

THE CIRCUITS OF TRANSLATION: THE PHILIPPINES AND THE WORLD¹

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(1) One is tempted to say that the Philippines is a nation constituted through translations—although this may simply be a pretty statement, considering that “translation” has become a fashionable concept extended to designate practically all acts of human communication.

But consider these facts.

The first book printed in the Philippines was a translation, *Doctrina Christiana* (1593), a basic introduction to Catholic dogma in Castilian and Tagalog, printed in Roman and indigenous scripts.² In the first two centuries of Spanish colonial rule, local book production was dominated by translations and lexicons that “reduced” diverse Philippine languages to Castilian.

The first printed book authored by a “Filipino” was a manual for Tagalogs learning Castilian, Tomas Pinpin’s *Librong pagaaralan nang manga Tagalog nang uicang Castilla* (1610).³ The first book of poetry written by a Filipino was a book of epigrams written in Latin, Bartolome Saguinsin’s *Epigrammata* (1766).⁴ The first known native writers were bilinguals called *ladino*, a reference to their fluency in languages and the poems they wrote, texts of alternating, line-by-line translations of Spanish to Tagalog.

The greatest Filipino writer, Jose Rizal, wrote in the form of the European novel in the Spanish language. In his final years, he attempted to write his third novel in Tagalog but abandoned it, confessing that he had difficulties writing in his native tongue and

that he did not wish to write in the way the Spanish missionaries did, writing in Tagalog but “thinking European”.

Today, the Philippines is one of the “Top 5 English-speaking countries of the world”. The total number of English speakers in the Philippines has been estimated at seventy-six million, representing sixty-four percent of the total population five years and older. The Philippines has probably the highest percentage (relative to population size) of English speakers among countries where English is not the “first language”. (India has 125 million English speakers but this represents only ten percent of the total population five years and older.)

We can account for all these facts as the result of colonialism (in the case of the Philippines, a country thrice colonized, by Spain, the United States, and briefly by Japan). But we are dealing as well with a basic condition of Philippine life. The Philippines is a multilingual country, with 55 indigenous languages and 142 dialects (the exact figures depending on how these categories are defined), in a maritime environment where movement and contact are defining conditions of local life. Whether it is the imperative of survival or that of becoming a ‘nation’, interlingual translation defines what the Philippines is.

(2) Translation is a basic human activity and a necessity in a polylingual world. But it is unavoidably enmeshed in the politics of relations between those who or whose languages get translated and those who, for what purpose and how, do the translating.

This is particularly true in societies fraught with the realities of domination, as in the Philippines. Translation was a tool and medium of conquest and conversion in Spanish-colonized Philippines, the channel through which the messages of a new Spanish-Catholic order flowed, and the means by which natives were disciplined and the anarchy of local languages (and what these languages intended) was organized according to a European grammatical and semantic grid (as Vicente Rafael so admirably demonstrates in his works).⁵

This was a time-honored motive behind translation that goes back to Roman and early Christian times when translation meant molding the foreign into the linguistic structure of one's own culture, without any real concern for its stylistic and linguistic idiosyncrasies. As Saint Jerome says: "The translator considers thought content a prisoner which he transplants into his own language with the prerogative of a conqueror."⁶

But this was not a one-way traffic between languages. Natives themselves translated the colonial language in their own fashion. Taking the case of Tomas Pinpin in the seventeenth century, Rafael shows that native translation of a foreign language can be defensive, an act of distancing, deflecting, or domesticating the threat of the foreign.

By the mid-eighteenth century in Europe, however, attitudes towards translation began to change. Other languages were now seen as equals rather than inferior forms of expression, and respect for the foreign in the original source language emerged as a guiding principle in translation. For the nineteenth-century Filipino nationalists as well (many of whom were exposed to European intellectual currents), translation became aggressively appropriative, a medium for accessing and ingesting the power of the foreign. It was in this spirit that Rizal and his contemporaries urged and embarked on translation work.⁷

Translation went beyond "translation proper" to adaptations, imitations, and plot summaries. It was often motivated by the capture of content and selected formal and stylistic elements—not unlike what the colonizers did, except that this was not the exercise of superior command but rather a case of stocking up on intellectual assets through which one could stand as equals to the more advanced nations of the world.

The relationships remained complex and it remains an open question as to what, in the Filipino history of translation, is gained and what is lost.

(3) Translation played an important role in the formation of a "national literature" in the Philippines as Filipino nationalists

worked to carve out distinct and autonomous literary space apart from that of Spain.

