

Bilingualism and Translation: Filipino Bilinguals as a Translator

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Abstract

The Philippines is a bilingual country with two official languages: Filipino and English. Due to a variety of extra-linguistic factors, most Filipinos are bilingual, with natural, productive, and coordinative bilingualism. As a result, almost all the translators engaged in the translation industry in the Philippines were untrained natural bilinguals. Therefore, this paper aims to provide some answers to questions such as whether natural bilinguals are capable of working in the translation field and whether translators are required to be experts in certain fields in order to translate? Meanwhile, to come up with some recommendations for the development of the translation field in the Philippines based on its unique characteristics.

Keywords

Bilingualism; Filipino; Translation.

1. Languages of the Philippines

The Philippines is an archipelago country in Southeast Asia. Situated in the western Pacific Ocean, it consists of about 7,641 islands that are broadly categorized under three main geographical divisions from north to south: Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao [1].

It is estimated that there are some 120 to 187 languages spoken in the Philippines, depending on the method of classification. For more than three centuries, Spanish was the official language of the Philippines until the early 1900s. Followed by the American colonization, the government and schools began using English in 1901, and English became an official language alongside Spanish according to the 1935 constitution. When the government decided to establish an official language in 1937, Tagalog was chosen on the basis that it was the most widely spoken and developed local language. Tagalog (Pilipino) and English became the official languages of the Philippines in 1973. In 1987, after leader Ferdinand Marcos' regime fell, Filipino and English became the official languages of the Philippines [2]. The term "Filipino" reflects the history of the Philippines, which is linked to the language.

As previously stated, Tagalog was retained as an official language in accordance with a couple of Philippine constitutions. Its name has been changed several times, first to Pilipino and then to Filipino. It was given the name Filipino partly because not everyone in the country wanted Tagalog, the most widely spoken dialect, to be designated as the official language. Nowadays, Filipino refers to a standard variety of Tagalog that is widely spoken in the Philippines [3], whereas Tagalog refers to a collection of dialects spoken by the majority of the Philippines' population. In 2000, more than 90% of the population could speak Tagalog, about 80% could speak Filipino, and 60% could speak English [4]. Aside from the Philippines, there are Filipino-speaking communities in other parts of the world, such as Canada, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Hong Kong, whose languages were brought there partly by Filipino migrants or overseas Filipino workers.

Filipino is a standardized version of Tagalog, classified as an Austronesian or Malayo-Polynesian language. Many scholars now believe that Chinese, Spanish, and English have influenced the entire language system, owing to the Philippines' geographical location and history. English and Filipino are both used in government, education, print, broadcast media,

and business, with a third local language being used at the same time. Aside from Filipino and English, the Philippines has 182 native languages, with Cebuano, Tagalog, Ilokano, and Hiligaynon having the most speakers, while others are on the verge of extinction.

2. Translation in the Philippines

As previously stated, the two official languages of the Philippines are Filipino and English. It has been demonstrated that Filipino is based on Tagalog, a regional language spoken primarily in northern Luzon, particularly in the Manila region of the Philippines. Filipinos prefer to use and speak their native or regional language. Therefore, Filipino is estimated to be used as a first language by only a quarter of the Philippine population, with the remainder using it as a second or even third language.

Filipinos typically know two or three languages, including their regional language and one of the two official languages. However, there is an intriguing phenomenon in which the majority of the population is fluent in only two languages, either their regional language and English, Filipino and English, or Filipino and their regional language, owing to the abundance of native and regional languages found in the Philippines as well as the country's geographical characteristics. Meanwhile, the younger generation is more fluent in English and Filipino, whereas the older generation prefers to use their regional language over the two official languages. As a result, these two factors have contributed to the Philippines' language or even generation gap.

The Philippines has a high demand for translation services, owing to the abundance of native and regional languages, geographical characteristics, a large population of overseas Filipino workers, and so on. Along with communication and interaction with the outside world, the demand for translation services in and out of the Philippines is constantly increasing. However, the University of the Philippines is the only university in the Philippines that offers professional translation courses. Despite the fact that there is only one university offering professional translation courses, the number of companies and organizations offering Filipino translation services in and out of the Philippines is more than sufficient. As a result, we can assume that the majority of the translators working in the Philippine translation industry are untrained natural bilinguals, since there is no existing test to prove Filipino language literacy and fluency, and they can't provide other credentials to prove their Filipino language proficiency aside from being natural bilingual.

