

New Prospects for the Spanish Language in the Philippines

*Rafael Rodríguez-Ponga **

Theme: The announcement by the Philippine government concerning the reintroduction of Spanish in secondary education offers new prospects. The new situation deserves consideration from the perspective of individual rights.

Summary: The pilot project by the Philippine Department of Education means that 17 state schools will offer Spanish as an optional language at secondary level. This offer comes in addition to the courses available in private schools and universities. Spain can offer support for teacher training, linguistic consultancy or bilingual classrooms, as it does in other countries. Naturally, the Latin American dimension of the language and people's right to choose their education cannot be overlooked.

Analysis: On 6 November 2008, the Philippine Education Secretary, Jesli A. Lapus, announced that Spanish would return to the state education system, dependent upon the Department of Education. The announcement came within the framework of the 4th annual *Tribuna* forum between Spain and the Philippines, held in the city of Cebu, and involving some 100 delegates from both countries.

The announcement unleashed an enthusiastic response from the Spanish authorities. On the same date the move was announced, Spain's Foreign Affairs and Cooperation Ministry (at the request of its Foreign Policy Director for Asia) issued an official statement saying that 'the Government of Spain is delighted by the solemn announcement' and that 'Spain expresses particular satisfaction' at this 'excellent news', which 'implies a great step forward in strengthening bilateral relations'. The statement also said that 'Spain is studying the launch of a linguistic cooperation programme'.

The Cervantes Institute issued another statement concerning what it called a 'significant step forward in the presence of the Spanish language in that country', but added that it is an 'offer of optional classes to secondary school pupils'. It also outlined a 'plan to mitigate the shortage of teachers', with the involvement of the Institute, the Spanish Education Ministry and the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID).

* *Doctor in Philology and Chairman of the Spanish Association for Pacific Studies (Asociación Española de Estudios del Pacífico)*

Press agencies carried comments by the Spanish Ambassador in Manila, Luis Arias, and the Director General of Foreign Policy for Asia and the Pacific Region, José Eugenio Salarich. The newspapers carried reports, and some Spanish media, in Internet editions, even ran the following unfortunate headline: 'Spain Reconquers the Philippines'. Significantly, the US agency Associated Press sourced its teletype print-out in Madrid, not in the Philippines.

On the Philippines side, the Secretary's announcement was just that: an announcement, with no frills attached. Initially, there were no official communiqués or press releases. The Philippines News Agency, when reporting about the *Tribuna* forum, made no mention of the language issue. The Department of Education took two months to make the news public, via a purely descriptive press release on 28 January 2009, with no added opinion. Only then did the Philippine press report the news and the political and academic world began to react.

There are two visions of the same issue: the Spanish vision and the Philippine vision. Perhaps, two different emotions.

In fact, it is the repetition of a 'decision already announced by the President [of Philippines], Gloria Macapagal [-Arroyo] on her state visit to Spain in December 2007', as indicated in the communiqué issued by the Spanish Foreign Ministry and as reported at the time by the Philippine media.

The presidential decision had immediate consequences. The Under-Secretary of the Department of Education, Vilma L. Labrador, circulated a Memorandum (17/XII/2007), on the 'Restoration of the Spanish language in Philippine Education'. In it, the Department 'encourages secondary schools to offer basic and advanced Spanish in the Third and Fourth Year level respectively as an elective'.

In Cebu, Secretary Lapus reiterated the initiative and offered a few more details, and still more specifics were provided at the subsequent meeting. The project consists in launching a Special Programme in Foreign Language, having recognised that the prevalence of English is no longer sufficient due to the international demand for speakers of other languages. Accordingly, adding foreign languages as optional subjects has become critical for the Philippine educational system.

The programme begins with Spanish, for historical reasons and because of its relationship to the Philippine national language (according to various sources, between 20% and 33% of Tagalog words are of Spanish origin). In the pilot project, which will start in June 2009, one secondary school (preferably with a language laboratory) will be chosen in each of the 17 administrative regions. Two classes, each with 35 students, will be set up from among pupils in the final two years of high school. They will receive four hours a week of Spanish classes.

The programme will therefore benefit 70 pupils in each of the 17 schools selected: a total of 1,190 pupils. Considering that Spanish is not offered even as an optional subject in the state-run education system in the Philippines, this is a significant step forward.

To adequately assess its scope, it is worth recalling that in the Philippines there are 5,078 state secondary schools, with 5,072,210 pupils, plus another 3,377 private secondary schools, with 1,290,792 pupils (2007).

