

# Winning at the Language Game

## Some Notes on Language and Culture

by Dave Zorc

*The following is a reaction to, and not against, linguist Eileen Scott's statement (Ang Boluntaryo, September, 1966), which was also backed up by the PC/P task force dialect committee: "The Volunteer must want to learn the language to become a member of the Filipino community." I hope to explicate at several levels how the language and the culture are so tightly knit, and why it is essential to enter both if one wishes to enter either.*

Legion is the name of motivations for learning or rationalizations for not learning the dialect in your area. Aside from considerations of effectiveness, basic communication, intimacy or depth of understanding your region and students, a good debate may be waged on the importance, the necessity, and the means of deeply entering into the culture through the local language. There are recorded cases of Volunteers who have to see other Americans in order to find "someone to talk to." Some PCVs erroneously believe that the Filipino people are shallow, while in reality their depth is expressed in the local language.

"Local language" means conquering the local dialect or else "Filipino English." It becomes vividly clear to all that the brand of English spoken at most levels here is quite different from that which the Volunteer has been speaking all his life. Idioms, humor, and life are translated directly

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from the dialect into English; hence, some involvement with the dialect is necessary to grasp the full cultural connotations of its English equivalent. Thus, poetically, "yellow" may be spoken of as "a cool color"; "eggs" can be a dirty word; "a cow eats grass" can be joking insult (a play on the word "ikaw" meaning "you"); or, in my dialect (Aklanon), "I am a man" is a pun ("ayam" meaning "dog") and "I'll put it in the bag" is rather gross humor since "alput" is the word for prostitute. To understand the peculiarities of your community, you have to understand the language—native or "Filipino English." Doing so, you have practically won at the language game, and understanding the culture is the pursuable prize.

NO matter how many speak so-called English in your area, the dialect is and will always be the basic means of communication. The English speakers are constantly switching back into the dialect; and there are all too many cases where this has caused embarrassment to all concerned. During one of the countless informal meriendas held recently, some teachers and a Volunteer were discussing a welcome party for a new division superintendent. Most of it was in English, but at one point a teacher made an aside to another teacher asking who would buy the rice for the occasion. The Volunteer mistook the word "rice" (*bugas*) for another word meaning "pride" (*bugae*) and automatically inferred, and quite wrongly, that she was speaking about him. He stormed out of the room, loudly voicing the

complaint that he detested their speaking about him in the dialect. To make matters worse, this was not a case of a simple misunderstanding. The teachers thought he *did* understand them, and felt the Volunteer was so cheap and stingy that they never asked him again for any financial assistance.

Obviously, there are times when Filipinos do make asides about you. Yet it has been found that Volunteers who speak the dialect well enough to understand and retort to these asides have the highest respect of the local people, even if it does embarrass them initially. Jeepneys are havens of dialectical and diabolical comments about you. The story rages in my area about a previous Volunteer's beautiful retorts. To a lady who commented that he was the ugliest American she had ever seen, he answered that she was the most ill-mannered Filipina he had ever met—and she subsequently had him over at her house for many delicious dinners. To a group of teenagers who asked him "where the American devil was going" he responded "to the same place that the Philippine animals are going" and when they arrived there, they treated him to several rounds of beer.

"Language is culture" simply because the language reveals the culture; and, conversely, the culture is molded, welded, and contained within the language. Culture classes during stateside training are not sufficient, particularly since they deal with the Philippines as a whole, and there are numerous sub-cultures throughout the nation. For example, finding out that in your dialect area, there are seven words for "carry" and 18 words for "rice" or means of buying, cooking or preparing it shows a great deal about Filipinos' immense concern for the practicals of daily living. Discovering that there is no word to describe the cuteness of children between the ages of six and 16 helps to illustrate that this is the time when children are ignored, made to do chores and eat at different tables. This is further illustrated by the abundance of words for babies and baby-care at the one end of the age spectrum, and the additional large number of words for young adults, bachelors and maids at the other end of the age spectrum.

**N**O book, bull session or series of learned articles will betray the culture better or faster than the language itself. If you're adept at just vocabulary hunting, the abundance of words in one area and the proportionate lack of words in another can say a lot to you about the cultural orientation of the people. The lack of words for "gravity," "allergy," "disease," and "germs" as

opposed to the countless words for "black magic," "luck," "fate," enchantments and incantations is a vivid explanation of "American mechanism vs. Filipino personalism."

Even research into grammar can prove rewarding. In most dialects, you can never make a person the direct object of an action. People, when named, must simply be the subject of your sentence. You cannot say, for example, "I will eat Pedro." You must change to a construction similar to the passive voice and say "Pedro will be eaten by me." This fact reveals a great deal about SIR or politeness. The language has a built-in respect mechanism; and even if you were going to go as far as devour a fellow human being, he would have to be the subject of your sentence, even if he might be the ~~o~~ subject of your action.

Further, the language will reveal a whole course of teaching methods to you, no matter what your work may be. Where you find a lack of words, there you'll also discover a lack of concepts; and like a machine with missing gears, the mind cannot function on a vacuum of concepts. Your students may study "germs" and "bacteria" in the classroom, but they are blind to them in their public spitting and urinating, in their raising of animals within or under the house, or their dumping of garbage within residential areas. They may know it is proper to consult doctors and drugstores when they are sick, but in dire ailments, there is always the *herbolario*. I know two doctors who actually recommend *herbolarios*; and one doctor who actually consults them!

