

HUMANIZING LINGUISTICS¹*TEODORO A. AGONCILLO*
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When I received an unexpected invitation from your President to deliver the keynote address to the distinguished members of this learned Society, I felt an embarrassment not unlike that felt by a teenager who was asked by a young girl if he had ever been in love. For like the young boy growing to manhood who had not experienced the pangs of love, I never had any experience, officially at least, of what is called the science of language. Why, I asked myself in silent wonder and surprise, should I develop the temerity to address myself to an association of learned men and women on a subject about which I know almost nothing?

I wish to confess to you that my contact with linguistics is minimal and informal, that is, done without any tutor or guide, limited to a few books read long before the last war, and specifically, to my study of the Tagalog language and literature. When, after the war, I picked up where I left off, I found linguistics as a discipline a strange land not of fairies, but of goblins and other mysterious beings of another world, and the only branch that I could fairly understand without having a headache was semantics as explained by such popularizers as Hayakawa, Chase, Walpole, Pei, Laird, and others. I got goose pimples when I turned to Ogden and Richards, but gained a little confidence when I came upon Jespersen. These, then, are my superficial, undistinguished credentials. And so this boor pleads with you to bear with him when he makes some statements that may be unpleasant to your educated palate.

Linguistics has become so complicated, like economics, that only patient and brilliant men and women have been attracted to it as a major field of study. Like economics, it has resorted to mathematical formulae which only a few understand. They are the Albert Einsteins of linguistics. I once bought a book on structural linguistics and I am not ashamed to confess to you that it took me two years to finish reading it — without, of course, understanding it, and by the time I got through with the book it was already classified as belonging to the Old Stone Age. The realization that linguistics has been for a long time now pushing its frontiers too rapidly for comfort made me desert it in favor of the old method of describing language which, to any linguistic scholar today, is backward. Backward though it is, the old method has grace, which contemporary linguistics does not have, and is easily understood even by less sophisticated laymen. It is this prejudice of mine that deepened my love for William Dwight Whitney who, though writing on such a dull subject as Sanskrit, could make the study of language a 'joy forever', as the English poet John Keats expressed it felicitously. The point I want to drive home is that by making linguistics too learned a discipline, with a terminology that frightens people, its practitioners have isolated it from the mainstream of culture and as a consequence have made people shun it as if it were a plague. I am aware, of course, that the resort to what Will Durant termed 'barbarous terminology' has for its

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purpose to shorten what otherwise would have been long sentences. The intention is good, but on the other hand it makes for unnecessary abstruseness that drives away people who are interested in the study of language.

This unfortunate tendency of linguistics and the social sciences to ape the abstruseness of the physical and mathematical sciences on the excuse that it is the 'new approach' has resulted in the alienation of many people who would like to study those disciplines painlessly. This is not to say that knowledge should be acquired without exerting any mental and physical effort. Far from it. It simply means that every branch of knowledge, whether in the humanities, in the social sciences, or in the natural and physical sciences, can be written about and taught in a lively and interesting way. In a word, to humanize knowledge, for this is intended not for a few but for the whole of humanity. To make it very difficult for people to learn a certain discipline by a resort to what look like puzzles and hieroglyphics and recondite terminology is to dehumanize knowledge and thus do humanity a distinct disservice. While it may be true that profound learning is not for everybody, it is nevertheless equally true that learning, to be effective and of service to humanity, must be disseminated to as many people as possible in order to make them less inclined to perform barbaric acts which make the modern world more brutal than the previous ages taken together. What value would learning have if only a few, the chosen few, know its secrets?

