

The Subdialect Filipino

by Edwin Camaya

What is “Filipino?” There is much difference of opinion on this matter. According to one school of thought, Filipino is not only different from Tagalog, but that it (Filipino) still does not exist, but on the contrary, it still has to be developed. If one were to pursue this argument to its logical conclusion, it would lead to the authorities stopping the compulsory teaching of “Filipino” in schools, and ending its use in government, since such a language still does not exist. That this opinion has influence even in government can be gleaned from the fact that it was the argument used by the Cebu Regional Trial Court in 1990, when it stopped the Department of Education, Culture and Sports and its officials in the Central Visayas from requiring the use of Filipino as a medium of instruction in schools in Cebu (Philippine Daily Inquirer, June 10, 1990). We all know that this issue became moot and academic when the Cebu Provincial Board withdrew the ban on the compulsory teaching of the putative national language on the “request” of then President Joseph Estrada in 1998.

On the other hand, the predominant view these days (incidentally, that held by the authorities, at least at DepEd/DepTag) is that Filipino already exists. The following is taken from an article by the late Bro. Andrew Gonzalez, one of the staunch supporters of Filipino:

“The national language of the Philippines is Filipino, a language in the process of development and modernisation; it is based on the Manila lingua franca which is fast spreading across the Philippines and is used in urban centers into the country.”

“De jure, it is named in the 1987 Constitution of the Republic of the Philippines a language that will be enriched with elements (largely vocabulary) from the other Philippine languages and non-local languages used in the Philippines. De facto, the structural base of Filipino is Tagalog, a language spoken in Manila and in the provinces of Rizal, Cavite, Laguna, Batangas, Quezon, Camarines Norte to the south of Manila and Bulacan, Nueva Ecija, and part of Tarlac to the north of Manila. The enrichment has been going on as the language spreads itself through the mass media and as a medium of instruction in schools at all levels.”

It is therefore clear (from a Tagalista source) that Filipino is based on Tagalog, specifically the form of Tagalog spoken in Manila. This explains the DILA stand that “Filipino,” as taught in Philippine schools today, is a subdialect of the Manila dialect of the Tagalog language.

The question is, does a language lose its identity and become another language when it borrows from other languages? This question is at the heart of the Tagalista argument, that simply by borrowing from other Philippine languages, Tagalog (or Manila Tagalog) has become an entirely different language, “Filipino.”

Take the case of English. English is perhaps unmatched in the number of words it has borrowed from other languages. According to “The Miracle of Language” by Charlton Laird (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1953), “in one of the large dictionaries like the New International, more than half the words are likely to come from Latin, and of these more than half are likely to come through French” (p.81). Yet, no one is proposing to change the name of English to, say, Anglo-Latin or Anglo-French on this basis. It is still English, which remains the same language as that used by Shakespeare four centuries ago, and is also the language spoken in the United States, Britain, Australia and English Canada.

Let’s examine the case of Tagalog/Filipino. A possible indication of the contributions of the non-Tagalog languages to the contemporary speech of Manila might be found in “Tagalog Slang Dictionary” by R.David Zorc and Rachel San Miguel (Manila: De La Salle University Press, 1990). Slang would tend to be more receptive to loanwords than, say, the literary language, or the standard form of the language. Yet, according to the introduction to the book (by Dr. Zorc), only 2% of the entries are from "Bisayan" (not differentiated according to individual language), while Kapampangan and Ilokano account for another 0.1% each. No other Philippine language is mentioned individually in the estimates. In other words, the non-Tagalog Philippine languages had an aggregate contribution of less than 3% to the Tagalog slang vocabulary. Thus, the “basis of the national language” has a long way to go before it can be said to be an amalgam of the Philippine languages, as many Tagalistas assert.

To be fair, it must also be mentioned that 38% of the words in Zorc’s and San Miguel's dictionary come from English, and 17% from Spanish (btw, it must be pointed out that slang words comprise only a portion of the total vocabulary of a language). But then, Bikol does not cease to be Bikol, nor does Hiligaynon stop being Hiligaynon, by borrowing from Spanish or English. Why should Tagalog become “Filipino” when it does?

One might also cite the on-going debate in the Tagalog Wikipedia over whether to rename it the “Filipino” Wikipedia (instead of its current name) as proof that the boundary between Tagalog and Filipino is far from clear even to speakers themselves.

It is obvious then that the so-called “Filipino” is merely a form of Tagalog, and not a separate language. Not surprisingly, the 2006 Ethnologue classifies Filipino as being the same as Tagalog:

Filipino [fil] Throughout the country. Alternate names: Pilipino. Classification: Austronesian, Malayo-Polynesian, Meso Philippine, Central Philippine, Tagalog

And, as we have said, DILA chooses to be more specific: it considers “Filipino” a subdialect of the Manila dialect of Tagalog.