

## **PRIVILEGE SPEECH OF SENATOR PIMENTEL**

Likewise, availing himself of the privilege hour, Senator Pimentel underscored the need to preserve the languages of the Filipino people.

*The full text of his speech follows.-*

### **PRESERVE OUR LANGUAGES/ STRENGTHEN THE REPUBLIC**

Some people believe that we have many dialects, which may be true, but we have also many languages. To name some: 1) Iloko in the Ilocos and other adjoining provinces; 2) *Pangalatok* in Pangasinan; 3) *Kapampangan* in Pampanga; 4) *Tagalog* in Manila and in Southern Tagalog provinces; 5) *Bik-olano* in Bicol; 6) *Hiligaynon* in the Iloilo provinces and in Negros Occidental 7) *Binisaya* in Cebu, Bohol and many parts of Mindanao; 8) *Waray* in Samar and parts of Leyte; and 9) the languages of the Maranaos in the Lanao Provinces, the Maguindanaons in adjoining provinces, and Tausug in Sulu and nearby areas.

These languages have nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, clauses, all the major components of language that are needed in verbal communications as well as in literary works.

Unfortunately, I think that all our languages are in danger of extinction with the exception of Tagalog, which has been mandated by law and by the Constitution as the basis of our national language.

Do not get me wrong, I am in favor of having a national language. We need it so that we do not have to speak the language of foreigners to communicate with one another, which is happening today in the halls of Congress most of the time. For example, I find it distressing that in our country today, we need an interpreter to translate proceedings in our courts of law throughout the land. Usually, it is from English to Tagalog or to any of the dominant language that is spoken in the place where the judicial proceedings are held. I think that trying a Filipino especially in criminal cases in a language that is foreign to him is atrocious and should be rectified soonest. But that is another story.

### ***Napoleonic idea***

Anyway, historically, it looks like it was the Jacobins of France in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century who led the drive to implement the Napoleonic wish to unify the people of France by mandating the use of one language – French – to achieve that end. Parenthetically, let me say that was how visionary Napoleon was. And to think that Napoleon was born in Corsica and his native language was Corsican, a dialect of the Italian language.

The Napoleonic concept of language as a unifying element of nations dominated the thinking of nation-builders and policymakers in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### ***Diverse language***

Nowadays, however, that kind of thinking may already be dated. Multiple identities of people and diverse languages in one nation are now common place. Ready examples are Spain, Wales in the United Kingdom, Belgium and Switzerland.

Hence, I submit that forcing the language of one ethnic group such as Tagalog upon other ethnic groups is divisive and disruptive of the national fabric. The key word here is "forcing" a foreign language on a people. It does not unite Pakistan learned this the hard way after the super-nationalists in Islamabad declared that only Urdu would be the national and official language of Pakistan. Among other things, it led to the breakaway of East Benizal and the eventual formation of Bangladesh. The ongoing civil war in Sri Lanka had as a major cause, the imposition of Singhalese as the sole national language over the objections of the Tamil,. Belgium almost had a civil war and it had to recognize Flemish as an official language along with French. Until then, influenced by the Napoleonic Doctrine, only French was the official language and the sole language of instruction in Belgium. Spain after Franco wisely recognized the regional languages as official language and as languages of instruction.

### ***More Sugboanons***

In our country, “until about 1970 there were more Filipinos who spoke Sugboanon or Cebuano-Visayan and its various dialects, than those speaking Tagalog. Tagalog as we all know was adopted as the major but not the sole basis of Filipino, our national language in 1937. Since then more of our people have learned to understand and speak Tagalog than Cebuano-Visayan, because of the

teaching and use of Tagalog or Filipino in our schools and their daily use by radio, cinema and television.”

Many of us who were not born in Tagalog-speaking areas believe that unless we take pains to protect our own indigenous languages, they would eventually disappear completely from our consciousness and from use in our verbal and written communications.

### ***Tragic end***

That would be sad, tragic and a total waste of a people's resource that can be put to promote our own understanding of concepts that the world outside our own limited firmament use.

Indeed, an adviser to the President of Iceland in the 1800s, Ornlfor Thorsson. – said "Without our language, we have no culture. We have no identity, we are nothing."

Thorsson said that when the Icelandic language was in danger of disappearing after years of Norwegian colonialism. Had this, happened, the Icelanders as an ethno-linguistic people would have disappeared from the face of the earth.

There is a study made by Gemma Cruz-Araneta that was published in her column in the *Manila Bulletin* of November 16, 2006. "It shows a decline in the number of users of Filipino languages other than Tagalog through the years. Tagalog users have steadily increased in number from 19 percent of the population in 1948 to 29.30 percent in 1995. The rise of Tagalog is far from spectacular, until it is compared to the decline of other languages in the country. In fact, Save Our Language through Federalism (SOLFED), this is an NGO organization, woefully predicts that in about 50 years, many of our other vernacular languages will cease to exist. To illustrate the urgency of the situation, Zambali is spoken only in four obscure towns in Zambales. Sen. Dick Gordon is one of the few who might be able to speak Zambali. I know that our Senate President Pro Tempore speaks Zambali too.

And so, there is another graph that follows. I will no longer read it for purposes of demonstrating that there is a decline in the number of non-Tagalog speakers, in other words, of other languages in the Philippines.

### ***Losing a culture***

Now, that would be indeed a tragedy as Dr. Kenneth Hale, who taught linguistics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, said that: "When you lose a language, you lose a culture, intellectual wealth, a work of art."

