

# Policy outlooks for translation and related language policies in the Philippines<sup>1</sup>

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As a multilingual state, the Philippines has grappled with the political aspects of determining which languages ought to serve in official functions in a vastly dispersed archipelago. From a policy perspective, recent initiatives—such as the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB–MLE)—have served to assert the importance of regional languages not only as a symbol of linguistic plurality within the country, but also as being of intrinsic academic value. The need for translation between and amongst the major languages of the Philippines thus remains an astute goal for improving communication options throughout the country and institutionalizing diversity.

## Language policies in the Philippines

Language policies in the Philippines have historically emerged in conjunction with education policies. The single most significant language policy in the country is the establishment of the *Wikang*

*Pambansa* (national language). The 1987 Philippine Constitution promulgated Filipino as the national language, which was to be “developed and enriched based on existing Philippine and other languages.” Article XIV mandated the use of both Filipino and English as official languages of communication and as media of instruction of the Philippine education system. Consistent with the Constitution’s provisions, the following policies exist to promote bilingual education in the Philippines:

- The Department of Education (DepEd)’s 1987 Policy on Bilingual Education (DECS Order No. 52, s. 1987) called for the development of children’s bilingual competency through (a) the intellectualization of Filipino and its propagation as a language of literacy and (b) the utilization of English as an international language. Per the order, both shall serve as languages of instruction and, therefore, be taught as language subjects in all levels of basic education.

<sup>1</sup> This policy brief is based on a roundtable of the Decolonial Studies Program (DSP) of the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS) on the state of translation in the Philippines held on August 23, 2019. The roster of speakers included Dr. Mary Ann Gaitan-Bacolod (Department of Linguistics, UP Diliman), Dr. Romulo Baquiran (Departamento ng Filipino at Panitikan ng Pilipinas, UP Diliman), Mr. Kristian Cordero (Ateneo de Naga University), Ms. Karina Bolasco (Ateneo de Manila University Press), Prof. Wylan de la Peña (Department of European Languages, UP Diliman), and Ms. Jillian Loise Melchor (Department of European Languages, UP Diliman).

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- The Commission on Higher Education (CHED)'s New General Education Curriculum (CHED Memorandum Order No. 59, s. 1996), in consonance with the Bilingual Education Policy (BEP), states (a) that the mandatory medium of instruction ought to be consonant with the title of the language course (English or Filipino); (b) that Filipino, English, or any other language may be used in teaching literature courses, if there are enough instructional materials in the chosen medium of instruction; and (c) that Filipino ought to be the preferred language of instruction for courses in the humanities and social sciences.

Beyond the intersecting policies on language and education, the 1987 Constitution appears wanting of any legal provisions that could potentially set standards or guidelines for translation practice in the country. Its only mention is the mandate to translate the constitution itself: "This Constitution shall be promulgated in Filipino and English and shall be translated into major regional languages, Arabic, and Spanish" (Article XIV, Section 8).

As the Philippine education system transitioned from the old Revised Basic Education Curriculum (RBEC) to the K to 12 Basic Education Curriculum (beginning in school year 2012–2013), a shift transpired from a bilingual to a multilingual approach in basic education. The Bilingual Education Policy eventually gave way for the MTB–MLE framework, which set regional languages (hitherto considered an auxiliary language) as the medium of instruction across all subjects from Grades 1 to 3. DepEd Order No. 16, s. 2012 adopted the following major languages within the said framework: Tagalog, Kapampangan, Pangasinense, Iloko, Bikol, Cebuano, Hiligaynon, Waray, Tausug, Maguindanaoan, Maranao, and Chavacano. The following year, the department issued DepEd Order No. 28 that added Ivatan, Sambal, Akianon, Kinaray-a, Yakan, and Surigaonon to the list. While there remains a lack of any veritable policy for translation, challenges in implementation highlighted the core importance of translation in the development of instructional materials in the mother tongues (MTs). The Bilingual Education Policy, having dominated the country for the past decades, ensured the proliferation of didactic materials in both English and Filipino vis-à-vis the scarcity of learning materials in the formerly marginalized languages in the regions.

