

Jose Rizal and the Filipino language

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Jose Rizal wrote most of his famous works in Spanish. Even his final farewell poem, *Mi Ultimo Adios*, was written in the language of his executioners. He was, after all, a man of his times when most educated Filipinos rarely wrote formally in their mother tongue. Over a century later, not much has changed except that the foreign language of choice is now English.

But Rizal was not a *malansang isda* (stinking fish) who did not love his own language. Throughout his short life he worked to enrich Tagalog literature and to make it more accessible to ordinary people. He translated European stories into Tagalog such as Friedrich Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell* and the fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen. He wrote a short Tagalog grammar and he also attempted to write his third novel in Tagalog, known today as *Makamisa*, but it was left unfinished when he was executed in 1896.

While Rizal promoted indigenous literature, he also recognized the need to spread literacy among ordinary Filipinos. The first obstacle that Filipino children faced when learning to read and write, if they had the chance, was mastering the confusing method of spelling native words with the Spanish alphabet. Rizal got the idea to formulate better ways to spell Tagalog words using the modern alphabet after he read an 1884 essay by Trinidad Pardo de Tavera about the ancient *baybayin* alphabet.

In an article published in *La Solidaridad* in April of 1890, Rizal wrote, "... it occurred to me to do something to lighten the work and make easy the first attempts of children to learn by simplifying the orthography [spelling], introducing another more rational and more logical [method], which will be in harmony with the spirit of the language itself and of its sister languages ..."

Tagalog spelling at that time followed the rules of the Spanish

alphabet, which does not use the letters *k* and *w* except in borrowed foreign words. To spell all the *k* syllables before Rizal's time was not as straightforward as it is today – *ka*, *ke*, *ki*, *ko*, *ku* were spelled *ca*, *que*, *qui*, *co*, *cu*. This made learning Tagalog grammar much more difficult.

One example in Rizal's 1890 article was the word *katay* (to butcher). This was normally spelled *catai* but when the past tense was needed (butchered), the spelling changed radically to *quinatai*. By adopting the letter *k*, Tagalog spelling immediately became more consistent and logical. The past tense of *katay* was predictably *kinatay*.

The *g* syllables had similar difficulties. *Ga*, *ge* *gi*, *go* and *gu* were spelled *ga*, *gue*, *gui*, *go* and *gu*. Rizal favoured dropping the letter *u* and using the letter *h* for the aspirated Spanish *g*; as in words like *heneral*.

Rizal's proposal to drop the letters *c* and *q* in favour of *k* did not please everybody, though. Some people accused him of being unpatriotic because the letter *k* was supposedly a German letter and at that time Germany and Spain were involved in a dispute over the ownership of the Caroline group of islands, east of the Philippines.

But Rizal was not alone in his struggle. At the same time that he was developing his ideas for Tagalog spelling, two of his contemporaries were doing the same thing independently and they even went further in their reforms.

Trinidad Pardo de Tavera was the first to use the English form of the *w* in Tagalog writing in his 1887 essay *Sanskrit in the Tagalog Language* and Pedro Serrano Laktaw may have been the first to use the *k*, according to Rizal biographer, Austin Craig. Laktaw published his *Hispano-Tagalog* dictionary in 1889 using the new spelling, including the *k* and the *w* and he even changed the spelling of his own name from *Lactao* to *Laktaw*. As soon as Rizal saw the "more perfect orthography," of Tavera and Laktaw, he became an enthusiastic



Jose Rizal, age 29, studio photo taken in Madrid in 1890

supporter and gave them full credit for their ideas in his article of 1890.

The addition of the letter *w* helped to simplify spelling, too. In the old spelling, the sound of *w* was represented by either *o* or *u* but in no particularly logical way. The word *awa* (mercy) was spelled *aua* but *araw* (sun or day) was spelled *arao*. The Pampanga town originally known as Wawa (river mouth) was spelled Guagua and like many place names and family names, the old Spanish spelling persists to this day.

Not all the innovations were winners, though. In the 1880s the sound of *ng* was written as *ng*, with a tilde over the *g*. Rizal and Tavera agreed that this complex combination of characters had to be stripped down to only one letter as it was in the ancient *baybayin* alphabet, *ᜏᜃᜄ*. They proposed that the *ng* sound should be represented by the letter *ᜏᜃᜄ* alone with a tilde above it. Words such as *magulang* (parents) and *marunong* (knowledgeable) would have been spelled *magulaᜏᜃᜄ* and *marunoᜏᜃᜄ*, but as we can see today, this idea did not survive.

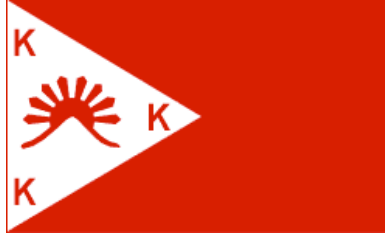
Jose Rizal did not overhaul Tagalog spelling single-handedly but his prominence as a writer probably did the most to advance

the reforms. Members of the Propaganda movement including Mariano Ponce and Marcelo H. del Pilar quickly adopted the new spelling. It was also integral to the identity of the revolutionary *Katipunan* society that was formed in 1892. The *k* was prominent in the group's name, *Kataas-taasang Kagalang-galangang Katipunan ng mga Anak ng Bayan* and in the name of their newspaper, *Kalayaan*, which lasted only one issue before the Spanish authorities captured their printing press. The letter *k* was also featured in several *Katipunan* flags, both in its Latin form and as the ancient *baybayin* character, K .

Rizal's writing, his exile and his execution inspired Filipinos to rebel against Spanish colonial rule but the most tangible part of his legacy that continues to affect the lives of Filipinos is the way we spell Filipino words today.

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feedback@pilipino-express.com or visit ***www.mts.net/~pmorrow*** for more about Filipino history and language. Comments are also welcome on ***Paul Morrow's Facebook page***.



Most of revolutionary flags featured the letter K (for Katipunan), either in its Latin form or from the ancient baybayin alphabet.

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