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Translation as Metamorphosis, as Awakening

In the Philippines, a country of roughly 104 million inhabitants, approximately 149 languages are spoken.¹ To be a Filipino, therefore, is to live and breathe in a multilingual atmosphere, which includes English, the language we inherited from American colonial education. However, despite aggressive efforts since the beginning of the 20th century on the part of our colonizers to educate native populations in English, the average Filipino continues to associate English and Spanish with the colonial elites, creating “a linguistic hierarchy roughly correspond(ing) to a social hierarchy.”² In my school days, those who dared to speak the local languages were either extorted (hilariously and painfully made to pay 25 cents for every local word we uttered), punished, or both. Filipino or what many still call Tagalog, was promoted as an alternate state-sponsored national language. Still, many consider the vernacular languages, among which Filipino is included, to be inferior, ineffectual, and impudent.

Within the last five years, however, it seems there has been a shift in the thinking about the importance of the local languages. Many young writers from the countryside now write in their local languages. Others, who began their careers writing in English or Filipino, like Luis Cabalquinto, now either translate their old works into Bikol or are writing new works in Bikol from the start. In the context of our ever-shifting government policy, congress recently passed the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE), which mandates that classes K-3 be taught in the local languages.³ Regrettably, however, despite the program’s good intentions, such top-down policies only reinforce existing hierarchies and privileges in public education, rather than achieving any real change in the mentalities of the people. Having facilitated many workshops on this topic, I have often been approached by teachers and parents to discuss the difficulties they face when teaching in their mother tongues. This is largely because of a lack of good pedagogical materials but also because of their unfamiliarity with the languages. They resort to English or Filipino as a matter of convenience.

In my opinion, inequality between languages can be mitigated by interrogating our existing multilingual reality against the backdrop of the pernicious legacy of colonialism. To this end, we must integrate translation as a key component in our pedagogical praxis, and develop an approach to language and literature that views them not as closed, petrified specimens of cultures and ethnic groups, but rather as works-in-transit. In other words, literature and language should transcend their origins, and expand the range of local languages and literatures—like my mother tongues, Bikol and Rinconanda. Therefore, when I translated Borges, Kafka, Rilke and Čapek, I was well aware and conscious that I was waging a countermovement against prevailing policies and mindsets that privilege English over our

¹ See <http://kwf.gov.ph/mapa-ng-mga-wika-ng-filipinas/> for the recently released Linguistic Atlas of the Philippines by the Komisyon Sa Wikang Filipino. KWF is the state agency that is mandated to promote, research, and develop the national language and other languages in the country. It is under the Office of the President.

² See Vicente Rafael, *Motherless Tongues: The Insurgency of Language Amid Wars of Translation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

³ See <http://mothertongue-based.blogspot.com/2013/05/full-text-of-republic-act-no-10533.html>. Last uploaded, August 30, 2017.

local languages. I am happy to note that at least the Tigaonan-speaking population of Buenos Aires in Ticao Island, whose access to Spanish and English might be limited, can now access Borges in Bikol or Filipino.

Metaphorically, I prefer to think of translation as an awakening. When translating Kafka into Bikol, I deliberately changed the title “The Metamorphosis” to “An Pagkagimata ni Gregor Samsa.”⁴ For me, the word *pagkagimata* has a spiritual or a revolutionary undertone similar to the word *awakening*. I translated Gregor Samsa’s dialogue into Rinconada (from the Spanish word, *rincon*, ‘at the corner’), precisely when his speech was most incomprehensible to his family. In contrast to Bikol, the local media, the academy, and the Catholic Church prefer not to use Rinconada. The latter remains an oral language. But with this translation, both Bikol and Rinconada can experience a kind of metamorphosis--in part because this is the first time both languages are being used together in the same text. I view this work not as a self-contained literary or linguistic artifact, but rather as a work-in-transit, which, despite limitations, has started opening new doorways for Bikol and Rinconada.

⁴ Translation is *The Awakening of Gregor Samsa*