

# Conceptualizing Philippine Language Policy using Liberal Neutrality Philosophical Model: A Policy Brief

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## Abstract

Since 1937 with the legal provision on the adoption of a national language for the Philippine republic, the Filipino/ Tagalog language has occupied a privileged position in the hierarchical framework of the Filipino's linguistic ecology. While English and Filipino have status as official languages in the Constitution, the other indigenous Philippine languages are relegated to being auxiliary languages in official communications, and only about ten of them are recognized by the Department of Education to be used for implementation of the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education policy. This paper argues for a hybrid theory of language policy based on liberal neutrality model that levels the playing field by not granting certain languages a higher status than others. An informed choice for individuals and communities in a policy of multilingualism that takes into account freedom, identity, social mobility, and justice is offered as an alternative to the present Philippine language policy.

Keywords: *language policy, liberal neutrality, multilingualism, philosophy of language, hybrid theory of language policy*

## 1 Introduction

Philippine language policy is entering another crossroads with calls for scrapping the mother tongue-based multilingual education policy (MTB-MLE) (McEachern, 2020) as well as revising the policy itself to conform to a better multilingual model (Albano, 2022; Belvis & Morauda-

Gutierrez, 2019). The Department of Education (DepEd) is itself cognizant of the need to improve MTB-MLE's implementation (Department of Education, 2020), as the program was revealed to be wanting in many respects (Monje, Orbeta, Francisco, & Capones, 2021). Formerly, politics played the major part in language policy debates (Kaplan & Baldauf, 2003). More recently, educational outcomes as the yardstick for choosing one policy over another have injected themselves into the conversation and debate on language policy in the country, primarily through the efforts of scholars and educators. What is not being deliberated clearly is the philosophical grounding for the policy choices.

This paper is about discussing the liberal neutrality model (Patten, 2012) as a guide in crafting the Philippine language policy. This model has been argued to be relevant as part of a hybrid theory of language policy (Patten, 2003). Patten made the case for the liberal neutrality model upon the backdrop of two phenomena present in linguistic conflicts – language diversity and language shift. This present paper proceeds to present a backgrounder on the liberal neutrality model, then analyzes the history of Philippine language policy-making, and finally argues for a coherent position on how to craft the next revision of the nation's language policy.

## 2 Language Planning Models

The liberal neutrality model is seen as an alternative to the more popular common public language model and language maintenance model. The modern doctrine (Dworkin, 1978; 1985) is stated as follows:

Legislators (and other state officials) must be neutral on what might be called the question of the good life, or of what gives value to life. Since the citizens of a society differ in their conceptions [of what makes life worth living], the government does not treat them as equals if it prefers one conception to another, either because the officials believe that one is intrinsically superior, or because one is held by the more numerous or powerful group.

Think of the constitutional non-establishment clause on religion and religious freedom as an analogy as noted by scholars (Kymlicka, 1995; Patten, 2012; Barry, 2001). Applying the model to language policy, a strict adherence to liberal neutrality results in a state not choosing a language or languages to be a national language/s, official language/s, or language/s-in-education (or what Filipinos call medium/media of instruction) over other languages. This position has been thought to be impossible (Kymlicka, 1995). In Southeast Asia at least, for instance, language policy-making is thought to be inseparable from nation-building (Tupas & Sercombe, 2014). In the Philippines, a national language was chosen in 1937 just as the country was about to become independent during the Commonwealth period (Tupas & Lorente, 2014). Language policy shifts have also been theorized to come at the behest of coalitions of ethno-linguistic groups pressuring their central governments for linguistic concessions (Liu & Ricks, 2012). Thus, having to choose a language/s seems to be a given for states.