We, the Visayan-speaking peoples of the Visayas and Mindanao, for instance, have a word "*bana*," meaning "husband" in English **for which** the Tagalogs have no equivalent. Tagalogs use the same word "*asawa*" for husband and wife. That, to my mind, is promoting same sex marriage because if one can have "*asawa*" and "*asawa*" in the same household, that means that, theoretically, he can have people of the same sex getting married. But that is another story.

Our word in the Visayas for blanket is "*habol*" but "*habol*" in Tagalog means "to run after." Our word for "ant" is "*hulmigas*," but the Tagalogs would call "*langgam*" but to us, "*langgam*" means "bird." In short, it would be a pity if we lose our language just because we are far from Manila whose *lingua franca* Tagalog has been the language of the people in Manila, the capital of the country, for centuries mainly for practical purposes.

If we, the non-Tagalogs, want to give our languages a decent chance of survival, what can we do?

I suggest that there are, at least, two things that we can do: one fairly easy, the other quite difficult.

One merely calls for a change in the curriculum of our schools so that we allow the use of the dominant language in the various regions of the land as the medium of instruction from Grades I to VI.

I submit that the proposal makes sense because concepts would be more easily understandable to the graders if stated in the language of their homes. For instance, if one teaches Visayan grade school kids arithmetic the teacher would usually say in English, "One plus one equals two." But the concept of addition would be more clearly transmitted to the pupils in the Visayan-speaking areas if they are told in Visayan that "*Ang usa dungagan ug usa mahimong duha.*"

I would also suggest that we should teach English and Tagalog in our grade schools by using the dominant language of the people in the community. Taiwan is doing that, teaching Mandarin in Taiwanese language. The rationale is the same for the use of the local language to teach arithmetic.

At this point, let me say that I am not aware that this change in the curriculum needs legislation to implement it. All it probably needs is a policy adopted by the Department of Education that may immediately be implemented

for the entire six grades or staggered over a few years as may be necessary in accordance with the decision of our education officials in the DepEd.

If a law is necessary, I think we can easily mobilize enough support from our lawmakers to make that proposition possible.

### ***Adopt federalism***

The other way of doing it is more cumbersome because the proposal is to adopt the federal system for the country. Under the proposal, we can create 10 federal states based mainly on the linguistic preferences of the citizens.

To adopt the federal system of government needs an amendment of the Constitution. In the instances when I have articulated the need to adopt the federal system for the country. I have always maintained that the federal system would facilitate the economic development of the country and advance the cause of peace in the land.

Among other things, the adoption of the federal system would enable the federal states to enhance their own culture, language being a major component of it.

Unless we adopt the first proposal as an interim measure and the second one as the more permanent solution, I fear that our non-Tagalog languages are doomed.

We can take heart from the examples of post-Franco Spain, the United Kingdom, Belgium and Switzerland.

### ***Spain***

The evolution of Spain after Franco is a thought-provoking case. Catalan, Basque and Galician have been co-officialized and are now used side by side with Spanish in their respective regions. A conscious and systematic language policy favoring the elaboration and social implementation of minority languages in all fields of social life has led to spectacular results. Spain is often considered as a model of linguistic development and the peaceful solution of ethnic and linguistic conflicts in the process of nation building.

### ***United Kingdom***

In the UK, the Welsh Language Act 1993 and the Government of Wales Act 1998 provide that Welsh and English language should be treated on a

basis of equality. Public bodies are required to prepare and implement a Welsh Language Scheme. Thus, the Welsh Assembly, local councils, police forces, fire services and the health sector use Welsh as an official language, issuing official literature and publicity in Welsh versions.

### ***Belgium***

In Belgium, since 1993 there are now three levels of government: federal, regional and linguistic communities with a complex division of responsibilities. French and Flemish are now considered official languages of the Kingdom.

### ***Switzerland***

In Switzerland, the land of the cantons, four languages are recognized as official. In a small country with about 26 million people, four languages: French, German, Italian and Romansch.

I guess we have other examples of countries having multiple languages which have contributed to the stabilization of their situation instead of causing them problems of division.

I end with the suggestion that the time to take the first move to revise the curriculum of our education system, so that we allow the use of the local languages as the medium of instruction in our grade school, is now. Our other major languages are dying. We have to save them now.

The other suggestion is for the adoption of the federal system. I also suggest that it would be to our advantage as a nation for us to begin discussing the issue now. The federal system is a rather complicated one. It needs time to make our people aware of its various ramifications and to discuss and negotiate with all the stake-holders in Luzon, the Visayas and Mindanao its practical implications.

In the meantime, allow us to plead with our colleagues in government: Help us preserve our languages to enhance our cultures and we strengthen the nation.

As I close, I would like to mention that Sen. Lito M. Lapid, I think, has introduced a resolution where the discussions in the Senate, the record of the Senate, would be translated into Filipino for purposes of posterity.

I would suggest that we consciously try to adopt our own national language even in the discussions of matters affecting us in the Senate. I will be put

to a disadvantage because am not a Tagalog-speaking Filipino. I was born in Mindanao and I speak the language in Mindanao. Therefore, I should be the last one to advocate such a move as I had articulated. But it is important that as a nation, we must begin to realize that we need a common language to unify all of us but, at the same time, we must preserve the various languages of our nation because in preserving those languages, it would enhance the social fabric of the nation.