Early on, they recognized that the creation of a national literature required the accumulation and concentration of literary resources and intellectual capital through the twin process of (1) consolidating, codifying, and promoting local languages and traditions, and (2) appropriating, diverting, and converting the foreign into local capital.⁸

Translation is central to both these processes. Thus, on one hand, Rizal (to take him as our paradigmatic example) was driven by a passion for languages, translated works in German to Spanish and Tagalog, urged fellow-Filipinos to study foreign languages, and was himself conversant (so it is said) in twenty-two languages.⁹ On the other hand, he studied Philippine languages and urged others to do so as a way of discovering and appreciating the nation's unity in difference, though this would come only in the last years of his brief life.

These undertakings presented enormous difficulties because of the absence of a single common language in the country. Spanish was not as it was in Latin America: the Philippines had a tiny Creole population and less than ten percent of the population, the most educated, could speak and write in Spanish. Tagalog, the language of the capital and surrounding provinces, accounted for only twenty percent of the population. There were six other major languages in the country.

Translation then was not going to be a two-way process but a multi-polar one. It is thus that as Filipinos set about organizing an independent republic at the end of the nineteenth century, the framers of the Philippine constitution were undecided on the question of the national language, retaining Castilian as the official language but allowing for the optional but regulated use of any of the Philippine languages.¹⁰

(4) The situation was further complicated with the onset of US colonization in 1899. English was introduced as a “unifying” language, propagated through what was the country's first

nationwide public school system that was based on the English language and the American system of education. So effective was the system that the number of English speakers quickly multiplied, with the English language prized as the mark of education and avenue for economic and social advancement.

In the literary field, the possession of English lulled young Filipino writers in the belief that they had direct access to the world (and the United States was the “world”)—to such an extent that in 1912 Jorge Bocobo, a leading Filipino intellectual, would call for “the birth of a new Tennyson” in the country; the UP Writers Club, the country’s premier writers’ group, would declare in their 1927 founding statement that they aimed to become “the faithful followers of Shakespeare”; and in 1928 the country’s leading magazine, the *Free Press*, would commit itself to the goal of developing “some literary genius who might make a name for himself in the United States.”¹¹

There was little sense of naiveté or guilt in all these: the Philippines had become an intellectual outpost of the United States. Writing in a “world language”. Filipino writers in English imagined that they were part of a world that had New York as its capital, only to realize that one still needed a visa and English proficiency did not suffice. And even if one gained entry, it may be for reasons other than sheer literary excellence. From Jose Garcia Villa’s *Footnotes to Youth* (Scribner’s, 1931) and Carlos Bulosan’s *The Laughter of My Father* (Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1944) to Ninotchka Rosca’s *State of War* (W.W. Norton, 1988) and Jessica Hagedorn’s *Dogeaters* (Pantheon, 1990), works by Filipino authors have intermittently appeared in the US not solely on the basis of merit but enabling, extra-literary factors like the country’s status as a former US colony, World War II, or the interest generated by events like the “People Power” revolution in 1986.

And there was a cost to writing in a foreign language as well. In the dilemma of “self-translation”—the obverse of Rizal’s “writing in Tagalog, thinking European”—N.V.M. Gonzalez, one of the country’s best English writers, would write of his writing in English:

My merest jottings were notes not so much from an underground as from another world... The life I described quite literally spoke a different language in the description... and became a different life. Rendered in an alien tongue, that life attained the distinction of a translation even before it had been made into a representation of reality... even before becoming a reality of its own.¹²

This was not just a matter of language but of the literary and social formation of English writers, which divided them from local realities and the greater mass of the country's population. It was not until the Japanese occupation, with its policy of anti-Western Asianism, that the dominance of English was challenged, but this was a brief period. It would not be until the 1970s, with the rise of Left-wing nationalism in the wake of the Vietnam War, that the choice of language became a hotly contested issue once more.

But even then it may have been too late. English is too entrenched as to become (so it is argued) a Philippine language, naturalized as "Filipino English", one of the world's "englishes" (that, despite the bravado with which it is proclaimed, occupies an inferior position in the world of englishes). Moreover, the development of *Pilipino/Filipino*, the Tagalog-based national language, has been mired in inconsistent state policies of promotion, definitional debates, and the resistance of other languages. Other Philippine languages are vanishing because they are not taught in the schools and there are limited opportunities for their public use.

The country's indigenous linguistic resources have been depleted. There was reason for the social critic Renato Constantino to lament that while the English-based educational system was meant, at the beginning of the twentieth century, to produce bilingual Filipinos proficient in English and their native tongue, we have not produced proficient bilinguals but non-linguals.

In this context, what is the position of translation?

(5) We have said that there is a twin process in the creation of a national literature, the appropriation of foreign works, and the recovery and building up of indigenous and local traditions. Both require the work of translation.

There is no doubt that the possession of English is an asset and an advantage. We only have to think of the resurgence of interest in English-learning today because of the allure of overseas employment and the demand in the country's business process outsourcing industry. The value is not just economic. Knowing a "world-language", we have direct access to the large body of literature available in this language. And English and its literature, it should be acknowledged, have infused into local writing new values of form and style, sensibility, and thought that have enriched local literature.

