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## Phonological Differences and the Phonological Problems of Meranaw Second Language Speakers of English

Sorhaila L. Latip-Yusoph

Associate Professor, Department of Communication and Media Studies  
Mindanao State University, Marawi City, Philippines

### Abstract:

*English language teaching and learning is vital for the development of a country and its people especially in the Philippines where English is used as a second language and is the medium of instruction used in the country's educational system. Meranaws, an ethnic group in the southern Philippines, speaking English can be both challenging and useful. Meranaw language is especially interesting from a phonetic perspective because it includes four "heavy" consonants /p' t' k' s'/ which have peculiar effects of raising and tensing vowel sounds. This can have an effect on how Meranaws would use such sound in the English language especially the fricatives /f / and / v /. Having this as a prelude to this research, this study therefore would like to present and investigate Phonological differences and the phonological problems of Meranaw second language speakers of English. Specifically, this aims to present the phonological differences of English and Meranaw languages with ample Phonological*

*Production of Meranaw users/ speakers of the English language through contrastive analysis applied to Meranaw and English languages; and to preliminarily investigate the problems arising from the phonological production of sounds based on few recorded production of*

*English sounds by Meranaw speakers of English. This study found out that misformations of sounds in English are largely due to the high number of phonemes and possibility for reduction and replacements of certain sounds. This study opens more possibilities for the strengthening of the Meranaw language because of the timely implementation of the mother-tongue based education in the Philippines.*

**Keywords:** English language, Meranaws, phonology, contrastive analysis

### 1. Introduction

English language teaching and learning is vital for the development of a country and its people especially in the Philippines where English is used as a second language and is the medium of instruction used in the country's educational system. The country, Philippines is a multi-linguistic and multi-ethnic country that allows its educational system to use its mother-tongue language to be spoken in the pre-school years of a child up to finishing primary grade level. After which, students are then expected to use the English language in order to provide learners with the capabilities to understand the language and the ability to both write and speak it aside from the fact that it is an official language as mentioned in the article of Wa-Mbaleka (2014) on TESOL: The Case of Philippines.

However, to Meranaws, an ethnic group in the southern Philippines, speaking English can be both challenging and useful. In terms of sociolinguistics and language attitudes, the Maranao (a.k.a Meranaw) language (and culture) is likely one of the least endangered in the Philippines (Lobel and Riwarung, 2011). Hence, the Meranaw people speak the language with its phonological features vibrantly up to this date.

Because of this, the Meranaw speakers of English find the sound production of English as challenging due to its limited sound combination of vowels and consonant sounds. In Lobel and Riwarung's study, they mentioned that the Maranao (Meranaw) language is especially interesting from a phonetic perspective because it includes four "heavy" consonants /p' t' k' s'/ which have peculiar effects of raising and tensing vowel sounds (Lobel and Riwarung, 2011). This can have an effect on how Meranaws would use such sound in the English language especially the fricatives /f / and / v /. Having this as a prelude to this research, this study therefore would like to present and investigate Phonological differences and the phonological problems of Meranaw second language speakers of English. Specifically, this aims to produce the following:

- Presentation of the Phonological Difference of English and Meranaw languages;
- Presentation of the Sample Phonological Production of Meranaw users/ speakers of the English language;
- Investigate the problems arising from the phonological production of sounds based on few recorded production of English sounds.

As to the scope of this study, this is limited to desk research about the Meranaw phonological structure as presented by Lobel and Riwarung in 2011; and a few recorded utterances of Meranaw speakers. Ten Meranaw English teachers and users of English language as a second language were recorded for this study's purpose. A poem is requested of

them to be read aloud and recorded. The same recording is run through the Audacity software to see the production waves of the pre-recorded utterances and identify the sounds that were mispronounced on the phonemic level and example sounds are provided in the presentation of findings and discussion section.

