

Why We Can't Speak the Same Language

by **Maximo Ramos**

A WHOLE LOT has been spoken and written about the language ills of our country. Should we keep English in our schools? Can we? Was it wise to start our children's schooling in the vernaculars beginning last school year? Are our vernaculars adequate means of communication in a technological world in which peoples speaking a wide variety of languages are meeting one another across the conference table as they could hardly have dreamt of doing not so long ago? Why did we add to our language headaches by requiring our students in liberal arts, law, commerce, education and foreign service to present 24

units of Spanish before we grant them a college degree?

These and numerous related questions have occupied our educational leaders for some time now and, on the whole, we have answers to them neatly formulated and tucked back of our collective minds. What has not received the attention it deserves, however, is the body of sociological bearings of our language situation.

Frequently in history, language has been used by an entrenched minority to dominate a population. Such of a minority may be the priestly class, a group of political schemers or a self-appointed upper caste. Just as literacy in a dead language

in China or Tibet and in Latin and Greek was employed by the class using its ability to read and write in that language as a means of controlling society, so has literacy in Spanish — and in more recent years English — which have been learned by relatively few of our people, been used by the social elite in this country to lord it over the majority.

During the entire American regime, the ability to use English was the chief test for employment in the civil service. More than a decade after independence, and in spite of the Constitutional injunction that we develop a national language based on one of the native tongues, the ability to read and write in English is a prerequisite to the practice of the professions: the board examinations for instance, are all in English.

A class language helps the members of the group using it to monopolize the cultural and social advantages in the community. Thus in early modern Europe, since French was used as the language of the court, this helped the privileged classes preserve their feeling of belonging to a brotherhood of the elite. Hebrew, Latin and Greek had earlier served their users in a similar way. In its time, Hebrew was considered the language spoken in Paradise. It was,

therefore, believed to be the ancestor of all languages, and only those who spoke it were regarded as truly patrician. Latin grammar used to monopolize the European child's school hours, to the neglect of such subjects we now consider indispensable to the child's education as science, arithmetic and social studies. Grammar was synonymous with Latin for centuries, since only Latin was deemed worth studying. The traditional secondary school in England was known as the "grammar school" until almost yesterday, and in Denmark the secondary school is still known as "latinskola." For Latin was the language of the Church and the universities. Those whose only languages were the "vulgar" tongues were fit to be exploited. Similarly, Spanish has long been a class language in the Philippines, and English, if we do not drop it or, keeping it, we do not upgrade the efficiency with which we teach it to more of our people, may well become another class language in a few decades.

EACH ONE OF the colonial powers, as indeed each of the peoples of the world at all times, thought its language the most beautiful language ever spoken and the most adequate for the needs of mankind, including those who were unfor-

unately not able to learn it. The Spaniard, the American and the Japanese, unless he was of a scholarly turn of mind, never bothered to learn a Filipino language when he was here. He held the native tongues in contempt — thought them crude, unwieldy, completely inadequate for the communication needs of civilized society. Some writers, more fluent than reliable went so far as to try to make others believe that the language of a people was accountable for their cultural achievement, or their lack of it. It used to be contended, for example, that in chemistry the Germans were way ahead of other peoples because the German language easily lent itself to the formation of new words, i.e., the chemistry of words. It was seriously claimed that England was the first European state to become industrialized because the English people spoke English instead of Russian, German, French, or Italian.

What these writers forgot is that functionally, as Richard T. La Piere has put it, "one language is or can readily become just as good as another for any particular purpose." It is true, of course, that European culture was in a number of ways superior to that of the peoples the Europeans conquered. But the difference did not lie in any superiority of the European lan-

guages over those of the natives; it lay, rather, in the materials and methods for conquest the Europeans had perfected.

DREAMERS HAVE long envisioned a world society whose members are bound to one another by common language ties. Esperanto and the more recent Basic English have been advanced as languages that should unite the world by making it easier for people to communicate with one another.

It is true that people are getting to meet and know one another better because new inventions have made travel and communication faster. And it is true that the more people get to know and another the more they will find that they have a lot more things in common than differences among themselves. A world language, therefore might well be a means of blending the many dissimilar cultures of the human race.