But the relation between languages is not equal. While there are benefits to direct access to English, there are negative repercussions as well. It has stunted the growth of a local publishing industry since the local book market can be supplied with imported works rather than locally-produced translations of foreign works. (One only has to browse in the bookstores of Metro Manila to see that some 90 percent of the book inventory is in the English language, and that these books are predominantly sourced from publishers and distributors in the United States.)

The dependence on the English-language book market reinforces the dominance of the English language as it also cuts us off from non-English literatures outside of those made available in English translation through the intermediation of publishers in London or New York. For this reason, Filipino book readers are familiar with current American best-selling novelists (who come to the country on book promotion tours and are featured in the local media). They know next to nothing about the novels their neighbors in Indonesia, for instance, are writing.

There are implications less visible. For one, we miss out on the opportunity for the enrichment of local languages through foreign translations. Surely there is a value lost for the Tagalog language,

our experience of it, and of the text we are reading if we read Gabriel Garcia Marquez in an American English translation instead of reading it in a Tagalog translation from the Spanish original—assuming, of course, it is an excellent translation and we are Tagalog-proficient.

The irony is that possession of a “world language” has not made us more visible in the world. In the international circuit of translations, Philippine languages are practically invisible, either as source or target language. In UNESCO’s cumulative index of worldwide translations from 1979 to 2012, no Philippine language is in the “Top 50” source and target languages of translation. While the invisibility as a target language can be explained by the direct access Filipinos have to English works, it is interesting to note that as a source language, Tagalog (26 million speakers) is greatly outranked by smaller languages like Catalan and Bulgarian (around 10 million speakers each).¹³

The reality is that our literature remains one of the “small” literatures, located at the periphery of a world literary system that is heavily biased in favor of center-to-periphery flow rather than the other way around. The critic Pascale Casanova cites an economic explanation. Translations are high in countries where the volume of local production is weak and there is a deficit to be filled. Thus, while foreign translations make up 33 and 50 percent of the total book production in Portugal and Sweden, respectively, foreign translations account for only 3.3 percent of book production in Great Britain.¹⁴ Obviously, there are other factors since the countries with strong publishing industries are the dominant, trend-setting literary capitals as well. Hence, translations from English and French are the most sought after in Europe.

(6) But enough of “being visible” in the world. Perhaps the more immediate question is: how visible are we to ourselves? What of translations between or across Philippine languages?

With the country’s multi-linguistic heritage, translations across local languages are imperative in building the base for a national literature. Of these languages, Tagalog is the most important

because of state promotion and its location. Under the name *Pilipino*, it is the official national language although—as contested by English and other Philippine languages—it does not have the kind of authority and force that Bahasa Indonesia, for instance, has.

The level of inter-Philippine language translation remains low since, at least in print, English is the preferred target language because it has a larger book market. Across Philippine languages, the bias favors Tagalog as the source language. This is illustrated in the country's leading vernacular literary magazine chain, *Liwayway*, in which Tagalog fiction published in the mother magazine, the Manila-based *Liwayway*, is translated into Iloko, Cebuano, and Hiligaynon in the magazine's regional editions. However, the reverse flow of translations from these regional languages to Tagalog is practically non-existent.¹⁵ While the imbalance is largely driven by the economy of “literary remaindering,” it points to an important fact. As in the case of international translation, the flow of translation is from the center to the periphery rather than from the periphery to the center.

One result is the marginalization of many Philippine languages. It would be interesting to construct an index of the vitality of Philippine languages. Cebuano is the second most important Philippine language, the mother tongue of 20 percent of the Philippine population. (The percentage was higher a century ago.) But Cebuano is not taught in the schools and there is little publishing in the language today. There were 84 periodicals wholly or partly published in Cebuano between 1900 and 1940; there are only two small Cebuano-language tabloids today. If one inventories the words in a seventeenth-century Cebuano dictionary, one will find that a very high percentage of words is no longer in use today. There were 56 Cebuano terms for kinds of jewelry in the seventeenth century; many Cebuanos today would be hard put to recognize more than five of them.¹⁶ This is explained by material changes in Cebuano society, but it indexes an impoverishment of language as well.

The critic and translator Ilan Stavans writes: “For languages to survive, they need to be in a state of constant mutation. They need

to engage in a give-and-take, to borrow and improvise new terms, and offer terms to other languages...They cannot take too much, otherwise their essence vanishes. Nor can they give too much because they would disintegrate the languages that surround them.”¹⁷

What happens in a person’s encounter with a foreign language when the person is barely literate in his own? I recall listening as a young, aspiring writer many years ago, to a lecture by an established Filipino novelist in English. “To write in English well,” the novelist said, “you have to think in English, feel in English, dream in English.” It seemed straightforward advice; it was only sometime later that I asked myself, “What then shall I have become?” I have since come to the conclusion that the most productive encounter between two languages lies not in the surrender of one to the other but in the state of tension one is able to achieve between one and the other.