## Translation projects in multilingual contexts

### Translation projects in the Philippines

Apart from the current education situation that has created opportunities for translation of didactic materials into regional languages, several non-literary translation opportunities exist in the private sector, such as the translation of official documents or technical manuals. This commercial dimension, however, often obscures the societal and economic dynamics of literary translation, which has served as an essential cultural conduit both locally and internationally.

Literary translation has typically been to and from English and Filipino, although considerable efforts exist to translate between and among regional languages. Ateneo de Naga University Press Director and literary translator Kristian Cordero notes that the history of Bikol literature is grounded in translation work, similar to the tradition of world literature where great classics have been translated from other languages to English. The following are some of the projects cited in the roundtable that address the need to promote literary translation in the Philippines.

- *On intellectualizing local languages.* Cordero stressed the importance of attending to this issue through the translation of well-loved literary texts from English to Bikol, a move to increase readership of literature in the local language. Romulo Baquiran of the UP Diliman Departamento ng Filipino at Panitikan ng Pilipinas (DFPP), further noted his frequent collaborations with the UP Diliman Department of English and Comparative Literature (DECL). These joint ventures resulted in the translation of works such as *Flowers for Algernon* and *Alice in Wonderland*, which have long been staples in local bookstores. In order to provide a perspective from the publishing industry, Karina Bolasco, director of the Ateneo de Manila University Press (and formerly of National Bookstore's publishing house, Anvil Publishing), cited market forces behind the trend of translating bestsellers from English to Filipino, especially American young adult literature. Adding to the discussion on readership as a significant factor in determining the direction of translation

projects in the country, Jillian Melchor of the UP Department of European Languages (DEL) remarked that the “Aklat ng Bayan” project of the Komisyon sa Wikang Filipino (KWF) operates with the objective to promote love for reading in Filipino. It has so far translated older works, such as *King Lear* and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

- *On bringing works in Philippine languages to a mainstream audience.* There has been much effort to translate works in Philippine languages to English in order to bring them into the mainstream. English translations of Jose Rizal’s seminal novels, *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo*, made it possible for his works to be included in the prestigious roster of Penguin Classics’ world literature editions, enabling their accessibility to Filipino and foreign readers alike. Penguin Classics’ success with *Noli* and *Fili*, through the leadership of Elda Rotor, encouraged the integration of other Filipino authors within its titles, among them Jose Garcia Villa and Nick Joaquin (Jaucian 2016).

#### Translation projects in other multilingual contexts: The case of South Africa

South Africa has adopted various policies to accommodate and recognize multilingualism—even designating 11 official languages. The recognition of these languages as official languages in post-apartheid Africa created a linguistic basis for additional social, political, and economic rights of 74.64% of the country’s population, which then paved the way for a free, democratic, and multilingual society. The Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB), which is mandated by national legislation, protects and promotes multilingualism in South Africa. In May 2004, they launched a campaign to increase public awareness of language-related issues and to reinforce community rights to be served at government institutions in their first language (“Pan South African Language Board” 2002). In the same year, they also launched an electronic translation program in cooperation with Afrilingo, a company experienced in translating computer programs (ibid.). Thami Olivier of Afrilingo had succinctly said that their goal was “to break down language barriers” (ibid.). However, for Krog, Morris, and Tonkin (2010, 17, cited in Bernacka 2012, 112), translation from one language to another, in the context of a

multilingual South Africa, is a reconciliatory act, especially because some languages, particularly Zulu and Xhosa, were previously neglected in the country’s social, political and cultural life. They saw this as an essential national concern given that it would “make other voices [be] heard” (ibid.) and would serve as a mediator between “dominant and aspiring cultures” (Bernacka 2012, 112).

The challenges of formal recognition and the implementation of multilingual and translation-directed policies and initiatives in South Africa (and similar multilingual states) can serve as a conduit to rethinking approaches to multilingualism and translation in the country.