In terms of significance, this study can be a prelude to understanding why Meranaws have difficulty in uttering English language words according to its phonological structures. This can also contribute to the ability of the teachers of English to identify better lesson plans that can cater to the specific phonological weaknesses of the Meranaws. Lessons can emphasize drills on maintaining phonological appropriateness of the sample activities in the classroom. Teaching materials could be tailored to the needs of learners of a specific first language. Linguists on the other hand, may produce relevant production samples and remedies to such phonological problems. These linguists can use this preliminary study to strengthen the motivation for the provision of proper Meranaw orthography and proper Meranaw language literacy.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Presenting and analysing the recorded phonological production of the Meranaw speakers of English is better understood using the theory of contrastive analysis by Robert Lado. According to Gast (2013), "contrastive analysis investigates the differences between pairs (or small sets) of languages against the background of similarities and with the purpose of providing input to applied disciplines such as foreign language teaching and translation studies."

Robert Lado, being the advocate of contrastive analysis wrote in his book *Linguistics across cultures (1957)* that it is possible to identify the areas of difficulty a particular foreign language will present for native speakers of another language by systematically comparing the two languages and cultures. Where the two languages and cultures are similar, learning difficulties will not be expected, where they are different, then learning difficulties are to be expected, and the greater the difference, the greater the degree of expected difficulty (Lennon, 2008). For this study, Meranaw and English languages and cultures differ in many aspects. Therefore, learning difficulties are expected from Meranaw learners of English.

Further, Contrastive analysis assumed that errors have only one cause, namely influence from the mother tongue. However, it has since been found that intralingual and interlingual factors often combine to produce error (Lennon, 2008). The background for CA, as applied to language teaching, is the assumption that the native language plays a role in learning a second language. Mother tongue influence is sometimes very obvious, e.g. in the case of foreign accent (Johansson, 2008). Hence, in this study, the effect of the Meranaw language is manifested the way sounds are produced by the recorded phonological production of the ten Meranaw speakers of the English language.

## 3. Methods of the Study

This study is a qualitative research that relies heavily on the existing data about Meranaw and English Languages written on different literatures or related studies to be used for the presentation and the recorded sound production of the selected English teachers reading an English poem with words containing sounds that are not existing in the Meranaw language.

On the data analysis, the recorded reading of the poem will be played using Audacity software and the sound length and waves will be analysed accordingly to identify the specific sound difference found in both languages and sample recording of the sounds are presented for this purpose.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

This part of the study shows the presentation and investigation of the Phonological differences and the phonological Problems of Meranaw Second Language Speakers of English. The presentation flow below is guided by following:

- Presentation of the Phonological Difference of English and Meranaw languages;
- Presentation of the Sample Phonological Production of Meranaw users/ speakers of the English language;
- Investigate the problems arising from the phonological production of sounds based on few recorded production of English sounds.

### 4.1. Presentation of the Phonological Difference of English and Meranaw Languages

To completely understand the difference of English and Meranaw languages, individual presentations of each language are presented first then a separate discussion on the differences of these language are then discussed after the descriptions of each language.

#### 4.1.1. English Language: Phonological Structure

English is considered one of the most difficult languages to learn. While there are many rules in the English language about how words are pronounced, there are also quite a few exceptions and areas where particular rules do not apply.

For the English Language Phonological Structure, its phoneme is the abstraction of a speech sound or of a group of different sounds which are all perceived to have the same function by speakers of that particular language or dialect. In English there are 24 consonants and 11 vowel sounds.

	Bilabial	Labiodental	Dental	Alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Stop	/p, b/			/t, d/		/k, g/	
Fricative		/f, v/	/θ, ð/	/s, z/	/ʃ, ʒ/		/h/
Affricate					/tʃ, dʒ/		
Nasal	/m/			/n/		/ŋ/	
Liquid				/l/	/r/		
Glide	/w/				/y/		

Table 1: English Consonant Phonemes (Adapted From Celce-Murcia Et Al., 2010)

	front	central	back
high	iy ɪ		uw ʊ
mid	ey ɛ	ʌ	ow ɔ
low	æ	ɑ	

Table 2: English Vowel Phonemes (Adapted from Celce-Murcia et al., 2010)

4.1.2. Meranaw Language: Phonological Structure

For the Meranaw Language Phonological Structure, the Meranaw language has been preliminary studied by Lobel and Riwarung in 2011 and they found out that there are 19 consonant phonemes and four vowel phonemes (Tables 3 and 4 below).