"**A**MERICIANS are mechanistic; Filipinos personalistic." What does this mean? How often is your mind filled with explanations like 'ghost, vampire, evil spirit, or incantation?' How fluent is your daily vocabulary for various species of charms, magical animals, or black magic? Because you haven't the vocabulary, you simply do not think in these patterns. Fluency in that type of vocabulary was forbidden you, so to speak, by your culture (viz. your family and friends.) Your fluency is only as rich as your culture will allow. But Jose's culture has spoken a different language since he was born, and his thought patterns are consequently rigidly fixed.

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A funny thing happened to PCV Ralph Newell on his way to the Embassy dispensary during the annual physical exams in Manila. Armed with his stool specimen in a paper bag, Ralph was confronted by a gentleman who wanted all of Ralph's money. Instead of fishing into his pockets, quick-thinking Ralph handed the gentleman the paper bag—and away sped the bandit gleefully.

To change Jose's attitudes you will have to make him "unthink" or replace words and concepts which force of habit and culture have imposed. Very often, you must reach him through the language in which these concepts are ingrained. Otherwise you may discover a form of cultural schizophrenia where one thinks of germs in English and witches in the dialect, never totally accepting or rejecting either as true or false, but as a rather full but confused picture of "the truth."

We have seen how Jose may study about germs and yet not practice these convictions outside the class situation. True. But Jose also studies about folklore, witchcraft and reads the Dracula stories with tingling interest and excitement, but with no practicable convictions. The language of each is different. And these things do not just reflect external or surface attitudes, but deep thoughts and internal or cultural convictions.

You may think it unfair to compare Jose's study of germs and Joe's interest in witchcraft and wonder why each is not convinced of the other's viewpoint. "But we have the true, the scientific approach," you say. Yes, but your culture taught you to respect such methods as discovery and procedure. To call a person a "philosopher" here is not a compliment to his intellectual prowess, but a rather sarcastic insult. The cultural leisure and the absence of a necessity to grovel for our daily bread makes philosophy a possible and praiseworthy enterprise in our society; here, with the shortage of leisure and abundance, such types of intellectual rhetoric are mockable amidst the immense weight of more practical daily concerns. The same might be said for the scientific method at the barrio level.

**B**Y "language" we should not only understand a spoken vocabulary, but also the internal words, convictions, and psychological processes that make up both thinking and vocabularies. Hence, in learning the dialect, remember that translation is not simply transliteration, but also conceptualization and certain prejudices. "Bahay" does not just equal "house" because the whole situation of how a house is built and what its purpose is, what it means to an individual placed within it, and its whole psychological connotations to the American and to the Filipino are quite different. Words are parallel very often, but rarely equal between languages. This will apply

A little delicatessen-like sandwich shop surrounded by some of Manila's most down-to-earth girlie bars on del Pilar street just finished an internal face-lifting. During the renovation, this sign was seen in the window:

**BUSINESS AS USUAL UPSTAIRS**

for "Filipino English." "Yellow" is a cool color to Filipinos, but anything but cool to Americans. "I've forgotten your face" is idiomatically correct American English, but here it literally means, "I left your face behind somewhere, and if I find it, I'll return it to you." It is also true that in learning the language you will not easily pick up the psychological connotations of words. I have noticed that the Volunteers in my dialect area, even when speaking English, refer to the genitals in the dialect, because our English words are embarrassing to them, but somehow or other, the words in the dialect, though meaning the same thing, are more or less appropriate verbal symbols, but lacking psychological overtones. This is true of words at every level: "rice," "life," "courting," "dancing," etc., are loaded psychologically to each, but in a different way. I can and have uttered the dirtiest word in my area without a single blush, yet the Filipinos who hear it cringe at its vulgarity. It simply has not yet imposed its meaning on me.

The silent language has other dimensions. That hand over the shoulder is verbally silent, yet screams a message to the newly-arrived Volunteer. The collection of fish heads and tails you left on your plate speaks "ugh" to you, but "delicacy" to your host, and may even further speak of rudeness or insult by your refusing them. These, too, are instances of the language you are dealing with, because they cause verbalizations in the mind and are meaningful within the cultural context. That appointment held two hours late speaks "Filipino time" to Jose, but a "waste of time" and an insult to Joe.

**L**IFE at every level in your community—study, humor, prayer, prejudice, anger, love, fear, shyness, indebtedness, friendship, and so on—centers to some degree or other on the spoken or silent languages. Any Volunteer interested in life, be it at any level, must study just that local language. It is the community embraced by a culture and a language you are entering; if you refuse to enter either or both to at least some degree, then, in all seriousness, such a Volunteer has no right to be here in the first place.

Let us not speak of "going native"; no one is asking you to do that. Every Volunteer chooses his own particular line of demarcation—just how much he will accept or refuse of the culture. What is called for is a serious study of "words" (written, silent, and acted) and their content to the extent that no linguistic vacuum, no barricade to communication is ever set up. Idealistic as this may be or sound, it is a responsibility.