

Language Usage and Interaction in the Sangguniang Panlalawigan ng Camarines Norte

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Abstract

The majority of Bicolanos are trilingual. This reality is observed in the *Sangguniang Panlalawigan* regular sessions in the province of Camarines Norte, as this study will show. With the aims of describing language usage and interaction in the province, this paper analyzes transcriptions of regular sessions of the *Sangguniang Panlalawigan ng Camarines Norte*, via content analysis of code switches using Poplack's distinction of types and Gumperz' list of conversational functions. Findings show that English, Filipino, and Bicol are commonly spoken during provincial council sessions in Camarines Norte. While English is recognized as the medium of transaction during council sessions, random code switching to other languages is highly frequent. Filipino is the language of choice during council sessions, and there has become a blur in what may be considered the primary language spoken. The observed indiscriminate code switching is seen as an indication of lack of fluency in the English language, thus the need to improve overall language and communication skills. There may also be a need for a review of parliamentary procedure, often disregarded in the conduct of the sessions. Overall, findings show that multilingualism, though existing in the province, is not officially recognized in formal spaces. It is recommended that this be done through language- and language-related policies in the province, the region, and even the nation. Findings will contribute to existing knowledge about multilingualism in general, towards more informed language policies, and in support of equality among all languages in the Philippines.

Keywords: *Code-switching, Language policies, Multilingualism, Philippine languages*

Introduction

Camarines Norte is one of the six provinces of the Bicol Region, and is located at the northernmost part of the region, bordering Quezon Province. It has 12 municipalities in two congressional districts. Its *Sangguniang Panlalawigan*, the focus of this paper, is presided by the incumbent Vice Governor, and is composed of 13 board members: five from each of the two districts, one from the *Liga ng mga Barangay*, one from the provincial federation of the *Philippine Councilors League*, and one from the *Sangguniang Kabataan*, following the Local Government Code (Republic Act 7160).

In 2000, a census of demographic and housing characteristics reported that the majority (63.09%) of households in the province speak Tagalog as their language at home, followed by Bicol as the second most-spoken language (35.57%), while a small

percentage (less than one percent) each speaks Ilocano, Maranao, Kankanaï, and other languages or dialects (National Statistics Office, 2000). This attests to the fact that the Philippines is a multilingual nation, and that, particularly for Camarines Norte, the languages of preference are Tagalog and Bicol.

This paper further probes into the multilingual nature of the Province of Camarines Norte, as part of a larger study that seeks to describe language use and interaction in the Bicol Region and compare language behavior across its six provinces, towards revisiting and possibly improving existing language policies for the benefit of the Bicolanos. It uses the *Sangguniang Panlalawigan* as source of data owing to the public nature of its regular sessions, and because it is a space occupied by individuals who represent different parts of the province and where the English language is commonly used to conduct sessions following parliamentary procedures, but where different languages are nonetheless used.

This paper particularly (1) identified the languages used during regular sessions of the *Sangguniang Panlalawigan ng Camarines Norte*, (2) analyzed the code-switching behavior in the said sessions, (3) described language use and interaction in the province, and (4) identified areas of improvement in language and communication skills. Inasmuch as the researcher is an English Language professor, there is an intention of finding out the importance placed on the use of English during council sessions, attitudes that members of the council have towards the language, and training needs that the council may have in the use of the English language.

Results of this research will become a significant contribution to the currently limited body of knowledge on the Bicol Region and particularly the Province of Camarines Norte. Few language studies have so far been conducted in this area, especially ones that acknowledge and factor in the multilingual nature of the speech community under scrutiny. This paper will therefore raise awareness about multilingualism, and contest monolithic views on language that continue to pervade the Philippine society.

Awareness of actual language use in the province, and confirmation of the presence of multilingualism even in formal spaces in the society will provide concerned entities and officials a better perspective for making decisions on language and language-related policies in their areas of governance. This will similarly inform the academe on the dynamics of the languages available to and used by the community they are part of, and help them make necessary adjustments to language and language-related curricula to make them more relevant, practical, and liberating.