	BILABIAL	DENTAL	ALVEOLAR	PALATAL	VELAR	GLOTTAL
STOPS-VOICELESS	p	t			k	ʔ
-HEAVY	p'	t'			k'	
-VOICED	b		d		g	
FRICATIVE			s			
FRICATIVE-HEAVY			s'		(h)	
NASAL	m		n		ŋ	
FLAP			r			
LATERAL			l			
APPROXIMANT						
SEMI-VOWELS	w			y		

Table 3: Preliminary Consonant Phonemes (Adapted From Lobel and Riwarung, 2011)

	FRONT	CENTRAL	BACK
HIGH	i		o
MID		ə	
LOW		a	

Table 4: Preliminary Vowel Phonemes  
(Adapted From Lobel and Riwarung, 2011)

Similar to the study made by the BiL linguistics experts ([www.bilinguistics.com/filipino-tagalog-speech-sounds/](http://www.bilinguistics.com/filipino-tagalog-speech-sounds/)), they have a good presentation of how Filipinos in general have problems in producing English speech sounds due to the contrastive difference of consonant phonemes. Figure 1 below has its representation in the form of a Venn diagram contrast of common and different sounds present in each language.

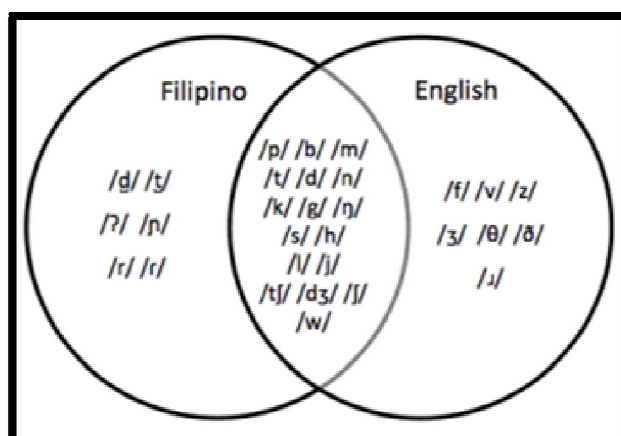


Figure 1: Venn Contrast by Bilinguist on Filipino and English Consonant Phonemes

Aside from the above contrastive presentation, there are also vowel contrast presentation made by the BiLinguist which have given more emphasis why Meranaws may have difficulty in producing vowel sounds in English.

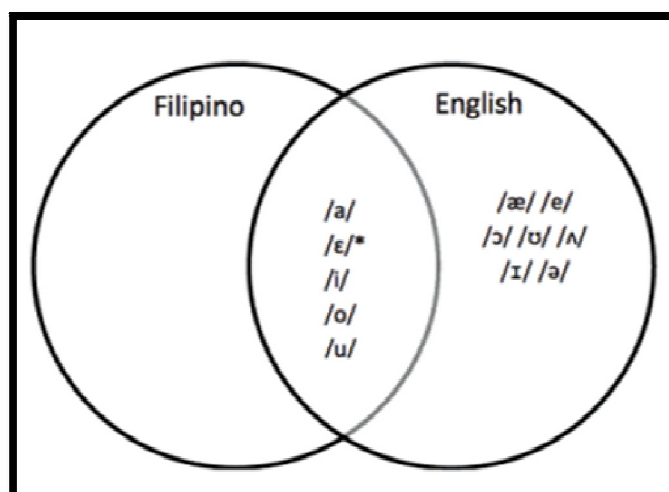


Figure 2: Venn Contrast by Bilinguist on Filipino and English Vowel Phonemes

4.1.3. Phonological Difference of English and Meranaw Language

Meranaw language as preliminarily investigated by Lobel and Riwarung in 2011, they found only 19 consonant phonemes and four vowel phonemes; while in English, Celce-Murcia, et.al. in 2010 have shown 24 consonant phonemes and 11 vowel sounds. From the number along, we can definitely see the big difference. However, in the tables presented above, among the obvious difference in consonant sounds is the absence of labiodental and dental fricatives. This absence will definitely affect the difficulty of the Meranaws in producing such sound. Misinformations of the sounds will definitely be produced by the speaker. Below are the sample phonological productions where evident difficulties or misformations of

the sounds appear. Misformation as term here is the mis-pronunciation of sounds which is a result of the wrong formation of the speech organs when produced.