Unfortunately, the problem is formidable. For instance, there are at least 28 principal languages in the world each of which is spoken by at least 20 million people. The physical problem, alone, of disseminating a universal language all of them can use profitably seems insurmountable under our present political and technological arrangement.

Nor is the picture dim only

because of numbers. More important is the fact that language is deeply seated in the psychology of the people who speak it, and it cannot be easily superseded either by edict or by cultural domination. The sociologist Kimball Young has written: "While technology and modern business, politics, sports and so on may have made for a kind of universal *lingua franca* in these matters, the deeper emotional meanings of culture, which are imbedded in speech and writings, serve as a basis for variability and separateness which cannot be gainsaid. Certainly any plan for an international order must reckon with the linguistic factor if it is to fact reality."

Even more important is the fact that languages are constantly being changed by those who speak them. Only a dead language, one no longer spoken or written, does not change. Hence, even if the world's three billion people were to speak the same language today, that language would not sound and look the same everywhere tomorrow. The ways in which the people spoke their old languages, plus their particular needs, chance a language. Note how the English spoken by Filipinos varies with the vernacular background of the speaker.

Those who propose Esperanto and similar synthetic tongues

make their own task even harder by not stopping at the claim that their new language will unify the world. They also aver that the new language is superior to any of the existing tongues in that it is more precise, more logical, more versatile, more easy to learn. The proponents of these made-up languages forget that no language, living, dead, or artificial, is superior to any other language. To any given society the language that is the most useful the most adaptable, the easiest to learn, the most accordant with logic, the most musical and sonorous and mellifluous is its own language.

The misconception about the alleged superiority of the language to all others led to the myth of the superior race which saw in Hitler's regime what tragic excesses a foolish myth can lead to. The race myth is traceable to certain doctrines of the later years of the 18th century. Some imaginative writers of the time came up with the idea that what they called "national character" was all that accounted for the differences in people's cultures and institutions. Johann Gottlieb Fichte, for example, claimed in his much-cited Address to the German Nation (1807) that what gave rise to German culture was the unique quality of the German language. The stress laid

by Fichte and his followers on the decisive place of the German language in determining the German character as a people triggered a series of reactions. It gave rise, first, to the science of philology — certainly a fruitful result. Philology, in turn, led to comparative studies on the languages and institutions of the languages of Europe and Asia. Scholars were particularly fascinated by the similarity between certain European languages and Sanskrit, the ancient languages of faraway India. The belief soon grew that Sanskrit was the original language from which the European tongues were descended, Hebrew having long been deprived of that preeminence.

IT WAS ALL very fascinating indeed, and for an entire generation after 1830, the philologists were engrossed in the nice game of tracing the origins, migrations, and kinships of these languages which soon came to be known as "Indo-European," "Indo-Germanic," or just "Aryan." Before long, a doctrine which won wide support grew; this claimed that there had been a parent Aryan language and that a primordial Aryan race spoke it. This, it was held certain, explained the unmistakable resemblances between Sanskrit and the languages of Europe.

From this point, it was only

one short step to the claim of the cultural superiority of a race and the consequent call on such a race to save the world from barbarism.

It could have been easy, of course, to show that contrary to such racist nonsense, race and language are not identical. Even a well unified race like the American Indian, for example, has over 100 distinct languages, plus a far more numerous variety of dialects. Different races in some European states speak the same language, for language is no respecter of national boundaries and historical barriers.

THE RACES have also been assigned "temperaments" by superficial observers who fail to realize that the differences they see are merely caused by differences in gestural language. For example, the Western visitor's idea that Filipinos are a placid and unemotional people, and on the other hand the Filipino's idea that Westerners are by temperament violent and lacking in self-control may be traced to the fact that the Westerner uses more and livelier gestures in his language than the Filipino.