Further, national and even international entities concerned with language phenomena may find useful data from this research.

Methodology

To achieve the objectives of this study, recordings of two regular sessions of the *Sangguniang Panlalawigan ng Camarines Norte* (henceforth SPCN) were used as primary source of data. Initially, available journals, which are verbatim transcriptions of the sessions, were supposed to be used, but these were not available at the provincial council's office. Their secretariat provided recordings of the sessions instead, and these were transcribed for use in this study.

In order to analyze the dynamics between and among languages used in the sessions, portions that were entirely in English, particularly materials

prepared prior to the sessions and simply read to the audience, such as prayers, proposed resolutions, and ordinances, were noted but excluded from the analysis.

Being primarily a content analysis, this research used a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012; Krippendorff, 2004). However, overall, the study is qualitative in nature.

Languages used in the sessions were identified, quantified, and compared for frequency of use. Code switches were then categorized using Poplack's (1982) types, namely: inter-sentential, or code switches that occur between sentences; intra-sentential, or switches that occur within the sentence; and tag-like switches, or switches applied to particles, tags, or interjections while keeping the rest of the sentence in another language. After this, the common morphosyntactic functions of these code switches were noted. The switches were then further analyzed for functions based on those identified by Gumperz (1982).

Based on the data acquired, language usage and interaction in the given context was described, with inferences and implications carefully deduced and corroborated with existing literature.

After analyzing and interpreting the data, a focus-group discussion (henceforth FGD) was then carried out to validate the findings so far laid out, and the analysis was deepened and finalized. The FGD was attended by a board member of the *Sangguniang Panlalawigan ng Camarines Norte*, the acting-secretary of the same *Sanggunian*, and two language teachers. Three of them are residents of the province, while one of them lived in the area for a number of years. The first two participants shared inside information about language behavior during their council sessions, while the language teachers gave insights as language experts.

Results and Discussion

Multilingualism is found to be a norm in the SPCN. This is seen to be a reflection of language behavior in the province. Research findings presented below gives details of this phenomenon.

Languages Used in the Sangguniang Panlalawigan ng Camarines Norte

Three languages are spoken in the provincial council of Camarines Norte: English, Filipino, and Bicol. Table 1 below shows the comparative breakdown of use of these languages in the two data sets analyzed for the province.

Table 1 Number of Words per Language Used in Provincial Council Sessions

Language	Data Set 1	%	Data Set 2	%
Filipino	5280	62.90	5741	67.96
English	3097	36.90	2694	31.89
Bicol	17	0.20	12	0.14
Total	8394	100.00	8447	100.00

Findings reveal that among the three languages spoken by members of the SPCN, Filipino is the preferred language. In both data sets, most words used during the sessions were in Filipino, followed by English. The least used was the local language, Bicol.

Given that regular sessions held by local government councils in the Philippines are mostly in English following the parliamentary procedures adopted into our legislative system (Orendain, 1961), it is unexpected that Filipino would be the most-used language by members of the council. During the FGD held to validate initial research findings, it was explained that, indeed, Filipino (or Tagalog) was preferred by the provincial board members. One of the participants, whom we shall call Discussant A, and here described as one of the senior board members of the SPCN, attested that most of them prefer to use Filipino/Tagalog because their goal is to be understood by their constituents. According to her, if one uses English, they will most probably be ridiculed by the common people they serve – “pagtatawanan ka, ano at pa-English-English ka?”. To emphasize this preference of language by the people, she said that usually, if a candidate running for public office were to use English in campaigning, they would most likely lose.

According to another participant, Discussant B, this language choice, particularly the preference of Filipino/Tagalog over Bicol, which is the supposed to be the local language, is also influenced by the fact that there are a lot of varieties of the Bicol language used in their province. Across their 12 municipalities, there would be about that same number of varieties of Bicol which poses a difficulty in understanding each other. There are also Tagalog-speaking municipalities among them, and since this language would be most commonly understood, it naturally became their *lingua franca* in the council, considering that its members came from different places across the province.