According to Patten (2003), the common public language model looks at language policy as an instrument in nation-building. It posits that having linguistic unity/ convergence is the desirable outcome and decisions about what language/s to use in governance and in education are geared towards attaining this goal. Some have noted that being a more monolingual polity is a characteristic of being more developed economically (Fishman, 1966; Pool, 1969; Ricento, 2000, p. 11), although the correlation could be bidirectional. According to Fishman (1964), language maintenance refers to “the preservation of a language or language variety in a context where there is considerable pressure for speakers to shift towards the more prestigious or politically dominant language” (Swann, Deumert, Lillis, & Mesthrie, 2004). The language maintenance model prioritizes the preservation of language communities that are negatively affected because of language shift (Patten, 2003). Language

maintenance and language shift are often contrasted.

### **3 Philippine Language Policy-Making History**

Seven milestones in Philippine language policy-making were noted by Tupas and Lorente (2014, pp. 170-171). In 1937, the Tagalog language was designated as basis of the national language when the Philippine territory was still under American colonial rule with internal sovereignty attained as then President Manuel Quezon presided over internal affairs, but the United States retained responsibility for defense and external affairs. According to Tupas and Lorente (2014), the choice of Tagalog as basis of the national language was “to use an indigenous language as a symbol of Philippine independence”. The reasons for selecting the Tagalog language include the fact that it “was the language spoken by most of the national leaders including Quezon”, and that “the seat of political government was (and still is) in Manila in Central Luzon, the region in which the majority of people spoke Tagalog as a mother tongue”. It is fair to say, then, that the language planning model used here was the common public language model.

In 1959, Tagalog was renamed as Pilipino to de-ethnicize Tagalog as national language (Tupas & Lorente, 2014). According to Gonzalez (1991), as cited by Tupas and Lorente (2014), “because of the choice of Tagalog as the national language, the politics of language took on an ethnolinguistic dimension”. The Tagalogs were accused of imperialism, as “at the time, Bisaya, the language spoken in Central Visayas and in many parts of Mindanao, was numerically greater than Tagalog” (Smolicz & Nical, 1997; Tupas & Lorente, 2014). There was still insistence on the common public language model but increasing pressure from other major ethnolinguistic groups was taking hold.

From 1947 to 1974, vernaculars were used as languages of instruction in Grades 1 and 2, English was made sole medium of instruction thereafter, and Pilipino, the national language, was taught as a subject (Tupas & Lorente, 2014). This marks the first time post-independence that the justification to improve educational outcomes was the main impetus language policy change. However, ethnolinguistic and political tensions still played a major part culminating in 1973 with the adoption of the revised Constitution. The youthful demographics in the 1960s contributed to a

“powerful and pervasive youth movement” who were “anti-Marcos (who achieved the Presidency in 1965), anti-administration and administrative corruption, anti-colonialism, anti-economic and cultural imperialism (particularly opposed to the 'objectionable' agreement with the U.S.), anti-English, pro-Pilipino, pro-Philippine nationalism” (Kaplan & Baldauf, 2003). However, this was especially true right around Manila, the capital (p. 73), and may not have been shared by the older generations as shown in the sharp divisions on the issue of national language in the 1973 Constitutional deliberations, with three different positions emerging: an 'anti-purism' view; a 'fusionist' view based on a 'theory of linguistic convergence'; and a 'universal' view based on many languages, and using features found in most languages (p. 74). Here, the “anti-purism” view, opposed to “a language ideology which emphasizes the desirability of linguistic 'purity', and which negatively evaluates the presence of foreign lexical or grammatical material in a language (e.g. regional dialects, sociolects)” (Swann, Deumert, Lillis, & Mesthrie, 2004), and the “universal view”, posed challenges to the prevailing Tagalog nationalists. It may be observed here that the language maintenance model roughly represented by the “universal” view has begun its collision course with the assimilationists represented by the “anti-purism” and “fusionist” camps.