In this connection, let me refresh your memory with the initial attempts to humanize the abstruse fruits of learning. In the early 1920s, as a reaction to the learned but dull history books written by learned but uninspired professors of history, H.G. Wells brought out his *The Outline of History* which, because it was written in layman's language and in a style that captivated readers, sold millions of copies in the space of a few years. Wells' reputation as a fictionist was overshadowed by his *Outline*, which almost everybody who knew how to read bought for his edification. The groves of academe the world over were scandalized by what the learned historians described as the 'horrible errors' of Wells, but the people loved the book and continued buying and reading it with lusty shouts of approval. It was later followed by the now famous *The Story of Philosophy* by Will Durant who died last year, which made such a dismal subject as philosophy, especially epistemology, an interesting, lively, and charming discipline. The result, as can be easily surmised, was that millions of people the world over became attracted to history and philosophy and began to read historical and philosophical books. Negatively, the serious but dull books of the learned men were left untouched in the shelves of libraries, ignored and spurned because their authors did not know how to carry on a meaningful dialogue with their potential readers. This is a lesson well worth keeping in mind: that the penalty for being too learned and esoteric is to be ignored by people who hanker after knowledge and find nothing but sharp disappointment with people who know but refuse to stoop in order to conquer. To humanize, I like to think, is not synonymous with vulgarization. It is the attempt to humanize or popularize a subject by a phony that makes for vulgarization, as happened after Durant's unprecedented success in making a difficult discipline like philosophy interesting and inspiring by simplifying, without deviating from the truth or the facts, the esoteric thoughts of philosophers through the ages. But the success of a few is usually followed by the desperate attempts of the many to cash in on the popular craze with disastrous results. Dozens of 'outlines' and 'stories' of the knowledge of the whole of mankind, even of medicine, mathematics, anthropology, and such, invaded the market and soon people began to suspect the motives and the credentials of their authors. The pendulum once more swung, this time to the opposite direction, and knowledge has to this day been confined to the mysterious realm of the obscure and the esoteric, with only the high priests intoning the sacred rites of learning. This need not be the case, for there are many learned people who could write with ease and distinction, but, alas, they opt to remain in their ivory towers and allow the

phonies and the charlatans to impose their incompetence and ignorance on the reading public. It is in this context that the blame for such a debacle – for debacle it is – should be shouldered by the competent and learned people who, in their unshaken belief that popularization per se is synonymous with incompetence, yielded the floor to the popular hucksters.

With reference to Philippine linguistics, I doubt if, aside from the honorable and learned members of this august Society, more than twenty laymen have read Philippine linguistic works couched in an esoteric language. This is tragic, particularly so since we have in our country more than a hundred languages that need to be not only studied but also learned in order to narrow the gap that separates them from one another, on the one hand, and from the language of the capital, which is Tagalog or, if one prefers to be not so honest about it, Pilipino or, constitutionally, Filipino, on the other hand. There was a time when a student of linguistics or even a layman, assuming his intelligence, could easily understand the works of the pioneer Philippine linguistic scholars like Otto Scheerer and his contemporaries and successors at the University of the Philippines, but the breathless march of linguistics in this impatient world of rapid changes – changes which are not always beneficial – has made the science of language a formidable obstacle to a proper understanding and learning of language, any language. The study of language has remained to this day largely a science, while its artistic aspect, which is perhaps more important than its scientific aspect, has been neglected. It is in this area where our linguistic scholars should exert more than an ordinary effort to make language the living thing it is. It seems to me, from the studies I have come across, that too much emphasis has been laid on the nature, structure, and complexities of language and not on how language should be used effectively to convey ideas and to promote understanding through correct usage, either oral or written. I should not be understood to mean that language as science should be deserted in favor of language as art, but that the two – science and art – can merrily go hand in hand, each helping the other to make language what it was intended for, namely, to communicate ideas with a clarity that leaves no room for doubt.