### Issues in translation in the Philippines

***Lack of government support.*** This is an important factor that contributes to the instability of translation, as seen in the following national policies:

- The National Book Development Board (NBDB) offers grants for the translation of Philippine works to English. However, it can use its mandate to encourage translations across Philippine languages as well.
- The MTB–MLE has established an extensive practice of translation into the regional languages, albeit informally, as teachers need to translate didactic materials into mother tongues. Unfortunately, since this additional task was not compensated, it was regarded as more of a burden than an affirmative act towards the promotion and empowerment of regional languages.

***Lack of readership in Philippine languages.*** The roundtable highlighted the lack of interest from the Filipino readers in literary texts (e.g., pocketbook romances, classics, young adult bestsellers) that have been translated from English into local languages. Regrettably, the failed attempt of local publishing houses to raise the readership in the Philippine languages through translation demonstrates congruence with the government’s view in giving more prestige to English.

***Lack of official translation centers.*** The lack of translation centers was likewise identified, citing the Sentro sa Salin at Araling Salin, initiated by and

housed at the University of Santo Tomas (UST), as the lone center dedicated to translation studies. To make the establishment of translation centers in universities a norm, proponents of this pioneering translation center deem it necessary for a law to direct their institutionalization in Philippine universities.

***Lack of proficient speakers and qualified translators.***

Another significant constraint is the limited number of proficient speakers in the target languages who are qualified enough to endeavor in translation work, as credentials have yet to be systematized. Hence, there is likewise a pressing need for the regulation of qualifications, as translators are ideally Filipino scholars who are not only proficient in the source and target languages, but also knowledgeable about translation theory and philology. A database may also be needed to facilitate access to translators whenever required.

***Lack of availability of translation studies degree courses.***

Existing degree programs on translation normally focus on academic approaches and critiques rather than the practice of translation itself. Most of these courses are also offered at the graduate level, allowing them to be accessible only to very few students. Only when academic institutions and the government work together towards the formation and supervision of translation as a career and the institutionalization of a degree in translation studies involving both theory and practice will there be clear guidelines as to who can practice translation.

***Lack of standardized professional fees.*** Oftenly, translators play by ear when charging fees, a problem stemming from the absence of standard translation practices. Commissioners often fail to see that translation work requires prior research and study and that translating literary and non-literary texts have their own challenges. By and large, negotiations are motivated, not solely by the desire for the recognition of the efforts poured in doing translations, but also by the need to be credited for intellectual work and accountability.

## Policy options in translation

***Government.*** The KWF has spearheaded efforts to professionalize translation by partnering with UST to establish the Sentro sa Salin at Araling Salin, which offers certification and accreditation and

conducts research activities on translation (UST 2018). Moreover, the KWF has a Translation Branch that is tasked to produce translations in Filipino and other regional languages, aid KWF commissioners in the creation of standards, and form a Bureau of Translation which will be composed in part by a pool of translators. However, John Enrico Torralba, chief of the KWF Translation Branch, pointed out that its mandate is only to propose policies and not to enforce them (de la Cruz 2019). The expansion of the Branch's responsibilities could be an additional policy consideration.

***Academe.*** The academe plays a significant role in professionalizing translation. By offering degree programs or certificate courses in various types of translation, potential translators could be trained in its theory, techniques, and ethics, eventually increasing the pool of qualified and accountable translators. As previously mentioned, UST plays a significant role in the establishment of the Sentro sa Salin at Araling Salin. The Pambansang Kumperensiya at Kongreso sa Pagsasalin held in August 2019 aimed to set the agenda in professionalizing translation (Teves 2019) and a technical working group was formed to this end (de la Cruz 2019).

***The religious sector and the media.*** As groups that often use translation in their functions, the religious sector and the media could be engaged to provide significant support for the professionalization of translation.