Given these explanations, the main reason why English is used in conducting regular council

sessions would be the efficiency the language offers in establishing the flow of each session. The use of parliamentary procedure in the country’s legislative system dates back to the American period (Orendain, 1961), and the formulaic expressions that go with it ensure the smooth flow of the council sessions. Thus, it will be observed that the sessions are started in English, transition to the different parts are announced in English, reports are rendered in English, motions are made in English, and the session is declared adjourned in English. However, when it comes to discussions that occur during the conduct of the sessions, Filipino surfaces as the language of choice. Still, neither are these discussions in pure Filipino. More often than not, the board members code switch, shifting from English to Filipino or vice versa, and on occasion, some Bicol words slip out.

Code-switching Behavior in the Sangguniang Panlalawigan ng Camarines Norte

As mentioned in the introduction, natives of Camarines Norte speak a number of languages. While it was not specified that English is one of them, the legacy of the American educational system imposed on us has made sure that many, if not all, who went through formal schooling have a certain command of the English language. Therefore, aside from the local language, Bicol, in all its varieties, and Filipino as the national language serving as the *lingua franca* among these varieties, English is also spoken in this province. All these are found to be spoken during regular sessions of the SPCN, where members of the council switch from one language to another. This code-switching behavior is described in this section.

Code-switching Types. Poplack (1982) identifies three types of code switches: inter-sentential switches, intra-sentential switches, and tag-like switches. All three types were found in both data sets. Table 2 summarizes and shows comparison between the results of the two data sets analyzed.

Table 2 Types of Code Switches in the Provincial Council Sessions

Types	Data Set 1	%	Data Set 2	%
Inter-sentential	49	13.14	17	18.48
Intra-sentential	171	45.84	71	77.17
Tag-like	53	14.21	13	14.13

*Total number of turns n = 373 n = 92

Data shows all types of code switches to be used in conversations that occur during provincial council sessions. In both data sets analyzed, similar results were acquired.

In the first data set containing a total of 373 turns, intra-sentential switches were the most common, with 45.84% occurrence. This was followed by tag-like switches, but this type occurred in only 14.21% of the turns, a much lower rate compared to intra-sentential

switches. Least common were inter-sentential switches, found in only 13.14% of the total number of turns.

In the second data set of only 92 turns (due to longer statements), intra-sentential switches were likewise found to have the highest occurrence, in fact at a higher rate of 77.17%. This, time, intra-sentential switches registered a higher occurrence than tag-like switches, at 18.48% and 14.13%, respectively.

Morphosyntactic and Conversational Functions of Code Switches. One data set was analyzed to find out the type of words that are most often code switched. Table 3 shows the results.

Table 3 Most Common Morphosyntactic Functions of Code-switched Words

Morphosyntactic functions	Frequency	Examples
Particle	23	po, oo, eh, sige
Adverb	15	siguro, lang, hindi
Conjunction	15	kung, na, pero, kasi
Verb	12	itanong, may, nagbotohan
Determiner	9	yung, si, ang

The data showed that council members tended to use Filipino particles even when they were speaking English, and this is the type of word that appeared as the most common code switch point in the utterances of the council members. Among them, the politeness marker “po” stood out as commonly inserted within an English utterance. Following are examples of this:

“Inclusion form *po yun...*”

“Okay *po*, any objections?”

“Recess *po muna tayo.*”

These examples show a cultural feature of Filipinos, and Bicolanos in particular, who are known to be polite in their speech (Meneses, 2018). Even other particles indicate tentativeness that express politeness.

Adverbs and conjunctions rank next in frequency of words that are code switched. Similarly, especially considering the type of adverbs and conjunctions used, the same tentativeness is expressed, and may be likewise be interpreted to indicate politeness. Additionally, these words are normally used to introduce entire constituents that are used to modify

thoughts expressed in a sentence or utterance. Thus used, the shift from English to the local dialect allows the speaker to connect with their audience by indicating that they wish to make their message clearer by using the language they both identify with.