In 1973, “to account for various ethnolinguistic stances towards Tagalog-based Pilipino as national language, Pilipino ceased being the national language and was designated official language alongside English, and 'Filipino' was to develop as the future national language” (Tupas & Lorente, 2014). In 1974, the institutionalization of bilingual education policy, with Pilipino and English as media of instruction was promulgated. It was justified on the following grounds: “to follow the mandate of the constitution requiring the government to take steps towards the development of the national language (Filipino) which was yet to emerge, but to be undertaken through the use of Pilipino as medium of instruction, and to respond to calls for the development of a national identity which was destroyed by colonial rule” (pp. 170-171). Another observation here is that educational outcomes came to the fore aside from the usual politics-oriented discourse on language policy.

The fall of Marcos in 1986 was followed by the promulgation of the 1987 Constitution. This fundamental law provided for the Filipino language as national language, with English and Filipino as the two official languages. In Philippine jurisdiction, the Constitutions from 1935 up to 1987 has made the distinction between national and official languages. Other language policies from this period include the “reaffirmation of bilingual education” (Tupas & Lorente, 2014) and the use of the regional languages as “the auxiliary official languages in the regions and shall serve as auxiliary media of instruction therein” (Republic of the Philippines, 1987). The justifications for the changes, according to Tupas and Lorente, were “to continue to work towards the development of a nationalist consciousness among Filipinos, and to affirm the sociolinguistic legitimacy of Filipino as evidenced by its widespread use across the archipelago”.

The post-Marcos period may be characterized as a more stable version of the preceding years with an entrenched national and official languages, media of instruction, and a clear hierarchy in the status of languages in the country. The 1987 Constitution as currently worded places Filipino at the top as the national language, and provides for it to “be further developed and enriched on the basis of existing Philippine and other languages”, be used “as a medium of official communication and as language of instruction in the educational system”, and to be developed, propagated, and preserved by a national language commission. The aforementioned “development, propagation, and preservation of Filipino” shall also apply to “other languages”. These “other languages” most likely mean Philippine languages.

Apparently forgotten in the discussion of Philippine language policy is an executive order by then President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo in 2003 which provided for the “strengthening of the use of the English language as a medium of instruction in the educational system” (Office of the President of the Philippines, 2003), probably because the executive order in Philippine law post-revolutionary Corazon Aquino was below the Constitution and the Republic Acts. The salient provisions of this executive order include: the teaching of English as a second language, starting with the First Grade; the use of English as the medium of instruction for English, Mathematics and Science from at least the Third Grade level; the

use of the English language as the primary medium of instruction in all public and private institutions of learning in the secondary level, including those established as laboratory and/or experimental schools, and non-formal and vocational or technical educational institutions, with a not less 70% allotment for learning areas conducted in the English language of the total time allotment for all learning areas in the secondary level; encouraging institutions of higher education to adopt the use of the English language as the primary medium of instruction in the tertiary level; the evaluation of the proficiency of educators in the English language and the conduct of training programs nationwide to develop and improve it. The executive order was also explicit in its justification for the policy: “It is the objective of the foregoing policies to develop the aptitude, competence and proficiency of all students in the use of the English language to make them better prepared for the job opportunities emerging in the new, technology-driven sectors of the economy”. The economics of language thus became part of the conversation on language policy at the state level.

In 2009, nearing the end of the Arroyo administration, “low educational achievement of Filipino students as revealed by various international and national achievement tests” saw the “institutionalization of multilingual education, technically the end of bilingual education”, with the justifications “to use mother tongues as media of instruction in elementary and high school in the light of local and international research results which showed that mother tongues are more effective than non-local languages (including Filipino in most communities in the Philippines) in facilitating learning” (Tupas & Lorente, 2014). This 2009 version was effected through a Department of Education Order. Four years later, Republic Act 10533 was enacted to strengthen this Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) (Congress of the Philippines, 2013). The MTB-MLE could be seen as a recognition of the value of the students’ local language and culture (Young, 2002).