With the above presentation of sounds, and the Venn contrast done by BiLinguisit, this study is hereby arguing that almost the same is true with the Meranaw and English languages when it comes to Venn contrasting as shown below:

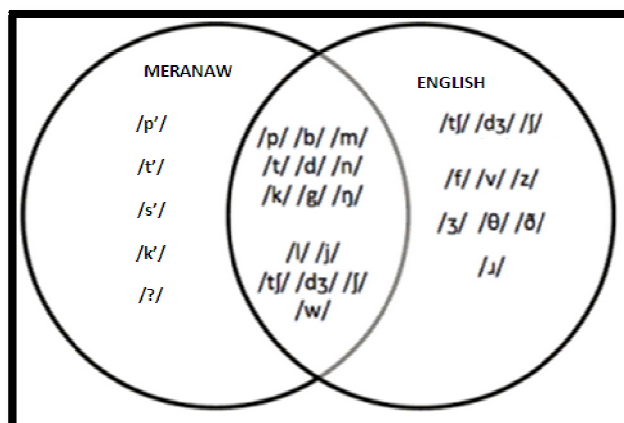


Figure 3: Venn Contrast of Meranaw and English Consonant Phonemes

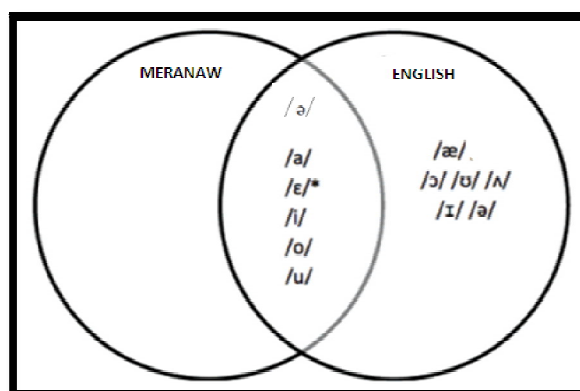


Figure 4: Venn Contrast of Meranaw and English Vowel Phonemes

From the above Venn contrasting, we can see commonalities of the existing sounds in Filipino are also similar with Meranaws, however, there are significant sounds in Meranaw that are neither present in English and Filipino (Figure 3). Hence, the challenge in pronouncing every speech sound by Meranaws is becoming more difficult considering the many languages to be learned by a speaker at the same time.

Since the Meranaw language has four basic vowel phonemes, and interchangeably produced as either of the sounds presented in the high front and high back vowel sounds.

In the figure shown above, the sound /ɛ/ is always among the most difficult sounds produced due to its unique formation. Another type of vowel sound is the /ɛ/ where it is usually substituted with a /a/ sound. Nonetheless, majority of the respondents in this paper tried to produce each vowel sound correctly.

#### 4.2. Phonological Production and The Problems Encountered

Presentations below are the sample phonological production of the Meranaw speakers who have used the poem "Am I my Brother's Keeper" where most of the English phonemes are present. After each presentation, analyses of the problematic formation of sounds are presented.

##### 4.2.1. On Labiodental Fricatives

For purposes of presentation, below where the labiodental fricative sound (final) /f/ is needed to be produced as the last sound of the word "oneself". Based on the above differences, this paper will focus only on the differences seen in both languages (English and Meranaw). Below is the sample production of sounds where the difference is seen as probable problem. However, the problems that may arise will be presented in the later section of this paper.

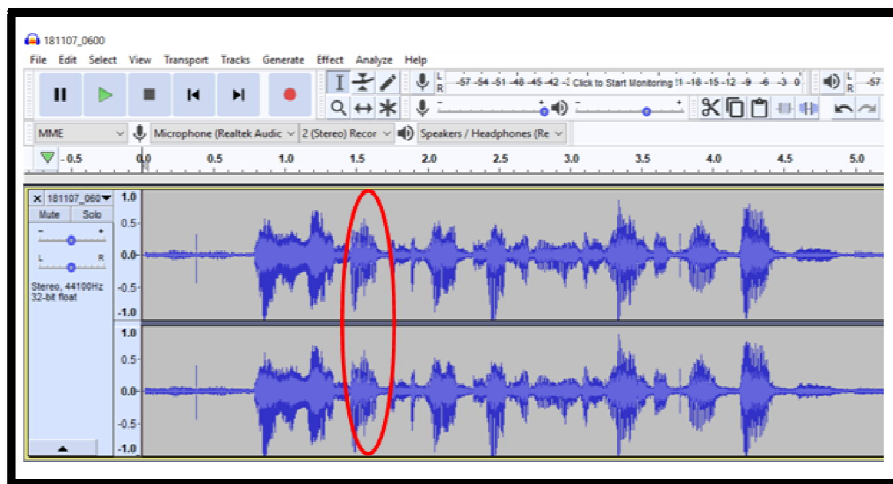


Figure 5: Speaker No. 1's Audacity Output of the First Line of the Poem  
Line 1: Knowing Oneself Is A Great Tragedy in This Land We Called Ours

