

TAGALOG AS A NON-SEXIST LANGUAGE*

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Noong isang araw, ako'y inanyayahan ng aking matalik na kaibigan na maghapunan sa kanilang tahanan. Mamamanhikan daw ang mga magulang ng kasintahan ng kanyang bunsong anak at magsisidalo ang kanyang mga kamag-anakan - mga kapatid at ang kanilang mga asawa, pinsan, pamangkin, apo, apo sa tuhod sa pamangkin, pati na ang kanyang mga bilas. Dadalo rin daw ang pinuno ng kanilang samahan.

Ipinagbilin ko na lamang sa aming katulong na sabihin sa biyenang ko na ako'y mauuna na at mamunili pa' ako ng ilan-iling pasalubong. Ako'y namili ng damit ng bata. Kinabwisitan ko pa nga yuong nagtinda sapagkat matanda na ay wala pang galang kung makipag-usap sa kapwa.

Tamang-tamang ako ay umiibis sa sasakyan nang siya namang pagdating din ng aking kaibigan. Sabay sana kaming papasok sa bahay nang kami ay salubungin ng kanyang kasamahan sa opisina. Ang sabi niya ay tumawag daw ang kalihim ng pinuno upang ipa-alam na hindi makarating ang panahung pandagal. Nagpunta raw sa ospital at biglang nagdamdam ang tagapamahala nila. Malubha raw ang kalagayan ayon sa manggagamot.

I shall end this singularly dull narrative and ask anyone who has managed to stay awake to engage in the uninviting task of translating it into English or, barring such a pointless chore, to deduce from the tale the sex of either the narrator or the dramatic personae. This exer-

cise was engaged in merely to point out that in Tagalog one can go on and tell a long coherent tale of generations of man/woman, the routine of common existence, and the elaborate intricacy of the kinship system and not yield a single clue as to the sex of the protagonists.

The bilingual or even trilingual Filipino, who is, incidentally, a natural schizophrenic, used as he is to gyrate between two or even three linguistic worlds, reacts with a sense of shock when he realizes that Tagalog is a non-sexist language. Contrast this with Spanish in which every noun has a gender and declension is sex-linked. The practiced and perceptive reader in English is even able to distinguish between a masculine style and a feminine style of writing. An American writer points out that choice of words betrays the difference. A woman would choose words like *chartreuse*, *mauve*, and *shocking pink*, etc., while a man would stick to *green* and *brown* and *red* - the standard colors on a school chart. There are also subtler cues which reveal the sex of the writer. Time was when the greatest compliment that could be paid to a woman writer was to say that she had a masculine style. In contrast, the simple question "what sex?" cannot be asked in Tagalog unless one uses the neologism *kasarian*. *Itong katagang ito ay hindi nawarian ng kasabukuyang manunulat hanggang sa siya ay magturo na sa pamantasan. Ang kanyang mga kinalakhang "myth, folklore and fairy tales" ay ang mga kuwento ni Lola Basyang sa Liwayway, kaya masasabi niya na Tagalog ang kanyang tunay na inang wika. Kung ano ang kasarian ay hindi itinatanong ni Lola Basyang.*

There is something to be said for a childhood where one's concerns did not include the sex of water (*el agua*) or table (*la mesa*). This is real innocence.

This is not to say that there are no sex-

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linked terms in Tagalog. *Ina, ama, kuya, bayaw* in the kinship system, *saya, baro, salawal, bahag*, are sex-linked but the terms have functional meanings rather than generic ones. There is no definite rule governing the formation of words relative to gender in contrast to the Spanish *nuestro-nuestra*, or the English master-mistress, gigolo-gigolette formulae.

Ama and *kuya*, both ending in *a*, are masculine. A wit pointed out that *asawa* has no gender and even when we acquire a *kabit*, we may be immoral but we are not sexist.

A language such as this, idealized as innocent by the chauvinist or despised as primitive by the sophisticate, becomes inadequate on a world which, the experts tell us, is threatened by unrestrained fertility. Family planners are having a heck of a time figuring out how to communicate sex information in a language with an extremely limited sex vocabulary. The Tagalog sex vocabulary consists of euphemisms which one uses sparingly or dirty words which a well-brought up Filipino would never use in mixed society. One family employs words from animal husbandry or horticulture while doctors resort to Spanish terms. The educated English speaker's escape into the chaste Latin is denied the Tagalog speaker. The Freudians can have a field day on this — a linguistic vacuum on sex, repression on a vast ethno-linguistic continuum — and a good time can be had by all. Parenthetically and seriously, the phenomenon is so marked that it begs for a theory.

All sorts of conclusions and inferences can be drawn about the character of a people who have a language like this in the light of the Whorfian hypothesis which claims that the perception of the world is shaped by language rather than vice-versa. We can understand why Filipinos mix *her* and *his* and *she* and *he* with such confusing frequency. The effect of the women's liberation movement here is probably not what might be expected. For one thing, Tagalog need not undergo the tortuous purge that English, with its heavily masculine bias, is going through. Terms like *chairperson* and lately *Womanhattan* (if we must believe *Time*), which twist both language and speaker strike us as ridiculous. With what sense of all's right with

the world the Tagalog speaks of *tao* and *kapwa tao* sans needling worry that half of the species is not included in the usually global vision one has when one speaks of *singkatauhan* in contrast to *mankind*. Does this term include women?

An eminent American psychologist informs us that he handles this problem by equalizing the frequency with which he uses *he* and *she* and thus avoids the awesome wrath of the women-libbers. One wonders how others cope.

The Tagalog blithely says *siya* or *nila* and that's it.

This business of the equality between the sexes, I suppose, has to be looked at from many angles. The Filipino myth of creation does not play favorites. *Malakas* and *Maganda* sprang simultaneously from different segments of the same bamboo. Certainly, this myth does not have the perjorative implications of Adam's rib.

Whether women of this country are disadvantaged or not in the present semi-technological, semi-agricultural and more than semi-colonial world we live in is for other disciplines to establish. The case can perhaps be easily built that indeed women are victims of prejudice and male chauvinism.

Be that as it may, at least, the language does not support a non-egalitarian stance. Suzanna Langer claims that in language, man comes into his own. This he does not share with animals, and by that token, perhaps, it is indeed the characteristic *per genus et differentiam* that lifts him above all others. The Tagalog should perhaps be grateful that here, in the most pervasive and the most explicitly human of his activities, the battle of the sexes need not be fought.

In closing, I would like to render an apology. *Sinabi sa akin na isulat ko raw ito sa ating wika, kahit na ang pagtanggap ko ay kailangang ipahiwatig sa Inggles.*

I cannot speak of the non-sexist character of Tagalog, in Tagalog, I need a meta-language for that. *Ipagpatawad po ninyo na ang ulat na ito tungkol sa Tagalog, na ginawa ng isang Tagalog ay isinulat sa Ingles.*