#### **4 Arguing for the Liberal Neutrality Model**

The liberal neutrality principle in language policy argues for a model that refrains from privileging one language over others and treats all languages equally within a society (Patten, 2003). This

principle stands in contrast to models like the common public language model, which tends to favor one dominant language, and language maintenance models, which prioritize preserving certain languages. Several arguments can be made in favor of this philosophy as the guiding principle for Philippine language policy.

##### **4.1 Promoting Linguistic Diversity and Inclusivity**

The liberal neutrality principle should promote linguistic diversity and recognize the value of individual and community choice in language use. According to Stilz (2009), echoing liberal culturalists (Kymlicka, 1995), political integration need not endorse cultural, which includes linguistic, homogeneity. Llamzon (1973), in his analysis of the case histories of Israel, Indonesia, India, and Malaysia, and in trying to articulate the need for a national language in the Philippines, concluded that ethnic unity, among a host of other factors, is more important than simply adopting a common language for a chosen national language to flourish, and as shown in India and Malaysia, privileging a language spoken by a dominant group can instead lead to ethnic conflicts. In fact, Tollefson (1993) foreshadowed the collapse of the Yugoslavian state based on a host of factors including deep-seated linguistic issues. The significant role played by language policy in power politics in the ill-fated country was emphasized. In the context of the Philippines, a multilingual and culturally diverse nation, adopting the liberal neutrality principle can address historical inequalities and create a more inclusive language policy. As San Juan (2007, p. 100) has averred, language cannot be uncoupled from material-social activity, human interaction, or consciousness. A level playing field for all languages in the Philippines seems like a required starting point for addressing the privileged positions of English and Filipino and the dominant groups who speak them as first language.

##### **4.2 Enhancing Cultural Preservation and Heritage**

Liberal neutrality should allow communities to maintain their unique cultural heritage through their languages. By not favoring any particular language, this policy should aid in the preservation of indigenous knowledge, traditions, and customs,

contributing to the rich cultural tapestry of the nation. Schwartz (2008), analyzing second-generation Russian Jew immigrants in Israel, noted the vital importance of a community-based supplementary education system in preserving the minority language among second-generation immigrants. The recent development called MTB-MLE in the Philippines is a step in the right direction towards a liberal policy that values all cultures and heritage. Indigenous knowledge, which is often closely tied to language, can be preserved when all languages are treated equally, and this knowledge contributes to the sustainability and productivity of many ecosystems (Ali, 2017).

#### **4.3 Facilitating Equal Access to Education**

Implementing liberal neutrality in education should facilitate students' equal access to learning opportunities in their native languages. This approach supports bilingual and multilingual education programs, enabling students to acquire knowledge effectively in both their mother tongue and the national language, fostering a more equitable educational system (Skutnabb-Kangas, & Phillipson, 2017). Even the old Spanish friars realized the educational power of the mother tongues of their would-be converts in the Philippines when they preached in the native languages of the country (De la Costa, 1961, as cited in Smolicz & Nical, 1997).

#### **4.4 Promoting Linguistic Human Rights**

Liberal neutrality aligns with the concept of linguistic human rights, emphasizing the right of individuals to use their native languages in various domains of life, including education, administration, and public discourse (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1997). Upholding these rights not only respects the dignity of linguistic minorities but also contributes to a more equitable society. In the Philippines, Tupas (2023) has argued that Filipinos need to remember their dark imperial past to transform the dismal educational system. The idea of linguistic human right may not yet be etched in the Filipino psyche and thus a facilitating language policy of liberal neutrality would be most helpful.