## Conclusion

In consideration of the challenges brought about by multilingualism and globalization, translation ought to be regarded as vital for nation- and identity-building as it democratizes knowledge and access to knowledge. It is thus essential to manage the practice and profession of translation, which would require cooperation and coordination amongst various public and private entities. These include the academe, professional translators, groups engaging in translation, and related government agencies. This collaboration ought to exist not only to ensure that official forms, laws, and promulgations are understood in local contexts throughout the country, but also to sustain cultural exchange both within and outside the country. Just as important, there is a need for translators to have regular venues to meet and to

discuss matters relating to their profession. These matters include, but are not limited to, the possibility of accreditation, remuneration, and the organizing of trainings, seminars, or certificate courses to increase access to the profession and foster an interest in learning both local and foreign languages. ■

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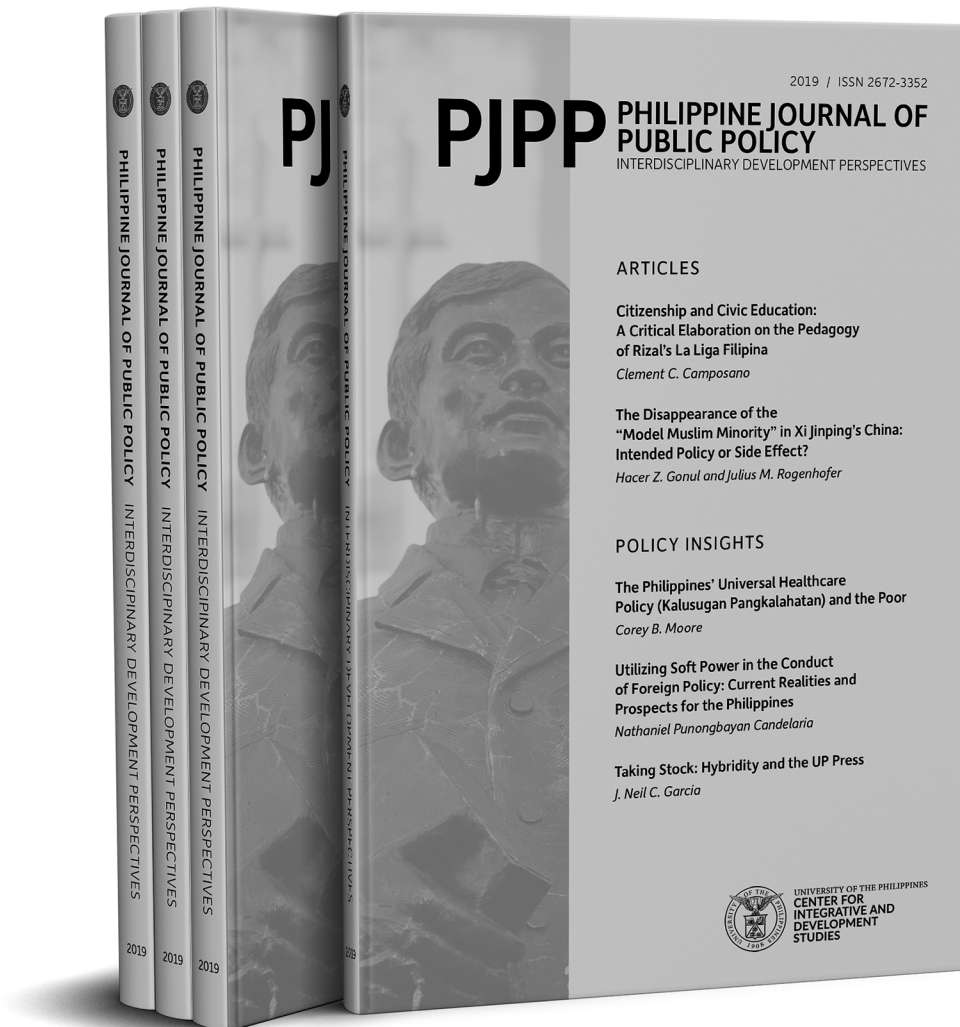
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