Therefore, this raised questions such as whether natural bilinguals are capable of working in the translation field, whether translators need to be experts in certain fields to translate, as well as what actions can be implemented to improve the development of the translation field in the Philippines, which will be addressed in the following section of this paper.

3. Whether Natural Bilinguals are Capable of Working in the Translation Field?

To answer the question of whether natural bilinguals can work in the translation industry, it is essential for us to have an understanding of what bilingual and bilingualism are. What is true or perfect bilingual and bilingualism? Why did we mention the terms "natural translation" and "coordinate bilingualism"? What does a translator do?

Bilinguals are often regarded as innate translators. The concise Oxford dictionary defines bilingual as having, speaking, or writing in two languages, whereas bilingualism is the complete mastery of two languages. Due to the complex language situation in the Philippines, it is essential to identify the differences between bilingual and true bilingual individuals and mention the terms "natural translation or interpretation."

Thiery proposed the concept of true or perfect bilingualism, arguing that the term "perfectly bilingual" implies two things: "the subject speaks both languages equally well; the subject has two mother languages" [5]. Due to the lack of measurement or criterion, it is difficult to tell whether a person can speak both languages equally well, and in the Philippines, it is difficult to tell whether a person can speak the Filipino language well, due to the lack of a language proficiency test, so this makes it completely impossible to say that someone speaks both official languages equally well in the Philippines. Considering the second criteria, we attach importance to the clarification of the term "mother tongue." Thiery considers it as "the language (or languages) which the child has acquired by "immersion," i.e., by natural reaction to the sounds made by its environment in order to communicate with it" [6]. It can be assumed that the Philippines meets this criteria since it is a bilingual country, but considering the local situation, a quarter of the Filipino children have learned the Filipino language since their childhood, while English is taught after they've started school, so this suggests that if the language is learned by tuition, then he or she cannot be considered as true bilingual.

Harris and Sherwood defined "natural translation or interpretation" as the translating done in everyday circumstances by people who have no special training for it [7]. As previously stated, the situation found in the Philippines is that almost all translators are bilinguals without any professional training or education, mainly due to the limited number of translation majors available in the country and the lack of Filipino language proficiency tests. Therefore, according to Harris and Sherwood's definition for natural translation, we may classify Filipino bilinguals as natural bilinguals who possess innate bilingualism.

Given the situation in the Philippines, where Filipino translators are not true bilinguals who are doing natural translation, and returning to the question of whether natural bilinguals are capable of working in the translation field, the answer still lies in the relationship between bilingualism and translation. Ever since Harris put forward the term "natural translation or interpretation," research has also been conducted on the relationship between the capacity bilinguals have to translate [8] [9] and the bilingual competence required for it [10].

Many studies have shown that bilingualism takes a specific approach to translations and/or is in possession of a special competence for translating [11]. For instance, Brian Harris claims that "bilingualism is not only competence in two languages, but also competence in mediating between the two languages." In the meantime, bilinguals can translate. Studies constituted by Harris [12], Harris and Sherwood [13], Malakoff and Hakuta [14], attest to this ability.

However, other studies claim that "bilingualism" does not necessarily equate with the ability to produce a good translation. For instance, Marissa Presas claims that "bilingualism is only a preliminary stage to the development of translation competence [15]. In addition, empirical studies conducted by Brian Harris and Bianca Sherwood suggest that bilinguals' meta-cognitive skills are increased and that they have superior thinking ability, but this does not always adequately apply to the translation profession [16].

Most scholars agree that bilingualism can only be seen as an initial stage in a translator's profession, assuming that being bilingual or having innate bilingualism is necessary but not enough in the practise of translation. In addition, studies have also been conducted to identify the translator's competence. For instance, the PACTE group carries out empirical-experimental research into translation competence [17]. This research suggests that translation competence does not only involve bilingualism, but also other factors such as knowledge about translation, strategic competence, etc.

Based on the situation in the Philippines, Filipino translators, who are classified as natural bilinguals, only possess the innate bilingualism that is necessary in the process of translation but may still lack other competencies due to the absence of professional training and knowledge.

4. Whether Translators are Required to be Experts in Certain Fields in Order to Translate?

To answer the question, do translators need to be experts in certain fields to translate? This question was raised because some people argue that scientific and technical texts should only be translated by bilinguals who are experts in the field, because it is impossible for translators to obtain expert knowledge.