For some years, there have been educational rapprochements between Spain and the Philippines: Philippines-Spain Friendship Day, on 30 June, introduced by law in 2003 (Republic Act No. 9187), which the Department of Education celebrates each year in cities like Manila, Zamboanga and Baler; the *Tribuna* forum, which began in 2005 as a forum for bilateral meetings; and the SPCC (Spanish Program for Cultural Cooperation) which the Spanish Culture Ministry launched in 1997 to foster cultural programmes via universities in the Philippines and Pacific islands. Some private cultural institutions in the Philippines (Ortigas Foundation, Vibal Foundation and Fundación Santiago) also contribute to learning about Spain. The Philippine Academy of the Spanish Language could again play an interesting role.

Until the current Constitution in 1987, Spanish had been an official language, alongside English and Filipino. This Constitution establishes four categories: one national language, namely Filipino (based on Tagalog); two official languages, namely English and Filipino; regional languages as auxiliary languages; and two languages for voluntary promotion, namely Spanish and Arabic.

It is important to point out that Spanish never replaced the vernacular Philippine tongues and no-one ever tried to make it. The Filipinos never abandoned their own languages. Spanish, despite being an official language between 1565 and 1987, was never a threat to the Philippines' linguistic diversity. Quite the contrary, it broadened it further, through its own presence and the emergence of Creole tongues known generically as Chavacano.

The status of Spanish has changed radically in the just over a century since 1898, and even more so since the end of the Second World War. It is no longer the international language of the Philippines, because that role is now for English. It is no longer the language of the country's social, political or cultural spheres, because that role is now for English or Tagalog (or Filipino, as the national language). And it is no longer the language of households, because Filipinos use their own vernacular languages (of which there are some 120) at home.

Francisco Moreno and Jaime Otero claimed that in 2007 'native speakers' comprised 439,000 people, which accounts for just 0.5% of the population (90 million). However, we observe that even mixed families, who used Spanish as their usual language, have stopped speaking Spanish to their children and grandchildren, and now speak English and Tagalog. Accordingly, what is being lost is not a 'colonial' language, as some would have it, but a specific and unique dialectal variety, with its own phonetic, grammatical and lexical characteristics: the Spanish of the Philippines.

Bilingualism at home is possible; but trilingualism is much more difficult. For three quarters of the people in Philippines, Spanish would be their fourth language, after their mother tongue, Filipino and English. Accordingly, the situation of Spanish is truly difficult in the context of the linguistic reality in Philippines, which is so diverse. Not only are there many languages, but each individual is multilingual.

When he made the announcement, the Philippine Education Secretary offered two examples: the initiative by the People's Republic of China to support the teaching of Chinese in the Philippines by sending 100 teachers, and private schools where Spanish is taught.

These private schools are mostly located in Manila and its suburbs, in Cebu and in other cities like Baguio City. They are international schools (American, French and British) or religious schools with Spanish or Mexican staff. Some also offer Spanish at primary level.

The Saint Pedro Poveda College (run by the Teresian order), in Quezon City, is the highly prestigious school that is taken as a reference. It offers Spanish throughout its curriculum, at both primary and secondary level. When it introduces Spanish in the state system, the Department of Education plans to take into account the curriculum at this school. Poveda is so closely linked to Spanish that some years ago there were talks aimed at making it a Spanish-Philippine school, but the Spanish Education Ministry eventually withdrew from the initiative.

Several universities offer Spanish, but fewer now than before, as part of the general trend that we have already mentioned. In 1995, Maruxa Pita identified 70 higher-education institutions which offered Spanish classes to 15,578 students. In 2006, her successor at the helm of the Cervantes Institute in Manila, Javier Galván, counted 32 institutions and 12,466 students.

In some cases, it is a specific subject for students studying Humanities degrees. In others, it is offered within the Department of Language and Literature (University of San Carlos, Cebu) or the Department of Modern Languages (Ateneo de Manila University) for students studying any degree. The university with the broadest range of qualifications is the state-run University of the Philippines, where it is possible to take a Bachelor of Arts degree (Spanish), Master of Arts (Spanish: Language, Literature, Rizal Studies, Translation) and Doctor of Philosophy (Hispanic Literature; Spanish American Literature; Spanish Filipino Literature; Peninsular Literature).

On the Spanish side, the AECID sends three Spanish lecturers to Philippines universities and the Cervantes Institute in Manila cooperates regularly with them and offers classes to more than 3,000 adults.

For decades, Spanish has been losing ground because it has been looked upon with prejudice as outdated, colonial, useless, difficult or elitist. The change currently taking place is hugely important: Spanish is starting to be seen as a useful, international and open language. Many Filipinos now regret not having learned it better and earlier.

President Gloria Macapagal, who does speak Spanish, knows and values the role of the Spanish language in the world.

International development consultants advise the authorities to encourage Filipinos to learn Spanish, just as Japanese or Koreans do, to help boost their trade relations with Latin America and Spain (and the EU). Consequently, they have told the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) that Spanish is part of development. And they told the mayor of Zamboanga to reinforce Hispanic elements because cities that identify with their culture tend to prosper more. Today, Zamboanga, 'the Pride of Mindanao', is also known as 'Asia's Latin City'.