Let me digress to give you a few examples of how the evolving national language is being murdered in our media, an atrocious crime that our linguistic scholars, with their knowledge of the language, have allowed to be committed every day by maintaining their resounding silence. Over the air waves, radio or television, in newspapers, and in articles or alleged essays written by the young and the not-so-young, one hears or reads such expressions as *na kung saan, ang labanan sa pagitan nina Pedro at Juan, konsernado, ministriya, naglakad sa pagitan ng Bulakan at Kapampangan, kritisismo, suportahan, pagkatakam-takam, kumuha ng hakbang*, and many more, which are literal translations of English words or phrases and more often, supposed translations into Spanish of English words but made to sound as if they are genuine Tagalog words. These solecisms and barbarisms are committed not by the illiterate masses but by highly educated people who have not been educated in their native tongue. Yet, these solecisms are foreign to the masses, especially to those of them who live in the provinces and the hinterlands. Unless the Linguistic Society takes a strong stand against the tendency of the educated to impose their ignorance on the people, what will evolve as our national language is neither Pilipino, nor English, nor Spanish but a caricature of all three languages, a sort of illiterate Esperanto fit neither for the masses nor for the elite.

That science and art can and should go hand in hand in this particular case is amply seen in H.L. Mencken's monumental masterpiece, *The American Language*, composed of three huge books. Mencken was not, and never pretended to be, a linguistic scholar, but he wrote on the American language with such verve, wit, humor, and perspicacity couched in ordinary language that any man of average intelligence and education could understand him. Even American and British linguistic scholars greatly admire his work and consider it the best ever written on the subject. In the perspective of history, Mencken's immortality lies not in his literary and social criticism but in his *The American Language*. I do not,

of course, expect a Mencken from any of us, but I know for sure that there are a number of you who can write with ease and distinction, and that given the opportunity, the will, and the encouragement, some of you can and, I hope, will succeed in writing lively works on Philippine linguistics without sacrificing accuracy. When this happens, linguistics as a discipline in the university will arouse the uncommon interest of students and laymen alike and so make it not food exclusively for the gods, but for all, since language is the concern of every human being – and even of animals, if I may say so.

Perhaps the reason why linguistic scholars and, for that matter, scholars in the other disciplines, have nothing but contempt for popularization or more properly speaking, humanization of the fruits of scholarship is that they feel that humanization of knowledge is beyond the dignity of the learned; that genuine learning cannot be popularized or humanized; and that anybody who tries to bring learning to the level of the uninitiated is a boor per se, a fraud who should be tarred and feathered to teach him a good lesson, namely, to look up to the learned person as a god to be worshipped but not touched; to be placed on the high altar and not to be paraded around like a Bonifacio or Rizal Day queen. This attitude has its provenance in the elitist belief that the people, the hoi polloi, as the Greeks of old called them, are incapable of learning, and that to make them understand in a short time what they, the learned, have studied all their lives, is to insult them. This attitude was shown to me by a learned linguistic scholar when, in one of our discussions on the Tagalog language, he dismissed popularizers like Laird, Pei, and others, while praising to high heavens the profundities of Rudolf Carnap whose book on the logical syntax of language, which I could not hope to understand, I gave to the learned linguist for his intellectual exercise.

As one who has never attended any class in linguistics, I believe that all branches of human knowledge must be made available to as many people as possible not only because knowledge as such is for all and not the exclusive preserve of a few, but also because the dissemination of knowledge through its humanization is one path to mutual understanding, and perhaps the most potent weapon against the illusions of the educated illiterates who were largely responsible for the rise to power of madness made flesh in the persons of such freaks as Hitler and his imitators. But the humanization of linguistics, like that of the other disciplines, requires the cooperation of the learned and the men with a style that is at once fresh and captivating. There is no need for the two to fight each other; mankind can profit from both. As the late Will Durant, who made the profound obscurities of philosophy and the complexities of history simple enough to be understood and loved by all and yet accurate enough to do honor to scholarship, 'each kind of teacher can be of aid to the other: the cautious scholar to check our enthusiasm with accuracy, and the enthusiast to pour warmth and blood into the fruits of scholarship'. Let your learned Society produce linguistic books that can be read by all and everybody will be happy: the readers who will come to love linguistics and buy and read linguistic works, and the linguistic scholars whose works will no longer be ignored but will be avidly purchased and read and thereby receive handsome royalties from their publishers.