As previously stated, bilingualism is agreed to be the initial stage in the translator's profession. Therefore, bilinguals who are experts in the field can translate. However, this does not imply that they can do the job well, because natural bilinguals still face difficulties in rendering the text into another language, even if they have the necessary knowledge or terms about the original text, due to a lack of professional translation training and knowledge. Translators, on the other hand, are language professionals by definition, so they have received professional training and are familiar with the translation process. Almost all translation jobs on the market require a written or oral interview, and the client will most likely choose the one with relevant experience. Even if the translator lacks related experience, he or she knows how to carry out the preparation required before the actual translation. For example, when translating text, the translator will read the entire text first, look for definitions of terms, and try to gain as much knowledge as needed to precisely translate. Furthermore, those who have been in the translation profession for more than two years may have specialized in one or more related material categories, such as legal, financial, medical, computer, electrical engineering, and so on. Each field has its own vocabulary, syntax, and style, and the translator must work hard to gain the knowledge required to deal with such material, so it is better for the translator to choose a field to work in in order to gain more experience in that field, as well as accumulate translation corpus and terminology, so that the task can be completed in a more professional and timely manner. Below are some ways of obtaining certain knowledge before translating:

Firstly, the translator should have the necessary background knowledge to work in the field. This does not imply that a medical translator must be a doctor or that a software manual translator must be a programmer, but some background, experience, or education (or all three) is required. This can be obtained through coursework, on-the-job training, or self-study. No one seems to care how translators acquire subject knowledge, as long as they do. Second, the translator should have the necessary resources to deal with the material. This includes dictionaries, glossaries, and any other resources that are available. Websites devoted to translation or terminology, internet discussion groups about translation, friends or colleagues who work in the profession, or magazines and newspapers are examples of such resources. All translators have to work tirelessly to maintain or improve their knowledge of the fields they work in by reading related material, which may necessitate an investment of both time and money.

To conclude, a translator does not need to be an expert in a certain field to translate because they have acquired the professional knowledge required before becoming a translator, and even if they lack the knowledge required for the field to translate, they will know how to acquire or solve this problem in a timely manner. Furthermore, natural bilinguals who are experts in a specific field can translate, but this does not imply they can translate well due to a lack of other translation competencies.

5. Suggestions for Improving the Development of Translation Field in the Philippines

As concluded above, bilingualism can only be seen as an initial stage in a translator's profession, and natural bilinguals who are experts in a specific field can translate, but this does not imply

that they can translate well. Therefore, we may assume that the current translation industry in the Philippines is in urgent need of enhancement since most of the translators are untrained natural bilinguals, and although they may be bilinguals who are experts in certain fields, this does not imply that they are qualified translators. Some suggestions for the development of the Philippine translation industry are as follows:

Firstly, more translation majors are required for the development of the Philippine translation industry. We must understand that professional translation education or training is required in order to be a qualified translator. To that end, it is critical that universities in the Philippines establish relevant majors for the training of professional translators. Furthermore, the government or the department of education must prioritize and even develop relevant policies or actions to aid in the development of the translation field in the Philippines, such as carrying out relevant projects or funds for the establishment of translation majors, organizations, and competitions, as translation is necessary for effective communication and exchange with other countries around the world.

Second, language proficiency tests, translation certification, and other related qualification tests are needed to improve the translation services as well as the translation industry in the Philippines. It is difficult to determine whether a person is a qualified translator without looking at his or her language and professional credentials and qualifications, so in the Philippines, it is critical to prioritize the establishment of tests and exams for determining Filipino language proficiency, followed by translator qualification tests, and other related qualification tests, in order to provide natural bilinguals with credentials for proving their profession as translators.

Lastly, the Philippines must give more importance to its official language, the Filipino language, because this language not only reflects the history of the Philippines but also carries Filipino culture. It is quite odd that in China, almost all language universities provide Thai, Vietnamese, or other Southeastern countries' language courses, but there are only around four universities that provide Filipino language courses. Maybe this is due to the bilingual characteristics of the Philippines, or the Philippines's use of English more often in official documents, or even the language used in communication between the Philippines and other countries is mostly in English. All of these will directly lead to an imbalance in the importance of the Filipino and English languages, which will then directly affect the development of the translation field.

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