This is what—translation theorists tell us—literary translation must aspire to do: render the foreign intelligible and familiar, yet retain its “foreignness”. It is not to reduce one language to another but to keep them in that state of creative tension that enriches both.

(7) What is the role of the translator at the margins of the “world literary system”?

Interpreter and broker between languages, the translator must work with respect for the distinctness and integrity of both source and target languages, producing a translation that does not distort, dominate, or diminish either language but expands the resources and possibilities of both.

The Cebuano word for translation is *hubad*. If you allow me a bit of ethnocentrism, I think it is a better word for translation than the Tagalog *salin*. *Salin* means “to transfer”. *Hubad*, on the other hand, has a richer signification: it means to solve a puzzle, to unravel a mystery, to disentangle what is entangled, to undress. In this last sense, I suspect it is related to the Tagalog/Visayan *hubad*, meaning “undressed, bare, or naked”.

In all these however the true end does not only come with the solution to a riddle, the explanation of the alien and obscure, or the sight of a body undressed, but that sense of the ingenious, that aura of mystery that must remain. This is what art—and the art of translation—means.

Notes

¹ Keynote paper at the 6th Asian Translation Traditions Conference (ATT6), University of the Philippines, Quezon City, October 23-25, 2014.

² *Doctrina Christiana, the First Book Printed in the Philippines, Manila, 1593* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1947), facs. ed.

³ Tomas Pinpin, *Librong Pagaaralan nang manga Tagalog nang Uicang Castila*, trans. D.L. Woods (Manila: University of Santo Tomas Publishing House, 2011).

⁴ On Bartolome Saguinsin's *Epigrammata*: Resil B. Mojares, "The Verses of Bartolome Saguinsin," *Isabelo's Archive* (Mandaluyong City: Anvil Publishing, 2013), 80-87.

⁵ Vicente L. Rafael, *Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society under Early Spanish Rule* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988); *The Promise of the Foreign: Nationalism and the Technics of Translation in the Spanish Philippines* (Pasig City: Anvil Publishing, 2006).

⁶ Quoted in Hugo Friedrich, "On the Art of Translation," *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 12-13.

⁷ See Resil B. Mojares, *Brains of the Nation: Pedro Paterno, T.H. Pardo de Tavera, Isabelo de los Reyes and the Production of Modern Knowledge* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2006).

⁸ Resil B. Mojares, "Jose Rizal and the Invention of a National Literature," *Isabelo's Archive*, 213-21. A Spanish translation was published in *Entre Espana y Filipinas: Jose Rizal, Escritor* (Madrid: Biblioteca Nacional de Espana, 2011), 89-104.

⁹ For a brilliant study of Rizal's translational practice: Ramon Guillermo, *Translation & Revolution: A Study of Jose Rizal's Guillermo Tell* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2009).

¹⁰ See Ernest J. Frei, *The Historical Development of the Philippine National Language* (Manila: Bureau of Printing, 1959). This was the provision of the Malolos Constitution. The earlier provisional constitution of Biac-na-Bato (1897) declared Tagalog the official language. Upon the establishment of US rule in 1900, English and Spanish were declared the official languages, with English as the language of education on the grounds that it was "the indispensable language of liberty" and the "language of free institutions." It was not until 1937 that Tagalog was proclaimed as "the basis of the national language," a somewhat prospective, open-ended statement that has been debated until the present time.

¹¹ See Resil B. Mojares, *Origins and Rise of the Filipino Novel* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1983).

¹² N.V.M. Gonzalez, "Moving On: A Filipino in the World," *Foreign Values in Southeast Asian Scholarship*, ed. J. Fischer (Berkeley: University of California, Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies, 1973), 137; *Work on the Mountain* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1995), 62.

¹³ UNESCO. *Index Translationum*. www.unesco.org/xtrans/bsstatlist.aspx?lg-o [5/7/2014].

¹⁴ Cited in Pascale Casanova, based on 1990 statistics, in *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M.B. DeBevoise (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 164-72.

¹⁵ See Resil B. Mojares, "From Cebuano/To Cebuano: The Politics of Literary Translation," *Philippine Quarterly of Culture & Society*, 18:2 (1990), 75-81, with a "List of Published Literary Translations To/From Cebuano [1903-1989]"

¹⁶ Mateo Sanchez, S.J., *Vocabulario de la Lengua Bisaya* (Manila: Colegio de la Sagrada Corazon de Jesus, 1711; compiled in 1617).

¹⁷ Ilan Stavans with Veronica Albin, *Knowledge and Censorship* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 62.