Linguistic human rights, similar to economic, social, and cultural rights, are inherent and universal. Every individual possesses the right to participate fully in their cultural and linguistic community (linguistic human rights) just as they

have the right to an adequate standard of living, education, and cultural participation (economic, social, and cultural rights). Both sets of rights are essential for preserving individual and community identities. Linguistic human rights protect the linguistic diversity that enriches human culture, while economic, social, and cultural rights protect the cultural practices, education, and economic opportunities that define communities. Preserving these aspects is fundamental to maintaining human dignity. Linguistic human rights empower individuals to participate fully in society by allowing them to express their thoughts, ideas, and emotions in their native languages. Similarly, economic, social, and cultural rights empower individuals by providing access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities, enabling active participation in social and economic spheres. Both sets of rights play a crucial role in combating discrimination and marginalization. Linguistic human rights protect minority languages from being suppressed, promoting equality among linguistic communities. Economic, social, and cultural rights ensure that marginalized and vulnerable groups have equal access to resources, education, and healthcare, addressing economic disparities.

#### **4.5 An Alternative to the Common Public Language and Language Maintenance Models**

It seems apt to make an analogy between language policy and dealing with ethnic groups of varying status and privileges. For instance, adopting the homogenization of ethnic groups towards a dominant group seems like the Nazi solution or a white supremacy cause. This is akin to the common public language model. Meanwhile, language maintenance seems like a parallel to the affirmative action model to minority groups in vogue nowadays. The question of adopting a model is related to language ideologies, referred to as commonsense notions about the nature of language and communication (Woolard, 1992), particularly implicit or unstated assumptions about language that determine how human beings interpret events. Different ideologies including linguistic assimilation, linguistic pluralism, and internationalization have become objects of study (Tollefson, 2017).

For a multilingual or plurilingual society like the Philippines, a common public language model

seems like the most inappropriate. The language choices made by Philippine policy makers as shown above show a bias towards Tagalog and English until recently when multilingualism was made official in at least the education domain. Even then, the early-exit MTB-MLE model is still criticized (Albano, 2022). The conferring of special status to languages, mostly of the ones spoken by the political and economic dominant group, has been shown to perpetuate inequalities (McCarty & May, 2017, p. xi). In the country itself, the choice of Tagalog over Bisaya/ Cebuano has led to tension, although such has fortunately not led to physical wars. While there has been increasing acceptance of Filipino/ Tagalog among non-native speakers, charges of “Manila imperialism” has not disappeared (Pefianco-Martin, 2014). The language has been privileged since 1937 (Kosonen, 2017) and could be a reason why identity politics could spill into open wars or divide the country (see Solid North or Bangsamoro). Even in the regional level, the Bikol Naga and Bikol Legazpi has split into linguistic factions due to a squabble over the privileging of one over the other in educational materials in the advent of MTB-MLE.

As for the affirmative action-like model of language maintenance, the disadvantage comes from the fact some parents and learners feel that their mother tongue may not be the most viable if they desire social mobility. The case in Southeast Asia as in the Philippines is that English and the dominant languages are the most likely vehicle for upward social mobility. Language maintenance applied to endangered languages is often costly and may not be that ethical since the remaining speakers could be ghettoized if they retain their languages without provision for learning to communicate with the rest of the world (May, 2014).

An alternative to the above models is the liberal neutrality model in which the language speakers and/ or their languages are neither privileged nor allowed to just become extinct or be diminished in relevance. The speakers must be given the informed choice on what to do with their linguistic repertoire. While this policy may favor the established dominant languages since people tend to gravitate towards assimilation and shift to the entrenched languages, still the alternatives as discussed above may not be that palatable. A strict liberal neutrality model may not be the best since language choices are inevitable. The hybrid theory

of a language policy which means “a distinctive and appealing way of making the case for minority language rights and also to an understanding of the reasonable limits that can be placed on such rights” (Patten, 2003) may be a way forward. This policy entails a recognition of the multilingual/plurilingual reality in the Philippines but at the same time equalizing the playing field. Thus, conferring official status to certain languages like Filipino and English should be done away with at least on the basic law and the relevant statutes. The official policy should be one of multilingualism with the people given the rightful choice of language use as they deem useful and just considering their own identity and social mobility in a democratic space.

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