Verbs and determiners, when used in the local languages, are often used to start sentences or clauses. Thus, when a speaker code switches from English to the local language using these words, they function to emphasize the message they are wanting to convey.

This data primarily means that code switching is a normal occurrence in the conduct of regular sessions of the SPCN. This observation was also validated during the FGD, where participants agreed that code switching was something they did on a daily basis, and in fact was, according to Discussant A, already their “way of life,” and “nakasanayan na.” During the FGD, Discussant A gave herself as an example of someone who code switches naturally. “Ako halimbawa, katulad ngayon, nag-istart ako sa English, mamaya-maya Pilipino na yung ginagamit ko [I, for example, like now, I started in English, but later on, I was already using Filipino].” She also spoke for the sanggunian when she articulated:

...Pero pagdating nana mandito, sangguniang panlalawigan, ang katotohanan, sa aming probinsya, ang katotohanan ay we do not use English all throughout our session. We start in English; we end in English. Kasi yun yung nasa agenda. Pero with- during the deliberation, within the session, during the session, walang nagsasabi sa amin “no speaking of Tagalog” or “no other dialects”. Wala. “Straight English,” wala din.

[... But when it comes to the provincial council, the truth is, in our province, the truth is we do not use English all throughout our session. We start in English; we end in English. Because that is what is in the agenda. But during deliberation, within the session, during the session, no one tells us “no speaking of Tagalog” or “no other dialects.” No one. “Straight English,” none as well.]

Reasons for switching particularly to Filipino (or Tagalog as the local language of parts of the province connected to Quezon) were also articulated by FGD participants. Primary reason given was the need to connect with one’s constituents. To them, what is important is to be understood. According to Discussant A, audience is a factor. Especially since their sessions are aired in public spaces, they are conscious that aside from the council itself, they are also addressing the people they serve, who are mostly native speakers of Bicol or Tagalog, and, therefore, they choose to use the language these people understand best.

It cannot be denied that some members of the council are simply more comfortable using the local language. Discussant C opined that perhaps one thing to ask is where these individuals come from, and this was supported by Discussant D who pointed out that one consideration is the educational background of the council members. Discussant C noted that probably not all of them “come from exclusive schools where English is the only language, perhaps, that they are using during instruction,” in which case these individuals are expected to be more proficient in English. And since, as Discussant D indicated, educational background is not among the qualifications for running for office in the country, there will always be members who would not be so proficient in the language. Thus, speaking in the local language/s, especially one’s mother tongue, would come more naturally for them, and since they can express themselves better in these languages, they become the language of preference even in such a formal context as provincial council sessions.

Use of English, however, is also found important. As mentioned by Discussant A, the agenda necessitates that the provincial council sessions start and end in English. This is interpreted to mean that because these

legislative sessions follow parliamentary procedures, the established formulaic expressions are simply used, i.e., “The session will now come to order,” “Call the roll,” “Move to adjourn,” “I second the motion,” and “Session is adjourned” (Iowa, 1998). Discussant A expounds:

... pag gumawa kami ng resolutions, that is in English. We present the resolutions, the ordinances, in English. [...] But during the deliberations, we may start in English, somebody, or a board member may use English, wala, wala sa aming nagbabawal na wag kang gumamit ng ibang language maliban sa English language. Wala yun sa aming internal rules.

[when we create resolutions, that is in English. We present the resolutions, the ordinances, in English. But during the deliberations, we may start in English, somebody, or a board member may use English, none, no one among us prohibits the use of other languages aside from the English language. That is not in our internal rules.]

It can be inferred that the use of English during the regular sessions of the SPCN are mostly out of convention, in observance of parliamentary procedures handed down through the years, and which are found useful in efficiently conducting the sessions.

Language Use and Interaction in the SPCN

From the data presented in the two previous sections, it can be said that Filipino, or perhaps more accurately, Tagalog, is the primary language of choice among the members of the provincial council of Camarines Norte. By practice, English is recognized as the medium for conducting the sessions, but there is no prohibition against using other languages commonly understood by the majority of its members. Indeed, it has become the norm to switch to Tagalog, sometimes Bicol, especially during discussions of items in their agenda. As the data has shown, Filipino words has the highest occurrence in the research corpus studied.