In some degree programmes (History, Law), Spanish is still extremely useful, not least in order to understand the original Philippine documents.

Students of medicine and nursing now study Spanish to enhance their chances of being able to emigrate to the US, because they know that it is the second language there and that, consequently, they will have better employment opportunities if they speak it.

Workers at call centres also speak it: their salaries are quite a lot higher if they can offer a bilingual service. Due to its geographical location between Europe and America, the Philippines is the ideal place to fill the gap caused by time differences. In Zamboanga, where the Chavacanos learn Spanish easily, it has become an instrument for professional promotion.

Carers (of children or elderly people) who have emigrated to Spain have found that learning Spanish has opened new doors for them.

For all these reasons, the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) has set up the National Language Skills Institute (LSI) which offers Spanish classes directly geared to obtaining work permits. And the Cervantes Institute of Manila, which is now run by José Rodríguez, offers courses for specific niche employment groups: Spanish for call centres and teacher training.

Accordingly, Spanish is now perceived as an instrument of communication, with 400 million speakers and, even more importantly, as the second language in the US. It has become a channel towards new opportunities and a way to climb the employment ladder.

Spanish is starting to be less associated with Spain, the colonial past and the history and literature of the Philippines. In a way, we are witnessing a decoupling between the Spanish and Philippine identities and the Spanish language. This is pivotal: it is a useful tool, with no further connotations. It is as successful as English as a universal tongue: most do not learn it for historical or literary causes, but for practical reasons.

Against this new backdrop, we can ask ourselves what Spain can do. The Cervantes institute already does great work teaching the language and spreading the culture in Manila, but it could open new branches or satellites elsewhere in the country. The AECID could contribute by sending more lecturers and implementing more educational development projects. The Ministry of Culture could reinforce its cultural cooperation programme (SPCC). And the Education Ministry could launch the Education Department at the Spanish Embassy in Manila, set up in 2002, and follow the example of its own experience in other countries, with linguistic consultants, resource centres, Spanish sections in schools, Spanish language and culture classes or sponsored schools.

It could help with the training of Philippine teachers, publishing school materials, organising education and better divulging the reality of Spanish in the Philippines (as in the magnificent book by Antonio Quilis and Celia Casado-Fresnillo, *La lengua española en Filipinas*, CSIC, 2008).

In all of these areas, I believe that from Spain we should be particularly sensitive. And we should also consider the American dimension of Spanish, because Spain does not own the language, and nor is it the main focus of interest of those who learn it. The relationship between the Philippines and the US and Ibero-America (especially Mexico) must be taken into account.

At the same time, the Spanish authorities must pay more attention to the 32,000 Filipinos who live in Spain, offering a range of new possibilities, with people who are perfectly bilingual or trilingual (Spanish-Tagalog-English, Spanish-Cebuano-English). Accordingly, the teaching of Philippine tongues and fostering studies about the Philippines take on a whole new meaning and would serve to strengthen ties between the two countries.

Conclusions: First and foremost are the opportunities for people who wish to learn languages in Spain or in the Philippines. It is a question of human rights, of individual freedom: freedom of culture, education and expression. We all want opportunities for freedom. And that includes the freedom of parents to choose for their children to learn Spanish at home and at school, whether in the state or private system.

The argument is that it is more important for Filipinos to learn Chinese or Japanese, and that is reasonable. But let us leave it to the pupils themselves (or their parents) to decide. Let us allow each person to choose the language they want to study, because it is precisely the Philippine Constitution that entitles them to, stating expressly that Spanish is a language that will be fostered on a voluntary basis.

It is necessary to know the socio-linguistic reality of the Philippines, since not all places are the same. It is a vast country, full of nuances. It makes much more sense to learn Spanish in Metro Manila, Cavite, Zamboanga and Cebu than anywhere else. Consequently, a special effort should be made in those areas, where there are families with a Spanish background and pupils spontaneously interested in learning the language. There are people from households where they have heard Spanish spoken and others who speak Chavacano as their native tongue and would be delighted to learn international Spanish, or for their children to learn it. Consequently, there should be a distinction between when it should be taught as a quasi-native language and when it should be taught as an international language (foreign language). Or, what amounts to the same, when to teach that 'What's your name' is '¿Cómo te llamas?' or, in Filipino Spanish '¿Cuál es tu gracia?', because in no case should the teaching of standard Spanish entail snubbing the local linguistic varieties.

In conclusion, let us help offer alternatives to those who want to study *the* Spanish language or *in* the Spanish language. Let us grant them new opportunities for jobs, development, culture, education and individual freedom. And let us do so with resources.

Rafael Rodríguez-Ponga

*Ph.D. in Linguistics and Chairman of the Spanish Association for Pacific Studies
(Asociación Española de Estudios del Pacífico)*