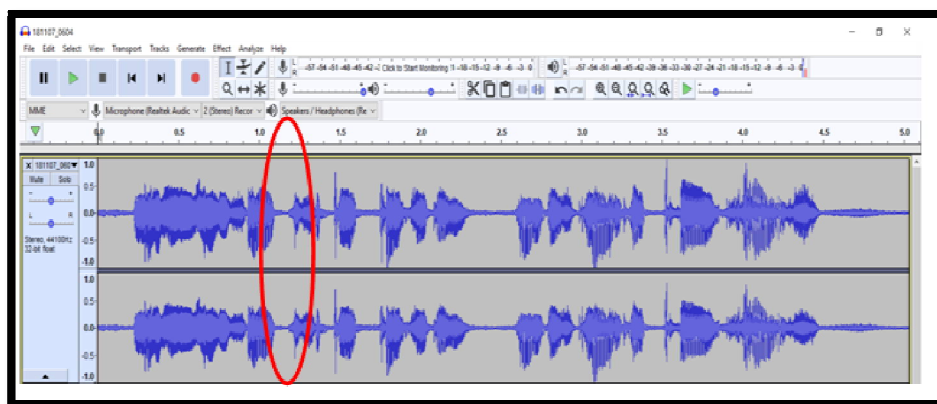


Figure 6: Speaker No. 2's Audacity Output of the First Line of the Poem  
Line 1: Knowing Oneself Is A Great Tragedy in This Land We Called Ours

#### 4.2.2. On Dental Fricatives

All dental fricatives are absent in the Meranaw language. Hence, the mis formation of the production of these sounds may be evident in speeches made.

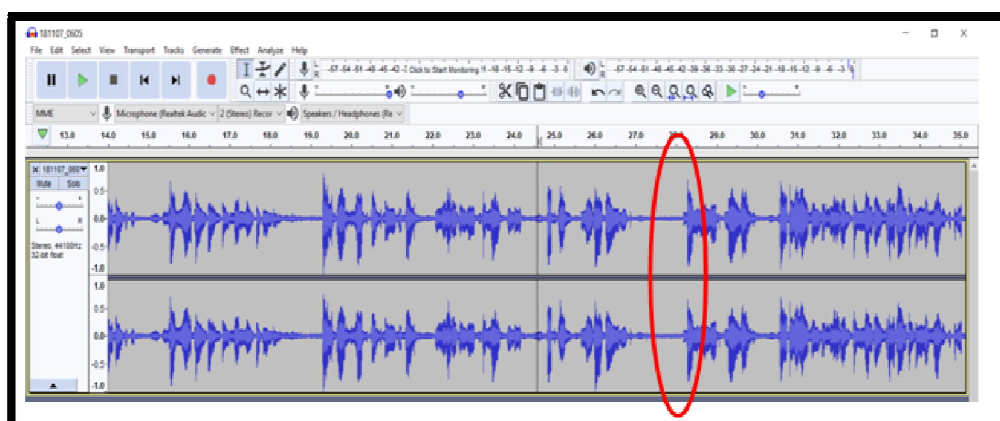


Figure 7: Speaker No. 3's Audacity Output of the Fifth Line of the Poem  
Line 5: But If We Are Owned, Then We Move Nowhere!

#### 4.2.3. On Palatal Fricatives and affricates

Fricatives and affricates are among the most difficult sounds in the English language because of the formation of the speech organs that requires palatal use. In the recording shown below, the affricates are produced as alveolar instead.