That the analyzed data sets slightly vary in terms of ranking of occurrence of inter-sentential and tag-like switches, is something that is not that significant. The rates of use of these two types of code switches are not far apart, at 13.14% and 18.48% for inter-sentential switches, more so with tag-like switches at 14.21% and 14.13%. It is more significant that intra-sentential code switching is most common, and true in both data sets. What can be inferred from this is that the code-switching behavior of the members of the council is random, such that even the inter-sentential

code switches are incidental, at most brought on by pragmatic functions, which are discussed as well, in the latter part of this paper.

One major observation is that there has become a blur in terms of what might be considered as the primary medium of communication in the conduct of SPCN regular sessions. Inasmuch as it was admitted that there is no explicit prescription of language or languages to be used in the sessions, the code-switching behavior is almost equally from Filipino to English as it is from English to Filipino, or the local dialects, for that matter.

Many times, members of the council start their utterances in Filipino, then switch to English, apparently when terms in that language are more convenient to use. The convenience of using English may present itself when they find that Filipino counterpart terms are more complicated, lengthier, or even absent altogether from the lexicon.

The use of English can also be a conscious and motivated choice of the speaker. Discussant B, a language teacher, explained how starting one's speech in English is a strategy that allows the speaker to establish authority with their audience. This, because, according to her, our culture and colonial history unfortunately wired us to have higher regard for things foreign, including the language of our colonizers, in this case, English which was imposed upon us by the Americans.

On the other hand, still according to Discussant B, the shift to the local language would be for the sake of relatability and appreciation, the latter having been also mentioned by Discussant C. She similarly emphasized that the goal of communication is for one's audience to understand what one wants to convey. Discussant B also brought to the discussion the principle of propinquity in public speaking, which is considered a major factor in the choice of language use. This latter contribution of Discussant B also supports and formalizes what was earlier expressed by Discussant A, that public officials like her need to have a connection with their constituents. Thus, the local language becomes the language of choice, and English becomes secondary, though not necessarily removed from the picture. As pointed out, it has its uses.

Another salient observation is that there is very little use of Bicol in SPCN sessions. According to the data in Table 1, less than one percent of the words in each data set is in Bicol. This was a point of inquiry during the FGD, and according to the participants, it is not a surprising observation, given the diversity in the languages used by the members of the council. As mentioned in the introduction, Camarines Norte is a province where different languages and dialects

thrive, primary among them Tagalog and Bicol. It is also assumed that many speak English, especially the educated public. But, during the FGD, it was clarified that Tagalog is naturally the default language, since this is the language understood by all, thus, this has become the primary language used in the SPCN sessions. While Bicol is spoken by many of its members, not all understand and speak it. Geographically, Camarines Sur has Tagalog speaking areas and Bicol speaking areas, with more Tagalog speakers than Bicol speakers. It is most likely that these Bicol speakers also speak Filipino (ergo Tagalog), but not all Tagalog speakers also speak Bicol. In the council, therefore, Filipino becomes the lingua franca.

The overall analysis provides a picture of a province where multilingualism is a natural occurrence, and where code switching among the three languages commonly known to the people of Camarines Norte is normal and acceptable. This supports many studies on code switching and multilingualism in the Philippines, which mostly affirm the normalization of this linguistic reality in the country. The range of studies show the presence of these phenomena in various contexts including classrooms (Espino, et al., 2021; Osborne, 2020), social media platforms (Caparas & Gustilo, 2017), and advertising (Tajalosa, 2013), to name a few. These and other studies pursue the recognition of local languages as equals of the still more dominant English language especially in the realm of education. These, along with this current study, serve as statements against language ideologies that favor monolingualism, and instead advocate the acceptance of multilingualism as "the norm rather than an exception" (Kalaja & Huhta, 2020). This research endeavors to increase awareness primarily among Filipinos that multilingualism is an advantage rather than a threat to communicative competence, and to promote decolonization by questioning the prevailing notion that English holds supremacy over Filipino and all other Philippine languages, including Bicol.

