896 Constitution of Biak na Bato maintained Spanish as the temporary official language along with the local languages; the 1898 Malolos Constitution recognized Spanish, but the 1935 Constitution mandated the creation of a body to develop the national language, which was recognized by the 1943 Constitution under Japan. The search was restarted by the 1973 Constitution and finally settled on Filipino in the 1987 Constitution.) Filipino is officially the national language, used in a bilingual scheme in school, but hardly cultivated for intellectual purposes.

In brief, there has been language planning but not implementation or realization.

The same comment may be made on the vernacular teaching program in the Philippines or the use of the ethnic home languages as languages of instruction for initial literacy.

In actual fact, no matter what the policy has been, the local vernaculars have been used in schools as the initial languages of instruction among entering school children, but the languages have not been given the official recognition that they deserve. Soon after the UNESCO recommendation in 1950 at an international conference on the use of the mother tongue (see UNESCO 1953), an experiment took place in Iloilo on the use of Hiligaynon as the first language of instruction in the division (province). The experiment proved successful and was the basis for later interesting experiments in language instruction undertaken in the Philippines (see Davis 1967). These experiments gave rise to a Vernacular Education Policy of the Department of Education from 1957 to 1974 whereby the eight major languages of the Philippines (a major language being defined as one having at least a million speakers) were used as languages of initial literacy in a form of transitional bilingual education in Grades 1 and 2, with transition to English as medium of instruction beginning in Grade 3. Unfortunately, the policy was not implemented because of the lack of resources allocated for the training of teachers in the use of the vernaculars and for the production of materials for the first two grades for content subjects.

The bilingual education policy of 1974 divided the curriculum into a Filipino domain (Filipino Language and Social Studies) and an English domain (English Language, Mathematics, Science) with the vernaculars as 'auxiliary media of instruction'. In actual implementation, the vernaculars were used only during the first few weeks of schooling. Instruction using Filipino and English began soon thereafter. During the incumbency of Andrew Gonzalez as Secretary of Education under the Estrada Administration, an attempt was made to revive vernacular teaching through the use of the three major local linguae francae of the Philippines (Ilokano, Cebuano, Tagalog) as media of instruction until Grade 3 and in English thereafter, under the bilingual scheme. The pilot program was conceptualized with the help of specialists in literacy from the Summer Institute of Linguistics. The initial feedback from the pilot schools set up was overwhelmingly positive (the pupils were active, not passive; they asked questions spontaneously instead of answering in monosyllables and phrases in a language they hardly understood, conceptualization especially in mathematics took place almost from the first day of school). Initially, under Undersecretary Isagani Cruz during the Macapagal-Arroyo Administration, the reports from the field were so positive that Undersecretary Cruz mandated the pilot experiment to end and to use the three local *linguae francae* as initial languages of instruction during the first two years in the entire system. However, policy differences with his superior moved the Undersecretary to resign and the pilot program itself has suffered from 'benign neglect'.

Once more, practice was aborted in spite of a rational and well-thought-out policy.

Insights from the Philippine experience and other experiences

Language policy is relatively easy to draft; language planning, usually based on a policy document or even a law, is likewise easy to formulate. In the case of the Philippines, since the first attempts at a forming a republic, language policy was made part of the Constitution or the fundamental law of the land.

And yet in spite of policy expressed by equally eloquent rhetoric, realization has been slow. The key element towards realization of language policy is political will based on a developing or, better still, a developed, cohesion within the state that leads to genuine nationhood. What emerges from the Philippine experience, and from experiences in other countries as well, is that utilitarian more than symbolic objectives prevail in the actual development of the national language, especially as an intellectualized medium. Moreover, in the case of the Philippines, it seems that the need for an indigenous intellectualized medium is less urgent because of the continuing dominance of English and the extension of its use in multiple domains.

There is likewise the larger issue pointed out by friendly critics that the Philippine state and Philippine society have not developed enough to be a 'crystallized' nation or a unified culture, manifested in part by the failure of the society really to consider the national language for purposes beyond the symbolic.

Economics seems to be one of the most determinative of factors. With Filipino services in demand in other societies and with the scarcity of jobs in the Philippines because of its population problem, the new initiatives in improving competence in English and the fact that the national language is taking a back seat to English is easier to understand. Economic considerations and survival make language planning for the national language (Filipino) unrealistic. In fact, the actual operative language plan in the Philippines at present is to use competence in English to competitive advantage in the service industries worldwide and to give more emphasis on English in our school system, in effect making the implementation of the 1974 bilingual scheme a second priority.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, insights from the Philippine experience may be of some application to other multilingual societies:

Policy may not be fully carried out in practice. The Philippine experience is that the selected national language has been standardized and propagated and even cultivated as a language of literature and entertainment. The only dimension where it has not seen full development is as a language of

intellectual discourse in the print medium and in academia. The latter demands corpus planning but since corpus planning is expensive in terms of human and financial resources, the society might not be willing to make it a priority in the face of competing needs and economic imperatives.

Language development is multidimensional and has many facets. Like some other countries which have a similar option, the Philippines has a national language which it holds up as a symbol of unity and linguistic identity but not as a medium of instruction for scholarly discourse at the university level. Thus, symbolism takes priority over use in some domains but not in others.

Present social problems in the Philippines (a rapid population growth rate, resulting unemployment and underemployment, too large an output of university graduates for an economy that is not sufficiently industrialized to make full use of its output in the educational system, the slow rate of economic growth due to many factors, the reliance on Overseas Employment as a source for foreign currency for the balance of payments of the country) have caused it to reemphasize English competence more than National Language competence at the tertiary level. Hence, in spite of the rhetoric for the national language, the resources at present are being directed to the improved teaching of the former colonial language, English, to the perceived neglect (genuine or not) of the cultivation of the national language for intellectual purposes.

Yet for language to be cultivated intellectually, it must be used and not just studied. If school policy makers choose not to use the national language in certain academic domains, the language will not be cultivated for higher cognitive activities in that field of specialization. It is, of course, easier to reach a stage of critical thinking in one's native language or mother tongue and it takes special tutoring and practice to cultivate a second language for purposes of higher order thinking. In the Philippines, because of the lack of financial resources, the national language has not been sufficiently developed as a language of intellectual discourse. English competence, once attained, becomes a highly effective tool of intellectual discourse and learning of the world's knowledge. However, the number of those in the system who reach such an advanced stage in a second language such as English is bound to be small and elitist.

The advice based on investigations and experience of literacy experts is that the best way to teach a second language is by enabling the students to master the first language to the point of critical thinking; these skills can then be transferred to the second language. In spite of this evidence, Philippine decision makers and parents continue to insist on English as early as possible, even though that hinders children's ability to think critically in the mother tongue or at least in the national language which is structurally similar to the mother tongue. This partially explains the problems of language and quality in Philippine education today.

In brief, language planning presumes rationality on the part of the language planners in drafting action plans, but these action plans likewise presume rationality on the part of the political decision-makers and would-be beneficiaries (parents and their children) of these rational policies. Unfortunately, in a world not quite fully rational, rational means to realize plans do not always obtain and results are often mixed, which they are in the Philippines!

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