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Like many stories about ordinary Filipinos during the early colonial era, the history of the Chabacano language is under-researched. The Spaniards studied many Philippine languages but they were not very interested in the heavily Spanish-influenced language that emerged during their occupation of the country. The few accounts that mentioned Chabacano usually dismissed it as merely “broken” or “bad Spanish” and that attitude persists to this day. The word *Chabacano* itself is a Spanish word that means vulgar, common or rude and because of this, some Chabacano speakers prefer to spell the word as *Chavacano* or they refer to the language according to where it is spoken; calling it Zamboangueño, Caviteño, Ternateño, etc.

Linguists began proper studies of the various dialects of Chabacano in the last century but the dearth of historical records has made studying their origins rather difficult. This has left the door open for many wannabe historians to confuse matters with several conflicting folk tales.

Chabacano in Cavite

The various dialects of Chabacano were formed out of necessity, like all languages, though scholars and laypersons disagree about exactly when and where it all began. Most believe that the seeds of the earliest form of Chabacano were planted in Cavite when many ethnic groups from throughout the Philippines and Christian Malays from Ternate in the Spice Islands (now a part of Indonesia) were brought together in 1574 to help defend Manila against an expected attack from the forces of the Chinese pirate, Limahong. The various language groups working at the Cavite naval base needed a way to communicate with each other and

with the soldiers who were barking the orders in less-than-genteel Spanish. It was from this situation that Chabacano began as a simplified form of Spanish – a pidgin language that later developed into a mixed, or creole language. The fact that the first Chabacanos learned their Spanish from the coarse language of soldiers is probably why they were called Chabacanos in the first place and why speakers of “proper Spanish” never regarded them as equals.

However, some historians disagree with parts of this story and say that Chabacano did not emerge until almost a century later when Catholic Malays settled in Cavite after the Spaniards had abandoned the Spice Islands to the Dutch in 1662. These Malays, known as the Mardicas (likely from the Malay word *merdeka*, meaning “free”), settled in the town that now shares the name of their original homeland, Ternate. They joined with many other language groups to defend Manila from yet another Chinese warlord, Koxinga (Zheng Chenggong).

Chabacano in Zamboanga

Today, Chabacano speakers are a small minority in Ternate, Cavite and Cavite City, and their numbers are dwindling. Another dialect of Chabacano that was once spoken in the Ermita district of Manila is now extinct. However, in Zam-

boanga City, about half the population of almost 600,000 still speak their own dialect of the language. Zamboangueño can be heard on television and radio, and read in newspapers and magazines. It is also spoken outside the city, throughout the lower half of the Zamboanga Peninsula and in places on the nearby island of Basilan. There are also dialects of Chabacano in Cotabato and Davao, though the Davao dialect has almost disappeared.

The origin story of Zamboangueño follows the same pattern as Chabacano in Cavite and it is just as debatable. Some popular histories mark the origin of this Chabacano dialect with an exact date – June 23, 1635 – as though the language was created spontaneously overnight. That was the date when the Spaniards established Fort San Jose at the current location of Zamboanga City. It also had a polyglot complement of workers who received their orders from Mexican and Spanish soldiers.

However, Spain held Fort San Jose for only 27 years. In 1662, its soldiers were called back to Cavite as part of the general consolidation of forces that was needed to defend Manila against Koxinga. The Spaniards abandoned the fort to their Muslim rivals until they could return in 1719 to rebuild it and rename it Fort Pilar.



Major areas where Chabacano is spoken – from chabacano.iespana.es

During the reconstruction, masons from Cavite, including Chabacanos, were brought to the fort to work with migrant labourers from Cebu, Iloilo and some of the local ethnic groups such as the Samals, Subanons and possibly, some escaped Muslim slaves. Just as in Cavite in the previous century, these various language groups needed to communicate with each other and with their Spanish and Mexican bosses. Eventually, the most successful dialect of Chabacano was developed – Zamboangueño.

What is Chabacano?

Chabacano is what linguists call a creole, which is a language that is formed when two or more languages have been mixed together. Chabacano has a predominantly Spanish vocabulary but its grammatical structures are based on local languages. For example, like all other Philippine languages, it does not follow the gender rules of Spanish. The masculine *el* (for *the*) is often used where the feminine *la* should be used, though *la* does exist in Chabacano. The plural forms, *los* and *las* are usually

expressed with the neutral Tagalog particle *mga*, which is often pronounced *maga* or *mana*. In the case of Zamboangueño, plural personal pronouns such as *kame*, *kita*, *kamo*, *sila* and other basic words are taken from Cebuano rather than Spanish. The chart below contains translations of the Lord’s Prayer, which show just some of the differences between Spanish and three major dialects of Chabacano.

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The Lord’s Prayer in Spanish and three major dialects of Chabacano – from Wikipedia

Spanish	Zamboangueño
<p>Padre nuestro que estás en el Cielo, santificado sea tu nombre, venga a nosotros tu Reino, hágase tu voluntad en la Tierra como en el Cielo.</p> <p>Danos hoy nuestro pan de cada día, y perdona nuestras ofensas, como también nosotros perdonamos a los que nos ofenden, no nos dejes caer en la tentación, y líbranos del mal.</p>	<p>Tata de amon talli na cielo, bendito el de Uste nombre. Manda vene con el de Uste reino; Hace el de Uste voluntad aqui na tierra, igual como alli na cielo.</p> <p>Dale kanamon el pan para cada dia. Perdona el de amon maga culpa, como ta perdona kame con aquellos quien tiene culpa kanamon. No deja que hay cae kame na tentacion y libra kanamon na mal.</p>
Caviteño	Ternateño
<p>Niso Tata Qui ta na cielo, quida santificalo Tu nombre. Manda vini con niso Tu reino; Sigui el qui quiere Tu aqui na tierra, igual como na cielo.</p> <p>Dali con niso ahora, niso comida para todo el día. Perdona el mga culpa di niso, si que laya ta perdona niso con aquel mga qui tiene culpa con niso. No dija qui cai niso na tentacion, pero salva con niso na malo.</p>	<p>Padri di mijotru ta allí na cielo, Quidá alabaó Bo nombre Llevá cun mijotru Bo trono; Viní con mijotru Boh reino; Siguí cosa qui Bo mandá aquí na tiehra parejo allí na cielo.</p> <p>Dali con mijotro esti día el cumida di mijotro para cada día; Perdoná qué mgá culpa ya hací mijotro con Bo, como ta perdoná mijotro ‘quel mga culpa ya hací el mga otro genti cun mijotro; No dijá qui caí mijotru na tintación, sinó hací librá con mijotro na malo.</p>