Areas of Improvement in Language and Communication Skills

On the whole, certainly the SPCN is able to conduct its sessions efficiently, such that its main functions and objectives to "enact ordinances, approve resolutions and appropriate funds for the general welfare of the province and its inhabitants" (RA 7160, Section 468) are met. However, following the analysis of the transcriptions of the council sessions, the following are observed:

Intra-sentential code switching. As previously presented, analysis of both data sets show intra-sentential code switches are most common, and its frequency is up to 77.17%. As mentioned, this is an indication of random code switching, which, in turn,

is an indication of a lack of fluency in the language. Trainings on language competency may be designed to fit the needs of the council members.

Lack of Observance of Parliamentary Rules. The transcription of the two sessions shows that in many occasions, council members fail to follow proper parliamentary procedures in the conduct of the SPCN regular sessions. One glaring example is when council members address each other directly rather than addressing the chair. Communication in the context of legislation, particularly proper application of parliamentary rules may therefore be one of the trainings that may be offered.

Improvement of Overall Language and Communication Skills. During the FGD, it was asked if participants felt that SPCN members have a need for improving their language and communication skills. Discussant A emphatically answered in the affirmative, saying that there is always room for improvement. According to her, "... there is always a need. Education is a continuing process *nga, e.*"

However, she cautioned that council members may not be welcoming of the idea for such trainings, as they may take it as an insinuation that they lack skills that they are expected to have. She suggested that this may be done discreetly as part of their sessions, that is, they could have "at least a session for the improvement of communication skills." According to Discussant C, such training proposal may also be explored through the league of provincial councilors.

Conclusions

Based on the findings of the study, it can be concluded that multilingualism is alive and thriving in the province of Camarines Norte, even in formal contexts such as its provincial legislative council. The data revealed that while English is used as the medium to establish the flow of the SPCN sessions, Filipino is actually used more than English, and Bicol appears occasionally, and seemingly unintentionally but naturally, often as the first language of the speaker. In fact, Filipino surfaced as the language preferred by most members of the council.

In this multilingual scenario, code switching has a high frequency. Among the three types of code switches, intra-sentential switching is most common, leading to the inference that there is also a lack of proficiency in the English language, otherwise, inter-sentential code-switching would be preferred. However, looking at the functions of the code switches in the utterances, they seem to add significant elements in the message

that is conveyed, which may be more important than fluency in the English language. Politeness, for instance, is considered part of our culture and identity, thus, the frequent use of interjections including the polite particle "po" in their utterances. Further, the need to establish connection with their audience is achieved when shifting to the local languages, thus, the high incidence of code switching.

Overall, it can be said that multilingualism is a phenomenon that has been existing but not formally acknowledged in the province of Camarines Norte. It is not only existing, but it is also a practice that is found to be useful and therefore highly acceptable in their community, even in such a formal and official context as the *Sangguniang Panlalawigan*. It is high time that this multilingual nature be recognized and officially acknowledged through language and language-related policies in the local community as well as the Bicol region and even the country.

Recommendations

With the findings and conclusions arrived at, it is recommended that multilingualism be officially recognized, not just in provincial councils but in other legislative bodies and even other public and private offices in the region. Indeed, English still has a place in official and formal functions and transactions in the region, but it is high time that the local languages be officially recognized as well. One concrete step is to include a provision in the Internal Rules of Procedure (IRP) of the SPCN that explicitly states that SPCN sessions may be conducted in English, Filipino and Bicol.

Another recommendation is for trainings to be held for council members to improve not just their language and communication skills, but also to better practice the proper application of parliamentary procedure in legislative functions such as the *Sangguniang Panlalawigan*.

It is also recommended that findings of this research be used as basis for language and language-related policies that will guide academic institutions towards improving their curriculum to not just recognize but also promote the use of local languages.

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