Our continued use of English and Spanish in our schools at the expense of our mother tongues has hampered our artistic development as a people. Thought and language are inseparable: "It can be said that

the whole history of an area will be mirrored in the ways of saying things, the ingenious meanings words take on, the idioms, proverbs, humor, and the like." Dr. Clifford E. Prator, who was Fulbright lecturer in the teaching of English here some years ago and later wrote what is perhaps the most definitive study of the language problems besetting this Republic, has arrived at the conclusion that we Filipinos are — to make a blunt summary of his chief finding — wasting our time on English. He goes on to say: "When command of the language is imperfect, then thinking is inhibited. If a man borrows a strange language to express himself, at least part of his thought is also borrowed and vital elements of his individuality are sacrificed. Yet true creativeness involves the fullest possible expression of self. . . . Four centuries of colonialism have reduced Philippine cultural individuality to a low ebb. Much of the art, architecture, music and literature of the Islands is unmistakably derivative. There can be no doubt that this cultural eclipse is due partly to the long-continued neglect of the local languages in which the native culture found expression. In the eyes of the child who finds his natural medium of thought and communication almost entirely banned from school, the vernaculars lose pres-

tige. The child fatally develops an inferiority complex toward his own thinking."

To illustrate, thousands of Filipino children grow up bating or, at least, indifferent to Lapulapu, Diego Silang and even Gregorio del Pilar and Andres Bonifacio, all heroes in their ancestors' long fight for liberation from their conquerors, because even some Filipino historians treat these men little better than hoodlums.

One argument often advanced to frighten our people into continuing with our wasteful attempts to master English and Spanish is that we have more than 80 vernaculars. As a matter of fact, however, too much has been made of the differences among Cebu Visayan, Iloilo Visayan, Tagalog, Ilocano, Bicol, Pangasinan, etc. The proponents of the foreign tongues blind us to the fact that the Philippine vernaculars are really variants of one and the same language; they have identical patterns of sound and structure. Dr. Cecilio Lopez, a German-trained Filipino linguist, has compiled a list of some 2,000 words common to all the major Philippine vernaculars. Surely, with all the means of travel and communication that modern technology has made possible, a Filipino national language is bound to arise much faster than we have heretofore be-

lieved possible. In the course of time, the dialectal differences between the Lancashireman and the Bedfordshireman have been blended out into modern English, and that between the Rhinelander and the Prussian into modern German. Without doubt, the differences among the Philippine vernaculars are bound to disappear and blend into a Filipino national language, an outgrowth of Filipino culture. Philippine social life and Philippine history.

Almost every country that has been faced with a language problem as knotty as ours has decided that each child's education should begin in his mother tongue, a transition being later made to the national or common language which is the principal medium of instruction. In fact, there has been what amounts to a world-wide movement in that direction. In Mexico, the school system saw a complete rejuvenation under Jaime Torres Bodet, the country's minister of education and later the Secretary-General of UNESCO, who made general the use of the different Indian dialects in the first few grades of school. A carefully written series of bilingual primers is now being used in Mexican schools. Both Peru and Bolivia are finalizing plans to follow Mexico's

lead in this program. Upon advice of American educators, Haiti has abandoned French in the first two grades of school and put the Creole vernacular in its place. The American authorities in Puerto Rico have reluctantly, but finally, accepted the hard fact that it is unwise to continue using English as the vehicle of instruction in the grades. In all the dominions and colonies of the British Empire, the children's native tongue is now used as the language of the first few grades of school.

WHAT IS THE probable outcome of our language situation? Do our native tongues have a chance of survival? They have no influential backers, and their literature is, admittedly, not exactly rich. But they belong to the population, and they have proved their durability by surviving half of millennium of linguistic colonialism.

A Filipino writer who has produced a considerable body of highly competent English prose, having been writing in the language since 1930, summed up the whole situation in a remark he made to me soon after he returned from Korea and Japan where he had gone on a writing scholarship. "I never realized how silly we Filipinos have

been in trying to use English until I heard two Koreans trying to speak to each other in English."

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Is That So?

"I hear that your uncle who tells those tall tales has a slight cold."

"He's dead."

"Still exaggerating, huh?"

Is There Such an Animal?

Husband: "It says here that the musk ox of the far north is not really an ox at all, but a member of the sheep family."

Wife: "Well, just who is he trying to fool?"

A Juvenile Report

MY SMALL DAUGHTER had spent some time with her grandmother and broke something for which she had been reprimanded.

A few days later, she was listening to a discussion and I were having about weapons, and afterward my daughter asked me what the word meant. I answered that it usually referred to an object that did damage.

She thought about this for a moment, then asked in a little voice, "Mother, am I a weapon?"

—MRS. W. H. DE MOURE

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