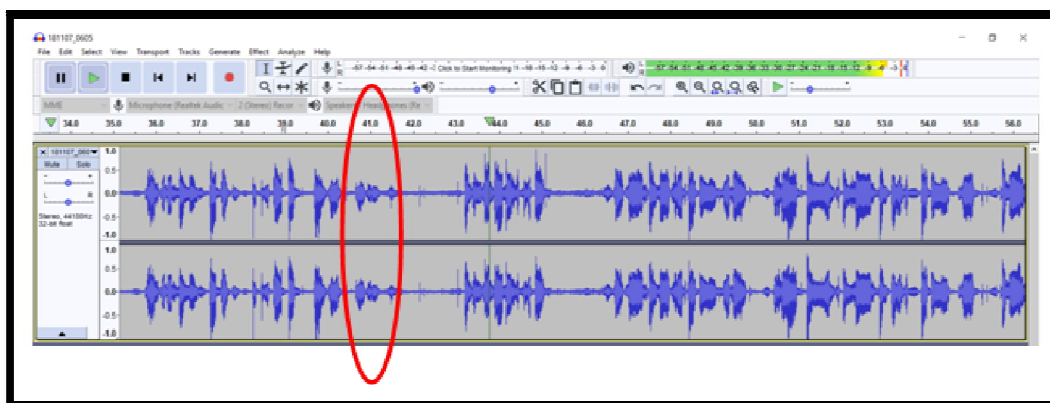


Figure 8: Speaker No. 3's Audacity Output of the Fifth Line of The Poem  
Line 5: *But If We Are Owned, Then We Move Nowhere!*

From the above sample presentations of the speech sounds produced. It cannot be denied that our being Meranaws and Filipinos at the same time has a bearing on the way we produce sounds of English. According to BiLinguistics experts, the problem of production of all sounds may be attributed to the native language influence. In this study, we can argue that production of sounds is affected by the absence of initial word consonant clusters, so initial clusters are sometimes reduced. Further, replacements such as /b/ instead of /v/ and /p/ instead of /f/ are numerous in the experience of Meranaw speakers in this study.

In the next section below, some of the realizations can be concluded and recommended.

## 5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the study done, most of the challenges faced by Meranaw speakers were the production of the sounds that are NOT present in the Meranaw language. However, their difficulty is induced also by the presence of the unique sounds in the Meranaw language such as /p'/, /t'/, /k'/and /s'/. Logically speaking, it is expected to have difficulties on the part of the Meranaws which may result to misformations of sounds.

As it is also observed by other researchers who studied phonological errors of second language speakers of English, like Wheelock (2016), he found out that misformations of Vowel sounds in English, are largely due to the high number of phonemes and possibility for reduction, present, arguably, a larger hurdle than do consonant sounds. Similar to this study, the observation is also the same. However, the case of the Meranaws may be different in the case of consonant misformations. The absence of labiodental and dental fricatives and affricates has been contributory to the misformations produced in the samples of this study.

Nonetheless, this study is still the first and preliminary of its kind in the Meranaw context. It can therefore be recommended that a thorough study on this type, a longitudinal one and a varied set of respondents have to be used for a bigger presentation of the problems, errors and phonological challenges encountered by the Meranaw speakers. As emphasized in the significance of this study, English education for Meranaws has to be tailored-fit to the needs of the second language learners. Drills in the lessons under English Speech classes have to make appropriate materials in order to minimize the fossilised Meranaw sounds. Furthermore, linguists have to play a great role in studying more of the orthography of Meranaw along with its phonological implications. Strengthening the Meranaw language is considered timely because of the implementation of the mother-tongue based education in the Philippines.

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**Appendix***Poem Read for Recording***AM I MY BROTHER'S KEEPER?**

By Soar High

Knowing oneself is a great tragedy in this land we called ours.

We do not even know who we are in its vast identity--

Some may own us and some may abandon.

All of us have a story to tell, decisions to make and life to live;

But if we are owned, then we move nowhere!

Interweaving decisions and wonders are all in our hands to keep;

Just to be someone's property—a keeper of the untold culture.

Am I my brother's keeper?

His dreams and solitude are to me revealed;

His life un-lived and sorrows untold are to me grieved!

The dreams of the land are for me to fulfil;

The solitude he bears is to me a reality each day;

When can sorrows be heard by those who listen not?

When can we start dreaming for a never ending start?

A start that will bring us to heights of recognition...

A realization that we are the slaves of our own brothers.