

Iluko: The Language^{*}

The tool which GUMIL [Gunglo dagiti Mannurat nga Ilokano] writers use to perform their task is one of which they have every right to be proud. Iluko is a language whose strength and vitality mirrors the character of the millions of people who learned to speak it at their mother's knee, a people whose character has been strengthened by adversity, a people who in the search for a better life have so often been willing to uproot themselves from their native soil and facing unknown hardships and dangers travel to distant land. This is why even though Iluko only ranks third in the Philippines in terms of number of mother-tongue speakers, it is the main language of many areas outside of the Ilokos, such as the relatively newly settled lands in Mindoro and Mindanao and accounts for the language of over 90% of the more than 120,000 Filipinos in the State of Hawai'i.

Wherever the Ilokano has gone, his language has gone with him being enriched by every experience he has encountered. Iluko is a language of unsurpassed beauty. The existing dictionaries have only scraped the surface of the wealth of words that are available to the skilled orator or the proficient writer. The grammars that have been written have only begun to turn the key which will unlock the intricate complexities of its syntax.

Iluko is a language with a heritage to be proud of. It is a descendant of the original Austronesian, or Malayo-Polynesian language. Its distant cousins are spread from Madagascar in the West to Easter Island in the East, a massive family of over five hundred languages, equalled in number only by the Indo-European language family. Ilokano is one of over one hundred sister languages in the Philippines, many of which have never been written down but nevertheless, they are, like Ilokano, languages in every sense of the word.

Ilokano's closet relatives in the Philippines are the other languages of Northern Luzon, a group called Cordilleran by linguists. This is one of the major language groups in the Philippines probably beginning its period of development upwards of three thousand years ago. It consists of three

^{*} Originally published as: Iluko: The language. In *Anthology IV*, 188-90. GUMIL [Gunglo dagiti Manurrat nga Ilokano], Ilokano Writers Association. (1976)

branches. The Northern Cordilleran, of which Ilokano is by far the most prominent member, has among its other members the languages of the Cagayan Valley, including Ibanag, and its relatives Itawis, Yogad, and Gaddang, as well as the languages of the northernmost reaches of the Cordillera Central, such as Isneg. The Central Cordilleran branch consists of Kalinga, and its sister Tingguian in Abra, Bontok, and its sister Kankanaey, as well as Balangaw, Ifugao, and Isinai. The Southern Cordilleran branch has as its most prominent member Pangasinan, as well as a number of lesser known languages including Ilongot, Inibaloi, and Kallahan.

Of the Northern Cordilleran languages, Iluko has probably had the longest period of independent development, which means that the other languages of the group are more similar to one another than any is to Ilokano, yet Iluko has a massive influence upon them. Just as Ilokano has developed because of its contact with other languages incorporating, for example, large numbers of Spanish and English words, so the other languages of Northern Luzon have borrowed heavily from Ilokano. Iluko has become the *lingua franca* of the area. The only reason that Tagalog and not Ilokano has become the official national languages of the Philippines is an accident of history that resulted in the Manila Bay area being populated by Tagalog speakers rather than Ilokanos. It is for the same reason that the dialect spoken in Paris became known and accepted as French. Yet Ilokano is Filipino to the millions who speak the language and who seeing themselves as Filipinos see their own language as the valid expression of themselves.

Not only is Iluko a language with a great ancestry, it is a language which can have a great future. Its vitality can be measured by the ever expanding volume of literature that is being produced in the language. Novels, plays, and poetry by Ilokano writers must rank among the greatest in the land. It is a language which is taught in colleges and universities in the United States. Organizations such as GUMIL have been formed to foster the use of the language.

Yet despite all this there is an incipient sickness which needs to be mentioned. This is the tendency which too many expatriot Ilokanos have of failing to ensure that their children become proficient in the use of the language. In Hawai'i, this is resulting in a generation of Ilokano youth whose only language

is English, who have no access to the wealth of Iluko literature and whose understanding and appreciation of their native culture is one which is mediated through the distorting grid of a foreign language. When they visit their native provinces they look like Ilokanos but they, of necessity, speak and act like foreigners. They are losing their Ilokano-ness.

One of the primary causes of this problem is a failure to recognize the value of Iluko as a language. How often we hear people speak of Iluko as one of the “dialects” of the Philippines, or as “the dialect I speak”. How rarely do we hear Ilokano referred to as one of the major languages of the Philippine people, or as “the language that I speak.” It needs to be reiterated that Iluko is not just an offshoot of Tagalog, or any other language spoken today. It is a language in its own right, as fully developed in its syntax and as rich in its lexicon as any of the classical European languages. The remedy to this problem is one which is in the hands of GUMIL members, more so perhaps than of any other segment of Ilokano society. The suggestion made by others needs to be repeated again. High quality, readable, culturally relevant materials need to be developed so that there will be an incentive for younger readers to lay aside their English comic books. And above all else, parents must be encouraged to speak to their children in their language and about their language in ways which will instill in them a pride of language and culture which will stand firm alongside the other languages of the community. Only thus will the rich linguistic and cultural heritage of the Ilokanos in Hawai‘i be preserved and developed for future generations.