

Our First Language, Our First Identity

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The first language a person learns is often more than a means of communication—it is the first bridge to understanding family, community, and self. Long before children learn to read textbooks or communicate in global languages, they encounter the world through the words spoken by parents, grandparents, and neighbors. Those first words carry affection, traditions, beliefs, and ways of interpreting reality. As societies become increasingly interconnected, however, many individuals grow up distancing themselves from their mother tongues in favor of languages perceived to offer greater educational or economic opportunities. While multilingualism is undoubtedly an advantage, losing one's first language may also mean losing an essential part of one's identity (Harrison, 2007).

Language shapes identity because it provides the framework through which people experience their earliest relationships and cultural environments. Every greeting, lullaby, family story, and expression of care contributes to a child's understanding of belonging. Unlike languages learned later in life, a first language develops alongside emotional, cognitive, and social growth. It becomes closely intertwined with personal memories and cultural values, making it far more than a collection of words or grammatical rules. As Bradley and Bradley (2019) explain, language is deeply connected to community identity, and its continued use strengthens cultural continuity across generations.

In today's globalized world, proficiency in widely spoken languages such as English has become increasingly valuable. Educational institutions, workplaces, and digital platforms often prioritize dominant languages because they facilitate international communication and economic participation. Consequently, many families consciously choose to raise their children primarily in these languages, believing they are preparing them for future success. While this decision is understandable, it sometimes comes at the cost of diminishing opportunities for younger generations to learn and appreciate their ancestral language. Over time, the mother tongue may gradually disappear from everyday conversations, surviving only in the memories of older relatives (UNESCO, 2021).

The loss of a first language extends beyond vocabulary; it can reshape an individual's sense of identity and belonging. Certain emotions, customs, humor, and cultural concepts are expressed most naturally in the language in which they were first experienced. Some words have no direct equivalent in another language because they reflect values and experiences unique to a particular culture. When individuals become disconnected from their mother tongue, they may also find themselves feeling increasingly distant from family traditions, oral histories, and community practices that once defined their heritage (Harrison, 2007).

This challenge is particularly relevant in multilingual countries such as the Philippines, where more than 180 living languages represent the nation's remarkable cultural diversity. Filipino and English play essential roles in education and national communication, yet indigenous and regional languages remain equally significant in preserving local histories and identities. Speaking one's mother tongue should not be viewed as incompatible with learning global languages. Instead, multilingualism allows





individuals to participate confidently in international communities while remaining firmly rooted in their cultural origins (UNESCO, 2021).

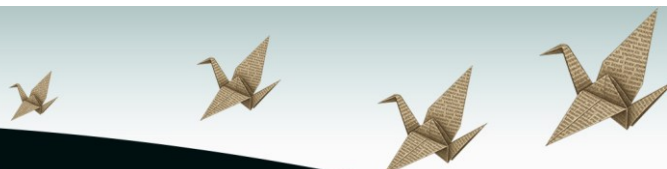
Recent research further highlights the importance of maintaining linguistic diversity. Bromham et al. (2021) found that regions with high linguistic diversity often overlap with areas of significant biological and cultural diversity, demonstrating that languages preserve extensive knowledge about local environments, traditions, and ways of life. Protecting first languages therefore contributes not only to cultural preservation but also to the conservation of knowledge that benefits broader society. Likewise, Bower (2022) argues that language loss is influenced by social, political, and economic factors, emphasizing that preservation requires supportive policies, educational initiatives, and community participation rather than documentation alone.

Education has a critical role in strengthening linguistic identity. Schools can encourage students to value their mother tongues by integrating local literature, oral traditions, and community histories into classroom instruction. Families also play an equally important role by speaking their native languages at home, sharing traditional stories, and encouraging children to communicate with older generations. Meanwhile, digital technology offers new possibilities for preserving linguistic heritage through online dictionaries, mobile applications, podcasts, and social media platforms that make indigenous and regional languages accessible to younger audiences. Rather than replacing local languages, technology can help revitalize them when communities intentionally embrace these tools (Bradley & Bradley, 2019).

Ultimately, one's first language is more than the language first spoken—it is the language through which identity first takes shape. It teaches individuals where they come from, how they relate to others, and what cultural values they inherit. Learning additional languages should be celebrated as an opportunity to broaden perspectives, but this growth should never require abandoning the language that first gave meaning to home and belonging. In a rapidly changing world, preserving first languages is not about resisting globalization; it is about ensuring that progress does not come at the expense of cultural identity. Every generation that continues speaking its mother tongue safeguards a unique voice within humanity's shared story, reminding us that our first language remains our first identity.

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